

Peace at any price ?

Collins

It has come to my notice that my name (and that of Cde. Callaghan) is being touted around as the latest convert to the Faction - if not politically, then on the organisation question.

This says more about how the Faction operates than my position. The Faction leaders know that on every major issue I disagree with them and support the politics of the majority. (Comrade Callaghan is if anything further away from them.) But what do politics count for when there are organisational grievances at stake ? Unlike the Faction I believe politics are paramount. The organisation question resolves itself down to : what kind of organisation are we trying to build, on what politics ?

Perhaps it should come as no surprise. Smith's vote against the expulsion of Booth at the last EC can only make sense if the Faction see politics as secondary to cementing old loyalties and consolidating their bloc with the rightist pro-B clique centred round Parsons in Coventry.

For the record, then, I would like to put down on paper where I stand in the present dispute - if for no other reason than that I will inevitably be accused (or excused) as having been bludgeoned into accepting the position of Carolan, Kinnell, Hill, et al.

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The present situation

Nobody can be in any serious doubt (notwithstanding any proclamations they may chose to make for tactical advantage) that the organisation is split. Irreconcilably split. To an extent, the apportioning of blame (though clearly I have my own views on this) is irrelevant. We are faced with a fact. And we must decide how to deal with it.

Jagger has proposed an amicable divorce. If it looked like it were possible, I would support it. If the two sides were capable of a calm rational division (of opinion, politics, resources, people) then we would not be in the position we are now in.

I was in favour of a 'divorce' a year ago - but I was persuaded (primarily by Carolan who is supposed to be the main motivator of a split) that the majority of the organisation did not at that point did not see the situation as irreconcilable. My position then was partly subjective (I have an instinctive sympathy - though it's not my considered position - with the view that it's a lot of neurotic male egos.) Mainly, though, it was a result of the experience of the work I was most

closely involved in. I could not easily forget that the Faction (and their then allies and cohorts) were responsible for wrecking our women's work. That led me to conclude :

- a) that their organisational responsibility could not be relied on - they would think nothing of wrecking the organisation's work if some factional advantage could be gained,
- b) that political divisions would widen, and be compounded by organisational accusations, hysteria, etc.,
- c) that having clearly decided conference policy could be no guarantee against the defeated positions being re-raised in the most disruptive manner possible. This would seem to have been borne out. I make no claims to prophetic powers, only that the women's 'discussion' was a rehearsal for all that happened subsequently.

It is for the same reason that I have grave doubts as to the possibility of a termination of the fusion. On the women's commission, when it became clear that the two approaches to women's oppression could not be made to gel, we tried a form of peaceful co-existence - with the two sides pursuing their own priorities and methods. But those closest to the present Faction were hell-bent not only on following their own politics but on making sure the alternative was obliterated. The violent hatreds aroused by the ensuing battle drove many women out of the organisation and left the survivors too shattered to pick up the pieces in any but the most desultory way. For something like a year we had no women's commission because no one was prepared to convene it and most women refused to attend. I hesitate to loose that kind of havoc on the organisation.

My experience has been that any attempts to conciliate, any offers of a peaceful resolution are taken as weakness and a signal to wind up the atmosphere to an intolerable pitch. I would like to see a bloodless solution. But if the Faction refuse (and I can see no real prospect of them accepting minority status, from all that has gone before) then I can see no alternative but forcible ejection. In the long run it will probably be less traumatic for what remains of the organisation.

We had a year in which the major political questions have already been decided and it is clear that far from the organisation looking outwards and building on these positions, we have seen increased internal chaos, differences declared on every question no matter how trivial - often a 'fundamental difference' in principle before the position has ever been debated.

So how to tie off the severed ends ?

I'm no longer sure it matters. I did (and still do) think it important to involve the membership, to avoid red herrings and the discussion being diverted into 'who did what when'. However it is accomplished (some kind of split is inevitable, there is no way we can co-exist in a common organisation, it is only a question of whether we bleed to death slowly, die of exhaustion or find some quicker way) there will be organisational accusations. What minority has ever claimed to be fairly treated ? who has ever gone into the political wilderness quietly - even if they subside into silence thereafter ?

I don't think the Faction's politics are coherent enough to build an organisation on. I await with bated breath the spectacle of an organisation built on their theory of the party, as elaborated recently, including as its founding principle the right not to pay your dues, paper debts, etc.

The Faction blocs, 'on the question of democracy' they say, with rightists, broad-church Trotskyists, wholemeal lifestylists, of a petty bourgeois complexion, with whom they have less agreement politically than with the majority. Will they be invited to join in ?

24/3/84

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Since writing the above, I have learnt that the Faction voted to dissolve itself. Who are they trying to kid ?

If nothing else they had done, such a light-minded and manoeuvrist attitude to the organisation merits expulsion. The Faction was formed after the disputed issues were voted on, after the election of a leadership in which they were significantly represented ; their claim was that the Faction was formed for 'self-defence'. Since then there has been a string of accusations of bureaucracy, suppression, victimisation, etc. Now, faced with a call to behave or get out, they dissolve the Faction. What happened to 'self-defence' ? Has the 'bureaucracy' changed its spots ? Either the Faction leaders were lying when they formed the Faction, when they spread their poisonous accusations, OR THEY ARE LYING NOW ! Or, quite possibly, both.

The dissolution of the Faction before a conference, when the leadership has finally and belatedly tightened up, when they genuinely are under threat, is a shameless ruse. It reveals the Faction as utterly politically unserious, blatantly dishonest, and slyly manipulative.

The dissolution of the Faction (in form but not in substance) is a ploy to win over those politically confused and naive comrades who reject the Faction's politics but are troubled that there may be some substance to their organisational charges (as well as consolidating the professional Abernites for whom the prospect of a continuation of the organisation's blood-letting holds no distaste.).

A meeting of signatories to the call for a special conference has come up with various proposals to 'save the fusion'. Their scenario (for which I don't have the details as I wasn't present at the meeting and/^{can}only go on the word of its supporters) runs something like as follows :

At a special conference to debate the internal situation, the membership will rise up and call the leadership to order; new leading bodies will be elected and a functioning EB and commissions will be set up ; the minority will be guaranteed their rights as a minority and in return will promise to operate in accordance with the organisations agreed policies.

Now what's wrong with that ?

It's diversionary, utopian, apolitical, and flies in the face of all experience up to now.

A special conference ?

We could certainly do with a conference. There are unresolved issues (how to proceed with SX; characterisation of B ; how to rebuild our women's work ; CND/ Greenham - to name but a few). If we are to have a conference, especially at a major turn in the class struggle (which impinges on the Faction only in so far as it's meat for factional agitation) then it should be turned over to how to build the organisation in the present situation, analysing where we are at in the struggle. We need to sort out our internal situation but to devote a whole conference to picking over the gripes is diversionary to the point of sabotage.

To separate out the organisational problems from the politics behind them is an upside down, apolitical method. The Faction is agitating round the organisational questions BECAUSE IT LOST ON THE POLITICAL ISSUES. With less and less chance of winning politically, with more and more of the organisation's politics decided democratically by conferences, the agitation has centred more and more around alleged organisational abuses. Those who genuinely believe that there can be an organisational truce with what is in effect a politically separate organisation are deluded. They have forgotten the primary purpose of building a revolutionary organisation - to forward its politics.

Look at the proposals concretely :

How would the NC/ EC/ EB/ Commissions function ?

Either they would be composed wholly of majority comrades, or they would replicate the factional warfare that already exists on the leading bodies. This might be OK for the NC (which decides the politics of the organisation between conferences, and for this reason guarantees representation for factions, etc.) But the others are executive bodies, charged with carrying out the agreed policies, not developing them, in their designated areas. What would happen if these functional bodies would be paralysed in executing the decisions of the organisation by 'fundamental differences' being declared on every issue (as happens at present on the EC).

Could anyone trust the proclamations of the Faction to abide by the organisation's norms ? Or indeed the Majority not to behave bureaucratically, if you subscribe to that view of the dispute ? Why should either change their spots ?

Yes, we need a conference. But a conference of those committed to building the same organisation. Whatever tactical protestations they make to the contrary, the Faction are not interested in building this organisation on its agreed politics. They have 'fundamental disagreements' - not on this or that discreet issue, but on every major issue; on how we view the world, imperialism, Ireland, the British class struggle, how we view the Labour and trade union bureaucracy, women, youth, the nature of the party, characterisation of the world Trotskyist movement and other groups. Is there anything left to agree on ?

And far from moving closer together, the disputed issues multiply at a dizzying pace. We do not even have agreement on what sort of an organisation we are building, and therefore no framework within which those disputes could be solved.

There are real issues of dispute within the organisation, but these are fogged and muddled by the presence of the Faction (and the career factionalists who act as their chorus). Until we have sorted out this diversion, those issues will not get a proper airing and chaos will reign.

Is the Majority leadership perfect ?

Comrades who share the Majority's politics, but agree with all or some of the criticism of the way the leadership (primarily Carolan, Kinnell, Hill) behave, may well feel they are being let off the hook too lightly. Essentially and for the present, that is beside the point. Any organisation built round people who like Carolan or are prepared to jump when he snaps his fingers, would be very tiny indeed. Most majority comrades would take issue with most things about Carolan EXCEPT HIS POLITICS. But that's what counts! Comrades committed to building the organisation on the organisation's politics may wish to settle accounts. But we'll do it in our own way in our own time. We don't need the Faction. And we won't let them wreck the organisation in the process.

26/3/84

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I have just received the Appeal by 8 NC members which would seem to confirm the above scenario. A few further points on that document :

A) The hypocrisy of the talk about 'collective leadership' is breath-taking - coming from Smith who has de facto abdicated any responsibility for leading the organisation; from Cunliffe who in his latest IB crows about the weakness of the paper, a situation precipitated in very large part by his ultimatic departure; and Parsons and Oliver who make a principle of opposing 'the leadership' (any and every leadership) on any question.

B) The 8 signatories have set themselves up demagogically as the champions of the membership.

How do they actually see the hapless rank and file ?

Well, they complain that 'the EC majority comrades are happy enough to pressurise individual members to take stands on some advanced and highly complex political issues'.

How outrageous ! Comrades are asked to take political decisions. In a revolutionary Marxist organisation ! Scandal. These are 'advanced and highly complex issues'. We mustn't let our poor dim-witted sheep worry their little heads with such questions. That's not what they joined the organisation (in preference to all the other tendencies and groups) for. That's not what they face everyday in their political work, taking a stand on complex issues.

What an insult to the membership they claim to defend .

No doubt Smith, who has had years to perfect this line, will argue that it's OK for the 'intellectuals' to make political judgments, but what about the workers ?

Well, we only expect them to seize power and re-make society afresh. We only expect our comrades to be the most advanced and politically conscious elements

of our class. We can't expect them to think through political issues, can we ? That kind of petty bourgeois claptrap I would expect from trade union and Labour bureaucrats, not from a self-proclaimed revolutionary Marxist organisation.

Again, we hear complaints of the 'crushing of dissent in one-to-one encounters'. What are these people made of ?

I'll take a one-to-one encounter with Frank Chappell or Neil Kinnock anyday in preference to the real material power based on their machine. Would that the class struggle were made up of such one-to-one combat. We'd have our victory well behind us by now.

Such is the real complaint behind the accusations of bureaucratism : comrades talk to, even shout at, other comrades in order to convince them politically ! (The reprinting of the minutes of the EC discussion on IB 50 in IB 89 provides a hilarious example of this. In a discussion about the way 'intellectuals' i.e. full-timers intimidate workers by political discussion, the comrades are asked for an instance of this. The example they give is of Keith on the Middle East. Now, there is no one in the organisation who more closely approximates, sociologically and culturally with Prof. Burnham (I'm not talking about his politics) than Keith, nor is there anyone with more experience and knowledge of that political issue.) What it comes down to is that, far from being the champions of free political debate, Smith et al. are violently opposed to any political discussion which is aimed at coming to a conclusion .

I can only conclude that the sensitive souls who signed the Appeal have led very sheltered lives. What kind of political work can they do in the outside world which doesn't involve them taking up political stances and arguing against hostile opponents? I, and I'm sure many other majority comrades, have had more threats and abuse from Cde. Carolan than anything I've seen dished out to Smith, but it's still nothing compared to what goes on in local union branch or ward meetings. Oh for the worst thing we had to face in the world being Carolan's tirades !

C) Finally, the voice of the proletarian rank and file, the champions of democracy, come up with the suggestion of national aggregates 3 or 4 times a year on top of the conference. This can mean one of 3 things :

- i) General kick-around discussions which don't take votes on the political issues. Fine, but that's just a dressed-up series of day-schools or educationals, hardly a profound proposal.
- ii) Votes are taken but only by the elected leadership within the wider gathering. This is only the same as the extended NC's we had in the ICL and which have been proposed in this organisation to deal with specific issues. It was the leaders of the Faction who opposed and denounced this procedure in no uncertain terms.
- iii) What I think is actually proposed : these gatherings will take votes and determine the line of the organisation. This effectively disenfranchises the membership, especially working class comrades, those most heavily involved in the class struggle, and mainly women with heavy domestic responsibilities. It gives a licence to free-wheeling, uncommitted, petty bourgeois cliques to hi-jack the politics of the organisation, and **TOTALLY UNDERMINES THE DEMOCRACY OF THE GROUP,**