

THE POLITICS OF THE WSL LEADERSHIP - A CASE HISTORY OF CENTRISM .

The authors of this document will be supporting the platform of the Internationalist Faction at the WSL conference. We think that the platform covers the major areas of disagreement that we would have with the Carolan/Kinnell and Smith/Jones/Cunliffe sections of the leadership.

However there are a number of aspects of the platform that we do disagree with. We have indicated the areas of our dissent on the final page of the platform. We present this document to explain our own positions more fully and to explain why we have dissented on certain areas of the platform. This document, therefore, is not intended for voting on. It is an explanatory document. It is a document of the undersigned comrades. It is not an Internationalist Faction document.

Reagan (Birmingham Branch)
Philby (Birmingham Branch)
Layton (Runcorn Branch)

April 1983

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Introduction

What follows is a critique of and alternative to, the current leadership's entire political strategy. We present it as a factional platform. We no longer accept that any section of the present leadership (either from the old WSL or old ICL) are capable of regenerating and re-directing the WSL in a revolutionary way. We therefore present our document as the basis of an alternative orientation for the WSL. We will fight to get conference to adopt this document, purge the current misleaders and elect a new leadership committed to implementing the proposals we are making.

At the time of fusion many of us entertained the hope that the unity of the WSL and I-CL would strengthen the revolutionary left in this country. This has not happened. In fact we have lost members and are failing to build the WSL as a strong, independent revolutionary organisation.

These failures cannot be put down to a lack of effort. Our criticisms are not directed at the enthusiastic efforts that comrades made to build our influence. It is the politics we are building on that is crippling us numerically and politically. They are the liquidationist politics developed by the old I-CL leaders against which the old WSL leaders have had no alternative. They deliberately blur the lines of demarcation between ourselves and left reformism. We now recognise that the fusion of the WSL and I-CL was based on these wrong politics. Because these aspects of the fusion were never debated out and were obscured by other (in fact less important and still unresolved) differences, we can now see that the fusion was an unprincipled one. It paved the way for the present situation.

The organisation was founded on a programme marked by an adaptationist orientation to the Labour Party and the labour lefts in particular. This was not immediately clear to us. It took the Malvinas war and the leadership's line on it - especially the positions put forward by the key ideologues of the WSL's right wing drift, Carolan and Kinnell - to reveal to us the extent of the adaptation. That is why we begin our critique with a restatement of the organisation's errors on that question.

The Malvinas

The Carolan/Kinnell leadership's attitude to the Malvinas issue was a consistent social pacifist one. It was in no sense a Leninist, International one. The most refined version of their position in IB No. 18 states that the war was reactionary on both sides and that for marxists the key issue is a 'democratic' one - namely, defending the Falkland islanders' right to self determination. Point 5. of their resolution states :

"support for the right of the Falkland Islanders - a distinct historical, ethnic, linguistic, economic and geographic community 400 miles from Argentina - to determine their own future is axiomatic for Leninists... The Falklanders' right to self-determination cannot be invalidated by a desire by them to adhere to the now-imperialist state that spawned the Falklands community" (p2)

Despite this stalwart defence of the community, however, Carolan and co. conclude, somewhat contradictorily:

"support for the Falklanders' rights plainly does not necessarily mean any support for military action to enforce those rights. In the actual situation, with Britain an imperialist power, we rejected and opposed the British military action" (p2)

No doubt Carolan would have preferred an economic blockade like Benn, Militant and, unfortunately, the Class Fighter comrades who voted for one at last year's LPYS conference.

The Carolan/Kinnell position recognises the right to self-determination for a tiny settler population and migrant labour force that is neither

politically nor (despite Carolan's false assertion) economically distinct or independent. In case Carolan did not know, the islands are owned by a British firm. Their adherence to British imperialism has enabled Britain to build a fortress Falklands to police Argentina's waters and the South Atlantic. Why will Carolan not support military action to enforce the right he purports to defend? If that right is threatened by military force, then only military force can defend it. The comrades have an untenable position. If it were logically pursued then it would lead them to Militant's view that a Labour Government (with socialist policies, mind) is needed to pursue a working class war against Argentina. Of course the comrades draw back from this and retreat into the social pacifism displayed by Benn, Race and co. Their position, like SO's was untenable. No matter, they held it and therefore so must SO and the WSL. If the price for maintaining this rotten bloc is the abandonment of a few old principles then it is worth paying. Out went Trotsky's position of defence of semi-colonies against imperialism (Mexico/Brazil). Indeed the whole notion of semi-colonies, Lenin's theory of imperialism and ultimately Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution were reduced to historical curiosities by Carolan/Kinnell.

If these theories are outdated, as some of Carolan's less sophisticated followers claim in their bid to prove their opponents are mere dogmatists then please show us the proof. Produce the documents to refute these theories. This does not mean producing statistics to prove that Argentina is a comparatively rich semi-colony. Prove that it is not a semi-colony.

The Malvinas debate also showed up the real character of the internal regime of the new WSL. So desperate was the leadership to conceal the eventual change of line from its Bennite allies, that it suppressed debate on the subject. It criticised the very idea of holding a conference to resolve the issue. Open debate is anathema to those who have set course on a liquidationist project. It gets in their way.

Not only was discussion abruptly and bureaucratically stopped, but the change of line barely saw the light of day. SO never mentioned it. A supplement to WSR number 2 (8 pages hardly attracting a mass readership at a price of 40p) was produced but many members, let alone the public, never saw it. It was hardly sold at all. Carolan obviously did not want to upset any of his hoped for left reformist allies. After all, Reg Race had already vowed never to grace an IMG platform again after Brian Grogan was forced to reveal that the IMG was Argentine defencist. Heaven forbid that fearless Reg should take the same oath in relation to us!

Unfortunately, through the whole Malvinas episode, the old WSL leadership did not provide the necessary challenge to Carolan/Kinnell's social pacifism. They moved to a position of defence of Argentina far too late, their final position - which does not recognise Argentina's right to the Malvinas - is still short of revolutionary internationalism, and since the defeat of Carolan's position they have failed to wage an unremitting struggle for SO to carry the new line.

Internationally, the leadership obstructed a proper discussion of the issue taking place within the TILC. This reached a disgraceful climax at the summer school. The school was announced as a WSL, not TILC, school therefore the international delegates who had travelled hundreds or thousands of miles to take part in a vital discussion, were offered five minutes a piece to make a statement. At precisely the time we needed international help to counter the nationalist pressures being exerted on us, Carolan, Cunliffe, Kinnell and Smith all united to prevent open debate. In our view this confirms the nationalist outlook and orientation of the leadership. Carolan's attitude towards the TILC (and the RWL in particular) in his 'withdrawn' document in IB 35 is a graphic illustration of this national centredness. He begins by announcing that everything is up in the TILC:

"TILC is, barring some unlikely miracle, already effectively split"

The 'sectarian' wing (the RWL and LOR) cannot be reconciled with the non-sectarians - i.e. Carolan. This split document then goes on, using all the methods of innuendo, factional sleight of hand and downright falsehoods that Carolan is past master at, to accuse the IT of being an RWL controlled tendency. Carolan comes clean as the defender of the WSL against the 'interference' of a 'foreign power' and its supposed agents. The document shows him as a narrow nationalist and it reveals the bankruptcy of those who still tolerate him in the leadership of the WSL. Its conclusions - IT is in fact RWL, RWL is not in WSL, therefore, expel the IT - reveal him as a bureaucratic factionalist intent on destroying TILC, which he has never forgiven since it proved a thorn in his side during the Malvinas war.

Permanent Revolution and the Democratic Programme

The Malvinas war also exposed Carolan's appetite for revising fundamental aspects of the marxist programme. He is doing so in order to render the marxist programme harmless and no longer a barrier to much sought after left reformist allies. This is clear in relation to Ireland and the Middle East. Carolan has only hinted at his position on the Zionist state and Palestine. His attempt to prevent the SO delegate meeting last Autumn from recognising self-determination for the Palestinians was an ominous sign. Self determination it seems, is alright for 1,800 Kelpers on some rocks in the South Atlantic, but not for millions of Palestinians kicked out of their homeland by the imperialists and kept out by the Zionist state.

On Ireland, Carolan has been more explicit. In SO his articles on the protestant working class have codified his abandonment of Permanent Revolution.

The programme of Permanent Revolution for Ireland neither means ignoring the protestant working class, nor seeing the national struggle as separate and distinct stage which must be completed before working class unity can be achieved. It means recognising the existence of a national question in Ireland as a cardinal question that requires a class answer, as against an nationalist answer. Permanent Revolution in Ireland would mean a struggle to drive out the British troops and smash the sectarian state by mobilising the working class on both sides of the border. It would mean fighting for the working class to lead the national struggle in a socialist direction. In this struggle the Orange State will inevitably mobilise the Protestant working class to its advantage. Our strategy must be to show that the protestants have nothing to fear from a working class united Ireland. However, we cannot compromise with them on our goal of smashing the Orange State and establishing a socialist united Ireland. In the course of this struggle, revolutionaries would defend all of the partial interests of the whole working class (wages, jobs, rights etc.). Along this road of probably quite bitter struggle, there is the hope that the protestant workers can be broken from the protestant state. The history of the twentieth century shows that such a dramatic rupture, a dialectical leap, will be the only way the protestant workers will be won to the cause of revolution and a socialist united Ireland.

Against this perspective, Carolan, despairing of the Republican-led solution he once thought possible and unable to provide a proletarian answer, reshapes his programme with plunder from the programme of left reformism and the camp of the two nationalists. He now advances a democratic solution in the vain hope that the protestant workers can be wooed away, rather than broken from, the state they identify with and its imperialist overlord. Thus, in place of the call for a socialist united Ireland, Carolan argues:

"Now, when the Tories propose new, foredoomed and very dangerous tinkering with the artificial and undemocratic Six County State, is the time to raise the whole question of an independent and united federal Ireland. This is the only

fundamental solution to the tragic mess that successive British governments, Labour and Tory alike have made and continue to make in Northern Ireland" (SO 15/5/82)

No mention of a 'workers republic' or of socialism as the only fundamental solution. This position has since been made even more explicit by the comrade. In the recent series on the protestants, the comrade advanced the above strategy with the following justification:

"If we do not have a democratic programme, then we rise no higher than the miserable partitionist Southern Irish bourgeoisie.... We must instead be consistent democrats (SO 3/2/83)

Lenin's enforced 'legal' euphemism for the illegal Bolsheviks before the First World War is, indeed, rendered more profound by Carolan! It is given a pure and simple democratic meaning.

His position on Ireland is not wrong because it expresses a concern for the protestant working class. We share that concern. It is wrong because it purports to win them by advancing a purely democratic programme. Carolan can do this with good conscience having de facto junked Lenin's theory of Imperialism and Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution during the Malvinas war. We will not give up these theoretical gains so lightly. We re-assert that only the struggle for a socialist united Ireland will resolve the national question in the North and break forever the Orange sectarianism of the Protestant question in the North.

The WSL's Liquidation into Social Democracy

At the root of all the current leadership's errors is a liquidationist approach to social democracy. The foremost exponent of this orientation is undoubtedly Carolan, however, he is not alone. The comrades of the old WSL leadership - Cunliffe, Smith, Jones - accepted his positions on social democracy at the time of the fusion. The organisation was - we would now recognise - specifically founded on this liquidationist basis.

The Workers Government

The new WSL was founded on a revisionist and centrist distortion of the Workers Government slogan. The position contained in the fusion document was based on the articles produced in Workers Action on the slogan. These articles were themselves a rightist revision of the old I-CL's use of the slogan in its manifesto 'The Struggle for Workers Power'. The fusion document showed that the old WSL leaders had abandoned the position on the Workers Government outlined in the Socialist Press polemics against the Workers Action articles. It declared:

"The Brighton/Blackpool/Wembley decisions to control MPs and to give the majority of votes on who shall be Prime Minister if Labour has a majority to the CLPs and trade unions could open the way to a new kind of Labour Government - a workers' government, instead of the government of the trade union party which merely administers capitalism according to capitalism's own laws, a Labour government potentially accountable to sections of the organised working class. The extent of that accountability would depend on the extent of independent class mobilisation and organisation" (Fusion platform p.19)

This formulation on the Workers Government - the old ICL's formulation, accepted lock, stock and barrel by the old WSL leaders - sums up the organisation's wrong attitude to social democracy. Social Democracy mildly democratised, becomes the form of workers' government that we have been reduced to propagandising for. The electoral college and the reselection process are put forward as the means of making a government potentially

accountable. And the outcome we fight for is to be a left Labour government accountable to CLPs who, hopefully, will be crowded out with workers. Gone are the clear guidelines of the revolutionary Comintern for the workers' governments that communists fight for. Gone are the key organs of struggle that we call for a workers government to be responsible to - workers councils/soviets and workers militia. These organs are called for separately from our call for a workers government, not as the indispensable bedrock organisation of any real workers' government. The tasks allotted to this government by SO are vague and general. It will be 'anti-capitalist'. It will, to an extent, dismantle the power of the bourgeoisie etc etc. Compare this vagueness with the Comintern's prescription for what the immediate tasks of a workers' government would be:

"The most elementary tasks of a workers government must be to arm the proletariat, disarm the bourgeois counter-revolutionary organisations, bring in control over production, shift the main burden of taxation onto the propertied classes and break the resistance of the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie.

Such a workers' government is possible only if it is born out of the struggle of the masses and is supported by combative workers organisations formed by the most oppressed sections of workers at grass roots level"

In posing the workers government (read, left Labour government accountable to the Labour Party) as an inevitable stage, we have robbed it of its tactical value as a slogan and built it as a strategic goal into our own programme. This error has paved the way for further liquidation. Given the recent victories of the right, a Labour government elected in the immediate future would not be the workers government hoped for and called for by SO. This change of perspective has not led us to question our use of the slogan, but to drop even that slogan in favour, simply, of a call for a Labour government pledged to Labour conference policies. This is precisely what we have argued for in the Socialists for a Labour Victory (SLV) campaign. We have not addressed demands to a future government on the basis of workers needs, but on the basis of what the LP conference has decided!

SO's liquidationism is now complete as it now vies with the SL to limit this campaign to Labour's policies and assures the fake 'lefts' that their reformist programme is 'socialist' and the adequate basis of a campaign against the Tories. Little wonder that this position leads to the sort of electoralism displayed on the front page of SO No 122. In an article signed by three people(!) the type of electoral campaign advanced was limited to pursuing CND, producing leaflets and the launch of an 'anti-Tory crusade' modelled on the ANL. But what action such a crusade is to take to fight the Tories is far from clear. Certainly there was no mention of the need to fight the Tories and the Labour right through the mobilisation of the working class in direct action against the bosses and the Tories, the organisation of councils of action, the spreading of strikes etc.

Socialist Organiser

The paper was launched as a monthly campaigning paper of the broad electoral campaign, the SCLV. Despite its pretence at being broad, it is now the only regularly appearing publication of the WSL - while retaining the diluted politics of the broad front period. When it went fortnightly, Carolan described it as a non-sectarian paper with a roughly adequate, but not scientific, programme. In fact the paper, the voice of the WSL supporters in the labour movement is opportunist in relation to the left labourites, the women's movement, the peace movement etc.

The paper declared that we were all "Bennites" during the Benn campaign. It was uncritical of Benn's deputy leadership bid - the politics it was conducted on and the way in which the campaign was fought. Our support was as uncritical as it was unconditional. We were silent following Benn's demobilisation of the democracy movement after the Bishops Stortford deal; silent even when the Labour Herald criticised Benn and Co. He committed a major act of sabotage at this meeting. He paved the way to the rights victories and the present witch-hunt. Yet we have not uttered a word of criticism of him for this. Indeed, in a sense we could not, because our conception of the democracy movement and our strategy for it, were not independent of Benn. We favoured not a united front and the raising of a clear revolutionary voice, but a "broad based" movement of the left on the same model as the RFMC. To criticise Benn and advance an independent programme would have upset this project. These are not "non-sectarian" politics in relation to Benn and the lefts. They are the opportunist politics of an irrelevant ginger group.

To maintain a fig-leaf for its opportunism, SO regularly opens its pages to an assortment of non-revolutionary elements. No bad thing in and of itself, but for SO these elements actually become spokespeople, for they are not criticised, added to, corrected. Their views are simply presented.

In the week following the Labour conference and the launch of the witch-hunt, the response of SO was given in a front page article by the left-reformist Tatchell. Why no comment from the WSL or one of the leading writers of the paper? The regular opening up of the paper in this way gives it protective cover - protection, that is, from those like ourselves, who demand that it be an open revolutionary paper.

Of course there is, in reality, one distinctive body of opinion in the pages of SO. It is contained in the voluminous outpourings of one John O'Mahony. His series on Ireland, Socialism and Democracy etc., are the means by which the paper's liquidationism and opportunism are rationalised and ideologically justified. The series on democracy - an elaborate attempt to prove that bourgeois and workers' democracy are compatible - was a classic in this respect. His front page lead on the Chelsea bombings presented as the paper's editorial proved both that the paper is O'Mahoney's property and that the WSL itself has no public and accountable voice.

All in all the features of the paper that we have delineated, reveal it to be a centrist paper. It is neither a Marxist paper adapted to MP conditions, nor a genuine left-reformist paper with a combined reformist and revolutionary following.

Municipal Cretinism

In tandem with the liquidation of our organisation into left-social democracy, we now have a gaggle of Labour councillors. By installing ourselves in the democracy caucuses and committees and befriending the local grass roots lefts, we have been able to rise to councillordom.

In these caucuses, in particular in the shrivelled wards and GMC's of London, we have been able to oust the right and secure their council seats (eg. Islington).

However, we have not done this on a revolutionary programme, but on the election manifesto of the local labour party. We have not presented ourselves as revolutionary opponents of capitalism, but as good left's who can manage local affairs better than the right-wing or the SDP.

In the light of this the criticisms we level at Livingstone et al, over rate rises, are formal, shallow and dishonest. Given that we did not do anything in Islington to mobilise direct working-class action until we wanted the Town Hall unions to support rate rises (!), we were in no position to oppose rate rises when faced with a central government attack. Our emphasis, like Tatchell's and other reformists, was on caring for the community not on mobilising the base. No wonder then that when it came down to it one of our leading councillors in Islington ended up managing capitalism in the same way that we had criticised Livingstone for doing. He voted against an already negotiated pay rise for nursery workers in the Labour policy group, has since voted for rate rises and accepted his responsibility as whip to force this anti-working class discipline on fellow Labour councillors.

Against this local government policy we counterpose devoting nine-tenths of our efforts to mobilising the base against cuts, rent rises and rate rises. Mobilise the unions, the workplace, the LP members, council tenants etc., in action councils to stop all cuts, rate and rent rises through direct action. We must demand that a Labour Council carry out such a policy and would support lefts who implemented it, while fighting to oust right-wingers who won't support such policies.

Revolutionaries would only stand as councillors on a clear action programme to fight the Tories to the end, up to and including a clash with the law. Our councillors can claim no such mandate.

SO's record is one of dishonest and disloyal criticism of the reformists and a failure to raise our own programme and mobilise the working class independently of the reformists.

The Witch-hunt

Our response to the witch-hunt was wrong all along. We failed to fight uncompromisingly for a united front on ; No Registration - No Expulsions - No Withdrawal of Democratically Selected Candidates. These policies were not optional. They answered every line of attack from the right. It was necessary to fight to defeat the weapons of the right as well as the use of these weapons. We should have called on every force, paper and figure, including Benn, on the left, to unite and fight.

Instead we accepted that Benn was not going to wage a serious fight and did not criticise him at all. We refused to criticise the Militant's bureaucratic, big rally style of campaign (though we criticised their use of the courts). In the more manageable arena of the LAW, we blocked with the IMG to oppose committing the campaign to defiance of the register. This was despite the fact that we fought against registration in the CLPD. In that forum we could safely pose as the outside left. Not so in the LAW.

The rationale for these positions was given by Carolan in IB 21. After a few ritualistic phrases against the witch-hunt and register, he declared :

"The alternative is to fight the register until it is established (if eventually it is) and Militant's hard core is purged and then go with groups like CLPD, LCC etc., if they register. We should oppose the registration of the CLPD at its December conference, but in general it is unlikely that the Marxists can shape what happens. As a rough rule of thumb I suggest that we use the CLPD as a weathervane, and advise co-thinkers in the LP to register (or attempt to register) at the point that it does, or is automatically registered whether it applies or not."