

- p.2: Beginnings, September 1982
- p.3: Political indifference
- p.4: April 1983: the National Committee slate
- p.5: The statement to the April 1983 conference
- p.6: 'Never mind about the politics'
- p.6: The 'middle faction' as ally of the Smith faction
- p.7: The Parsons slate for the NC
- p.7: Saving the Smith faction
- p.8: The August 1983 conference
- p.8: Federalism, anti-centralism
- p.8: Parsons, Smith and Jones

The Parsons group

by Carolan.

"Without plumbing the gist of programmatic differences, he repeats commonplaces on the 'impossibility' of any one tendency 'claiming to incorporate in itself all truth'. Ergo? Live and let live. Aphorisms of this type cannot teach an advanced worker anything worthwhile; instead of courage and a sense of responsibility they can only instill indifference and weakness... Revolutionary ardour in the struggle for socialism is inseparable from intellectual ardour in the struggle for truth".

(Leon Trotsky, polemicising against the semi-revolutionary French socialist leader Marceau Pivert: 'Trotsky on France', p.245).

"The opposition is the worst and most disloyal of all types of factional formations in a revolutionary workers' party: an unprincipled combination. Combinationism is the worst offence against the party because it cuts across the lines of political principle; it aims at an organisational decision which leaves the political and principled disputes unclarified and undecided. Thus, insofar as the combinationist struggle is successful, it hampers the education of the party and prevents a solution of the dispute on a principled basis. Unprincipled combinationism is in every case the denotation of petty-bourgeois politics. It is the antithesis to the Marxist method of political struggle.

Marxists always begin with the programme. They rally supporters around the programme and educate them in its meaning in the process of the struggle. The political victories of the Marxists are always in the first place victories for their programme. The organisational phase of the victory in every case, from the election of a definite slate of candidates in a party faction fight up to and including the seizure of power in an armed struggle, always has one and the same significance: to provide the means and the instrument for carrying out the political programme. Marxist politics is principled politics. This explains, among other things, the homogeneity of the Marxist formation, regardless of whether it is a faction in a party on a small scale, or a full-fledged and fully developed party directly facing the parties of the class enemy. It is this homogeneity of the Marxist organisation which makes possible its firm discipline, its centralisation and its striking power.

Petty bourgeois politics is always a hodge-podge. It never attains to a fully developed and consistent programme. Every petty

bourgeois formation, whether faction or independent party, has this characteristic feature. It fights at best for partial aims, and slurs over contradictions and differences within its ranks in order to preserve a formal unity. Petty bourgeois groupings struggle, not in the name of great principles, but for organisational objectives. To this end, they almost invariably unite people of different views and tendencies, and subordinate the clarification of their differences to success in the organisational struggle. This explains their lack of internal discipline, and their aversion to centralism which is incompatible with a heterogeneous political composition. This determines their tendency to fall apart in the course of a struggle, or soon after it, even though they may have gained a momentary organisational victory.

Petty bourgeois politics is the politics of futility, of the debasement of theory, of the miseducation of the rank and file, of diversion from the primary and decisive questions - the questions of principle - to all sorts of considerations of a secondary order, including the struggle for organisational control..."

(James P Cannon, 'The Struggle for a Proletarian Party')

Parsons declares himself firmly on the side of Smith's faction. If they refuse to accept the resolution on League discipline passed at the March 10 NC, and decide to go out of the organisation, because of it, he will, he says, go with them.

During the last year Parsons has presented himself to the organisation as representing a 'middle position'. But this is untrue.

On the basis of programmatic positions, Parsons should represent an extreme wing of the organisation, far distant from the faction. On issues like the Labour Party and Stalinism he is, logically, further from the Smith faction than the EC majority is. On the Falklands/Malvinas he was with us. On the 'world Trotskyist movement' he has a completely distinctive position.

In actual fact, in recent months, Parsons has been entirely with the Smith faction. At the March 10 NC he voted with the faction consistently - more consistently than did Cunliffe, a close political sympathiser of the faction. Now that agitation against the 'regime' is the primary (and almost the only) plank of the faction, Parsons' IB 84 aligns him completely with them.

Programmatic questions have, for him, been completely subordinated to organisational complaints against the EC majority. No matter what the politics will be of whatever organisation Smith and his group form after their probable split: Parsons will be with them on the basis of "all sorts of considerations of a secondary order..."

The history of the formation and evolution of the undeclared Parsons faction has many lessons to teach the organisation. Let us look at that history.

BEGINNINGS: SEPTEMBER 1982

At the September 1982 conference on the South Atlantic war, an attempt was made by Parsons, Oliver and others to form a buffer faction. Some of us took a semi-friendly attitude to it because we believed that the heat that Smith and his group had created around the Falklands/Malvinas issue was unnecessary (and not only to do with the explicit political issue in dispute: see IB 35 for our analysis). We thought the buffer faction could help slow down the factionalism and polarisation.

Now, a buffer faction can be really independent only rarely. It has pretensions to independence, and its leading figures are often very concerned for personal 'independence'. But not everything that says it is independent, is

independent. The only truly independent faction is one with independent politics: and a buffer faction does not, and cannot, have independent politics.

As James P Cannon put it, in a passage which fits the evolution of the Parsons faction in 1983-4 quite well:

"I am for... the maximum of independent critical thinking and for the amateur independent thinker. What I am against now, as I have been in the past, is the professional independent thinker. I never... saw any good come from that. The professional independent thinker - and we have had lots of them... - holds that independent thinking means disagreeing with Comrade Cannon. Just the reverse side of independent oppositionists...."

('The SWP in World War 2', p.361).

A middle faction will usually, on balance, be more on one side of an alignment than another, and be more or less a satellite of that side.

The September 1982 buffer faction was on our side of the alignment by virtue of inhibiting and slowing down the factionalism of the Smith group. And they said so:

"It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the Tendency comrades wish to polarise the situation in the movement..."

It condemned:

"the real conservatives in the movement - the sectarians, the 'public face of the WSL needs to be raised' merchants, the 'get Carolan' faction..."

We could hope that the buffer faction might organise old-WSL forces to pressurise Smith and Jones towards conciliation and collaboration.

POLITICAL INDIFFERENCE

But the Parsons/Oliver declaration at the September 1982 conference was politically sloppy, vague, written like a Labour-Party-style election address to catch as many people as possible. For example, they wrote:

"Respect is due to the leaderships of both the old WSL and the I-CL, the one for breaking from the politics of Healyism and learning from a genuine involvement in industrial struggle, the other for charting an independent course against other groups and gaining roots in the O..."

"The strengths of the old WSL are mainly twofold: a) its stress on international work, and b) its involvement in industrial and community struggles.

"International work is of vital importance: we need to intervene in the world movement with our ideas: we need to learn from the experiences of our international comrades: we need international solidarity. The formation of the TILC is a great step forward: we should try to expand it.

"The old WSL has a tradition of full involvement in a whole number of industrial and community struggles, fighting for leadership against the trade union bureaucracy. In this way a number of worker militant members were gained. At the same time they learnt in struggle to move from propaganda politics to basing themselves in the experiences of the working class.

"The strength of the I-CL has been mainly in the O. A Belgian comrade at the summer school complained that nobody in the debate had mentioned 'smashing the O.' and 'making the lefts fight'. The fact is that the I-CL started to do precisely that.

The fight for democracy and the Benn for deputy campaign led directly to the SDP split and the present witch-hunt. The Broad groups are a means of drawing the 'lefts' into a fight. The WF initiative has provided a lead to a whole layer of women activists in the labour movement".

Something there for everyone - even for the supporters of the TILC sectarians who were then earnestly engaged in trying to split apart the fusion!

The bit about the old WSL being strong in industrial work, and the I-CL in O. work, was good stuff to boost Smith and Jones, but factually nonsense about the I-CL. Throughout its entire history, the I-CL/WF had taken industry seriously, publishing factory bulletins, industrial papers, etc. Oliver knew this. I asked him why he endorsed the statement: he said it was the sort of thing that was expected. In reality it meant pandering to the pretensions of the old WSL leaders, and the hostile caricatures of the former I-CL people as interested only in O. work.

The summary of the 'strengths' of the pre-fusion organisations was, moreover, almost completely a-political. The I-CL was praised, cryptically, "for charting an independent course against other groups". But there is no virtue in being 'independent' of other groups as such, unless the 'independent' positions and analyses of the I-CL/WF were politically right, or better than the other groups'. Were they? Or were some of them? Which? What was positive about them, politically? The Parsons/Oliver statement offered not a word of actual political evaluation.

APRIL 1983: THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE SLATE

The 'second coming' of the Parsons faction in April 1983 was much worse.

In the run-up to the April conference, people like myself were preoccupied with avoiding a split. It was a very tense situation. The RWL faction was still in the WSL, in alliance with the TILC sectarians who were agitating for a split. They were putting pressure on Smith and his group. There was a danger of a split right down the middle of the organisation, after which a lot of people would afterwards probably have given up in despair.

We played it cautious, determined not to let such a split happen. We made gestures to reassure Smith, Jones and Cunliffe that we weren't going to carve them up. We tried to avoid unnecessary polarisation on the political issues: on the women's work issues, we proposed setting aside the polemical documents and collaboration on a constructive resolution on practical work. When that was refused, we proposed voting in parts on IB 34 to enable us to express support for the constructive parts of that document. On O. work, we collaborated with Cunliffe to produce a common document (IB 39). We proposed Single Transferable Vote for the NC elections to guarantee that minorities would get representation. We proposed to Smith, Jones and Cunliffe a joint agreed slate for the new NC.

The idea of proposing a joint slate was originally put to us by Oliver. Parsons later moved a resolution on the NC instructing the EC to compile such a slate. But the Smith group refused. So we proceeded without their agreement or cooperation to try to construct a balanced NC slate.

We tried to act as the aspirant leadership of an organisation, and not just as a faction. It did cost us something. It meant constructing a slate from which we had to exclude people whom we considered valuable (e.g. Wolf, (Bruce) a recent member of the I-CL EC), and including people whom we did not consider valuable except as representing the Smith faction.

Despite the Smith faction's refusal to discuss a joint slate, we thought that the 'buffer' faction would cooperate - especially since such a slate was their idea in the first place.

They wouldn't. I phoned Parsons with the first tentative draft of a slate, and got involved in a heated dispute about including Strummer, a member of the Coventry branch out of favour with Parsons. She was not fit to be on the NC, said Parsons. Her local work was bad. But the major reason for the nomination was her national CND work (the Parsons/Oliver September 1982 document had complained bitterly about the - very real - inadequacies of our CND work).... It finally became pretty plain to me that Parsons did not want a joint slate.

On March 10 this year Parsons told me that the sticking point had been Strummer. Since, despite everything, I still believe I'm in a political organisation, I hesitate to believe him. But such is the hostility expressed by Parsons towards members of the Coventry branch who dissent from him politically - Lintell, Leicester, Elvis - that it may even be true. The alternative explanation is that, given the refusal of the Smith group to discuss a joint slate, for Parsons to join us in discussing a slate would mean breaking demonstratively with Smith and allying with us. And that he would not do - even on the basis of his own proposal.

THE STATEMENT TO THE APRIL 1983 CONFERENCE

A statement was put out to the April 1983 conference, this time co-signed by Parsons, Oliver and McKelvie.

It started by condemning both "the major blocs" as unable to "build on the gains of fusion".

The major issues at the conference were O. work and women's work. On women's work Parsons expressed no differences with us. On O. work, Parsons had always been on the wing of the organisation putting most stress on involvement in the structures of the O. Shortly before the fusion he had written in Socialist Press (polemicising against Morrow) that the major forces from which a revolutionary party would be built were in the O. Left. To the extent that argument about the O. work at conference was about how much stress to put on O. involvement, Parsons represented one 'extreme' wing - with the Internationalist (RWL) faction on the other extreme, and the Smith group and the present EC majority in the middle. Parsons' positions in the recent debates on local government confirm that picture of his place in the spectrum.

(And we have not waited until now to say this. Before the fusion, when we considered Parsons a close ally in pressing for the fusion, I said at the I-CL National Committee, 20.12.80:

"Maybe some of the WSLers who seem closest to us are actually just softening up politically...")

Despite all this, the Parsons/Oliver/McKelvie document to the April 1983 conference claimed to have a middle position on O. work.

"We believe that the present 'debate' over orientation in the WSL is a sterile 'dialogue of the deaf'. In our opinion neither side fully understands how O. work should relate to trade union and other work. Cds Smith, Jones and Cunliffe clearly counterpose trade union work and work among the super-oppressed to our O. orientation. Cds Carolan, Kinnell and Hill emphasise organisation of the existing left far too much and end up with what is ultimately the opposite counterposition".

The answer? "We believe that the transformation of the existing labour movement and especially the O. will come from the involvement of new forces who are looking for a determined lead... Wiganisation must become the central watchword of our movement. Turn out to the youth, women, unemployed and blacks... Turn these forces into the O. to smash up the right wing stranglehold".

But the comrades must have known that by saying this they were not

adding anything to the majority positions. Hill had written in IB 37:

"Turning the O. outwards... This is not a novel idea. The idea of fighting to turn the O. outwards to the direct action struggles of the working class; to the revolts of the specially oppressed; to the working class estates - this has been a basic and often repeated conception from the beginning. So is its other side - bringing workers into the O., filling out what is often a feeble shell with militants, women and blacks struggling for their demands.

"Nobody is suggesting this is an easy job - any more than putting a real life and militancy into the shells of many trade union branches. But the approach has not only existed 'in theory'..."

And Hill endorsed and recommended a document from Oliver on 'Wiganisation' (IB 25 part 2). When Oliver came forward with proposals for 'Wiganisation' to the August conference, we supported them (while the Smith group was indifferent or hostile). And since the August conference we have done our even best, under difficult circumstances, to implement those proposals, for example through two national organisers' meetings on the question.

In IB 84 it is stated that the Parsons group had in fact, just shortly before the April conference, arrived at a new and more advanced conception of O. work. We still have not been told what it is. Certainly it did not give the comrades any clarity at the April conference. The three signatories of their document all voted different ways on the O. question - Oliver for the majority documents and against IB 48 (the Smith group document); Parsons for the majority document and abstaining on the Smith group document; McKelvie for all the documents!

'NEVER MIND ABOUT THE POLITICS'

In actual fact the document was not an argument for a new and distinct position on the O. It was an appeal to all the comrades who were tired or fed up or unwilling to think the arguments through, telling them: 'Never mind about all that. A plague on both their houses'.

The document also proposed fusion with Socialist Action and the Chartist minority, to form a "broad-based" revolutionary organisation. This, in some way, would enable us "to break from small-group mentality and reach out to the masses".

This made sense only as another appeal to the mentality of 'never mind about the politics'. If only we could wave aside the tedious political differences with people like the Chartists and Socialist Action - rate rises, attitudes to the local government Left, trade union policy, attitudes to Kinnoek, positions on Stalinism, orientation towards CND... - then, free from all that politics, surely we would "reach out to the masses".

THE 'MIDDLE FACTION' AS ALLY OF THE SMITH FACTION

This approach to politics, combined with the refusal to collaborate on a joint NC slate, turned the Parsons group into an auxiliary of the Smith faction.

Building on real failings and problems, the Parsons group fostered a current of vague, a-political dissent in the organisation. It cultivated and encouraged the view that all the political arguments were meaningless fury, and a demagogically "rank-and-file-ist" hostility to all those who tried to pose political arguments sharply.

Formally directed against both "major blocs" equally, this hostility was inevitably mainly directed against those of us who tried to take responsibility

for leading the organisation. The artificial "middle position" gave all sorts of people an excuse for not thinking through rigorously what was wrong with the Smith group's positions, and drawing conclusions. It stopped the Smith group being politically isolated as it deserved.

In fact all Parsons' speeches throughout the conference were more or less embittered attacks on and denunciations of the present EC majority. We were at fault, we were to blame.

THE PARSONS SLATE FOR THE NC

In the conference the Parsons group set up shop with open faction meeting to which people were invited to come if they wanted to stand for the NC. The strategy was to get a sizeable grouping to hold the balance on the new NC. And they appealed especially to the conference to elect people not on our slate.

This was an attempt to deprive the conference majority of an NC majority, by playing on vague moods and dissatisfactions. It was also imbecilic as a way to avoid a split. If they had succeeded, so that there was no majority on the NC for the conference's politics, then we would have had little option (in my opinion) but to call another conference after the first NC vote against our interpretation of what our documents and politics meant in practice.

The dishonesty of the Parsons' group's self-presentation as the middle ground was shown very plainly by one incident in the NC elections.

Getting Levy elected to the NC in face of the hostility of the Smith faction was a major problem. I saw the problem like this: Levy is the one and only case we have of a comrade likely to fall through a hole in the middle. On everything but the Labour Party he is with Smith and Jones. More than that. He believes in Smith and Jones. He shares their demonology against us. But he has honestly and independently thought through the LP question, and has had the seriousness to stand out from his usual group on this matter. This is progress of a sort.

It will be a bad thing for the organisation if we let Smith and Jones pay him back by kicking him off the NC. He is a test case for our side of the organisation: Do we want to build an organisation or a faction? Do we treat the impending 'execution' of Levy for treason to the 'worker leadership' on the LP question as just the business of the old WSL part of the organisation? Some of us decided to try to get Levy onto the NC.

Levy was the natural banner-bearer of the buffer-faction cause, a ready-made impending martyr to brutal factionalism (though there was no equivalent from the 'other side'!) So I asked someone to go to the Parsons meeting and suggest that the 'middle faction' adopt Levy as their own and help us re-elect him to the NC. Back came the message: Tell Carolan to use his own votes if he wants Levy elected.

What actually happened was that Levy was elected to the NC exclusively by majority votes. The Smith faction would not even add him as their lowest preference. The Parsons group would not give him any high-preference votes.

Think about that incident next time you hear Parsons claim a hearing as an honest broker and a person of goodwill trying to mediate between the other groups in the organisation.

SAVING THE SMITH FACTION

What was going on with the buffer faction?

Parsons saw that Smith and Jones were digging themselves into a ditch and had discredited themselves before all but their own hard-core (mainly Oxford) supporters. Still deferential to them, he set out to save them. Simultaneously he saw that the present EC majority current were going to have

a clear majority, and he set out to stop us.

Others in the Parsons group may have been motivated by muddled good faith, but I find that difficult to believe for Parsons himself, by April 1983. But at best we had here an attempt to find an answer to the problems of the organisation by evading politics and by detaching politics from organisation. We had an attempt to build an informal conference faction with no programme but an animosity to the leadership whose politics they were generally for (or anyway, more so than for the Smith faction's). The animosity was dishonestly presented as opposition to factionalism, but actually allied with and covered for the irreconcilable factionalists of the Sicilian Vendetta psychology, Smith and Jones.

THE AUGUST 1983 CONFERENCE

At the August 1983 conference, the role of the Parsons group was similar, but worse and more explicit.

The major political issues were Ireland and our attitude to civilian bombings. Parsons was ostentatiously un-interested in these, extremely reluctant, for example, to organise any pre-conference discussion on Ireland in Coventry.

But the Parsons group latched onto the mood of those many comrades who - for reasons justifiable or unjustifiable - were tired of the political disputes inside the League. Instead of telling those comrades that they should 'plumb the gist of the programmatic differences', and on that basis decide who bore the responsibility for the discussion becoming so envenomed, the Parsons group fostered a demagogic 'anti-leadership' current.

The Parsons group must have known very well that we supported 'Wiganisation'. But they used the conference debate on that issue, not primarily to make constructive suggestions for the work of the organisation, but to rally feeling against the EC majority - the people allegedly interested only in debating abstruse politics, not in the practical work dear to the rank and file member.

FEDERALISM, ANTI-CENTRALISM

The Parsons group is also federalist and anti-centralist.

The old WSL lacked a strong centre and political homogeneity. People and groups were grafted onto the ex-WRP trunk, neither absorbed politically nor transforming the trunk politically (though they did change it piecemeal). There was a tendency towards local 'chieftains', of which the clearest and worst example was Morrow in Leicester.

The Parsons group preaches hostility to the centre. It is undemocratic, according to Parsons, for the nationally elected bodies to intervene in a branch. There have been a whole series of disputes around this axis. The branch at one stage forbade James to attend national women's commission meetings. It tried to bar Strummer from national work. It complained bitterly about Elvis working at the centre. It put huge obstacles in the place of a visit to the branch by the national Youth Organiser to discuss youth work. Parsons played a leading role in all these cases (on some, like Elvis's work, Oliver expressed a very different attitude).

At the same time, resolutions from the Parsons group have repeatedly urged "more centralisation" in the League. How this is possible without more resources for the centre, and without more intervention by the centre in branches, they do not say. In practice the call for "more centralisation" seems to function only as a backdrop for agitation against the administrative and organisational shortcomings of the centre.

PARSONS, SMITH AND JONES

The final element in the make-up of the Parsons group is that Parsons, at least, subscribes to the ideology of deference to the 'worker leadership'. He defers

critically, if you like, but he defers. On the face of it the facts contradict this assertion. But look closely at the facts, and ask how they fit together, and the facts do bear it out.

A big part of the drive of Parsons is the understandable human desire to affect what happens, to have influence, prominence, and in general play a leading role. But Parsons' general political scepticism, lack of political self-definition and unwillingness to be defined make it impossible for him to play such a role except on a local scale or as an eminence grise whispering in someone's ear - specifically Smith's. This situation impels him towards seeking prominence and influence by way of a-political factionalism. By the August 1983 conference he was at the stage of 'pure factionalism' - factionalism completely unsullied by any defined politics.

But that is not all. Ask the question: what is it that Parsons has been demanding of us, the EC majority?

In summer 1982 he briefly resigned from the organisation in protest against the behaviour of the RWL faction. In September 1982 he was aware that "the (Smith) Tendency comrades wish to polarise the situation in the movement", and recognised the bad effect in the organisation of "the 'get Carolan' faction". He is aware of the role of the Smith group in making the internal situation envenomed.

So what have we been guilty of? We have failed to placate Smith and Jones. We have failed to jolly them along. Though conciliatory on secondary issues, we have insisted on posing the major issues politically (or, rather, on responding politically to the assaults of the Smith group on the Falklands, on the LP, on Ireland, etc.)

Parsons will tell you privately (he has told me more than once) that without us in the organisation Smith would be won over to Parsons' position on the LP. Personally, I suspect he is right about that. In other words, it is personal subjectivism and the logic of his factionalism that primarily drove Smith to oppose us on the issue. Parsons understands Smith and how the old WSL worked (as a matter of fact, his accounts of the old WSL helped me understand it, in the period after the fusion).

But then think about it: he blames us for the factional heat! Parsons' ideal of relationships with Smith and Jones derives from the old WSL. There, Smith and Jones were the titular leaders, high in prestige, low in political presence in the organisation, their general (SLL) culture acting as a sort of base-line for the organisation's politics, which were arrived at largely by consensus. Changes were made if 'the leadership' agreed.

Parsons is against a centralised revolutionary party, and we are the carriers of this idea in the new WSL. In place of the primacy of politics, he demands that we defer to Smith and Jones. His attitude to the 'worker leadership' may be modelled on his previous attitude to the SLL and after that the USFI. On his own account, all the time he was in the SLL (he joined it in the late '60s) he thought the organisation was crazy. He was critical. But he deferred (there was not much choice in the SLL). Then all through his time in the IMG he was again an ultra-dissident: but deference to some higher entity, presumably the 'world Trotskyist movement', dominated.

The federalism, anti-centralism, aincoherent yearnings for the old WSL regime, the general mush of unrefined subjectivism - all add up to a liquidationist current in the organisation. The attitude of 'never mind about the politics' logically negates our whole reason for existence as a Leninist organisation, and in moving over to B. McKelvie has only drawn the obvious conclusions.

Such attitudes "cannot teach an advanced worker anything worthwhile; instead of courage and a sense of responsibility they can only instill indifference and weakness".

