

Discussion Bulletin 240

December 2003

DIARY 2004.

- Thursday 15 January. 7.30pm, Great Hall, Manchester Town Hall. Unite Against Fascism rally. Speakers include Billy Hayes (CWU), and Julie Hesmondhalgh (Coronation Street actress). Organised by Manchester Against Racism.
- Saturday 17 January, noon to 4pm, University of London Union, Malet St, London WC1: No Sweat steering committee.
- Saturday 17 January, London: Socialist Alliance Council meeting. Two delegates from each local SA as long as at least one is a woman.
- Thursday 22 January, 6.30 - 9.00. Ken Loach is doing a Q&A after his film, Bread and Roses, is shown at a No Sweat benefit for Mexican sweatshop unions at The Other Cinema 11, Rupert Street, London W1. Tickets £8: book at <http://www.picturehouses.co.uk> or phone 020 7734 1506, 1pm - 9pm.
- Sunday 25 January, 10am, Friends Meeting House, Euston Rd, London NW1: Left Unity Convention, called by the "Respect" coalition. Download registration form from

<http://www.socialistalliance.net/events/convention/convention.pdf>

- Saturday 31 January. London AWL aggregate.
- Saturday 7 February, 11am to 5pm (registration from 10am). Convention of the trade union left, at Friends Meeting House, Euston Road, London NW1. Download registration form from <http://www.socialistalliance.net/tradeunion/CoTUL/conventionback.pdf>.
- Sunday 8 February, 11am to 5pm, London: AWL National Committee
- Saturday 28 February, from 10am at the Camden Centre, Euston Road, London WC1. Stop the War Coalition 3rd Annual Conference. More: <http://www.stopwar.org.uk>.
- Saturday 13 March. Socialist Alliance conference.
- Monday 15 March to Wednesday 17th: National Union of Students women's conference.
- Saturday-Sunday 27-28 March: Scottish Socialist Party conference, Edinburgh.
- Monday 29 March to Thursday 1 April: National Union of Students conference.
- Saturday-Sunday 8-9 May (provisionally): AWL conference 2004.

Contents

AWL on the web

Points from the Organisers' School (Martin T) National Committee 14/12/03

- Resolution on "Respect" coalition
- Resolution on LRC movement
- Resolution on 20/11/03 Bush demonstration

Minutes of discussion

National Committee 25/10/03

- Motion on AWL branch-building
- Student perspectives document
- Notes of discussion

National Committee 28/09/03

Notes of discussion covering:

- Iraq
- LRC movement
- International Workers' Liberty meeting

- European Social Forum
- Socialist Alliance

[Fuller details of the October and September NCs are available on the archive of the AWL email list, at <http://www.leftlists.org.uk/awl/>] "Voiceists and Realists" (Martin T, July 2003)



"I, too, hate being a greedy bastard, but we have a responsibility to our shareholders."

AWL ON THE WEB

www.workersliberty.org: latest news and comment
www.workersliberty.org/aboutus: Where we stand, basic info

www.workersliberty.org/join: join the AWL!
www.workersliberty.org/whatson: Meetings, events
www.workersliberty.org/action: Campaigns

www.workersliberty.org/unions: the unions and politics
www.workersliberty.org/tubeworker: Tubeworker
www.workersliberty.org/postalworker: Postalworker

www.workersliberty.org/esf: ESF, anti-capitalism
www.workersliberty.org/war: Iraq, war and after
www.workersliberty.org/unity: our case for left unity
www.workersliberty.org/socialistalliance: 'Respect', SA, etc.

www.workersliberty.org/?req=12: Workers' Liberty magazine
www.solidarity-online.org: Solidarity online
www.workersliberty.org/bolshy: Bolshy, youth paper
www.workersliberty.org/education: study courses, educationals

www.workersliberty.org/site: guide to lots more on the site!
www.workersliberty.org/internal: AWL members' page

POINTS FROM THE ORGANISERS' SCHOOL

(Martin Thomas)

From the discussions at our Organisers' School on 13 December 2003, four main tasks follow for all AWL branches:

1. Turning the branch out to 'radiate' and find new contacts.
2. Making sure branch meetings are businesslike (discussing, organising, and de-briefing on activity, rather than just passing round a list of meetings to cover) and politically alert (a 'Political Report' item, discussing current events and consequent tasks, should be mandatory on every agenda).
3. Organising regular monthly public or open meetings.
4. Helping the local No Sweat group to get going and pursue a campaign plan.

Notes on some of these points below.

CONTACTS: TALKING.

The core idea at the school was turning round our members to see politics as centred on taking our ideas out positively through conversation, discussion and argument with new people.

One first thing to discuss in every branch is: how do we explain who we are, and what we do, to a paper-buyer, a workmate, a neighbour, or a passer-by who asks?

How do we answer, if they ask? Or, if they don't, how do we take the initiative in starting a conversation, for example while getting the change for a paper sale?

The new 'streamlined' Where We Stand in the paper is designed as a written-out version of what we might say. (Being written out it is of course longer and more 'formal' than what we'd say in ordinary conversation. In ordinary conversation, we adapt, select and abbreviate, and add reference to whatever main local activities are current).

Please discuss it in your branch. See if you think it can be shortened or improved. The branch discussion should leave every comrade with a clear 'script' in their mind for future conversations with new people interested in the AWL.

Comrades should also have a clear idea of how they'll reply - positively and constructively - when inquirers ask (as they do): 'So how are you different from the other left groups?'; or 'how are you different from the SWP?'

CONTACTS: NOT THE 1980s!

This decade is not a bad 1980s. It is a different period.

There is a large diffuse radicalisation - a 'spectrum of communism', or at least of anti-capitalism - and we have ways of latching onto it (No Sweat, Campaign for Free Education and other 'rebuild welfare state' activity, etc.) But we have to go out and find it, and start from where the newly interested people are, politically, which usually is not where we were when most long-established AWL activists first started getting involved in politics.

The conditions of the early 1980s - a strong trade union movement confident of itself as a pillar of society, a pool of potential activists readily locatable in LPYS branches, CLPs and college Labour Clubs - will not reappear quickly. They may never reappear in that shape.

We must rid ourselves of any idea that our task now is to keep things ticking over until early-1980s conditions reappear, or to re-run our early-1980s type of activity but on a much diminished scale because areas of intervention of the early-1980s type are much diminished.

We start from how things are now, and the opportunities as they are now.

CONTACTS: WE ARE OURSELVES.

In the early 1980s we had the possibility of presenting ourselves to new contacts as core activists of a macro-'project' of immediate large-scale scope: transformation of the labour movement and the Labour Party, then in great flux, so as to open up the possibility of a workers' government.

That is good when it is possible. It is not always possible. It is not usually possible.

In other times, of course we present ourselves as not just self-sufficient. We explain to new contacts, for example, that we are part of a broader effort to build rank and file movements in the trade unions. And we always have immediate 'projects', campaigns, struggles we're involved in, etc.

But we should learn from the LCR in France. For about a decade, from the late 1980s on, they kept on presenting themselves to the public as less a political force in their own right, more just 'best builders' of a hypothetical 'project' - a 'new mass anti-capitalist political regroupment'. They even discussed changing their name to 'Revolutionary Democratic Left'.

They haven't shaken off that syndrome completely. But to some extent, at least, they have come to understand that they do better when they present themselves straightforwardly and boldly as what they are: Revolutionary Communist League.

We are what we are: the partisans of solidarity and workers' liberty. Let's proclaim it straightforwardly.

CONTACTS: GETTING OUT MORE.

Reports to the Organisers' School indicate that our biggest source of new contacts is through helping with No Sweat work. Already... before many branches have got going properly on this.

There's a large but diffuse milieu of young people interested in radical politics. We have to get out there and get working with them and discussing with them, starting from where they are.

CONTACTS: TRADE UNIONS.

Many branches reported a very small yield of new contacts from the trade union work which takes up a large part of comrades' time and energy.

Of course it is harder to win new contacts when you are working with older people who are less elastic, more set in their ways, more beaten down by life.

It is not impossible, though. It depends on what we do - whether we go out to seek political discussions with people, to follow up sparks of interest.

CONTACTS: ROUTINES.

Oxford AWL has an email list of 400 contacts whom they regularly inform of their meetings and activities.

Other branches, in larger cities (let's spare their blushes) have similar lists of... ten people, or... none.

Email is no substitute for talking directly to individuals. But to email 400 contacts takes no more effort than emailing ten... and is forty times better.

Another vital backstop routine which every branch needs is a regular phone-round to say 20 or 30 of its closer contacts, talking to them about current events and activities, checking out their news and ideas, telling them about what we are doing.

This can conveniently be done by a comrade who is confident on the phone but for some reason such as child-care duties does not get out much in the evenings.

NO SWEAT CAMPAIGNS.

Four points to keep in mind when helping local No Sweat groups to draw up their campaign plans.

1. Plan over a period - maybe a year; several months, at least - and towards definite and realisable objectives. (Raise a certain sum for trade unionists somewhere? Stop a college or school using sweatshop suppliers?)

2. The plan should include ample "lead-in" time to build up support for any direct action.

3. The "lead-in" should include systematically canvassing for sponsorship and support among potential allies (trade unions, campaign groups, and - even if your No Sweat group starts entirely off-campus - student societies and student unions).

4. The plan should include lots of simple and easy bite-sized activities which new people can do (and can see as contributing to the overall plan).

Additional activities - quick responses to new events, other discussions, etc. - can then be added on to the basic campaign plan.

But "set up a paste table outside Gap and wait for the masses to rally" is not a campaign plan!

The No Sweat office has information packs and other material which can help you, including material based on the experience of the big movement in the USA, United

Students Against Sweatshops. Phone 07904 431 959 or consult <http://www.nosweat.org.uk>

NATIONAL COMMITTEE

14/12/03

Resolution on "Respect" coalition as amended

1. We fight for independent working-class political organisation and representation, and within any formally and organisationally independent working-class initiative for the Marxist politics without which that initiative's independence can only be partial and unstable.

2. a. New Labour is progressively depriving the working class of any independent political representation.

b. The working class needs to re-establish its own independent political representation.

c. No self-selected group can substitute for the working class in this. However, activists - the organised sections of the working class, in the trade unions, and in the first place the socialist activists - must play a leading role.

d. We fight for the socialists to unite in a new socialist party, with ample rights of tendency, which can become the leading political force in the fight for a re-born mass workers' party, and within that re-born mass workers' party once formed.

e. In the fight for independent working-class political representation, a central task is to make the trade unions assert themselves politically against the Blair government, including within the New Labour structures, and to start a fight within those structures which rallies working-class forces.

f. We favour serious and solidly-based independent socialist or labour-movement candidates against New Labour, as ways to raise the banner of independent working-class representation in the electoral arena and regroup the forces to turn round the trade unions.

3. a. There is a fairly wide but diffuse mood among workers and youth of generally left-wing alienation from New Labour (pro-public-services, pro-union, pro-democracy, pro-peace, sometimes anti-capitalist). This is evidenced in such things as the demonstrations against the Iraq war and against Bush and the various "new anti-capitalist" manifestations, and, to a certain degree, in the victories for the "real trade unionists" of the "awkward squad" in trade-union elections against the advocates of "partnership" and "adding value".

In Scotland and in France the SSP and LO/LCR have been able to win sizeable votes (7%; 10%) with forthright working-class socialist platforms. That success rests on strengths acquired by long years of patient grass-roots work, not on some slick instant tactic; but there is no reason to believe that the broader mood it captures does not exist in England and Wales too.

b. The mood is however not matched by any comparable revival of working-class self-organisation. It remains atomised, molecular, diffuse.

c. The decades-long erosion of socialist political culture in the working class by Stalinism, and then the collapse of the hollowed-shell after 1989-91, still weighs heavy. There is an epochal task to be accomplished in the

working class, of the rebuilding of socialist political culture, the renewal of collective working-class self-confidence, and the revival of working-class self-organisation.

d. The activist left which should be tackling that task is seriously disabled by the after-effects on its culture of Stalinist seepage. It knows what it is against, but not what it is for. It is 'negativist' and narrow-minded, taking militancy against the powers-that-be immediately to hand as its highest value, and therefore preaching credulous applause of forces such as Islamic fundamentalism. It fails to promote a positive working-class socialist political culture.

4. In this political situation it is more or less inevitable that new upsurges of working-class politics will not happen tidily and neatly, with political clarity from the start. There will be a range of initiatives of a more or less populist character, some with positive possibilities, some simply blind alleys.

5. Our first, basic, irreplaceable job within this process is to agitate, educate and organise for class-struggle politics, for consistent democracy, and for authentic socialism. There is no substitute for this. All socialist tactics must be built up on this base. If they exclude or contradict it, then whatever their apparent advantages they do not serve their supposed aim. Within those limits, *tactically we should seek the closest possible relations with workers and youth moving confusedly towards independent working-class political assertion, build on what is positive, avoid sectarianism and doctrinairism.

6. The 'Respect' coalition launched on 9 December 2003 reflects not only the general 'populist' limitations of existing broad-left consciousness but a calculated political operation by a specific pseudo-Marxist current, the SWP.

They have calibrated the coalition to use George Galloway as its figurehead and to maximise their chances of drawing in the more modernising Islamists (the MAB) and mosque hierarchies.

Their aim is to maximise flow-over from the anti-war movement - where, in turn, the status of Galloway and the MAB (which they hope to take advantage of) was in large part manufactured by the SWP's deliberate choices in their role as demonstration organisers.

7. For ten years George Galloway was the 'MP for Baghdad Central'. He was an unofficial envoy for Iraq's Ba'thist regime, a regime which in the totalitarianism of its repression and its aggression against minorities within its own borders and neighbouring peoples exceeded pre-World-War 2 Nazism. On his account he visited Baghdad almost monthly to meet with top officials of the regime; acted as a go-between for the regime to business people and journalists, and proposed to the British government that he act as a go-between for it. He denies that his activity was funded by the Iraqi government, but says it was funded, to the tune of some £900,000, by the governments of Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, and by a businessman well-connected to Baghdad. On his own account he was on close friendly terms with Saddam's deputy Tariq Aziz.

All this is much more than a matter of 'having illusions' or 'having a false political position'. It is a matter of personal and financial connections with extreme reaction.

Nor is it incidental and secondary to Galloway as a political figure. It is central and defining.

It is not a matter of past errors now regretted and disavowed. Galloway has disavowed nothing. In all probability he continues extensive links with ruling-class circles in the Middle East (for example around the Cairo conference).

Galloway's only live claim to be considered as left-wing is the Iraq question. But precisely on that question he is closely connected to some of the most 'right-wing' forces imaginable.

From 1994 we called for Labour Party members and the trade unions affiliated to his constituency to deselect Galloway as a candidate. No internationalist or democrat can support an electoral coalition organised around Galloway as figurehead.

Fundamentally it does not matter what the formal political platform of such a left coalition is. If it is more left-wing on paper, that means only that the political operation is more mendacious.

8. The MAB is a British offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, the largest, oldest and richest Islamic fundamentalist movement in the Arab world. It represents a flexible, 'reformist', soft-soap, modernising variant of Islamism, but a variant of Islamism nonetheless.

To accredit such a grouping as 'the Muslim wing' of the anti-war movement - let alone of a left-wing electoral coalition - is a betrayal of atheists, secularists, feminists and democrats of Muslim background.

It is not certain that MAB will join the 'Respect' coalition. If it does, we should denounce the alliance, while of course emphasising that socialists should reach out to Muslim workers and youth as workers and youth in a way that is sensitive and avoids unnecessary affront to their religious ideas.

9. Support for socialist ventures from individual radical imams is welcome. Attempts to make formal alliances with mosque hierarchies, or to woo 'the Muslim vote' on a communalist basis, are unprincipled.

10. In its politics (various left demands, but no reference or allegiance to the working class); in its structure (personality-based); and in the figures and representatives it puts to the fore (Galloway!), the 'Respect' coalition represents middle-class stunt politics. It is a device to rally some left activists by offering them political vent through a vote for 'left' demagogues, not a step (even an imperfect, uncertain, wobbly one) towards independent working-class political self-assertion. If we continue to tell the truth about Galloway, the MAB, etc., we cannot vote for it. We cannot recommend trade unions back it.

11. Our objection to Galloway here is not a phobia, or a stance of saying we won't take part in any movement if Galloway is also there. We joined the anti-war demonstrations even though Galloway was given top billing as speaker at the end. There that was secondary. Here he is, as SA chair and SWP co-thinker Nick Wrack puts it, 'the key figure', the coalition's one declared top-of-the-list election candidate. To vote coalition is to vote Galloway.

12. The 'Respect' coalition must be unstable and cannot build a long-term movement. However, it can and

probably will attract many thousands in the short term. There is an objective basis for that in the diffuse nature of the current radicalisation and its weakness in self-organisation. It is not plausible to denounce it simply on the basis that "it won't get support" or "it's going nowhere".

13. Up until now we have been arguing inside the SA that the SA should not do anything like the "Respect" coalition but instead seek a coalition on a working-class socialist basis. We now have to address ourselves to a different audience: the trade unionists and activists who will attend the 7 February "Convention of the trade union left" or be interested in this (or any halfway plausible) left electoral alternative to Blair when it is presented in their union branch.

14. The tactical problem is complicated by the fact that other initiatives have faded. The Labour Representation Committee movement proceeds at a snail's pace (with one of its more dynamic leaders reflecting, philosophically, that it is a task "for generations"). The Socialist Party and Alliance for Green Socialism are likely not to run the Euro-election candidates they mooted, but instead to go along with the "Respect" coalition to one degree or another. We cannot at will create a large independent working-class alternative. (At the start of this year, before the SWP started its current coalition-concocting, we directly explored the idea of a broad working-class "political convention" - but the prominent trade unionists whom we approached, and whom we needed to float the project, would not bite).

15. We should say that we want a coalition of the left but on a working-class basis. We should fight for three demands.

a. A working-class stance. A coalition's platform, policy and programme must be firmly set within the framework of independent working-class representation. That is, independence from other classes, representing the interests and struggles of the working class. It must advocate public ownership and workers' control of productive wealth. It must stand for workers' MPs on a worker's wage. It must promote and advocate moves within the trade unions to free their political voice from the influence of the bourgeoisie. It must insist on trade union membership for its representatives and candidates.

b. Democracy. The policies and programme of the coalition must be decided through a democratic debate among its rank-and-file activists and supporting organisations, with the possibility of amendments and alternatives. The coalition must be pluralist. Its leaders must be accountable.

c. Break with Galloway. No political platform on paper can have credibility unless its public figures represent it credibly. No coalition can have a credible working-class stance if its figurehead is George Galloway. Galloway's sole claim to be considered left-wing, aside from long-ago tankie Stalinism, is the Iraq issue. But precisely on that issue, despite his opposition to the US/UK war, his record is right-wing (close links with the Saddam regime; personal links with Tariq Aziz; activity financed - on Galloway's own story - by the governments of Saudi Arabia and the Emirates and by a businessman well connected to the Baghdad dictatorship).

We should go to the 25 January "Left Convention" and the 7 February "Trade Union Convention" with these demands. We should make a series of amendments to the draft platform of the "Respect" coalition along the lines of the three demands and argue for the convention on 25 January to accept them. We should make a proposal to the 7 February Convention that instead of backing the already-concocted coalition it should convene an authentic labour representation committee. We should draft a brief statement based on these demands and get trade unionists to sign it.

In trade unions we should oppose support for the coalition. In left-wing union organisations where there are numbers of leftists inclined to support, be interested in, or give the benefit of the doubt to the coalition, we should push motions or amendments demanding answers from the "Respect" coalition on these three points before any decision to endorse it.

16. We should review and refine detailed tactics as events develop. Our basic parameters are:

(a) A principled stance for independent working-class politics, and therefore against folding behind Galloway;

(b) To be as positive, simple, and unsectarian as possible in our response to the mood among trade-unionists and activists desiring a broad left alternative to Blair and willing to accept something "imperfect" if that's all that's going.

Comrades in union branches or Trades Union Councils where the coalition is likely to be raised should put motions to their next union meetings opposing any support for 25 January or for the coalition by the conference of the trade union left on 7 February.

We should seek signatories to a statement based around the three points and our general perspective of independent working-class representation.

If/ when our proposals are defeated, we should not take further part in the coalition. (This does not exclude interventions at meetings, etc.)

It is to our advantage to be seen to be excluded because we are arguing for something simple, clear, comprehensible and forward-looking rather than secluding ourselves voluntarily because of a long list of grievances going back over time.

We want to keep dialogue and contact with the activists (including SWP members) who want to "give it a try" with the Respect coalition, rather than retreating in spluttering indignation. Our message to them is: we respect your desire to challenge Blairism, but this is the wrong way to go about it. We are working to rebuild the labour movement on the basis of independence from bourgeois influence. Please come and help us do it. In the meantime, if you or any other activists from the Respect coalition are going to do any work supporting workers' or community struggles, we'll be there with you. And we hope you'll support the work we're doing on that front, too.

[Note: the NC agreed that we shouldn't be too literal about this, e.g. that in leaflets or conversations the rather sarcastic tone of the text as it now stands - "if you are going to do any work supporting workers' struggles", etc. - need not be reproduced.]

17. We can and should use Galloway's statements about "needing £150,000 a year to function as a leading figure", and his poor Parliamentary voting record, to gain

the ear of leftists who, weak on internationalism, regard the Iraq issue as remote.

Some socialists oppose the ‘Respect’ coalition from a fundamentally sectarian mindset, or out of SWP-ophobia. We may ally with them on this or that issue, but should be distinct from them.

We should minimise the use of jargon like ‘popular front’ and ‘cross-class’. The SWP is politically popular-frontist, but we do not want to base our arguments here on debatable analogies between the ‘Respect’ venture and the popular fronts of the 1930s.

In fact, it is not that the SWP has definitely subordinated itself to Galloway, in the way that the 1930s CPs had definitely (at least for the duration of that phase of USSR foreign policy) subordinated themselves to French, British and Spanish bourgeois democracy. It is using Galloway. In any sharp conflict between it and Galloway, the SWP calculates (and rightly) that it will win.

We should not base our arguments against the coalition on the presence of marginal figures like George Monbiot.

18. In the euro-elections, it looks like coming down to it that we have no better option than to vote Labour, which may at least facilitate activity in the LRC movement as, when and if it develops.

New Labour’s remaining ties to the trade unions would not normally be sufficient to mandate voting Labour where there was an independent socialist or working-class alternative. In this case, as against this ‘Respect’ coalition, with its political corruptness and charlatanism, the residual trade-union link does indicate a Labour vote. We should tie it with vehement criticism of the Labour government.

We should not, however, let recoil from the SWP’s stupidities push us into thinking that New Labour is an alternative, or ‘vote Labour and demand working-class measures’ has again become a policy with real grip. The facts about the near-extinction of political life in the CLPs remain as they are. They may change, but not immediately, not predictably, and not at our will.

We should certainly not appear as champions of New Labour against left coalition-making. We say we want a left coalition, but one based on an independent working-class stance.

We should not present New Labour as the ‘working-class’ alternative to the ‘popular front’ Respect coalition. To do so would be to intoxicate ourselves with formulas.

We are not with Galloway. But we are not with the Blairites against Galloway, either. With the Labour left and the unions beginning (very slowly, very mildly) to assert themselves? Yes, against Blair. But against Galloway? Actually many of those Labour leftists and left unions are as credulous about Galloway as the SWP pretends to be.

18A. In selected areas - necessarily a few, because of limited resources - we should stand or work for independent socialist candidates in local council elections in 2004, under the Workers’ Liberty or Socialist Alliance or similar banner. We should look to working with the Socialist Party on some of their council candidacies, too. This will not only be useful work in itself (spreading socialist ideas, building local profile, making contacts, etc.) but also make the political point that our rejection of the ‘Respect’ coalition does not signify a collapse back

into leaving the electoral field uncontested to New Labour.

19. The SA Democracy Platform is essentially a ‘residual’ body - a gathering of the residue who object to the SWP’s course but have stuck it out rather than decamping. It includes some good people, and we should keep in touch with it. But its basis - democracy in the SA - is rapidly becoming obsolete. And on other issues it is a congeries of micro-groups and recycled ex-members of larger groups. It cannot achieve much.

With the launch of the ‘Respect’ coalition the SA will be wound up, not (at least for a while) formally, but de facto. We should support and work with local SAs and SA groups, like Erdington SA, who will continue on an independent socialist basis, and support and encourage any possibilities of linking them in a national network or federation. The forces involved, however, will be small.

20. Our main emphasis should be on promoting the AWL, as a force for rebuilding grass-roots working-class politics (workplace bulletins, trade-union work); for fighting within the trade unions for independent working-class political representation; for organising and orienting ‘anti-capitalist’ militants, especially youth, to working-class politics (No Sweat); and for serious political education. Do that properly, and we can recruit from the activists at first attracted by the ‘Respect’ coalition but then gradually disabused.

Resolution on LRC work and perspectives

1. New Labour is progressively depriving the working class of any independent political representation.

2. The working class needs to re-establish its own independent political representation. We reject the idea (held in practice by both the SWP and the SP) that ‘independent working-class political representation’ means primarily electoral opposition to New Labour. For us, working-class independence means class independence from the bourgeoisie (which is an ideological fight, and one to be had throughout the labour movement) - not exclusively formal organisational independence from the Labour Party.

3. No self-selected group can substitute for the working class in this. However, activists - the organised sections of the working class, in the trade unions, and in the first place the socialist activists - must play a leading role. We will fight for the trade unions to reassert themselves politically.

4. We fight for the socialists to unite in a new socialist party, with ample rights of tendency, which can become the leading political force in the fight for a re-born mass workers’ party, and within that re-born mass workers’ party once formed.

5. In the fight for independent working-class political representation, a central task is to make the trade unions assert themselves politically against the Blair government.

6. The last couple of years have seen a revival of real trade-unionism in Britain, by way of the election of new trade-union leaders who (with all their political

deficiencies) stand for collective working-class action to improve conditions rather than for unions making their way by offering “services” to individual members or “added value” to employers.

7. In the last few months this has found political reflection in the concerted action by the big trade unions at Labour Party conference and in the talk of founding a new Labour Representation Committee.

8. This is an important and welcome move, which we should strive to make the most of. One of our comrades has already taken the lead to secure the support of a major union for the LRC.

9. The actual moves by the trade union leaders are, however, extremely limited. Their stand against the Blair leadership at Labour Party conference deliberately sidestepped key questions, the Iraq war and trade-union rights. They have talked about a Labour Representation Committee, but not done anything yet.

10. All that is actually happening on the Labour Representation Committee front is movement by a former union general secretary, now voted out of office, to convene a conference in March. He has no definite backing from big unions. He has organised no broad mobilising committee. The political basis on which he is working is very weak, the tempo to which he is working is very slow.

11. We should be at that conference, supporting and urging forward all those trade unionists and Labour activists who want a more definite fight. On any reasonable assessment, however, it will be a limited affair. It is even possible that the whole business will peter out for the time being. If not, it will proceed slowly.

We should actively promote and encourage the creation of a broad mobilising committee and build for the conference in March. We should go to it with coherent and concrete proposals around which activists in the Labour Party and trade unions can organise.

12. On general principle, because of the very nature of the trade unions as catch-all organisations, and because of the limited politics of the new union leaders, we could never regard just urging on the unions and their bureaucracies as politically adequate. The best hope of real progress was and is by forming local rank-and-file LRCs which, by way of the animating activity of socialists within them, could build on the union leaders’ timid moves to start to create an autonomous new working-class political force. Local LRCs would also provide a vehicle for involving non-Labour Party affiliated unions.

13. In some areas we have tried to test the possibilities for such local rank-and-file LRCs. Some may be possible. But initial reactions are poor. Even limited local initiatives will be worthwhile, but on the evidence so far it would be utterly illusory to envisage a burgeoning national movement of rank-and-file LRCs.

Once a national conference/ coordinating committee has some kind of existence, the basis for arguing for the creation of local LRCs will be much clearer. As yet, it is difficult to see why local trade unionists should set up just another local talking shop that does not appear to be

linked in any way with a national agenda yet cannot function adequately on a purely local level.

14. The fundamental reason for this is the poor state of trade-union branches. The revival of real trade-unionism so far mainly takes the form of union members - individually, in their different homes - voting for new union leaders who stand for real trade-unionism. Only very episodically and patchily, as yet, does it take the form of any revival of workplace union organisation, union branch life, union rank and file groups, or industrial action. Not many union branch activists are confident and buoyant enough for broad new initiatives.

15. An additional factor is the passivity and demoralisation of the remnant constituency Labour Party left.

16. We have also discussed trying to form “LRC” caucuses within trade unions. We should pursue this. There may be valuable work to be done here. But here too it has to be said: any expectation of a snowballing mass movement any time soon is illusory.

17. We should continue to argue for the general “Labour Representation Committee” perspective, and to nurture, encourage and participate in every positive move in that direction.

18. We should not, however, be deceived into any idea that “LRC” work is the next big thing for our activity. For the foreseeable future, it is limited work, primarily fraction work. As far as we can foresee - though we should be ever on the alert and ready to respond - its development into something large lies the other side of a major revival of trade-union life at rank-and-file level, something which we cannot engineer at will. (Once it does develop, however, it can in its turn be a major lever in extending and deepening such a revival of rank-and-file trade-union life).

While in the early stages this work is of necessity going to involve only a few comrades in activity, nonetheless promoting the idea of an LRC should be part of the big political discussions that all our comrades engage in with their contacts, and all branches and trade union fractions should be discussing the implications of this project for their work and seeking out ways to promote the LRC within their broader activities.

19. Our strategy as working-class socialists ultimately depends on transforming, reviving and revolutionising the whole labour movement. However, we cannot and must not limit our tempo to that of the broad movement. In a period like the present, when the broad movement is developing only very slowly and hesitantly, our job is to combine patient work in the movement with boldness and energy in recruiting radical youth and building a cadre.

20. Important as the LRC work could be, we do not believe the process of unions reacting against the Blairite hijacking of the Labour Party will be neat, clear-cut, or as we would want. We cannot adopt one sweeping, generalised “line” for all the permutations we face in the flux around us. The signs are that there will be much fragmentation of what exists now before the movement can gather itself together coherently. We cannot respond as “inspectors-general of history”; saying that nothing

should move unless it accord to our strategic conception of the speedy replacement of Blairism by a trade-union-based working-class party. We should respond as militants fighting within the movement to shape and reshape it, and fighting to group enough revolutionary socialists to do this.

20. Considerable possibilities exist. There is a large milieu of radical youth, reflected in, for example, the anti-war demonstrations and the ‘new anti-capitalist’ mobilisations. It is amorphous, diffuse, and cannot quickly by any tactics, however deft, be condensed into a new mass working-class socialist force. Many of the young people involved are dubious of the idea of ‘socialism’ or sceptical about ‘politics’. Nevertheless, experience already with No Sweat shows that many of them can be drawn into working-class oriented campaigns. If we do our work right, and develop ways of relating to this new sort of milieu and new sort of radical culture, then we can recruit numbers large compared to our size.

21. France over recent years has shown how it is possible for a significant radicalisation, and significant possibilities for revolutionary organisations to strengthen themselves, to coexist over a period with a decline in the broad labour movement. Ultimately, in the long view, the revolutionary left cannot advance without advancing the broad labour movement. But there is no necessary exact parallel or synchronisation in short time-spans.

22. The young people we recruit or draw round us will in time, as we educate them, become central to the revival of the mass labour movement. Often in history it has happened before that the growth of a radical political movement among young people, and then the process of those radicals entering and becoming established in workplaces, has been essential to a rise or revival of trade unionism.

23. We have no rigid stages theory: ‘first recruit youth, then revolutionise the trade unions’. Actual developments will be more complicated. We simply observe that for now one of our main practical focuses should be on attracting, organising, and recruiting young people, primarily through No Sweat and kindred activities. We will assess events as they develop, without having rigid preordained schemes in our minds.

24. Our main practical focuses for the next period are therefore building No Sweat and kindred activities (which includes promoting No Sweat initiatives with People and Planet groups), developing alert and attractive AWL branches, and thus recruiting new young people to working-class socialism.

EC resolution on the anti-Bush protest of 20 November 2003

1. The Bush protest on 20 November was the largest workday demonstration for many years.
2. It reflects not so much a continuing ‘anti-war movement’ as the existence of a wide though diffuse mood of rejection from the left of Bush/Blair global neo-Thatcherism, disregard for the environment, and ‘globocop’ militarism.

3. This is the same mood as is reflected in the various ‘new anti-capitalist’ manifestations, and which we attempt to draw on and channel towards working-class politics with No Sweat.

4. Finding and developing contacts in the milieu of young people infected with this mood is central and essential for building and rejuvenating the AWL. It is also not easy, since the milieu does not exist in the form of an organised ‘movement’ where we can operate simply by ‘intervening’ in the appropriate meetings. We have to seize all the chances we can get.

5. Whatever about its organisers, the protest crowd was not an environment alien, hostile or unreceptive to us. It was in large part exactly the milieu where we must build. We got a good response. The paper sold well.

6. We gave the demonstration the front page of our paper in the run-up to it, and built a special page on our website about it. On the day, we ran stalls, sold a paper crafted for it (‘Bush no! US workers yes!’), and distributed leaflets for the No Sweat conference and for a meeting on the workers’ movement in Iraq with a speaker from the WCPI.

7. One of our comrades led a walkout of about 100 students from her school. Another played a big part in getting two and a half coachloads of students from her university (distant from London) to the protest. Yet another played a central role in organising a big local protest in a city outside London.

8. The shortcoming was that few of our London comrades turned up to the protest, though - with the protest running from 12 noon to after 8.30pm, and with the possibilities that many comrades have of flexitime, taking leave, etc. - almost no-one can have been prohibited from doing so by unavoidable work commitments. (We should note that many not-very-political people - in less tightly-managed jobs, to be sure - simply walked off the job to join the protest).

Even fewer comrades contacted our stalls or our prearranged distribution point for the new paper, near Trafalgar Square.

9. The problem this highlights is not just one of slack organisation.

It is at a different level. The lesson here is one emphasised in our October NC resolution on AWL branch-building: ‘We should educate our members in the idea that their first political job is to ‘radiate’ - to find contacts and points of political dialogue wherever they go’.

10. To ‘radiate’ in that way two things are as basic. We must pick up on those political events which stir normally-inactive people to action or interest. And we must offer to the people around us a model of political alertness and liveliness.

11. This was one of those political events that stir the usually inactive and inattentive. It was a great opportunity for our comrades to ‘hook’ people around them at work, in their neighbourhoods, among their friends, for political action or dialogue - to bring them to the demonstration and ‘show’ them the AWL in collective action, or at least to tell them about the protest the day after (and also tell them about the ideas we advocated there, how they were received, and so on).

12. Most of our comrades missed the opportunity. And that was not just to miss out. To our workmates, friends, neighbours who did go to the protest, or wish they’d gone, we can only have ‘radiated’ ourselves as snooty, scholastic, stand-offish, or just sour and burned out.

Unless, that is, we are so hunkered-down in our political

activity that we simply don't talk to ordinary people around us about politics, and regard our politics as a matter of occasional outings to prescribed small meetings with the cognoscenti.

13. Individual "excuses" - "tied up with the children", "urgent work deadlines", "too far to travel", "previous social engagement", whatever - are beside the point here. Even if in one or two individual cases they might be valid, they cannot explain the general inertia.

14. The problem here seems to be similar to the one that we have had with many No Sweat events and with many of the "new anti-capitalist" mobilisations (Genoa, Nice, Evian, ESF, etc). Those events have been enjoyable and attractive, and have drawn large crowds. They have been excellent opportunities to take not-so-political contacts along and give them an "easy" introduction to our activity. Yet they have not been used as such. Our comrades have often failed to attend themselves (presumably regarding these as "extra" activities), let alone bring along contacts.

15. Working-class socialism is not an idea to which one's duties can be discharged by regular attendance at our own meetings and routine trade-union committee and representative work, and which otherwise is a private matter. It is a world-view which animates all we do, which informs our attitudes on every question, which impels us to be advocates for it (sensible, sensitive advocates, but advocates) in every conversation we have - or it is nothing. "Our first political job is to 'radiate'..." Without that, all tactical and organisational discussions stand in mid-air.

16. The other thing this highlights is also indicated in the resolution on AWL branch-building. "Every branch meeting should include a 'political report' (current developments, and consequences for our activity)..." If all our branch meetings did that, and if the political report discussions paid due attention to the main themes of the paper, then no-one could have failed to turn up to the protest without some discussion beforehand. Everyone would at least have wondered: to whom was the big front-page headline, "Demonstrate against Bush", directed, and didn't it include ourselves? If branches fail to have such political report discussions, then, firstly, the paper cannot be an effective tool (because its sellers do not themselves think about and argue for what it says), and secondly, the branches cannot develop any sense of collective responsibility to the big political events around them. They cannot function as effective agencies for organising and recruiting.

17. Conclusion: we need a collective discussion, in the branches, on the centrality of "radiating" - and the reconceptualisation of who we are and what we do that it implies - and on the importance of "political report" discussions in those branches.

Minutes of discussion

"Respect" coalition

Martin introduced EC resolution.

Patrick: Should we oppose trade union branches sending resolution to 7 February convention? By doing that we may knacker the coalition before it starts.

Paul: Christine Blower chaired the 29 October Friends House meeting but has since written to the SA saying that she didn't see that as endorsing a new coalition. We need to pose an alternative to trade unionists.

Sacha: US comrades were sympathetic to voting Nader? Why?

Kate: It's right that we should not just say it's crap. It's also right that ordinary working-class people are not as credulous about Galloway as left activists. My motivations are not about a vast difference on practically what we do, but one of emphasis, a glass-half-empty or glass-half-full argument. We should test the possibilities for amendments on 25 January, argue for people to come there with us. I disagree with Martin on LRC. We never should have thought it would be a burgeoning mass movement. The LRC as an idea is an expression of our political thought-processes. It's important on an ideological level. And we have some influence over what happens with the LRC idea. We have to explain that "independent working-class representation" does not just mean an anti-Labour candidate, but a candidate representing independent working class interests. Focus on Galloway? It depends on the audience. You have to explain also that the SWP built up Galloway as a figure.

Pete: I want to make a case that the "Respect" coalition won't get far. It's taken a long time to put it together. The SWP constructed "Peace and Justice", then retreated. They've had a few rallies round Galloway. But they haven't managed to commit Serwotka, Crow, Blower, etc. The SWP special conference in January indicates some unease. Monbiot was interviewed last week and said the coalition would not work without the Greens on board. The SWP seems genuinely to have the idea that Galloway is looked to by millions.

One thing this indicates that we have not been doing our work very well in terms of getting our trade union contacts organised around our concepts of working-class political representation. We need to organise trade unionists round us on that basis for 7 February. I'm not sure we should go to 25 January. It could confuse things. The "Respect" coalition is what it is. We should not be arguing for it to be changed. The SWP do not understand the "popular front" question. We should educate around that.

Matt: What when SWP bring motions to trade union branches? On the 7 February conference, I put down an amendment in my union branch for independent workers' representation, and it got through. I don't think Martin is right about the public perception of Galloway. A lot of my students think he's a good bloke because "the Labour Party chucked him out for opposing the war". Martin's amendment? We should do any local council candidacies properly where we do them.

Mark S: The SWP will use the amendments option to batter the opposition on 25 January. We have a problem presenting our arguments for working-class representation unless we have a visible alternative project. So we should also argue e.g. about clause 4 or abortion rights.

In my trades council I got everyone who wasn't SWP or Outlook to vote against sending delegates to the People's Assembly. We can do the same for 25 January.

Martin: point of information - no indication that trade-union delegates will be sought for 25 January.

Mark: The same principle goes for 7 February.

Clive: There seems to be a generation gap on Galloway - younger people tend to support him, older people tend to think he's an idiot. And this bloc will clearly be about Galloway. The argument is about internationalism. Working-class representation? It is difficult to be concrete. But I think we can explain that it must at least be democratic. I think we should be prepared for this to have some life to it. But we will be proved right.

Bruce: amendments.

Mark S: amendment.

Gerry: We're all agreed that the coalition has no long-term future. But there's a difference about how much support in the short-term. I think it's quite likely that left trade unionists will keep some distance, in part for bad reasons, anti-politics or SWPophobia. I can't see what MAB could get out of joining the coalition. A lot of anti-war activists are non-voters, or distrust the SWP, or whatever. Galloway? Yes, it depends on the audience. I'm not happy with having Galloway as one of the three points. The other two points are positive. For the left, the 'break Galloway' will confirm their idea of our Galloway-phobia; for the wider world, people will have forgotten about Galloway's relations with Saddam etc. The coalition's support is going to be almost entirely on the basis that there is no alternative. We should make a propaganda for working-class candidates against Blair. How can we call for a default Labour vote? There is no left, it's all dominated by careerist shitbags. The Respect platform is to the left of Labour, even if we know it's a sham. 25 January and 7 February? Any democracy on 25 January will be very limited.

Bruce: The platform reads leftist. But is designed to blur. We can't stop this thing happening. We don't have an immediate big alternative. We have to use the opportunity to make basic propaganda, use the platform. But the document leaves things open which should be closed. We should say we cannot join the coalition. We gain from being seen to be excluded? The SWP may not exclude us, but rather by setting up a structure which we have no say in. We might be able e.g. to get Christine Blower to put her name to a statement. We should vote to go along to the conferences on our basis. It may be that we should walk out of the 25 January coalition. We have to make it clear that we have a bottom line. Para 18 - do we need to decide that now? How we vote in euro-elections? 'Break with Galloway' - we can explain that we want representatives with clean hands, trustworthy, etc.

Mark S: We should say that the trade union movement should have nothing to do with the 25 January event. The 7 February event? We should oppose any support at that event for the coalition. But it may just be a rally for the Respect coalition.

Mike R: On point 16 I want to support Mark S's amendment and oppose Bruce's. It would seem stupid to advocate trade union delegates attend the 25 January event and then walk out. Avoid the use of terms like 'cross-class'? How do we do that when arguing for independent working-class representation? A lot of leftists think this platform is socialist, because they have a vague idea of socialism.

John: I agree with Mark S's amendments about the two conferences. But we should think on our feet. Gerry is wrong about Galloway. Galloway is exposed on TV, and we can't take it up because the left will deride us? The lack of an obvious alternative is a difficulty. But we don't have it. I didn't think the LRC would be huge by now, but I did think it would move faster. I was gobsmacked when John McDonnell told me the LRC was a programme for 'the next generation', when he said that the March conference would not even discuss Labour Party structure. Yes, we should get involved. But it looks like our alternative to the Respect coalition is in fact propaganda.

Alison: We should not just go along to 25 January to have a shout. We should get amendments in from SA groups if we can. I agree with John about Galloway. If it weren't Galloway we might want to improve the platform, but we would have a different approach. We shouldn't leave denouncing Galloway to Ian Hislop. We should not pretend that we have an alternative big project. We can stand some candidates, but it will have costs for other work. The coalition? Galloway will be all over the publicity. But they may manage to get some better candidates. Should we treat them differently?

Sacha: Yes, it is hard to see why the MAB should join. But Galloway did say he was confident they would. Galloway? I agree with John. Cross-class? It's not exactly that the Arab bourgeoisies are running in the euro-elections.

Patrick: Even if we are seen as crazy on the Galloway issue, we still have to stand firm. It is a matter of principle. Also, ask why Galloway hasn't joined the SSP. Amendments? I disagree with Bruce. We should not build trade-union support for 25 January. 7 February has to be judged separately. We should look for any formula we can get Serwotka and Christine Blower in on. The 7 February conference: if no-one else raises it we should not take the initiative.

Martin: summed up.

Voting on amendments.

1. Bruce. Point 16, replace 4th para, 'It is to our advantage...' by:

"We should go to both 25 January and 7 February meetings arguing for something simple, clear and forward-looking, based around the three points and our general perspective of independent working-class representation. We should seek trade-union and other support for these events on this basis".

Defeated. For: 1 (Bruce). Against: many.

2. Mark S. Point 16. Add:

"Comrades in union branches or Trades Union Councils where the coalition is likely to be raised should put motions to their next union meetings opposing any support for 25 January or for the coalition by the conference of the trade union left on 7 February".

Carried. For: many. Against: 2 (Bruce, Martin).

3. Bruce: Point 16. Add. "We should seek signatories to a statement".

Carried. For: all.

4. Bruce: "If/ when our proposals are defeated, we should not take further part in the coalition. (This does not exclude interventions at meetings, etc)".

Carried. For: many. Against: 1 (Martin).

5. Bruce: refer back second para of point 18.

Defeated. For: 3 (Gerry, Bruce, Matt). Against: all others.

Resolution as amended: carried.

Minutes, matters arising

Clive: Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions? There's a website being set up. But WCPI are disputing that the IFTU is a genuine union organisation. I'm investigating. Also, there's been a split in WCPIraq.

Bruce: on question of Bush demonstration. There is a real problem in the organisation of people seeming ground-down, snobbish in relation to struggles around them, etc. We need to reflect on this a bit.

LRC movement

Cathy: Three questions. (1) Assessment. (2) Focusing the AWL for activity. (3) Broad perspectives.

We have a bit more information, we can make a sharper assessment. At present the March conference is being set up as a typical Labour left conference discussing "policy". We can try to shape it better, but we don't have much control.

Local LRCs? We are the only people likely to initiate them, and as far as we can see the possibilities are very limited. We should be clear about our estimate.

I think Kate's amendments defocus the assessment. The motion already says everything that can be said positively about intervening actively, etc.

The defocused assessment can send out a false message to the membership. It can lead to comrades becoming disoriented.

Kate says that we have not done enough in the way of deselecting MPs from within the Labour Party or mobilising the trade unions. If that's saying that we should take all the opportunities available, fine. But this is 2003, not 1998. The scope within the CLPs is much more limited.

The trade unions? The FBU focuses both what is new and what is old about the new trade-union leaders. At LP conference fringe Woodley spoke very strongly on the need for a TU fight within the LP. At the start of the FBU dispute Andy Gilchrist had spoken very strongly. It had sounded quite exciting. Then the FBU dispute... Then Woodley said "let no-one criticise Bro Gilchrist".

The left union bureaucrats talk a good fight and then close ranks.

If they were different then the LRC stuff would amount to much more already. Woodley would not have gone completely quiet on it as he has.

But things are as they are. And we have to tell the AWL membership the truth about it.

The worst of Kate's deletions to my mind is point 24.

Why delete a focus on No Sweat and branch-building?

We should not indicate to AWL members that the LRC movement is a default substitute for the Socialist Alliance.

Kate: I've proposed deletions not because I disagree. I don't think there will be a snowballing mass movement. Nobody thinks it. It's a straw man used in order to downgrade the importance of the LRC.

I don't think it's going to be a big activity. But I do think we have had a political perspective arguing for a LRC type movement, and now there's a little movement on it. Politically that is important.

It's about emphasis and the tone of our message.

I don't disagree with prioritising No Sweat. But to put a bit about prioritising it at the end of a motion about the LRC is to downgrade the LRC.

Different tempos? I think that's right. We have to understand that the labour movement always moves slowly. John McDonnell is wrong to say that it is a task for the next generation, but we should say it is wrong. There is an opportunity for us to have a strong influence on how this develops.

We should do more. We should have more left candidates to push in parliamentary selections. We should coordinate our LP work more.

Independent working-class representation means independence from the bourgeoisie not necessarily organisational separation from the Labour Party.

Pete: I have some sympathy with Kate's motion. We talk about the problem of thousands of trade unionists going with the "Respect" coalition, and then say there is little we can do about the LRC movement. It's not true that there is nothing we can do about elections.

In Nottingham lots of people are receptive to the general idea of organising for working-class representation. But it's hard to get moving because some of our comrades are not geared up to talk about politics.

We should start talking to trade unionists about independent working-class candidates in the next general election.

Duncan: I agree with Pete. I had thought things were moving faster on the LRC. So I think the assessment in the EC motion is right.
There's a problem about posing No Sweat as the answer to everything.

Clive: I was relieved by the SA beginning to break up. The idea of the LRC as an alternative was very attractive. But it was very short-sighted.
The No Sweat stuff is about a milieu to operate in.

Martin: Not present ourselves as just advocates of a "broad project", in the way the LCR presents themselves as advocates of a "new mass anti-capitalist party". Problem is not such future projects are wrong, but that we should present ourselves or "substitute for" a future perspective as yet intangible. Comrades have been saying to me maybe we should go into LP now that the Socialist Alliance is declining. We should tell them that's wrong.

John: Yes, we should go out and push. But the fact is that the March conference does not look good. We can't build everything round it. We should write propaganda about the LRC? We should. We have done. But we also make assessments. We have learned things. Woodley has gone quiet and appointed a Blairite as TGWU political officer. TGWU has not backed Rix's LRC moves. Rix's draft statement for March is awful. No committee has been set up for the March conference. We argued against John McDonnell when he said it was a matter for "the next generation", but we can't decide what he does.

Gerry: There has been a change. This LRC stuff has been going downhill in recent months. The defeat of the firefighters has had an effect. We may not have thought the LRC would become huge immediately, but we did think it would move a bit faster. Obviously we fight to go forward as much as possible. The trade union bureaucrats did not even make a fight about the foundation hospitals vote in Parliament. We have not given up on the idea of independent working-class representation. We should push for the LRC as much as possible.
We should gear up using No Sweat in trade unions.

Patrick: It is nuances. There's no evidence for challenging the assessment. But there is a problem of signals. The assessment does play down the LRC work. We do need to gear people to some urgency on the political necessity on the issue of working-class representation.

Kate: More optimistic? I don't know. We had a detailed discussion about the "Respect" coalition. But the EC text lacks a positive edge about what we do. We should be advocating an LRC even if the general secretaries were not doing so at all. True, at last NC I was expecting someone to make some sort of announcement at national level about an LRC being launched. Without that it's hard to move things locally. But it's not clear that there has been a political retreat by the trade union leaders. I was never sure Woodley was on for it. At LP conference the left trade union leaders dropped talk of the LRC in order to bring in Prentis. That was stupid. We should argue against it.

Cathy: Signals? The motion doesn't say that we shouldn't try on the LRC, or it's bound to fail, or anything like that. It says independent working-class representation is

politically central, and that the talk of an LRC is very positive. It does not rubbish the idea. It has practical proposals. This should be fraction work driven by the key trade union comrades.

But then the motion says that the NC should have a sober assessment. Comrades can then judge how to explain it to the wider membership. But we should have a clear assessment for ourselves.

Kate asks: who thinks it'll be a snowball movement? Comrades here have said that they thought a few months ago it might be.

To explain a focus on No Sweat is to give the AWL a direction about what we should be doing. It still requires a big cultural shift to turn the AWL membership to that activity.

Kate's amendments

Amendment to 4:

Add:

"Electoral campaigns in opposition to Blair will not be the defining feature of a new socialist party. It is still possible that a new united socialist organisation would, depending on the political situation, conduct its electoral politics by entry tactics in the Labour Party or by supporting a variety of independent working-class candidates".

Defeated, 5 for, 8 against.

Amendment to 10:

Delete and replace by:

"Progress on the Labour Representation Committee front is painfully slow. Although there was a relatively high degree of interest from left Labour Constituency Party activists, MPs and trade unionists over the summer, so far things have not progressed much further than the proposed conference in March".

Defeated 1 for, others against.

Amendment to 11:

Delete first para: "We should be at that conference.... proceed slowly".

Defeated 2 for, others against.

Amendment to 16:

Delete last sentence: "But here too.... is illusory".

Defeated 2 for, others against, 2 abst.

Amendment to delete 24:

Defeated 2 for, others against, 3 abst.

Resolution: all for.

Noted that comrades should report back on this resolution to branches and fractions in a way that makes clear that the assessment included should not discourage, downgrade or hinder mobilisation for feasible activities to push forward the LRC movement.

AWL conference

Decided: 17-18 April or 8-9 May, preferably 8-9 May.

Organisers' school

Martin reported briefly.

Attendance

Present: Kate, John, Clive, Alison, Gerry, Matt, Jim, Paul, Sacha, Jean, Sean, Duncan, Patrick, Cathy, Pete, Bruce, Mark S, Martin plus Mike R, Daniel R
Apols: Jill, Maria, Mick, Chris H, Mark O (plus Sean for afternoon - ill).

NATIONAL COMMITTEE

25/10/03

A. The following motion on AWL branch-building was carried.

- 1) We need to turn the AWL more towards face-to-face political activity.
- 2) Events like the European Social Forum and the Iraq war protests show the development of a new milieu of radicalised young people.
- 3) The limited revival of trade unionism is important, not so much because it will let anyone quickly recruit large numbers of established trade unionists to revolutionary Marxist activism, as for the possibilities it gives of expanding our trade union work and for convincing radicals that an orientation to the working class and the labour movement makes sense.
- 4) Our rate of recruitment since our conference in March has been much slower than the aim we set ourselves. The revolutionary left in general has not recruited enormously. In part this reflects problems built in to the nature of the new radicalisation.
- 5) Because of the perceived weakness of the workers' movement, and because of the fact that socialist political culture has to be rebuilt from the ground up following the collapse of Stalinism, the radicalisation is notably diffuse, atomised, multifarious. It is not the case, as it would have been in the 1960s or '70s, that any serious young radical wanting to get serious will immediately see the question they face as one of which strand of organised worker-socialist-oriented activism to adhere to. They see a vaster and more bewildering set of questions. They cannot be addressed just by finding this or that set of meetings and intervening to debate other left currents.
- 6) The Iraq protests were massive. Many young people made political advances during the mobilisations. But relatively few of them were immediately recruitable to the Marxist left. There was no large left-wing youth movement (of the type that the Labour youth movement, or youth CND, once were) in which they could become active on a variety of levels and discuss and learn at their own pace. They grew up in a time of low working-class industrial struggle. They are missing the central lesson that could turn them into Marxists: the potential of

working-class struggle. They can learn. But it requires special efforts.

7) Structural problems may make it impossible to quickly condense the new radicalisation into a big worker-socialist party. They do not stop us making a lot more young recruits - so long as we can orient and activate ourselves more appropriately.

8) No Sweat provides an "easy" entry into politics for young people radicalised in the recent protests. The main message that involvement with No Sweat can bring to them is precisely the central role of the working class. No Sweat therefore provides an excellent means by which to draw in young people without too many political preconditions and work and discuss with them.

9) Branches should build No Sweat groups as usually their main collective, public activity. All comrades can and should be actively involved in this at one level or another. It should involve not only discussion meetings and motions to trade-union branches, but regular public campaigning and protest activity of a sort accessible to young radicals without any great political preconditions.

10) To consolidate some of the most serious young people attracted to such No Sweat groups as committed No Sweat activists, and recruit a significant number of them to the AWL, it is necessary that the AWL branches operate as alert, active, cohesive collectives, with consistent public activities accessible to new recruits (paper sales, industrial bulletin distributions, etc).

11) Every branch meeting should include a "political report" (current developments, and consequences for our activity) and "business" (including some accounting for decisions of the last meeting, and activities since that meeting) as indispensable core items. Even open meetings primarily devoted to discussion or debate on some less-immediate question should include short "current-politics" and "business" sessions.

12) Every branch must elect an organiser with whom the buck stops; every NC member who is not a branch organiser must take responsibility for helping their local branch organiser. But the organisation and monitoring of comrades' activity should be done primarily through branch meetings, thus developing a sense of collective responsibility. It should not be primarily a personal transaction between branch organisers and individual members.

13) For their public or open meetings branches should look to staging debates with other groups, and developing new comrades as speakers, rather than exclusively relying on the same circle of established AWL speakers delivering setpiece speeches.

14) We should use the new No Sweat pamphlet for basic political discussions with young contacts. We should publish a new basic "We Stand for Workers' Liberty" pamphlet, oriented to young people who want to check us out.

15) Our literature has to include debate with the other avowedly-Marxist currents. Our members and sympathisers cannot act as a coherent force without some

flow of written explanation of what we propose as distinct from (and it is sometimes very distinct from) other currents on the left; new people are not going to join us just on the basis of activism, without checking out how our ideas compare with those other left currents. We must also find ways to talk with young radicals who are not familiar with the points of reference we share with other avowedly-Marxist currents, and work with them without lecturing and ultimatums. It is a difficult combination. We have to train ourselves to be able both to discuss patiently and accessibly with new young radicals who may have no idea what the word "socialism" means, and to argue our ideas boldly against the SWP, for example, in the many arenas where we will meet them (and, often, the young radicals).

16) No amount of literature-production, or general campaigning, or even organisation of meetings, will bring recruits unless we are also geared up to do the work of face-to-face discussion with interested contacts. Branches should focus their "contact work" on organising their activity, and training their comrades, to make the winning of new contacts a central concern in all activity. We should educate our members in the idea that their first political job is to 'radiate' - to find contacts and points of political dialogue wherever they go. Every activity (stall, participation in a protest or meeting) should be approached and audited in the expectation of getting new contacts from it.

17) Of course, much activity involves "ancillary" work with small committees and so on, where few new contacts can be gained. Of course, we should not discard such work. But if it squeezes out broader activity, then the means has consumed the end.

18) We should see "contacts" not just as those people who already more or less agree with us, but as anyone willing to discuss with us seriously about 'big politics'. Every person we come across in political activity should be approached with a view to finding some area of common interest from which we can develop common activities and discussions.

19) Each branch should also maintain, and keep constantly updated, a large list of people regularly emailed or mailed about meetings and activities, and a smaller list of people regularly phoned to discuss what's going on politically and offer invitations to upcoming meetings and activities. (This regular phoning-round is most efficiently done as an assigned priority of one particular branch member). The administrative side of contact work must however be seen as secondary and ancillary to the political side, the primary means of which is face-to-face discussions.

20) Email is a very valuable means of communicating information quickly, cheaply and easily to those who want to get that information. All comrades should read their email and use email to send reports and information. But email is not a means of organising. It cannot be a substitute for face-to-face talking (or even for the fallback, phone-to-phone talking).

21) Branches should therefore develop plans based on the following points:

- a) Building a local No Sweat group as a collective, public, accessible, consistent activity. Making sure that every comrade is involved in this activity in one way or another.
- b) Holding regular branch meetings, with "political report" and "business" sessions.
- c) Holding monthly public or open meetings.
- d) Regular discussions of contact work centred around (i) gaining new contacts from activities; (ii) purposeful discussion with contacts interested enough to discuss. Branches should also organise appropriate backup in the way of email lists, mailing lists, and regular phone-rounds.
- e) Doing regular public stalls or sales, and using petitions on them. Making sure that every comrade is involved in this activity in one way or another.
- f) Getting out more. The people we need to recruit are generally not to be found in our usual round of meetings.

B. The following student perspectives document was discussed and remitted to the EC for amendment.

Perspectives for AWL student work

Introduction

The student movement is still in flux. Last year's anti-war movement resulted in a widespread politicization and radicalization in most universities and colleges, but with the end of the war this upsurge of activity has ebbed. The general atmosphere is more open to left-wing ideas than for some time - but the new layer of activists has not, by and large, fed through into the official structures of the student movement. NUS and most student unions are still run by a thin layer of officers quite hostile to political student unionism and with no relationship to the broad left.

Most of the Labour Students/"independent" milieu that dominates the official structures is not as blatantly reactionary as its immediate historical predecessors; under pressure from various directions, the NUS leaders have for instance adopted leftish positions on education funding and Iraq (the former after being gradually pushed back by us within the NUS structures; the latter with a nervous eye on the revolt from below). Fundamentally, however, they remain what they always have always been, a barrier to creating a political, left-wing, militant student movement.

That they have not been removed or forced to concede more is at least part a result of the fact that the broad left in the student movement has been disorganized to the point of non-existence. The Campaign for Free Education, which we helped found as an effective rank-and-file campaign against the student movement's defeatist leaders, has for the last two years functioned as little more than a political brand. With the Government's proposal for top-up fees set to make education funding a central issue again, we have a good opportunity to rebuild the CFE as a campaigning force.

CFE and NUS

According to the recent report by Barclays, student debt is set to double, rising to £34,000 by 2010. This is in large part a result of the proposals contained in the

Government's White Paper – a very small, means-tested maintenance grant to sugar the pill of allowing universities to set their own fees up to a limit of £3,000. Clearly, there is potential for education funding to become the central issue that it was when fees were first introduced.

1) Unlike in 1997-8, official NUS policy is now for free education (largely as a result of our work) – but there is no indication that the NUS leaders have any intention of fighting for it. In such a situation, it makes sense to rebuild CFE as the “broad group” through which we intervene in NUS and student unions. Because they are unwilling to raise any demands which imply a radical challenge to the Government's overall pro-business agenda, the NUS leaders limit themselves to opposing the latest Government attack (e.g. the main slogan for the October 26th NUS demo is “Stop top-up fees”, with no mention of any broader policies). CFE's political niche should be to give political content to the now universally popular slogan of “free education” by organising a high profile campaign around demands that suggest a radically different set of priorities: against all methods of paying for education; a living grant for every student; making capitalism pay for the services we need, no matter how much it costs.

We can do this by: winning the maximum possible student and labour movement support for the free education statement launched at the recent CFE steering committee; official launching it at a high profile public event this term; using the “Alternative White Paper” as a briefing document and a publicity stunt to win the maximum possible publicity for the CFE; organising a distinct free education contingent on the NUS demo, with our own banner, placards and a special broadsheet, plus a meeting with a high profile speaker at the end of the demo.

2) We should use the CFE to group as many of the best student officers and activists together, organising a serious drive to win affiliations and making sure we get everyone we can to the Steering Committee. This will also require regular faxes, a regularly updated website etc. We should begin planning now for a second term discussion event to both as a sifting mechanism and a focus before next year's NUS Conference.

3) We should capitalize on our various international links by a) producing a briefing on the struggle around education internationally and b) organising a speaker tour with an international education speaker and one of our comrades, if not this term then next.

4) As well as a serious drive to win trade union affiliations to the CFE, we need to attempt to establish a sustained relationship with education trade unions, both so that we have a better idea of their struggles and so that their policies on education funding are not automatically informed by the NUS leadership (at the moment, for instance, the AUT, generally a left-leaning union, is in favour of a graduate tax). We can begin by using the free education statement to approach trade unions and union branches and making sure that we invite trade union and labour movement speakers to major CFE events.

No Sweat

The basic task is to establish a high profile and ongoing campaigning process for No Sweat in the student movement. In the first instance, we should work to establish local groups, with regular meetings in universities, colleges and schools where we have members, close contacts or interested parties. We can begin at the start of term by showing the USAS video at public meetings and move on to establish local campaigning initiatives, whether by taking up ready-made No Sweat campaigns (e.g. Mexico or Iraq solidarity) or reacting to local issues (e.g. production of university merchandise, e.g. in Oxford, Durham, Sheffield, or local workers' disputes).

Whether or not they are directly involved in No Sweat, getting contacts to the No Sweat conference this November should be a top priority. We also need to work hard to win the maximum possible affiliations/financial support for the campaign from student unions, campaigning groups etc.

We should immediately develop our own e-mail list and section on the No Sweat website and consider setting up a student No Sweat coalition. As a precursor to this, we need to approach local groups such as People & Planet about No Sweat; attempt to get No Sweat sessions at People & Planet events through our presence in NUS; make sure that we have a proper presence at these events; and attempt to get our members onto P&P's guiding bodies.

NUS Liberation Campaigns

Rather than standing a candidate for National Women's Officer for the sake of it, we need to try to develop campaigning initiatives that can group the best Women's Campaign activists around us again. The Student Committee should quickly develop plans for running some sort of international-focused women's campaign so that we can re-establish a profile. We should, however, take the decision that we will stand a candidate for Women's Officer.

With regards to the LGB Campaign, we should simply a) try to organise some meetings/discussion around Radical Chains in Manchester and other areas where we have LGB Campaign contacts and b) contact LGB groups offering speakers on No Sweat/anti-capitalism/Radical Chains in order to see who we can find. The underlying approach must be to find a layer of activists in these milieux, not simply relate to their official structures mechanically.

Further Education

Given that we do not have any FE students, the only way to establish FE work of any sort is regular sales outside colleges using No Sweat, Bolshy, petitions etc. If most branches pick one local college to do a stall at every fortnight, it will undoubtedly turn up a reasonable number of contacts quite quickly. The only thing to do is – do it.

Building the group

Every aspect of the group's work will be both more difficult and in vain if we do not recruit and retain new

members. To be effective, we need to restore norms concerning attendance at events, contact with the organisers and leading committees of the group and education. Sacha will circulate a 'Being a revolutionary in the student movement' document – every comrade should discuss this and the constitution in their branch and with the student committee and provide feedback.

There is also an urgent need to create a culture where recruitment is the norm. It would be pointless to set targets, but it is worth reiterating that, as a fraction, we have a large number of contacts and can grow extremely quickly if we put in the work.

C. The National Committee received a further report on the Labour Representation Committee work (see last NC minutes) and decided to put this matter on the agenda again for its 14 December meeting.

D. The National Committee discussed the background to the ESF, notably the "A to Z of the new capitalism" document available on our website.

NATIONAL COMMITTEE

28/09/03

Summary of decisions:

- On Iraq: while saying "end the occupation", we should focus on building solidarity with the re-emerging workers' movement in Iraq. The immediate available focus is support for the Unemployed Union of Iraq, but we want to avoid being boxed into exclusive ties with the UUI and the Worker-communist Party of Iraq. The EC will investigate getting a trade union campaign for solidarity with Iraqi workers launched, using the policy passed by the PCS trade union on our proposal.

- On the Labour Representation Committee: we make a major turn towards building the Labour Representation Committee movement. This will involve efforts at national level, but we should also take the initiative locally to set up local rank and file Labour Representation Committees.

- International Workers' Liberty conference: in Paris, 10 November. A draft international platform for debate at that conference is being circulated inside the AWL for discussion and finalisation. [This text, and amendments to it from the meeting, are now available on the AWL website].

- European Social Forum and No Sweat.

* Build local No Sweat groups and activities which will enable us to draw in some of the very large number of people interested - and to recruit young people to the AWL.

* A No Sweat delegation is currently in Mexico. Invite someone from the delegation to speak in your area when they return.

* Raise No Sweat in trade union branches. (Four national unions, and the Scottish TUC, already back it).

* Sell the new No Sweat pamphlet. Get Trades Councils, for example, to agree to take a bulk order and mail copies to all affiliated union branches, with an offer to those branches of a speaker from No Sweat.

* No Sweat national conference in Durham on 29

November. (Durham chosen because there is a large and lively group of students there, not AWL, who are active in No Sweat campaigns).

* The European Social Forum on 12 to 16 November.

Given it is in Paris, every AWL member should attend, at least for part of it. Use the event to get new contacts; also use it to bring along and develop already-existing contacts.

- Socialist Alliance. Agreed:

A. We continue activity in the SA on a reduced level.

B. In the SA opposition we argue for the Network/ISA platform. We seek to gain signatories to it. We are open to amendments in that basic framework, but we are against trying to negotiate a platform on the basis of a form of words broad enough to be acceptable to the whole SA opposition menagerie. We are also for a broad united campaign for democracy in the SA.

Remitted for further written discussion among the NC: the following policy

C. "We are for a new alliance of socialists. As against the idea that the basic task now is to redress the existing Socialist Alliance, or the idea that the only thing now is for the various left groups to go off and do their own various things, we argue for a new initiative to unite the activist left. We do not think that is going to happen, practically, any time soon, because of the attitude of groups such as the SP, but we propose it as the AWL's general perspective for how the relations of the various activist left groups should be organised. We seek to regroup socialists around this perspective and the AWL. It means:

i. Unity on a democratic basis.

ii. Collaboration where there is agreement, democratic debate where there is disagreement.

iii. Orientation to working-class representation and to constructive engagement with initiatives like the Labour Representation Committee, while not excluding independent anti-Labour working-class candidacies".

[This policy was subsequently endorsed by the EC after an email canvass of the NC].

VOICEISTS AND REALISTS.

By Martin Thomas 9 July 2003.

Reduced to hard, clear-cut, practical disputes, our current differences on independent socialist electoral activity are small. On that level, the divergence between "Voiceists" like myself (those who agree with the general line of the article, "A Workers' Voice in Politics", by John and Sean), and the "Realists" (as in the "Case for Revolutionary Realism" article) are tactical detail.

But the debate is useful on two levels. First, the very fact of focusing more attention on what we are doing in the unions as regards electoral politics can help to sharpen our act there. Second, there are important theoretical issues, highlighted, to my mind, by some of the stranger flights of the "Realist" camp.

First: what' s not in dispute.

1. We campaign for the unions to assert themselves politically within the Labour structures. This has been stressed in all we have written on the subject since 1998.
2. The rise of a new generation of feistier trade union leaders makes major new openings for that campaign. "Voiceists" were agitating about this in our paper long ago. (See, for example, an editorial by Sean in Solidarity last August, and one by me in Solidarity of 11 October 2002).
3. Our trade union work should be sharper, better organised.
4. We support running independent socialist and labour-representation electoral challenges to New Labour - serious, properly-organised ones of course, not toy-town token affairs. According to repeated declarations by the "Realists", this is not in dispute either.
5. The Socialist Alliance is going down the spout. "Voiceists" have made the indictments of the "new turn" of the Alliance; meanwhile, the "Realists" have not stated any opposition to the idea that we should not simply walk away from the Alliance, but seek to rally as much as possible from the mess.
6. Many motions on union political funds from the SWP and their allies within the SA are unsatisfactory. Some motion texts that were OK two years ago (in the FBU in 2001, for example), because in the context then their obvious interpretation related to independent working-class candidates, are now more dubious because in some contexts their obvious interpretation may be union support for George Galloway, Plaid Cymru, Greens or suchlike.
- Again, "Voiceists" made this point some time ago. See, for example, an article by me in Solidarity of 13 September 2002.
7. We should keep an eye on what' s happening in CLPs, and consider local activity here and there where there is life. (Every conference resolution of ours on electoral politics since 1999 has had written into it - by me - a clause saying that all AWL members should hold Labour Party membership cards if not specifically barred. Why? To keep open the option of CLP activity).
8. We should not make a major turn back into CLPs now. So the "Realists" say; and we "Voiceists" agree.
9. On one level, it is not even in dispute that we should seek union funding for independent socialist and labour-representation candidates. The "Realists" argue not

against such funding altogether, but about how it should be done.

On one level, then, the dispute comes down to one about methods and tactics of union funding for independent socialist and labour-representation candidates.

We "Voiceists" say that the AWL should back union rule changes to allow such funding. We should deal with the inadequacies of the SWP-type motions by putting our own motions or amending the SWP-type motions. If we can' t get our own motions onto the agenda, or our amendments fail, then we decide case-by-case how we vote on the SWP-type motions.

The "Realists" say that we should oppose all such rule changes.

On the face of it, the "Realist" position is odd. They want us to defend the existing union rules banning union money for non-Labour candidates. Defend them hotly, indeed. It is not just that they consider it inopportune, or a low priority, to push rule-change motions (as it may be in some unions at some times). They are very agitated about the danger of the unions adopting such rule-changes. They want us to fight against them at union conferences.

If the rule-changers win at union conference, they want us to campaign to get them overturned by a ballot of the whole union membership.

Yet... those same rules they defend so militantly, they also want to break!

Yes, branches should break the rule and give money to non-Labour candidates where they have "solid support".

They explain the contradiction by saying that it would be "too easy" to give money to non-Labour candidates if it were not that we have to break a rule in order to do it.

I think the "Realists" have got themselves into this strange (and hardly "realistic"!) contortion because their ideas are an unclarified mix of the analysis we have all developed over the last five years with an emotional reaction against it.

Before going into the differences, I' ll record two other points of agreement.

1. I think we should push motions in the unions expounding the basic principle of workers' representation, arguing for funds to non-Labour candidates in that context and not as a "shopping-around" exercise, and linking it with a fight to make the unions assert themselves in Labour structures, etc. Often in trade-union practice, however, we have to choose between putting a motion on one point or on another. Or we have to choose between two motions, both of which we would ideally support. In such situations I' d say generally we should give priority to motions to make the unions assert themselves in Labour structures. Not for any grand strategic reason, but because it is easier to give such motions barbs in the way of calling the union leaders to account.

2. I think the "Realists" are probably right in their conclusion (if not in their argument) about the inadvisability of the FBU standing candidates in the council elections this year. Standing on a very limited political platform, they would have got many fewer people voting for them than supported the FBU in its pay dispute, and so probably weakened rather than strengthened the FBU in that dispute.

The differences? First, there is the difference of analysis. The "Voiceists" say Blair has changed the Labour Party fundamentally. It remains a bourgeois workers' party, but a very different sort of "bourgeois workers' party" from old Labour. Rule changes have stifled rank-and-file input. A new, weighty, thoroughly bourgeois "party within a party" now sits on top of the structure.

Evidence? Read our literature since 1997. Or books like Dave Osler's "Labour Party plc".

The CLPs have lost life. A recent CLPD bulletin - written by people dedicated to remaining within the Labour Party, not by "sectarians" - described the active membership as made up of two main groups. Elderly people who have been in the Labour Party all their lives, who don't like Blairism, but who feel too old to make a new start; and young careerists.

Trade-union delegates? "As rare as hen's teeth", says the report. There are local exceptions. There may be a revival in the CLPs. We should keep tabs.

But that is the situation now, and it is not one which we can change at will.

The old Marxist tactic towards the Labour Party depended not only the Labour Party being a "bourgeois workers' party" in general, but, on the contrary, on it being a very special and unusual sort of "bourgeois workers' party".

It depended on the Labour Party being a sort of "general federation of the working class", with a great deal of open space for socialists to operate within it as a public faction using only mild precautions. That has changed.

The Labour Party is now a much more usual sort of "bourgeois workers' party". In fact, it has swung over to the opposite pole, being less open than for example the French Socialist Party, or German Social Democratic Party, or probably even the French Communist Party. Electoral tactics like those used by the Trotskyists in France have become relevant here.

The "Realists" used to agree. Now they say that the Labour Party has not changed much. The rule changes are only of "tenth-rate" importance, only an "alibi", etc.

Evidence? They say, with the air of people revealing some previously-unnoticed sensation, that the Labour Party remains a bourgeois workers' party and that the Blairites have not completely cut the trade-union link as some of them said in 1997 they would.

Doh! We had noticed! What we had also noticed is that the fact of the "link" remaining (in some form) does not mean things are better than we thought they would be. They are worse.

In 1997 the Blairites thought that union demands to have some "Labour" measures introduced, after the 18 years of Tory rule, might be a problem.

Rather than wait for that problem to hit them, maybe, they thought, they should go out to meet it. Provoke a showdown with the unions quickly, while the new Blair government still had large popular credit, and use that as an occasion for breaking the link and pre-empting future problems.

If they had done that, some union leaderships would have remained electorally aligned with New Labour regardless. But others would have reacted. By now we would have some sort of socialistic party to the left of New Labour, sponsored or supported by at least a minority of unions.

In fact the unions were undemanding. The "link" remained unbroken, not because the Blairites shifted trajectory to stay in line with the unions, but because the unions went along with the Blairites.

Now the beginnings of a union revolt face a Blairite machine with six years of consolidating itself, "bedding down" new rules, and shaping the party in its own image behind it.

The "link" remains but has been fundamentally transformed. Before, any issue of wide working-class concern which gained the attention of a halfway determined group of activists could be got onto the Labour conference agenda. Once it was there, the union delegations were more or less bound to vote on it according to union policy. When conference passed a policy, the party leadership could defy it, but not with the nonchalance of today's Blairites. When the 1960 Labour Party conference voted for unilateral nuclear disarmament, Gaitskell didn't just say: "Oh, conference doesn't decide policy", as Blair does. He had to "fight, fight and fight again".

Now a large part of the "link" is transacted behind closed doors. The level of rank-and-file control over the "link" is radically reduced. The "link" actually functions as a way to tie the unions to a policy worked out with almost no union input.

The unions as a body could still destabilise New Labour if they wished? They certainly could. This again is not a fact the "Realists" have suddenly brought to light. "Voiceists" have been commenting on it, and using it as a lever to urge trade-unionists to press their union leaders, for a long time.

However useful projections about "what if the unions decided to fight?" may be for agitation, they do not tell us what to do now, when the unions are as they are, and will not become otherwise just by us wishing for it. On exactly the same level of "what if", the unions could, if they had the will, decide tomorrow to disaffiliate from New Labour en bloc and set up a new party. If we're going for "what if", indeed, that's a cleaner, brisker, better "what if".

"What if" is not a substitute for policy. We fight for the unions to assert themselves in the Labour structures, not because a "what if" exercise has revealed to us that this exercise could (with different unions, in a different situation...) hypothetically solve all problems, but in order best to mobilise workers on a rank-and-file basis.

The "Realists'" writings are full of rather grand claims to know and represent what the working class - the real working class, the silent masses - really think, as against the despised "sectarians" and activist minorities. The gist is that the real working class, out there, remains loyal to Labour. Guided by a "militant revolutionary" outlook, they, unlike the "middle-class radicals", never "surrender any ground". They "stay put".

They stay with the Labour Party.

This seems unlikely. Yes, lots of workers still vote Labour. Inertia, nostalgia, lack of alternative, lack of confidence in new alternatives where they do exist, lesser-evilism, are all factors there. We can be sure that if Blair had carried through an open and clear break with the unions after 1997, there would still be millions of workers voting for New Labour, or for a new merged Blairite/Lib-Dem party.

We know that masses of former Labour voters abstained in 2001. We know that in that general election

most of the remaining Labour-left activists - unless they lived in unusual constituencies like Jeremy Corbyn's Islington North or Christine Shawcroft's Meriden - would tell us: "No, of course I won't go on the doorstep in my constituency to urge workers to vote New Labour". They would go off to the unusual constituencies to help.

I don't know the mind of the silent majority any more than I think the "Realists" do. What I do know is that my experience of canvassing in recent years, and my discussions with lots of comrades about the mood in their workplaces, suggest a rather different picture of working-class opinion.

Even in the 1980s you knew that class-conscious workers would almost always respond on the doorstep by saying: "Of course we vote Labour". (Then you might get criticism, expression of dissatisfaction, and so on). In 2001 they did not. Lots said: "I've always voted Labour. But not this lot! They're just Tories" Some of those disgusted old-Labour voters will have voted Labour, after all, in the end. On the polling booth in 2001, I had dozens of people saying to me that they would vote Socialist Alliance "next time". Now that the SWP has fouled things up, they won't; but that is because of the SWP, not because those working-class voters are unshakably loyal to Labour.

Other points: There's a big struggle already on to "reclaim the Party", and the main thing is to get inside it? Not quite. Of course we should be "inside" whatever's going on. That is not in dispute. The "Realists" don't propose anything additional, in the way of participation in the "reclaim the Party" effort, to what the "Voiceists" have already proposed.

We should urge the bureaucrats to act; but we shouldn't trust them. We shouldn't give them credit in advance by considering their promises to be as good as an actual struggle. Talk from union leaders about "reclaiming the Party" is not the same as action. I think some action will come of the talk this time (partly because I think the union leaders know as well as we do that the "Realists" are wrong about the Labour Party not having changed too much: they know that the rule changes are more than "tenth-rate" and they've been shut out!) But how much? I don't know. We don't know.

We don't forget that, in the current structures, it is hard to call them to account on their promises of a struggle. We don't forget that none of the "new" union leaders has called to account their union's Labour NEC reps who backed the Government on the Iraq war against union policy. We don't forget that key "new" union leaders like Billy Hayes of the CWU, and allies of theirs like Dave Prentis of Unison, took pains to defeat "reclaim the Labour Party" motions at their union conferences this year - while telling the members that if they left it to the leaders, and did not tie their hands with inconvenient motions, the leaders would do the business and "reclaim the party" for them.

One of the most worrying things to my mind about our current debate is the strange "historical revisionism" of the "Realists" as regards union leaders like Tony Woodley. No, they tell us know, what they themselves used to say and write about Woodley being a bureaucrat in the car industry was unfair.

He's all right. The "Realists" were even telling us to "defend Billy Hayes" only days before that same Hayes

secured the defeat of the "reclaim the Labour Party" motion at CWU conference!

If the big struggle were already on, in any case, our emphasis should be not just on enthusing about it, or even on this or that scheme for union control, but on the politics of it.

All the business about union rule changes is just a concoction of "the sectarians"? It is not. It is an authentic product of working-class discontent with Blairism. (Otherwise why would the "Realists" be so agitated about the danger of rule changes actually being adopted by some unions?) Of course the SWP and others have tried to seize on the discontent and shape it their way. What's wrong with that is not the fact of them trying to do it, but the politics with which they do so. The answer is for us to try to seize on it - with better politics.

"Sectarian" is hardly an adequate description of the SWP in its new popular-frontist mode. "Opportunist" seems more the word.

To trade-unionists it seems nonsensical and contradictory to combine a union fight within Labour structures with union support for non-Labour candidates.

So the "Realists" say. Why? Both tactics serve the same aim: independent working-class representation. They are not contradictory in fact. And the available evidence is that to most activists they don't seem contradictory, either.

ASLEF delegates saw no contradiction in supporting Mick Rix's line about "reclaiming the Labour Party" and supporting a non-Labour candidate for London Mayor. It's a problem from our point of view that the non-Labour candidate they supported is Livingstone. But no delegate found the policy incomprehensibly contradictory.

At the RMT conference Bob Crow presented his policy as combining union affiliation to the Labour Party (written into the RMT rulebook, where previously it was not included) with support for left-wing non-Labour candidates. Actually it looks as if Crow, or the thinkers behind him like Pat Sikorski, are trying to engineer disaffiliation from the Labour Party by a soft-sell tactic. But what they put forward as a soft-sell - what they thought, and rightly, would seem comprehensible and coherent to the members - was a combination tactic.

The SWP, as noted, are more opportunist than sectarian. Their chief concern on the political funds issue is not, as the "Realists" claim, to find ways of getting bits of union money for themselves. The SWP know quicker ways of doing that than laborious wholesale rule changes. Their concern is to find formulas that "fit the mood". They preach a variant of a combination approach - an incoherent, unstable variant, but a variant. Why? Because they find it "fits the mood". It is plausible at first sight, even if detailed examination of SWP proposals often reveals problems.

The "Realists" pose as experts on "the trade-unionist mind" to tell us that what they - in common with the rest of us - have been arguing for five years now sounds like self-contradictory nonsense to trade unionists. But by doing so they're also telling us that it's taken them, the experts in "the trade-unionist mind", five years to notice that what they say to trade unionists gets blank looks, shaken heads and wondering stares!

Perhaps we should give them another five years to see if they can find out what trade unionists think of their new line. What, for example, do trade-unionists think of the line that we should be militant last-ditch defenders of the rules forbidding union donations to non-Labour

candidates, and yet advocate breaking those rules wherever we are strong enough to do so?

Independent candidates? As noted above, in broad general terms the "Realists" still say they are for such candidates. Look at the detail and logic of their argument, though, and the picture becomes less clear.

Much of what they write suggests that they will support independent candidates only when they have majority local trade-union support - certified by workplace ballots - or maybe only when those independent candidates have first won the New Labour selection procedure and then been barred by the Blairite hierarchy. Since most of the deadlines for deselection have passed, that suggests, for example, that they would be against any socialist or labour-representation candidates in the next General Election.

(Even in Scotland? One of the odd things about the "Realist" polemic is that it is all as if Scotland does not exist. They denounce the Socialist Alliance as if the SWP's mishandling of independent socialist candidacies proves that no-one can handle such candidacies well. But what about the SSP?

Do the "Realists" think our Scottish comrades should leave the SSP and go back into New Labour?) But the reason for us favouring independent socialist election candidacies is not lack of trade-union control over the Labour Party. The reason is the shutting-down of the space that used to exist for open revolutionary socialist politics within the Labour Party - for efforts like the Socialist Campaign for a Labour Victory that we ran in 1979. That shutting-down came as part of the same operation as the reduction of trade-union influence in New Labour, but is not exactly the same thing.

Predictably, independent socialist election candidacies will not at first have mass trade-union support. That does not disqualify the idea of using such candidacies to win support (and not just from trade-unionists, but also from youth and workers in un-unionised sectors). Nor does it disqualify the idea of seeking support, including financial support, for such candidacies from more left-wing and active union bodies.

If mass official trade-union support were a precondition for running socialist election candidacies, then the Trotskyists in France would not have run in the presidential election last year - when they got more manual workers' votes than the Socialist Party or Communist Party, and vastly more votes from young people! - let alone in all the previous contests when they built up support. Remember, the first time they ran a Trotskyist candidate for president, in 1969, they got just 1.05%. From 1974 through to 1988 they got about 2%. Should they have been condemned?

In 1994 we backed the "Workers' List", run by our comrades of WOSA, against the ANC in South Africa's first post-apartheid elections. The "Workers' List" got much less than 1% of the vote. The ANC had the support of the trade unions (COSATU, with which it has organised links) and the mass of the workers. Were the comrades wrong to stand? I think not.

Our first and primary task is always to argue working-class socialist politics in the working class - the whole working class, so far as we can reach it, not just the small section active in trade union branches.

Everything else is ancillary to that. It made sense to operate as a public faction inside old Labour. It does not make sense to bury ourselves in New Labour. Do the "Realists" accept that things have changed on that score?

That, whatever about it still being a "bourgeois workers' party" in general, the Labour Party has changed fundamentally in the aspect that is key for our tactical choices? It is not clear.

Sometimes it seems that about the only independent candidate whom the "Realists" will unequivocally endorse is Ken Livingstone in 2000. And Ken Livingstone now? If mass union support is the criterion...? Or Galloway, who might well get local and national support from many unions for an independent candidacy...?

Paradoxically, the "Realists'" approach, carried through consistently, their emphasis on "trade-union control" as the be-all and end-all of politics, should lead to them supporting only those "independent socialist candidates"... who are neither socialist nor independent!

Ballots. A couple of years back we adopted a policy of favouring union branch ballots on whether or not to back independent socialist or labour-representation candidates against Labour, while defending branch-meeting decisions to back them where no ballot was or could be called. There was no controversy about it. I thought, and I suppose we all thought, that the political gain from being able to run a political campaign in the membership around such a ballot vastly exceeded the possible loss of a donation which might have been voted through by a branch meeting but would be defeated in a ballot vote.

The ballot idea now figures largely in the "Realists'" argument - but in a new form. No longer is it a way to get independent socialist ideas out more widely to the membership. Now it is a last-ditch defence if a union conference should vote for a rule-change allowing support to independent socialist candidates; we are to demand a ballot and try to get the conference decision overturned.

The change is not for the better.

All this is connected with the problem of the "new tempo". At our conference we resolved that we need to raise ourselves to a "new tempo" of activities, initiatives, meetings, and profile in order to rally and organise new young activists coming into political life through the anti-war movement, through international solidarity against capitalist globalisation, and through the reviving student activism.

It has proved difficult. We have not got there yet. We have not shaken off the habits of sluggishness and kibbitzer attitudes bred by the years of defeat from 1985.

We can persevere at trying to shake them off. Or we can console ourselves by thinking that whatever "the sectarians" do in the way of rallying revolutionary-minded youth, we stand higher because we know and are in tune with the deeper forces of history.

The second approach was that of Militant in the 1960s and 70s, when they camped comfortably in their "perspective". They alone knew how the great mass forces of the labour movement would move in future; they alone had resisted "ephemeral" temptations and had positioned themselves correctly for the great struggles of the future; they could afford to sneer at the "sects on the fringes of the labour movement".

I see a great deal of that in the rhetoric of the "Realists". The catch-all denunciation of all other would-be revolutionary activists as "the sectarians" (even when their real leaning is much more opportunist than sectarian). The disdain for "the street theatre left".

The desire to trim all our activity to a promised mass struggle of the future, and to warn against initiatives in the present for fear that they will spoil that (speculative)

golden future. The desire to believe the best of the bureaucrats who promise that golden future.

The demagogic counterposition of the trade unions (as a bloc) to the revolutionary activists ("TGWU or RDG" - RDG figures here not for its real, particular weaknesses, but as a straw man for the whole would-be revolutionary left). The exclusive blaming on the would-be revolutionary left of diseases (such as Galloway-philia) which in fact are current on the revolutionary left in large part through adaptation to the "broad" left.

The self-satisfied narrow focus on the processes of trade-union resolution-passing (in a trade union movement where the average age of a trade union member is 47, and the average age of union branch activists must be even higher). The preaching that the supposed chief danger in those union meetings is, not sluggishness or inertia or credulity towards the bureaucrats, but the activists running too far ahead of the inactive members. The injunction to us to rein in and overrule the activists through ballots of the inactive members should they do that.

This orientation - even more, this mood - is as deeply sectarian, in the sense of counterposing a private doctrine, revelation and "perspective" to the actual struggles of today, as anything else on the revolutionary left.

And for us today it has the immediate danger of dragging us back into self-satisfaction with the "old tempo", or even slower, when we need to move forward to a "new tempo".