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IRELAND. Seeds come to reformist fruition:
factionalism or federalism. Jones.
(Written October 1983)

The minority excluded from SX. Smith.

The role of the TUC and the crisis of the left
in the trade union movement. Smith.

IRELAND Seeds come to reformist fruition: factionalism or federalism

We have accused comrade Carolan of advocating a 'reformist' perspective on Ireland. More precisely, in presenting federalism as a "solution" in Ireland, he is acting as a reformist. This has been countered in two ways: firstly, with the question, why has this suddenly arisen? and secondly, with the statement that this is a traditional position of the old ICL, which certainly was not reformist on Ireland.

I want to answer these questions in two ways. Firstly, "federalism" is not a traditional position of the ICL - it is a position which emerged only occasionally. This can easily be proved by reference to historical documents. Secondly, it was in the background of this tradition; thus the seeds of today's reformist position were always present.

With regard to the latter, I think that the disagreements within the movement have pushed the comrades the whole way. Their extreme factional attitude led them, when they saw a disagreement on the question of federalism, to make it a point of principle. From being in the background, the comrades have now elevated federalism to the "only solution". I will also show how SO has been used in this factional way.

In IB 68, Comrade Kinnell says, on p.11, that we should combine the demand for "troops out" with those of federalism, and that we should "condemn those who call for troops out without such a proposal as mindless phrasemongers". If this is not phrasemongering, I don't know what is. Every major document of the ICL did not combine these demands. Yet, with no significant change, comrades who put forward the same position as comrade Kinnell in the past are to be ridiculed. Or is your own history irrelevant? Only a sectarian could be so arrogant.

The past

Comrade Carolan sometimes refers to his participation in the "League for a Workers Republic", and thus to his past advocacy of this demand. This is a very selective view of history. It is true that the LWR had the demand for the "secession" of the Catholic areas in the North, and an "autonomous state within a United Ireland" for the Protestants. It also, however, called on "the Protestant working class to defend Catholic workers' areas against Paisleyite attack" or to "agitate (note: not propagandise) for the setting up of a workers militia to defend Catholic workers and Protestant workers who are being intimidated by armed Paisleyite thugs." (taken from "The North, a political statement issued in response to the August 12th British Army moves in 1969").

How did comrade Carolan stand at that time? An interesting comparison to the way in which he ridicules the past position of the WSL in relation to the "workers Militia", and those of us who presently argue for that position!

In Comrade Kinnell's IB 68 document, there is a footnote on the WF/ICL's "history of federalism": "You will find it advocated in the 1969 Workers Fight resolution against the IS/SWP dropping of Troops Out". Indeed? The position put forward in this resolution was one of the right of secession of the Catholic areas from the Northern Ireland state, as well as "guaranteed rights and if necessary" autonomy for the Protestant areas".

* This position argues what we, the minority, argue now: "guaranteed rights" for the Protestants. The resolution does not advocate autonomy - merely accepts it "if necessary". This is a different and distinct position to that argued by the majority comrades now. It does, however, contain the seeds of their present reformism. But the main substance of the resolution is not a united Ireland - it is secession of the Catholic areas from the North, and the hope that this would lead to the collapse of the Northern state, and in this roundabout way to a united Ireland. Even this position was only held briefly.

Towards the end of 1971, the Trotskyist Tendency issued a statement on their position on Ireland that said the following: It talks about the above position as being only "briefly held" by them. It attacks the leadership for quoting

them as saying that secession was "inextricably linked to the slogan withdraw the troops" - which it calls "highly misleading". Note, comrade Kinnell, attacking others for saying that your solution for the North was "inextricably linked" to Troops Out. You now say that it must be. You will say it refers to "secession", but this was your "intelligent proposal" at the time.

But it then goes on to say that at the 1970 conference there was no resolution for "secession" - nor, I would assume, for autonomy. Because the position had been dropped. Kinnell's selective history omits this 1970 conference. This statement of the TT is centred on attacking the leadership for failing to call for "Victory to the IRA" in a specific slogan. This is not the same as "solidarity" as comrade Carolan claimed at the conference. It reveals some dramatic changes in Carolan's position.

He attacks the leadership for seeing "troops out" as coming about as a result of "political pressure", "but not because of military defeat" (p.14). This is why the TT advocated "Victory to the IRA", showing a different conception from the IS leadership. But now comrade Carolan actually argues that the solution should be through the British and Southern governments getting together with representatives of the communities in the North. He even said at the conference that he was in favour of "naming a date" for withdrawal. Does one "name a date" for a military victory? If he is trying to ignore the change in his position, as he did at the conference, perhaps he can explain how you can call for "Victory to the IRA" and advocate Protestants voting against Sinn Fein.

The statement goes on to say that the IRA is working-class based, both North and South - "It is remarkable how fast it is travelling towards the adoption of many specifically working class goals." "To cite the fact that it contains elements of, for instance, Catholic religious bigotry, is to fall into the cretinous stance of rejecting a mass movement because it is not a revolutionary party - i.e. to be utterly sectarian" (p.14).

We have listened for months to Carolan attacking "Catholic nationalist bigotry" in Sinn Fein. Similarly, the resolution to the 1969 Congress says: "Any declaration that 'bourgeois unity is undesirable' is capitulation to Orange pressure. In the guise of anti-bourgeois-nationalist militant socialism, it is actually an anti-Marxist refusal to fight for the democratic rights of the majority of the Irish people" (p.9).

It also says, "A united Ireland would bring immense benefits even under capitalism, and create the possibility of real working class unity in struggle against the bosses, through which the Workers Republic could be attained" (p.9). We have also listened to months of attacks on a bourgeois united Ireland and of the horrors it holds for Protestants.

To read these documents shows there is no continuity in their revolutionary content, only in the seeds of reformism. Obviously, I would not agree with all the wording above myself, but comrade Carolan is trying to argue his continuity. He is now acting in the same way as the "anti-Marxist cretins" he attacked.

After IS

It is true that in articles "autonomy" was used in the 72-74 period, but let us look at documents since.

1976: Fusion document with Workers Power. Troops Out - no mention of federalism (please note, comrade Kinnell). Were there differences with Workers Power on this? Or did they not come out? Or had the idea been dropped?

1977: Manifesto of the International Communist League. This is the major policy statement of the old ICL. Quite a long section on Ireland. Troops Out, no mention of federalism. But in other aspects, as with the earlier documents, this is quite different from what the comrades are now arguing. For example, in

IB 70 in the 12 Points document, comrade Kinnell says the following in the second point: "The Protestants cannot be compared with the whites of South Africa or the European settlers of colonial Algeria". This is a major point because it is an overall historical judgment.

Yet what do we see in the ICL Manifesto? "Despite the length of time that the Protestants have existed in north-east Ireland, the Orange state has had the structure, the internal communal relations, and the right wing and racist political dynamic of states such as South Africa, 'Rhodesia' (Zimbabwe) and Israel."

Or, "Britain's attempt, in the interest of normal relations with the Southern bourgeoisie, to desectarianise the Northern state, has produced a revolt by its 'Loyalists'. In its political and social essence, this is no different from the revolt of the 'Rhodesian' whites." Would we offer 'federalism' to the Rhodesian whites? Of course not. It is quite obviously incompatible with the 1977 ICL Manifesto. Are you now opposed to that manifesto, comrade Kinnell?

1979: SCLV Election Manifesto: "Troops out now", with no federalism mentioned. Says that the Catholic workers in Northern Ireland "do not fight the Protestants as Protestants. They fight for a united Ireland where Catholics and Protestants will live together without discrimination". Quite different, for example, from the review in SO 149 of the television film on Ireland.

Dec. 1980: SO pamphlet "Labour democracy and the fight for a workers government". Still being sold on the bookstall. Contains two articles, neither mention federalism. The second says, "our own British state is fighting a war against a people waging a national liberation struggle". Again, quite different from statements that now ridicule such a conception. "Where we stand", in this pamphlet and in all SOs, says "Troops out now", and does not mention federalism.

July 1981 WSL/ICL fusion document - mentions Ireland under the section on Permanent Revolution and in none of the discussion on this did comrades Carolan or Kinnell take this up. In this section it talks about the "national liberation struggles such as those in Kurdistan, Ireland and Palestine". The document calls for "an end to the political and military interference in Ireland by British imperialism" (p.14). How can this be reconciled with the British government being part of the political settlement? In the programme at the end is "Troops out now", and no mention of federalism.

Study history

Comrade Carolan has attacked us for not studying the history of the ICL and thus knowing that it had a "federalist" position. Looking at all the more recent documents prior to the fusion, and these were all policy statements, is this surprising? But the question is more relevant to ask of him.

He says he studied our material. He must have realised we did not have a "federalist" position. Why did he not raise it with us? If he and comrade Kinnell thought at the time of fusion that "federalism" was the "only solution now", or that those who did not say it were "mindless phrasemongers", why did they not raise it with us?

Two things become obvious when looked at in this way. One is that they did not consider "federalism" of any importance at that time, or when any of the major documents quoted above were written. It is simply something to be picked up and dropped at will. Now why is it so important? For the second reason - that politics are not objective things, but factional things. Everything is seen in a factional light. Comrade Carolan was being questioned on Ireland, and thus he had to try to ridicule his opponents. He could not lose a vote on this, and so federalism suddenly became a principle. It dominated everything.

But there is a third, less obvious yet more important, question which is that

the position on federalism is becoming more important as comrade Carolan's politics drift more in a direction of excusing imperialism. This came out in the Falklands debate and is now becoming clear in the Ireland debate.

SO and factionalism

From my letter on the 13th January up until the conference, an average federalism came into the paper every second week. My article was taking up two previous articles. Prior to those, in the whole of 1982 autonomy was mentioned just twice in the paper - once on 28-10, in an article by Carolan, and the other time on the 13th April when an article ended up for an "independent and united Federal Ireland".

Anybody could be forgiven for not realising how important the issue was, until disagreement with it arose within the movement. This year, on the 20th January, (one week after my letter) it even got into the lead article of the paper, which was not about Ireland but about the police shooting of the man they thought was Martin. Yet last year had many major articles by Carolan and Kinnell on Ireland that did not mention it. Several of them were specifically about the problem of the Protestants.

For example, on the 12-8, comrade Kinnell had a long article about the Assembly which had Troops out now in it, but did not mention federalism - more "mindless phrasemongering" no doubt. Or on the 6-5, comrade Carolan's article on the Workers Party that deals with the North - no federalism mentioned. On the 22-4, Carolan replied to the IRSP - no federalism. Surely he would have considered that relevant? On the 11-3, Carolan about the People's Democracy and the Provos. No federalism.

As in 1983, there were articles about every two weeks on Ireland in the paper. But in 1982 federalism was not an issue in the movement, and therefore the paper did not need to be used by the comrades to their factional advantage.

Some new points

At the 1983 LP conference, the major issue on Ireland was the Protestant veto. Tony Benn moved a resolution to end this and got more than 900,000 votes. We continuously made this the central question to our discussion in the debate.

Is the main thing, "persuading the Protestants" into a united Ireland? Comrades Carolan and Kinnell said this was the case, that otherwise you would have a bloodbath etc. This was the argument of the right wing at the LP conference. It has always been the basis of their policy as we showed in the IB.

Where do the comrades stand on the veto?

Carolan announced at a recent EC meeting that new conditions will now prevail in the group. In future only the majority political line will appear in SX. The model he gave was WF in IS, where he said they were lucky to get the occasional article. This statement completely changes the relationships which have existed since fusion - where the conception was the strengths of the two component parts coming together to form the line. Since then there has been open access to the paper, except naturally where positions have been voted on at conference. (Although in the case of the Malvinas war the conference decision has not been carried in the paper because Carolan Kinnell and Hill disagree with it).

There is a major democratic issue involved in my opinion if an individual can change a very major component of the relationships which exist within the group by a personal statement. But that is not the issue I want to take up here.

One of the practical results of this new policy has been the refusal to print an agreed article I wrote on the industrial situation in January.

This has been a source of friction within the EC and which has now resulted in a statement by Carolan justifying his action. The statement carries the authority of being attached to the minutes but in fact was not made at the meeting. It was written afterwards and then attached to the minutes. It is true that Carolan did raise some of the points at the meeting. But doing it this way none of the arguments of the other side are put.

Therefore given the importance of the general issue I want to put the other side here as to what happened and also to reprint the article so that comrades can judge for themselves if it was valid material for SX.

I approached Kinnell early in January and asked him if it would be acceptable for me to write an article on the industrial situation to the length of about two centre spreads. He said he could "see nothing in principle against it". Therefore at the EC on Jan 22nd I submitted the first part of it. Kinnell responded by saying "write the whole article and then it can be looked at"

At the EC on Saturday January 28th I submitted the whole article, with a bit of tidying up needed at the end which I would do. Kinnell took the article and I offered to call in the office on Monday Morning to discuss any problems with it and how it could be split in half.

On Sunday night Carolan phoned me to say don't come into the office but phone him on Monday night. When I rang he said a decision had already been taken not to put the article in and the space had been reallocated. He gave his objections as (a) it referred back to the September conference and was therefore me arguing my political positions. (b) It was journalistically poor and had too many quotes. (c) It was too heavy for SX and could be considered for the magazine.

I didn't agree with any of that, I thought it was of average quality and was material which was badly needed at the time given the political and industrial situation at the time. It is true that I did object to the fact that I clearly have far less rights in relation to the paper than John McIlroy who is a non-member. It is also true that Carolan responded by saying that he edits McIlroy's article but the point was taken when I said it was rather different since McIlroy's politics were indistinguishable for Carolan on such things. (I also objected to the centre of the industrial work of the group being Manchester University). On the context of the article I said I thought it was completely valid to refer to the September SX conference. It was only one of the best things we have done recently and a line was put forward which held up very well in subsequent events. There is in any case no WSL 'position' on the industrial situation.

I conclude therefore that the objection is due to the new policy of the Majority Faction towards everyone else's right to contribute to SX and the clearly differing line which has emerged on the role of the TUC. Carolan regarded my assessment of the September TUC conference - that it was a serious setback and wholly negative - as ultra-left. He argued that the role of the TUC in the NGA dispute was weak but progressive. I argued that it was wholly negative and much worse than in the 1970 - 74 period. Although there has not been a reference to it it is likely that there is a political objection to my view on the crisis of the Trade Union left - given Kinnell's past polemics with me over the role of Scargill.

Anyway in order that Cds can judge for themselves here is the article in full.

The role of the TUC and the crisis of the left in the trade union movement

The spectacle of the leadership of the NGA purging itself in front of the High Court after being stabbed in the back by the TUC sums up the role of the TUC since the Thatcherites came to power in 1979 - now within weeks we have the banning of trade unions at the GCHQ at Cheltenham: what will be next? Possibly a ban on strikes in the civil service in general, and in telephones and other "essential services".

I made the point in the opening statement to the Socialist Organiser trade union conference last September that the trade union and labour leaders have been even more determined to prevent strikes and to sell out struggles since the election last June than before - they see a shift to the right in the labour movement, in policy terms, as essential if Labour is going to make an electoral comeback - and this is harder to achieve if strikes and radical developments take place. This was an added reason to betray, over and above their reformist politics of collaboration with the employers.

We also argued at the September conference that developments at the TUC conference - which had taken place a couple of weeks before - fully reflected this objective of the right-wing. They were helped by a number of chance factors - they were able to utilise to the full the build-up of anti-communism in the weeks before around the Korean jet incident and the Cowley 13, Scargill's visit to Moscow, and the fact that Frank Chapple was in the chair to add flavour to it - but it was in any case they wanted to go.

The left in the Congress were largely isolated - something which had been made easier by the developing crisis of the left in the unions which had brought serious retreats in unions such as in the NUM (where Scargill failed to confront the right-wing over the Lewis Merthyr strike and went on to leave Monktonhall and Cronton in isolation).

Hypocrites from the right were able to use this to undermine Scargill's authority in the TUC conference and increase the isolation of the left - although Scargill retained support amongst delegates who more reflected the rank and file.

All this made possible the decision we all know about at the conference; most importantly the decision to end a policy of not talking to the Tories over anti-union laws and to enter into talks with Tebbit.

It was the logic of the TUC's real position coming out under these conditions. "They are the elected Government, they have the right to govern and we have to deal with the elected Government." We therefore ended up with a deeply negative conference, which gave the green light to the government and the employers. It was inconceivable that they would not seize on this retreat to advance their offensive and bring the anti-union laws - which they had deliberately kept in the background for tactical reasons - into the front of the stage.

I therefore argued at the September conference that the TUC conference marked a major turn in the already developing employers' offensive against the working class, which would characterise the next period of struggle. It was of course made worse by a swing to the right in the Labour Party conference in October - establishing a centre-right leadership around the 'unity' platform.

The accuracy of that assessment has become obvious. Since the TUC Congress, High Court injunctions have been falling thick and fast on the trade union movement. The full implications of the legislation which were spelled out by many people - including ourselves through a series of meetings organised through the Mobilising Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions - have become

painfully clear.

The response of the TUC to this, and often of the leadership of the trade union concerned, has been disastrous. The NUJ, which was first in line, stood firm until December, when its original Executive decision to defy the High Court was reversed by the 6-person Emergency Committee. Now a special conference, although formally voting to defy the law has left major loopholes that the right wing can use when the crunch comes.

SOGAT 82 leaders caved in in December and complied with a High Court injunction obtained by Robert Maxwell against the boycott of Radio Times distribution in London. Now they have decided to defy a further injunction requiring SOGAT members in other Maxwell plants to do work normally done by SOGAT members who are in dispute at Maxwell's Park Royal plant.

Tebbit's main break-through, however, came with the injunction in October requiring Post Office Engineering Union members to remove the boycott on the private Mercury Consortium's connections with the British Telecom system. There, a letter from the TUC, solicited by POEU general secretary Bryan Stanley 'confirmed' that to comply with the injunction was in line with TUC policy. The POEU executive committee, despite its new broad left majority, recommended to a special conference that the union comply with the law.

This decision was a crucial one. It was the first time a union had complied with Tebbit in a major confrontation. The employers and the government were boosted again. The subsequent situation needs closer examination.

In November, attention switched to the Stockport Messenger where the NGA had been in dispute with Eddy Shah for some time. Shah obtained an injunction against the NGA requiring the union to remove the picket they had placed on Shah's Warrington plant, on the basis that this was 'secondary' action. The NGA refused and were fined £150,000 for contempt of court. The NGA responded by closing down Fleet Street on November 25th and 26th, halting national news papers. The Fleet Street employer filed suits against the NGA for £3million damages for lost production.

On November 29th, the biggest of the mass pickets of about 5,000 people confronted 2,500 police and 300 riot police at Warrington.

The response showed what was very evident in the situation - that the working class were looking for a lead and the best organised sections were prepared to respond in action against the Tebbit laws - as they had done in a number of important disputes over the past year.

There could be no victory for the pickets at Warrington however. The state knew that it was the crucial physical test of the anti-union laws and they were prepared - backed up with the experience of the inner-city rebellions of the summer of 1981 - to use whatever force was necessary to smash the picket and get out Shah's production.

After that, the NGA were fined a further £375,000 and had the whole of their assets sequestered. They responded by calling a one-day national strike of all their members, and went to the TUC for support under the provisions of the Special Conference of executives which met on April 5th 1982 at Wembley and laid down TUC policy on Tebbit (the Wembley conference).

This led, after a disastrous one-week truce by the NGA on the calling off of the mass picket, to the two famous meetings of EPOC - the TUC's Employment and Organisation Committee which met to consider the NGA's request for support for the strike, submitted under the procedure agreed at the Wembley conference.

EPOC, which is chaired by Bill Keys of the other major print union, SOGAT, had been dealing with the NGA's dispute with Shah for some time. They had been giving verbal support but had been opposed to the mass pickets.

At the crucial EPOC meeting on December 12th, there were five absentees - at least three of whom would have voted with the right wing.

The debate at the meeting revolved essentially around whether the TUC should give the NGA 'sympathy' or 'support'. In the end Clive Jenkins coined the phrase 'a sympathetic and supportive attitude'. This was adopted by the 'left', but opposed by Len Murray who considered that it could still be interpreted by the courts as explicit support, and could make the TUC an accessory to the NGA's contempt of court.

In the end, a motion from the left giving a "sympathetic and supportive attitude" was adopted by a vote of 9-7. Those supporting were the TGWU delegation led by Moss Evans, Ken Gill, Alan Sapper, Joe Wade, Lil Stevens of NUPE and the ASTMS delegation led by Clive Jenkins. Voting against were the GMWU delegation led by Ken Baker, Ada Maddocks of NALGO, Roy Grantham of APEX and the AUEW delegation.

After the meeting dispersed, claiming that the left had won, and the TUC would support the NGA, Murray gave his famous and outrageous late-night TV interview on the steps of Congress house, in which he denounced the EPOC decision as out of order. It was against General Council policy and could put the TUC in the courts, he claimed. His job he said was to defend the TUC, and he would call a special meeting of the General Council to get the EPOC decision reversed. For this he was congratulated by Margaret Thatcher and lauded by the press.

(According to Tony Dubbins at the LCDTU conference, the TUC had already made this position clear over the administration of the "defence fund". Murray had ruled that it could not be used for anything which could be construed as illegal. In the end, it was only used for welfare benefits.)

As a result of this, the NGA called off the national strike until the result of the special General Council Meeting was known. The General Council met two days later on December 14th, to discuss the following resolution: "The General Council agrees to refer back EPOC's recommendations. The General Council also agrees to ask the committee, based on the decision of the General Council on December 2nd, to consider the issues further in the light of developments, including the identification and consideration with the NGA of means of bringing the dispute to the best possible conclusion and deterring other print employers and to consider the desirability of a committee of inquiry and to report to the General Council."

There was never any serious possibility of the resolution being lost because there is a built-in right-wing majority on the General Council (although had it been a card vote, the resolution would have been carried almost three to one). But there is another very good reason as well - there was no one fighting to get the members out in defiance of the law. Certainly the 'left' on EPOC were not doing so. Clive Jenkins went on TV two days later to explain that the EPOC resolution had been misread by Len Murray, since it did not imply support for an illegal strike - it had been worded to comply with the law and Len Murray failed to recognise it!

Moss Evans, who was reputedly the strongest for the NGA at the EPOC meeting, had insisted at one point that he was "not talking about bringing out the dockers".

Any chance of a vote for the NGA at that General Council meeting would

have required a determined minority fighting hard against the right-wing to expose the real situation and determined to get a strike and get the members out. There was no serious chance of that happening, given the present crisis of the left. Certainly it did not happen in any way.

Joe Wade summed up the situation quite well after the General Council meeting. He said, "What happened today is not only that the NGA has been sold down the river, but every trade union has been sold down the river... The policy of the TUC General Council is one of conformity with the 1980 and 1982 Employment Acts and not with the policy of the Wembley conference."

He is right. There is no doubt that that decision represented conformity with the Acts. There is no doubt that it represented total acceptance of the Tory law and total opposition to any section of the trade union movement which tries to break them. But more than that, it represented an historic setback for the class, which will have serious long term effects, and be very difficult to reverse.

To the extent that there was an argument at the General Council, it was over the terms of TUC policy as decided by the Wembley Conference. Did those decisions entitle the NGA to support or not? Joe Wade argued that they did; Len Murray said they did not. Murray said the support of Wembley was "conditional on the fight being winnable", and "we have to consider every decision on its merits". A time-honoured bureaucrat's let-out if ever there was one.

It is an important point, because it would be the central argument in a special conference if one were called, and presumably it will be argued over at the next TUC conference anyway.

As everyone knows, the Wembley conference adopted the famous eight point policy. Point one was, support for all those fighting for conditions and trade union recognition. Point two calls for no participation in closed shop ballots. Point three declares non-acceptance of funds for union ballots. Point four demands closer working between unions when in dispute with employers. Point five provides for support for a union in conflict with the Employers Act. Point six covers observance of the TUC disputes procedure. Point seven refers to trade union members of industrial tribunals refusing to sit on closed shop cases and point eight calls for a financial levy.

The key to it all, therefore, is point five, which is worth quoting in full: "Where the General Council receives a request to assist a union faced by or experiencing legal action by an employer, and are satisfied that assistance from the movement is justified, they are empowered

- 1) to co-ordinate action by other affiliated unions in support of the union in difficulties, including, if necessary, calling industrial action against the employer concerned, or more widely;
- 2) to provide financial assistance to a union which experiences severe financial problems as a result of damaging actions."

The get-out clauses were obvious enough. The General Council were given discretion to decide if support is "justified". Murray did talk at one point about "extricating" unions from difficult situations. This was a substantial qualification. But it has to be seen in the light of the speeches motivating the policy at the conference. They show clearly that neither Murray nor any of the right wing were talking in the terms used by Murray on December 14 when he ruled out TUC support for illegal strike action on principle.

This is what Murray said when motivating the policy at Wembley: "Recommendations four and five hang together. We need to reaffirm today our commitment to work more closely together, and to help each other in difficulty. That is not something we can leave until a legal case emerges. We have to build a sense of common purpose among unions in negotiations and industrial action."

where members see immediately that they have common interests. In that way we can then more easily swing into defence of a union or unions which encounters difficulties.

"That brings me to recommendation five, which is pivotal. In it we are warning employers and other potential litigants that if a union which is acting justifiably faces or experiences legal action by an employer, it will not be left on its own (my emphasis - AT). It will have the right to turn to the movement for financial and for industrial support (my emphasis - AT). So let any employer concerned remember that and think twice before he decides to run the risk of taking us all on - and let other employers understand too that they could become embroiled in this."

Now the get-out clause is there again - "acting justifiably". But there is no objection in principle to strike action against the Act. Indeed, Murray explicitly supports strike action against the Act - and there has never been any suggestion that the NGA was not acting "justifiably". In fact the NGA, as Joe Wade has said, followed all the provisions of the eight points to the letter. They worked with the TUC on the dispute throughout.

Murray went on to spell out the qualification again: "The support they (the General Council) give cannot be automatic or unconditional: there will be no blank cheques."

But again this is not what was said to the NGA. In their case Murray simply said the TUC cannot support illegal industrial action - his job, he said, was "to defend the TUC".

Yet at the Wembley conference he went on: "The General Council will be asking executives for the support that only you are empowered to give, so unions can have confidence in the General Council, both to give firm and positive leadership and to act in a responsible way, whether it is providing financial support or for calling for supportive industrial action (my emphasis)."

Here he is talking about the TUC calling supporting action, not just endorsing it!

"In voting for recommendation five, you must understand that you are giving a pledge to respond to a call from the General Council when that call comes! (my emphasis). That call will be to support another union or unions which are under attack, to sustain an essential trade union right. We are not talking about breaking the law for the sake of breaking the law (my emphasis). We are not talking about using industrial action to smash a government undemocratic-ally - but if public concern with the consequences of this ill-judged and harmful legislation adds to the growing disillusionment with this government and leads to an early election and to the election of a Labour Government pledged to repeal this act, then I for one will cheer that".

So here he talks about breaking the law. There is no way this can square with December 14th.

He wound up this way: "No government can take away from the working people the right to defend themselves and defend the unions which they have created and which they sustain. If, while the unions are going about their proper function, they run up against laws which threaten their very survival as effective bodies, then no one should be surprised if union members say "We cannot live with this law". That is the danger the government courts if it puts ordinary men and women into situations where they are left with no options but to resist an unjust law, and to face fearlessly the consequences which flow from that."

Again there is a get-out clause - unions going about their "proper" function - but it cannot be applied to the NGA, which quite clearly was. Subsequently the word "proper" has been used by Murray to imply action within the law; but that is not the way he used it at the conference, where it appeared in a paragraph which urged workers to resist an "unjust law".

Joe Wade was right therefore in what he said after December 14th. But why did Murray and Co. put themselves in such a situation? Why were they not much more careful what they said at Wembley and why did they not have some bigger loop-holes?

Mainly because Wembley came before the June 9th election. In fact it came before the South Atlantic war at a time when Labour was still well ahead in the opinion polls. They had no reason to think that Labour would not win the election and hopefully the Prior and Tebbit Acts would be repealed.

The Tories were not pushing the Prior Act very hard, and they would probably scrape through until the election without a major confrontation. Under those conditions the TUC leaders felt they could afford the bravado and of course they needed to be seen to do something because of the nature of the legislation.

Secondly many of them did not believe their own words when it came to the Employment Acts. Many had convinced themselves that the employers would in most cases not choose to use the law. The TUC put out a pamphlet designed to convince the employers of this:

"Once the Employment Bill becomes law, it will be mainly up to the employers to decide whether to take unions and their officers to court... It is up to the unions therefore to emphasise the dangers of the new legislation to all the employers with whom they deal."

Thirdly they had the get-out clauses which they hoped would be adequate if they were ever asked for help. The speeches on April 5th 1982 were bravado, but they knew if the worst came to the worst, as it did with the NGA, they would ignore any decisions taken and do as they liked anyway - they have a reliable right-wing majority they can rely on if necessary.

There was certainly no possibility of anything better coming out of Wembley, since the 'Special Conference' was a unity jamboree. There was no attempt at all from the left to challenge the escape clauses or to assess if it would be adequate when the time came. In fact every single left-winger who spoke, spoke in full support. Scargill called for industrial action, but he did not criticise the proposals.

By far the best speech of the conference came not from the left, but from Joe Wade. It actually addressed the real situation facing the unions, criticised the resolution and was quite prophetic in the way he saw the print unions being in the front line - which was no doubt why he took a more realistic view of the situation. He says that the validity of the resolution will depend on "the interpretation which the General Council place on those recommendations" and went on "and at the present time we have certain reservations about them".

It is well worth quoting quite a bit of his speech, given how central the NGA has been subsequently: "As Len Murray pointed out, this Employment Bill will obviously hit us all, but it will hit the print unions and some other unions particularly hard. Certain sections of the Bill have far-reaching implications for us which are not quite so damaging for other unions.

"So I have to say that these recommendations, in the eyes of the print trade unions, may not go far enough. That will depend on the interpretation

which the General Council place on those recommendations and at the present time we have certain reservations about them, but, whatever interpretations they place on them, I have to say that I entirely agree with Arthur Scargill that inevitably we will have to resist aspects of this legislation by taking industrial action or we will have to accept organisations, which we have had built up over many, many years, being destroyed, with the consequential implications in terms of unemployment and reduced wages and conditions for many thousands of our members...

"We have reservations about the General Council's current course, but, having said that, I can say that the NGA will whole-heartedly support the TUC's campaign. The NGA will come to the support of any trade union under attack. The NGA will pay the levy and the NGA will accept the decisions of this conference...

"If this leads the print unions into a confrontation with our employers, we have no doubt that, in the same way that we have committed ourselves to support any other union in trouble, we shall have the wholehearted support of the Movement in our fight and our resistance."

Most other speeches were empty rhetoric. But overall there was no doubt about what was being said. The motion gave the general council discretion, but the conference was in principle in favour of industrial action against the Tebbit laws.

After the sell-out, the NGA said they would consult with their "friends" as to what to do next: their "friends" being the unions who had voted with them at the General Council. It was not much of a prospect. It could be said that with friends like that, they hardly needed enemies!

On the front page of the January edition of the TGWU Record, Moss Evans called it a "protective alliance". "I pledge that the NGA will be afforded full moral, financial and physical support", he said.

He also accused the TUC of departing from Wembley: "The TGWU stands by the eight point charter agreed by the Wembley conference in 1982. With the failure of the TUC General Council of December 14th to back that charter, particularly clause five, there is now a need for unions and others who could become casualties of the Prior and Tebbit laws to form a protective alliance to fill the vacuum."

And TGWU executive officer Larry Smith pledged: "The 21 TUC representatives who supported the NGA will lead the majority of trade unionists in the fight to protect their unions."

But still nothing came of it. They never took the call for an emergency TUC conference seriously, and were even at that time looking towards the September conference to overturn the General Council. But what situation will the trade unions be in by then? The TUC will have retreated even further!

Nothing came of all this of course. The NGA executive took the decision to go back into the High Court and purge their contempt, in other words get down on their knees and apologise. It was another very (dark) day for the trade union movement.

It puts the TUC far to the right of their stance. Nor have the betrayals continued just at the level of the anti-union laws! The process we pointed to in September - the employers' offensive and the collapse of leadership in mines, in engineering, in cars, in shipbuilding and in the public sector - have continued apace.

In ship building, a very militant section of workers - more than ready to enter into struggle - have been ruthlessly sold out by the Confed leaders under conditions where it will mean virtually the end of the industry.

Last week Confed leaders accepted the so-called "restructuring" plan which ends all protective agreements - the so-called "restrictive practices" - on the very day that British Shipbuilders management announced the closure of three more yards and hundreds more redundancies, on top of the loss of 3,000 jobs at Scott Lithgow and 6,000 more in recent months. Confed officials said that the deal was designed to "stabilise the industry".

Scott Lithgow is a good example of what sell-outs like this do to the working class. They were a work force which had voted solidly to support the national strike call - despite the fact that they were threatened with closure; an extremely strong and principled position.

Yet immediately after the sell-out (the original sell-out) they told management that they were prepared to accept any conditions provided that the yard was kept open. Now they are involved in the "work on" which seems to be a way of avoiding real action and hoping for the best.

In the rail workshop closures, neither the right wing of the AUEW nor the broad left leadership of the NUR have any answers to propose. All this gives us little grounds for confidence for the future of the Ford strike decision and the defence of jobs in other parts of the car industry such as Rovers and Leyland Vehicles.

In the health service, plans are being drawn up for the massive privatisation of ancillary services, with the loss of hundreds of thousands of NHS jobs. The response of the union leaders in most cases is to enter into some form of competitive tendering for the jobs. The closure programmes go ahead at the same time with some important victories liked Hayes Cottage Hospital, where an occupation has won the hospital a reprieve.

The march to the right at the top of the trade union movement has done its job and the working class have to foot the bill. They are faced, as ever in such a situation, with the problem of fighting not just the employers and the government, but also fighting against the betrayals of their own leaders and for their own independent way forward.

It is often difficult. Trade union officials have tremendous power when a struggle erupts, to either promote the struggle or defuse, demobilise and destroy it. If the role of the bureaucrats is to be combatted and a struggle taken forward it often depends on whether there is a conscious group of workers and activists able to organise against them, present an alternative leadership and show an independent way forward.

This is where the crisis which exists within the left in the trade unions - at all levels - becomes a big problem. To some extent it reflects the crisis of the left in the Labour Party, but it also reflects the harsh condition in industry and the inadequacy of the left in giving any leadership under those conditions.

The Scargill leadership is an example of the reformist Bennite left gaining positions at the top of the unions. They have been unable to promote the current wages struggle. Although the overtime ban is playing a useful radicalising role within the pits - it is a union action, however inadequate, and it has to be defended against the scabs (and overtime should be banned anyway) - it was an avoidance of a real struggle on the wage review.

On jobs, the Scargill leadership has collapsed completely, as we pointed out the September SO conference and in detail in other SO articles. Kinneil was the start of it. The demobilisation of the strike which spread in support of Kinneil throughout the Scottish coal-field and the CP-led 12-7 vote on the Scottish area executive was not only the responsibility of McGahy and the Scottish area Staligists but also of the Scargill leadership at National level.

After that, Scargill failed to take on the right wing in the NUM Executive in the crucial strike over Lewis orthery a few weeks later in February last

year. The right wing has determined the policy of the union since then, and every defence of a pit closure has been isolated and defeated. Scargill substituted manoeuvring at the top of the union for what was in reality the only way forward - the mobilisation of the membership by developing a powerful strike movement into a national action.

The retreat of the NUM has been particularly important, because workers had looked to it so strongly and it had previously offered the most effective example of the defence of jobs (over Deep Dyffryn).

Another aspect of the crisis of direction of the left is in the broad lefts. They have been an important development in the unions over recent years with the decline of the Communist Party in industry and the rise of the left in the Labour Party.

This development led to broad lefts winning majorities on the executives of two unions - the CPSA and the POEU. Both of these 'victims' led to disasters. In the CPSA the broad left leadership under Militant supporter Kevin Roddy acted little different to the right-wing in the four month strike at Oxford and Birmingham, at the end of 1982.

Twice they tried to get the strikers back to work on shabby compromises and were rejected. They opposed the spreading of the strike. In December a CPSA delegate conference of DHSS workers voted for an all-out national strike from January 17th, after branch consultation and a special conference on January 12th.

Then just before Christmas the leadership called off the consultation, cancelled the conference and recommended a return to work on another shabby deal after an intervention by the TUC. The strike was broken and the right-wing regained control of the union not long after.

In the POEU the process has been remarkably similar. The 1983 conference elected a majority from the Broad Left slate onto the National Executive. Several from the Militant - who have been active in the union for a long time - one from the SL and two from the CP (who are not a major force in the Broad Left) and then the right wing of the Broad Left led by Tony Young.

They were thrown into leadership because the right wing could provide no answer to privatisation which was looming on the immediate agenda. Unfortunately nor could the broad left or any of the elements within it.

They adopted a super-tactical, legalistic approach which excluded by definition the development of the actions which developed over Mercury into a national strike. They actively limited the number of workers on strike in order to maintain their disastrous policy of paying full wages to strikers or those laid off. It was a policy which meant they could only fight with a minority involved and it was not possible to win that way.

The leadership of the broad left and the broad left members on the POEU executive resisted all attempts to change this policy, such as those which were put forward by a supporter of SO at a crucial national meeting of the broad left in the middle of the struggle.

This "selective action" policy is an elitist approach which shares similarities in practice with the elitism of the right wing. In the case of the right wing, of course, they don't want to mobilise the membership; whereas the left simply have no confidence in their members and therefore try to substitute their own sharp moves for the development of a struggle involving the mass of workers.

Alongside this was their failure at any stage to challenge the long-established, appointed bureaucracy of the POEU, who continued to run things despite the election of a left executive.

In fact, as the struggle with Mercury went on, Bryan Stanley increased his grip on events. And when it came to the special conference where the disastrous decision was taken by the executive to recommend that the union comply with the Mercury injunction, Stanley did the complete job. He approached Len Murray for a letter advocating compliance with the law and circulated every delegate with a letter from the union's legal advisors outlining the consequences of breaking the law.

Not that they lacked the means to challenge Stanley. Phil Holt, a member of Militant, held the key position of chairperson of this industrial action subcommittee. All of the decisions on strategy and tactics came from that committee - which was never overturned by the executive or anything else throughout the action.

The left cannot ignore the problem which has arisen. A union with a broad left executive collapsed, and provided Tebbit with his first major breakthrough without a shot being fired in terms of resistance to the law.

This clearly had a serious effect on the struggle against Tebbit, since the POEU was also a union in a strong strategic position to carry out an effective struggle.

In general, the root of the problem is the failure of Trotskyists, in the post war period, to develop a current in the unions which can seriously challenge the reformists for leadership, and present an alternative way forward.

Specifically, however, there is a serious problem in the way the new non-Stalinist dominated broad lefts have developed. This was drawn out at the SO conference in the workshop on the broad lefts. The speaker from the POEU broad left, Colin Talbot, who introduced the discussion, defended strongly the way the POEU broad left operated, particularly their policy of never taking a vote and never adopting an official position as a broad left.

He argued it on the basis that the main question in the broad lefts was the unity of the forces involved. SO supporter Tony Richardson challenged this view in discussion, arguing that the question was not one of unity as an end in itself, but of the struggle for leadership in the union through the fight for a policy which could show a way forward in the struggle.

The problem is that "unity" in the POEU broad left essentially meant never challenging or even criticising the members of the broad left who were on the executive committee and were going along with disastrous policies. It meant never criticising the executive itself. Therefore criticism of those policies or an alternative to them never got a look in, in fact met with hostility.

It meant an accommodation with Tony Young and Co within the local left which led to him being put forward, in the middle of the struggle, on the broad left slate for the 1984 conference (a decision which was reversed when the broad left met to discuss a postmortem on the struggle after the defeat).

There is a conclusion we should draw from this. Broad lefts are of little value just as electoral machines or as a forum for discussion. They may play this role to some advantage in the early stages of their development or in quieter times in the union. But when a struggle emerges and particularly when they are in a position of some influence, they are either bodies which can make a contribution to the struggle for leadership, the development of an independent strategy to the bureaucracy, and the mobilisation of the mass of workers involved behind that strategy, or they are nothing.

If they continue under those conditions as a discussion group and not a fighting force taking decisions and acting on them, then they must become prey for the right wing who will take full advantage of the weakness, and the

movement will suffer a setback (as will the left, who are seriously discredited by such examples).

As Marxists we base ourselves not on elitist sharp manoeuvres to outwit the employers or the bureaucracy in control of the unions, but on our confidence in the strength and potential of the working class as an exploited class to respond in struggle to a leadership and a programme which points towards their own independent interests.

If the mistakes of the past are to be avoided, the development of new left currents in the trade unions must be based on such conceptions.

As Marxists within such trends, we must fight for workers' control demands, as advanced by Trotsky in the Transitional Programme. We need to organise and educate a tradition within the unions which can take workers, in a process of struggle, beyond a reformist level of consciousness and shake off the limitations which have been imposed upon them for so long.

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