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"All that glisters...": A reply to the platform
of the 'Internationalist' Tendency

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ALL THAT GLISTERS . . .

A reply to the Platform of the "Internationalist" Tendency

By Jack Cunliffe.

"Not all that tempts your wand'ring eyes
And heedless hearts, is lawful prize;
Nor all, that glisters, gold."
(Thomas Gray: Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat)

It is easy to see what has attracted a number of comrades towards the "Internationalist" Tendency: in an organisation which they feel is bogged down in political confusion or saddled with political positions with which they disagree, and under conditions where they feel nobody in the central leadership of the League is mounting the kind of political fight they wish to see, the Tendency appears to offer a bold statement of opposition and a rallying point for a fight. There is no doubting the fact that it has successfully set itself apart from the majority not only of the leadership but of the organisation as a whole: but I feel that a closer examination of the political platform put forward by the Tendency shows that it falls in fact way short of the kind of clarity and programmatic orthodoxy to which it lays claim, and in fact can only compound the kind of confusion it apparently seeks to combat. Far from offering a beacon in the darkness, the light offered by the Tendency is more akin to a will o'the whisp, which can leave its followers hopelessly adrift in the struggle for the principles they seek to uphold.

This document is intended to show in some detail why this is the case.

An opportunist text

Though the Tendency and a number of its positions have been characterised as sectarian in their trajectory, the document announcing the Tendency can best be understood as an opportunist text, in that it seeks to hold together comrades holding a wide variety of political positions by adopting ambiguous formulations and implicitly hinting rather than forthrightly stating political positions.

So vague and so diplomatic are the phrases that several of the Platform theses (2,5,7) are - at face value - effectively no more than re-statements of the common position of everyone in the League. They are not "Tendency" positions at all. If they mean just what they say, nobody who disagreed with them should be in the WSL. So why do comrades feel they are contentious? Plainly because behind the bland phrases lies a significance which is not explained in the text. We have to probe beneath the surface to find this meaning.

Elsewhere the formulations are so curiously sloppy - presumably reflecting an extremely low level of debate prior to the launching of the Tendency - that any comrades who have read the Transitional Programme (TP) should logically balk at putting their names to clauses 12 and 13.

Again, we can only assume from this that it is not the words on the pages of the Platform statement which are seen as the key issues for odes joining the Tendency: it is the very existence of the Tendency, its general stance of opposition to the leadership of the old-ICL and the "soft" forces of the old-WSL, rather than the Tendency's ability to formulate correct or consistent policies and positions of its own which are seen as the main thing.

For this reason we are forced to look not only at what is in the text, but also at what is not in the text - at the questions evaded and positions fudged - if we are to get a true assessment of the politics of the Tendency and the confusion which it is spreading rather combatting within the WSL.

The LP debate: A great tragedy of the first two months of debate on the LP question was that it was almost completely beside the point of the main differences that do exist on this in the League. The initial text on the LP

in my British Perspectives draft was never intended (by me) to stand as the organisation's final word on the topic, but rather to ensure that the debate got started and included some general points about our orientation to the labour movement. In the event, a large number of the initial aspects of that early draft - in particular its heavy-handed, a-historical and in some instances factually wrong characterisations of the Bonnite left - proved to be a liability in promoting the necessary discussion on how we should work in and through the MO as part of our overall orientation. The redrafted section in IB39 has since shown that on the question of analysis of recent events and the present conjuncture in the MO there are only secondary and minor differences; the disagreements that do exist are on questions of method, orientation and party-building within the broader context of our work in the labour movement.

The Tendency document, however, fails to make any worthwhile contribution on either level of the debate. On the conjunctural situation it is miles out in its assessments; and on the question of method its points are so vague as to be meaningless.

Orientation. In Clause 1 for instance, we read "Our primary orientation is to the working class." Who could disagree? But such a statement poses more questions than it answers. Where do edes say workers are to be found? Do they propose a diffuse orientation to the "working class" in general? Or do they recognise - as the WSL has always recognised - that as a small group we cannot reach the whole class, and must primarily focus on particular sections of the class - those organised in unions, the LP, other labour movement campaigns, those currently in struggle, or those we can potentially mobilise in struggle.

Since our break 10 years ago from Healy's "mass party" delusions we have accepted that our work must be primarily through the organised labour movement, often seeking to organise broad sections of the working class not directly under our own party banner.

The question that arises, and is the focal point of the current debate in the WSL is how we work in this way through reformist organisations to build a revolutionary cadre, and in particular how we ensure that we are recruiting and training proletarian forces in the League. In other words it is not whether, but how to orientate to the working class.

The Tendency tells us nothing about this. They confine themselves to telling us what orientation they reject: "the notion that work in the MO and MOYM is the central area of our work".

At face value, many edes critical of the current orientation of our work might agree with such a formula: but they should beware. Behind an apparently innocuous statement lies a welter of possible interpretations.

It is correct, in my view to say that the MO and MOYM in themselves are not the centre of our work. To insist that they are is incorrect because it one-sidedly focusses on one component of the reformist labour movement, to the relative belittlement of - particularly - work in the unions.

But though the MO and MOYM are not "the centre" of our work, they are central to it. The struggle against reformism in the workers' movement requires a political struggle against all those leaders who confuse, betray and hold back the working class. And the fight does overlap from the unions into the MO and vice-versa: it is a combined, all-round struggle to break the grip of reformism on the working class.

We should also ask the Tendency: if they are so adamant that the MO and MOYM are not central to our work, what work do they think should be central? Trade union work? Black work? Work amongst women? Unemployed work? While other EC/OC edes have - right or wrong - felt obliged to spell out their views on this, Morrow and the Tendency, in the name of "clarity" claim the privilege of complete obscurity.

To organise or not to organise the left?

The diplomatic silence of Clause 1 continues into Clause 2. At face value we see a down-the-middle statement of the majority view - until we recognise

the question that is evaded in the first sentence:

"Our work in the MO is directed towards breaking workers from reformism as part of the struggle for revolutionary leadership in the class, not simply to helping the left to develop or evolve." (emph added)

The words "not simply" could be no more than a truism - of course everybody would agree that we must do more than simply "help the left to develop". Alternatively, the Tendency may mean something else: that we should not play an active role in the struggles of the MO left, but confine ourselves to propagandist "interventions" from a standpoint outside the actual struggle.

Do the Tendency agree that we should continue as part of our work to organise the left in the MO, and to struggle in that context to win workers to revolutionary politics? Or do they advocate a Workers Power-style abstentionist existence of propagandism and irrelevance? Clause 2 is open to either interpretation.

In the history of our organisation, our fight to break workers in the unions from reformism has always been seen as inseparable from the closest possible links with the sections in struggle. We have engaged alongside often inexperienced workers in often extremely partial struggles, devoted considerable resources to them, and fought in that context to draw political lessons on the role of the union bureaucracy, the general context of the class struggle, and the need for revolutionary leadership.

The weakness since fusion is that few areas of the fused organisation have followed through or adopted these methods in their trade union work - leaving us less involved in day to day union struggles than before fusion - while the same method has been only partially developed in the context of the MO work.

But instead of explicitly seeking to build on these strengths of our organisation and its history, the Tendency's Platform points no way forward, and instead merely rests at the level of discontent already rampant in the League.

Layers and Languages:

In Clause 3 we find still more confusion on orientation. We are told that we should orientate to "the most militant layer of the class". Provided we recognise that the "most militant layer" is not a fixed or stable category, but is to be read as that section of the class at the forefront of trade union and political struggles at any given point of time, then of course it is true that we should respond to those forces, and far better train, equip and mobilise our comrades to respond at local level to those struggles. Within them, we must aim to reach the best militants, to broaden their grasp of the struggles they are involved in, spell out practical and programmatic steps which can advance their struggles, and convince them of the need for a new type of leadership - a revolutionary party.

But if this orientation is not to lead the organisation into an incoherent course of zig-zags from one dispute to the next - and leave us becalmed in periods of comparatively little industrial action - we must combine our responsiveness and practical involvement in every serious struggle with a consistent overview and orientation to the workers' movement as a whole. The alternative is to transform the Tendency's phrase into the equivalent of the Mandelite "new mass vanguard" of the mid 1970s and adopt a completely empirical course.

Our press must combine agitational, educational and organisational material. But once again the Tendency's formulations fudge the issue. They call for "a clear revolutionary programme and bold revolutionary propaganda", in "a language they (workers) can understand". This all sounds fair enough until we ask what language the comrades envisage. Do they mean more popularised expositions of our revolutionary programme? Is the phrase therefore a criticism that SX is too heavy going in its propaganda? Or are they demanding more complex and advanced propaganda in our press?

Certainly we must endeavour to present what we have to say in language which workers can understand, if we don't want to wind up talking to ourselves. That would be equally true whatever position comrades take on the orientation of the WSL. In itself it is not a "Tendency" position.

We need to win workers' respect and attention; and we need to raise their level of understanding. The two sides of the task must be carried through simultaneously if they are to be done at all. We need an orientation as a movement, and we need to convey that and its implications in our press. While some comrades - and I tend to be one of them - feel that SX has been rather more successful at relating to the existing level of its audience, and reflected an excessive emphasis on the political problems of the existing Labour left, rather than raising the level of our readership, there is no automatic answer to this in the form of a change of language in the paper. The question is one of method in our work in general, whom we seek to address politically, and how the experiences of our work are used to reinforce and expand our agitation and propaganda.

We could do all of that successfully through SX; or we could equally FAIL to do any of it even under the imprint of a "party press". To make a fetish of the "party press" label does nothing to advance the discussion on the content of our work and the content of the paper.

Indeed the very term "party press" as used in the Tendency Platform is profoundly ambiguous. What do they mean by it? On the one hand we have the Erswoll/Erswoll/Jonos document calling for a no-holds barred "Party Press" which would slap WSL and TILC on the masthead as a provocation to the chauvinists and witch-hunters in the MO leadership, hoping to go out in a blaze of "internationalist" glory. On the other, eds Morrow and others have argued verbally - as in the Midlands pre-conference aggregate - that by "party press" they do not even necessarily mean that the League's name need appear on the masthead, leaving us in doubt as to the significance of the term. Where would the comrades see a regularised League magazine fitting into this context?

Of course the "party press" slogan is attractive to wide sections of the League who are dissatisfied with this or that aspect of SX and legitimately frustrated by the lack of WSL publications to assist and direct towards recruitment. They feel - with some justification - that the League has largely submerged as a distinct force in the workers movement. But by their vague formulations the Tendency avoids telling its supporters or the rest of the movement just what it advocates.

Red Hurrings and Registration:

The case is similar when we come to Clause 4 of the Tendency Platform. We find a form of words which could mean all things to all people. We have been told by many Tendency supporters that it is a slander to suggest that they favour a withdrawal from MO work. Yet the first sentence of Clause 4 could only logically be interpreted to mean just that:

"The choice posed by the witch-hunt is not one of a choice between staying in or getting out of the MO but between taking our politics to workers and not taking our politics to workers".

The clear implication of this rather opaque sentence is that if we stay in the MP, we cannot take our politics to workers; whereas - by implication again - if we get out, we can. Alternatively the sentence means that being in or out of the MO is utterly irrelevant compared to the (presumably distinct) task of "taking our politics to workers".

Unless it is read in one of these ways, the sentence is on the face of it meaningless. In any case it is plainly designed to link up with the nods and winks of Clause 1 to suggest that only outside the MO can we relate to workers. Some eds within the Tendency or drawn towards its formulations would correctly pull back from the logical conclusion of this one-sided position on the MO.

Indeed from a one-sided view on the relevance of the MO to the class the Tendency goes over the top completely in its lop-sided view of the Registration issue. In a sense it may seem to be just bad luck for them that they nailed their colours so firmly to the mast of making the Register a matter of principle - particularly now that it has virtually faded from the scene as the centrepiece of the witch-hunt. But in another sense it is no accident that the eds have got it wrong.

The Tendency's starting impulse is to find ways and means of turning from work in the MO to other (undefined) forms of work. They have therefore seized upon the Register issue because it seemed to offer an argument for such a turn. In this respect the Tendency platform is the sectarian mirror-image of the way Carolan in IBs 23 and 45 has set out to use the conjunctural situation in the MO to press the case for a lowered political profile in our press - which he advocates irrespective of the witch-hunt or MO legalities.

In reality, the fight against the witch-hunt and the Register has been taken up by the whole of our organisation (hopefully including members of the Tendency) - and if anything most energetically and prominently by those edes who have advocated the view that Registration - if ~~the~~ left wing resistance is defeated - is a tactical rather than a principled question. The Register can indeed be opposed in practice not by passive external propaganda but only by organising with the left in the MO, and fighting in practice for a boycott and full-scale resistance to any expulsions of those that refuse to register.

The terrain of struggle however has now shifted to the expulsion of the M EB members. Our co-thinkers have taken up this fight too without slackening the struggle against the register. The Tendency has nothing to contribute on this, the real struggle now in the MO.

It is significant that the Tendency in Britain stand alone - even in the context of TILC - on the notion that the Register is not a tactical question but a principle. To arrive at this new "principle", the Platform text employs a double sleight of hand.

Firstly it asserts that to apply to register would "negate our fight against the witch-hunt". In fact of course it would merely indicate that despite our best endeavours we and the left had lost the first round of that fight, and had to regroup for round 2. Secondly, the edes drag in the red herring of "internationalism". The register, they claim, would "oblige us to repudiate all international links in favour of the 2nd International". This is not even an honest argument: the edes know full well that according to the letter of the Constitution it applies on a formal level even now. If we follow the logic of the Tendency, we should on principle, never have allowed any of our co-thinkers to join the MO. Indeed, logically, we should withdraw at once since its constitution prevents us from being affiliated to TILC!

To conduct a discussion on this kind of level is just silly. The fact is that even now we are engaged in a form of "illegal" work in the MO. And no matter how large we featured the words TILC on our paper's masthead, the probability is that we would be expelled from the MO by the witch-hunters not for our international affiliation to organisations few will have heard of, but because of what we represent in the British class struggle. (It is precisely for this reason that the Workers Power sectarians can be tolerated with their "full programme" in the MO).

The whole register question is introduced as a pretext on which to erect a "principled" argument for withdrawal from the MO. Significantly even in the acrimonious debates of the December TILC meeting, in which the edes of the LOR in particular appeared over-eager to write off the potential for further struggles by the MO left wing and draw a "final" balance sheet of its defeat, there were no voices raised to argue that the Register is a matter of principle.

The implication of the Tendency's stance is clear. While arguing against "voluntarily limiting our politics", they argue that if the

Register issue goes against us we should voluntarily "adopt illegal methods of work in the MO". In other words - behind a volley of phrases on the Mlavinias and Ireland - their proposal is to throw the towel into the ring and - on the basis of a tactical setback - to embark voluntarily upon a long term self-imposed withdrawal from serious organising work in the MO before any expulsions or proscriptions of our edes or our press take place!

This defeatist stance could only strengthen the hand of the right wing and of the soft left in the MO, redoubling the hold they exert on the left of the rank and file. In exchange for this self-isolation we would gain . . . NOTHING! Under the guise of hard, relentless political struggle and confrontation, the Tendency in reality is retreating before a fight and offering us propogandism in place of agitation.

The Specially Oppressed:

Once again, at face value, Clause 5 of the Tendency platform is not a "tendency" position at all. Though the weaknesses of WX are clear for all to see and only the most diehard factionalists of the ex-ICL are prepared to defend it; and though the tactics and strategy of our work amongst women plainly need much more discussion, it cannot be denied that WX - for better or worse - IS a "special method of work" for a section of the specially oppressed. The discussion is at a still more primitive stage in terms of special methods of work amongst gays; but the Tendency offers us no hints on this or serious proposals on organising amongst black workers.

Instead Clause 5 is once again an attempt without saying anything concrete to appeal to those edes who are understandably dissatisfied with the way the League has tackled this area of work. In this respect it is analogous to much of the RML's position on women, which boils down politically to a restatement of "orthodox" positions, coupled with restatements of the importance of women workers.

A serious attempt to implement Clause 5 of the Tendency Platform would also of course run in flat contradiction to the sectarian attitude to democratic demands spelled out in Clause 13.

MISSING THE TARGET

Clause 6, however, contains its own elements of confusion. It seeks to "reaffirm" (?) a "primary orientation to working class women in struggle" (my emphasis). This is - as it stands - a very narrow focus for our work amongst women. Do we orientate in the workers' movement as a whole simply to male workers who are at that moment in struggle? A movement that fails to respond to the spontaneous struggles of the class - men, women or youth - can never build a proletarian cadre; but a movement that makes its "primary orientation" simply relating to the struggles that erupt must lack any coherent strategy and face real pressures towards syndicalism.

It is true that the WSL's work amongst women since fusion has been characterised by its failure to turn our members and the broad organisation into most of the struggles waged by working class women. The list of our missed opportunities began with St Mary's hospital and embraces a wide range of strikes, struggles and campaigns. But this can best be answered by defining an orientation of the movement in terms of our objectives - to build an organisation of working class women based in the labour movement, that enables us to organise working class women, mobilise them in struggle, relate to their spontaneous struggles, and offer them leadership and policies which will advance their struggles and convince them of the need for a revolutionary socialist party.

This is a two-pronged orientation. We must simultaneously establish a basic structure of regular work amongst working class women through the labour movement - TU branches, MO women's sections, and certain campaigns (Nac etc) which we seek to turn towards working class estates and unions. And within this overall context we must make specific, direct approaches to women in struggle, or to mobilise struggles on particular issues - childcare, rents, cuts, unionisation, sexual violence, jobs, or other issues. In no case must we substitute general solidarity work in support of struggles (MO resolutions, etc) for our own direct work

on picket lines with strikers themselves, in campaign meetings and with the leaders of campaigns and struggles, giving them encouragement, leadership, political advice, tactical guidance and fighting policies. This is the element that has been so weak in much of our work amongst women since the fusion - with a few notable exceptions. It is the failure of WX to relate in this way to the struggles of working class women which has reduced it to the petty bourgeois rump it has become, rather than develop from the promising beginnings we anticipated at the time of fusion to build a real fighting organisation with a structure and base of support in the working class. The Tendency's position in Clause 6 therefore relates to a real political problem. But their solution fails to come to grips with it.

It is certainly possible to orientate towards women in struggle in a "miserable economism" fashion which would leave us simply tail-ending a string of partial trade union struggles without developing them politically or creating a longer-term framework for the organisation of working women. It is equally possible to become bogged down in the routine leftism of MO women's sections or to capitulate politically to the woolly notions of petty bourgeois feminism. Another danger is that the organisation - in a backlash against the drift of WX over the last period lurch onto a crazily sectarian course of ultimatism towards the wider women's movement, rather than patiently arguing our politics in the context of broader campaigns.

For any comrade to castigate an active intervention into class struggles of women workers as "miserable economism" is an indication of their remoteness from such struggles and the class, and their inability to build a working class women's movement "broad" or narrow.

But such aloofness cannot be answered by the Tendency's equally narrow focus. An example of how the positions of the existing leadership of the women's commission can be combatted by a balanced political approach is given by the authors of IB34.

There is no logical connection between this question of orientation and the points about positive discrimination in the second part of Clause 6. The polemic is surely misdirected. Who in the League has a position of substituting positive discrimination for the mobilisation of working class women? The appalling weakness of WX is not its support for positive discrimination but its lack of any effective political direction or structure, and the absolutely factional and subjective attitude shown by its leadership against the edes of the old WSL who attempted to strengthen its work by bringing in the methods we had developed in struggle.

The tendency gets it wrong too on the politics of petty bourgeois feminism - which WX has tail-ended. The problem has not so much been its (far from uniform) emphasis on 'separatism' as its drift towards the method and programme of reformism, and its failure to draw class lines in the struggle for women's liberation.

Instead of sharpening the debate on the theory and practice of WX and our actual work, the Tendency's hints and nudges lead the discussion away from the key political issues, while making no concrete proposals.

Youths

Clause 7 shows a further confusion between the question of to whom we should orientate the movement, and the tactical mechanism by which we pursue that orientation. As the League - a couple of hundred people - we cannot hope to orientate to "working class youth as a whole" (note it is not "working class youth in struggle"). We must seek tactical means to extend our reach, our influence and our ability to win working class youth. The MOYM is in this respect a useful means to an end: offering working class youth a framework in which they can make political experiences and learn in struggle.

In certain instances, the MOYM cannot serve that function - either because dominated in an area by M, or - more rarely - because key layers of militant youth refuse to join it. While it is reasonable that in such circumstances we use CX groups as a means to organise and develop youth contacts, it is vital that this tactic really is used "flexibly" rather than transformed into a rigid formula for all occasions and all areas.

It is reasonable to say that through such groups where we build them we should seek to "win youth to our politics and draw them with us into the struggles inside the mass labour movement" (assuming that we ourselves pursue those struggles rather than using the witch-hunt to withdraw from them). But to do this in practice means that even within the CX groups there must be a political fight to win the youth to an understanding of the importance of their involvement in the MOYM and the unions. This is not because we are "substituting" the MOYM for working class youth "as a whole", but because we regard the MOYM and the work we can do through it as the most readily available tactical means of reaching broad layers of working class youth. Once again the logic of the Tendency's formulations is to erect a basis for sectarian abstention from the struggle in the MOYM and thus to miss out on important aspects of the political development of our youth contacts.

Anti-imperialist politics

Point 8 of the Tendency platform enters into new realms of political confusion. The obligation upon every communist to give unconditional support to the defence of anti-imperialist fighters against the attacks of the imperialists and their agencies becomes entangled with the notion of giving uncritical support - which is nowhere part of the Leninist tradition.

It is indeed in marked contrast to the insistence in Clause 6 upon rigid demarcation between our class politics and the politics of petty bourgeois feminism that the Tendency appear to oppose any such class criterion in our approach to the politics of petty bourgeois nationalism.

Yes, comrades, we are obliged to stand for the defence of the republican fighters: no we are not obliged to endorse their actions at any particular point. Yes, comrades, we must stand firm against the media witch-hunters and their cronies in the labour movement: but no, this does not mean we should deny the scale and reactionary consequences of some of the actions of the republicans. We criticise these actions from the standpoint of their inability to advance the Irish struggle, and from the standpoint of the Irish, and international proletariat.

The strategy of guerrillaism cannot be so neatly separated from the tactical methods it adopts, or the tactical targets it selects. Through both runs the political method and approach of petty bourgeois nationalism.

What should be spelled out is (1) We first and foremost oppose British imperialism, and defend the oppressed Catholic minority and their struggle; we blame the violence upon the oppression they suffer; (2) We stand four-square opposed to any attacks by the British or Irish bourgeoisies upon the struggles of the republican movement; (3) We mobilise to this effect consistently in the British workers' movement and combat the chauvinism of the labour bureaucracy; (4) In this context we express our political assessments and criticisms. If approached from this starting point, any attempt to portray the League's positions on Ireland as "pacifist" could be easily disproved.

Plainly there have been articles in SX which many comrades fool have fallen short of this. The Tendency comrades have latched on to a question of wide concern in the movement, and one where extreme care is needed if we are to hold a line between tail-ending the republican leadership on the one side, and sectarian or pacifist denunciations on the other. The problem is that - as on every other issue raised so far, the Tendency has little to say - and manages in its brief statement to get things wrong.

Permanent Revolution

The Malvinas debate showed that there are large numbers within the WSL keen to defend ~~the~~ the method and spirit of Lenin's theory of Imperialism, and develop this in the context of the post-war period. Such a position is not unique to the Tendency. What distinguishes the signatories of the Platform is that they seem to acknowledge no need to go beyond Lenin's contributions on the topic: and they combine this with their own reading of the concept of Permanent Revolution.