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TRADE UNION WORK

February 1981.

WSL/League joint NCs meeting
3.1.81.

Minutes - part 1.

Trade union work

Women's F.

Workers' Government

(Part 2 - broad groups,
4th International, general
summary - is to follow)

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BS. There have been discussions for some months. WSL sees this joint meeting as an extension of those discussions to the whole NCs of both organisations. We do not come to it with a fully fixed position, but in a spirit of flexibility and seeking clarity.

Alan. In this joint meeting, League members will be putting their individual views, not necessarily the organisation's line.

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TRADE UNION WORK

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PL. The relation between revolutionaries and the working class will decide the fate of the social revolution. We base ourselves on the working class, therefore our attitude to the trade unions is bound up with the goal of building a combat party. It's a question of a road to the masses.

In Britain especially the trade unions are of great importance. So our trade union orientation is central to the WSL. And we don't place trade union work on the same level as Labour Party work.

The WSL was formed from a fight against the ultra-leftism, propagandism, and sectarianism of the Healy group. We fought on the basis of the Transitional Programme. We made a connection between the struggle for a revolutionary programme and the struggle to resolve the crisis of leadership. There needs to be a struggle to develop comrades in a practical fight.

The present leadership is the product of forces which have developed to defend capitalism - thus there is a need for conflict with them. We have sought to generalise the base we have got in BL. Our attitude is typefied by the unionisation struggles. We intervened continuously - Grunwicks, hotels, Garners, Sandersons, Economists Bookshop, Adwest. We have done that as a way to develop comrades in conflict with the requirements of capitalism and therefore with the existing trade union leaders. We have seen the need to fight the bureaucracy, not only the right wing but also the left.

We go into these struggles to win. Through that we have been able to develop comrades. We have fought for strikes, occupations, opening the books... striving to relate and coordinate struggles through the demand for councils of action. We also intervene in trade union conferences to raise particular demands. And, to popularise the programme of the Trotskyist movement we have created the CDLM.

Winning leadership, developing comrades, taking workers through experiences - that is our method.

We're not against colonisation into industry, but we do not see it as a major policy.

We have also taken up other issues in the unions - racism, Ireland, etc. The development of worker-communists is the key test. We recognise the dangers of syndicalism, but the only answer to those dangers is to have comrades beginning from the class struggle and the necessity of the party.

Ramsey. On the basis of PL's introduction, I see no conflict between the views of the two organisations.

Our tendency originated from the SLL, had a short time as an independent group, then entered IS. Our main base then was in Manchester. Very early we initiated a bulletin in the docks. We

saw such work as necessary despite our limited resources.

In 1972, after we were expelled from IS, we took our limited industrial base, round local bulletins, and tried to extend it by developing the bulletins into national papers: in the docks, in hospitals, and in steel. It's a different history from the WSL - we started from very limited industrial resources and tried to reach out.

After the 1972 upsurge of class struggle those national papers collapsed. But we've always retained that same basic orientation - developing local bases and also trying to extend our influence nationally. On a national level we intervened in the SWP/IS-initiated 'Rank and File Movement'.

We see no argument against a revolutionary group having industrial front organisations. But we need other methods too - broader initiatives in the unions.

The WSL's experience round unionisation struggles is an area where our experience is weak. Not as a result of any principle on our part, but tactics and allocation and resources.

We have fought to meet our responsibilities. E.g. take the Shrewsbury 24 pickets struggle. We started the defence campaign and 'carried' it initially, basing ourselves on contacts from our work in the steel industry. We did not have the forces to defeat the CP when it moved in, but it was our duty to initiate the movement nonetheless.

Since 1974 we have allocated considerable resources to the O. Maybe comrades will think that means our TU work has declined. But no: at the same time we have developed Lutte Ouvriere-type bulletins in several workplaces.

The TILC document talks about "finding the point of conflict with the TU bureaucracy". Our worries about this have been allayed by discussions with WSL comrades and by what PL has said. But the formula is wrong. It is correct as against SWP rank-and-file-ism that we must take up the bureaucracy, but it would be wrong to seek for points of conflict with the bureaucracy which may not correspond to the logic of the struggle. However, we don't see the needless confrontation with the bureaucracy implied by the formula in your work in BL.

As regards PL's comments on TU work and LP work: We don't see it as necessarily wrong for a particular comrade to spend more time on LP work than on TU work. It certainly is wrong if TU work as a whole is starved of resources. But we must look at the labour movement as a whole in deciding our intervention.

It would be wrong to get into conflicts by each organisation over-generalising from its different experiences of industrial work.

DC. Do we go out of our way to find the sharp point of conflict with the bureaucracy? Look at Garners. We had a lot of discussion inside the WSL about it. Our line was: first, how to win the strike. We did not start from: how to recruit as many as possible to the WSL. We used the positive promises the bureaucrats made - against them. It was not a question of artificial confrontation but of what was necessary to take the struggle forward - e.g., blacking. Obviously sometimes you can get bureaucrats to make positive calls - then we use it, rather than decrying it. I don't think the WSL's work in BL is different from our TU work anywhere else (though it was different in the WRP.)

Macaulay. I agree completely with DC. You don't just call the bureaucrats rats, but you fight to force them into making commitments, and then you fight for those commitments - against the bureaucracy. Take the BL victimisation struggle. We think it is important

to approach people in the LP and even Benn. And not in the spirit of denouncing them in advance. We campaign to get Benn to support the Metro strike, while not hiding our own views. Why? (A) To help the struggle; (B) to gain the ear of reformist workers.

If Benn refuses, then we can expose him. But too often in the Trotskyist movement there has been a method of routinely denouncing in advance.

PL is right that TU work is not at the same level as LP work. But we must relate to the labour movement as a whole, and there is no Chinese wall between the different wings.

GW. I query your orientation to LO-type bulletins. I was involved in a factory bulletin in IS. And the problem with that bulletin was not just IS politics but that it was just good advice to the existing leadership. There was no real fight for leadership against the existing leadership, no emphasis on the need to establish an alternative pole of leadership. I see the same tendency in your Longbridge bulletin.

Alan. The bulletins should not just be good advice. I do think they should focus on positive proposals and mostly leave the polemic with the bureaucrats to the paper. But the balance is a concrete question. E.g. our Bagnalls bulletin reflects a running battle with the right-wing convenor there. But there is no difference in method from the Longbridge bulletin.

Our general conception is modelled on Lutte Ouvriere. LO has developed probably more worker-revolutionaries as highly developed political militants than all the rest of the world Trotskyist movement put together; theirs is a very important experience to learn from. Their bulletins are certainly not 'good advice'. LO stress that the bulletin is not the means to make a call to action: the comrades inside the factory must do that, and the bulletin can only back them up. The bulletin must be linked up with building a cadre of political militants in the factory: the bulletin means that the comrades can, and are forced to, argue their politics publicly to all the workers regularly.

LO stress the need to be political militants in the factories, not just TU militants - and we agree with them on that.

TR. Seeking out conflicts with the bureaucracy? No: the conflicts are not artificial. In the unionisation struggles there was a deliberate attempt by the union bureaucracy to sell them out as part of the Social Contract. We aimed to expose that. We are conscious that each struggle does not start from zero. There is a bureaucracy which we already know about. We can bring the past experiences, and their lessons, to the workers.

Landis. In the SLL, certainly, and in at least one recent article in Socialist Press, there was a strong tendency to the view that the bureaucracy is the 'last prop' - knock that prop down and the revolution is there. I'm thinking of the SP headline, "CP keeps Thatcher in power".

On TR's point: I think it may lead to propagandism if you try to generalise a lesson - 'the bureaucracy are all rubbish' - from one individual struggle to the whole class. It is not true that if you tell everyone about what happened in one particular struggle, then you can break illusions in the whole class.

AMS. I stand by the headline "CP keeps Thatcher in power". Leadership is the central issue. That's not a hobby horse, but something shown by every struggle. We don't start out with attacks on the bureaucracy, but with a policy. E.g. round Longworth Hospital we

fought for the bureaucrats to commit themselves. But CoHSE has been trying to suspend the occupation.

The bureaucrats are fighting to stabilise the system. We have a completely alien and opposed method. We don't just say this, but bring workers through their own experience to see it.

Keith. There's no point in seeking conflict with the bureaucracy, because you get it fast enough anyway! But the bureaucracy is based on real material factors. Its hold can be broken by leading workers through experiences, not by 'chalk and talk'. What's wrong with "CP keeps Thatcher in power" is that it isolates the bureaucracy as the only factor, as if the workers were all ready apart from that. But there is also the ideological hold of reformism, etc. etc. It would be wrong to see the bureaucracy as some sort of conspiracy without a material base in a whole network of structures and relations.

But the Trotskyist analysis of the counter-revolutionary role of the bureaucracy is certainly common ground between us.

AT. Obviously it is not true that the workers are all straining at the leash and the bureaucracy is the only obstacle. But specifically in BL it was like that on the last wages round. I would not particularly defend the headline "CP keeps Thatcher in power" (which was mine) as a balanced assessment. But in BL we had rammed through a series of militant resolutions. There was a will to fight. And the CP was crucial in selling it out. We don't have a propagandist approach. We created the situation in BL, and then the Stalinists betrayed. That betrayal should be highlighted.

The amount of effort we have put into Longworth might seem a ridiculous allocation of resources. But we actually made that struggle possible.

O'Keefe. It's hard to put a finger on the differences here. We have raised some general points, but every time the comrades respond with examples of specific struggles where their approach seems very reasonable.

Maybe there is a tendency to look at things through different spectacles; maybe you tend to slot reality into too-rigid categories. E.g. "CP keeps Thatcher in power" - is the CP really a monolith? In the 1960s on the docks I had the experience of the SLL making blanket denunciations of the CP while some CPers were playing a positive role.

I want to put some proposals from us: a joint effort for a campaign for TU democracy and general labour movement democracy, in the trade unions, bringing out the political implications. It would help develop TU work, get contacts; it would not contradict activity round local struggles.

ML. Win or lose, the main thing for communists in the TUs must be to get workers to draw the correct political conclusions. So we must expose the bureaucracy - not just individuals but reformism in general. We must counterpose revolution to reformism.

Transitional demands are vital. E.g. in the recent Liverpool docks strike there should have been a fight for work-sharing on full pay.

Lewis. We should look at the issue of tactics in relation to the bureaucracy more broadly. For example: in Wales we fight inside NUPE against the NUPE bureaucrats on the 6 per cent - but we also work with them on LP democracy, which we could not do if we had a rule of denouncing them on every occasion.

AC. The trade union method of the WSL does not really come out of our

short history, but from the work at Cowley, which is a fundamental development for Trotskyism, and which was related to the struggle in the YS and among students in Oxford.

The basis of our TU method was formed in a fight for the Transitional Programme. The Transitional Programme asserts that the crisis of leadership is central. The conflict with the bureaucracy arises objectively. It is not a struggle taken up by continual denunciation.

In the early history of the WSL, we started out in London just having classes on the Transitional Programme. Then some comrades went down to the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson. They argued for an occupation - and it happened! The fight against the WRP for the Transitional Programme was also a fight for a bridge to the masses.

There are important questions on factory bulletins which need to be discussed further.

Daly. Sometimes comrades seem to be arguing as if the bureaucracy is a conspiracy and the working class is a blank. Then in relation to specific cases they deny any such idea; they recognise the material roots of the bureaucracy and the ideological hold of reformism.

Certainly raising transitional demands is vital. But AC seemed to argue almost as if transitional demands are a magic wand. We must raise transitional demands in correspondence to the logic of the struggle.

KW. It would be useful if we could test our different views on a particular struggle.

There does seem to be a difference. You have put great stress on consistent work round factory bulletins. We focus on finding struggles and intervening in or initiating struggles from the outside - you seem to neglect that sort of work.

Transitional demands: we're worried on two points. (1) To what extent do you raise transitional demands? (2) Why not raise the question of workers' control bodies? What role do you see for propaganda round transitional demands?

The WSL has consistently campaigned for transitional demands.

Foster. Any difference on transitional demands is certainly not a matter of us not raising them. E.g. we argue consistently for the sliding scale of wages. Maybe there is a difference in the manner of presentation.

JL. The broad paper and F. tone down transitional demands. That's important for us. We have fought for transitional demands through the CDLM. The CDLM programme is more advanced than the broad paper 'Where We Stand'.

We have been tactically flexible. E.g. in the NUJ we fought for the sliding scale of wages, making little headway. So this year we are just pushing the workers' price index.

Even in sell-outs and defeats - which seem to be the most likely over the coming years - we must work for a conscious leadership. E.g. it is right to draw out the lessons of the Stalinist sell-out in BL.

Matthews. We have consistently fought for the sliding scale of wages, for example. At my steelworks we had a 5-week strike for the sliding scale of wages. Also, for example, we have consistently put resolutions up to NUPE conference for the sliding scale of wages.

We also know that the sliding scale of wages is a class-wide

demand. Revolutionaries cannot just orient to particular struggles which are particularly open to intervention, as the WSL seems to do, but must also keep up consistent work in the major areas of industry.

Ramsey. The demand on the docks should have been a national strike for a shorter working week, not work-sharing in Liverpool. That shows you can't just read off transitional demands onto particular struggles.

I raised the TILC document quote on 'finding the point of conflict' for clarification. But I think the actual differences can be ironed out in common work. Some of them come from different experiences. There may also be differences over the principle of intervening wherever you can.

We don't share all the politics of Lutte Ouvriere, but we find their type of bulletins a useful method of work. For example, at Bagnalls in Basingstoke we got a walk-out against a visit by Thatcher, despite the official plant leadership, as a result of our work round the bulletin.

PL. The main theme is leadership. The fight for leadership is not just a matter of holding positions, but a means of setting in motion a process. The existing leaders of the working class are consciously against socialist revolution. They are an obstacle to the working class.

As regards the headline 'CP keeps Thatcher in power' - in Cowley the CP are in a bloc with the right wing and the witch-hunters, and that's a result of our practice. A body of knowledge has been developed in struggle - it's an element of consciousness, against spontaneity, which we bring in to other struggles. We do make very big demands on the working class, but that's necessary.

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WOMEN'S F.

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Lamarre. I'll try to locate our perspective on F in the history of the discussions inside our organisation. In the early '70s we had what we now consider an abstract slogan - a mass communist women's movement. It was based on a rather mechanical learning from the movements in Russia and Germany, and an over-reaction to feminism. Our activity tended to be propagandist; we tended to find ourselves as onlookers vis-a-vis the women's movement. Inside the Working Women's Charter we had a rather ultimativist approach.

That early approach was based on firm ground in that the basic message, linking women's liberation to communism, was right. But we reassessed the tactics. What did 'mass communist women's movement' mean apart from building our own women's fraction? What potential for intervening did the slogan give? 'Mass communist women's movement' is a meaningful slogan only when linked to a mass communist party. For now, we needed a slogan to act as a link or a bridge. We worked out an orientation of fighting for a mass working class based women's movement, and within that movement to draw women to communist politics.

We worked for a while in Women's Voice, because of its working class orientation. We were excluded from that by the SWP's tightening up, which we fought against, counterposing the mass working class based women's movement perspective.

Then the election of the Tory government and the Tory attacks opened up a situation where we could launch a campaign on the perspective of the mass working class based women's

movement. We aim to build a broad movement not separate from either the women's movement or the labour movement. We try to reorientate sections of the women's movement rather than just propagandising at them. We want to link up with women who are doing good work in the women's movement, and link their activity with a fight to restructure and reorient the labour movement. This includes fighting to implement the apparently good resolutions on women's rights which are passed by the trade unions but not put into practice, and fighting to reorient LP women's sections.

This approach would have been contradicted if we put a full programme at the first conference. Our aim was less to put forward programmatic demands than to present an orientation. Then we can develop the programme through the movement's involvement in struggles and in campaigns.

Intervention in struggles is vital, but WSL seem to have a concept of building brick by brick from local struggles, which we would reject.

We're not trying to substitute ourselves for the broad movement, but to reorient the movement.

AMS. We have based the WSL's work among women on the Bolshevik experience, and Woman Worker on the Bolshevik press. We don't think we need wait until we have a mass membership to adopt this approach.

We get involved in local struggles. But F's primary objective is to relate to those layers of the women's movement who have socialist sympathies. That's all very well, but the main task is to bring working class women to revolutionary politics. And the orientation to the women's movement and to the working class are opposites - F's attempt to straddle that opposition can only fail.

F has a headline, 'The workers united will never be defeated'. But that's wrong. It ignores the questions of programme and leadership.

The F 'pin money' leaflet completely misses out the policy of occupations. You said this was not a deliberate omission but a mistake. But that mistake results from F activity not being centrally based on occupations and other struggles. F calls for a national demonstration against women's unemployment, but we should have a call for national strike action instead.

On school meals cuts, F put forward NUPE's policies uncritically. But we need a fight against the NUPE leadership. You said that was a mistake, too, but that also results from non-involvement. F gives credibility to reformist leaders by reporting their initiatives positively while they are selling out struggles.

We do not approach every struggle with the whole Transitional Programme. But as a founding policy for F, a programme of struggle was needed. You should have welcomed the WP amendment at the F conference which you rejected.

F is a broad movement which limits itself to fitting in with reformism. It does not raise the question of leadership - or hardly at all.

Alan. Comrades should not lecture us on fighting for the Transitional Programme and on the reactionary nature of the bureaucracy as if we were unaware. We've been active as a Trotskyist tendency for 15 years now!

The real difference seems to be that AMS is looking at the

world through distorting spectacles. In some local struggles the political issues may be posed as single combat between the WSL and the bureaucracy - but that is not a balanced picture of the labour movement as a whole.

We have the same principles as the Bolsheviks. But they were a mass party dominating the workers' movement. We are a tiny minority in a heavily bureaucratised movement. Therefore tactics are different.

F is an expression of a basic approach worked out 4 years before we started F. If comrades are critical of F, they should say what they think of the basic approach. But of course if you think an orientation to the women's movement is incompatible with an orientation to the working class, then the 'mass working class based women's movement' orientation will not make sense.

PF. The problem with the women's movement is not that it does not have a working class base. The problem is politics. So the crucial question is what politics we fight on. Yet F tends to water down the programme.

No-one doubts that the I-CL has a clear position on the TU bureaucracy. But we do query the way that is presented in F.

Two questions. The French OCI has a concept of building mass centrist currents and then intervening in them. Do you agree? And how do you relate to the mass paper debate in 1935?

Landis: The world isn't made up of permanent strikes and occupations. We're fighting to bring women into the labour movement, swivel the movement, change the movement. Obviously you can get tremendous explosions of militancy. But that's not general. So we have a general, consistent fight to transform the movement.

Simply to take a general assessment of the bureaucracy and mechanically transpose it to this context is wrong. Some sections of the bureaucracy are doing progressive things in this context.

HF. We have a different orientation. We start from the question of the objective needs of the working class. So we argue for occupations and strike action. Then the union bureaucracy denounces us. F. waters down its policies.

The bureaucracy are progressive if you see it in a stagist way. The question of the bureaucracy was raised immediately in the nursery campaign.

Fraser. What is F. based on? We also start from the objective needs of the working class. We have to deal with a labour movement that's already in existence and has pre-formed ideas.

On the F. conference and the WSL's 'correct' amendments: it is a question of the situation which demands you raise, how you relate to women. The WSL just 'put its line' without relating to the women's concerns.

F. is not an attempt to convince some militant women that they must become communists: we're building a movement.

A lot of the discussion is not very constructive - it's counterposed aspects which should go together. But you do have to relate to the problem of our size and relation to the women's movement and the labour movement.

WSL criticism of the 'pin-money' leaflet is correct, but didn't arise as a result of our not understanding the class struggle.

PL. There is a tendency to make a straight comparison between different experiences. It's wrong to directly compare F. and Woman Worker. Nevertheless some issues stand out. We do need to pose the link between women's oppression and class oppression.

I want to ask two questions. Lammarrre said that the programme of F. would be brought out in struggle. What does that mean? Also how does the I-CL intervene in F.?

O'Keefe. The dividing question is the question of the transitional programme. We accept that F. is in transition and that eventually it will be judged in relation to the direct struggles. But don't judge too early.

Our approach on women is consciously based on Trotsky's view on the Labour Party in the US in the 30s. We put forward the idea of a working class based women's movement and on the basis of raising a working class angle raise a working class perspective. We don't just put forward socialism in general but specific demands for women.

The dispute seems to be like those in the 2nd International over women: the WSL seems to say that one should relate to women simply as targets for socialist propaganda.

On what Landis said: the bureaucracy is of course reactionary, but it is not one reactionary mass.

TR. On the Labour Party in the US: Trotsky stressed programme in discussing the LP. It shouldn't be copied mechanically.

The policies of the Tory government are affecting women through the creation of mass unemployment. The struggles may be a minority but consciousness can develop explosively.

Harrison. This time it's AMS instead of Militant berating us for not raising nationalisation enough. The WSL seems to see not just the bureaucracy as one reactionary mass but the working class as one militant mass. Cdes. are looking at it through a very limited experience: it's true that great steps in the consciousness of workers are made during struggles. But that doesn't cover everyone e.g. women who don't go to work.

There are different approaches to transitional demands: the WSL seem to have a 'tablets of stone' attitude to the transitional programme. Democratic demands are important too.

The WSL are saying: mobilise women on the basis of socialism; we're saying mobilise women on the basis of their oppression in order to get to socialism.

GW. It's not true that we start from our preconceptions rather than from struggles. But I have sympathy with the ICLs criticisms of our general orientation. Woman Worker has been sectarian. And there was a tendency in AMS's introduction to ignore the existence of a women's movement.

Women in the home: this is not a difference. Neither of us has much of an answer.

Landis is right that the bureaucracy is not one homogeneous mass. But their 'progressive' dreams usually don't mean much though we should be quick to pick them up.

On the women's movement: we can quote the past theorists, but they weren't necessarily all right

AMS. I-CL said we should start from the needs of the working class, not from abstract demands. But we don't just say it, we do it. We fight for our supposedly abstract demands. Longworth women have related to our demands.

Occupations - we are not just talking about factory occupations but also nursery occupations. We do relate to women in the home.

Can we work with the women's movement? The problem with the women's movement is its politics. Yes, we can recruit from/learn from the women's movement. But we must work within a socialist perspective, not capitulate to feminists. And the bureaucracy sells out women in every case. They organise schools only to divert from the real struggle.

Daly: We rejected a mass communist women's movement as an ultimatum slogan - a very good slogan, but who's listening? That's why we didn't pose a full programme for F. We did not just want to duplicate the I-CL women's fraction. We wanted a platform that was not all-inclusive but open-ended.

The logic of what AMS said is that the women's movement is reactionary. Either there exists the possibility of a common struggle with the women's movement or the women's movement is reactionary. So that's the logic of the WSL's view.

WORKERS' GOVERNMENT

JL. For the WSL, the workers' government is a transitional demand. Not a label for pinning on this or that government.

The headline on 'The CP keeps Thatcher in power' does relate to a WSL political view. The Tory government is unstable. We saw BL pay as central, and we've focused on bringing down the Tory government, building on specific struggles that develop. We're for a general strike to kick the Tories out - what about the I-CL?

What do we want to replace the Tories? We want the dictatorship of the proletariat, but recognise we don't have workers' councils etc. But we orient to prepare, to develop independent organs of working class power. We also place demands on Labour MPs and so on.

How do we put the workers' government demand? We call for a Labour government, kicking out Callaghan and Healey, for left MPs to fight for a Labour government with socialist policies and also fight for councils of action.

There is an important distinction between a parliamentary government of workers' parties and one genuinely representing the interests of the working class. We do not expect the Labour Party or the existing Labour leaders to give a revolutionary lead. A parliamentary Labour government cannot be a workers' government.

So where do we differ? Different passages of I-CL material give different impressions. e.g. S* pamphlet on

workers' government raises soviets. Or the I-CL manifesto on the workers' government. But the WA articles on the workers' government seem to see the Labour Party as the vehicle for a workers' government.

O'Keefe. On the difference in texts: the 1977 Manifesto is rather abstract, now things have changed and we've made it more concrete.

There was a 3-way split round the early Communist International: proposing either to abandon the labour movement, to reorient it, or to accept it as it was. So we're trying to reorient the labour movement, in an unexpected situation where the labour movement is in flux.

Exposure of the reformists in office? the last Labour government was exposed and that has led to great convulsions within the labour movement. Therefore we fight to claim the Labour Party for working class politics.

There are two alternative positions: either you only accept the dictatorship of the proletariat as a workers' government or you pose in relation to the Labour Party and the existing labour movement. There are no guarantees. The upsurge may lead to a consolidation of the right wing. We don't say we're bound to win. We say: fight; and give a perspective for that fight.

On the points made in the SP articles: firstly, that we don't raise Soviets. We need to relate to the existing labour movement - Soviets are part of our programme, but how will they emerge? The first movements towards them will almost certainly come in the framework of the existing movement. We need to make propaganda for soviets, but not immediate agitation as the WSL does with councils of action.

Secondly that we are not for a party. Comrades, we are a party. We don't proclaim the party. That is because we are very weak.

We're trying to give a rational form to the slogan of a Labour Government with Socialist policies, which is a general, propagandist summary. It needs to be linked to a practical critique of the Labour Party. The upheaval in the Labour Party leads to the possibility of fighting for a workers' government.

Soviets will emerge after a serious erosion of the bourgeois parliamentary system. That doesn't mean waiting 50 years... the erosion can take place very rapidly in big struggles; both from our side and from the side of the bourgeoisie.

We fight to claim the LP; maybe to win it, at least to win a sizeable left split from the LP.

ML. Challenging the Parliamentary system is an objective process. E.g. in Portugal there was dual power, but they only had the SP, so now they have lost the gains they made. Centrists like Benn can't decide to decide. They don't want to split, they want to have a 'realistic alternative'. Communists must expose the reformism of the LP. The working class will not spontaneously learn the political lessons. A workers' government can only be sustained by the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Alan. We worked out our basic position on the workers' government about 6 years before we raised it as a current slogan. It's not an empirical adaptation!

Most of the objections to our slogan seem to be based on the idea that we are saying 'the LP will do it'. Not at all.

We put forward a perspective of struggle within the existing labour movement for our demands and against the existing structure of the movement. And we aim to organise revolutionaries round that perspective - it won't be realised otherwise.

As with F, we aim to organise people for a struggle within a broader movement.

Of course Benn won't do it. And we don't think we can win over the whole LP. The most likely outcome is a split. But as Trotsky wrote in the Transitional Programme, there is no need to speculate - the workers' government demand retains enormous educational value.

WSL calls for left MPs to kick out the existing Labour leaders and fight for a Labour government with socialist policies - i.e. for a left Labour government with socialist policies. We think fundamentally the same criticisms apply to this as to 'Labour government with socialist policies'.

TR. Our slogan is not really 'left Labour government with socialist policies'. And we only use 'socialist policies' as a convenient summary.

The essential point about the workers' government is how to develop soviet-type bodies. Otherwise it becomes a reformist slogan. Trotsky talks about transitional stages to soviets. That's how we see the demand for councils of action, which goes alongside the demands on the left MPs.

If you see a relatively peaceful period ahead, then the call for soviets only has propaganda value. But a 1968 situation is developing in Britain. We have to be ready for mass upheavals. So the Councils of Action demand is essential.

Keith. JL was right to stress that "workers' government" is not a label to stick on this or that government.

The problem we're relating to with the workers' government slogan can be seen by looking back at the Pentonville 5 struggle in 1972. Dockers were entirely for a general strike - but they also said "of course, you'll only get a Labour Government back". They saw themselves as cannon fodder at the level of general politics.

The workers' government slogan does not depend on detailed verbal formulas, but on an actual relation to the mass movement. What's wrong with the "Labour to power with socialist policies" and "Kick Out Callaghan-Healey" is that they miss that vital element in the workers' government - the relation to the movement outside parliament.

We relate to the possibility of a workers' government starting in a parliamentary framework - but our perspective is not parliamentarist. We aim to give workers like those dockers in 1972 a perspective for an active role in fighting for a new government.

In the WSL's ideas on councils of action, I see a tendency to a sort of syndicalism - opting out of the fight within the existing movement in favour of a hypothetical new labour movement.

PF. Just looking at the Comintern texts is not very helpful. The discussion is really about how we see the use of a slogan for a workers' government now. I-CL seems to give it too much parliamentary emphasis.

The argument for bringing down the Tories by mass action is

crucial. And if the Tories are brought down by mass action, councils of action would emerge.

I-CL tends to pose the WG as a necessary stage; to focus too much on renovating the labour movement and on LP democracy; to direct the working class into reforming the LP, at a stage when the LP cannot offer reforms. We fight instead inside the LP to draw workers around us on our programme.

I-CL does not understand WSL on councils of action.

Oliver. WSL calls for a Labour vote, because there is no alternative - and then it talks about councils of action. But what perspective for action in between the Labour vote now and the councils of action in the future? What perspective for action in the LP? We propose a fight in the LP to break down the hold of parliamentarism, to link direct struggle with the political fight in the LP.

The WSL's stress on direct industrial struggles is very positive. But shouldn't we also take workers into the labour movement and the LP and develop them in the struggle? In every sphere we start from where workers are at, and try to develop them. Why won't the WSL apply the same method in relation to the LP and to women's work as it does on industrial struggles?

Alan. It's been a fruitful discussion and we may be able to resolve the differences. TR said 'socialist policies' is just shorthand. That's fair enough; in practice the WSL does break it down into specific demands. The 'Kick Out Callaghan/Healey' also has some rationale as a way of adding a notion of changing the LP to Healy's sterile formula of 'Labour to power with socialist policies'.

But why is the call focused on just the left MPs? Why not organise the whole left to change the LP? And focusing it on chucking out Callaghan and Healey is sterile.

So the WSL's changes to the old SLL formula are positive, but there is still a gap in your policy: you have the call on the left MPs now, and the hope for councils of action in the future. So what do the dockers whom Keith mentioned do now? They're not left MPs, they can't build a council of action now...

On soviets, Trotsky argued against the ILP that the only way to prepare for soviets was through 'a correct policy in all spheres of the labour movement'. You won't get soviets by telling people they are necessary. The struggle which we propose to renovate the labour movement is what can actually be done now to prepare for soviets.

JL. The I-CL comrades assert they do not hold a parliamentary view. This is a valuable clarification.

How do we see councils of action? Not as a rank-and-file route round the bureaucrats. We raise the slogan round specific disputes, e.g. most recently in Winsford. We do draw out the connection between TU struggles and the LP, by carrying issues like nurseries and cuts fights into the LP.

We need an explicit line drawn between a parliamentary policy and a policy based on mobilising the working class in the existing mass organisations - no confusion.