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In defence of our party press... Cunliffe

Our international work ... Cunliffe

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When discussing where we go next on international work, it is relevant also to discuss to what extent we as an organisation will retain and develop a public voice and face in the international movement. A clandestine organisation in Britain will find itself hog-tied on the international arena.

On my return from the USA I was horrified to learn that the Majority on the Executive had declared their support for a motion to the NC tabled several months previously by the Glasgow Branch. The gist of the motion is to ~~cut the size and~~ "broaden" the Editorial Board of our weekly paper by bringing in non-League members; and to scrap the Workers Socialist Review as our journal, and instead launch a bi-monthly magazine in the name of the broad groups, with an EB "controlled" by the League, yet incorporating "prominent left wing intellectuals who are sympathetic" (no names are mentioned).

I attended the NC on October 15 expecting to face a battle to defend the last vestiges of the WSL's public face (though WSR can scarcely be viewed as a well-known or regularly-appearing face). The night before, Majority cdes on the EC had agreed to extend the debate on this question to 2 hours. To my (and everyone's) surprise, however, cde Carolan announced after the lunchbreak his proposal that the motion - which he strongly supported - be held over by the NC, pending what he described as "individual discussions" on the possibility of carrying through a "convergence" between the League and the broad groups. One aspect of the "convergence" would of course be the abandoning of the name WSL - and therefore it would also imply the scrapping of the existing magazine. In place of the WSL and WSR there might be - were these "discussions" to go the way cde Carolan intends - a "democratic centralist broad group" and a broad groups' magazine.

It was not feasible - in the absence of a Glasgow cde to argue for it, and in view of cde Carolan's shift of tactics - to force the resolution onto the agenda. But there is no doubt that its postponement simply postpones and amplifies rather than averting the real dangers of liquidation implicit in these proposals. Indeed Workers Socialist Review is already to all intents and purposes dead - since there is no way the Majority will allocate resources to the production of a magazine they clearly hope to do away with. Thus already one specific conference decision from April - for the production of two issues of the magazine to a timetable - has bitten the dust in spirit as well as in the letter.

Since the Glasgow proposals are the only ones actually on the table for us to discuss at present (while selected individuals are taken to one side by Carolan for the back-room "discussions" he plainly prefers to open, democratic debate), let us look at their implications.

The resolution (backed by the EC Majority) proposes: "That steps be taken forthwith to broaden the editorial board of the paper to include non-League members, and that the paper be reduced in size to provide resources for the point below" (emph added).

Now broadening the EB is a long overdue task. In reality there is and has been no functioning EB for at least nine months now, and the entire content of the paper has been basically decided week by week by two or three people. This does not and cannot adequately reflect the political strengths and talents in the League: and it contributes to the organisational chaos of the weekly production process.

But broadening the EB "forthwith" (ie last week, if the motion had been adopted by the NC) to include non-League members would mean that this ramshackle arrangement would be further confused by the addition of outsiders with equal voice and vote (I presume <sup>for</sup> at least the Glasgow movers do not mean the newcomers to be a mere fig-leaf for the status quo).

So, having made no headway in establishing adequate League participation in the paper, we would begin at once further diluting our input and control. And worse: with less space in a reduced size of paper - as proposed by Glasgow - the need for clarity and balance between our line and that of other forces would become not less but that much greater.

Already - as cde Carolan has admitted in heated moments discussing the contents of particular issues of SX - we carry week by week a number of "shitty" articles by non-members for discussion purposes (though few of them receive the hammering they deserve). Already this causes readers some good deal of confusion. (I was asked all over the USA if we had changed our line on Nicaragua following Corbyn's articles). That confusion could easily become the dominant feature of a paper constructed according to the Glasgow model: yet Majority cdes appear ready to support the proposals.

For my part, though I have always remained sceptical as to the "broad paper" format as against a clearly formulated party press, I have been prepared to work along the lines of the fusion agreement: for a broad paper fulfilling many of the functions of a party press. The Glasgow proposals - supported by the EC majority - carry the real danger of negating that combination for good. Any more dilution of our (WSL) line in SX would in my view render it little more useful than a "Briefing"-style sounding board, open to all comers with little differentiation, ill-equipped to give leadership or clear analysis in the demanding struggles ahead.

Secondly, the Glasgow/Majority proposal is for launching a new, non-League magazine. It does not actually mention WSR, but must surely negate its existence through material resources if not explicit political expediency.

"Priority," it says (this means priority over the weekly paper) "should be given to the establishment of a magazine appearing at least (!) bi-monthly, with a format similar to that of Marxism Today, International, Chartist, etc. and that prominent left wing intellectuals who are sympathetic be coopted onto the editorial board. The League must ensure that it retains control over the magazine, which will be published in the name of the broad groups." (emphasis added)

Thus the decision of the Majority in supporting this, is to wind up the only publication which (every 9 months or so) carries the name of the Workers Socialist League - and to substitute a "broad" magazine patronised by unnamed "intellectuals", within which the WSL would have some input by virtue of controlling the EB.

So what's in a name? If the League retains "editorial control" does the "Label" WSL mean very much? Could we - as the Majority want us to believe - carry our full politics in a "broad" magazine, while reaping all kinds of advantages (soaring sales, admiring circles of intellectuals, respectability) by discarding the "label"?

No we couldn't! Certainly on some issues we could argue the same formal position as we would in WSR (as we do in the paper). But the magazine is not intended simply as a vehicle for this that or the other article: it is a vehicle for the Leninist organisation to explain its relationship to the issues of the class struggle, to questions of theory, culture and history. The party "label" should not just be something stuck on the front cover, but should inform the whole content and thrust of the magazine. In building the WSL, and fighting to recruit from the "broad" milieu to our ranks, we argue the need for a disciplined, Leninist vanguard party organisation - distinct from broader, looser caucuses and pressure groups in the existing reformist movement. We need to present our own programme, policies, tactics and strategy: we need to show a distinct method of organising and fighting: we need leadership if we are to win the best elements of the workers' movement to our banner. In dropping the "label", we drop also the banner - leaving step the dropping of the party itself: and all for no tangible gain.



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Quite apart from the questionable viability of finding any prominent sympathetic intellectuals (and obscure ones are of no particular use in the Glasgow enterprise) we have to recognise the implications for the WSL of scrapping its only publication.

WSR is the only forum in which we could argue our full political analysis of social democracy; it is the only forum where we can call openly for the reconstruction of the Trotskyist Fourth International; the only forum where we can argue simply why people should join the WSL and build a revolutionary party. The Majority's move to scrap this forum is the more major because it follows on a 2-year process of gradually dissolving and discarding public activities of the WSL. Already our "entry" is so total that only three leading comrades - myself, Smith and Levy, none of whom can gain admittance to the MO - can publicly acknowledge ourselves members of the League!

Since the successful Fusion Rally of October 1981 (anyone remember that, highly successful, event?) there have been few, if any WSL meetings in the local areas and none nationally: my proposal for an anniversary rally last autumn was brushed aside as "crazy" by Hill and other Majority cdes. The only national WSL event since then has been the 1982 Summer School (in which the WSL title was insisted upon vehemently by cdes of the present Majority as a transparent ruse to block TILC sections from any voice in the agenda or conduct of the school). League classes exist on a small, occasional scale in only a few areas. The WSL issues no leaflets, no statements (with the exception of the NC resolution on the Cowley 13) and has to all intents and purposes ceased to exist for the workers' movement. Indeed in a number of areas - as the Branch Organisers' meeting showed - even League branch meetings have become a thing of the past, while few of those which persist appear to feature an introductory political report.

Those of us who have looked on at this decline with some dismay, supported the amended resolution on Building the WSL at the August conference as a means of tightening up the organisation, and hoped that, in a fight for the regular publication of the magazine, a stimulus could be given to WSL recruitment and public presence. Instead, the Majority wants to scrap the magazine, and dissolve the League into the broad group!

Of course cde Carolan's notion of a democratic centralist "broad group" is self-contradictory. Were the Broad group to adopt the full programme, overt Leninist structure and international orientation of a full-fledged Trotskyist party, it would cease to be a Broad Group. Any one of these elements would prejudice the MO legality of the existing broad group. But to form a "democratic centralist" formation which did not clearly embrace these principled elements would confine the resultant body to a centrist existence of left criticism detached from the necessary revolutionary conclusions. The movement's theoretical work and discussion and international work - already at rock bottom levels and grossly neglected - would be prime victims of such a liquidation: but every aspect of our work, including our ability to do day to day work in the labour movement would be jeopardised. We would not, for example, even be able to write a letter in our own name to other international organisations with whom we may wish to discuss and work jointly.

But to return to the Glasgow proposals which are before the NC: what would the consequence be of scrapping the magazine?

(1) Firstly, it would mean scrapping the last vestiges of the fusion agreement of 1981 - in which many of us were only reluctantly persuaded to give up our weekly party press in exchange for an agreement that there would be a regular party magazine to supplement the "broad" paper.

It is worth asking the question of whether such a repudiation at this stage is not in fact a calculated provocation by the Majority, in the hopes that substantial numbers of old-WSLers will be infuriated enough to leave the

organisation (and thus further strengthen the grip of the Carolan-Kinnell Majority). Certainly nothing in the conduct of these odds at leadership level should give members any grounds to believe that they wish either to preserve or still less to strengthen the remnants of the fusion. And it seems that this attitude at the top is finding a predictable reflection in a high level of polarisation - even systematic denigration of old-WSLers - throughout the organisation.

In gauging whether or not the move is a calculated provocation, it is important to note that the Majority's decision to push for this far-reaching change in the public profile of our organisation (and Carolan's mysterious talk about possible "convergence") takes place quite deliberately seven weeks after the final stage of an extended conference period. Carolan's cult-like and shadow individual discussions are plainly a substitute for any serious attempt to hold a frank and open discussion: but they are also an obvious insult to cdes from the old WSL who are known to hate and detest such personalised and cliquist methods of operation.

(2) Secondly, the proposal would make the WSL (for as long as it remained in existence, and its successor) a laughing stock in the international arena, where every organisation, no matter how minuscule, succeeds - if nothing else - in producing some kind of party press speaking in its own name. Apparently Carolan/Kinnell now cite the Socialist League as an exception to this pattern. Since when has the SL been regarded by these cdes as an epitome of Trotskyist party-building? In any event the USFI (Majority and minority) have independent journals used by the SL, and International is clearly an SL journal.

With neither a magazine nor a paper in our own name we would be particularly badly-placed to exploit the opportunities for party building in the USA and the coming crisis in the USFI. The retreat on the magazine would be a gift for our opponents, a blow to our friends - and do nothing to strengthen our members.

3) The final aspect of the scrapping of the magazine is precisely the question of how our members view and fight for the WSL.

Low sales of the magazine have been cited by Carolan and Kinnell as "evidence" that it is not saleable as a party publication: if the "label" were dropped, it is claimed, cdes would keenly sell it.

Yet there is no evidence that this logic applies to the paper - whose sales have tailed off terribly. Nor would selling a "broad" magazine necessarily help at all in building the WSL (as I have pointed out above).

My view is that low sales of the magazine, like the poor level of organisation, are evidence of a low political morale amongst our membership and a lack of leadership commitment to following through the work. There has been no sign at all of any drive by cdes of the majority to produce and push the magazine: and this is reflected in the branches, where members naturally hold back from what they see as an unnecessary struggle to sell an irregular "extra" publication. Not surprisingly, given the general absence of public profile, low sales also run alongside low recruitment to the WSL, low levels of branch activity and weak, sporadic and largely marginal involvement of our cdes in local level disputes.

It might of course be possible to cover over one aspect of this process of liquidation of the WSL by abandoning production of a magazine whose sales provide a practical test of members' commitment and activity: but the retreat to a "Broad Group" magazine will not build a Leninist party.

I hope that comrades will be on their guard against the top-level liquidationism now being advocated to the select few in forthcoming "private discussions" with cde Carolan: and that in B ranch and area meetings between now and the next NC, NC members will be told quite categorically that they should vote to throw out the Glasgow motion and reject the even more far-reaching and brazenly undemocratic proposals now floated by Carolan.

Gunliffe. Oct 27 1983.



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On our international work.

- Cunliffe

Summary: Where do we stand at present?

After its ignominious collapse in April 1983, the fiction of a "continuity of TILC" cannot be sustained either by the RWL/LOR/TAF sectarians, or by the WSL/SF/PTT comrades who in practice stood by the founding principles of TILC. As a body with any significance (however limited) TILC is now decisively DEAD, and the conditions in which it was appropriate to launch it in 1979 have to a large extent changed (though the need for an international tendency that will conduct a programmatic fight for the political and organisational regeneration of the FI is of course in no way diminished).

Our future international work is therefore at the crossroads. There are four obvious alternative lines of approach to the problem. In my view three of them are completely unacceptable or impracticable.

1) We could forge ahead regardless, and set up ~~the new body~~ a "mini-TILC", as an organised structure more or less openly depicting itself as the continuity of TILC. This body would - given recent events - be composed of three components: the WSL; those (SF) who with insignificant differences agree completely with the WSL majority leadership; and those (the PTT) who would be prepared to subordinate their differences with the WSL majority sooner than lose an international affiliation.

In favour of such a notion is the fact that it would not "hand TILC to the sectarians", and retain our claims on its name, texts and record; and also the fact that it would retain links with the Australians and American comrades. It is of course important to work with SF and the PTT. But a mini-TILC is the most sectarian way imaginable of doing so; it would be universally (and *in part* correctly) seen and portrayed as simply a ~~new~~ satellite grouping of those prepared to accept the WSL majority line. As such it would become a profoundly negative factor amongst any potentially sympathetic forces we might otherwise expect to reach: it would be incapable of attracting fresh forces or of conducting any serious interventions. While masquerading as "international work", this is in effect a course that would mean renunciation of serious international initiatives, and in my view discredit the WSL irreparably on a world scale.

2) Also wrong, but less damaging, would be simply to pull back from international work for an extended period while we discuss internally on our attitude to the world movement and await a more favourable conjuncture for some renewed initiative. This overtly "national Trotskyist" course at least does not pretend to be anything else. But having thus retreated from any international initiatives, it is highly doubtful if any worthwhile discussions would ever actually occur inside the WSL; the incentive to tackle programmatic and theoretical problems would diminish, and it seems unlikely the WSL could ~~ever~~ pull out of such an introspective nosedive.

3) A third false conclusion would be to look for immediate fusion into one of the larger existing groupings - the Morenist LIT or, more likely, the USFI, on the grounds that we have "no choice", and must be in some international grouping.

The obvious organisational obstacles to this - the existence of the Socialist League as a larger grouping in Britain holding the USFI franchise, and an alien political method, and the virtual confinement of Moreno's LIT to Latin America - should not blind us to the political limitation of such a course, which effectively amounts to renouncing our long-held objective of fighting for a serious and thoroughgoing reconstruction of the FI, not simply pursuing a restricted debate within one component of the present divided movement.

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In my view courses 1 and 3 rank equal worst of the possible answers to our problem of international perspective.

4) The fourth, more difficult, course, is to declare our willingness to discuss seriously the prospect of fusion - as a separate sympathising section or with tendency rights - with the USFI, and attempt from this standpoint to generate discussion and debate within the USFI sections. Were discussions to occur we could be well-placed to intervene in US developments and in the delayed USFI World Congress discussion. We could hope and expect that at least some of our programmatic and analytical points would draw a favourable response and possibly open support from individual USFI militants, perhaps whole tendencies. Such a response might well create conditions to reassess our future prospects in a more favourable light.

By setting out in this way deliberately to generate the maximum public involvement and interest, and combining this with serious work in the class struggle in Britain, we could take steps that would reestablish the WSL as a factor in the international movement with something to contribute. It would be the best means of seeking to attract any non-sectarian unaffiliated forces internationally, and the best forces from the SWP. It is our best hope of breaking out of the British backwater, and utilising the standing which the WSL still retains on an international level to promote a real fight for political clarification.

Central issues which we should raise with the USFI should include Central America, Cuba and Iran as well as the politics of the "turn to industry".

Is such a course of action feasible? There are no guarantees, but I think there is a good chance it could happen. We should remember that the tiny Milan-based LOR managed to draw the 10-times Mandel group in Italy into 18 months of leadership discussions, involving leading USFI figures, around a proposal for fusion. According to Mandel, the reason the USFI put such resources into this (and put up with LOR sectarian antics) is because they wish to open up discussions with the WSL. Our group has a much greater standing, record, and ability to rival the official USFI section in Britain: we should be able to exploit this to secure discussions which go beyond leadership-level wrangles with the SL to a public, international discussion.

5) As far as the Morenists are concerned, they have repeatedly shown their willingness to devote resources to discussions with the WSL. Most recently, it was only the divisions in the WSL over the Malvinas and a sectarian lurch by TILC which combined to bring a decision on our part to proceed no further with a dialogue. The Morenists clearly recognise us as potential competitors: we should consider whether it is not in our interests to pursue the mooted public debate on their Theses document, their attitude to women's and gay rights, and some of their policies and pronouncements on Latin America.

6) On the eventual outcome of such talks/debates/polemics - the possibilities that may or may not arise, the further upheavals that may erupt to change yet again the face of the world movement - there can be no guarantees. But course (4) - possibly combined with (5) - would provide an incentive to enrich and strengthen our own positions, and bring stimulus to the flagging or non-existent internal and theoretical life of the WSL, broadening the horizons of our members and putting them on their toes on the key issues of the crisis of the FI. In this way we can go forward - rather than backwards towards sectarianism - after the sorry experience of TILC.

Cunliffe. October 27 1983