

THE BELATED CRY FOR UNITY

Carolán

Nothing was more predictable than that the NC's vote to sort out the problem of the faction one way or another would lead to an upsurge of unity-mongering.

The faction are politically very isolated in the organisation. They escape from their isolation only when 'organisational questions' are centre stage - so they have been ignoring politics and focusing on manufactured and concocted 'organisational questions' for months.

The NC resolution was a godsend to the faction. Now, with the help of Parsons and poor Levy they could appeal for support and protection against expulsion. They could appeal to every good-willed, soft-hearted comrade who hasn't been paying attention to what has been going on in the organisation for the last six months (or the last 2 years).

Smith, Jones and Cunliffe, who have made the organisation unliveable by their disruptive factionalism and refusal to live by the basic norms of the organisation's constitution, could now bound forward as champions of unity. Everything is changed. "All changed, changed utterly". A terrible nonsense is born!

They have dropped their politics out of sight and merged - like the IMG/SL into some new front - into the popular front for 'unity', for federalism, and for making Carolán do local work in Islington. They might reasonably as a faction form a bloc with others for limited goals. Instead they merge, blurring all politics beneath a platform based on secondary issues. Smith and Jones are reborn.

But everything is not changed. Unity is desirable - but after over two years of mounting chaos the onus is on those - the honest ones - who say that unity with the Smith-Jones group is possible to show us how it is possible. The fusion of 1981 has broken down. It is the unanimous view of those of us who run the organisation from day to day - and who have tried conciliation again and again over two years to try to salvage any hopes of unity - that all the hopes of 1981 are gone, irrevocably. Unity does not exist at present. Instead we have a faction bitterly hostile to the new WSL encased within the same organisational shell as it - two organisations within one structure. As far as I can judge the majority on the NC shares that view.

Smith, Jones and Cunliffe also believe that the fusion has broken down. Smith and Jones reached that conclusion a year before we did. Their attitude is that they have "fundamental differences" with the WSL on "every major question", that no Trotskyist in the world "would touch us with a barge-pole" because of our politics, and moreover that those responsible for the day-to-day central functions of the organisation are "worse than the trade union bureaucrats".

They declared a faction - not based on politics, for they declared it just after the conclusion of the conference debate on those politics, but based on the assertion that they were going to be mistreated. They refused to discuss with us what guarantees could be instituted against such mistreatment. They adopted an open attitude of unbridled hostility and hatemongering towards us. (They seem to have been running a covert campaign against Carolán from day 1 of the fusion - Levy commented on this campaign at the EC after the April conference). They allied with the RWL and the RWL faction against us in the

spirit of 'the main enemy is at home'. Even after collaborating in drawing up the charges against the RWL faction, they refused to vote to expel them - saying that "Carolán was just as bad". They refused even to discuss a joint NC slate with us before the April conference. They gradually withdrew from any practical collaboration.

Then in January Cunliffe withdrew from the paper, and his document virtually pronounced the fusion dead.

"Talking to the EC majority is as useful as talking to Carolán and just as useless".

WHAT SMITH, JONES, AND CUNLIFFE INTEND

The unity-mongering of Smith, Jones and Cunliffe does not come from a belief that the fusion has not broken down. They know - and have said - differently. Their unity-mongering comes from the belief that the best place for their distinct and separate organisation is, for now, within the WSL.

The faction is not fighting against a split. Nor, now, is Parsons. They are fighting under the banner of 'unity' to make the split as favourable for themselves as possible - that is, as damaging as possible for the WSL. Listen to Cunliffe:

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"In/86 Kinnell warns of the possibility of the WSL being left 'with a shell and a bad odour around us'. Comrades prepared to split with Kinnell/Carolán should prepare for just such an eventuality as far as the League is concerned".

Is there any reason to think that the fusion can be repaired? That's a matter of opinion. In our opinion it can't be. And our opinion is based on nearly three years of trying to make the fusion work, of attempted conciliation after attempted conciliation, and of running the organisation despite the horrendous problems created by the progressive breakdown of the fusion over two years.

Anyone who thinks differently has at least the obligation to put forward definite proposals for how the fusion could be repaired - not just to express the wish that it should be.

In our opinion, the March 10 NC resolution was the last possibility of sorting things out without a complete organisational break with the Oxford faction. It stated the minimum basis. Not 'the minimum basis on which we were prepared to work with them' - we don't play parliamentary games like that - but the minimum basis of agreed norms that would allow the organisation to continue functioning despite the factionalism.

Not honestly and openly, but nevertheless unmistakably, they rejected those conditions.

If they wanted unity, they would have accepted them, or at least discussed them seriously. That they agitate for unity instead of doing what would have secured it is proof of the sort of unity they have in mind. They want, not unity to build the WSL according to the fusion agreements, but unity such as they have now - unbridled licence to function as a distinct (though now underground) organisation, hostile to the WSL, irresponsible towards it, but with special rights within it and on its leading committees.

On the basis of formal politics unity is possible. It is an irony that despite the faction's attempts to maximise differences, there is arguably more formal political agreement between the two 'sides' now than at fusion! That is not decisive. Last December we had bitter rows - which had as consequence Cunliffe's final decision to withdraw from work on the paper - over our attitude to the TUC despite having fundamental agreement on the outline of what was, on the left, a distinct WSL position on the NGA dispute.

The factional dynamic and the dynamic of Smith and Jones is independent of formal politics.

Trotsky evaluated the 1940 split in the SWP-US thus:

Question: In your opinion were there enough political differences between the majority and the minority to warrant a split?

Trotsky: Here it is also necessary to consider the question dialectically, not mechanically. What does this terrible word 'dialectics' mean? It means to consider things in their development, not in their static situation. If we take the political differences as they are, we can say they were not sufficient for a split, but if they developed a tendency to turn away from the proletariat in the direction of petty-bourgeois circles, then the same differences can have an absolutely different value...

The direction of movement is crucial.

ONE LAST TRY?

The idea that we should make one last try for unity will be especially tempting to comrades who have only just begun to consider the question as an urgent and burning one. It has been an immediate and burning question to the EC majority for many, many months. In fact the history of the post-July-1981 organisation is the history of our attempts to make unity (fusion) 'work'.

Look at the list of episodes (which incidentally will dispose of the hostile myth that we have functioned in the organisation as a faction like 'Smith's. No, we have not!)

1. We proposed to give the old WSL a majority on the EC, by adding Piggot, in late 1981, so that all its authoritative and influential voices could be heard on the EC. (We had already given the old WSL a majority on the OC). This was vetoed, after the NC voted for it, by the Oxford area committee!

2. We proposed changing the system of electing the NC to give them guarantees that they would not get carved up. We also proposed working out a joint slate - they refused to discuss it.

3. We have given them more or less free access to the public press - and they have repaid us with lying allegations that they have been suppressed.

4. In the working-out of documents for the April conference, we made several attempts to minimise polarisation and get common ground.

5. After the April 1983 conference we gave the faction far more than their proportional share of the EC. We resisted a proposal from Parsons to exclude Jones.

6. After the April 1983 conference we continued joint editorship of the paper. Eventually Cunliffe walked out of it to take up a well-paid job as a GLC-funded PR man, covering himself with a spurious and essentially ludicrous agitation about the EB he had never tried to call when he was editor. The faction backed him.

7. We tried to involve Smith in central work. We invited him to be industrial organiser. He did practically nothing. As late as the NGA dispute, we carefully avoided recriminations and yet again tried to involve him. We were repaid with no cooperation and bitter polemics.

BASIS FOR UNITY

Unity is not something floating in the sky, like the star of peace at Bethlehem. It has to be something real and tangible, and it is for a purpose - the purpose of building the WSL. The real test of whether unity is possible or not lies in such practical details. At the time of the fusion, the mutually agreed test of the fusion was whether we could cooperate in practical work and discussion.

Those who talk of unity now do so when it is perfectly clear that such

real unity is not possible. If we could not create or maintain real unity given the goodwill of the immediate post-fusion period and the high hopes we had of the fusion (and we, at least, did bring a lot of good will to the fusion) - then what earthly reason is there to believe that we can do it now? If the ultra-liberal conditions granted to the faction after the April 1983 conference did not satisfy them then, what reason is there to suppose that they can be satisfied now?

The areas of real collaboration that we created after the fusion have collapsed one by one. Today there is no collaboration. There is no goodwill. There is no hope of things getting better.

If we were formally separate organisations now, we would have relations of deep hostility. Anybody who suggested that two formally separate organisations with the relations that exist between the two formally united organisations in the WSL now should fuse would be laughed at.

There was one way to preserve unity. Though we cannot create either the goodwill or the hopes and illusions of 1981, we could establish and operate a framework of functioning groundrules for coexistence in a common organisation. Goodwill and positive attitudes could return as a result of work over a period for the common purpose of building the WSL according to the groundrules unanimously agreed at fusion. That was the purpose of the March 10 NC resolution, which reiterated agreed requirements of the constitution.

We have had their answer: business as usual, and proposals which in a rather incoherent way amount to turning the organisation into a loose federation. The proposals bear no relation at all to any attempt to recreate unity. If implemented, they would simply make the situation worse and the eventual split more messy; they would put the organisation into a state of constant uproar and undercut any attempt at centralisation. This is no basis for unity to build a revolutionary party. This is no basis for unity.

UNITY AND SPLITS

All sorts of people who should know better are scared of words like 'split'. In reality splits are the small change of organisations like ours. Some splits are good, positive, liberating. Genuine unity is better, but we do not have that, nor any chance of getting it: we have two organisations, one largely parasitic on the work of the other, inside one formal structure.

Splits are the common coin of the Trotskyist and semi-Trotskyist groups. What has distinguished the WF/I-CL tendency over the last 15 years on this question is not that we have had splits - and we have had many splits, big and small - but that we have negotiated and carried through a series of fusions unique in the history of the movement: in 1968 with IS; in 1975 with Workers Power; in 1981 with the old WSL. We also initiated and built the greatest rellisation of the unity of the broad left for many decades, the Mobilising Committee.

We will negotiate other fusions and initiate other Mobilising Committees. But we do not make a fetish of unity. Splits and fusions are both tools in the work of building the revolutionary party, which concretely is the work of assembling, educating and tempering the cadre of that party. Not all splits are bad, and not all fusions lead to good results. WF/I-CL gained a great deal from the 1968 and 1975 fusions (by no means all of WP split). The 1981 fusion has been a costly failure, which will have to be analysed and discussed at more leisure.

The task we attempted in 1981, of fusing two equal-sized organisations, was a task that has never been done successfully since the period of Trotskyist fusions in the 1940s, and before that in the period of fusions to create the Communist Parties after the Russian Revolution. We were trying to do it with two organisations which had directly or implicitly been in political conflict for 15 years; in a not particularly favourable period for the Left in general;

in conditions where there was no dramatic shift in the world around us making the differences of those previous 15 years irrelevant; and where, far from a relatively strong international movement playing a constructive role, the major international intervention was by groups deliberately out to split us.

The probability was that we would fail. Elsewhere we present the evidence that the main responsibility for that failure falls on Smith, Jones and Cunliffe.

We should not sink into depression and mourning for the fusion. It broke down long ago, and now we must recognise that there is no hope of repairing it and face up to the consequences. Let the dead bury the dead, and let Smith, Jones, Parsons and those who want to go with them stew in their own politics. We have the organisation we projected for ourselves at fusion to build. We will build it.

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