

Two pages from our history

**Disputes inside the
WSL from 1983**

- ***The Korean jet***
- ***The witch-hunt
at Cowley***



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These are two - of many - examples of the irrational, apolitical behaviour of the WSL minority, led by Alan Thornett. This behaviour was eventually, in 1984 to lead to a split in the WSL which took the form of the expulsion of Thornett and his faction by the majority.

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Workers' Socialist League EC meeting, 10 Sept 83
Minutes of the discussion about the shooting down
of a passenger jet by the USSR's airforce.

Alan Thornett: Unhappy about the editorial balance. But my position is that it was a mistake - a mistake which was very easy to make. Personally I think it was a spy-plane. But that does not minimise it being shot down. Overwhelming evidence that it was a mistake. We should question whether USSR went far enough in identifying it. Attacks on spy-planes are normal in those areas. I think we should have the general line of Socialist Action. Editorial accepts it was a mistake - but then condemns the USSR in inappropriate terms. We should debunk Reagan more. We should have another article debunking the US case.

Martin Thomas: We can not judge the technicalities - suggestion of provocation and probe of defences. Can not imagine the Kremlin coldly deciding to shoot down a civil aircraft. It did show a recklessness to loss of life. Not clear what level decision to shoot taken at. Very clear they did not take adequate steps to identify it etc. Clear from Russian reaction later reckless of consequences. Can not see that the defence of the USSR would override other considerations in this case. No positive evidence this was a spy-plane or that they checked. Socialist Action concedes too much to the Russian bureaucracy - benefit of the doubt on every question. They shot down the plane and it was indefensible.

Collins: Whether or not it was a spy-plane, it was doing something odd. Obviously sufficient care was not taken. We should however more emphasis on the US's use of the fact that it's a civilian plane - they share the responsibility. It's unarguable that there was some conscious use of the plane by the US.

Sean Matgamna: It's possible that it was eliberately set up by the US. But basic question is: does defence of the USSR commit us to supporting such specific acts? Bureaucracy 'defends the USSR' in its own way, and has its own interests. They had the option eg of forcing it down. They behaved with typical recklessness. You can not just argue "they shoot down spy-planes, don't they?" Bureaucracy is brutal outside its own territory, too.

John Lister: It's a question of what happened. Bourgeois commentators have said it was probably a mistake. US story does not hold together. We should expose it. Does not mean saying it's OK for USSR to shoot down planes.

Martin Thomas: Resolution.

Alan Thornett: I would like to put a resolution but I have not got time.

Martin Thomas: Should do a neutral article exploding US cover-ups, but not drawing pro-USSR conclusions.

Alan Thornett: Recklessness for human life? No evidence of that. You have to ask - was there any evidence for the USSR to think it was a civilian plane? There is a difference of world view: Matgamna is unable to assess objectively what the USSR does. We have a material interest in debunking this witch-hunt.

I think it was a mistake - its an open question whether sufficient checking was done - but we donot accuse the USSR of recklessness.

Sean Matgamna: Danger of lurching into a debate in the paper? Next paper should also assess the USSR story.

Parkinson: Its indefensible even if it is an accident.

Martin Thomas: Article starts saying we can not believe what USSR says, it generally lies etc - then go on to analyse the US case in detail.

Alan Thornett: I think that the USSR is not really to be condemned.

Martin Thomas: Resolution.

Sean Matgamna: Add "The fact is that a plane was shot down..."

Alan Thornett: Amm.: "While we do not accept the whole of the USSR case".

Voting: Thornett Amm.: 2 for 5 ag.

Matgamna Amm.: 3 for 3 ag. I abst. - falls

Thomas: 4 for I abst. (Matgamna)

Who to write article?: collaboration Thomas/Lister - lost
Thomas - carried.

Motion:

We write an article which opens by saying briefly that the USSR at first tried to hush up the affair, and then simply brazened it out; they are habitual liars; that their conduct is appalling - as in the editorial this week - and goes on to analyse and debunk the US story in detail.

1. We do not give the Kremlin bureaucracy the benefit of the doubt in such matters. Our position of defence of the USSR does not commit us to put the best complexion on such acts as the shooting down of a civilian aircraft. We therefore condemn the shooting down as an act of criminal recklessness.

2. The US is clearly covering up parts of the affair. It may be that they consciously provoked it or were using the plane for spy purposes. We should expose the hypocrisy and the cover-ups, and point to the possibilities of a provocation etc - but we should not do this in such a way

as to be effectively apologists for the Kremlin, like Socialist Action.

3. We also, of course, condemn the use of the affair by the US, etc, to build up their war drive.

It's a political witch-hunt

BRITISH LEYLAND is a company with a long record of sacking workers for their political and trade union activities. The dismissal of Derek Robinson and Alan Thornett, senior and deputy senior stewards in the Longbridge and Cowley car plants are the most well known examples of such victimisation. No one believes that Robinson and Thornett were sacked for the technical charges made against them. They were victimised for their political and trade union views and activities. And there have been numerous other less publicised sackings.

BL is lying when it says it does not dismiss workers on political grounds, or that it would hire workers in spite of their union record or socialist beliefs. Methods of political victimisation and exclusion are systematic in BL and large British companies.

This can be proved simply. If BL does not sack or prevent people from gaining employment for reasons of their political views or trade union activities why does it, like most large companies, operate a system of blacklists? Why does it employ organisations to check the trade union and political backgrounds of its workers or those applying for jobs?

The use of such methods is known to all those involved in trade unions and industrial relations, and the press; if BL denies this state of affairs it is merely falsifying its own, and other companies' practices.

Obvious

The facts are obvious. The BL management has not one single complaint against the work record of the thirteen dismissed during the entire time they were at Cowley. Everyone knows that the company would be taking no action against the thirteen if they were not suspected of having strong socialist views.

The real facts of the BL case were stated in the Financial Times on 13 August 1983, "BL has been careful to stress officially the constitutionality of its procedure . . . In effect however its central concern was their sus-

The Socialist League has been the target of a most vicious witch-hunt in the press over the last week. 14 of its alleged supporters have been sacked from BL's Cowley assembly plant. As an act of solidarity with the comrades we print excerpts from their statement on the witch-hunt.

pected revolutionary affiliations."

Accusations of 'left wing conspiracy' are merely stupid. If BL did not victimise people for their political and trade union views in the first place no-one at all would bother to hide their views from the management. If BL states it would have taken off workers it knew were strongly in favour of trade unions and were active socialists then it is merely lying — as its entire past record

shows.

The charge that anyone with socialist views can instigate workers to go on strike, or are 'infiltrating' the trade unions is a conscious invention by the press.

Risk

Workers going on strike lose hundreds of pounds of their income and risk their jobs. They will not strike unless propelled

to do so by deep-seated and genuine grievances against the company. It is the activities of BL management, not any political group, which leads to workers strike in BL or any company.

The exclusion of the thirteen workers from Cowley should be opposed by the entire labour trade union and women's movement as an attempt by the company to enforce a political ban on recruitment and employment. If a policy of systematic exclusion from employment, and use of victimisation, by companies continued and strengthened there will be a further major erosion of democratic rights to add to the many already carried out by this government and the BL management.

An attack on unions

Behind the witch-hunt, the unions are under attack!
End Blacklists!

The witch-hunt and victimisation of 14 people at BL Cowley for falsification of their application forms is an attack on the trade union movement. They were clearly sacked for political reasons; there was no complaint about their work. They are obviously being victimised.

The Tory government has just started its second term of office. It is increasing its offensive against the working class, with rising unemployment, privatisation, cuts, and new attacks on the unions.

It is getting the assistance of the right-wing majority of the TUC General Council, which now wants to discuss with the Tories. As Arthur Scargill has said, this is like discussing the rope with your aspirant hangman.

To get through their attacks, the Tories must deal with those who are opposed to them and to their stooges in the TUC. They will now use the hysteria around the Cowley situation to boost their attack on the unions particularly at rank and file level and

The Workers Socialist League for many years has been the target of witch-hunts, victimisations and attempted victimisations at BL's Cowley plant. We print excerpts from a statement on the current witch-hunt put out by the National Committee of the WSL on 13 August 1983.

in industry — where the main opposition to the Tories will come from.

The press campaign is the start of this. Left-wingers come from outside the working class, they say. This campaign is designed to discredit all those, at all levels, who fight back, particularly those who try to change the leadership in the labour movement. Everybody who argues for militant policies becomes a suspicious person. Like rising unemployment, the campaign will be used to try to intimidate the shop floor. (...)

On the day after the sackings, the shop stewards at Cowley got a report from the joint inquiry of trade union officials and management that came out

of the 'washing-up time' strike. This joint report talks about the "political" nature of some shop stewards. It talks about shop stewards not being aware of the kind of increases in productivity necessary.

During the 'washing-up time' strike, the bureaucracy stopped the Cowley Assembly Plant shop stewards putting their opinions to the mass meeting. This was a go-ahead for the current campaign. It was saying to the membership that the stewards should not be listened to.

Right wingers in other unions will try to take up the same cry. Kate Losinska of the CPSA has already spoken on this. (...)

We must refuse to be cowed. Trade union members have a right to be political activists. Left wingers have a right to have a job and be active in their unions. It is not a crime to be a socialist. The press thinks it is a crime, the capitalists and the Tories think it is a crime, the right wing thinks it is a crime to be a socialist in the unions or the Labour Party. We must oppose these witch-hunting ideas, and we must oppose all blacklists . . .

End the blacklist!

'MOLES', 'conspirators', 'infiltrators', screamed the press. BL itself piously insisted that politics did not come into it: they had sacked 13 workers simply because of false information on their job applications, discovered as a result of a 'routine audit'.

But everyone knows that the sackings were political. BL has form when it comes to politically motivated victimisations. Back in November 1979, they sacked the then convenor of Longbridge, Derek Robinson, just for putting his name to a pamphlet criticising the Edwardes plan. With the thinly disguised connivance of the AUEW leadership, and a vicious red-baiting campaign in the press, the BL bosses rode out the spontaneous walk-outs by thousands of BL workers, and Robinson stayed sacked, probably never to work in industry again.

Exactly one year after Robinson's dismissal, six militants (including four shop stewards, one of whom was Jim Denham, a Socialist Organizer supporter) were framed up and sacked at Longbridge for allegedly leading a 'riotous mob' on a 'rampage' round the plant. The evidence against the six would not have stood up in any court outside a police state. Again the workforce struck spontaneously, and again BL won the day thanks to the weakness and cowardice of the union leadership, in this case the TGWU.

Like savage dogs who have tasted blood, the bosses turned next to Cowley, and seized their chance to sack one of the best-established and most widely respected militants in the industry, Alan Thornett. In November 1982, he was sacked for a trivial driving offence that normally would not have warranted even a warning. The local TGWU leadership gave Thornett verbal support, but in practice ensured that no industrial action took place.

The purges had their effect. The stewards' movement was cowed and terrorised. Rank and file workers lost confidence in the unions' ability to defend them. Known militants have to watch every step, consider every utterance, and be constantly on their guard. Any BL worker will testify to the reign of terror that Edwardes and his henchmen unleashed upon the workforce.

Meanwhile the track speeds crept constantly up, conditions were eroded, and real wage levels were slashed.

Elsewhere in industry, other bosses took careful note of Edwardes' tactics and followed his example. A spate of victimisations (and who knows how many threats of victimisations?) followed the Robinson sacking. Managers throughout the private and the public sectors have seen that blatant intimidation and straightforward industrial blackmail can succeed against shop floor activists, especially when union leaders like Duffy and Evans go along with it.

The case of the Cowley 13 is the latest and most dramatic example of such intimidation. The official reason for the sackings is a sick joke. Any trade unionist knows that blacklists exist, not just of political activists, but also of straightforward trade union militants. Falsifying job applications and arranging false references is the only way for many people to get a job at all, especially with over three million out of work. If everyone with untruths on their application forms were sacked, then perhaps 20 or 30% of the total manual workforce in the country would be out of their jobs tomorrow.

The newspapers speculate wildly about a 'conspiracy' to 'infiltrate' the Cowley plant. They describe the 13 sacked workers in terms that would be much better applied to the clique of professional tough-guy managers brought in by Edwardes specifically, to bash the unions and intimidate the workforce.

Men like Tom Gray and Andy Barr, who closed down Speke and Rover Solihull, moved on to Longbridge to break the unions there, and then headed south to Cowley to put the boot in again. Or John Mackay — brought in from Chloride to manage Edwardes' image. He recently turned up as a consultant for management at the Financial Times in their long-running strike. These are the real infiltrators, and theirs is the real conspiracy.

As Steph Grant, one of the 13 sacked, says, 'If BL management knew I was a socialist, they would never have employed me'. That's the real scandal of Cowley.

If BL management and others like them get their way, socialists will have no right to work in this country.

Our answer must be clear and firm. We will fight for our socialist principles and for strong and effective trade unionism wherever we can. We will support, by the most effective methods we know, all those workers blacklisted and victimised. That means industrial action wherever possible against blacklists and for the right to work regardless of political affiliation or trade union activity.

The Labour Party must give a commitment that a future Labour government will reinstate all socialists and trade unionists victimised by the likes of BL management and their Tory backers.

Plane truth

269 PASSENGERS and crew died in the the Korean Airlines jumbo jet shot down last week under mysterious circumstances by a Soviet fighter deep inside Soviet air space.

It was a dramatic indication of the recklessness for human life, the habitual brutality, the uncontrolled ferocity, which flow from the very nature of the Kremlin bureaucracy.

Nobody but a crank could imagine that the Kremlin leaders, seeking to halt new missile deployments in Europe, had anything to gain from the deliberate destruction of the airliner.

Whatever the sequence of events that led up to the firing of the fatal missile, it is self-evident that even had the whole jumbo been packed to capacity with camera-toting CIA agents, the worst possible response (had Soviet procedures offered any flexibility) was to shoot down an unarmed civil aircraft — thus fuelling an immediate and universal escalation of cold war propaganda to the benefit of Reagan the the hawks in the imperialist governments of the West.

But we cannot be surprised at the initial scandalous silence, followed by lumbering and inept attempts at a cover-up, on the part of the Kremlin chiefs. The gang of bureaucrats who masquerade under the stolen banner of 'communism' in the USSR, Eastern Europe and other deformed workers' states are the political descendants of Joseph Stalin, whose ruthless suppression of every form of political opponent and brutal indifference to the fate of millions is well known.

They have never known — probably by now cannot even imagine — any sort of democratic accountability for their actions, any system of having to answer for what they do to the workers and peasants of their countries. They are used to 'explaining themselves' by means of the policeman's boot and baton.

When Andropov and his fellow-leaders attempt to respond to this crisis by at first trying to hush up the affair at top level, and then by simply brazening it out and seeking to ride the storm of international anger, they are just doing what comes naturally.

But don't let the appalling conduct of the Soviet bureaucracy fool anyone into thinking that Reagan and Thatcher are remotely concerned for the passengers. (Or even for the truth: it took them several days to admit that a US spy plane was operating in the area).

They are reveling in an ideal opportunity to stoke the fires of anti-communism, to bolster their own arguments for a further escalation of the arms race.

Nothing could be more cynical. The whole scenario of the night encounter between an 'off course' airliner and Soviet fighters, six miles above some of the most sensitive Soviet military installations, is a scenario of growing military and political tension consciously fuelled by Reagan and by Thatcher.

Reagan's hands are not clean. They are dripping with blood.

It was Reagan who set out to raise the stakes in the nuclear poker game, by equipping the USA with new first-strike weaponry — Cruise missiles, Pershing IIs, Trident, and the new giant MX missile.

It is Reagan — backed by Thatcher — who has insisted upon siting Cruise missiles in Europe as a new threat targeted on the USSR.

It is Reagan who has banged the military drum, dispatching fleets to cruise off the Nicaraguan coastline, sending thousands of troops for 'manoeuvres' in Central America, stationing aircraft carriers to menace Libya, and arming bloodstained dictators around the world.

Reagan's military actions are deliberately designed to create a climate of suspicion, fear and anxiety — and to further the strategies and ambitions of the US bankers and military top brass.

Death and suffering are a daily by-product of the operations of the US ruling class. Millions die agonising deaths in the plundered Third World through avoidable famine and curable diseases, while in the advanced capitalist countries farmers are paid not to produce and drug companies vie to promote the latest marketing gimmick. Thousands die and are maimed in factories and workplaces world-wide as victims of the multinationals' ruthless will to sacrifice human life to profit.

And deaths arising from US political strategy are even more visible.

In Chile, deliberate US 'destabilisation' of an elected government paved the way ten years ago for a vicious junta that drove one million into exile, murdered thousands, and destroyed the country's economy.

The 'psychopathic killers' running the El Salvador military — as even a former US Ambassador described one of them — are trained, financed, armed, 'advised', and propped up by the US.

When Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza and his National Guard unleashed murderous war against the Sandinista revolution, the US was right behind them — as it had been right behind the Somozas' brutal rule for over 40 years. Washington abandoned Somoza only when it was clear that he was going to lose. Now the US pumps in money, guns and 'advisors' to help ex National Guardsmen waging counter-revolutionary war against the new Nicaragua.

Reagan deplores Kremlin brutality: but the murdering military dictatorship in Turkey is the apple of his eye, keeping a strategic country safe for NATO. The same US administration which professes horror at the death of 269 on the KAL airliner remains doggedly committed to the diplomatic recognition of the defeated genocidal Pol Pot leadership of Kampuchea — which killed an estimated three to four million people.

No: Reagan's hands drip with blood. The British ruling class not only supports US imperialism, but has its own, longer, blood-stained record.

The answer is to stop the arms race. And to do that we must disarm and overthrow Reagan, Thatcher, and the class they represent.

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Unexpected ally helps halt frenzied hunt for "moles"

THE MOST surprising development in the course of the singling out and victimisation of the 13 socialists from BL's Cowley plant was the attitude of David Buckle, the right-wing Oxford District Secretary of the TGWU.

His main claim to fame is many years of determined witch-hunting against the far left in the union.

On this occasion, however, he played a very different role. It was his powerful defence of the 13 and condemnation of the witch-hunt which defused the situation to some extent at a time when it was becoming very dangerous for the labour movement.

He countered the 'infiltration' slander by quoting Thatcher at the Tory trade unionists' conference urging them to 'infiltrate' the unions and win support for the Tory party. He asked how many of such people had been sacked.

Appalled

He strongly attacked the media: "There has been no natural justice for these people, who have been tried and found guilty by the media. As a magistrate I am appalled at the media's conduct". In response to question from the press, he said he could "smell fascism around in this country".

Such comments from someone like David Buckle show how deep were the dangers for the workers' movement that had developed at that time. Thatcher and Tebbit were sitting waiting to see what they could utilise for their own anti trade union ends.

Organisations like the Economic League — which had not been prominent for many years — were crawling out of the woodwork to advertise their dirty trade of more systematically and effectively operating the blacklist.

BL had a more fundamental objective. In their opinion they have a serious problem in Cowley, having decided to make it their major area of investment.

IN THE aftermath to the massive witch-hunt of socialists in BL's Cowley Assembly Plant, and the campaign built upon it by the press, ALAN THORNETT, himself politically victimised and sacked by BL, gives his reactions and his view of the wider implications.

They have to deal with the militant tradition of the Assembly Plant.

A decision to pump investment into Cowley (which has an ideal combination of Body and Assembly facilities side by side) was also a decision to launch a vicious and protracted war against the trade unions.

For various reasons, not least the Tory offensive and the dramatic sell-outs in BL since 1979 by the trade union leaders, mostly at national level, this achieved a high degree of success. Shop stewards and workers were harassed and intimidated. Militants were victimised, and the shop stewards' committee reduced to a third of its previous size.

By the end of last year BL considered (with some justification) that the exercise had been largely completed.

The remaining stewards had their backs to the wall; massive speed-up had been introduced; and the remaining key agreements, like seniority, had been largely smashed.

However, they were wrong, seriously wrong.

In April the workforce struck over the six and nine minutes hand-washing time. The strength and solidarity of the strike demonstrated that trade unionism and the militant history of the plant were far from dead, and not so easy to kill.

BL's initial response came through the joint inquiry agreed as part of the sell-out of the strike.

This report again identified the shop stewards' movement as the problem. It was, they said, the "political opinions" of "certain shop stewards" which were the problem, and a reorganisation of the shop stewards' movement was required.

This response, however, although serious, was never adequate to BL's requirements. They wanted (and still want) a clear-out of those militants who represent and can express the militant history of the plant.

That requirement, more than anything else, determined their response to the 'discovery', by whatever means, that a number of socialists and trade union activists had taken jobs in the plant — mostly at the time of the Maestro recruitment.

Many of them had been forced to falsify their application forms to get round BL's discriminatory recruitment procedures.

BL decided, along with the media and the government (who followed the events very closely) that this was the basis for a massive witch-hunt against socialists in industry.

Whilst lyingly saying that they were sacking 13 workers for falsifying their application forms (when they had already identified political ideas as the problem in their report), they deliberately fuelled the political witch-hunt.

Each day for several days the gutter press 'revealed' information (such as details of educational qualifications entered on the application forms) which logically could only have come from management sources.

The press witch-hunt was designed not just to get the 13 sacked — although management did see that as important in itself — but to discredit and weaken the trade union movement and to create the conditions to sack more people. Since the witch-hunt started, the pressure has increased considerably on militants in BL.

They hoped to discredit socialist ideas ideologically through lies and smears, thereby isolating

shop stewards from their members — making them look like outsiders or 'moles' working subversively for political ends.

They did the same to me in 1974, and to Derek Robinson in 1979.

Such a witch-hunt says to socialists: If you want to get a job or keep the one you have got keep your political ideas to yourself — or, more precisely, don't have any political ideas at all. (The Sun announced that one way to spot a 'mole' is to find anyone who reads the Guardian rather than the Sun!)

It says to other less committed workers: Don't listen to or get involved in politics, and don't become an activist in your union.

Battering ram

Thus it was the witch-hunt which was most damaging. Every day that it occupied the front pages, this ideological battering ram was in operation.

For this reason it was a mistake for Stephanie Grant to hold a press conference when she did. Her arguments were entirely valid, explaining that as an activist she could not have got a job in any other way. But she gave the press three more days of front pages, which would otherwise have been difficult to sustain. This far outweighed the effect of the points she was able to get across.

After Buckle's speech the headlines faded, but one dimension of the situation was brought into sharper focus — the Labour Party angle, with the Tory editors' eyes on the upcoming Labour Party conference.

This had been a factor from the outset. Right-wingers like John Golding had been quick to equate so-called 'infiltration' into BL with so-called 'infiltration' into the Labour Party. In other words, people with socialist ideas should be outlawed.

The Sun used its editorial three days running to challenge Neil Kinnock to say where he stood on 'infiltration' into BL.

The Telegraph and the Express carried front-page articles claiming that there were "1000 SL members" "infiltrated" into the Labour Party, and quoted a Labour Party spokesperson saying that "we have got to deal with them".

Although most of the left

press (leaving aside the scurrilous role of Newsline) have roundly condemned the witch-hunt — including the Morning Star — there has been some reluctance by prominent labour movement figures in coming forward to denounce it.

Ken Livingstone has done so, and so has Eric Heffer, who warned in a letter to Labour Party workers (see page 3) of the dangers of creating an atmosphere in which a McCarthyite witch-hunt could flourish.

Eric Heffer is right. The dangers are there. Those concerned for democracy in the Labour Party and the trade unions should make it their duty to stamp out this witch-hunt before any more damage is done.

Analysing the witch hunts

TWO POINTS about Alan Thornett's article (SO 144).

The BL witch-hunt was vicious. The popular press is, indeed, vile and repressive and hysterically anti-socialist. Attempts — though pretty feeble ones — were made by the press to spread the Cowley witch-hunt across industry, and to claw into it the Labour Party, CND, etc.

Precisely for that reason it is important to make a cool assessment of where we are at and of what happened.

I think it is wrong to see the BL witch-hunting as part of a concerted and integrated campaign to smash the labour movement. The evidence suggests it was far more haphazard.

The Cowley management is not the whole capitalist class, and it had its specific motives for dealing with the 13 as it did. The press seized its opportunities, but it is not all-powerful.

The conditions existed in Cowley for the management to sweep out the 13 with relatively little trouble. It takes more than a few horror stories in the press to create the conditions for purges in every industry and every area of society.

And if the Cowley witch-hunt were part of a concerted effort to smash up the labour movement, then that fact would invalidate Alan Thornett's criticism of the Socialist League.

He says that they merely fed the witch-hunters' fires by holding a press conference, and that it would have been better to keep their heads down. That makes sense if the witch-hunt was basically a localised, limited affair, so caution and tactical sense could hope to prevent any serious extension of it.

But if there were a concerted drive against trade union militants with the Cowley witch-hunt as its cutting edge, then lying low would not help and might hinder.

It's like the well-worn argument against any militant self-assertion: that it 'provokes' the reactionaries, 'gives them an ex-

cuse' to strike at you. And the answer is the same: if it's in their interests, they'll manufacture an excuse or a provocation.

Strategy and tactics cannot be shaped by fear of provoking our opponents. Whether the SL should have kept its head down is a matter of judgment of the immediate circumstances.

A far more weighty criticism of the SL is what they did and didn't do in their press conference.

After they had been thrown out of their jobs for being revolutionary socialists, it served no purpose to continue to deny their political identity. Who believed their denials?

The denials must have discredited them, and not only them, politically. They missed the

chance to make a bold and principled Marxist statement.

To choose to try to integrate themselves into the BL workforce rather than make socialist propaganda would have been perfectly proper — if it were an option.

But by the time they held the press conference, it wasn't.

Yet they had... a press conference to deny any connection with the SL, chaired by one of the better known SL full-timers!

They fed the press witch-hunt at that point mainly by seeming to fit exactly the media image of lying, twisting reeds.

From whichever angle you look at it, it was a lamentably incompetent and disoriented performance.

JACK CLEARY,
London.

Significance of BL's Cowley witch-hunt

JACK Cleary (in SO149) seriously distorts my article on the recent Cowley sackings. He does so to such an extent that I can only conclude that he does so in order to more easily polemicise against me.

He claims that I predicted "a purge in every industry and every area of society" as a result of the sackings. And he claims that I see the sackings as a part of a campaign to "smash the labour movement".

Exaggerating your opponents' arguments until they are incredible is a very destructive way of conducting a polemic.

In fact I made no such sweeping statements, although I think the sackings were very serious. The nearest I came to such statements, which I stand by completely, was to say, "Such comments from someone like David Buckle show how deep were the dangers for the workers' movement that had developed at that time."

"Thatcher and Tebbit were sitting waiting to see what they could utilise for their own anti trade union ends".

I think that is a cool assessment. I think the Cowley sackings and the witch-hunt around them was one of the factors which has created a significantly new situation in industry. This can be seen in the pits, was seen in the Stockport Messenger, and now in the hardening of BT management and their injunction against the POEU.

I don't intend to respond extensively on the matter of SL. My article was written in the spirit of fraternal solidarity with a far left group who were being witch-hunted by the media at the time by forces which posed a danger to the labour movement as a whole.

Jack Cleary is clearly incapable of comprehending such an approach, since the logic of his comments would be to provoke a discussion, which even if it did not have sectarian intent could be damaging to the far left.

Therefore I will go no further than to defend the criticisms I made of Stephanie Grant for the Monday press conference. It is just not true to say that the media can whip up a national witch-hunt at will. Why did they pick on Scargill's ill-timed visit to the USSR, for example?

They need the right kind of things to hang it on and they need the right things to keep it going. We should not give them those things at the time they need them if we can avoid it.

There are no timeless rules on this, we have to take the concrete situation.

In my view, having followed it in detail, the media had a problem after a few days in the Cowley situation and needed a fresh angle to keep it going. In particular they needed personalities and the press conference gave them that.

As a result we had another four days of damaging witch-hunting. That is why I made my comment.

There is, however, another worrying aspect to Jack Cleary's letter. That is the way he sets out to play down the role of BL management in Britain today.

He says for example that, "The Cowley management is not the whole capitalist class". I assume we can accept that he means BL management rather than Cowley management, who clearly would not have had the authority to do this.

Well, it is certainly true that BL management are not the whole capitalist class, but it is the single most important industrial asset they have. More-

over someone in Jack Cleary's position could not possibly make a chance remark on it, and any playing down of the role of BL management in the current situation is seriously politically wrong.

In fact very few people in the whole labour movement today would deny the central role of BL management over the last five years, or see their actions as a local affair.

Take Tony Benn's speech at the Labour Party conference last week as an example; or the recent events at Vauxhall. Even the right wing would not deny it, since they cannot deal with them in the same way.

That is part of the reason for David Buckle's attitude to both this and the hand-washing strike.

The very fact that it was BL who sacked the 15 in this way was absolutely not by chance. It may have come up in a 'hazardous' way, but it was not dealt with as such.

It was dealt with with all the authority BL management has amongst the employers, and they were all strengthened by

it. (Not enough to smash the labour movement at a stroke, of course, but significant just the same. Certainly enough to tell the difference if you are a militant in a key industry).

Perhaps I could ask Jack

Cleary if he could name a few more managements who might have taken such an initiative as this in this period? Is there a parallel to BL's 1979 survival plan and the way they implemented it? What kind of effect did that have on the national situation?

Is there a parallel to the sacking of Derek Robinson and what effect did that have on the national situation? Would any other management have carried through the sacking at Longbridge two and a half years ago so effectively?

Has any other management achieved even half of the speed-up of EL? Has any management broken down a powerful shop stewards' movement to anything like the same degree?

For all these reasons it is wrong to see it as just another management acting for its own local interest. Michael Edwards' book has been such a big seller for all of these reasons. It now plays the role of an employers' handbook on how to fight the unions.

On top of this Cowley has another significance which should not be played down. It is the only major factory in manufacturing industry with a significant and long-established tradition of Trotskyism within it, and which has played a significant role in the situation.

Jack Cleary should be playing up the significance of BL, not playing it down.

ALAN THORNETT;
Oxford.

How serious was the Cowley witch-hunt?

WHY is Alan Thornett so touchy? Everyone writes bad articles sometimes: I'm considered to be pretty good at it myself.

I don't think I misrepresented his article (SO144).

In my letter I wrote: "It is wrong to see the BL witch-hunt as part of a concerted and integrated campaign to smash the labour movement".

I argued that though it had been possible for BL "management to sweep out the 13 with very little trouble", conditions did not exist for a general purge. "It takes more than a few horror stories in the press for purges in every industry and every area of society".

I put the argument starkly for clarity and brevity. I do not think that I accused Alan Thornett of specifically predicting "purges in every industry..."

Exaggerated

Still, when I first read Alan Thornett's letter I thought that maybe I had exaggerated, or slipped up and commented on something he had said in a private discussion, rather than on his article. Not so. Re-read the article.

With the discovery of the 13, it says, "BL decided, along with the media and the government (who followed events very closely) that this was the basis for a massive witch-hunt against socialists in industry" (emphasis mine).

The article also says that the "powerful defence of the 13 and condemnation of the witch-hunt" by Oxford TGWU district secretary David Buckle "detused the situation... at a time when it was becoming very dangerous for the labour movement".

Distance

Alan Thornett quotes Buckle further: "In response to questions from the press, he said he could 'smell fascism around in this country'. Such comments from someone like David Buckle show how deep were the dangers for the workers' movement that had developed at that time".

Alan Thornett seems to distance himself from the letter of Buckle's comment. But he does use the comment to back up his own picture of the dangers to the whole labour movement.

In his letter Alan Thornett quoted his comments on Buckle, but he chose to omit the remarks of Buckle that he was approving.

But his letter itself shows how far from misrepresenting him I was: it refers to the witch-hunt "by the media at the time by forces which posed a danger to the

labour movement as a whole". (My emphasis).

He also says: "The Cowley sackings and the witch-hunt around them was one of the factors (his emphasis) which have created a significant new situation in industry".

Since when? What were the others? To illustrate the 'new situation', he cites "the pits.. the Stockport Messenger... the hardening of BT management and their injunction against the POEU".

Was the Cowley witch-hunt a major factor in causing all this? Or wasn't it? Clearly his line of thought is that the Cowley witch hunt was a major turning point.

Wriggling around as Alan Thornett does in his letter is also a "very destructive way of conducting a polemic" – and of conducting political life in general.

On the Socialist League, Alan Thornett evades my point: that

his criticism of the SL was internally incoherent. On the one hand, he mis-read and exaggerated the forces and power behind the witch-hunt; on the other he said that this major effort by the ruling class depended on such small beer of routine journalism as finding 'an angle', 'personalities', etc.

Of course the press needed 'an angle'. Alan Thornett is right here, as far as it goes. 'Red

Steph's' press conference was 'an angle', and was used.

But they can find or invent 'angles' – they do it all the time just to spice up newspapers. If it was really a decision by 'BL, along with the media and the government' to launch a 'massive witch-hunt' against socialists in industry generally, then they could certainly have found fuel.

Alan Thornett asserts that it is within the bounds of 'fraternal solidarity' and not 'sectarian intent' to criticise the SL (as he did) when the witch-hunt is only beginning to die down, for daring to try to have their say at a press conference; but it is outside these bounds to criticise the *political content* of their press conference some weeks later, when the witch-hunt is clearly over.

He attacks them arbitrarily for disagreeing with him on the tactical issue of whether to lie low physically or not: he then attacks me as sectarian for commenting on their decision to lie low *politically*, to disavow themselves publicly.

Another contrast: he criticises the SL for daring to have the impulse to make a stand, while praising Buckle – and ridiculously exaggerating his role – for

making a stand. I can't understand any of this.

Perhaps the key to the whole dispute is in Alan Thornett's final two paragraphs: "Jack Cleary should be playing up (his emphasis) the significance of BL, not playing it down" – because it has "a significant and long-established tradition of Trotskyism within it".

When he accuses me of playing down BL, he means I don't agree with some things he says in his letter, such as that the BL management is "the single most important industrial asset the capitalist class have". "The very fact that it was BL who sacked the 15 in this way was absolutely not by chance. It may have come up in a 'haphazard' way, but it was not dealt with as such. It was dealt with *with all the authority BL management has amongst the employers*, and they were all strengthened by it".

Not Cowley management, he asserts, but only the central BL management (possibly, from what Alan Thornett says elsewhere, after consulting the Cabinet) could decide to sack 13 sitting ducks who had little chance of

getting even token strike action in their defence!

There are bits and pieces of truth scattered in this, but it is all exaggerated and distorted, according (I suppose) to Alan Thornett's injunction to "play up BL". To describe BL management as 'the single most important industrial asset' is perilously close to the 'bad King John' theory of history – capitalist class power certainly needs ruthless men, but serious class struggle issues are decided by something more fundamental than the personal qualities of managers.

It is not that I play down or deny the importance of the 'Edwardes Revolution' in BL, but that Alan Thornett paints his picture with no sense of proportion, perspective or balance. Indeed, he openly disavows and condemns objectivity.

But if you decide in advance that, for whatever reason, you are going to play something up or down before you analyse the facts, then you part company with Marxism. You necessarily increase the risk of getting lost in your own wishes, dreams, fears and fantasies. As someone probably said, don't play up, don't play down, first understand.

First work out and define what is happening and your own objective place in it – and then map out what you can do to affect what happens next. The fact that there is a 'Trotskyist tradition' at Cowley has no

proper bearing on what we are discussing.

A BL-centred or Oxford-centred view of the world is inevitably a distorted one -- as useless as the view that the sun revolves around the earth, and pretty close to being its political equivalent.

'Story-lining' for clear presentation is very important: but if it is not woven around a framework of determinedly objective assessment of how things in the world really stand, then such story-weaving is the weaving of ideological cataracts on our own eyes.

On this issue Alan Thornett has mistaken the art of weaving facets and impressions of reality together into a plausible story around the axis of one's own preconceptions, for the job of making an objective Marxist assessment of reality. These are very different arts.

JACK CLEARY, London.

How has the faction campaigned since August? What do they represent politically?

They have not developed any debate on the explicit political issues which they see as fundamental.

The November 19 EC unanimously agreed (on my proposal) to launch a discussion on imperialism " in order to clarify the basic issues behind the recurrent disputes ". Practically all the debate since then has been between those opposed to the faction (eg Scott and myself). Not a word from the faction until Cunliffe's recent document (IB 81) - a depressing exercise in scholasticism, on which more later.

The majority has written at length on recent developments in the Labour Party. Not a word from the faction.

Instead there has been a series of " scandals ".

It is a sorry and tedious tale. The political issues explicitly at stake would not merit one-hundredth of the sound and fury. The point is however, is as we noted in IB 70:

" In the earlier factional struggles around the Falklands and the Labour Party, the factionalism emerged, more or less, from the issue (though there was more to it ...). Now the issues emerge, almost completely, from the factionalism ".

And having emerged, in their turn, the " issues ", and the way they are argued, consolidate and shape the factionalism.

The record which follows looks like a record of trivial details. In a sense it is. But these " trivial " issues are what the faction leaders have chosen to define themselves.

As Lenin put it:

" Every little difference may become a big difference if it is insisted on, if it is put in the foreground ... Every little difference may assume tremendous importance if it serves as a starting point for a turn towards definite mistaken views ... "

(" One step forward, Two steps back ")

A. September 17

In the cause of trying to recreate unity, Carolan (supported on this by the EC majority) nominated Smith to open the September 17 conference.

On the day, shortly before the proceedings were due to start, Smith approached Kinnell and declared that he (Smith) would refuse to participate in the conference. " You'll have to find another speaker ".

Reason: members of the Spartacist League had been admitted to the conference.

Only after an emergency EC meeting did Smith calm down and agree to speak.

His speech put his own particular slant on events. The combativity of the working class was presented as a constant factor, and the shift for the worse in the political situation presented simply in terms of decisions by the Tories to attack harder and decisions by the trade union leaders to sell out more.

Carolan's concluding speech, in my view, presented a more rounded, materialist analysis of developments, trying to locate the leaders' sell-outs within the whole development of the working class. It was moreover, a summary of what we had said in conference documents. (See papers nos. 147 and 148).

But we do not need to, and should not try to, have a hard " party line " on such questions of analysis. If we found Smith's analysis somewhat crude and non-materialist, it does not matter all that much.

Nor did it matter that much that Smith gratuitously used his speech to " have a go " on various factional issues. He insisted heavily on his own unrelievedly pessimistic picture of the situation (how he squares that with the idea that the combativity of the working class has remained constantly high is his problem), a pessimism which he had made something of a factional " point of honour " as against the more nuanced assessments of the majority.

He got in a bit about the alleged centrality of the Cowley witch-hunt. One of the faction's main arguments at that time, as comrades may remember, was that the Cowley witch-hunt represented a fundamental turn in the whole political situation: it had been planned from Cabinet level as the first stage of a concerted drive throughout industry. They condemned the EC majority for underestimating it when we argued that the Cowley witch-hunt, while certainly important, was fundamentally a local BL issue rather than something which changed the whole situation throughout industry.

It can now be seen that we were right. The Cowley witch-hunt was a local issue. Smith implicitly admits that when in his call for a conference he omits the Cowley sackings from his list of new political developments since last April. It would be good to have an explicit statement from the faction that they were wrong, and irresponsible to factionalise on this issue as they did.

But again, the reference in Smith's speech did no great harm. Nor did his dragged-in reference to the Korean jet affair, on which more below.

What did do harm was Smith's reaction after the conference. He brought a motion of censure to the NC ... because he thought his speech had not been presented prominently enough in the paper! Plainly nothing would satisfy him except to have himself presented as the star of the conference.

B. The Korean jet

Smith raised objections to the paper's line on this issue at the EC on September 10 and September 17. His argument was that the USSR was guilty of nothing worse than a mistake, and that Socialist Action's editorial line had been better than ours.

Whatever you think of the issue politically, it was reasonable to raise it on the EC. What was bad was:

(a) The demagogic arguments used. Smith declared, for example: " There is a difference of world-view. Carolan is unable to assess objectively anything the USSR does. We have a material interest in de-bunking the anti-communist witch-hunt ". The issue was argued as if we had to stand up for the USSR over the shooting-down, or else be guilty of not fighting " anti-communism ". It was " anti-imperialist camp " politics against class politics once again.

(b) Cunliffe's behaviour. He had drafted the editorial in paper no. 145 which caused Smith's initial complaint, and he had freely agreed to amendments proposed by me. Anyone can change their mind. But when Cunliffe sided with Smith's condemnation of his own editorial, he did not say that he had changed his mind. He said there were new facts.

In reality there had been nothing to change our fundamental assessment. (After all, the Socialist Action editorial which Smith praised must have been written before, i.e. on the basis of fewer facts than, ours. They go to press earlier.) There had been some further holes revealed in the US story: but all that was common ground. As regards the USSR's story, which was the point of controversy, all the new revelations reduced its credibility ... and should have strengthened our initial condemnation of the shooting-down.

(Initially, for five days, the USSR denied shooting down the plane, and said it had been unable to identify it. Then it said that it had identified the plane as a spy-plane, and admitted shooting it down. There were other contradictions in the story too.)

C. " No demands on Kinnock "

At the October 15 NC Smith put forward a resolution declaring:

" We have to have a clear uncompromising attitude to the centre/right leadership established in the LP under Kinnock. We would no more place demands on him ... than / (on) the Foot leadership "

I proposed an amendment to retain the condemnation of Kinnock but eliminate the idea that we should not place demands on the Labour Party leadership. (We had, after all, frequently placed demands on the Foot leadership!) For text of resolutions see IB 76.

Smith responded by saying: " I can't see any difference between my resolution and Kinnell's. But I won't accept Kinnell's because I'm sure that it will turn out later to contain something I don't agree with ". And eventually he pushed it to a vote.

Clearly there was a political difference of sorts: Smith wanted a more strident declamatory tone towards Kinnock, and altogether a more propagandist, self-proclamatory profile in the LP. He also insisted that the LP left was dead, or practically dead, while the NC majority argued that the Left was in retreat (but not dead), and was also differentiating, with sections like the LCC moving to the right and some moving more to the left.

But above and beyond that political difference, Smith's behaviour here was a clear example of dead-end gang-warfare factionalism ... he couldn't see what was wrong with my amendment but he would vote against it just the same.

D. The local government left

The October 15 NC also discussed the issue of socialists and local government. A resolution from Kinnell was passed (and has since been written up as a discussion document for the broad groups).

The faction leaders made no contribution to the discussion, except a brief statement from Smith that he agreed that we should be cautious about putting people forward, but that was because of the general political situation (bad situation in industry, death of the LP left, etc., as above).

Then in his summing up, Kinnell criticised the work of various comrades in local government - including a faction member. The faction leaders were immediately up in arms, and voted against the resolution.

Since then, the faction leaders have been silent, but other faction members have been arguing that the NC position is too critical of the local government left and of our own comrades involved in that sphere, and that we should push forward with getting more comrades involved. (See paper nos. 165 and 168; also GS's speech at the broad group agm).

At the March 10 NC the faction members voted against the item in the " Immediate Tasks " resolution on the local government left. In EC discussions on Booth's taking the wrong side on a local government wages struggle, the faction members have avoided endorsing Booth but also avoided coming out clearly against him, saying they have not heard enough to be sure yet.

Until further notice then, we must take the faction's position on local government as being for heavier involvement and less criticism. It seems a remarkable turnabout from the debate before the April Conference, when the faction were attacking the present majority for too much emphasis on involvement in LP official structures!

But then ... a number of faction members are involved in local government. And the Parsons faction, which the Oxford faction leaders want to woo, strongly favours more involvement in local government.

Here we have " factionalism " in the most sordid sense - trimming your politics to suit your chosen allies.

There is also a political logic, though. Because the Healeyite politics of self-proclamation are so abstract, the " revolutionary " rhetoric can easily be combined with the most humdrum reformist practice. All you have to do is to explain that your council chamber activities are, despite appearances, in their dialectical essence " the fight for leadership ". We predicted this as far back as IB 22+: using the faction's orientation, we said, " Instead of a unifying and dynamic political approach to the whole labour movement, we would get a more or less sharp disjunction in the organisation between TU activists and LP activists, and the possibility of routinism and accommodation on both sides, ie the inner collapse of ' the party ' into a series of constituencies ".

E. Palestine

The October 15 NC also saw the final stage of the faction's drive to condemn the leaflet issued at the LMCP conference.

We commented on this in IB 70: " The EC was acting responsibly and entirely within its rights to interpret the policy of the organisation. The gist of the problem is that Smith and others actually do not agree with the TILC resolution they voted for ... or do not understand it. All of us bear part of the blame for this: vague phrases about self-determination have frequently been used in the paper, and clearly, we did not bring the issue out well enough in the discussion (in 1982)."

" The organisation is in fact confused on the issue. A full political discussion on it is overdue and urgent. It is quite plain that a number of quite different positions exist within the majority formula of ' the democratic secular state '. The confusion can be remedied only by political debate, not by wild accusations in which politics takes second place to factional point-scoring. "

But we can't get any reasoned political debate from the faction.

At the broad groups AGM on October 30 we had on Palestine another example of the countless minor " crisis " which the faction has engineered over past months. There was a resolution from a non-member of the League on the question. Smith's first reaction was to declare that he would not accept anything the EC decided on our reaction to it. Finally he agreed that we should accept the resolution without amendment.

There was also the beginning of the argument about Grenada which would culminate at the November 19 NC in a motion of censure from Smith because there was an editorial introduction to a polemical article of his. (See IB 77).

Smith started by producing a resolution portraying the invasion of Grenada as a consequence of the South Atlantic war. He said he had a right to put it to the AGM whatever the EC said, because it reflected the line of the September 1962 conference!

Eventually he calmed down and agreed that we put a simple solidarity resolution, and he could argue his analysis in the discussion.

Then towards the end of the AGM, he approached Kinnell and said he had written a polemical article on the issue. Could Kinnell give a guarantee that it would go in the paper? Kinnell replied that he hadn't the authority to give a guarantee, and that Smith had better ask the EC: but personally he (Kinnell) would be in favour of publishing.

Not good enough, declared Smith: unless he got an assurance he would raise the matter in the AGM there and then! Eventually he calmed down on this, too.

There were other minor " confrontations " that weekend. When the scheduled pro-withdrawal speaker, McVicar, failed to turn up for the debate on the EEC at the day school on October 29, Smith immediately (in front of all present - including many non-members of the League) denounced the organisers of the school for allegedly rigging the debate. He then went on to accuse us of preaching an EEC parliamentary road to socialism and giving political credit to Kinnoch!

On Ireland there was a resolution from non-members of the League attacking the line we had agreed at our August conference. The EC, after a bit of argument, decided that we must have a definite League line against this resolution. Smith then abstained in the vote: and became indignant when in the EC later we asked him for an explanation.

All these disputes were essentially trivial. What makes them important is that these are the disputes which the faction pursues, and thus they shape the functioning of the leadership. Time is taken up with endless attempts by the faction to raise " scandals ". No political issue can ever be discussed calmly, on its merits.

F. International work

International work came up at the November 19 NC. Since April the EC majority has been pressing for definite policy in this area - proposing essentially what was in the end decided by the November 19 NC (see IB 77).

Each time the faction leaders had said we needed more discussion and a more fundamental reappraisal. We could have used our majority on the EC to ram through a decision: but we tried to be conciliatory.

Thanks to the constant procession of " crises " and " scandals ", the desired discussion was postponed and postponed, to November 19.

Then Cunliffe came up with the proposal to go for fusion with the USFI (IB 77). The faction leaders abstained on this, and voted against the resolution eventually passed. They had no positive proposals of their own.

That did not stop them making it a factional issue. Smith: " Whettling's contribution is just dead-end sectarianism. Kinnell's arguments against me in his document are just part of the bureaucratic method. Of course, on anything that relates to a world view on imperialism I will come out closer to the SL than the WSL. The WSL position is not held by anyone else who regards themselves as Trotskyist. It is a freak position ...

" Cunliffe's document is a big issue. To apply for a USFI franchise in Britain would be a big step to take. There should be a conference on it. If there is a vote I shall abstain on Cunliffe's proposal and vote against Kinnell.

" We have a very serious problem of national isolation. The majority of the WSL think that they themselves are the only people worth talking to... We have no option now but to find some way into the USFI, seek to get a hearing in the USFI.

" Part of the majority attitude is to get our own membership poisoned against the SL ...

" Because of our political positions, nobody in the world will touch us with a barge-pole..."

G. " Convergence " and the magazine

The issue of launching a broad-groups magazine came up first at the October NC.

The EC majority was in favour of it, but wanted to avoid polarisation if possible. So Carolan sought out a private discussion with Smith to put to him the idea that the magazine issue could be subsumed into a broader project of " convergence " between the League and the broad groups. The problems about loss of party profile, etc., could thus be avoided: the new magazine would be a party magazine, only that the " party " would have a different name.

Smith eventually seemed to acquiesce. Good: the issue could be taken to the NC without factional polarisation.

No such good luck. By the November NC the faction leaders were raising hell about " liquidationism " ... and condemning Carolan's move to get agreement and avoid polarisation as a dirty underhand trick!

The NC decided that we had to drop all talk of " convergence " and stop the discussion: however correct the proposal, it could not be carried through with a well-entrenched faction raising hell against it, even if that faction was in a small minority.

But we had to go ahead with the magazine - so we eventually decided at the January 7 NC. In this debate the faction leaders made speeches which identified Trotskyism and Leninism, not with the substance of the politics of an organisation, but with the labels and emblems it adopts. To produce a magazine with the same " political content under a different title (which we proposed for the sake of the advantages in circulation) would be " a further move away from Trotskyism " (Smith), " junking the specifically Leninist component of our politics " (Cunliffe).

H. " Not part of a developing situation "

During the NGA dispute the League had a line which was clear, substantially different from all other left groups, and in essence, unanimously agreed. It should have been an excellent chance to pull the League together.

On the anti-union laws more generally, in 1982 we had developed a line which again was clear, fairly distinctive, and unanimously agreed.

When we discussed perspectives for the coming months at the NC following the April conference (June 18), there was unanimous agreement that anti-union laws would become a bigger and bigger factor. And we were right.

Here was the possibility for uniting the League in action. In fact, much less has been done than could have been, thanks to Smith's inactivity (commissioned last June to convene a MCDTUR meeting, and reminded many times since, he has yet to do it). The issue has been made a factional football.

The high point of that dispute was the December 11 EC. Smith accused the EC majority of being on " an SWP binge " (too much stress on rank and file initiative as opposed to denunciation of TUC). He refused to vote on a resolution from Carolan which spelled out our attitude on the inter-relation of rank-and-file initiative and demands on the TUC. He put down a resolution assessing the HGA decision to call a one-day strike (which they later called off) and to suspend the mass pickets as " a serious retreat which puts the whole struggle in jeopardy ". When the majority indicated that we agreed with that, he added on a clause to make sure we wouldn't agree - " and we do not regard it as part of a developing situation "!

It would be comic if it were not tragic. It is certainly petty. Yet that is how the faction pursue their factional struggle on the issue of the HGA dispute.

Finally, Cunliffe's walk-out from the paper, and the EB " issue ", and the April conference " issue ", are the most recent steps in the factional struggle.

At each step, the explicit political content becomes less, the accusations against the majority wilder, the tone more desperate and strident.

Recreating Healyism

The ideological core of the faction's new international outlook is a regression to Healyism.

The Healyites' " anti-pabloism " fundamentally accepted the " Pabloite " vision of the world as being shaped by the struggle of two camps, Revolution and Imperialism. The Healyites differed by branding as sell-outs some of those seen by the " Pabloites " as good leaders of the Revolution, and by insisting more loudly on the need for a new leadership.

Thus for the " Pabloites " Castro led the Revolution in Cuba; for the Healyites, he sold it out. Neither faction provided an adequate positive analysis of the actual revolution.

This common ground between Healyism and " Pabloism " enabled Healy to move easily from strident sectarianism towards the colonial revolutions, to " Pabloite " attitudes to the Vietnamese Stalinists and Arab nationalists.

The present leaders of the faction made some efforts to move away from that after 1975. Now they have reverted to the original " camp " politics in the crudest form.

In domestic politics too, Healyism always tended to define a revolutionary stance by how loudly the existing leadership was denounced and a new leadership was proclaimed, rather than by an independent viewpoint on basic political issues.

One example: July 1972, the highest point of class struggle in Britain since World War 2, when five dockers were jailed under the Industrial Relations Act and then released under pressure of mass strike action. The Healyites called for a general strike - with the proviso that it should be called off when a general election was called! This reformist position was of course coupled with all sorts of denunciations of the existing leaders and self-proclamations by the Healyites.

In domestic politics too, the faction is moving back towards Healyite formulas: propagandist declarations on a bedrock of routine. That the movement is carried out through violent arguments over often minor issues means only that it is blind: the faction leaders themselves do not know where they are going.

Conclusion

In IB 36 the faction leaders accused us of "'critical support' minus the criticism " towards the LP left and of " rushing to prevent any move to raise a critique of Benn ". Around that time Piggot accused us of " telling workers to go to LP ward meetings rather than fighting the Tories in the factories ", and the faction leaders made much the same accusation in scarcely less crude terms.

Now they accuse us of being " on an SWP binge " - and some at least of the faction members reckon that we are " sectarian " because we criticise the LP local government left too sharply.

Is there any coherence behind this?

One basic feature of the view on domestic politics which the faction leaders have developed over recent months is a deep, demoralised pessimism. An initiative by us for a campaign against the anti-union laws is not viable. The LP left is dead. The GCHQ struggle was hopeless from the start. Everything is bleak in the trade unions: it is " an SWP binge " to fight for rank and file action in support of the NGA; all we can do is denounce the TUC.

This leads to a sterile denunciatory propagandism (" no demands on Kinrock "), which is coupled with a fetish of labels and emblems (a different form of a magazine is " a further move away from Trotskyism ", " an abandonment of the specifically Leninist component of our politics ").

At the same time, the most humdrum work in local government, if done by members of the faction, can be glorified as a fight for leadership.

All these political elements would be no more than nuances - if it were not for the fact that they are made the political platform for a faction which is effectively in a state of " cold split ".

As a platform, it is a characteristically neo-Healyite platform: revolutionary self-proclamations and flag waving to cover up lack of effective interventionist activity.

The pessimism seems un-Healyite. But even that has a precedent in the ultra-pessimistic perspective adopted by the Healyites' French counterparts, the Lambertists, after 1958.

After 1975 the old WSL, influenced by its Healyite background, grossly overestimated its possibilities of acting as and growing as an " alternative leadership " in the organisational sense. Its move towards the fusion represented the beginnings of a break from that whole way of thinking. Now the comrades have regressed politically: but disappointed by events, they have relapsed into a demoralised pessimism.

