

‘We take the very unpopular position of giving unconditional support to the republican movement’<sup>1</sup>

## Questioning everything: The origins of the Revolutionary Communist Party

The Revolutionary Communist Tendency (RCT) originated among a small group of radicals expelled from the Revolutionary Communist Group (RCG) in 1976. A product of a split from the International Socialists (IS) in 1974, the RCG charged the radical left with perpetuating ‘nationalism’ and ‘reformism’ in the labour movement. According to the group’s foundational text, *Our Tasks and Methods* (1975), the prevailing trends on the left – subordinating workers’ interests to those of the state or asserting that state-led reforms could ameliorate capitalism – occluded independent revolutionary politics.<sup>2</sup> Among the RCG’s few dozen cadres, prominent theoretician Frank Richards expressed the critique especially starkly: ‘The greatest threat facing the labour movement is its own reformist consciousness.’<sup>3</sup>

Charging the British left with hubris, the RCG – and, subsequently, the RCT – emerged dissenting against radicals who were nostalgic for the militant

1 ‘The Irish War: Which side are you on?’, *the next step: review of the Revolutionary Communist Tendency* (hereafter *tns*), February 1981.

2 ‘Our tasks and methods – the founding document of the RCG’, *Revolutionary Communist: Theoretical Journal of the Revolutionary Communist Group*, 1 (January 1975).

3 Frank Richards, ‘The question of fascism and racism in Britain’, in *Revolutionary Communist Group Discussion Bulletin*, 3 (April 1975): 48–60. For security reasons, members of the RCG, RCT and RCP generally used ‘cadre names’, which often took the form of a false surname. For example, the RCP’s central founding figure, Frank Furedi, employed the cadre name Frank Richards. Sometimes, activists assumed entirely new monikers: serving on the Political Committee at the turn of the 1990s, avid Newcastle United supporter Kirk Leech became ‘Mick Quinn’, in homage to the team’s burly goalscorer. Following standard practice, in each instance, this book simply refers to individuals by the names they publicly used in the given context. Kirk Leech to the author, 13 April 2022.

peaks of the early 1970s. After the ferment of the global 1968 – when student protesters, anti-war activists and industrial militants especially swelled the ranks of Trotskyist groups – fringe organizations to the left of Harold Wilson's Labour Party rose in confidence. At the zenith of industrial unrest in 1971, the leaders of the official labour movement – in the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and the Labour Party alike – joined forces to oppose the Heath government's Industrial Relations Act, designed to restrict workers' ability to strike. Although the act became law in August 1971, the labour movement remained galvanized: after unsuccessfully imploring the electorate to renounce industrial militants as a menace to democracy – 'who governs Britain?' – Heath was expelled from Downing Street in the election of February 1974. At the forefront of the emboldened radical left, Tony Cliff – whose International Socialists grew after 1968, before becoming the Socialist Workers Party in 1977 – later remembered the early 1970s as 'the best years of my life'.<sup>4</sup>

From the vantage point of the late 1970s, however, the founders of the RCT arraigned British revolutionaries for overestimating their strength and coherence. In 1974, with Labour returned to power, the TUC leadership had settled a 'social contract' with Wilson's government, agreeing to limit inflation and industrial unrest. Whereas trade union bureaucrats largely endorsed the concordat with Labour, the more radical left – especially around the International Socialists – were left dismayed by the collaboration.<sup>5</sup> In this context, the RCT's founders postulated that the radical left had been hoist by its own reformist petard. Expounding their 'tasks and methods', the RCT's founding cadres denounced reformism and envisioned instead a Leninist vanguard, organized around the principles of democratic centralism, to establish an independent revolutionary movement in the working class.

To challenge reformism and invigorate independent class politics, the RCG aspired to forge a revolutionary vanguard in the working class. Its foundational priority was to develop ideological independence: 'our aim', leading cadre Judy Harrison wrote in 1974, 'is to widen the political consciousness of the working class as a whole'.<sup>6</sup> Expelled from the Brighton branch of the International Socialists in 1973, Sussex University physics undergraduate James Woudhuysen aligned with a dissenting milieu around David Yaffe in Brighton and Frank

4 Cliff, *A World to Win*, 124.

5 Stephen Meredith, 'A "brooding oppressive shadow"? The Labour Alliance, the "trade union question", and the trajectory of revisionist social democracy, c. 1969-1975', *Labour History Review*, 82 (2017): 251–76.

6 Judith Harrison, 'Political work amongst women – perspectives', July 1974. *Revolutionary Communist Group Discussion Bulletin*, 2 (December 1974).

Furedi in London. In 1974, he became a founder member of the RCG, attacking 'economism, chauvinism and left-reformism' in the labour movement.<sup>7</sup> Some five decades on, Woudhuysen recalls a moment when an alternative to left-wing sloganizing seemed possible:

In those days, at Sussex in particular, the left was quite intellectual. . . . There were some heavy, quite good scholarly Marxists. . . . I liked all that. The atmosphere was right for it. The curiosity was part of the sixties. And I rapidly ran into this sort of faction, the [David] Yaffe/Frank [Richards/Furedi] faction. . . . that wasn't satisfied with the left's failure to respond to the charge that wage rises caused inflation [ . . . ] It was also clear to me and to us that more militancy and 'Heath out' just wasn't a solution, just like the left's political economy on wages and inflation.<sup>8</sup>

By 1978, Harrison, Richards/Furedi and Woudhuysen, veterans of the RCG, would be among the founders of the RCT.

The new organization emerged from an RCG schism rooted in abstruse theoretical and programmatic differences. Dissenters within the RCG had criticized their leading figure, David Yaffe, especially in relation to his position on the South African anti-apartheid movement. In November 1976, tensions within the RCG peaked at a conference discussing the liberation struggle. Several cadres accused Yaffe of drawing the RCG towards the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and its affinity with the Stalinist tendency in the South African liberation movement. Charging Yaffe with abandoning an 'independent working-class standpoint', three cadres – Chris Davies, Judy Harrison and Frank Richards – left the group acrimoniously.<sup>9</sup> Barred from an RCG meeting in Manchester in December 1976, the trio began organizing an independent propaganda group with a small coterie of comrades.

Styling themselves the Steering Committee of the RCT, a cell of approximately twelve comrades spent the opening months of 1977 producing the first edition of their theoretical journal. Published in March 1977, this formative text ('Revolutionary Communist Papers No. 1') presented the dissenters' version of the RCG's fracture. For the RCT's founders, most notably Mike Freeman and Frank Richards, the RCG had latterly failed to challenge chauvinism in the

7 James Wood, 'The crisis of the bourgeoisie: The European Economic Community', in *Revolutionary Communist Group Special Discussion Bulletin, July 1975* (London: RCG Publications, 1975), 43.

8 James Woudhuysen interview with the author, 7 December 2022 (hereafter, James Woudhuysen, 7 December 2022).

9 Revolutionary Communist Group Executive Committee, *Statement on the Expulsion of a Chauvinist Grouping in the RCG*, 17 November 1976. Copy in author's possession.

labour movement. Committing, by contrast, to 'the struggle for proletarian internationalism', the RCT's founders began developing and documenting their revolutionary critique.<sup>10</sup>

The intensiveness of the RCT's early theoretical work reflected the perceived scale of its world-historical objectives. In July 1979, reissuing the RCG's *Our Tasks and Methods*, the RCT's founding Political Committee echoed its ambitious imperative: 'to **transform** the present consciousness . . . [and] win and train a vanguard in the working class movement'. The fledgling organization vowed to act on the most adverse political terrain. Noting the 'absence of a Marxist tradition' in the working class, the RCT's founders anticipated that their politics would 'often be met with indifference'.<sup>11</sup> Deliberately challenging orthodoxies in the working class, the RCT would prioritize campaigning on issues 'which most clearly reveal the necessity for a break with reformism'.<sup>12</sup>

Like the RCG before it, the RCT was founded upon a critical analysis of the radical left. For revolutionary cadres eschewing reformism and statism, it was crucial to develop ideological independence among activists and, in time, among the working class. Identifying reformism not as a diluted version of their own revolutionary objectives but as an entirely different political project, cadres echoed Rosa Luxemburg's resonant contempt for reformism's essential conservatism.<sup>13</sup> Writing as a member of the RCG Political Committee in 1975, Richards had asserted that a revolutionary alternative must supplant left-wing tendencies which bore the imprint of successive working-class defeats.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, repudiating the Moscow-aligned CPGB, the founders of the RCT

10 Pat Morris, *Open Letter to All Members of the Revolutionary Communist Group*, 1 February 1977. Copy in author's possession.

11 Chris Davies and Judith Harrison, 'A retrograde step for the Marxist movement – a reply to Cde Yaffe', in Revolutionary Communist Tendency, *Documents on the Split within the Revolutionary Communist Group* (Revolutionary Communist Papers, No. 1, March 1977), 5, 7, 20. Emphases in original.

12 Revolutionary Communist Tendency, *Our Tasks and Methods* (Revolutionary Communist Reprints, No. 1, August 1979), 2.

13 In the 1890s, the German radical Eduard Bernstein had intimated socialism could be achieved constitutionally by democratic methods. Lambasting Bernstein's reformism, Luxemburg's pamphlet *Social Reform or Revolution?* (1899) underscored the imperative of the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism: 'People who pronounce themselves in favour of the method of legislative reform in place and in contradistinction to the conquest of political power and social revolution, do not really choose a more tranquil, calmer and slower road to the same goal, but a different goal. Instead of taking a stand for the establishment of a new society they take a stand for surface modifications of the old society.' Marc Mulholland, *Bourgeois Liberty and The Politics of Fear: From Absolutism to Neo-Conservatism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 142; Rosa Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution*, reprinted in Helen Scott (ed.), *The Essential Rosa Luxemburg* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2008), 90.

14 Frank Richards, 'The Question of the International', *Revolutionary Communist: Theoretical Journal of the Revolutionary Communist Group*, 2 (May 1975): 40.

scorned the 'reactionary consequences' of 'official communism'.<sup>15</sup> Diagnosing the 'ideological weakness' of the radical left, they positioned themselves rebuilding from scratch 'independent' revolutionary politics.<sup>16</sup> As Evan Smith has noted, from its foundations, the RCT disavowed the 'no platform' tactics of the left and the student movement and opposed all forms of censorship.<sup>17</sup> For revolutionaries envisioning a herculean struggle for revolutionary ideas, inviting authorities to police expression was anathema.<sup>18</sup>

The RCT's vanguardist methods tasked cadres with winning class-conscious workers to a revolutionary standpoint. In microcosm, vanguardism epitomized the momentous *modus operandi*: galvanizing a dynamic subjective force to defy adverse objective circumstances and change the world. Founding activists held that revolutionary independence would not emerge spontaneously from working-class institutions but rather required the compelling leadership of a vanguard organization. Echoing Lenin's critique of economism in *What Is to Be Done?*, RCT theoreticians asserted that without the vanguard's inspired leadership, workers could attain only limited trade union consciousness, fighting sporadically against the bosses but not holistically establishing their class interests. Addressing the RCP conference of October 1982, for example, Frank Richards again invoked Lenin's pamphlet: only a class vanguard, Richards told cadres, could transform trade unionism's defensive 'subservience to spontaneity'.<sup>19</sup> Underlining the connection between formal discipline, strategic independence and theoretical clarification, James Woudhuysen reasserts the importance for the RCT's founders of *What Is to Be Done?*

I really loved it. Some people find it very hard to understand, and the bourgeoisie particularly: they think it's a blueprint for secret organisation. It isn't. It's all about ideology: shades, nuances, not falling into 'the marsh', and the defects of the economists – a word that had a special meaning in Russia in 1905. . . . So the willingness to polemicise against our opponents, the willingness to talk tough

15 Frank Richards and Phil Turner, 'Stalinism, the Communist Party and the RCG's New Turn', in Revolutionary Communist Tendency, *Documents on the Split within the Revolutionary Communist Group*, 28, 42.

16 Revolutionary Communist Tendency, *Isolation and the Radical Left – Statement on the Split within the RCT* (May 1977). Copy in author's possession.

17 The National Union of Students (NUS) conference of April 1974, for example, codified the no-platform tactics which were already widely employed on the left. Labour leftists and members of the CPGB, IS and International Marxist Group (IMG) supported the successful motion stipulating that students' unions should deny platforms 'by whatever means necessary' to 'openly racist or fascist organisations or societies'. Smith, *No Platform*, 4–5.

18 Revolutionary Communist Tendency, *The Recession, Capitalist Offensive and the Working Class* (20 July 1978).

19 *Building the New Leadership*. RCP conference bulletin (1982); V. I. Lenin, 'What is to be done?', in V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 5* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 417–18.

with each other about what we really understood and believed and identified with – that was also a very refreshing part of it all. It kept you on your toes.<sup>20</sup>

In that spirit, the RCT committed to train a vanguard in the working class to transform 'anti-capitalist potential' into 'independent class politics'.<sup>21</sup>

Members of the new organization developed their theory and propaganda in a period of feverish activity through 1977 and 1978. The febrile and hectic atmosphere triggered a brief schism. On 7 May 1977, after disagreements relating to the pace of organizational development, a minority of the RCT's founders left the group. Those who remained insisted that the defectors underestimated the requirements of political elaboration and cadre-training.<sup>22</sup> Styling themselves as the 'Committee for a Communist Programme', the departed activists vowed to maintain 'fraternal relations' with the Tendency.<sup>23</sup> Within months, several had rejoined.

Cohering approximately twenty cadres, the new organization mostly comprised dedicated full-time revolutionaries.<sup>24</sup> According to a founding member, most of the RCT's early recruits were students or graduates, and all were under the age of thirty.<sup>25</sup> Training a vanguard, they asserted, required a rigorous education programme. From the outset, cadres regarded their challenging educationals as a mark of organizational distinction. Sabina Norton and Keith Tompson, for example, contrasted their organization's intellectual demands with those of rival leftists:

The S[ocialist] W[orkers] P[arty] doesn't even want to see its members regularly. . . . [It] can play no role in the development of an independent working class vanguard.<sup>26</sup>

Founders also distinguished their theoretical literature from what they considered the perfunctory sloganizing of the radical left. In 1978, previewing proposals to

20 James Woudhuysen, 7 December 2022.

21 Revolutionary Communist Tendency, *Our Tasks and Methods*, 1.

22 Revolutionary Communist Tendency, *Isolation and the Radical Left*.

23 Committee for a Communist Programme, *On the Split in the Revolutionary Communist Tendency and the formation of the Committee for a Communist Programme*, May 1977. Copy in author's possession.

24 Codifying their party constitution in the 1980s, RCP activists agreed that full members were entitled to twenty-eight days per calendar year off party activism. Members booking leave were required to give at least fourteen days' notice to the Political Committee. *Notes for a constitution* (internal RCP document, 1985). Copy in author's possession.

25 Mike Fitzpatrick interview with the author, 15 August 2020.

26 Sabina Norton and Keith Tompson, *The Struggle for a Revolutionary Propaganda Group* (London: Revolutionary Communist Tendency, October 1977), 10. Emphases in original.

publish a regular review, the RCT insisted that 'unlike the newspapers of the radical left it will not simply describe strikes or issue lists of abstract demands.'<sup>27</sup>

As a programmatic corollary of their vanguardist strategy, cadres aspired to maximal ideological independence, by which workers would clearly and consistently identify their class interests. Distinguishing their politics from the nationalist, reformist and statist tendencies that they abhorred, cadres trumpeted 'independent' working-class politics. Recalling Trotsky's rejoinder to 'ultra-leftists' on revolutionary tactics, 'independence' became a mainstay of the RCP lexicon.<sup>28</sup> Challenging workers to identify and act upon their class interests, the few dozen cadres who formed the RCT elevated a struggle for revolutionary subjectivity. Correspondingly, they accused radical left organizations, most significantly the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), of abdicating responsibility for developing ideological independence in the working class.<sup>29</sup> Tony Allen denounced the SWP's 'narrow trade unionist focus',<sup>30</sup> while Frank Richards opined that Tony Cliff's party tailed the 'reformist leadership of the working class' and failed to recognize that 'the shop stewards are far from revolutionary'.<sup>31</sup>

Vowing to transform working-class consciousness,<sup>32</sup> the RCT attacked 'opportunist' leftists who merely tailed present forms of trade union militancy.<sup>33</sup> Borrowing from Lenin's wartime critique of the labour movement, cadres adopted an avowedly confrontational approach towards the institutions of the working class.<sup>34</sup> Mike Fitzpatrick's account of a Labour Co-ordinating Committee conference in March 1980 encapsulated how the RCT's determination to

27 Tony Allen, Gareth Evans, Mike Freeman and Kate Marshall, *The Recession: Capitalist Offensive and the Working Class* (Revolutionary Communist Papers, No. 3, July 1978), 2.

28 Writing in 1938 during the escalating international crisis, Trotsky defended the nascent Secretariat of the Fourth International. Trotsky's famous dictum lambasted contrarian radicals who mechanically determined their position by inverting the contingent position of the bourgeoisie. Revolutionary tactics, Trotsky insisted, must flow from class independence: 'In ninety cases out of a hundred the workers actually place a minus sign where the bourgeoisie places a plus sign. In ten cases however they are forced to fix the same sign as the bourgeoisie but with their own seal, in which is expressed their mistrust of the bourgeoisie. The policy of the proletariat is not at all automatically derived from the policy of the bourgeoisie, bearing only the opposite sign - this would make every sectarian a master strategist; no, the revolutionary party must each time orient itself *independently* in the internal as well as the external situation, arriving at those decisions which correspond best to the interests of the proletariat'. Leon Trotsky, 'Learn to think: A friendly suggestion to certain ultra-leftists', *The New Internationalist* 4, no. 7 (July 1938): 206-7.

29 According to former activist Jim Higgins, by March 1974, after a period of growth, the International Socialists (IS) had 3,310 members. The IS became the SWP in January 1977. Jim Higgins, *More Years for the Locust: The Origins of the SWP* (London: IS Group, 1997), Chapter 11.

30 Tony Allen, 'World in recession', in Revolutionary Communist Party, *World in Recession* (Revolutionary Communist Papers, No. 7, July 1981), 21.

31 Frank Richards, 'One or two things Tony Cliff forgot', *tms*, December 1979.

32 Richards and Turner, 'Stalinism', 41.

33 Davies and Harrison, 'A retrograde step', 2.

34 V. I. Lenin, 'British pacificism and the British dislike of theory', V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 21* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), 260-5; Frank Richards, *Under a National Flag: Fascism,*

transform working-class consciousness underpinned cadres' sense of formal and strategic uniqueness. Billed as a 'debate of the decade' identifying socialists' priorities for the 1980s, the event included among its platform speakers representatives of the Labour Party, SWP and International Marxist Group (IMG). Reviewing the discussion, Fitzpatrick charged the gathered leftists with sharing illusions in the labour movement, where 'the grip of reformism' was 'tightest':

The radical left may worship the shop floor . . . [but] it is not *where* you operate that makes revolutionary politics distinct, but the final objective and the political strategy.<sup>35</sup>

Above all, the critique of the left arraigned its orientation towards the state. Amid a deepening recession, the RCT's founders charged radicals with prioritizing the national economy over working-class interests. RCT theoreticians railed especially against the Labour left's Alternative Economic Strategy, by which Tony Benn and his parliamentary colleagues expounded a programme for industrial democracy, founded upon major nationalization, increased public spending and controls on prices and imports.<sup>36</sup> Emerging from the theoretical work of the academic and party adviser Stuart Holland, most notably *The Socialist Challenge* (1975), the Alternative Economic Strategy continued to percolate Labour's programme until the party's cataclysmic defeat in the general election of 1983.<sup>37</sup>

For Frank Richards, trade unionists calling for the state to restrict the movement of goods and capital demonstrated the deplorable 'strength of British nationalism' in the labour movement.<sup>38</sup> As James Callaghan's ailing Labour government toiled in economic crisis, the RCT's first public meetings and day schools exhorted workers to identify with their class rather than with their nation. Addressing a meeting in 1978, Richards attacked Labour grandees and Trades Union Congress (TUC) officials who posited that workers shared with their bosses an interest in repairing British capitalism.<sup>39</sup> Cadres found their theoretical analyses substantiated in contemporary labour disputes. In the spring of 1980, when the right-wing leadership of the steelworkers' union struck

*Racism and the Labour Movement* (Revolutionary Communist Pamphlets, No. 2, second edition August 1978 [first edition January 1978]), 3.

35 'A night out for the left', *tns*, April–May 1980. Emphases in original.

36 Andrew Friend and Andy Metcalf, *Slump City: The Politics of Mass Unemployment* (London: Pluto Press, 1981), 178–80.

37 Paul Auerbach, *The Left Intellectual Opposition in Britain, 1945–2000: The Case of the Alternative Economic Strategy* (London: Kingston University, 2003), 5–10.

38 Richards, *Under a National Flag*, 24.

39 Revolutionary Communist Tendency, *The Trade Unions and the Struggle Against Racism* (1978). Copy in author's possession.

a deal with British Steel, ending a fourteen-week strike, the RCT condemned the TUC for the 'sell-out . . . [a] setback to the entire labour movement'.<sup>40</sup>

The RCT's hostility towards left-wing statism dovetailed with its antipathy to reformism. Cadres who vowed to dismantle workers' illusions in the state were especially hostile to trade union hierarchies vying to collaborate with the government. In January 1981, for example, the leaders of the steelworkers', miners' and railway workers' unions commended to the government a 'strategy for economic recovery'. Imploring the Conservatives to subsidize and protect nationalized industries against foreign competition, the union organizers positioned their respective sectors 'at the heart of the nation's struggle for economic survival'.<sup>41</sup>

RCT cadres inveighed against trade union hierarchies, which equated workers' interests with those of 'the nation'. Richards, for instance, scorned the reformist assessment of the state as an 'essentially neutral agency', which radicals and trade unionists could positively transform.<sup>42</sup> At a public meeting at London's Conway Hall in July 1978, Mike Freeman and Kate Marshall castigated 'state socialists' who implied that capitalism could be made 'humane and efficient' and therefore obstructed revolutionary politics.<sup>43</sup> RCT cadres instead expounded the necessity of a vanguard committed to smashing the state and establishing a dictatorship of the proletariat. Following Lenin's critique of 'social-chauvinism', theoreticians fulminated against the 'national-reformist' tradition, by which British leftists endorsed the state apparatus of immigration controls, trade quotas and bans on capital export.<sup>44</sup>

Early theoretical work juxtaposed the revolutionary potential of the working class and the perceived reformism of its institutions. The organization emerged in an epoch of substantial labour militancy: in the year 1972 alone, some

40 Members of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation (ISTC) had initially demanded a 20 per cent pay rise. Resolving the strike, the ISTC leadership negotiated a more modest pay rise – tied to local productivity deals – below the rate of inflation, and accepted redundancies. 'The price of TUC leadership', *tms*, April–May 1980.

41 Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, *What Is the Future? Steel – Rail – Coal* (London: Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, 1981), 10–12. The leaders of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, the National Union of Mineworkers and the National Union of Railwaymen authored the document.

42 Richards, *Under a National Flag*, 9.

43 Revolutionary Communist Tendency, *The Recession*.

44 *Racial Oppression: How to Fight It* (Revolutionary Communist Pamphlets, No. 4, April 1979), 21. Lenin coined 'social-chauvinism' in 1915, repudiating socialists in the Second International who espoused 'national defence' at the outbreak of the First World War. For Lenin – who called for the defeat of the imperial powers – social-chauvinism signified 'the justification of an alliance between the Socialists and the bourgeoisie and governments of "their own" countries in this war, the refusal to preach and support proletarian-revolutionary action against "one's own" bourgeoisie'. V. I. Lenin, 'The collapse of the Second International', Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 21*, 241.

twenty-four million working days were lost to strike action.<sup>45</sup> In a resonant assessment, four founding activists counterposed the 'organisational strength' and the 'political weakness' of the British working class.<sup>46</sup> Norton and Tompson contrasted the labour movement's 'courage and militancy' and its failure to 'advance an independent political response to the capitalist assault . . . the workers' movement is in ideological disarray.'<sup>47</sup> Such a dialectical relationship between subjective possibility and objective reality defined the vanguardist project, which configured a leading role for the revolutionary party.

Promising an antidote to the baleful influence of reformism, cadres condemned leftists' habitual electoral support for Labour. Anticipating the general election of 1979, for example, the SWP's magazine editorial attacked the Callaghan government's record but concluded that in the absence of a credible radical alternative, socialists were 'forced, reluctantly and against their wishes, to call for the return of a Labour government'. Although the SWP proposed rank-and-file organizing, independent of Labour, to build a socialist movement, its leadership maintained that 'to abstain in a situation where the mass of workers continue, despite everything which has happened, to support Labour would be the worst sort of irresponsibility'.<sup>48</sup> By contrast, espousing revolutionary abstentionism, Mike Freeman and Kate Marshall fulminated against Labour's 'classless strategy', which had ensnared the working class in 'the service of the nation', 'suppressed class contradictions' and buttressed capitalism. Rather than voting Labour *faute de mieux*, Freeman and Marshall asserted, an 'uncompromising struggle' against its reformism was vital.<sup>49</sup> Reflecting four decades later, one of the authors of *Who Needs the Labour Party?* (1978) positioned the pamphlet as an 'important marker' of cadres' distinct critique and tasks, 'defining our relationship with the left. [. . .] We came out of the old left but we were no longer part of it'.<sup>50</sup>

For its rivals on the radical left, the RCT was a utopian sect in thrall to idealistic abstraction. More established left-wing groups regarded the new organization's cadres as dogmatic ideologues, whose theoretical absolutism would repel workers. Distributing propaganda at an RCT day school in August 1978, the Spartacist League portrayed the Tendency as a doctrinaire faction 'not

45 Satnam Virdee, 'Racism and resistance in British trade unions, 1948–1979', in Peter Alexander and Rick Halpern (eds), *Racializing Class, Classifying Race: Labour and Difference in Britain, the USA and Africa* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 138.

46 Allen et al., *The Recession*, 42.

47 Norton and Tompson, *The Struggle for a Revolutionary Propaganda Group*, 2–3.

48 'The left's choice', *Socialist Review*, April 1979.

49 Mike Freeman and Kate Marshall, *Who Needs the Labour Party?* (Revolutionary Communist Pamphlets, No. 3, September 1978), 9, 26, 30.

50 Mike Fitzpatrick, 15 August 2020.

seriously interested . . . in building a party to struggle for state power.<sup>51</sup> For Alex Callinicos of the SWP, training cadres in the primacy of ideas and theory represented a 'fallacy', indicating the RCT's aloofness from the vital class struggle. Animosity towards the labour movement leadership, Callinicos contended, rendered the RCT irrelevant: 'revolutionaries should look for every opportunity to involve themselves in whatever struggles are taking place.'<sup>52</sup> Reflecting today, Mike Fitzpatrick avers that the emphasis upon ideological independence underpinned a fundamental strategic difference between the RCT and its left-wing counterparts:

Whereas the left adapted to the prevailing outlook of the labour movement, we always tried to promote an independent line. . . . The left mistook our commitment to polemic as sectarian and divisive, when it was all about ideological clarification.<sup>53</sup>

The RCT commenced an intensive period of internal education and theoretical clarification during the late 1970s. Cadres joined rigorous educationals and convened events to attract class-conscious thinkers. In February 1979, for example, during the 'winter of discontent', Kate Marshall, Mary Masters, Frank Richards and Keith Tompson coordinated a series of public forums in north London, elaborating a distinct definition of revolutionary independence.<sup>54</sup> Although at this juncture the core membership remained confined to a network of between twenty and thirty activists, the RCT's organizational flair engendered contact with wider metropolitan left milieux. In September 1980, for instance, more than 200 activists attended the RCT's first major conference, which addressed imperialism and the global economic crisis.<sup>55</sup>

Meanwhile, cadres forensically researched detailed pamphlets elucidating their polemical critiques of the left, the state and imperialism. In 1979, the RCT launched *the next step* as its monthly review. The newspaper represented a vital propaganda output and a focal point for organizational activity. Renouncing the 'pompous calls to action', which they considered typical of the left-wing press, members of the editorial board published polemical analyses of contemporary politics and essays adumbrating the inadequacies of reform and the historical

51 'RCT: Wrong tasks, wrong methods' (1978) quoted in 'Born-again Cliffites on the move', *Spartacist Britain*, July–August 1983.

52 Alex Callinicos, 'Politics or abstract propagandism?', *International Socialism*, Winter 1981, 111–28.

53 Mike Fitzpatrick, 15 August 2020.

54 Revolutionary Communist Tendency, *Public Forums* (n.d. [1979]). Copy in author's possession.

55 Revolutionary Communist Party, *Malvinas Are Argentina's* (Revolutionary Communist Pamphlets, No. 13, June 1982), 33.

imperative of revolution.<sup>56</sup> Stylistically, the newspaper adopted what its founding editor remembers as an 'austere look': close-typed Times Roman, unbroken by images.<sup>57</sup>

The establishment of the RCP in May 1981 signalled a new phase in the organization's development. Approximately eight-five activists gathered in London, elected a Political Committee and vowed to take their propaganda into the working class with renewed vigour. According to an undercover police officer infiltrating the organization in its foundational stages, the conference, which launched the RCP in May 1981, hosted twenty-nine 'cell members' – core cadres comprising the leadership and its inner circle – as well as approximately forty 'ordinary' members and a further fifteen 'contacts'. The most recent recruits, 'contacts' were typically individuals who had demonstrated particular interest in the organization's politics at a public meeting or attended a follow-up meeting after buying literature at a street sale.<sup>58</sup> Recruitment typically arose from personal contacts between activists and interested individuals who bought the organization's literature or attended demonstrations and meetings.<sup>59</sup> By September 1981, when the RCP convened its first national conference – ambitiously titled 'Preparing for Power' – the party's founding cadres had spent several years developing their ideas and strategy.<sup>60</sup> The following chapters trace the RCP's efforts to supersede the past defeats of the international working class through a revolutionary movement 'to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat in Britain' and realize 'communism throughout the world'.<sup>61</sup>

Forming the RCP in May 1981, cadres embarked upon their vanguardist project in a spirit of profound seriousness combined with realistic self-assessment. Activists perceived themselves attempting to rescue revolutionary politics six decades since the defeat of the Bolshevik revolution: their foundational critique held that the struggle would be arduous and against the odds. A leading cadre recorded that the party was 'small and marginal' and 'did not reflect any

56 'Breaking new ground', *tns*, December 1979.

57 Mike Fitzpatrick interview with the author, 22 August 2020.

58 Undercover Policing Inquiry (hereafter, UPI) I0000015575: 'Special Branch report on an internal conference of the Revolutionary Communist Tendency to discuss forthcoming policies and actions', 1 September 1981. Available at [ucpi.org.uk/publications/special-branch-report-on-an-internal-conference-of-the-revolutionary-communist-tendency-to-discuss-forthcoming-policies-and-actions/](http://ucpi.org.uk/publications/special-branch-report-on-an-internal-conference-of-the-revolutionary-communist-tendency-to-discuss-forthcoming-policies-and-actions/) (accessed 12 July 2021).

59 Mike Freeman, 'The road to power', *Confrontation*, 1 (Summer 1986): 83.

60 Frank Richards, 'Editorial: Their alternative and ours', in Revolutionary Communist Party, *World in Recession*, 2.

61 RCP founding statement (May 1981), quoted in Mike Fitzpatrick, 'Waking from the nightmare' (unpublished manuscript). Copy in author's possession. I am grateful to Mike Fitzpatrick for sharing this unpublished manuscript.

significant trend in the working class.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, founding members noted with dismay that nationalism, reformism and social-chauvinism pervaded the labour movement. As secretary of Tameside Trades Council, RCT activist Dave Hallsworth delineated the importance of challenging the CPGB's influence in the working class and supplanting its reformist strategies 'in the factories where . . . they dampen down struggles.'<sup>63</sup> Sabena Norton admitted that the party's leftist rivals, most notably the CPGB, remained the most 'organised left-wing force in the trade unions.'<sup>64</sup> With three million British workers unemployed and real wages falling in 1981, *the next step's* editorial board lamented that 'the hold of the labour bureaucracy over the working class remains intact.'<sup>65</sup>

Some four decades on, cadres remember the early RCP as an attractive milieu defined and distinguished by the clarity and freshness of its analysis. Kirk Leech, who joined the party in 1982, evokes the impression of formal and ideological independence:

We never saw ourselves as being part of the left. We were organisationally in it, but probably politically and even emotionally outside of it.<sup>66</sup>

Positioning themselves as a revolutionary alternative, activists drew inspiration from their critique of the left:

We spent a lot of our time arguing against the rest of the left. . . . We really weren't part of that world. *On the left but not of it*, I think Frank once said. . . . That was part of the appeal of it for me, was being separate from that kind of morass and having, I thought, the arguments to take them apart.<sup>67</sup>

The historical momentousness of their project energized cadres who believed that their organization was capable of advancing revolutionary politics despite adverse circumstances. Rob Killick, who met the RCT in Canterbury in the late 1970s, depicted the frisson of excitement during these foundational stages:

It was exciting intellectually, and it was exciting to feel committed to something, and to feel that you were building something important.<sup>68</sup>

62 Freeman, 'The road to power', 53.

63 Dave Hallsworth quoted in 'Fight TUC line on Ireland', *Socialist Press: Weekly Paper of the Workers Socialist League*, 9 July 1980.

64 Sabena Norton, 'Communist Party conference: A knife in the back of us all', *tns*, December 1979.

65 'No turning back!', *tns*, December 1981.

66 Kirk Leech interview with the author, 7 September 2020.

67 Former RCP member interview with the author, February 2021.

68 Rob Killick interview with the author, 20 August 2020.

Early recruits revelled in their commitment to a cadre organization, which aspired ambitiously to overcome the left's past defeats:

What attracted me was just the rigour of their analysis, the fact that it wasn't like the rest of the left. It was very serious and had theoretical depth, but not in an academic sense: they were doing things, and they were out on the street arguing, selling, organising. But what impressed me was their intellectual seriousness, depth, and rigour.<sup>69</sup>

Adopting the Leninist organizational principles of democratic centralism, RCP organizers instilled a culture of internal debate and discipline.<sup>70</sup> At national conferences, cadres would discuss and determine the party programme. Once strategic priorities and campaigning tactics were agreed, activists worked locally and 'collectively under the discipline of a Branch organiser' – who, in turn, was directly accountable to the elected Political Committee. Cadres committed to 'understand, accept and fight for the RCP programme'.<sup>71</sup>

Some of the earliest recruits first encountered the party through its organizers on university campuses in Canterbury, Coventry and Manchester. Throughout the organization's lifespan, students would remain an important constituency. Affiliating to their local party branches, the RCP's student societies connected issues on campus to broader political controversies: at Newcastle University in 1986, for example, rallying around two Libyan students who had been detained and threatened with deportation, the Revolutionary Communist Students (RCS) amplified their anti-imperialist opposition to the US air strikes on Tripoli.<sup>72</sup> For an activist who met the RCP as a student in Manchester in the early 1980s, the nascent party's self-conscious brio and waspish intellectual culture promised to supplant weary left-wing orthodoxies:

It was pretty much love at first sight. The RCP were everything I was looking for in terms of political engagement. They were young, they were sexy, they were intelligent, they were active, they put pressure on you. What I particularly liked was the provocativeness. Whatever I thought, they would sort of challenge. They weren't interested in platitudes or being nice for the sake of it. . . . I liked that sort

69 Norman Lewis interview with the author, 16 February 2021.

70 Delineating 'party unity' in March 1921, Lenin asserted that democratic centralism married rigorous theoretical discussion *within* the party, with organizational cohesion and 'strict discipline . . . to secure the maximum unanimity in eliminating all factionalism'. Lenin adumbrated these principles in his resolution to the Tenth Congress of the Bolshevik Party. V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 32* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973), 241–4.

71 *Notes for a Constitution* (internal RCP document, 1985). Copy in author's possession.

72 George Napier, 'In defence of Libyan students', *Courier: Newcastle University Students' Newspaper*, 15 May 1986.

of provocation, and for many, many years afterwards I tried to employ the same approach myself.<sup>73</sup>

The revolutionary ideals which inspired RCP activists represented, above all, a profoundly humanist radical politics. Aspiring to a communist society, cadres pursued what Hartley Dean and Sabeen Ahmed, conceptualizing Marx’s vision of human emancipation, have termed ‘eudaimonia’ – translated variously to signify happiness, fulfilment or flourishing.<sup>74</sup> As the following chapters will demonstrate, eudaimonic humanism formed the bedrock of the party’s project. Marx posited that under capitalism’s strictures, the ‘alienated’ worker was forced to subjugate their affective subjectivity – spanning their talents, desires and emotions – to the dictates of the social system.<sup>75</sup> Impelled by this central critique, RCP cadres pursued a movement capable of realizing an emancipatory society in which human activity would no longer be alienated: in Freedenian terms, these aspirations represented the core concepts, interwoven at the outset with a vanguardist form and strategy. Freed from want and capitalism’s inhibitions, the liberated subject would be able to maximize all facets of their true potential.

### ‘Unconditional support’ for ‘Irish freedom’

Pursuing the project adumbrated in *Our Tasks and Methods*, the RCP committed to campaign on the issues which most sharply arraigned the perceived nationalism and social-chauvinism of British working-class institutions. In 1980, a national conference agreed unanimously to prioritize strengthening working-class anti-imperialism. Accordingly, the party pinpointed militant anti-racism and ‘unconditional support’ for ‘Irish freedom’ as campaigning focal points.<sup>76</sup> They would remain the party’s foremost campaigns for over a decade.

73 Former RCP member interview with the author, November 2021.

74 Hartley Dean, ‘Eudaimonia and “species being”: A Marxist perspective’, in Joar Vittersø (ed.), *Handbook of Eudaimonic Well-Being* (Cham: Springer, 2016), 507–20; Sabeen Ahmed, ‘Communism as *eudaimonia*: An Aristotelian reading of human emancipation’, *International Journal of Philosophy & Social Values*, 1 (2018): 31–48.

75 Since labour under capitalism was ‘external to the worker, i.e. does not belong to his essential being’, the worker ‘does not confirm himself in his work, but denies himself, feels miserable and not happy, does not develop free mental and physical energy, but mortifies his flesh and ruins his mind. Hence the worker feels himself only when he is not working; when he is working he does not feel himself. . . . His labour is therefore not voluntary but forced, it is *forced labour*’. Karl Marx, ‘Economic and philosophical manuscripts’, 1844. Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 326.

76 *tns*, June–July 1980. The RCP’s anti-racist campaigns are the subject of Chapter 2.

Since the turn of the 1970s, republican guerrillas, constituted primarily in the Provisional IRA, had waged what they considered a 'war of National Liberation' against British rule in Northern Ireland.<sup>77</sup> For revolutionaries combating social-chauvinism in the British working class, 'the Irish war' was supremely, if instrumentally, significant. Cadres acknowledged that their emphasis upon Ireland reflected their 'programmatic heritage' in the RCG,<sup>78</sup> which similarly challenged the 'pro-imperialist . . . stranglehold' in the labour movement.<sup>79</sup> Writing in 1976, a senior member of the RCG had underlined the imperative of campaigns for 'Irish freedom' to challenge the 'chauvinism' of the British working class.<sup>80</sup> 'Unconditional support' for 'Irish freedom' originated in a theoretical conviction, following Lenin's dictum:

The English working class will never be free until Ireland is freed from the English yoke. Reaction in England is strengthened and fostered by the enslavement of Ireland.<sup>81</sup>

As far as RCP theoreticians were concerned, British workers who failed to call for the defeat of 'imperialism' could not identify their class interests.<sup>82</sup> Vowing to confront workers' illusions in the state, cadres anticipated a monumental struggle: at a demonstration in Hyde Park in July 1978, RCT speakers declared that 'the absence of opposition to the oppressive role of the British state in Ireland consolidates the political weakness of the British working class.'<sup>83</sup> Founding RCT activist Pat Roberts similarly acknowledged the onerousness of challenging 'anti-Irish prejudices fostered by the labour bureaucracy'.<sup>84</sup>

77 *Republican News*, 13 October 1972.

78 Revolutionary Communist Tendency, *Special Issue on Ireland* (Revolutionary Communist Papers, No. 2, May 1978), 2 n. 3.

79 *Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism!* January–February 1981.

80 Chris Davies quoted in 'August 22nd 1976 demonstration', *Hands Off Ireland!*, 1 (December 1976).

81 V. I. Lenin, 'The right of nations to self-determination', V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 20* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 440.

82 From the mid-1970s, a substantial proportion of the British electorate favoured withdrawal from Northern Ireland: a series of Gallup polls and British Social Attitudes surveys suggested between 50 and 65 per cent support. Pro-withdrawal opinion, however, reflected British self-interest more than anti-imperialist conviction. In 1974, for example, the Bring the Boys Back from Ulster campaign received 120,000 petition signatures from soldiers' concerned relatives. Paul Dixon, "A real stirring in the nation": Military families, British public opinion and withdrawal from Northern Ireland', in Graham Dawson, Jo Dover and Stephen Hopkins (eds), *The Northern Ireland Troubles in Britain: Impacts, Engagements, Legacies and Memories* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 41–56.

83 Revolutionary Communist Tendency, *Ireland: It's a War, Not a Question of Human Rights*, 9 July 1978. Copy in author's possession.

84 Pat Roberts, 'The Revolutionary Communist Group: On the backs of the oppressed', *tns*, June–July 1980.



**Figure 1** Organized by the Smash the Prevention of Terrorism Act Campaign on 31 October 1981, this day school formed part of a series of early RCP events on the Northern Ireland conflict. Credit: Author's possession.

The RCP's assessment of Northern Ireland echoed the orthodox anti-imperialist strand of Irish Marxism epitomized by Michael Farrell's book *Northern Ireland: The Orange State* (1976).<sup>85</sup> British imperialism, cadres averred, dominated Ireland north and south, denying the island's populace self-determination. In this analysis, Northern Ireland's Protestant workers allied with the British crown and unionist bourgeoisie to enjoy 'limited but definite advantages' over their Catholic counterparts. Since their sectional privileges derived from maintaining the union, the argument ran, Protestant workers could not act independently as a class until British imperialism was defeated.<sup>86</sup> Assimilating Lenin's taxonomy of imperialism as the 'highest stage' of capitalist development,<sup>87</sup> the RCP's founders asserted that during a recession, imperialist

85 Michael Farrell, *Northern Ireland: The Orange State* (London: Pluto Press, 1976).

86 Andrew Clarkson and Phil Murphy, 'The loyalist working class', in Revolutionary Communist Party, *World in Recession*, 31.

87 V. I. Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (London: Junius/Living Marxism, 1996). During the imperialist epoch, Lenin argued, monopoly and state intervention replaced free competition, while economic growth became increasingly uneven and volatile. Frank Richards, 'Revisionism, imperialism and the state: The method of *Capital* and the dogma of State Monopoly Capitalism', in *Revisionism, Imperialism and the State* (Revolutionary Communist Papers, No. 4, February 1979), 17.

powers would intensify their colonial exploitation but could only mitigate and delay the crisis.<sup>88</sup>

Cadres interpreted the Northern Ireland conflict straightforwardly as a war between Irish republicans and British imperialism.<sup>89</sup> Positioning working-class unionism as precariously dependent upon British jurisdiction in Northern Ireland, party theoreticians cleaved to the republican orthodoxy that loyalism would wither when Britain withdrew. The RCP diverged entirely from those leftists, such as the members of the Militant tendency, who considered the republican insurgency a major barrier to class unity between Northern Ireland's Catholic and Protestant workers.<sup>90</sup> Insisting that the British state could play no progressive role in Ireland, the IFM also contradicted the strategic emphasis of the CPGB, which envisaged British trade unionists pressurizing Westminster to implement reforms felicitous to developing class unity in Northern Ireland.<sup>91</sup>

Writing in the late 1980s, the historian John Callaghan asserted that the RCP invoked its stance on Ireland to distinguish itself from leftist rivals.<sup>92</sup> 'Unconditional support' functioned as a polemical challenge to British leftists who qualified their support for republican objectives or criticized guerrillas' methods. As Marc Mulholland has demonstrated, most British radicals endorsed republicanism's militant content but were reluctant to endorse explicitly the IRA, lest they alienate working-class patriots.<sup>93</sup> Socialists who idealized Irish unification were wont to criticize republican tactics. The International Socialists, for example, had supported the Provisionals to the extent that they defended the Catholic community against British troops and sectarian attacks but argued that the lack of a social programme prevented republicans from winning a critical

88 *Workers against Imperialism: The British Labour Movement and Ireland* (Revolutionary Communist Pamphlets, No. 5, May 1979), 34.

89 Revolutionary Communist Tendency, *Special Issue on Ireland*, 1.

90 Founded by the Trotskyist Peter Hadden and his comrades in the Militant tendency in the late 1970s, the Northern Ireland Labour and Trade Union Group charged republicans and loyalists alike with exacerbating sectarian divisions. Militant espoused instead 'neither nationalism nor unionism – but workers' unity'. Moreover, Hadden and his comrades arraigned the Provisionals with prosecuting 'individual terrorism' and enabling the state to sharpen repression. Labour and Trade Union Group, *Northern Ireland Labour and Trade Union Group* (Belfast: Labour and Trade Union Group, 1985); Peter Hadden, 'Workers Unity against THE REAL ENEMY', *Militant: Marxist Paper for Labour & Youth*, 552 (15 May 1981).

91 In 1983, for example, the CPGB conference envisioned the labour movement compelling the British government to rescind repressive legislation, underwrite a Bill of Rights unifying Protestant and Catholic workers and 'create in the speediest time possible the political, social and economic conditions for the reunification of Ireland'. Chris Myant, *Common Cause: Trade Unionists and Ireland* (London: Communist Party of Great Britain, 1984), 6–8.

92 John Callaghan, *The Far Left in British Politics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 145.

93 Marc Mulholland, 'Northern Ireland and the far left, c. 1965–1975', *Contemporary British History*, 32 (2018): 549–50.

mass among Protestant workers or the southern proletariat.<sup>94</sup> The SWP backed the republican 'right of self-determination' but stipulated

this does not mean that we necessarily support the politics of the Provisionals, nor that we consider them socialists, nor that we support all the tactics they use.<sup>95</sup>

With bases in Liverpool and London, the revolutionary group Big Flame upheld Irish republicanism's challenge to the British state but explicitly criticized republican politics: the Provisionals' 'petit-bourgeois' leadership and military 'elitism', the argument ran, lacked a social programme capable of sufficiently mobilizing the Catholic working class.<sup>96</sup> Lambasting the Provisional campaign more sharply still, the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) denounced IRA bombings in Britain – 'a political gift to Thatcher' – for enabling the government to justify repression.<sup>97</sup> For the CPGB, meanwhile, the IRA campaign could only alienate the Protestant working class and prevent class unity in Northern Ireland.<sup>98</sup>

In a Leninist tradition, RCP cadres insisted that revolutionaries must support unconditionally the oppressed nation against the imperial oppressor, irrespective of the methods and programme of the liberation movement. Delineating the right of nations to self-determination, Lenin distinguished between 'oppressed' and 'oppressor' nations under imperialism. Writing during the First World War, the Bolshevik leader urged revolutionaries in oppressor nations to expedite the defeat of their imperialist rulers and to unite with the workers of the world's oppressed nations.<sup>99</sup> As such, the RCP espoused 'unconditional support' not to align specifically with the Provisional IRA per se but to endorse without reservation the republican threat to the British state. The RCT's foundational position on 'the Irish war' elaborated the principle:

The RCT gives unconditional support to national liberation movements and we particularly give such support to the movement for Ireland's liberation. We have our criticisms of the programmes of the organisations leading the movements. . . .

94 'Northern Ireland: Background to the crisis', *International Socialism*, 70 (June 1974).

95 Socialist Workers Party, *Why We Say Troops Out of Ireland!* (London: Socialists Unlimited, 1980), 7, 9.

96 Big Flame, *Ireland: Rising in the North* (Birmingham: Big Flame Publications, no date [1975]), 16, 26–7.

97 *News Line*, 27 July 1982.

98 *Ireland: A Question for Us All: Report of a London District Communist Party Delegation to Belfast* (London: Communist Party of Great Britain, 1983), 10.

99 V. I. Lenin, 'The revolutionary proletariat and the right of nations to self-determination', Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 21*, 407–14.

But we have never used our review to criticise the IRA. . . . Today any criticism of the IRA only gives succour to the forces of British chauvinism.<sup>100</sup>

The party's anti-imperialism inflamed controversy on the British left. Radicals who envisaged influencing republican politics accused the RCP of misguidedly tailing the Provisionals. For the *Leninist* faction of the CPGB, the RCP's 'unconditional support' meant 'automatically' acclaiming the British state's heterogeneous adversaries, from the 'Argentinian fascist junta that butchered thousands of progressives' to the 'petty bourgeois' Irish republican movement.<sup>101</sup> *Leninist* cadre Alan Merrik stipulated that British radicals should 'confront' the republican leadership's classless nationalism, rather than simply upholding their right to resist British rule.<sup>102</sup>

For leftists who advocated more interventionist engagement with the 'petit-bourgeois' republican movement, the RCP's position represented a dereliction of duty.<sup>103</sup> The Trotskyist organization Workers Power, for example, scorned the RCP's 'unconditional support' and argued that it behoved British revolutionaries to cultivate a revolutionary vanguard in the republican movement.<sup>104</sup> The Spartacists, meanwhile, accused the RCP of 'tailing . . . petit-bourgeois Green nationalism':<sup>105</sup> according to the Spartacist organizers, British imperialism would only be defeated when a 'revolutionary vanguard' in Ireland supplanted the 'national sectoralism [*sic*]' of Sinn Féin.<sup>106</sup> Criticizing the Provisionals' socialism as a deviation from the 'Marxist theory of Permanent Revolution', Simon Pirani of the WRP implored leftists to 'fight out battles with all political tendencies', including the 'nationalist, Republican movement'.<sup>107</sup>

From the vanguardist perspective, opposition to British rule in Ireland contained a revolutionary dynamic only insofar as it fundamentally challenged the state. Eschewing liberal reforms, revolutionaries called explicitly for

100 Mike Freeman, 'The Irish Republican Movement: Why we give unconditional support', *tms*, February 1981.

101 James Marshall, 'The Revolutionary Communist Party: Prepared to defend workers' power?', *Leninist*, July 1984.

102 Alan Merrik, 'Class questions', *Leninist*, 27 December 1987.

103 Across the British left, the pejorative 'petit-bourgeois nationalism' invoked Marx's formulation of the 'petty bourgeoisie' as a 'transitional class' between the bourgeoisie and proletariat, 'in which the interests of two classes are neutralised'. RCP cadres and rival leftists alike employed 'petit-bourgeois nationalism' as an epithet for nationalists who submerged class differences to rally the masses to a national liberation struggle. Karl Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', in Terrell Carver (ed.), *Marx: Later Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 62.

104 Workers Power, *The British Left and the Irish War* (London: no date [1983]), 41–2.

105 'Born-again Cliffites on the move'.

106 'We remember Bloody Sunday!', *Spartacist Britain*, 54 (February 1984).

107 Simon Pirani, 'On Sinn Féin', *Workers Press: Weekly Paper of the Workers Revolutionary Party*, 3 October 1987.

imperialism's defeat.<sup>108</sup> Protesting against the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), activists picketed courts and police stations not to 'quibble about civil rights' but to animate class opposition to British rule in Ireland.<sup>109</sup> Developing a position formulated by their former comrades in the RCG, cadres charged the Troops Out Movement (TOM) with failing to confront imperialism.<sup>110</sup> Solely calling for British troop withdrawals, the RCG Political Committee had postulated in 1976, did not challenge 'the dominant chauvinist position' in the working class.<sup>111</sup> Any individual or organization calling for troop withdrawals and all-Ireland self-determination could affiliate to the TOM. As Manchester TOM activist Geoffrey Whittle acknowledged in 1983, his organization was open to 'right-wing' elements who jingoistically implored the government to 'bring the boys home' from a supposedly tribal conflict.<sup>112</sup>

The RCP's vanguardist emphasis upon class-conscious anti-imperialism codified 'solidarity' more discerningly than did the republican movement itself. Straightforwardly envisaging in Britain the largest, most influential pro-withdrawal constituency, Provisional strategists candidly admitted that they welcomed all forms of 'troops out' sentiment. Interviewed by British radicals in October 1978, leading Belfast Provisional Gerry Adams epitomized the movement's pragmatic support for all British strands of pro-withdrawal politics:

We're very satisfied . . . to receive whatever support we can get for the short-term Republican objectives from the British left and the British working class, regardless of the motives. From a purist point of view, we would prefer that it be a conscious solidarity action; from an expediency point of view we are only

108 *Ireland's Victory Means Britain's Defeat* (Revolutionary Communist Pamphlets, No. 7, June 1980), 14.

109 Revolutionary Communist Tendency, *Smash the Prevention of Terrorism Act!* (June 1979). Labour Home Secretary Roy Jenkins introduced the PTA in 1974, after Provisional IRA bombers killed twenty-one civilians in Birmingham in 1974. Illegalizing support for proscribed organizations, the PTA allowed for suspects to be arrested without a warrant and detained for up to forty-eight hours – and, with the Home Secretary's permission, for a further five days. By December 1992, 7,192 persons had been detained under the PTA in relation to the Northern Ireland conflict. Some 6,200 of those arrested were released without charge. Paddy Hillyard, 'Irish people and the British criminal justice system', *Journal of Law and Society*, 21 (1994): 48.

110 Until an internal schism in 1977, the Troops Out Movement had over 1,200 active members across Britain, and a wider affiliate membership numbering more than 10,000. The TOM's demands for British withdrawal and Irish 'self-determination' gained traction among British leftists in the International Socialists, IMG and CPGB and enjoyed substantial support in the trade union movement: 326 union branches attended TOM's conference in 1974. Aly Renwick, "Something in the air": The rise of the Troops Out Movement', in Dawson, Dover and Hopkins (eds), *The Northern Ireland Troubles in Britain*; Jeremy Tranmer, 'A force to be reckoned with? The radical left in the 1970s', *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique*, 22 (2017): 7.

111 Jim Johnson, 'Lessons of TOM', *Hands Off Ireland!*, 1 (December 1976).

112 'Call to unite', *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 24 March 1983.

interested in the dismantling of the British imperialist structures and whatever volume of support for that dismantling, we would welcome it.<sup>113</sup>

Determined to expose the social-chauvinism of the trade union bureaucracy, the RCT inaugurated its Smash the Prevention of Terrorism Act Campaign (SPTAC) in 1979. Highlighting the authorities' powers of summary arrest and detention, the SPTAC challenged trade union branches and area committees to declare outright opposition to British rule in Ireland. At this juncture, the TUC endorsed the Better Life For All Campaign, which denounced violence in Northern Ireland and shunned the national question. Launched in Belfast in January 1976 by the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, the Better Life For All Campaign condemned paramilitarism and advocated reforms in employment, housing, education and social services.<sup>114</sup> Initially, SPTAC activists lobbied trades councils only in areas where the RCT had a presence, such as Tameside in Greater Manchester, and Battersea, Lambeth and Wandsworth in London. In 1980, to enhance the campaign's public profile, the National Organisation of Revolutionary Communist Students moved the National Union of Students (NUS) to condemn the PTA.<sup>115</sup> Picketing courts and detention centres, SPTAC pickets garnered publicity and a degree of organizational growth: in 1981, for example, the Nottingham TOM branch defected to the SPTAC.<sup>116</sup>

Taking its anti-imperialism into the trade union movement represented a dominant theme of early RCP activity. A founding member of the RCT, Dave Hallsworth was also an elected executive official on his local trades council in Tameside, Greater Manchester. In 1980, when Tameside provocatively endorsed the RCT slogan – 'Bring the war to Britain' – the TUC ordered a recantation. When Tameside refused, the TUC leadership disaffiliated the council. Imploring trade unionists nationwide to raise motions supporting Tameside, Hallsworth and his comrades publicized the controversy to expose and challenge what they considered a reactionary union bureaucracy:

113 'interview with Gerry Adams: Vice-President Provisional Sinn Fein', *Hands Off Ireland!*, 6 (January 1979). For a detailed analysis of republicans' and British leftists' divergent ideals of 'solidarity', see Jack Hepworth, "'The moral rearmament of imperialism": The Revolutionary Communist Party, the Northern Ireland conflict, and the new world order, 1981-1994', *Contemporary British History*, 36 (2022): 591–621.

114 A Better Life For All Campaign, *The People's Declaration: 'A better life for all'* (Belfast: A Better Life For All Campaign, 1976).

115 Kate Marshall, 'The Smash the PTA campaign', *tns*, January 1980.

116 UPI0000015575: 'Special Branch report on an internal conference of the Revolutionary Communist Tendency to discuss forthcoming policies and actions', 1 September 1981.

Whenever workers organise independently, union bureaucrats reply with bans and proscriptions. . . . The reaction of the labour bureaucracy to the Tameside conference shows the importance of Ireland for British workers.<sup>117</sup>

Similarly, in March 1981, as the SPTAC, cadres coordinated a national conference at Coventry's Lanchester Polytechnic, imploring union branches to lobby the TUC to express 'support' for the 'national liberation struggle against British rule.'<sup>118</sup> The TUC's draconian response – threatening all 440 British trades councils with disaffiliation if they attended the Coventry event – provoked a furore in the labour movement.<sup>119</sup> Only six trades councils officially defied the TUC diktat, but the conference nevertheless assembled 260 workers who passed resolutions condemning the TUC's nonpartisan position on Northern Ireland.<sup>120</sup>

In September 1981, the RCP's Workers March for Irish Freedom provoked a similarly hostile response from the leadership of the labour movement. Proceeding from Manchester to Blackpool, marchers arrived in the Lancashire seaside town to picket the TUC's annual conference and highlight its failure to support the Irish republican hunger strikers in Long Kesh.<sup>121</sup> Pledging to 'bring the war to England', leading cadres Fran Eden and Carol Taggart told local reporters that marchers were 'fighting the establishment' as republicans fought the British state.<sup>122</sup> Gaining limited traction in the labour movement, the march won formal endorsement from only two trades councils nationwide. Nevertheless, twenty-six organizers from union branches and area offices across the country joined in a personal capacity, and the regional media afforded the Workers March for Irish Freedom considerable coverage.<sup>123</sup>

Throughout the 1980s, cadres who were active in the labour movement endeavoured to win their colleagues to support the 'liberation struggle'. Picketing the Labour Party conference in 1986, IFM activists collected the

117 Archive of the Irish in Britain, London Metropolitan University: *Ireland and the British Labour Movement* (London: Smash the Prevention of Terrorism Act Campaign, n.d. [1980]).

118 'TUC hands off Ireland!', *tms*, February 1981.

119 Michael Bromley, 'TUC alert over H-block meeting', *Belfast Telegraph*, 23 February 1981.

120 "'TUC hands off Ireland" Coventry conference', *The Irish Prisoner*, March–April 1981.

121 In March 1981, five years after the Labour government withdrew politically motivated prisoners' special-category status, republican prisoners in Long Kesh/HMP Maze commenced a hunger strike for five demands: the right not to undertake prison work or wear a prison uniform; the right to free association; the right to one visit, one letter, and one parcel per week; and the right to full remission. The strike continued until October 1981, by which point ten prisoners had died, comprising seven Provisional IRA volunteers and three members of the Irish National Liberation Army.

122 Kevin Keenan, 'Strong arm squad on march: Karate experts to guard H-block demo', *Lancashire Evening Post*, 4 September 1981; 'March backs death fasts', *Lancashire Evening Post*, 5 September 1981.

123 'Workers march for Irish freedom', *tms*, July–August 1981.

names of more than 200 Labour activists who were willing to raise IFM motions in party and trade union branches.<sup>124</sup> Occasionally, leading RCP activists with substantial union cachet won support in their branches for party positions on Ireland, piquing the TUC hierarchy. As secretary of Tameside Trades Council, for example, Dave Hallsworth convinced his union comrades to host an RCP film screening in 1983. Banning the event, senior TUC official John Monks threatened to expel Tameside for 'irresponsible' behaviour 'not worthy of genuine trade unionists'.<sup>125</sup> Similarly, as president of Hammersmith National and Local Government Officers' Association (NALGO), RCP veteran John Fitzpatrick persistently campaigned for his union branch to oppose British rule in Ireland.<sup>126</sup> In 1988, when Fitzpatrick's branch finally endorsed Irish self-determination, he revelled in the opportunity to convene a contentious debate including republican speakers: 'for the first time in years we have drawn hundreds of members into a full discussion on Ireland'.<sup>127</sup>

From 1982, the RCP generally pitched its campaigns on Ireland under the banner of its front organization, the Irish Freedom Movement (IFM). Regularly coordinating demonstrations, marches and conferences, the IFM brought the party into contact with class-conscious workers in the trade union movement and the Irish diaspora. Urging workers and their institutions to take sides against Britain in 'the Irish war', participation in the IFM's activities went beyond the core cadre membership of the RCP. The 450 activists at the London conference, which launched the IFM in February 1982, explicitly distinguished this 'anti-imperialist movement' from 'liberal pressure groups' which lobbied parliamentarians for a British withdrawal.<sup>128</sup>

Exhorting British workers to take sides against the state formed an important component of the IFM's challenge to labourism.<sup>129</sup> Distributed in the labour movement and among higher education student societies in the 1980s, IFM agitprop films were designed to win British militants to the RCP's position on Ireland. Combining documentary footage in Belfast and Derry and interviews with republican activists, *No British solution* (c. 1984) purported to disabuse

124 'In the unions', *IFM News: Bi-Monthly Bulletin of the Irish Freedom Movement*, 1 (November–December 1986).

125 'TUC wall of silence', *tns*, April 1983.

126 Fitzpatrick was embroiled in controversy in March 1988, when he reportedly used union notepaper for a letter of sympathy to the families of three IRA volunteers killed in Gibraltar. 'Full house for IRA', *Fulham Chronicle*, 21 April 1988.

127 'Debating Ireland in the unions', *tns*, 29 April 1988.

128 Mike Wall, 'A tale of two conferences', *tns*, March 1982.

129 Following the usage of RCT and RCP theoreticians throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, the uncapitalized 'labourism' is employed here to connote the strategies of the Labour Party and the wider trade union movement.

British workers of 'imperialist' illusions.<sup>130</sup> Similarly, featuring extended testimony from IFM activist Dave Hallsworth, *The longest war* (c. 1985) documented how Tameside Trades Council's 'unconditional support' for the republican campaign had piqued the hostility of the union bureaucracy. Offering the video for hire to youth groups, college and university student societies, and trade union branches, the IFM also sent speakers to accompany screenings.<sup>131</sup>

Cadres sought to highlight the Labour Party's record on Ireland as a marker of its essential reformism. For example, when Sheffield City Council refused to allow the IFM to use the City Hall for a rally in 1984, IFM organizer Keith Tompson unsuccessfully challenged Labour council leader David Blunkett to a debate on Northern Ireland.<sup>132</sup> The RCP's polemical purposes for championing 'Irish freedom' were not lost on Blunkett. Responding to a letter from a Spartacist League activist in 1983, the future Home Secretary noted that the RCP had 'declared their main enemy to be the Labour Party and Labour Movement'.<sup>133</sup> Blunkett recognized the IFM's modus operandi: 'I think they use the issue of Ireland to pursue their avowed aim of smashing the Labour Party'.<sup>134</sup> The strategic determination to explode Westminster's bipartisan consensus on Northern Ireland underpinned the IFM's notoriety on the reformist left. In 1985, for example, when the Cambridge University Fabian Society invited the Labour Committee on Ireland (LCI) to join a debate on Ireland, LCI secretary Niall Power stipulated that he would send a speaker on condition that they did not share a platform with the IFM:

such groups as the IFM and the RCP cause such harm to the question of Ireland and indeed British socialism we would decline to give them any credibility.<sup>135</sup>

At the turn of the century, reviewing a century of uneasy interactions between British leftists and Irish republicans, a former RCP activist commented acidly upon how the Labour Party

130 Linen Hall Library, Belfast: Northern Ireland Political Collection: Irish in Britain Box 1. Irish Freedom Movement, *No British solution* (n.d. [c. 1984]).

131 Linen Hall Library, Belfast: Northern Ireland Political Collection: Irish in Britain Box 1. Irish Freedom Movement flyer (n.d. [c. 1985]).

132 *Star*, 13 January 1984.

133 North of England Institute of Mining and Mechanical Engineers: Dave Douglass Archive: Miners' Strike Box 1: David Blunkett to David Douglass, 8 June 1983.

134 Sheena Clarke, 'An interview with Sheffield council leader David Blunkett', *Labour & Ireland*, 2, no. 3 (n.d. [1984]).

135 Archive of the Irish in Britain, London Metropolitan University: Anne Waring to Labour Committee on Ireland, 5 April 1985; Niall Power to Anne Waring, undated [1985].



**Figure 2** RCP and IFM activists at County Hall, London, during an IFM demonstration, c. 1985. Credit: Joan Hoey/Revolutionary Communist Party.

in orientating itself towards the institutions of State, has consistently subordinated the aspirations of Irish Nationalists to the interests of either strategic advantage, the co-operation of the Ulster Unionists or the continuance of bipartisanship.<sup>136</sup>

The IFM positioned the republican campaign as an inspiration for working-class independence against the state and the ruling class in Britain. During the miners' strike, leading RCP cadre Mick Hume asserted that republicans' militant anti-statism bore 'important lessons for the labour movement'.<sup>137</sup> Vanguardists implored British workers to emulate the ideological independence which characterized republican resistance. Writing in 1986, an RCP organizer in Stockport hailed the republican campaign as a salutary example of a

fight-back against the British state. . . . British workers have nothing to gain by supporting the British state . . . but everything to gain by supporting the fight for Irish freedom.<sup>138</sup>

By the end of the 1980s, the IFM's twenty branches comprised the largest radical solidarity movement in Britain.<sup>139</sup> Each August, its annual march in London typically attracted an estimated 3,000 demonstrators, including activists beyond

136 Cronain O'Kelly, 'British socialists and Irish republicans', *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 1 (2001): 18.

137 Mick Hume, *After the Brighton Bomb* (London: Junius, 1984), 15.

138 C. Moore, Revolutionary Communist Party, Reddish, 'Workers and the Irish agreement', *Stockport Express Advertiser*, 1 May 1986.

139 *Irish Freedom: Bulletin of the Irish Freedom Movement*, May–June 1990.

the RCP's inner circle.<sup>140</sup> For Rob Killick, the August march represented an organizational highlight. As a leading cadre, Killick organized the stewards for marchers running the gauntlet of fascist counter-protesters.<sup>141</sup>

We'd have a core of about twenty blokes who were all ready and willing to get stuck in. So there was a physical-force element to it, which was also very good. I loved all that stuff. And I loved organising the demonstrations.<sup>142</sup>

As fixtures in the radical calendar, IFM demonstrations galvanized diverse militants against British rule in Ireland. In 1986, alongside nine MPs and two Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), some 115 Labour Party councillors joined the march. Trade union branches in Durham, London and Nottingham were among the affiliated sponsors, while the CPGB's *Leninist* faction and the WRP also endorsed the rally.<sup>143</sup> *The Leninist's* correspondent at the IFM march in August 1991 noted 'many contingents . . . freely handing out different literature'.<sup>144</sup>

Refusing to criticize publicly republican politics or tactics reflected the RCP's conviction that social-chauvinism pervaded the British working class. In a climate of anti-Irish hostility, cadres argued, rebuking republicans could only galvanize nationalist prejudices and reformist politics.<sup>145</sup> Contrary to superficial appearance, however, 'unconditional support' did not imply specific approval for particular republican policies or actions. For RCP activists, 'Irish freedom' was not, in itself, a strategic terminus but rather a campaigning point to polarize debates in the British working class. The party's rationale anticipated conditions in which revolutionaries would censure republicans' political limitations: when 'large numbers' of British workers celebrated the IRA offensive, Mike Freeman wrote, '*then* there will be a time to criticise the programme of Provisional Sinn Fein'.<sup>146</sup> As a senior cadre told an internal party debate in 1981, the ultimate objective was to establish an independent Marxist alternative to the republican movement: once British workers en masse demanded Irish freedom,

140 'Anti-internment rally, Whittington Park', *tns*, 19 August 1988; *Green Left Weekly*, 4 September 1991; Stuart Sharpe, '3000 support anti-war march', *Irish Freedom: Bulletin of the Irish Freedom Movement*, Winter 1993.

141 In 1988 and 1989, for example, British National Party and National Front contingents attacked the IFM marches and fighting broke out. More than eighty people were arrested in total. *Illustrated London News*, 1 September 1988; 'Arrests as rivals clash', *Sunday Life*, 6 August 1989.

142 Rob Killick, 20 August 2020.

143 *Workers Press*, 26 July 1986.

144 'Irish Freedom Movement demonstration', *Leninist*, 13 July 1992.

145 Revolutionary Communist Tendency, *Smash the Prevention of Terrorism Act!*

146 Freeman, 'The Irish Republican Movement: Why we give unconditional support'.

revolutionaries would move to supplant Sinn Féin.<sup>147</sup> Reviewing the memoir of former IRA Chief of Staff Seán Mac Stíofáin, Andrew Clarkson stipulated that in an independent Ireland, a revolutionary party must develop the class politics which Sinn Féin could not.<sup>148</sup> If republicans forced a British withdrawal, Frank Richards opined, a 'consistent anti-imperialist' vanguard would have to organize.<sup>149</sup>

The Leninist distinction between a struggle's *form* and *content* underpinned cadres' 'unconditional support'. Members of the RCP endorsed Irish republicanism's anti-imperialist content rather than its particular tactical or political forms. Concomitantly, rhetorical 'unconditional support' coexisted with criticisms of the movement's programme. Mary Masters and Phil Murphy lauded the republican challenge to the British state while positioning republicanism in a tradition of 'petit-bourgeois nationalism'.<sup>150</sup> RCP vanguardists regarded the republican movement as a nationalist alliance which would settle for a domestic transfer of power without transforming class relations. Éire Nua ('New Ireland'), Sinn Féin's programme between 1971 and 1982 – when it was unceremoniously dropped after a leadership faction fight – proposed a federalized Ireland built upon redistributive economic nationalism. Private property rights would remain, albeit subordinated to local industrial and agrarian co-operatives.<sup>151</sup> Invoking a fabled *Comhar na gComharsan* philosophy of neighbourhood co-operation and mutual aid, Éire Nua's architects aspired to transcend both the individualism of Western capitalism, 'with its poor and hungry amid plenty', and the dictatorial repression of 'Eastern Soviet' Stalinism, 'with its denial of freedom and human rights'.<sup>152</sup> Sinn Féin's *ard fheiseanna* (annual conferences) of 1979 and 1980 further underlined the programme's 'democratic socialist' credentials, championing co-operatives above 'capitalist plundering' and 'private enterprise', which would have 'no place in industries' in the new Ireland.<sup>153</sup> Reviewing Sinn Féin's erstwhile social and economic programme, Mike Freeman noted republicanism's 'middle

147 UPI0000015575: 'Special Branch report on an internal conference of the Revolutionary Communist Tendency to discuss forthcoming policies and actions', 1 September 1981.

148 *Revisionism, Imperialism and the State* (Revolutionary Communist Papers, No. 4, February 1979): Andrew Clarkson, 'Review: Seán MacStíofáin: Memoirs of a revolution', 35.

149 Frank Richards, 'No equivocation!', in Revolutionary Communist Tendency, *Special Issue on Ireland*, 25.

150 Mary Masters and Phil Murphy, 'British imperialism and the Irish crisis', 5, 16.

151 *Éire Nua: The Social and Economic Programme of Sinn Féin* (Dublin: Sinn Féin, 1971).

152 The Secretary, Belfast Executive Sinn Féin, 'What Sinn Féin means by a socialist federal Ireland', *Irish News*, 25 October 1973.

153 Sinn Féin, *Éire Nua: Updated text* (n.d. [c. 1980]); Sue O'Halloran, PRO Sinn Féin (Britain), 'Provisional Sinn Féin Ard Fheis 1980', *Ireland Socialist Review*, 7 (Spring 1980).

class traditions'. Through the mid-1980s, as Sinn Féin extended its experimental electoralism, Freeman criticized the movement's 'opportunist' tendencies.<sup>154</sup>

While cadres seldom publicly criticized republicans in the 1980s, the RCP leadership openly declared that it had no illusions in the Provisionals' ambiguous political ecology. Endorsed at the party's annual Preparing for Power conference in 1985, the Political Committee's position bears quoting at length:

As the IRA has pointed out, it is not a Marxist organisation. . . . The Revolutionary Communist Party's support for the republican movement has nothing to do with its politics. We support the republican movement because it is leading the fight against British rule in Ireland. . . . We would support the republican movement if it was led by a collection of Catholic priests and nuns, so long as it was leading resistance against British domination. . . . The RCP will continue to give unconditional support to the republican movement irrespective of its programme, its strategy, or its tactics. As long as it remains the leading force in the struggle against British imperialism and the biggest threat to the stability of the United Kingdom, that's good enough for us.<sup>155</sup>

An internal document circulated to party members and supporters the following year similarly separated the struggle's 'inner essence' and 'the movement leading it'. Activists were reminded that the RCP did not sloganize specifically for the IRA, and the party 'reserved the right' to criticize the republican movement if they deemed that it ceased to threaten Western imperialism. Endorsing republicanism's content rather than its forms, cadres did not pronounce upon particular tactics. Theoreticians differentiated specific guerrilla actions – such as 'planting a bomb in a Birmingham pub . . . a stupid thing to do' – and the broader revolutionary dynamic of an anti-imperialist campaign.<sup>156</sup>

In recent media coverage of the RCP, the party's historical position on Ireland has featured among its most controversial facets. In 2020, when the Conservative government nominated Claire Fox for a peerage, journalists in Britain and Ireland alike underscored Fox's past association with the RCP and its 'unconditional support' for Irish republicanism.<sup>157</sup> The *Sunday Times*, for example, vilified Fox's journey 'from champion of terror to peer of the realm'.<sup>158</sup> Describing Fox as an 'IRA apologist', the *New European* noted that when an

154 *tns*, February 1985.

155 Frank Richards, 'Comrades of the IRA', *Times*, 14 August 1985.

156 'The RCP and the Irish struggle (1986)', reprinted in *tns*, 20 November 1992.

157 See, for example, Lauren Harte, 'Bomb victim's father slams peerage for MP whose former party "defended" the IRA', *Belfast Telegraph*, 3 August 2020; 'IRA sympathiser's Lords peerage is "insult" to town', *Liverpool Echo*, 9 October 2020.

158 Kinchen and Al-Othman, 'From champion of terror to peer of the realm'.

IRA bomb killed schoolboys Johnathan Ball and Tim Parry in Warrington in 1993, the RCP upheld the 'right of the Irish people to take whatever measures necessary in their struggle for freedom'.<sup>159</sup>

In subsequent years, cadres somberly declared the demise of class politics and the defeat of the republican struggle.<sup>160</sup> Yet for most former RCP activists, the rationale for espousing 'Irish freedom' remains clear. Underlining the historical specificity of 'unconditional support' – in an era preceding the Provisionals' strategic reorientation in the 1990s – one veteran reasserts the vanguardist imperative of campaigning on 'the Irish war':

The reason why the issues of Ireland and racism were so important is, again, they were issues where the establishment could get people to rally round the flag by being British. If you supported the actions of the British state in Ireland, how are you ever going to be capable of fighting for your independent interests within Britain? If you support the suppression of democratic rights, think the British state has the right to do that, withhold the rights of the Irish people and suppress them, use violence to do that – if you accept that, then how do you stand up for your rights in Britain?<sup>161</sup>

Claire Fox evokes more starkly still how the RCP instrumentalized the conflict in Ireland to implore British workers to clarify their class interests:

The RCP's Irish politics actually didn't have very much to do with the Irish. . . . It really had to do with encouraging people to not side with the British state against the Irish . . . even where you thought that particular tactics were ridiculous, barbaric, stupid, vile, abhorrent.<sup>162</sup>

Rather than expounding a sentimental or thoroughgoing affinity with the Irish republican movement *per se*, the IFM's affinity rested upon republicanism's fundamental antagonism towards the British state.

In addition to imploring workers to take sides against Britain in 'the Irish war', the RCP's militant anti-racism was similarly intended to expose and counter left-wing nationalism, reformism and illusions in the state. From the formation of the RCT in 1978, cadres espoused and enacted anti-capitalist, anti-racist politics. The organization's anti-racist activism forms the basis of the following chapter.

159 Jonathon Read, 'Brexiteer and IRA apologist Claire Fox joins House of Lords', *New European*, 8 October 2020; 'The response to Warrington', *tns*, 2 April 1993.

160 See Chapter 4.

161 Former RCP member interview with the author, August 2021.

162 Claire Fox interview with the author, 1 September 2020.