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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