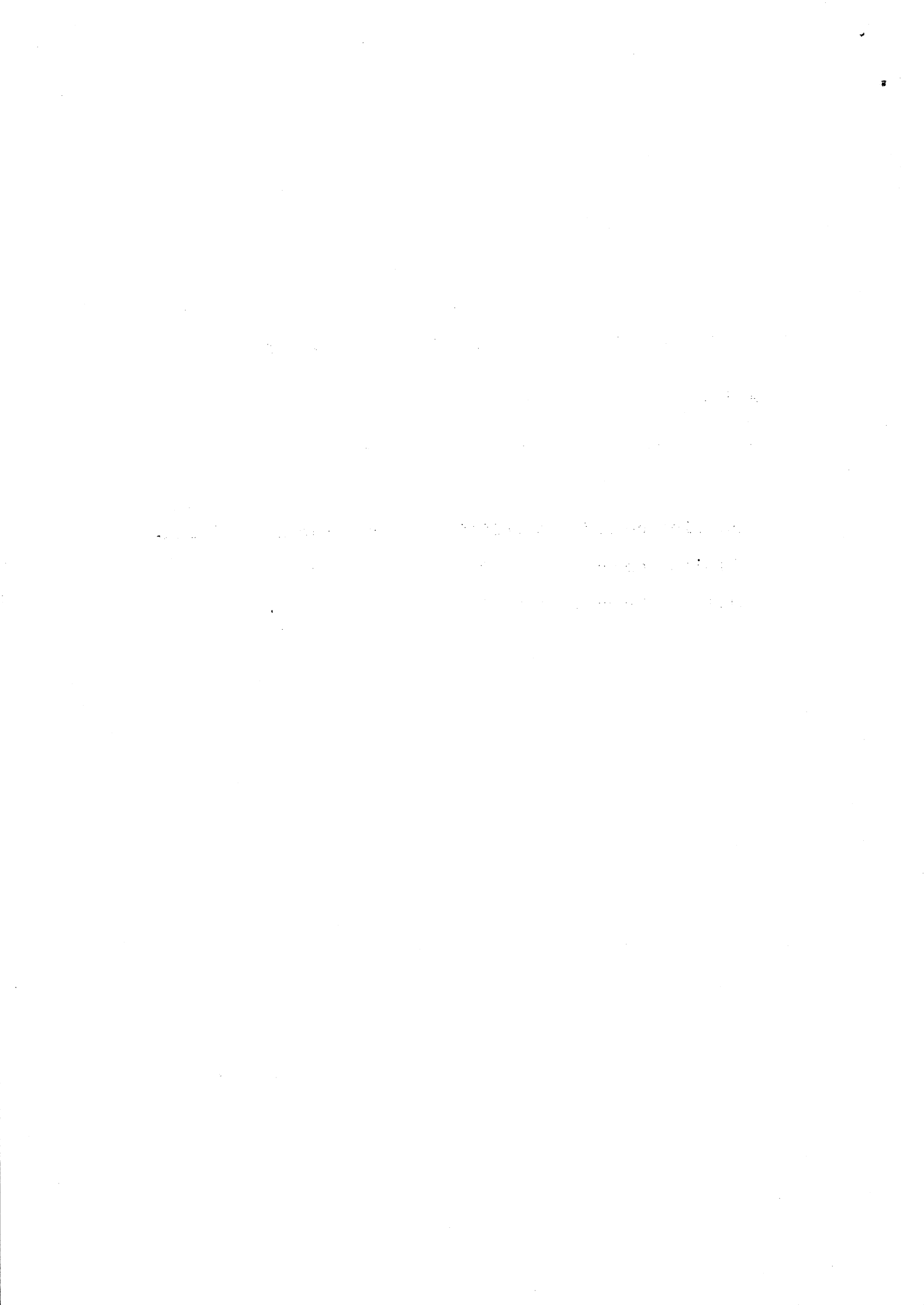

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What lies behind the politics of the majority?..Smith.

Politica Obrera statement, April 5th 1982.

Politica Obrera statement, June 12th 1982.



WHAT LIES BEHIND THE POLITICS OF THE MAJORITY ?

This contribution to the Malvinas discussion arises out of the contribution I prepared for the debate at the summer school. Owing to the agreed division of speaking time, I was not able to include all the points I would like to have made either in the presentation or the reply, I have therefore set them out here.

First I'll make a rather peripheral point on the world Trotskyist movement. The observation by the minority that the majority comrades should think seriously about the isolation their positions place us in within the world movement has met with the answer: "It is not necessarily wrong to be isolated". Or, "We have been isolated before, e.g. Afghanistan". This however does not resolve the problem since this situation is quite different. Afghanistan was a contentious issue which not only initially split the world movement, but created minority groups in virtually every movement. The Malvinas war in contrast is a relatively simple issue for those regarding themselves as a part of the Trotskyist tradition. It involves principles well established in the literature and traditions of our movement. Therefore Argentina and defeatism was almost immediately and almost universally adopted, not only by the various movements but more or less unanimously within them. As far as we can see, no national or international grouping has a significant minority, or any minority at all, pressing for Argentine defeatism. The only people who have such a position, apart from the WSL, fall broadly into two traditions - the ultra lefts, such as the Sparts, and the various state capitalist groupings around the world (the significance of which I will refer to later).

Secondly, before I begin to argue the main point of this document, let me repeat some common ground as to the general principle of revolutionary defeatism - which still seems to be causing confusion. This is that revolutionary defeatism applies differently in an imperialist country as against a country oppressed by imperialism. In an imperialist country, Trotskyists are always for the defeat of their own ruling class in any war at any time, whether that war is against a rival imperialist power, a semi colony or a workers' state. This is not the case with an imperialist-oppressed country. There it is often necessary to stand with such a country in a war with an imperialist power - despite the nature of its regime. This is the only point we were trying to make with the much maligned quotes from Trotsky.

Compromises and contradictions in the TILC resolution

As the minority have said a number of times, the leadership of the WSL was very slow to react to the dispatch of Thatcher's task force to the South Atlantic. Three weeks after it had been sent, the majority on the EC still refused to take it seriously and still regarded the most likely action as skirmishing to back up diplomatic pressure. It is now plain that this was not a matter of a poor assessment, but a reflection of the politics of the current majority leadership in relationship to imperialism - which is always to seek to play down its role. Other movements regarding themselves as part of the Trotskyist tradition were able to immediately adopt positions which at least came to grips with the realities of the situation.

PO, as you can see from the article in this IB translated from the editorial of their paper, had developed a position and published it 3 days after the Galtieri invasion. The WSL leadership did not even seriously discuss it for nearly 3 weeks later.

The Easter TILC meeting forced us to begin to discuss it since the other sections insisted that it be made a major item on the agenda. Our lack of previous discussion made it difficult for us to operate as a delegation at that meeting. We had to develop our own position as a WSL leadership whilst at the same time discussing the issue with the other groups who were much better prepared. I want, however, to refer to our delegation discussions and

the resulting TILC resolution since they have an important bearing on today's debate. From the outset our delegation was agreed on two points: 1) That the Galtieri invasion of the Malvinas was a reactionary invasion since its aim was the containment of the Argentine working class. 2) That opposition to the war was the only possible policy to adopt in Britain (we are of course still agreed on these two points). There were two other points, however, on which there was controversy, although we eventually agreed on compromise formulations. These were 1) Self-determination for the Falklanders and 2) When and under what conditions would we defend Argentina?

These compromises, which contained the seeds of our future differences on the Malvinas, were achieved in various ways. The compromise of self-determination was achieved by moving it from the first paragraph, which it occupied in comrade Kinnell's first draft, to a lower and less significant position (although it is clear there was no real agreement).

The compromise as to when and under what conditions we would defend Argentina against Britain was reached after quite a sharp discussion. It resulted in the famous sentence with which everyone is now far too familiar: "While recognising that the present conflict is restricted to the Falklands issue, in the event of a full scale war between Britain and Argentina we would be unequivocally for the defence of Argentina".

Since this clause is important to the present debate, I want to focus on it for a moment. It contains two problems which were soon to emerge in full force. The first problem was that the clause threatened to fall apart as soon as the political and military situation demanded an interpretation as to what constituted an "all out war", and even more crucially - under what conditions would the war cease to be simply a "Falklands issue".

The second problem it contained was an assumption on the nature of Argentina which became an remains an unresolved contradiction in the majority case. This comes out of the clause calling for the defence of Argentina under certain conditions. To defend Argentina under any conditions implies that Argentina is something qualitatively different Britain, i.e. a country oppressed by imperialism. This view sharply conflicts with the overall view that the majority comrades project on imperialism (which is in essence a post imperialism theory) which would in my view preclude the comrades ever supporting an oppressed country against imperialism whatever the precise conditions. This contradiction, as I will show in more detail later, has led the majority comrades into confusion in their documents over the nature of Argentina. (In fact it should not have been necessary to debate the nature of Argentina once it was agreed that Argentina could be defended under certain conditions).

Two different starting points

Comrade C says in IB 9, page 2: "There is of course no getting away from the fact that whatever the correct reading of the TILC resolution, we now have in the WSL two radically different interpretations of it".

This was certainly true. But what makes these two different interpretations so important is that they mark the point of divergence. They define in the clearest way the two different starting points, of the majority and minority, from which flows their different analysis of the war.

The main division of opinion came over the first part of the clause: "Whilst recognising that the present conflict is confined to the Falkland issue".

The basis of the majority case is that despite the dispatch of the fleet and the start of the war, the war remained entirely confined to the "Falkland issue". Comrade C. put it this way in IB 9: "Both politically and militarily the war has remained strictly - one might almost say surgically - confined to the Falkland issue".

We need to look at these different starting points in more detail.

The minority starting point

For the minority, Thatcher's decision to go to war made the international dimension the key factor. Far from being a "Falklands issue", the war had become a world issue of considerable importance. Thatcher's decision had made it a war of imperialist authority. Imperialism would now use it to try to reestablish its ability to use a military option around the world which it had lost to such a serious degree in Vietnam and since. It would use it to demonstrate its ability to crack the whip and make the oppressed nations jump back into line. In other words, Galtieri's move had changed from an invasion with reactionary aims into a war between an imperialist power and an oppressed nation. Its outcome would seriously affect the world political situation. A Thatcher defeat would be a serious setback for imperialism, whilst a Thatcher victory would strengthen imperialism all over the world. It would as we have said, alter the balance of forces on a world scale to the advantage of imperialism.

The majority staked a lot on attacking our reference to "a world balance of forces". Sometimes they have denied its existence at others they have called it "intangible", "amorphous" or ridiculed it. At other times they have effectively accepted our point, such as comrade C's admission on page 20 of IB 9 that Thatcher's war was a factor in the Lebanon invasion. "No doubt the war in the South Atlantic was a factor in when the Israelis launched their war".

However much that quote underplays the situation, it accepts the basic point, that the Malvinas war created an international situation in which Begin felt he could launch a war of genocide against the Palestinians. (If Thatcher could defend her interests 8,000 miles away, he could defend his 60 miles away, he said). It concedes that Thatcher's war has increased the ability of imperialism to use its military option.

An ambivalent attitude to the strengths and weaknesses of imperialism and its ability to suppress opposition to its rule is a mentality which can only really be projected from a relatively safe position within one of the imperialist powers, and a determination to ignore the international dimension of the conflict. Seen from the Middle East, Central America, Soweto or Namibia, the "world balance of class forces" is a very tangible issue indeed. Liberation fighters in Salvador know exactly how tangibly an imperialist victory anywhere in the world affects them. Nor should these majority comrades ridicule our reference to a "tight situation in terms of the world balance of forces". We simply mean that it is easily shifted one way or the other at the present time by world events, making Thatcher's war more dangerous. It sometimes seems as if the majority comrades fail to think in international terms at all, except in the most general way.

In fact, a failure to think in international terms seems to be the only way to explain how the comrades can appreciate the importance of assessing the relationship of forces on a national level, but not an international level. The comrades would have a very good assessment of how the ASLEF betrayal altered the relationship of forces in Britain to the advantage of the Tory government and the employers. They wouldn't say that was "intangible" or "amorphous", they would say it is very real and very dangerous. They would recognise that the ability and confidence of the Tories to attack other sections of workers is strengthened by it. Yet when we talk about the strengths and weaknesses of imperialism, it is used as one of the reasons to call us Maoist. Thatcher made her assessment. Her summary of the result of war was: "Britain's great again". She now heads a government which has a new authority in the world, which can act as the cutting edge for world imperialism. She has shown that military power can be used.

This was how the minority defined the war, by what it represented politically. Not by who started it, or why, but what it politically became.

The majority starting point

Now let's go back to the starting point of the majority, and trace where it led them. Their insistence that the war remained confined to the "Falklands issue" was not an accident. It was arrived at as a necessary precondition necessary to establish that the primary political demand of their position was self-determination for the Falklanders. They were determined to establish that as the primary demand, and therefore equally determined not to allow a number of awkward facts to get in the way. Like the fact that the Falklands are a colonial enclave of Britain. The comrades are either avoiding such awkward facts or they have a serious problem in their basic definitions of the world. (Apart from seeing a semi-colony like Argentina as sub-imperialist).

If the Falkland islands are not seen as a colonial enclave, how do the comrades explain another awkward fact - that the Falklanders do not want independence, in fact would fight against it?

Colonised peoples all over the world have spilt rivers of blood fighting for independence, but here is a group in an official British colony who are hostile to it! The answer can only be seen in their role as a colonial enclave. The colonial enclaves are a particular phenomenon within imperialism. They are outposts of the empire dotted around the world at strategic points. The population is transported there, administered as part of the imperialist country. Woven into its structure. Generally in culture and language they are identified with the metropolis. They are protected by its military power. And when the peoples from whom the territory was plundered in the first place raise the demand that they want it back, the imperialists always produce the same answer - whether it is the Falklands or Gibraltar for Britain, or Guantanamo or the Panama canal zone for the USA - "the people have the right to decide, they want to remain part of us, and we will defend that right".

The majority comrades say the Falklanders oppress no one, but that is not really true. They are, and have been more so in the past, a part of a system of colonial enclaves which play a particular role in the domination of the capitalist world by imperialism. They are therefore a part of the system of imperialist exploitation. Their rights should never be counterposed to the rights of the peoples of the semi-colonies against whom they have been used by imperialism. (It would not be demogogy to urge the majority comrades to think about this, and also why their own demands for self-determination seem to centre on the peoples of the colonial enclaves).

It has always been a part of the programme of Marxism not only to be for the freedom of colonial peoples, but for the handing back of colonial enclaves to the peoples from who they were plundered (this does not mean of course that we support every action to this end automatically, irrespective of the character of the particular move, it means simply that it is part of our programme).

The majority comrades however found a way around these problems. They got around the colonial enclave status of the Falklands by ignoring it. They got around the awkward fact that the Falklanders had never asked for independence by inventing a completely new definition of self-determination, which comrade C spells out in IB 9: "The Falklanders reportedly express their self-determination not by wanting independence, but by wanting to remain with Britain". The Falklanders "express their self-determination" by militantly fighting to remain part of Britain - the second imperialist power. That is a very strange kind of self-determination indeed. It bears not the slightest resemblance to anything Marx, Lenin or Trotsky said on the subject. Lenin repeatedly defines self-determination as the right of an oppressed nation to secede and form a separate state. He always speaks of the right of nations, not groups of settlers transported and strategically placed by imperialism to justify its hold on territory by maintaining the support of the population to remain a part of the imperialist power. Search Lenin's works and you will not find anything remotely referring to such conditions. These are the terms that Lenin speaks of self-determination, in all of his major writings on it.