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THE 'DISSOLUTION' OF THE FACTION, THE CALL FOR A SPECIAL CONFERENCE, The Smith group and the NC's duties

Carolann (written March 29 1984)

At its national conference in London on March 25 the Oxford faction decided "to dissolve and campaign as individuals" for proposals which the faction had decided to put to the special conference. (The quote above is from Smith on the 'phone to me the same evening).

This is their response to the demands put to them by the NC on March 10, in the following resolution:

"This NC declares that the situation must be resolved by the next NC one way or another. The facti must decide to go out of the WSL or come into it. It cannot continue the way it is.

The NC declares that a split is neither desirable nor necessary, and that it can be avoided if the faction shows itself willing to build the organisation and to accept - for now - minority status.

The following are the basic minimum preconditions for integrating the faction into the organisation.

a) That all members of the faction fulfill their basic obligations as regards paper sales, dues, etc., like all other members of the organisation not formally exempted.

b) The faction accepts majority rule.

c) An end to federalism.

d) That the faction accepts a full share both in decision-making and in responsibility within the organisation, or accepts exclusively-majority decision-making. The faction leaders either work constructively in the leading committees, or get off them and accept a subordinate role. The committees must be allowed to function properly.

e) That the faction leaders cease irresponsible and disruptive agitation.

The imposition of these conditions is nothing more than the enforcement of democratic-centralist norms".

WHY THE NC PASSED THIS RESOLUTION

The NC decided to confront the faction with these demands like this because we believe that we cannot continue in a common organisation with the faction unless we can agree to operate the constitution as agreed by the WSL at fusion as the basic common rules and norms of the organisation.

Last year we had three conferences. On every important issue the faction

were a minority. But they refused to accept the verdict of the conferences on the political questions and on the election of a League leadership until the next conference. They declared their faction only after the verdict of the first two legs of the conference.

They didn't do the logical thing (from their point of view) and split. The WSL is loose enough in its discipline and has developed a practice of accommodating the faction leaders. So the faction leaders decided to stay in the organisation.

But since the August 1983 conference the faction has increasingly withdrawn from the work of the League. Collaboration in the central leadership has dwindled to zero. Branches dominated by the faction have - with some individual exceptions - run up increasing debts. In terms of the work of the League there has been a partial secession by the faction.

At the March 10 NC Smith declared that there was not a single major question on which the faction did not have fundamental differences from the organisation. At the November 19 NC he said that on all international issues to do with our attitude on fighting imperialism he was closer to the USFI than to the WSL. Repeatedly he has described the EC majority as similar to, but worse than, the trade union bureaucrats.

These are repeated, definite statements, not exaggerations in the heat of the moment.

Normally any individual with such attitudes to the organisation would simply leave it. Indeed, a large number of comrades educated by Smith in such attitudes have left. But the whole Smith grouping, as a group, was not likely simply to decide to leave. Instead they have remained within the WSL - but totally alienated from it both politically and organisationally.

The faction leaders' primary political relationship to the WSL has become that of an implacable opposition within an alien organisation, agitating and seeking scandals and issues to expose, trip up and ambush the 'bureaucratic' leadership. The beginnings of this go back a long time. After the April conference in 1983 the faction leaders refused to vote to expel the WIL - though they did not deny that the WIL people had broken discipline, and indeed they had collaborated in drawing up the charges. They had sought to maintain collaboration with the WIL right up to the time when the WIL broke with them, etc. But matters have got steadily worse since August 1983.

The organisation has not had the strength to insist on discipline from them, or that they pay for their rights to agitate in the organisation by at least discharging their constitutional responsibilities. For example: Smith has spent months agitating over the secondary details of the way his speech at the September 17 conference was reported in the paper (though it was carried in full). The same Smith had refused point-blank to be mobilised with other full-timers to build that conference - which then looked like it might be a flop - in the three weeks between the League conference and September 17. He refused point-blank because he 'wanted to work on his book' of memoirs. Yet Smith bears the title of 'industrial organiser' of the WSL. This is only one example of the faction's attitude to the work of the League.

The NCA Warrington dispute was a major move towards a cold split in the organisation. There were no political differences worth mentioning within the WSL on our attitude to the dispute. We went out of our way to involve Smith in the work round the dispute. We deliberately avoided recriminations over the fact that Smith had done nothing on the task of reviving our activity on the anti-union laws, as he was commissioned to do by the June NC - and had done so, so he told us, because he personally thought the activity was 'unviable'.

Yet Smith did nothing apart from help organise one of our lobbies of the TUC. Instead he devoted himself to an agitation around a largely contrived controversy on our attitude to the TUC (see IB 90).

The withdrawal of Cunliffe from joint editorship of the paper snapped the last links of real collaboration. The partial internal secession developed into a situation best defined as one of two distinct organisations 'within' the WSL.

The Smith faction has for months acted towards the new WSL as the RWL-WIL faction did before them, and almost as the two Spartacist factions did to the old WSL. (Except that the RWL-WIL and the Spartacists did agitate about politics. Since last September the agitation of the Smith group has had less and less explicit political content. It has become almost exclusively a matter of organisational gripes, recriminations, and contrived 'scandals').

THE SPECIAL CONFERENCE

Smith and Jones no longer feel or take any financial or political responsibility for the League or its work. Their prime and only concern now is internal agitation. They are not even concerned for the League's work in the immediate class struggle.

Take the question of a special conference. Smith and Jones started agitating for a new conference in January - four months after the last 1983 conference. There was no chance that such a conference would change anything decisive or important in the organisation to their advantage. No chance whatsoever, and they knew it.

They put forward various reasons for wanting a conference. Vague talk about 'political questions' was part of the call for 'an April conference'. Then at the March 10 NC the motivation switched to 'the internal situation'. After March 10 their purpose for the special conference is some constitutional amendments. The 'good reasons' for a conference have changed. The real reason remained. What was it?

Their business in the League is agitation to keep the pot boiling - and they had no better issue than the call for a conference to rally their supporters and keep them from dropping out as Hunt, James, Todd, Andrea C. etc. had done. So, whatever the arguments they had to use, they were determined to have their conference. Not even the miners' strike could stop Smith on March 10 from switching to the call for a special conference. The needs of the faction dictated the campaign for the conference, even though it cut squarely across the needs of the WSL and especially of the WSL in the immediate class struggle.

So the agitation developed in various forms and on varying pretexts. It would have been irresponsible at the best of times, since everyone knew that the special conference would resolve nothing. It is doubly irresponsible - and makes it doubly clear that the special conference is not even intended to fulfill any constructive function for the WSL - that the special conference is called for in the middle of the miners' strike.

So we have the demand for a special conference in the middle of the miners' strike - and only three months in advance of the scheduled August 1984 conference - to discuss the sort of question that the faction have been agitating about for months: what sort of EB etc. etc. Now in the first place they have little chance of winning the votes at the special conference; in the second, if they did, they would not be satisfied (they were dissatisfied with the very liberal arrangements after the April conference, and they would still feel that the League was fundamentally wrong on all major political issues and led by people 'worse than the trade union bureaucrats'); in the third, these are rather capricious demands to disrupt the work of the organisation for, especially in the miners' strike.

Smith and Jones, after all, spent last year accusing their opponents of not being interested in industrial work. Remember? That was last year. This year the agitational line has shifted to 'the struggle for democracy in the WSL'. So to hell with the miners' strike and the responsibilities of the WSL in it.

Nothing demonstrates so clearly the present real relationship of the faction and its fellow-travellers to the organisation as this incident does. They are sectarian factionalists whose primary orientation is internal, who see the organ-

isation as a field for factional operations, and who now use it almost entirely for factional purposes. We are dealing here with a fully distinct organisation, which has its own leadership, finances, communications, and local organisations (Oxford, Hull), and which is only notionally under the jurisdiction of the elected leadership of the WSL and not even notionally committed to the decisions of the three 1983 WSL conference.

In the clause of the constitution allowing 25% of the membership to call a special conference, the faction thinks it has found a way in which the sectarian tail can constitutionally wag the WSL dog and force us to turn inwards to discuss their petty recriminations during the most important working class struggle for many years. They have the formal and inalienable right so long as they are members of the organisation to call for a special conference. But the willingness of the faction to so use the constitution is the proof of how far they fall below their self-image as being primarily 'class fighters' and how degenerate a 'part' of the organisation the faction and its fellow-travellers are. Since they claim industrial work as their special area, their irresponsibility here proves that they are irreconcilable.

THE MARCH 10 NC RESOLUTION

Things have developed since the resolution on the faction for the March 10 NC was first circulated, a month ago. But the faction's irresponsibility towards the League's work around the miners' strike is only a continuation of its factional irresponsibility towards the work of the League over many months.

All that remains of the July 1981 fusion is that the depleted Smith group continues to have special rights to agitate within the WSL, which it long ago ceased to build or regard as in any political or organisational sense its organisation.

Recognising that there are now two distinct organisations "in" the WSL, the March 10 NC decided to sort it out one way or the other - the faction must come in or get out. This resolution was passed by those people who have borne the weight of trying to make the 1981 fusion work for nearly three years. Some of us negotiated the fusion in the first place. For 2½ years we have tried concession after concession to get normal working relations and cooperation from the Smith group. In the arrangements for and after the April 1983 conference we did all we could to give and guarantee the Smith group liberal treatment as a minority. For many months we have lived with an increasingly impossible situation, clinging to every last chance of avoiding a split.

The March 10 resolution summed up our conviction that conciliation has not worked, and now there is no chance of it working. Things cannot go on the way they have been going for over 18 months. The resolution embodied a determination to settle accounts with the faction, a determination which grew out of our experience since the September conference. The experience led us to the conclusion that there was no hope that things would ever get better; that they were getting progressively worse; and, therefore, that we had either to take action or to let Smith and Jones gradually wreck the new WSL.

We sincerely meant it when we said that we wanted to avoid a split if we could and that a split was not necessary. But an open split which would free the WSL to develop would for us be preferable to the paralysing cold split which has grown colder, deeper and more paralysing since the August conference.

The NC defined the situation. We laid down the basis for continuing in a common organisation with the faction - the minimum, irreplaceable and only possible conditions for positive coexistence to build the WSL according to the 1981 fusion agreement.

The ball was at the feet of Smith and Jones and their faction.

THE FACTION 'DISSOLVES'

When the NC passed its resolution, Smith formally refused to reply to it. We

weren't going to trap him, he said. But what he did say was a sort of reply. He said: 'This means expulsions'. Implicitly he ruled out the alternative: that the faction should honestly comply with the resolution.

Now the faction's national conference has tried to find an alternative to either complying or being expelled: subterfuge, manoeuvre, dissimulation. As we shall see, it is a transparent subterfuge, a manoeuvre so obvious as to be an expression of contempt for the NC.

The NC did not tell the faction to disband. It has no constitutional right to tell the faction to disband. A faction that would disband at the dictat of the NC - acting outside its constitutional powers - of an organisation which, so the faction says, is run by bureaucrats, would be surrendering the constitutional rights of the rest of the organisation and betraying them to the 'bureaucrats'. In 1971, faced with the option of formally disbanding or going out of the fast-degenerating IS, Workers Fight chose to go out rather than pretend to dissolve (as many in IS urged). Smith and Jones agitate against our 'bureaucratism' and yet run to surrender their basic democratic rights to us - without even being asked to! They don't believe their own charges of bureaucratism. On this as on most things you can't take what they say at face value.

What is the explanation, then, for the decision to dissolve the faction? The faction has not 'dissolved': last Sunday the faction decided to go underground. That is clear even from their own account of what happened.

The faction met. It decided as a body on proposals to put to the special conference. It decided, as a body, to campaign in the organisation for those proposals. Then it decided to 'dissolve', they tell us. In fact they decided that the best way to make reprisals by the NC difficult; the best way to win the sympathy of any 'middle ground'; and the best way to gain support broader than the faction, would be to pretend to dissolve. The faction, they decided, could work better "as individuals". Their response to the NC resolution was to step up 'business as usual' and couple it with evasive action.

Or worse. Their move to dissolve the faction, which at least notionally had a political platform, and replace it by an unprincipled combination on a ragbag of organisational issues, is an explicit declaration that they are interested not in constructive political debate but in sub-political recriminations.

Politically the faction has become increasingly marginalised and discredited. The March 10 NC showed that. On almost all the votes about our political tasks they and their fellow-travellers were left as a die-hard minority of 4 or 5 abstaining or voting against everything, with no alternatives. But on organisational gripes they can get slightly wider support. They can play on comrades' liberal instincts and sympathy for the underdog. So that's what they have decided to do - and never mind about the politics.

In its own way the faction has thus given a clear answer to the NC's resolution. It is as clear an answer as we can expect from them. Their answer is that they will not comply with the resolution, and that they will not accept the resolution - which restates the constitution - as a common basis for coexistence with us in the WSL.

WHAT THE N.C. SHOULD DO

That the faction may have decided formally to 'dissolve' makes no difference to anything (except, they hope, to its effectiveness in the struggle). The faction scarcely existed as a formally structured group anyway. It was an informal network of old WSL members with a designated leadership (Smith) which seems to have made decisions in the name of the faction, presumably after informal consultation. It works through the Oxford area organisation, which is run as virtually a separate organisation from the WSL. This grouping does not need formal structures to exist and function.

Formally the faction was declared only after the April 1983 conference:

yet there was very tight whipping of votes by them at that conference. All the faction members voted for the faction slate, and all of them in the same order of preference bar at most minor individual variations. None of them voted for anyone not on the faction slate. None of them, for example, would vote for Levy, even as their lowest preference: he got elected to the NC only thanks to majority votes. One faction member who left the conference early was able to vote for the faction slate, and all in the 'right' order, before the slate had even been announced. Neither the Parsons grouping, nor still less the majority, had anything remotely like the same 'whipping' of votes.

It is typical of the topsy-turvy world of the Smith group that their faction was 'declared' after the April conference (which they saw as decisive) and is 'dissolved' just before a special conference! The explanation is that the faction did not need to be declared to exist, and that it continues to exist after it has formally declared itself not to exist. The faction has not 'dissolved', it is making a feeble attempt at going underground.

Decisive for the March 10 NC resolution is not whether the Oxford faction formally exists or formally ceases to exist, but what the Smith group does and what it intends to do. What it chooses to call itself is not important.

The faction decided to continue agitating, on business as usual, and it decided that it will best be able to carry through what it planned collectively as a faction if it operates "as individuals". That is what matters. That is what is decisive for the organisation.

If the faction genuinely dissolved (though no-one demanded that it should), then it would abandon the enterprises of the faction. Its former members would pursue the goals of the organisation in the class struggle and would not continue to place the internal goals of the faction in the WSL above the performance of the WSL in the class struggle. If the faction leading members continue 'business as usual' with the support of the 'former' faction members, then the faction has not dissolved. And, more important, it has not ceased to do what the NC told them not to do. And that is what is decisive.

The faction has not dissolved. It has taken a tactical decision to pretend to dissolve. The faction's decision to engage in such a manoeuvre is the proof of what it intends and what its real response - as distinct from the 'diplomatic' one - to the NC resolution is.

By pretending to dissolve they add a petty conspiracy against the League to their misdemeanours. They have now transformed themselves into a secret faction, and there is no constitutional right to form or maintain a secret faction. A secret faction is an illegal faction. This is not a case of informal discussions or consultation by co-thinkers being called a secret faction. These comrades have had a formally convened national faction conference, and, having worked out their 'campaign' and the campaign strategy for the coming period, have formally decided to go underground as the best way to pursue the faction's interests - by (they hope) lulling its opponents and pulling the wool over the eyes of what they see as the naive and politically soft middle ground in the organisation.

Therefore it is plain that these comrades have no intention of abiding by the NC decision or of being responsible members of the League.

It would be better had they agreed to comply with the NC resolution. But from the point of view of clarity these developments are to be welcomed. If the faction leaders and members had chosen to lie retail and pretend to accept the individual demands in the NC resolution, it would be a difficult and messy business to pin them down. Instead they decided to lie wholesale and pretend to dissolve. Their collective decision to go through such a manoeuvre with the NC is an indication of how things stand.

The NC should interpret it in this light. We should immediately begin proceedings to expel the faction leaders.

THE QUESTION OF A SPECIAL CONFERENCE

The constitution allows a relatively small minority (25%) to mandate the NC/EC to call a special conference. This means that the faction and its fellow travellers can impose a special conference on the organisation more or less at will. If the faction uses the power that the constitution gives to minorities light-mindedly or disruptively, then the organisation is in serious trouble. The consequence of too-frequent conferences showed itself at our August 1983 conference in a badly-attended and altogether bad event.

Last September the faction leaders voted together with us for a conference next August/September, a year after the close of the 1983 conference. The task before the organisation was to see what it could do with the decisions laboriously arrived at by the three 1983 conferences. The (difficult) task for the faction was to work as a loyal and constructive minority. We did all we could to ease that task. But in fact after September the faction's relations with the organisation went from bad to worse.

Then at the January NC the faction called for the 'regular conference' to be held in April. It was 'constitutionally due'. Then they started campaigning among the membership on the grounds that the political situation had changed sufficiently to necessitate a conference. At the March 10 NC the call was switched to one for a special conference to discuss 'the internal situation'.

The first thing that needs to be said is that this is not a special conference such as is envisaged in the constitution. It is the faction being dog-in-the-manger and abusing the power given to minorities by the constitution. There was and there is no issue to necessitate or justify a special conference. The NC resolution did no more than reiterate the jointly agreed norms of the constitution and attempt to assert them against the faction. The reality of the League - and the reason why nothing less than expulsion will solve the problem - is that every limited attempt to discipline the faction, to apply minimum sanctions against them, is fuel for their agitation. An NC attempt to reiterate the norms of the constitution is not proper grounds for a special conference; the NC is discharging its duty; and if the faction resists, it places itself outside the norms of the organisation.

It is understandable that some comrades should feel alarmed at an impending break with the faction. But we do not need a special conference to work out whether or not the faction accepts and will operate the basic norms of the organisation.

THE PURPOSE OF A CONFERENCE

The faction based themselves originally on the utterly spurious claim that a conference is constitutionally due for April. Serious people will base themselves on the question: will a conference help sort out our problems? (For practical purposes there is no real difference here between a regular annual conference, a special conference, or an aggregate).

Despite the utter spuriousness of the argument that the annual conference was due in April, we would have agreed to hold the conference then if we believed it would help sort out our problems. There is absolutely no reason to believe it would.

What are the possible things a conference might do to sort out the League's problems?

1. Pronounce on an urgent new question of policy that had been thrown up by events since the last conference and which could not wait until the scheduled conference in August/September. No such issues has been thrown up. The faction has not claimed that it has, nor that some such issue is the root of the factionalism in the organisation. The August leg of the 1983 conference pronounced on the last issue in heated dispute - Ireland.

2. Throw out the existing leadership and put the Smith group in their

place. The faction has lost support since August because a lot of its members have drawn the logical conclusions from Smith's attitudes, comments, and accusations against the League majority, and left; also because their negative, a-political attitude has alienated people from them who might be or have been sympathetic on particular issues.

There was no reason to expect any solution from these normal conference activities.

It might be that, apart from these calculations, a conference is desirable nevertheless, because it would placate and satisfy the faction, and afterwards we could settle down to fruitful collaboration in building the League. There was never any reason to believe this, and there is no reason to believe it now.

They now say that the April (second) leg of the 1983 conference was decisive; but they came out of that conference and declared a faction! They were among the champions of the August 1983 third section of the conference. (We thought it was stupid to hold it, and the low attendance and bad atmosphere confirmed that view). In January they began to retrospectively downgrade the August conference, and to pretend that it was less than a full part of the 1983 conference.

Since August they have kept up a ceaseless internal agitation - and the call for the "April conference" was only the latest excuse. They have increasingly withdrawn from the work of the organisation and from financial and organisational responsibilities.

Finally, there was one other possible reason for having a conference - that it would put an end to the present impossible situation by producing a big bang and a split. That was the only scenario according to which a conference would sort out our problems.

The short answer to this last argument is that there are ways of organising a split less expensive in time and resources than a conference. If there is going to be a split, then the loyal members of the League will best use the preconference period to discuss building the League with other loyal members, rather than devote it to an irrelevant series of squabbles.

The central political question the organisation faces cannot be helped by a conference - on the contrary. That question is to make the last conference stick - to make it count for something. We are in the process of determining whether or not we have a common organisation with the faction - whether or not decisions of the last conference count for anything with them.

They have yet to prove that they would abide by any conference. We are interested in holding conferences to work out the details and perspectives of activity to build the organisation. The purpose of the next conference will be to draw the balance sheet and lay down perspectives for the work of the League. There is no point in having such an event jointly with those for whom it is no more than an occasion for continuing the factional vendetta on the most favourable terrain.

THE SITUATION NOW

The situation now is that to all intents and purposes the faction, in its own way, has decided to reject the NC decision as the basis for coexistence in a common organisation - and that therefore, according to the constitution and the NC's interpretation of it, we no longer have a basis for remaining in a common organisation. There are two organisations in the process of separating from each other.

Nobody who knows the reality of the League and has the will to face the facts could deny that this is where we are at. The March 31 NC will have to decide what to do about this situation. The best thing would be to agree to

separate as amicably as possible and thus try to preserve the possibility of some cooperation afterwards. Jagger made such a proposal to the EC, and though the majority were prepared to discuss it, Smith rejected it out of hand.

What, then, are the 'dissolved' faction's perspectives? They rule out accepting the March 10 NC resolution and honestly trying to make the existing organisation work. They know they would not win anything important at a special conference. Their entire trajectory since the August 1983 conference has been towards splitting the organisation. Even Smith and his comrades must know that their behaviour will at some point lead to a split. So what perspective can they have now?

a) To try to cash in on the likely unpopularity among some members of the March NC's decision to bring the situation to a head. They hope to group a few additional comrades round the faction in the course of 'resisting expulsion'. They want to prolong the process as much as possible.

b) To regroup 'all the old WSL forces before the split. Smith and Jones have been the sectarian 'left' of the new WSL. But their faction includes members of the extreme 'right' of the old WSL who are still around - Graham S who has supported rate rises in his area, and argued to defend Booth on the issue of council workers' pay; Hotc kiss who writes about involvement in local government being good preparation for socialism because it gives us practice in running a big bureaucracy! (letter in paper no. 165).

The faction shows no scruple about allying with the 'right wing' of the League. Smith voted against expelling Booth, or publicly dissociating from him (see paper no. 172) - apparently because he wants to keep open the possibility of recruiting Booth afterwards. Smith seems to have convinced Booth that the moves to break with him publicly over his opposition to a council workers' pay struggle were part of our drive against the faction. Parsons says he will join the future Smith organisation.

c) The faction wants to do as much damage as possible to the organisation before splitting.

d) They are probably apprehensive about what will happen to them after a split. They have grown used to the carefree life of an irresponsible opponent. Their prospects of setting up a new organisation are not very good. They can count on some sympathy from Socialist Action; but there will be nothing remotely like the 1975 blaze of publicity for them this time round.

The truth is that they are pretty demoralised - only people who are politically demoralised through to their bones would do what Smith and Jones did in 1982-3, and switch from the attempt to make the fusion work to pursue petty personal and factional ends.

A CONFERENCE FOR A SPLIT?

halfway

So, at least up to March 10, the only/sensible argument for a special or early conference was for a conference to have a big bang and a split.

When I first heard Jones propose the early conference, in January, my initial (private, emotional) reaction was to support him for that reason. But I argued against an early conference because - even then - I still had not entirely given up hope of avoiding a split. And because a conference is the worst way to organise a split.

If the NC believes that a split is inevitable, then it is the NC's plain duty to minimise the cost of the split in time, energy and lost comrades, and to make it as quick and clean as possible. The NC should make the split happen in the most advantageous way for the organisation, and the least advantageous for the future rival organisation separating from us.

Here we had a case when the political arguments were as clear as nearly two years of faction-fighting and four conferences could make them. The faction-fighting had degenerated to petty recriminations.

A split conference preceded by a two months' campaign of miscellaneous grievance-mongering which hamstring and paralyse the organisation and drives more of the less resilient comrades out of the organisation (as it would) - that is the least sensible and efficient way of organising a split. The least sensible from our point of view, that is - to prolong the affair as much as possible, doing as much damage as possible, is of course in the faction's interest.

Yes or no: is there any reason to think that the now underground faction and the rest of the organisation can continue to coexist? That is the decisive question. Nobody who knows the facts will sincerely answer yes to that question. The faction do not even answer yes with any conviction. The last chance was the March 10 NC, and we have had an unambiguous (though lying) answer from them on that. Thus a split is unavoidable, and it must be brought about as quickly, cleanly and economically as possible, in such a way that it minimises the damage to the organisation.

'THE RANK AND FILE MUST DECIDE'?

To bow one's head meekly before the demagogic and unconstitutional argument that the NC cannot decide such things without consulting the full membership is to passively accept that a serious amount of additional and unnecessary damage will be done to the organisation, on top of the inevitable damage that the now unavoidable split will do anyway. The 'leadership' that would proceed like that would not deserve the name.

The new WSL is not a head-less unstructured sprawling mess. It is, according to the constitution agreed at fusion, a democratic-centralist organisation whose NC has the right and the duty to lead the organisation. We have an NC which was democratically elected in the heat of serious factional battles last April.

One of its first tasks was to throw out the Morrow/RWL faction, which had not many fewer comrades in it than the Smith faction has (and on average, in my view, they were better people, the bulk of them miseducated or raw youth). Although Smith and Jones could not bring themselves to uphold the discipline of the League and vote at the NC to throw them out, they helped us draw up the charges and voted for them on the EC.

There was no talk of a special conference then. Everybody accepted - in principle, even Smith and Jones - that either Morrow and his group accepted the common rules of functioning under the elected leadership, or they had to be put out of the League. Why is the Smith faction different?

Of course, they themselves see it differently: they are a self-glorifying group round the pre-ordained 'worker leadership' who disdain the rest of the organisation. But why should the rest of the organisation take them at their own evaluation on this, when we reject their pretensions and calls for deference in other areas of League life? When Smith and Jones plainly put themselves outside the control of the NC, why is it insufficient for the NC to deal with them?

According to the ancient right of the condemned nobleman to the axe rather than the commoners' gibbet, perhaps?

THE MARCH 10 NC RESOLUTION AS MOTIVE FOR A SPECIAL CONFERENCE

The new unprincipled combination of the 'underground' faction and a group round Parsons can argue that since March 10 the NC resolution itself has changed the situation and made a conference necessary.

Think about this for a moment. The NC reiterates the League's constitutional norms and demands that a very disruptive faction complies or gets out of the League. Was the NC on March 10 right or wrong according to the constitution? Was it right or wrong in its political and organisational assessment of the role of the faction in the organisation?

The answer to both questions is that it was perfectly right.

Nor was the NC precipitate or hasty in deciding to act. It was very late indeed in responding to the many-months-long campaign of disruption by the faction and its allies. The March 10 NC did not take a decision to throw the faction out: it gave them a choice. They could have chosen to comply with the NC resolution and the constitution.

They have not complied. They have seized upon the NC resolution to justify their two-month-old campaign for an early conference, now translated into the call for a special conference. It was predictable that if they decided not to comply and make peace they would use the March 10 resolution in this way. We knew it would be grist to their mill and that they would try to use it to gather those non-faction comrades opposed to a break with them around the faction.

The entire game they are playing now consists in trying, with the help of Parsons and his group, to switch attention from their dispute with the NC and from their defiance of the NC and the constitution, where they are indefensible, and to deflect attention onto the question of a special conference. They do not seriously contest the inevitability of a split. But, they say, if there is to be a split, then it must be by way of a special conference. The NC, they say, is a feeble powerless entity which cannot even act to defend the constitutional norms of the League.

This argument depends entirely on the view of the NC implied in the federalism to which the old WSL tended. (This federalism is stated or implied clearly in the declaration of the eight NC members, with its call for national conferences every 3 or 4 months). That is not our view of the role and authority of the NC. Nor is it the view embodied in the constitution.

WHO CALLS THE TUNE?

The NC might choose to take a dispute with a section of the organisation to a special conference. It would do that if it helped build the organisation, or avoid damage to the organisation. But it is not obliged to do so. According to the most wishy-washy version of Bolshevism, the NC is obliged not to go to a special conference if it believed that nothing can be gained from such a procedure and/or that much damage can be done to the organisation as a result of it.

If the faction defies the NC and rejects its stipulated minimum framework for the faction continuing in the organisation, then the NC has a right to act against the faction.

But this question is now posed in a different way to the organisation. The argument is not - directly - that the NC should initiate a conference to deal with the matter, but that the NC should hold its hand and not act against the faction because the faction (and others) call for a special conference.

Given the 25% rule, the faction and its fellow-travellers can call a conference more or less at will. Of course they choose to call a special conference rather than meekly let the NC expel them! They know themselves to be in a faction fight - and from their point of view they see it as the political equivalent of a fight to the death.

They would be mad to pass up the secondary advantages which the March 10 NC resolution gives them: they can hope to break out of their political isolation, dropping their politics in a corner somewhere (as they have done), and setting up a formal anti-regime alliance with the Parsons group. They can appeal for protection to every naive, soft, ill-informed, or malcontent member of the League, and especially to everybody in the League who has recoiled from the factionalism inside the organisation and spent the last year or 18 months concentrating on local work, and is therefore not very familiar with the experience that drove the NC to say: 'Enough is enough'.

The question, however, is whether the NC should let this predictable reflex response of the faction and the Parsons group (dragging with them some goodwill

but confused comrades) dictate to it a course of action which it would not otherwise choose, and which it knows to be very much against the interests of the League and of the working class... a course of action that would force us to spend the next two months in an internal faction fight centred on petty issues.

The question is whether the NC will abandon a Bolshevik centralist conception of its own place and role in the organisation under pressure, and behave according to the notion of the place and role of an NC belonging to the federalist notion of a 'revolutionary party' of Smith, Jones and Parsons.

Constitutionally the NC is perfectly free to act against the faction - our constitution does not embody Smith's, Jones's and Parsons' notion of a revolutionary party, but Lenin's, Trotsky's, and Cannon's. The NC should use that power to bring about a clean break with the faction as soon as possible.

THE COSTS OF A SPECIAL CONFERENCE SPLIT

Finally, I want to deal with two aspects of the call for a split by way of a special conference - the costs of doing it that way; and the belief some comrades have, or the half-belief, that a conference may be an alternative to a split.

The costs of a special conference are as follows:

- * Two months, as from now, taken up with internal 'discussion' - in fact, not with discussion but with bickering between groups which can establish no dialogue.

- * The probable loss of additional comrades as a result of nausea at this.

- * The complete waste of two months. It is utterly utopian to think that the discussion can be more than minimally educative. Most of the document of the eight consists of trivia, and it is all very much at a tangent to the real issues between the two organisations.

The notion that a special conference is an alternative to a split is extremely naive. For a start, even if all the federalist amendments of the faction were passed, it would still not licence what the faction is doing.

Or suppose that the conference decides not to expel them but nevertheless to endorse the March 10 NC resolution? Assuming the faction didn't walk out, then immediately after the special conference, after two months wasted in bickering, we would be back full circle to where we are now.

The first meeting of the NC (the same NC as we have now, for a special conference does not elect an NC) would have to deal with the problems of the faction. Having got their way about having a special conference, and having defeated the NC, they would not be more manageable than they are now. That's for certain. Very much the opposite. So the NC would be faced with taking action against them, just as it is now. We would have spent two or three months moving around in a full circle. What would we do then? Call another special conference?

No? Why not? Because the NC would have the authority of conference? What does that mean? That the faction would obey the conference? That is naive and utopian, on the last year's experience of the faction. They would settle down in the organisation if they controlled it, and not otherwise.

The NC already has the authority of a conference - the founding/fusion conference which agreed norms of functioning. That conference gives the NC more authority than any special conference could possibly give it - for we agreed those rules of the constitution unanimously after calm discussion of the issues and of our objectives in banding together.

The NC already has the authority. What it needs is the determination not to be deflected by the self-interested demagoguery of those whose politics are the question are federalist and not Trotskyist.

But would the conference mean that the membership had been consulted? Yes, and that would be useful. But it has to be weighed against the cost. The

membership can be 'consulted' over the next two months - amidst a hullabaloo on essentially irrelevant issues, and in a process which would become increasingly unreal as the already-existing 'cold split' grows wider and hotter - or the membership can be turned outwards by the NC towards the miners' strike. There is a choice to be made. Only the NC can make it. The NC has the right and the duty to make that choice. It has the duty to give a lead to the organisation, and to tell any non-NC member who would choose, naively or for whatever reason, to turn inwards now, that they are making a wrong political choice.

The NC members have no duty passively to reflect the view that only a full assembly of the membership can settle with the faction. Such ideas are alien to the constitutional definition of the role of the NC. The NC has a duty to resist such ideas and educate the membership to understand that the populist demagoguery of Parsons and Smith is alien to our tradition.

The NC is of course obliged to work the constitution and call a special conference if enough members call on it to. The NC is not obliged to refrain from acting against the faction until a special conference. It is not obliged passively to let the faction determine the sort of conference we are to have. In my view the best thing will be to bring forward the regular conference.

'KNOCKING HEADS TOGETHER'

Finally: the notion that some comrades may have, that at a special conference 'the rank and file' can 'knock their heads together', is utterly naive.

Knocking heads together would still leave bodies threshing about, as for the last year and more. There is only one possible way of salvaging the fusion in a way that frees the organisation from paralysis and allows it to grow and develop. That is agreement on common rules of functioning, or rather agreement on how to work the unanimously agreed constitution. If we cannot agree on that, then we cannot agree on anything - we do not have a basis for coexistence in one organisation.

In fact we have not had that basis for a long time. We tried to get it with IB 50 ('Building the WSL'), then with the March 10 NC resolution. We have not got it. Instead we have the faction going underground and a ridiculous campaign for 'democracy' in response to the NC's demand that the faction behave itself or get out.

The truth of the matter is that the fusion broke down long ago. At the EC level it began to break down in December 1981, when we had the dispute about self-determination for Poland and Smith and Jones complained that the organisation had been 'hi-jacked' because the NC had voted against them on the issue. We have had a progressive breakdown ever since until today there is nothing left of fusion. What we have is the WSL playing host to an almost totally parasitic Oxford faction which is - apart from being disruptive - a very great deal more hostile to the WSL than Workers Fight ever was to IS, which we always defined as a centrist organisation!

We hold conferences to decide what the organisation will do, and what we will do to build the organisation. The faction's reaction to the March 10 NC resolution leaves no one with the right to believe that they see us as building a common organisation on a democratic-centralist, Trotskyist basis. Their hypocritical agitation for 'unity' is designed to build the faction, and no more.

The NC has the right, and a pressing duty, to resolve the situation and allow the organisation to turn immediately towards the miners' strike. There is nothing more for us to say to the faction and its fellow-travellers except: "Enough is enough".