

Alliance for Workers' Liberty conference 2003

A new tempo

1. We should turn ourselves towards a concerted AWL recruitment drive. The increased tempo of politics creates possibilities. Conversely, to go through a period of significant political ferment without making a serious drive to recruit would mean not just failing to advance, but levelling ourselves down to a passive, closed-circle mode of politics.

2. The trade union movement has been reviving for a year or so. Strike action in 2002 has been at a higher level (measured by striker-days) than any year since 1990, and over double the level of any of those years except 1996. The latest official statistics showed a total of 1,320,000 striker-days in 2002, compared to 525,000 in 2001 and fewer than 300,000 in most years since 1994.

The FBU dispute, whatever happens next, has already been qualitatively as well as quantitatively different from every national dispute since the late 1980s, going beyond a string of one-day strikes and eliciting significant solidarity action.

Falling trade-union membership figures bottomed out in 1997. The latest figures (autumn 2001) show 7.6 million UK workers in trade unions — 178,000 higher than in 1997, or 29% of all employees.

A series of union election results, in PCS, RMT, Amicus, ASLEF and elsewhere, have produced a new "awkward squad" of trade union leaders, people voted in on the basis of trade-unionism which is about improving workers' conditions rather than being good "partners" and "adding value" for employers.

All this makes it easier to argue our class-struggle perspectives with people new to radical politics, and makes people already sympathetic to class-struggle socialism feel more confidence and a greater urgency about being active about their sympathies.

3. For three or four years now a "new anti-capitalist" mood has been emerging among young people. With the work done on No Sweat over the last year, we now have gathered a periphery of some hundreds of people inspired by that mood and interested in class-struggle activity.

4. The planned US/UK war on Iraq has already provoked large demonstrations (a couple of hundred thousand in London, a million in Florence), including large numbers of young people and students new to political activity and significant numbers of older activists previously dormant and now reawakened.

5. The collapse since March 2001 of the USA's huge stock-market boom, and the gradual (so far) slide of the USA into recession over the last year or so, with probable repercussions world-wide, is another factor of ferment.

None of these developments should be exaggerated. The level of strike action and trade union membership is still low compared to the late 1980s, let alone earlier. Trade union membership was actually lower in 2002 than in 2001. It is only 19% in the private sector and very low among younger workers.

The poor election results of the Socialist Alliance show not only the faults of the Alliance but the foolishness of thinking that any sizeable working-class radicalisation (as distinct from mass working-class disillusionment and resentment against New Labour) has yet emerged.

But conditions far short of a mass radicalisation — a significant political ferment, among tens or hundreds of thousands, if not yet millions, and an increased feeling of confidence, and of urgency about being active, among the politicised — give opportunities for a revolutionary ideas-group like ours to grow significantly. And if we do not take the limited opportunities now, we cripple our capacity to take the larger opportunities when they come.

6. Unless we get the politics basically right, effort spent recruiting is effort wasted. The first essential for us is a clear grasp of the main issues:

- The political independence of the working class (the "Third Camp");
- The struggle for independent working-class political representation and a workers' government;
- Consistent democracy, notably on the national question.
- The need for a revolutionary party, in the first place for a Marxist organisation fighting to transform and rearm the labour movement; the centrality of political clarity in this respect, and the centrality of building the AWL.

However, an organisation which is right on the issues, but is so weighed down by the inertia of past unfavourable conditions, so settled in a small-group existence, so willing to console itself that it can act as an ideological influence without recruiting, that it does not make extra and specific efforts to reach out and recruit, will, with that passive and elitist approach, not remain "right on the issues" for very long.

7. Writing about Max Eastman, once an important person of ideas on the US left, Edmund Wilson described what happened to Eastman when he rebelled against Stalinism but turned to disdain for the struggle to build a Trotskyist organisation.

"This whole period of Max Eastman's writings was damaged by a peculiar disgruntled tone. In dealing even with those contemporary figures — Trotsky and Freud, for example — whose ideas he courageously defended, he sounded as if he were airing a grievance...

"For a fighter, a worker in ideas, it is dangerous, it may prove fatal to one's effectiveness, to betray that one's feelings have been hurt. The critic must remain invulnerable. When goaded, he should show himself not peevish, but indignant, with a background of scorn".

We are perforce in the situation of being "critics" within the broader left. For us too an air of peevishness or disgruntlement is damaging. Indignant, but confident, and resolved to get on with the job — that is how we must be.

7. In any situation of political ferment, the largest of the existing revolutionary socialist groups has an automatic advantage in recruiting. The obvious disarray of the SWP, and the crassness of its right-wing popular-frontist turn, will reduce its ability to take that advantage.

8. It is not necessary to be the largest group, or to have a particularly impressive technical apparatus, in order to grow. On the other hand, no organisation can recruit just by proving itself right on the issues, still less just by "winning respect". No serious activist decides on joining a revolutionary organisation by doing a full academic survey of all the viewpoints and controversies, and writing a scholarly conclusion. A revolutionary organisation recruits by convincing new activists that it is dynamic, clued-in, on the ball, and provides a milieu where they can be fruitfully active and learn and develop politically.

9. The detailed mechanics of a recruitment drive can best be worked out in organisers' schools, committee meetings, and briefing papers. Certainly our publications must promote the AWL, and the idea of joining the AWL, more boldly. The first step, however, that we have to make collectively is a shift of angle and vision. We must look at our activities and our organisation from the point of view of how they appear to new contacts.

People become revolutionary activists because they become convinced that the world can be changed, they want to be active, and they see a way of being active which is accessible and makes sense to them. Our main tasks with the people who have enough initial spark of interest to talk to one of us is (a) to discuss political ideas with them; (b) to offer them reliable, well-organised, well-directed, accessible activities as and when they want to be active.

A "contact" is not someone whose name and address appears on a list; not someone whom we cajole from time to time to attend meetings; not someone whom we enlist to give us assistance in trade-union or student-union routine — but someone with whom we regularly and seriously discuss big political ideas.

10. A recruitment drive is not an alternative to, and should not be counterposed to, systematic continuation of long-term trade union work.

Neither, however, should we allow such trade-union or similar work to crowd out a recruitment drive.

If capable AWL members make choices which mean that practically all their political-activity time is spent working with already-set-in-their-ways activists, so they participate in no, or almost no, meetings and activities where they meet a regular flow of fresh people, then the means (systematic trade-union, or whatever activity) is swallowing up the end (agitation, education, and organisation for social revolution).

Likewise if we "soak up" the desire to be active in new people we come across by cajoling them to take on trade-union or student-union positions where we hope they will be helpful to us. Our first aim should be to convince such people to be active as political partisans. We will urge them to be active as political partisans in their trade union or student union, and maybe to take on this or that trade-union or student-union position as a subordinate part of their activity. But if people wanting to change the world find that the activity we first recommend to them is some petty routine (with, presumably, the private thought in our minds that this is a "first stage" from which they may later progress to higher things), then we are blunting rather than sharpening their radical impulses.

11. To recruit people to the AWL we must ask them to join. To ask them to join is not an embarrassing request to them to do us a favour. It is offering them the chance to contribute effectively to changing the world. Generally we are far too slow about asking people to join. Asking new people to join should be a routine part of every AWL member's activity — something that every member does at least a couple of times every month.

12. When new people join they must understand what they are committing themselves to, and they must immediately be integrated both into regular activity and into a systematic "induction" process. The concept of recruiting people as members on a loose, vague basis, and then gradually hardening up their commitments, is a false and short-sighted one. It means wasting their initial enthusiasm.

13. Whenever anyone agrees to join, or to consider joining, we should explain to them that a full discussion on what that means is necessary before we can accept them into membership. We are a revolutionary organisation, and to join means a long-term commitment to being a revolutionary activist. It means being a fighter for revolutionary ideas and for the AWL wherever you go, notably at work and in your trade union. It involves attending branch meetings each week, educationals, and at least some other specifically-AWL activities each week. It involves paying money and selling literature. After a full discussion, some people who have previously agreed to join will not want to; some we will have to tell that they cannot join yet. That is all right. We should encourage them to work with us as sympathisers and talk to them again later about joining.

14. Each branch, even the smallest, must have a range of activities, not too demanding, not too hectic, but regular and well-organised, into which the newest and least confident recruit can be integrated immediately: branch meetings, educationals, public paper

sales on the streets and door-to-door, stalls, distributions of industrial bulletins.

15. The "induction" process should include:

a) A formal and full discussion, as above, on what membership means, during which the new prospective member "signs up" formally for membership and for the financial commitments. This will include discussion on the AWL constitution, a copy of which will have been downloaded from our website and made available to the new prospective member in advance; and discussion with the new prospective member on what regular political activities they will do. We already have a "membership agreement" form for new members to sign. This should be used systematically, and expanded slightly (see appendix).

b) A session at a branch meeting at which the new person is formally accepted into membership;

c) An organised series of educationals at local level, round the Basic Education Programme;

d) Arranging for the new member to attend a national AWL Introductory School within a few months of joining. This school will cover some basic political ideas of the AWL and basic practical questions (finances, literature sales, public speaking, and so on).

It should go without saying that all this should be done in a positive, welcoming, friendly way. The formality, which lets the new member know exactly where he or she stands, should appear as nothing more than a desire to integrate the new member as an equal in the usual businesslike procedures of the branch.

16. Last year's conference document resolved to "re-register" our membership, for reasons which amounted effectively to re-organising ourselves so as to make a recruitment drive possible.

"We must raise our expectations of ourselves, and systematically replace activity which aims no higher than 'to survive' or 'to do our bit' by activity which aims to spread and rally new people round our political ideas..."

"We must convert our branch life so that it can attract and integrate new young recruits. Four basic requirements: businesslike, attractive, interesting, educative, regular branch meetings and public or open meetings; a bedrock routine of purposeful but simple AWL activity (stalls, paper sales, industrial bulletin distribution, etc.) into which almost any new recruit can integrate quickly and easily, without needing previous political experience; responsiveness to the struggles around us; an outgoing, friendly attitude..."

"Every branch should systematically train its members to become effective advocates in the working class and the labour movement for our basic ideas. This is done through educationals, debates, and study, but also through learning-by-doing."

"Branch organisers should see to it that new, diffident, or jaded comrades are systematically taken along with more experienced, bolder and more vigorous comrades to 'mass' activities (e.g., door-to-door petitioning, canvassing, sales, etc.), to contact visits, to debates in labour movement and left meetings, and that, from time to time, they organise 'training events' for public speaking, contact discussions, and arguments which comrades find 'difficult'. We should make sure that our press equips comrades for this work, i.e., takes up the arguments which comrades will find at work, on the doorsteps, etc."

"In order to do these things we must re-register our membership, i.e., establish a clear distinction between a membership of activists and a periphery of sympathisers. Branches and fractions can only achieve the vitality we need in order to be effective and grow if they are made up of members who want to be active and will reliably carry through their collective decisions".

By contrast, we noted: "Where a branch is an aggregate of people all immersed in their individual student-union and trade-union work, with little collective activity or educational/discussion routine which is accessible to new people and offers them a picture of what they might do if they decide to be members, then it cannot recruit except by accident... That sort of routine life has an inbuilt tendency to lose speed and run down. It means that many comrades are doing enough to feel that they have discharged their minimum duties, but doing it in a rundown fashion, or doing so little of it, that

they are unlikely to secure any positive result from what they do, even at the level of individual contacts or recruits".

Maybe half a dozen people previously formally "members" decided that they did not want to make the active commitment, and stepped down to "sympathisers". In a few individual cases the "re-registration" discussions were not carried through properly, and comrades remained "on the books" without proper clarification. On the whole the "re-registration" gave us a boost and increased the tempo of our activity: thus, for example, a markedly better response to the mobilisations against the planned Iraq war than to those against the Afghan war, and a slight up-tick of recruitment.

We must drive the process forward to a next stage, turning out systematically to recruit. If we do not do that, much of the "re-registration" will have been wasted effort (what is the point of a "tightening-up", if it does not lead to you turning outwards with more vigour?), and the gains from it will peter out and go into reverse.

17. To do what we have to do:

a) We must help and train every member to become a contact-maker — finding new people with an interest in our ideas in their workplace, college, trade union, social circle, and everywhere they go. This work does not require a lot of prior political education or, for that matter, any extraordinary high pitch of activity. A friendly, outgoing attitude; a will to talk politics; and a degree of infectious enthusiasm, are the most important requirements. The newest member can do it as well as, and often better than, the oldest. Older members can lead by example, and by instruction in certain basic routines. (For example: always, while waiting for the start of a political meeting, or at the end of it, seek out new people, introduce yourself, get talking).

b) We must help and train every member to become an articulate advocate for our ideas. This does require systematic study and education, which branches must organise. However, the activist who systematically does their best to be an advocate for our ideas, knowing that sometimes he or she will have to answer questions honestly "I don't know", and being ready to give that answer and then go and find out, will learn much faster than the one who yearns for a "complete" education before he or she turns out to convince others.

c) Every member must be a minimally reliable activist. Otherwise we cannot offer new people the range of well-organised and reliable activity necessary to draw them in. For this we need efficient branch meetings which organise and check on activity, and which do not hesitate to lapse inactive people from membership.

d) Every branch must have regular public or open meetings. Every time we meet a new person interested in our politics, we must be able to tell them the time, date and place of the next local meeting where they can check out what we're saying and doing, and who we are. Even the tiniest branch can organise open educational discussions.

e) We must aim much higher when we organise public meetings. The recent "Two Nations, Two States" meeting in Oxford, organised by us in collaboration with some other local activists, which drew 80 people, is an instructive model here. There is nothing very special about political life in Oxford, or the strength and connections of the AWL branch there, to make that an exception unrepeatable elsewhere. We should aim to reach out to new people with every meeting — use debates, or guest speakers, or video showings, to add extra life and variety to the event.

f) Every branch must have a bedrock routine of purposeful but simple AWL activity (stalls, paper sales, industrial bulletin distribution, etc.) into which almost any new recruit or contact can integrate quickly and easily, without needing previous political experience.

g) The anti-sweatshop campaign No Sweat is an important and growing area where fresh activists are getting involved. We must be active both in building the campaign and in introducing our distinctive Marxist ideas to those fresh activists. In every area where we have AWL activists, we should help in setting up a local No Sweat group (or, if appropriate, a No Sweat caucus in some broader group). Such organised local groups are vital for the

broader campaign, enabling people interested in No Sweat have somewhere to come to check out what No Sweat is saying and doing. We should make sure that fresh activists in No Sweat — like fresh people in every other area where we are active — are introduced to what the AWL is saying and doing. Those who find our ideas, and our broader activities, interesting will want to become AWL contacts.

h) Every branch must have systematic processes for induction of new members in place.

i) The office must organise regular Introductory Schools for new members (and contacts who are considering joining).

j) The office must be a driving force in turning the organisation towards reaching out to new people. It must help, encourage, and where necessary apply uncomfortable pressure to organisers and branches.

k) Our tempo of activity must increase, and be seen to increase, in line with the increased tempo of events. For us to be able to recruit the best new young activists, being right on this or that issue (which the new activists may realistically consider themselves still too politically unlettered to judge) is not enough. Being visibly dynamic, purposeful, and "meaning business" is much more decisive.

l) To enable the office to raise its tempo in this way, we need more staff there; and for that, we need more money — a serious fund-raising drive, and a drive to raise regular income from members, in part by organising members to sell more literature.

Appendix: membership agreement.

The present text runs:

"The Alliance for Workers' Liberty aims to create an organisation of activists which can convince, mobilise and lead the working class to fight for workers' liberty. To be effective, our organisation must be democratic; geared to the maximum clarity of politics; and able to respond promptly to events and opportunities with all its strength, through disciplined implementation of the decisions of the elected and accountable committees which provide political leadership". — From the preamble to the constitution of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty.

As a member of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty I agree:

- To attend branch meetings regularly;
 - To take part in at least two AWL activities each week (literature sales, meeting contacts, educationals, etc.);
 - To pay dues and sales money (I have recently filled in a contributions assessment form);
 - To respond to big political events and mobilisations.
- Signed..... Date

Suggested reworking:

"The Alliance for Workers' Liberty aims to create an organisation of activists which can convince, mobilise and lead the working class to fight for workers' liberty. To be effective, our organisation must be democratic; geared to the maximum clarity of politics; and able to respond promptly to events and opportunities with all its strength, through disciplined implementation of the decisions of the elected and accountable committees which provide political leadership". — From the preamble to the constitution of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty.

I want to become a member of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty. I agree:

- To attend regular meetings of my local AWL branch. These take place

- To be politically active in a regular, consistent way.

Immediately my main planned regular activities will be:

a) Specifically AWL activities (paper sales, visiting contacts, educationals):

b) Broader activities in which I will promote AWL ideas and literature:

- To pay dues and sales money (I will sign a contributions assessment form);

- To respond to big political struggles, events and mobilisations.
Signed..... Date

Addition to "New Tempo" document

1. We reaffirm these paragraphs from our Basic Education Programme (originally from a resolution of our August 1983 conference).

To favour a looser structure for the sake of being able to recruit workers is short sighted. Loose standards of discipline in a revolutionary organisation make it uninhabitable for workers.

A regime of hyper-activism and "permanent emergency", in the Healyite style, is equally destructive. But the answer is a regime where discipline and reliability are demanded and ensured on the basis of education and rational political perspectives.

Where there is no adequate education, and no system of generally enforced and understood norms, discipline becomes an arbitrary and subjective matter. Effort is wasted: arrangements miscarry, meetings are chaotic, some comrades are overworked trying to cope with the mess, others are under-utilised. Inefficiency leads to more waste of effort through recriminations. Such a regime is uninhabitable for most workers.

Youth work is a crucial area for recruitment. We cannot confine ourselves to the established activists. We must be constantly looking to new struggles and new activists coming from them.

This demands a disciplined organisation. Working class youth new to revolutionary politics, eager to learn, eager to get things done quickly, are the first to be repelled by a regime of bickering, routinism and muddling along. It requires a proper system of education of contacts and members: otherwise the energy of revolutionary youth can quickly spend itself in demoralisation.

2. We further reaffirm these paragraphs from last year's conference documents.

Since we regard revolutionary activism as a lifelong commitment, and have an urgent interest in "protecting our investment" in comrades with any length of experience, we seek to accommodate comrades through difficult times as far as we can without destroying the integrity of the organisation. Parents, especially single parents, with small children? Comrades in poor health? Those with difficult shift patterns? We should make exceptional provision for them. Comrades who can't get out in the evenings without arranging a baby-sitter can, for example, do phone-rounds instead. And, generally, we should try to adapt activity to comrades' talents, abilities, special interests, and other circumstances.

However, as a norm, comrades' minimum of AWL activism has to include collective activity which they go out to take part in together with other AWL members. This norm is necessary for the AWL, and AWL branches, to have a capacity for collective initiative, and to have a visible collective activity into which new sympathisers and recruits can be easily integrated.

Revolutionaries have to live in the world as it is — have to find a way of fitting in domestic life, social life, work, other personal interests, round their political commitment. That can be done, and has been done, by generations of revolutionaries. Revolutionary politics no more entails a grim and cheerless life than any other seriously-pursued commitment; and the idea that the good life is the one without self-defined, thought-through, seriously-pursued commitment to any larger purposes beyond the personal and domestic is, to say the least, debatable. It is undesirable, in fact it is counterproductive, to try to turn members into hyper-activist zombies unable to sustain any domestic or social life. Nevertheless, those who find that their domestic, social, career, or other personal-interest preoccupations have expanded in their scheme of priorities to the point where they squeeze out political activism and relegate it to the role of something marginal and occasional, define themselves out of revolutionary activism. Their motives for becoming preoccupied elsewhere may be personally understandable or even,

on some levels, laudable; the sincerity of their sympathy for AWL ideas unquestionable; but the fact remains. You cannot be a member of a choir just by sympathising with the idea of singing, or occasionally singing along. Likewise, you cannot be a member of a Marxist revolutionary organisation just by sympathising or occasionally joining in activity. Both with the choir and with the Marxist organisation, it is not a question of moralism or censoriousness or an abstract desire to be "hard" for the sake of it, but of what's needed to create a collective in which individuals can contribute fruitfully and with a minimum of wasted effort. The valid idea of accommodating individual circumstances becomes invalid at the point where chosen "individual circumstances" swallow up political activism.

3. We therefore resolve, specifically, as follows:

3.1. We are committed to organising creches for conferences, schools, etc., and for National Committees wherever requested.

3.2. For National Committees, branches, and similar smaller meetings, it may be better from everyone's point of view for children to be looked after at or near their homes, by people they know, rather than being hauled along to a meeting place to be looked after by a stranger. The AWL will pay the cost of such childcare.

3.3. Any idea of making the organisation habitable for parents of young children, or for any other particular group, by reducing our general demands as regards members' activity, is counterproductive. It makes the organisation less habitable for members with difficult personal circumstances if, when they make difficult efforts to turn up to meetings and activities, they find that others don't bother to turn up, or don't carry out the decisions made. Strict discipline is the only way to make the organisation habitable for people with difficult personal circumstances.

3.4. Lots of people drop out of revolutionary politics when they have children, when they become absorbed in "careers", or just when they become thirty-somethings. That always has been the way, and always will be the way. However, with stricter discipline, and an energetic and uncensorious policy of keeping in contact with the lapsed thirty-somethings, we can minimise the losses and enable ourselves to reclaim some of the lost when their circumstances change, or when new political developments rekindle their commitment.
