

Letter to the RWL-USA Cunliffe/Smith

The 'RWL Tendency' and our response
to it Carolan

The Sectarian Offensive Carolan/Hill/
Kinnell

Amendments to Industrial
Perspectives Levy

Comrades should also have received the following:

IB 36 ... Cunliffe and Jones on the LP

IB 31 ... Cunliffe/Kinnell on imperialism, Dupont on the police,
PTT(ex-RWL minority) statement, Dupont on S. Africa,
Ellis on the LP (this last document has since been
withdrawn)

IB 30 ... Kendall reply to Evington, Collins on women, Parsons
amendment, material on IMG/SL, Kinnell on Ballykelly

IB 29 ... Hunt on youth

IB 28 ... Joplin/Fraser on youth, Joplin on students

IB 27 ... Gay commission document, Layton discussion article

IB 26 ... Democratic centralism in TILC (Jan.1983 NC), information
on TILC

IB 25 part two ... Amendments to Cunliffe Perspectives, Carolan 2nd
1st resolution on LP (reproduced from IB 21), Industrial
Perspectives (Levy), Oliver on Wiganisation, NC resolutions
on Ireland and EEC

IB 25 ... Cunliffe on British Perspectives

IB 24 ... International situation (OC), Kinnell on the economic
situation

IB 22+ ... Carolan 2nd resolution on the LP, Parkinson/Fraser on women

IB 22 ... Crisis of FI & our tasks (OC), Glasgow WSL on Ballykelly

IB 21 ... Carolan, Kendall, Kinnell, Cunliffe resolutions on LP

The Crisis in the British Section - Evington

* Towards an International Tendency - problems and tasks (Morrow)

* Platform of the WSL Internationalist Tendency

Women's oppression and socialist revolution (Cunliffe)

(*: produced outside the centre, in short supply: more copies being
done).

Out soon should be:

IB 32 ... to be produced in Coventry by cd Parsons

IB 33 ... to be produced by some women cds in Oxford

IB 34 ... a document by 3 members of the Internationalist Tendency,
already in limited circulation.

CONFERENCE IS FEBRUARY 18-19-20. PLEASE MAKE THE NECESSARY ARRANGE-
MENTS TO BE ABLE TO ARRIVE FRIDAY EVENING

LETTER TO THE RWL-USA

13.1.83

Cunliffe and Smith

Since we were very disturbed by the position and conduct of the RWL at the December TILC conference we are writing to ensure that you know our account and view of the conference.

Comrade Leland came to the conference, as did the LOR delegation, to promote a set of organisational measures. First they wanted democratic centralism to be established forthwith (or alternatively a definitive, irreversible date to be fixed some time this year) quite irrespective of whether this would be politically principled or organisationally feasible. If this was not achieved, it was the intention of both RWL and LOR to declare a number of administrative measures. Firstly, to declare an international tendency to 'fight for a democratic centralist TILC'; this tendency would become a faction if the transformation of TILC were not achieved this year. Secondly, to call on those comrades who may agree with this perspective inside those TILC sections which do not, to declare tendencies in solidarity with the new international tendency. It appears that in all this a political basis for such a tendency is regarded as secondary: for while the declarations have been made, we are still waiting to see a political platform document setting out the tendency's positions.

Smith went to Milan in November to attempt to persuade the LOR comrades not to proceed with precisely this course of action; and he spoke to Leland on the phone as soon as he arrived in Britain with the same end in view. In both cases he was entirely unsuccessful.

When the TILC conference opened on December 27, both Leland and the LOR attempted to preempt the debate on democratic centralism by challenging the status of the conference - calling for it to be declared an international 'pre-conference' preparatory to a conference which would establish a democratic centralist TILC this summer. During the debate on this, Leland said that democratic centralism was essential because the secretariat (ourselves plus Carolan) was 'bankrupt', and working to 'sabotage' the work of TILC. The WSL, he argued, had fallen under the control of a 'revisionist' majority of old I-CL leaders, and the leaders of the old WSL were refusing to fight against them. (Yet unaccountably, od Franco, one of the most vocal critics of the WSL, pointed out during the discussion that the International Situation document submitted to the meeting by the unanimous vote of the WSL Executive was "90% of what we need for a democratic centralist tendency").

Indeed on the part of the LOR there has been a complete reversal of the position on democratic centralism agreed since the TILC was formed. We had agreed that democratic centralism could not be proclaimed but had to be politically established. In other words TILC had to develop politically into a common international tendency before democratic centralism could be established. This, it was always agreed, involved firstly the achievement of the necessary level of political homogeneity, and secondly (and very much subordinate to that) the organisational capability necessary to establish an international centre which could effectively administer and politically develop a democratic centralist international tendency.

Suddenly both the LOR and RWL announce that none of this is necessary. In fact that the reverse is true. Since there is now less homogeneity in TILC than at the time of its formation, we are now told that it is necessary to establish democratic centralism as a prerequisite for establishing political agreement!

We cannot accept that this is an honest position. The LOR in particular have always been the harshest critics of fusions on an inadequate or unprincipled basis: indeed it is this very question on which the current WSL stands accused by the LOR and RWL. Yet democratic centralism is essentially a fusion - and the RWL and LOR are demanding immediate fusion with a 'bankrupt', 'revisionist' leadership!

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The political reality is important in approaching the problems of democratic centralism in TILC. During 1981 the TILC doubled in size with the fusions of WSL/I-CL and the RWL/SL-DC. These very important steps naturally posed political problems in the moves to an international democratic centralist structure - as would any significant growth. Sharp problems have arisen in both of these fusions over the last year. In the WSL, sharp differences erupted around the Malvinas war and now exist on other issues in the run-up to our conference in mid-February. In the USA the fusion has ended in a split under conditions where even the LOR comrades agreed at the December conference that serious questions remained unanswered.

Yet now, under these conditions, we are told that, though everyone agreed we do not have the political conditions for democratic centralism in 1979 when we formed the TILC on the basis of the Transitional Programme in Today's Class Struggle, now, in 1983, with serious differences dividing us, we do have the basis for it!

We strongly supported the WSL resolution which started from the importance of moving to democratic centralism, and set October 1983 as a tentative target date by which we could seek to create the political conditions for it. In retrospect there are some obvious weaknesses in the resolution; it overstates the organisational questions involved in d/centralism and thus overstates the role played in the delay in establishing d/c by the organisational failings of other TILC sections. And it does not dwell sufficiently upon the problems that have arisen from the British fusion. But in general its line is a sound, political approach to the political problem of establishing international d/centralism.

In our view the real reasons why the TWL and LOR are so insistent upon immediate moves to d/centralism have not been honestly stated. It arises in our opinion not from assessing the development of TILC - which could only be damaged by ill-considered and premature organisational transformation to d/c - but from the desire of both RWL and LOR leaderships to create the best conditions to intervene in the WSL. It is an attempt to find the organisational and external solutions to the political problems that obviously exist in the WSL.

We have made our views clear on this. We think that the TILC sections have every right - indeed a duty if they see things as seriously wrong - to intervene politically in the WSL. But such an intervention must be a political one - through documents and statements - not an organisational attempt to conduct and lead organisationally the struggles in the WSL. Such an intervention could only distort and disrupt the political development of the struggle and of the comrades involved in that struggle.

Worse, however, we believe that cde. Leland's perspective for the WSL is to split it. He spoke on several occasions in the December conference of the "Stalinist" methods he believes exist in the WSL, and declared his determination at all costs to "end the compromise" on which he argues the fusion is based. Indeed, if he holds the view that the WSL leadership is "bankrupt" and "revisionist" (since the WSL leadership is identical to the TILC secretariat), then that is not surprising. And in seeking to split the WSL, cde. Leland does not seem too concerned which cdes or how many of them are drawn towards his banner.

It is not "national Trotskyism" - of which we are now suddenly accused - to object to such manoeuvres, which can only damage, if not destroy the cadre we have fought to develop in many years of patient struggle. It is not "national Trotskyism" to expect international comrades with whom we have been working to build an international tendency to act in an honest political fashion, to have some regard for the process of political development in the largest section of TILC, and not to argue that they want d/centralism for political reasons when in fact they want it only in order to make an organisational manoeuvre.

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We have not reached our views on cde. Leland's behaviour lightly; but they were inescapable having seen his conduct at the December conference. He called upon the "left" in the WSL to organise. He called in effect for the membership to rise up against the leadership. Since the TILC conference he has remained in London in the flat of the only two London cdes. that we know of who support the formation of a tendency. He is constantly phoning WSL members and meeting them in order to encourage a struggle against the leadership - both the old WSL and the old ICL. And we drew equally negative conclusions from cde. Leland's general attitude at the TILC conference. He actually did not make a single political intervention or contribution throughout the entire 5 days. Every one of his contributions was on an organisational level - mostly plainly factional in content. Even when he was specifically asked to make a political contribution - on the draft International document's section on the USA, and on women's oppression (the Australian cde. had presented a document and voiced disagreements with aspects of the RWL text) - he would not do so. On women's oppression he promised an eventual written response; yet the debate is an important development for TILC, and the SF cde. had seen it as the most important contribution Socialist Fight could make to the fight for an international tendency, travelling all the way from Australia to present it. Leland is now telling WSL cdes critical of his silence that he had to "avoid provocation". Yet on an organisational level there was no provocation Leland was not prepared to promote, while on the political front the LOR cdes made serious contributions on every topic, including the debate on women.

The worst aspect of Leland's a-political positions, however, was over Steve Z and the SLDC. He dismissed Steve as "a shyster", "a petty crook" and a "compulsive liar". He went on to say that he had held this view of Steve since before the fusion. This kind of thing raises a number of problems. It also raises the questions as to what was the motive behind the RWL's fusion with a group led by such a person. With such an attitude it was plainly impossible to create a constructive or conciliatory framework for fusion, as Leland claims was the case.

This type of denigration, character assassination, also raises other problems, since the only people we know in the Trotskyist movement who use such extreme and damaging characterisations of those with whom they disagree are Healy and Robertson. We say this as cdes who have constantly defended - and will continue to defend - the general direction of the RWL as one towards the working class and away from cult politics, and not in a Spart direction. But Leland's deliberate statements cannot be ignored, and must be seen as linked to an aspect of the RWL's current practice.

There is to be a TILC inquiry into the breakdown of the US fusion; but this kind of comment does not inspire confidence in us that Leland's motive was ever to make fusion work.

In the July TILC meeting, Leland embarrassed Smith by presenting a rather obvious point he had made at an earlier meeting as if it was a profound statement and a great contribution to the development of Marxism. It was in fact a part of Leland's diplomatic, public-relations style of approach to the building of a movement, an approach which rests upon the cultivation of personal ties and loyalties in place of what should be political understanding, political confidence and respect.

This attitude has now been put sharply into reverse in Smith's case; he is now branded as a "capitulator to revisionism" and a demon of "national Trotskyism". But it is a pointer to some of the politics we have felt for some time are problems in the RWL. The clearest example of this in our opinion was the document on the Organisational Crisis presented to the RWL 1982 conference.

That there was a crisis is clear; whether it was organisational in its roots is less so. But certainly the worst way of tackling that crisis was to hold a conference so largely devoid of political discussion on the situation in the USA, and centred instead around that type of document. At a time when the RWL

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needed to turn outwards, it turned inwards to a monumental session of self-examination. The document goes into detail about the relationship between the leadership and the membership. It even, for example, takes decisions of the whole movement on the kind of approach and kind of letter Leland should write to individuals who have left the RWL - with Leland assigned the first half of July (!!) to prepare one such letter.

Building and holding together a movement by such methods we feel is unhealthy. Of course the leadership must lead and hold the movement together, but such a disproportionate weight of reliance upon personal intervention between individual leadership cdes and individual members is in our view wrong. In any event it is a regime that cannot be sustained in a larger organisation. The leadership must lead through its political contribution to the direction of the movement; and it must at the same time allow the movement - and the individual cdes at local level - to develop independent political initiative and analytical skills. The conclusion of the document was quite the reverse; it called for more discipline and "iron centralism" as the way forward.

Nor can such over-centralisation only affect the internal politics of the movement. It must also affect the approach of the RWL to the working class.

It is for example an unresolved mystery in the conflicts which led to the breakdown of the US fusion as to how cde Bob M., a PC member of long standing, leading a Local in one of the most cosmopolitan cities of the USA, could have had so much as a moment's doubt over the correct policy in relation to the "Open Borders" slogan.

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"Open Borders" is no new issue; it has a long history/demand in the US labour movement and was the standing policy of the hotel union caucus. It was the centre of a particularly heated debate between various tendencies and the Sparts who took a racist line of opposition to the slogan. It is hard to see how cde Bob could either have been unaware of this or have functioned for so long in the leadership of labour movement work in the Bay Area without encountering it and raising any doubts he may have had.

It is even more surprising that in an organisation which legitimately prides itself upon its serious turn to work amongst the most oppressed racial, national and sexual groups in the USA, a cde could have any room for doubt as to the correctness of the Open Borders demand - let alone a doubt so deep-rooted as to merit phone calls to Detroit, the holding up and eventual interference in a crucial trade union caucus leaflet, and eventually requiring a 15-page explanation as to why the demand is acceptable!

This extremely laboured approach to what should be a straightforward issue of principle - opposing racist immigration controls - is also echoed in the tendency of the RWL towards electoral abstentionism - broken only by painstaking and soul-searching debates on whether critical support can be extended to particular candidates from other labour movement organisations.

That this process of deliberation finally secured a decision to give critical support to an SWP candidate in St. Louis should perhaps be taken as an encouraging sign. But the narrow basis on which the matter has been approached - along the lines of "is there anything, anywhere, in any of the policies of the SWP which we might, conceivably, ever-so-critically, regard as a partial step forward for the working class? - appears to us to be sectarian and wrongheaded.

In extending critical support to Labour candidates in Britain we do so not because of, but despite their programme - however "left" their pronouncements. We support them as candidates of a party through whose election the working class can at least express its political rejection of the overt parties of the bourgeoisie, and hopefully take a step further forward, putting demands which will test out and expose these candidates, bearing the need to go beyond Labourite politics to build a revolutionary leadership.