

INTERNAL BULLETIN No. 85

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A REPLY TO IB 83

In his destructive document "Enough is Enough" (IB 83) Carolan argues that the present chronic internal problems of the WSL essentially date from last April's conference. After that he says the minority was faced with a choice between two options - either split, or act as a disciplined minority. He says that in reality we did neither and "launched instead on a course of escalating disruption".

He goes on to argue that the "them and us" polarisation was "posed initially (and essentially) entirely from their side and not all from the majority".

In other words there was on the one hand these honest people constructively trying to build up the organisation in an unbiased non-factional way and on the other, a bunch of factional wreckers trying to stop them from doing it. That is not an exaggerated reading of IB 83.

It is an interpretation of the internal problems which is designed to line up ex I-CLers for the organisational moves Carolan is currently planning against the minority. His challenge however on how the factional heat developed in the organisation cannot go unanswered.

The basic problem was the emergence, after the fusion, of a series of deep going differences between the two old traditions and the absence of the necessary democratic structures and tolerant attitudes necessary to contain and discuss them.

This problem, it can be seen in hindsight, was contained in the attitude of Carolan/Kinnell/Hill to the fusion. It is very clear now -whatever they said to the I-CL at the time- was not to "draw on the strengths of both traditions" (where did that go?) but to absorb the old WSL into their own culture. It was not a fusion, but a takeover bid. The old WSL was to be digested into the I-CL tradition and the undigestable bits spat out.

This attitude led to fusion negotiations which were mainly characterised by diplomacy. Differences came out in as much as they were dragged out. The attitude of C/K/H was to play them down at that time and to gradually bring them out after fusion and systematically establish their line on every significant issue. Anything less than this would be completely unacceptable to them since they are self-evidently incapable of co-existing with any significant differences at all.

The problem with that approach was that the absorption of the old WSL was never a serious possibility. The fusion would either exist on the basis of "drawing on the strengths of both organisations" and having a regime which could contain the differences arising from the different traditions or it would become impossible. The situation would increasingly polarise around the old traditions.

So what happened? When did the differences emerge and who was responsible for the factional heat? Certainly to date it from the April conference is not serious. In fact the disputes and problems arose very soon after the fusion and in fact have been a part of the same political thread throughout.

CAROLAN'S ROLE IN THE FUSED GROUP

The first sharp clash came a few months after the fusion, in the autumn of 1981 over the role of Carolan in the group. At that time (and for a long time afterwards) he effectively was a full-timer without a job. Nominally he was joint editor of the WSR, but it never came out. Therefore, all he did in reality was write articles for the paper - in most cases the articles he decided to write. It did of course give him a very big influence in the paper indeed.

Booth came to the EC and raised the matter of Carolan's duties as a full-timer. He argued that it was unhealthy that someone so little involved in the implementation of policy should be so dominant in forming it. The reaction of Carolan to this was to absent himself from EC and OC meetings, and all party work for a period of five weeks. He said he wanted to "think things over". All attempts to bring him under the discipline of the group were frustrated by the ex I-CL side of the EC. Carolan (who then as now had an answer for everything) argued that it was a "mature" thing to do. Eventually he came back and argued that we must have a "tolerant regime". It was a very sharp clash and eventually resolved by a decision to keep the whole episode inside the EC - not even report it to the EC. It had very serious long-term effects because what it really meant was that the EC was not competent to criticise Carolan or control what he was doing. From then on the full-timers based in G Street were really not under the control of the leading bodies in any fundamental way. The EC for example was not in the position to take controversial decisions in relationship to their jobs, or to propose controversial changes or replacements. Booth never mentioned the matter again after that meeting and everything settled down into a very unsatisfactory situation.

ORIENTATION OF THE PAPER

Soon after that there was a clash over the orientation of the paper (early January 1982). I argued that it was essentially speaking to the left in the MP and not to the industrial working class. It was quite a constructive clash in the sense that I felt someone was listening and the paper improved afterwards to some extent.

CONTROL OVER THE PAPER

A much worse clash came over the coverage of martial law in Poland in the paper - which came about at that time. Carolan wanted to write two lengthy articles for the paper before it had been discussed by the EC. We argued that it was a major world event, probably very contentious within the group, and our first response should be discussed. Carolan denounced this as "censorship" and we had a sharp clash. This eventually resulted in Carolan moving a resolution to the EC (on February 2nd) on the "press and the regime".

Looked at in the light of recent positions of Carolan "the norm in Trotskyist groups is that the positions of the majority are the only ones which appear in publications of the group" it is a bizarre resolution - but of course it came at a time when Carolan thought he might be in a minority on some things.

The resolution argues how sterile a paper would be which was confined to majority views on everything and presses for open access to the paper. We opposed sections of it at the time because of the context in which it came forward. It was designed not only to give open access on non-voted position -with which we agreed- but to allow Carolan to continue to have the kind of latitude he wanted over Poland which goes beyond that. (Viewed in today's conditions of the WSL however, it is very good, and if it still on offer we will have it) :-

"1) The paper should be so edited as to promote and defend the agreed positions of the League. It will maintain a sharp and clear line on the immediate issues of the class struggle.

2) Agreed policy covers positions adopted by conference, leading committees, etc. It does not and cannot cover shades of analysis, assessment, etc; moreover, such officially adopted positions can be solidly and scientifically grounded only to the extent that they are based on substantial work done by competent and interested comrades to develop those 'shades' as clearly as possible in line with objective reality. The Leninist method strives for a

homogeneous understanding - but not on the basis of averaging out. Leninism therefore demands a range of shades of analysis in the press - the alternative being to edit the press on the basis of the lowest common denominator or a consensus i.e. to sterilise the paper and the organisation politically.

3) Given the different cultures and traditions in the League, and given that the lowest common denominator politics is alien to Trotskyism and unprincipled, we do not have any alternative in the organisation but the approach above.

4) Where there is a majority position, minority views should generally be allowed space in the press for discussion. The exceptions should be where such public discussion compromises the integrity of the organisation, would bring us into discredit, or uses the weight of bourgeois public opinion against the League etc.

On major defined differences the right of decision would, of course, lie with the leading bodies of the League."

How could you find a more dramatic change of position? As soon as Carolan becomes a majority he wants a complete clamp down! Kinnell put some amendments to the resolution which had the same thrust:

"Political discussion should be pursued in internal bulletins and internal meetings. Certainly articles having the character of sharp internal polemic should go in the IB. But, given that committees can't write articles, the week-to-week work of political agitation and propaganda cannot fail to express shades of controversy - unless all articles are reduced to shallow, minimal agitation. The appearance of articles reflecting shades of analysis (within agreed positions) should be regulated by the class struggle around us - i.e. by the need for keeping facts in review and responding to developments."

The resolution in the context of the day effectively meant that Carolan could continue as freelance writer for the paper with very little control over what he did, and he carried on that for a further year and a half.

WORK AMONGST WOMEN

Before moving on to later events, there was another factor which seriously shaped the early part of the fusion - the question of work amongst women. This presented itself at the time of fusion as the least resolved problem. Certainly it quickly became a very contentious issue. Again for us the central problem was that the whole area of work around FB was firmly outside of the control of the WSL and its leading committees, RL was out of control, strongly objected to any control from the WSL, and was taking FB down a clearly feminist road. Every attempt by members of the old WSL to change that situation was blocked by Carolan and Kinnell. RL was constantly protected by them.

One attempt to take up the situation was made by Cunliffe in January 1982. He tried to identify the problems of the work and propose a number of practical steps which could be taken to try to redirect the work around upcoming conferences and struggles involving workers.

Since it argues a pretty full case and shows what we were trying to do at the time, it is worth quoting in full:

" 1) This EC recognises that the differences that have remained in the work amongst women are political differences which cannot be dismissed as mere personal antagonisms between the comrades assigned to lead the work. They reflect (a) the initial failure of the fused WSL EC/NC to establish a common political focus for the work around which the very different experiences and strengths of the pre-fusion organisations could be brought together; and (b) a failure of the existing leadership of FB to make any significant attempt to incorporate forces from the old WSL, or make any significant turn towards working class women in struggle (St Mary's !)

As a result there is now a danger that the two forthcoming conferences -which might have provided the needed focus- could prove instead to be further missed opportunities unless the EC recognises its responsibility to give political leadership in this work and mobilise the movement as a whole along agreed lines.

At present however, the EC remains completely unaware of the political structure of either conference, or the orientation of the work for them; within the WSL itself the committees (Steering Cttee, editorial sub-cttee) set up by the EC/NC to direct the work have not functioned; political decisions of the Women's Commission and even the FB Summer Conference have been ignored or overturned (publication of Action Programme); and no reports of this area of the movement's work have been given to the EC.

2) Accordingly, the EC agrees to work as seriously and systematically on our political campaign and preparation for the WF TU conference as we intend to work on the SO TU conference. We therefore instruct cde R as the full-timer responsible for this work:

(a) To present a full report on the work done and plans laid for the WF TU conference, along with an account of our involvement, our level of control (if any) and possible input into the Action Committee Women's Right To Work conference, to the next meeting of the Organising Committee. And then to report each week to the EC/OC on progress in these two campaigns - either in person or in writing.

(b) To convene a full meeting of the Steering Committee, to be attended by other EC members, which will discuss in detail the preparations for these two campaigns - including leaflets and other propoganda. This will mean fixing a time and place which is convenient for SC comrades who live outside London and who have until now been largely excluded from its work.

(c) To submit for prior discussion and agreement by either the EC or OC, resolutions and substantial proposals which she or other leading WSL members wish to table on broader committees organising either conference. Where necessary, special meetings of WSL leading bodies should be called. But in any case such provision should apply to the final proposals which we make for the agenda and structure of either conference.

(d) To take steps, in conjunction with cdes P & J, to ensure that all branches take up campaign work for these two conferences, not leaving it simply to women cdes or the minority of women cdes active in FB. It should include lobbies and approaches to CLP's, union branches, Trades Councils etc, and, in particular, energetic approaches to women workers from current or recent struggles, as well as those forces disorientated by the winding up of Women's Voice.

(e) To ensure that each WSL Branch/area organises through FB, a local public meeting on the fight for a Women's right to work. Such meetings must combine general propoganda on the ideological questions ("a women's place"..etc) with agitation for the WF Action Programme of demands to defend jobs.

(f) To ensure that these campaigns are run in such a way as to establish and broaden the membership of FB, with the formation of genuine and functioning branches in all areas as part of a national organisation. At the same time we must draw the most developed and militant women into the WSL itself - which means that our campaign material and the conduct of our meetings must maintain sufficient marxist profile to attract the best elements. Any political difficulties in getting branches to work in this way should be taken up by the EC.

(g) To ensure that the content of each issue of WF is fully discussed wherever possible by the Women's Commission, or on other occasions by a properly convened full meeting of the Steering Committee at a time and venue accessible for comrades outside London. To present material in such a way as to offer a lead rather than simply reportage for women in struggle and for the broader women's movement. To carry in the next issue of WF the Action Programme adopted last summer, and to ensure that all future issues find ways of propogandising and popularising its demands. And to ensure that any political changes in the content of articles or substantial rewriting of articles submitted by WSL members is carried out only by prior