

PART III by Kinnell

The crucial political defining element of the faction is on the question of the party.

The faction leaders have always made a lot of 'the worker leadership'. The problem is that this term does not refer to a system of measures for helping workers to become educated Marxists and political leaders - 'worker-intellectuals' as Gramsci put it. It is a term of self-praise applied by two people to themselves. They define themselves as 'the leadership' not by virtue of cogency of political argument, breadth of knowledge, or practical function, but simply by virtue of being who they are - as 'symbolic workers' so to speak.

A real system of measures to make the League more of a workers' organisation would run in the opposite direction to what the faction wants. It would require that issues for general debate were carefully chosen and debated with plenty of time - not a hectic series of 'scandals'. It would require a businesslike centralised leadership. It would require "political culture" where young comrades could develop their ideas in an atmosphere free of biblical denunciations of heresy (and this latter is also pretty important for women comrades).

It also requires a "political culture" where there are some standards and norms, so that new workers are not greeted by cynical jibes against the organisation when they enter a branch - where they are educated in a spirit of responsibility not cynicism.

In short, it requires the opposite of what feminists have called 'the tyranny of structurelessness', where a demagogic formal democracy allows politics to be decided not by rational argument, but by the prestige, oratory or self-given talismanic qualities of individuals.

Lenin wrote:

"This does not mean, of course, that the workers have no part in creating such an ideology. But they take part not as workers, but as socialist theoreticians, as Proudhons and Weitlings; in other words, they take part only when, and to the extent that they are able, more or less, to acquire the knowledge of their age and advance that knowledge." (What is to be Done?)

The same Lenin was concerned to build a workers' party. But that was not done by lionising a coterie of 'symbolic workers', but by organising to develop workers as 'socialist theoreticians'. It meant internal education; a businesslike regime, with structured discussions where the issues could be understood by all, and definite decisions made to be implemented by an authoritative leadership.

Leadership by celebrities

James P. Cannon wrote of the pre-1914 Socialist Party in America:

"Lawyers, doctors, teachers, preachers, writers, professors - people of this kind who lived their real lives in another world and gave an evening, or at most two evenings, a week of their time to the socialist movement for the good of their souls - they were the outstanding leaders of the pre-war Socialist Party.

"They decided things. They laid down the law. They were the speakers on ceremonial occasions; they posed for their photographs and gave interviews to the newspapers....

"As for the party functionaries, the people who devoted all their time to the daily work and routine of the party, they were simply regarded as flunkies to be loaded with the disagreeable tasks, poorly paid and blamed if anything went wrong ...

"When we organised the Communist Party in this country in 1919, under the inspiration of the Russian Revolution, we put a stop to all this nonsense... We decreed that no one could be a member of the Central Committee of the party unless he was a full time professional party worker, or willing to become such at the call of the party.

"WI think we had the right idea in 1919."

('The Struggle for a Proletarian Party, Cannon).

Now of course Smith and Jones have a proletarian, rather than a petty-bourgeois standard of living; though Smith is now a writer, Jones is a factory worker; and they have done much more work for the movement than the lawyers and professors whom Cannon refers to.

But much of what Cannon writes about the method of leadership by celebrities is still relevant. Whatever the living standard or individual background of the 'celebrities', this method must run counter to businesslike, politically sharp, Bolshevik operation.

The faction's changed positions

The procedure of the faction reflects their concept of leadership.

The faction leaders changed their positions on the South Atlantic War in the first week of May 1982. The entire grouping that makes up the present faction changed with them.

Between May and the special conference in September 1982 the faction leaders changed their position on the Falklands/Malvinas several further times - on whether support for Argentina was correct from the beginning or only from early May; on whether the Argentine claim to the islands was just; etc etc. (see IB 14). Each time their grouping changed with them. There were no faction meetings where a discussion could take place.

There was no political accounting for any of the changes in line.

It seems like the whole grouping was blindly following Smith and Jones. But it probably wasn't as simple as that. As far as I can make out, the whole grouping moved politically in a sort of sticky consensus, where the 'leaders' responded to pressures from the 'base', and then the 'base' followed the 'leaders' because they knew that the 'leaders' were responding.

What happened on the Labour Party issue in February 1983 was even more remarkable. Up to shortly before the conference of that month the faction leaders' position on the LP has been represented by a section in Cunliffe's IB 25. Then that section was withdrawn to be replaced by a document jointly agreed by Cunliffe, Hill and Kinnell. Until the day of the conference - when Smith produced a short amendment to the Cunliffe/Hill/Kinnell document - the faction leaders had no distinctive document on the LP.

Yet at the conference the Oxford area committee presented a call, decided on by them some days earlier, for a vote on the LP question at that conference. What did they want to vote for? Smith's document - the content of which they could not have known at the time they decided they wanted to vote for it. They did not know what the 'worker leadership' was going to say - but they were sure that they wanted to vote for it.

No accounting

Presumably they felt sure that the 'worker leadership' would do the right thing by them: that what the 'leaders' said would adequately reflect the 'base'.

This method in politics made absolutely sure that there would be no political accounting in the Oxford group for where they had been wrong politically when they supported the now-abandoned Cunliffe document. Just as there had been no

political accounting for their shifts on the South Atlantic War. Just as they have never made any political accounting for their many and varied positions on Ireland going back to the WAP.

The faction's shifts on civilian bombings

Even worse were the faction leaders' political methods on the question of civilian bombings by the IRA.

Comrade Jones brought an amendment to the August 1983 conference. He changed the amendment twice in the course of the debate itself. The aim was not to clarify it, but the contrary; to maximise the amendment's vote-catching powers but at the same time to try to phrase it so that the EC majority could not vote for it!

There were two basic political lines on the issue. One, that civilian bombings must be distinguished from military bombings and be condemned. Two, that civilian bombings cannot be distinguished from military bombings, and/or that specific military tactics of the IRA (as distinct from their general strategy) must not be condemned.

Jones' line was formally an amendment accepting the first basic line and arguing about its presentation. In fact - as became clear in the debate - it was a formula for rallying a 'constituency' most of whom accepted the second basic line.

Worse: when some of us also proposed voting on the basic line prior to any amendments about presentation, Jones heatedly opposed us and argued that this was a 'manoeuvre'.

He changed the wording of his amendment twice in the course of the conference debate itself. The aim was not to improve clarity, but just the contrary. It was like trimming the sails of a boat to catch the wind. He was balancing between the aim of maximising the vote-catch of his amendment, and the other aim of making sure that the EC majority could not vote for it!

The aim was to glue together a political 'constituency' by obscuring the basic political issue and negating all political accounting.

The whole debate had started with EC discussion on the Chelsea bombing in Late 1981. Jones and Smith were for all-out condemnation of the bombing. Carolan and I convinced them that the condemnation should be more qualified.

Then there was an outcry from the faction leaders' 'base' against the article which Carolan wrote, reflecting the EC line. Smith and Jones started to back-track. At the NC they had voted for a resolution condemning civilian bombings against a sharply-posed alternative (drafted by Gable) which said that no clear distinction could be made between civilian and military bombings and that they should not be condemned anyway.

But within those limits they did all they could to dissociate themselves from the EC line and minimise the break in the 'consensus' between them and their 'base'. What Jones was doing at the August conference was reassembling the consensus - in a direct negation of rigorous political accounting.

April's NC elections

The NC elections at the April conference were another example. Although Smith hypocritically claimed that the Oxford slate was not a slate at all, in fact there was a solid bloc of people voting for it in a tightly-whipped fashion (most of their ballot papers were identical apart from minor variations in order of preference, right down to the fact that they voted for no one who wasn't on the Oxford slate).

The chair's summing-up

Not one of the issues on which the faction has agitated since April was contained in the original faction platform. In each case, the faction leaders initiated the issue - and it became (or we suppose it became) faction policy subsequently.

It is unlikely that the faction is quite so monolithic as it seems. And the old WSL was quite heterogenous ideologically. Many people other than the 'worker leadership' played a part in shaping its politics.

But the bottom line for the 'worker leadership' is that it remains the leadership - that on all essential questions, it gives the chair's summing-up at the end.

It is a political method that makes for a static, fixed leadership - on the basis of sticky consensus politics rather than rigid top-down control - and a total absence of political accounting.

The party as a machine

The concept of the party here is a mixture of Healyism and a crude 'answer' to Healyism. The Healyite concept is maintained of a party as a machine for which rigorous political accounting is secondary. But the SLL/WRP is seen as going wrong by virtue of the fact that it had a rigid top-down leadership from an office in London. Instead the comrades advocate a looser 'concensus' regime with a 'worker leadership'. While inverting some of the terms of Healyism, they retain the essentials.

That is what explains their blind, incoherent, lashing-out against the position of being a minority.

The 'worker leadership' in the Pope's chair

It also explains the manner of their political polemics. Even on issues where they are obviously ignorant - like Ireland, or the Marxist theory of imperialism they speak like Popes rebuking sinners. They proceed not by evidence and argument, but by attempting to present their own position as Orthodoxy and anyone else's as notorious Heresy.

If someone argues something beyond their ken, that is denounced as 'intellectuals oppressing the workers'.

Whenever the present faction leaders have been in a position to decide such things, they have had a markedly un-liberal attitude towards discussion and dissent.

Their picture of the majority as a monolith dominated by a few individuals intent on enforcing complete conformity is produced by projecting their own concepts of leadership onto us - and exaggerating a bit for the sake of peppering up the factional struggle. As an account of the reality of the majority it is ludicrous.

The faction leaders are far from being brave fighters for democracy and collective leadership. Their concept of the party corresponds much more to Healyism.

The party, for them, is first and foremost, an organisational machine. The leadership is a fixed body of people. The method of establishing a political line is not by scientific argument, based on the best knowledge available, but (ultimately) by the authority of the leadership'. (The leadership, may, of course, be liberal, choose to take advice etc. Even Popes are only infallible when speaking on certain designated occasions).

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The faction leaders' concern with prestige

In the SLL this concept of the party was integrated with a harsh centralised regime. For the faction leaders it is integrated with a preference for a loose federalist regime. But the concept is the same. Whether it smothers critical Marxist thought by the heavy hand of a bureaucratic leadership, as in the SLL - or by the presence of a philistine 'Trotskyist public opinion', concerted by the chair/leadership, as in the faction's preferred functioning - it is utterly antagonistic to building the sort of revolutionary party we need: the 'collective intellectual' of the working class.

This concept of the party can make the machine, the emblems, the fixed 'leadership', seem more important questions than class-struggle politics. And to the self-proclaimed 'worker-leaders' themselves, of course, it makes their own prestige and status seem very important issues. They can protect their own prestige and status and believe that symbolically they are protecting the whole working class. Thus the blind factionalism, with such a slender explicit political basis.

In the old this concept of the party was integrated with a harsh, centralized regime. For the faction leaders it is integrated with a preference for a loose, federalist regime. But the concept is the same. Whether it is more critical, Marxist thought by the heavy hand of a bureaucratic leadership, as in the old, or by the press of a 'philistine' Trotskyist public opinion, concerned by the chair/leadership, as in the faction's preferred functioning - it is necessarily antagonistic to building the sort of revolutionary party we need: the objective intellectual of the working class.

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