

I-CL National Committee minutes, December 20 1980:

'Discussion on the old WSL'.

(From I-CL Internal Bulletin no.44).

'Putting it in perspective', by Kinnell.

NATIONAL COMMITTEE 20 December 1980

DISCUSSION ON THE W.S.L.  
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**Carolus** . In 1949 the old Trotskyist movement collapsed - through a loss of cadres and also a political collapse. Healy took the leadership of the remnants.

The Healy tendency was characterised by (a) since 1944, a fight for a LP orientation, (b) political primitiveness (e.g. in the early '50s their theoretical magazine discussed nationalisation in an implicitly Fabian way - this primitiveness led to political mimicry, e.g. adaptation to the chauvinism of the Left on German rearmament), (c) an authoritarian internal regime derived from the 1940s faction fight. Healy used the authoritarian regime to consolidate a majority in the post-1949 organisation. By the late '50s, at least, the regime had become pathological. Psychological terror was used to keep the members in line. At each conference a comrade would be singled out and denounced for failures of the organisation.

In 1948-50 Healy had quite a lot of success through the Socialist Fellowship, a loose left grouping within which the Trotskyists had influence. Then the Socialist Fellowship split apart over the Korean war. In 1950-54 the Healy group was still quite influential tho' tainted by adaptation to Stalinism.

In 1954 their paper was proscribed and until 1957 they just sold Tribune. Their practice was certainly opportunist, but not as bad as it would seem now because they were working in a real movement round Tribune. After 1957 they recruited a lot of CPers, started the Newsletter and Labour Review, gained a serious implantation in industry, were able to hold an industrial conference of 500 in 1958.

What happened next was essentially the result of the regime. After 1959 the Healy group became much less open. Then, after the Scarborough conference in 1960, there was a shift in their attitude to the LP. First they were euphoric about the Scarborough victory. Then they soured up as the lefts betrayed, and began an Oehlerite turn identified by Cannon as early as mid-'61. The feebleness of the official Labour left and the sectarian turn of the revolutionary left were two sides of the same coin in this period.

In the early '60s the Healy group gained in numbers - especially raw youth who were easily manipulated, so the regime hardened even more. It began to counterpose its own organisation to the evolution of the labour movement. Serious industrial work was still done, but was being weakened by the turn to youth. The Labour Left was just denounced. In 1964 the Healy group provoked its own expulsion from the LP. By 1965-66 'Build the revolutionary party' was a front page headline. The turn to youth eventually destroyed the industrial work. Then the degeneration accelerated - systematic lying, abstentionism in relation to VSC, a Maoist line in 1967, etc.

The WSL came out of the WRP at an ultra-degenerate stage, when it went literally mad in 1974. And Thornett joined the SLL in 1966 so his whole history was in the degenerate period of the SLL.

It is remarkable these comrades could 'recover' from the SLL/WRP to such an extent. Perhaps it is because long-standing SLL people were more damaged by the turn to systematic lying in the 1960s than people newly coming into the SLL then.

In 1974 Healy seems to have gone literally mad, and the WSL people split. It seems that Thornett had contact with Robin Blick,

an ex-SLLer who had teamed up with the OCI and was producing a duplicated 'Bulletin' aimed at the WRP members. The other element in the split was that Thornett was trying to relate the WRP's politics to the industrial reality around him.

Then Thornett split from the OCI people - perhaps under the pressure of the SLL polemics against the OCI. Both Thornett and the OCI people wanted to go back to a golden age of the SLL - for the OCI people this was the mid-'50s, for the WSL, the mid-'60s. Now in the mid-'60s the SLL was becoming Oehlerite but it still felt some need to relate to the labour movement, and so tried to square the circle with slogans like Make The Left MPs Fight. The WSL picks up those same ideas going in a different direction.

The WSL criticised the SLL/WRP for being propagandist and not using transitional demands. But the WSL seems to tend to see transitional demands as a way of breaking down workers' psychological resistance. They have SLL-ish formulas about "the alternative leadership", but they break these down in their practice to quite rational forms. Actually they do not use transitional demands much except to tag on the end of articles. Also they use a call for Councils of Action, meaning a call for Soviets, artificially tagged on to limited struggles.

The WSL took in a lot of people from various sources after its split from the WRP, and never seems to have really homogenised itself. There have been two Spartacist factions, generated by people sticking to the propagandist side of the WSL as against the practical work of the WSL.

Although in practice the WSL often gives a more rational interpretation to 'build the revolutionary party' than the SLL's original bureaucratic invocation, the approach does lead to fetishism: the sterile repetition of 'kick out Healey-Callaghan', the line of maximum conflict with the bureaucracy, a completely wrong assessment of the LP over the last year, shadow-play 'exposure' politics.

So: they are still fundamentally Healyites, therefore there are a lot of difficulties. But they are a serious organisation, especially their leadership, and a fusion would be highly desirable. Therefore we fight to achieve fusion. We can't avoid some serious preliminary educational discussion, but we should aim to convince the WSL comrades, not to bash them, not to split them - to have an honest fusion.

We should also look at our own state. We are in flux, partly but not completely because of the turn. Unless we rectify this it could jeopardise fusion.

Time-scale? I don't know. Probably 3 months minimum.

Finally: maybe some of the WSLers who seem closest to us are actually just softening up politically. We should take care not to appear as a soft option.

Oliver. I agree with 's general assessment. But I think he is wrong about our state - and our influence. We can link up with the WSLers oriented to their practical work, as against the propagandist-minded who have gone to the Spartacists. Some of their politics result from our influence. We should be confident.

does not take account of the heterogeneity of the WSL or of our own influence on WSL people. Let's have unity and have the necessary discussions within one organisation. The League may have problems of people paying debts etc but we are relatively homogeneous - look at the Sparts' inability to make any impact on

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us. One of the lessons from our previous experience is: don't let "courting" drag on.

If the WSL don't come to us, they could break up. At least we should set a deadline - take a decision for fusion at the joint meeting - implement it before the March rally.

**Carolyn** . What does Oliver propose we do concretely? And what impression does he have of the WSLers most favourable to fusion?

**Oliver**. They are arguing inside the WSL for immediate fusion. To miss this fusion would be a serious dereliction of revolutionary duty.

**Keith**. I agree with Oliver's sense of urgency, but you must vote for the SC resolution [NTO 169]. You may have more or less optimism about the speed of the results, but you must support the programme of action in the resolution. The only alternative would be just to declare a common organisation and sort out all the disputed questions within it. But that is hardly possible...

The openness of the WSL - in sharp contrast to the Healyite tradition - is more impressive than their political positions as such.

On our state, I agree with Oliver. We are quite homogeneous politically. We should aim to win over the leadership of the WSL.

But the WSL does have some peculiar positions. E.g. they insisted Spain was fascist long after Franco's death.

**Whetling**. I share Oliver's sense of urgency. I agree with the SC resolution, but I'm concerned about our seeming lack of urgency in chasing up the WSL.

It's true the WSL have gone in for literary sectarianism. But we should not insist on sorting out, e.g. all the details of 1953, before a fusion. The actual differences are often not the same as the formal ones. In BL we have been able to work well together, and if anything the WSL's tendency has been to conservatism rather than ultra-leftism. Practical cooperation will allow the differences to be hammered out, and that must be within a fused organisation.

They are sectarian, but that partly reflects a serious attitude to the Trotskyist tradition.

We shouldn't put off fusion because of concern about our own state. If we do not bring off a fusion with the WSL, the IMG may.

**Oliver** presented an amendment for a quicker fusion, before the March 21st rally.

**Wolf** : The WSL left the WRP when the craziness of the WRP was seriously affecting industrial work. Ever since then they have had a separation between their formal positions and their day to day practice. There even seems to be an internal division of labour between the comrades on the paper and the comrades in the trade union work. The difficulty is that they are held together by a formal allegiance to the SLT tradition, which applies equally to the industrial activists.

We should take some care. We were seriously set back in some aspects of our political development by the WP fusion/split. And we have more to lose now.

**Khan** . We should review the situation after the joint meeting. Don't rush it. We need time to consolidate the broad groups. Perhaps it would be a good idea to bring the WSL into the broad groups, but on balance I think not.

Ritchie. The WSL comrades in Scotland seem keen on joint work. But we need guidelines. For example, we have had differences with them over work round the steel industry near Glasgow. There are also differences on youth work. The SYL has a separate leadership from the WSL. Some of them are in favour of work in the J., some not.

But the WSL has some comrades who would be very valuable to a fused organisation.

**Kimell.** Comrades say we have been slow, but in fact we have been pushing the WSL for unity and joint work for months now. Perhaps we have been slow in seeing this is chased up locally as well as centrally.

Whettling says we should not require agreement on 1953 as a condition of fusion. True. But when we discussed the FI with the WSL, they insisted against us that the 1963 reunification was unprincipled precisely because it took place without agreement on 1953.

That illustrates the problem. There are major differences: general strike, Fightback, Afghanistan, workers' government. What makes fusion worth fighting for is that the WSL does seem to be re-thinking, and its proletarian orientation.

But it's wrong to think that their good industrial activity can be neatly divided off from the political errors. There is unity as well as contradiction between the industrial activity and the sectarian declamation. The key to that unity is the method, typical of the '60s SLL, of seeking always to translate politics into organisational conflicts.

At its best, that method was a Bolshevik resolve to see issues through to the end. Then it became irrational confrontationism, e.g. the SLL's self-provoked expulsion from the LP. Then, shadow-play, simulation of organisational conflict through literary declamations.

The WSL focus their industrial work mostly round particular disputes. They seek the point where politics are translated into organisational conflict. And then they have a good record of seeing the conflict through to the end. But they also have the wrong formula of seeking the point of maximum conflict with the TU bureaucracy. And they seem to base their general slogans on the drive to translate politics into organisational conflict, too: so those general slogans are always sterile, representing a false attempt to 'encode' political ideas in organisational conflicts, like 'kick out Callaghan-Healey'.

It is condescending and wrong to think that Thornett is some Honest Joe Worker who does not care about the theory. The leading worker militants of the WSL are educated comrades who take the theory seriously. And we must take their theory seriously too.

Oliver's idea of the WSL possibly breaking up seems wide of the mark. They have had a functioning organisation for 6 years. It won't collapse.

There's a problem of our size being about the same as the WSL's. If either group were substantially bigger, fusion could take place on the basis of the bigger group's positions. But how do we reach common positions when we're about the same size?

Our own state is a problem. We need to be strong enough to provide the backbone for a fused organisation which is a lot more heterogeneous and problem-ridden than the present League.

Finally: beware of escapism. Some comrades seem to see fusion with the WSL as a let-out from the problems of our own work.

**Gardiner.** Would fusion disrupt the work we are doing now? Look at the broad groups. We have perhaps 10 or 20 people who could be recruited straight off - the rest are loose people. A fused organisation could help bring them in. But would the fused organisation then be the 'convergence', or would the fused organisation also have a periphery organisation? If the latter, would it be more like the S\*\*\* than S\*?

Will the WSL break up? No. But people may drop out. And if we do not fuse with the WSL, then it is a dangerous competitor.

Political differences? We could have provision for a discussion period during which disputed questions remain open. The really problematic question is the workers' government, but we would win that.

We should step up the pressure, but deadlines don't mean much.

They should not come into the broad groups until the fusion is agreed.

**Oliver.** I agree with **Gardiner** : the disputed questions can be dealt with.

We don't want endless discussion like we had with the RMC and the IS/LO. The best thing would be a conference of the fused organisation - though that may be risky.

Let's announce a fusion before March 21st - have Thornett speaking at the rally - have both organisations building the rally. The SC resolution leaves everything open. We should not hold back on the grounds that we could mess up our own organisation.

**Carolan.** Comrades seem to be trying to ignore it, but there are barriers to fusion with the WSL. They are open to us, but there are big differences. Fusion is possible, but we must keep our heads. The WP/WF fusion, despite everything positive, did set us back a fair bit politically.

The WSL do take their ideas seriously. They'll fight us unless we can win them. We have to get common politics or it'll be a beargarden.

If we don't think it through, we could mess it up. To get a common paper we would have to have some agreement on the workers government and how to fight the bureaucrats. We should continue dialogue, make running assessments - maybe at some point make a gamble. But we do need resources for the turn, and we must make sure that's not disrupted. We will have to fight to make sure fusion is not counterposed to the necessary work, rather than presuming it in advance.

We should beware of general unity ballyhoo embracing the IMG. We should also beware of giving the WSL an impression that we're not serious about our ideas.

Approaching the WSL locally? We proposed joint branch meetings and they said not until a joint meeting of NCs. We should respect that - don't give them the idea we're trying to split them.

I'm very much in favour of fusion, but we must fight for a solid fusion, not just rely on good will.

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**Kinell** proposed a counter-amendment to Oliver's amendment (see end of resolution as in NTO 169); Oliver's amendment was then withdrawn and **Kinell's** amendment and the amended resolution were passed unanimously.

Further decided: to send resolution to the WSL; to propose relaxation of discipline in joint meeting so comrades can express individual opinions.

## PUTTING IT IN PERSPECTIVE — Kinnell

The minutes from the I-CL National Committee (December 1980) reprinted here should nail three diversions.

1. It proves that we did not go into the fusion as sharks trying to chew up the old WSL.

"They are still fundamentally Healyites, therefore there are a lot of difficulties. But they are a serious organisation, especially their leadership, and a fusion would be highly desirable... we should aim to convince the WSL comrades, not to bash them, not to split them - to have an honest fusion". (Carolan).

2. It proves that the points we are now making about the old WSL are not artificially invoked for the sake of the immediate faction fight.

"The WSL took in a lot of people from various sources after its split from the WRP, and never seems to have really homogenised itself..." (Carolan).

3. It proves that our criticisms of the 'old WSL right wing' around Parsons are also not artificial.

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

### IN PERSPECTIVE

These minutes should also help put the whole experience in perspective.

What we tried in 1981 had never been done before, except possibly in the Communist Parties after World War 1 and the Trotskyist fusions after World War 2.

In those cases there was a new and inspiring political situation, rendering many old differences irrelevant; there was a tremendous influx of new recruits, swamping the old organisations; and a strong international movement played a vital constructive role.

We were trying to fuse two organisations of roughly equal size which had been in political conflict, directly or implicitly, for 15 years - in a situation generally unfavourable to the left, and where the major international input was from groups deliberately out to split us.

That we failed is still tragic. But it is not a cause for despair.

### HOW IT HAPPENED

Some sort of overview can be gained by looking at the whole history of relations between the old WSL and the I-CL/WF. I can describe it, of course, only from the I-CL/WF angle.

When Smith, Jones and their comrades were thrown onto the streets in the ideological clothes they stood up in by Gerry Healy in December 1974, we were of course interested. So was everyone else on the would-be Trotskyist left: Smith was by far the best-known Trotskyist industrial militant in Britain, and had been the SLL/WRP's star public figure for some time.

But the ideological gulf seemed huge. In our view the SLL had already been utterly degenerate when Smith joined it in 1966, and had only got worse since.

Its stock-in-trade was constant preaching of crisis and

catastrophe; sectarian bluster (covering up ideological incoherence and instability, and often quite opportunist practical politics); and utterly unscrupulous ultra-hostility towards other left tendencies, in the service of which it would lie quite freely.

Yet up to the early '70s the SLL was not only the biggest far-left group, but also, in the perception of most militants, the Trotskyist group. The IMG and Militant were small and low-key, almost invisible. The SWP/IS was explicitly non-Trotskyist. For most militants, 'Trotskyist' meant 'SLL'.

For WF, one of our main purposes and reasons for existence was to challenge that equation, and to show in practice that Trotskyism was something utterly different from and opposed to the SLL.

So what of the WSL? We wrote in 'International Communist' no.1:

"The WSL represent a 'scrambled' version of the WRP's politics. They have the same basically religious conception of politics, and the same rightist tendency on the Labour Party, Ireland, the EEC, the women's question, etc. However, they show signs of 'thinking' and should be treated flexibly and sensitively".

On the Labour Party, we were referring to the WSL's use of slogans like 'Make the Left MPs fight', etc; on Ireland, to its failure to take an unequivocal stand of solidarity with the Republicans against British imperialism. Strange, in view of the recent debates? Not really. Organisational sectarianism and loud denunciations towards the Labour Party are not the same as ideological firmness against reformism.

In May 1976 we proposed a debate with the WSL on the question of the Fourth International. We got a very curt response.

"The reasons for such a debate were not and are not apparent... you have nothing but the most scathing terms to describe the WSL, asserting that:

'the "anti-Pabloite" currents have added an extra element of poisonous confusion. They... can offer only ideological left-overs from the USFI current's work, together with an obscurantism which is properly their own...'

It seems curious to go out of your way to seek a debate with another group whose history the I-CL despises..."  
(Letter from Cunliffe, July 27 1976).

We also tried to get a dialogue on the women's question (Short wrote a letter to Socialist Press, which was published and replied to).

But by 1977, when we wrote the I-CL manifesto, we concluded:

"They showed signs of open-mindedness after their split with the WRP, but are now rapidly congealing".

And our February 1978 conference document on 'The I-CL and the Revolutionary Left' said:

"Politically unstable and extremely primitive, unable or unwilling to debate their line (at least with us), and reportedly wracked by internal conflict, the WSL has nevertheless gained a certain presence. Its CDLM conferences have been sizeable, bearing witness to some energetic strike support work... In short, it has established itself as the philistine-sectarian

beneficiary from the rebound from the philistine-opportunist SWP and IMG - the group for those who want a 'hard' organisation and do not care too much what politics it is 'hard' about."

#### THE SPARTACIST RAIDS

But then came the two Spartacist raids on the WSL. We thought that on the rebound the WSL might once again be open to rethinking. And so it proved.

In 1978 we had a joint internal bulletin. But there was little dialogue then. The WSL was still loudly denouncing our work in the Labour Party (the S\*\*\* it described as "a 'socialist' campaign which supports Callaghan"; the R\*\*\* as "errand boys for Benn").

In May 1980, we tried again, and got a much more positive impression. An amendment carried at our August 1980 conference said:

"Despite their sectarian bias, the WSL have a proletarian orientation and some working class base. Also, they are relatively close to us, in comparison to the rest of the left. For these reasons, and because of the WSL's signs of relative open-mindedness, we should discuss with them in the spirit of proposing and seeking unity. Even if unity turns out to be impossible, it is our duty to explore the possibilities as far as possible and to win over the best people in the WSL to our ideas".

#### THE PRE-FUSION DISCUSSIONS

The 14 months of pre-fusion discussions between May 1980 and July 1981 went pretty well. The December 1980 I-CL NC (the minutes of which are reprinted here) passed a pro-fusion resolution which said:

"We recognise, however, that:

- a) there are serious differences with the WSL on numerous questions: General Strike, Workers' Government, Afghanistan, etc.
- b) There are also serious differences of method (attitude to reformism, use of transitional demands, etc.)

The WSL has a contradictory combination of some good un-sectarian industrial work (eg BL) with a general political method (reflected in its paper and general slogans) of literary denunciations and sectarianism. That general method could rapidly wreck the sort of broad labour movement work we have recently undertaken. It has inspired several silly sectarian attacks in their press on SCLV and the RFMC.

Over recent months they have empirically corrected themselves and drawn much closer to us. That shift, plus the proletarian orientation of the WSL, makes unity thinkable. But for unity to be solid, the sectarian method will have to be corrected (to a serious extent) consciously and not just empirically".

This resolution, by the way, should deal with Smith's allegation in his latest IB that:

"... negotiations... were mainly characterised by diplomacy. Differences came out inasmuch as they were dragged out".

On the contrary: we sent the above resolution, posing the issues rather candidly and brutally, to the WSL; and the minutes of the pre-fusion discussions, which were produced in large quantities, confirm that our approach was one of honest and rigorous political discussion.

### ASSESSMENTS

So: what conclusions, positive and negative, did we draw about the old WSL from the pre-fusion discussions? Why did we fail to foresee what would happen after the fusion?

We saw the following good features:

1. Open-mindedness. "The openness of the WSL - in sharp contrast to the Healyite tradition - is more impressive than their political positions as such" (Keith at the December 1980 I-CL NC).

2. Good practical work. "They have SLL-ish formulas about 'the alternative leadership', but they break these down in their practice to quite rational forms". (Carolan).

An I-CL circular (January 25 1981) argued: "At the joint meeting of NCs we developed the idea that a fusion could unite the best of the different experiences and approaches developed by the two organisations... Example: the workers' government... our workers' government policy integrates the positive elements of the WSL's two disconnected formulas into a broader and more rational framework... Second example: Women's Fightback... We should be able to convince them that within the general framework developed by Fightback, there is room for their industrial and outwork as part of a broader perspective...

"We seemed to have some success".

What were the problems?

1. "There are big differences" (Carolan, December 1980 NC). In particular, the fusion almost broke down at the last minute over the question of the 'broad groups' and the 'party paper'.

2. We were worried about the fact that even when the old WSL leaders came to agree with us, as they largely did on the LP, the workers' government, etc., they never openly analysed their previous positions. Also, they did not seem to be fighting the anti-fusion elements in the old WSL very boldly.

But we did not recognise the full significance of these facts at the time. We told ourselves that it was sectarian to demand agreement on past disputes, and that Smith and Jones probably knew best how to handle the situation inside the old WSL.

3. The incoherence of the old WSL worried us. "We need to be strong enough to provide the backbone for a fused organisation which is a lot more heterogeneous and problem-ridden than the present (I-CL)" (Kinnell).

4. Something which worried me at the time - but I'm not sure I ever openly said it - was a feeling that the old WSL was being pushed towards the I-CL by a feeling of demoralisation and decline and inability to stand on its own, rather than by more positive motives. This would mean that apparent political agreement would not prove very solid.

I wish I had thought this through more at the time.

### PERSPECTIVES OF FUSION

Still, on a whole number of crucial issues, the method of trying to

develop a broad overview or synthesis within which the concerns and experiences of the old WSL could be integrated seemed to work.

Our perspective for the fusion depended on continuing this process. It didn't work. Why not?

The pre-fusion discussion had never challenged Smith's and Jones's political method of having themselves as a pre-ordained 'worker leadership' which acted as the ideological arbiter for a process of consensus politics. The input from the I-CL in the fusion discussions was simply another element which they had to integrate into the process of political averaging-out. (Thus the open-mindedness combined with the lack of rigorous accounting for past positions or clear political battle against sectarian elements like Morrow).

But the fused organisation had to take clear political decisions on immediate issues. This necessity was bound to upset things.

### THE FIRST PROBLEMS

The first problems after fusion were:

1. Acute conflicts in the women's commission.
2. Political differences over Ireland. (Smith sometimes says that we had somehow concealed our positions on Ireland before the fusion. But we regularly published those positions in our press, and Carolan had attended the old WSL Irish commission before fusion and argued against what he saw as an Irish-nationalist tendency there. The fact is that we saw the old WSL positions on Ireland as extremely primitive, and thought this issue would be one for education rather than polemic).

3. Generalised discontent in sections of the old WSL, especially Oxford. (This seemed to arise from the fact that many old WSLers had been assured that the old-WSL element would dominate in the fused organisation, and that the "Pabloite leadership" of the I-CL would be "smashed". They felt betrayed.)

The way we reacted to these problems is convincing proof that Smith's portrayal of us as doctrinaire factional sharks is false.

1. We asked Noonan, an ex-old-WSL woman EC member, to intervene in the women's commission. She refused (apparently because of the prospect of conflict between her and Todd).

2. We proposed adding Piggot to the EC (thus giving it an old-WSL majority; we also gave the OC an old-WSL majority). The purpose was to bring those sections who were discontented - both generally and specifically on Ireland - directly into a process of discussion on the EC. Smith and Jones felt bound to 'represent' the discontent on the Irish question, but were self-confessedly incapable of arguing it: so nothing could be solved by discussion only with them.

This proposal was 'vetoed' by the Oxford area committee.

3. Proposing an extended, calm discussion on Ireland. There were a number of meetings. But there was no dialogue. Many old-WSL comrades were now extremely alarmed about being 'conquered' ideologically by the I-CL. But they didn't know how to deal with the arguments. So we got responses like Jones's at the October 1981 NC: "Carolan stands too close to the problem. Should see it in the context of the world struggle against imperialism... Should not focus on danger of civil war but on fight against imperialism".

Never mind the complexities of Irish reality: look at the world struggle against imperialism instead!

Our aim was to try to bring about a process of ideological integration by convincing people, and in the first place the ex-old-WSL leadership. We knew this was a very delicate business: any full-scale political clash could rapidly become a clash of two very different political cultures, and soon we would not even be speaking the same language.

We were ultra-conciliatory on minor matters, and we tried to develop 'syntheses' to overcome the differences on the general strike and on the EEC (with some partial success, in both cases).

#### POLAND AND THE FALKLANDS

But the one thing we could not do - unless we were to abandon our most basic duty as Marxists - was to compromise on sharp, immediate political questions.

Thus the conflicts on Poland and on the Falklands, which have been described elsewhere.

Two aspects of the Falklands dispute merit comment here.

1. It reveals the utter hypocrisy of the Smith group's present agitation about democracy. They wanted to overthrow a line decided by TILC and by an extended National Committee through a simple EC vote - and an accidental EC majority at that, due to people being absent.

2. More important, it was - in hindsight - a decisive breakdown of the political cohesion of the new WSL.

What Smith and Jones used to support their position in that dispute was not primarily rational Marxist (or would-be Marxist) argument. It was an appeal to old-WSL clan loyalties, to their own prestige as trade union militants, and to the general 'Trotskyist public opinion' around us.

This was to be a feature of all the subsequent disputes. On none of them did we have even the attempt at discussion on the EC that we had in the earlier argument on Ireland. On the Falklands it would have been comic if it were not tragic. When we tried to get an EC discussion on their documents, they moved next business after the opening contribution, then refused to speak, then (when some stumbling exchanges got going moved next business again twice before we eventually gave up...

Our perspective of consolidating the fusion by a process of discussion inside the new WSL was dead. For political disputes were being moulded not by Marxist discussion, but by factors completely external to it.

#### DESTROYING THE PARTY

A digression is necessary to explain the importance of this.

The bourgeoisie within feudalism already controls important institutions within the old society. It develops its own ideology and culture within the old society.

The working class within capitalism is different. It remains a slave class. All the major ideological and cultural institutions of capitalism are controlled by our enemies. Yet the working class needs its own clear ideas much more than the revolutionary bourgeoisie did. The socialist revolution, unlike the bourgeois revolution, must be a revolution where the masses know and understand what they are fighting for. The new society to be created is one that requires conscious

planning, not one that develops spontaneously like capitalism.

So how can the working class develop its own ideas, when the society around it - and the masses of the working class, in normal times - are dominated by bourgeois ideology?

The revolutionary party is the answer to this problem. It creates a scientific community, or an ideological workshop, in which an alternative view of the world can be developed.

The party also needs organisational sinews. But a feeble group with a sound Marxist basis can develop those sinews in time, whereas the most powerful movements - if they do not organise themselves to fight for scientific socialist clarity - can quickly collapse.

The most essential condition for the party to fulfill its basic ideological role is that Marxist discussion within the party determines its line, and not any external pressures - that the reference point for every section of the party is the weight of scientific argument within the party, and not any outside group or factor.

Once the prestige of Smith and Jones, or the influence of outside 'Trotskyist public opinion', became weighty factors in our internal debates, that severely damaged our internal political life. It meant that an easy-going, civilised regime was unworkable. But at the same time a strict, formalistic, disciplinarian regime was unworkable because it would seem like degradation to Smith and Jones.

That dilemma has dogged and crippled us increasingly over two years. We tried all we could to restore dialogue and normal working relations. We couldn't.

#### WHAT WE FAILED TO SEE IN 1980-1

Most of the elements of the 'worker-leadership'/consensus-politics system described in IBs 88, 89, and 101 were visible before the fusion. But we failed to put them together into a coherent picture.

We failed to see the full significance of the failure of Smith and Jones to settle accounts properly with their own past positions, or with sectarian currents in the old WSL. We wrote a resolution which said: "the sectarian method will have to be corrected (to a serious extent) consciously and not just empirically" - yet we tolerated a situation where all the 'corrections' were empirical and arbitrary.

For my own part, personally, I also grossly overestimated the level of Marxist education of the old WSL leadership.

Smith's picture of the fusion is that our attitude:

"was... to absorb the old WSL into (our) own culture. It was not a fusion but a takeover bid... The attitude of Carolan, Kinnell and Hill was to play (differences) down at the time and 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 coexistence with any significant differences at all".

As it stands this is nonsense. The I-CL and WF were lively, argumentative organisations. As for playing down the differences in the pre-fusion discussions, firstly we didn't, and secondly if we had tried to then anyone could have tripped us up just by reading our press!

But the nonsense does point to something important. Consider: what precisely is Smith's objection to us? That we tried to win the new WSL to our politics, by political argument. No more.

In discussions on this issue Smith has frequently complained about our unwillingness to "make concessions" on political questions - and he genuinely does seem to have a conception of political positions being worked out by a process of trade-union-type bargaining.

But concessions are appropriate on secondary and organisational matters - and we made plenty of them. On principled political issues they are not.

Of course we have tried to win the new WSL to our politics. We tried to develop a synthesis or overview, based on our politics, within which the concerns and experiences of old WSL comrades could be integrated. We expected old WSL comrades to try to win us over to their politics. The two rival efforts would not necessarily mean conflict, as long as we operated according to a regime of trying to convince and being willing to be convinced.

But the problem was this. Outside events - communal polarisation in Northern Ireland, military law in Poland, the South Atlantic war - demanded immediate sharp responses. We had proposals based on more-or-less developed Marxist arguments. Smith and Jones had rather incoherent reactions based on a mixture of old Healyite ideology and current 'Trotskyist public opinion'. Their concepts of 'worker leadership' and of representing a constituency made it impossible for them to go along with us politically. But they also couldn't really argue. So they mobilised other factors than scientific argument - their own prestige, old-WSL clan loyalties, weight of left public opinion, etc. Rather than discussing with us, they tried to beat us down with these outdigs.

That made political life inside the new WSL unworkable. And now it has worked through to making organisational life unworkable.

#### TOO HARSH? TOO FACTIONAL?

But some comrades still say that somehow we were too harsh, too factional, too intolerant. This is the common theme, in different tones, of McInnes, of Parsons, of McKelvie, of Levy.

For McInnes, Parsons and McKelvie, the argument amounts to little more than saying they find Carolan, Hill and myself disagreeable people. It is true that we are all three of us somewhat deficient in politicians' soft-soap and bonhomie, but apart from that there is not much to say about this argument except to ask why these authors find it worthwhile to bring this into the Internal Bulletin.

Levy has tried to present a more considered case. We have become so habituated to faction fights, he says, that we cannot rise to the broad view necessary to build a party.

This argument can be disproved by citing facts.

1. In the 18-years history of the WF/I-CL/new-WSL-majority current, 1966 to 1984, there have been only four faction fights of any size:

a) The period in the IS/SWP (but that took the form of acute faction-fighting only in two relatively short periods, in 1968-9 and in late 1971).

b) The early faction fight in the Irish Workers Group.

c) The faction fight with Workers' Power in 1976 (of which the acute period was only four months).

d) The drawn-out two-years faction fight in the new WSL.

What distinguishes us among would-be Trotskyist currents is not the large number, but the small number of our faction fights. Most of the major political developments of our tendency have come through lively (and at times sharp), but non-factional, discussion.

The old WSL had more faction fights in 6 years before the fusion than we had in 15.

2. Those - especially Carolan - who are painted as being interested only in faction fights, played a major constructive and initiating role in those positive political developments.

3. We are distinguished from other would-be Trotskyist currents not by a particularly large number of splits, but rather by a particularly large number of fusions.

Blind, short-sighted factionalists are not the sort of people who organise fusions.

Besides, our error - both in the 1981 fusion and in the 1975 fusion with the IS/SWP Left Faction - was not being factional enough. Our error was an excess of naive good will and optimism.

4. The new WSL fusion broke down first, long before its present general breakdown, in the women's commission, i.e. in an area where none of the alleged evil geniuses were directly active.

5. The first moves we made when the fusion began to run into trouble - documented above - were not those of narrow factionalists.

And so on, and so on.

#### MARXISM AND SECTARIANISM

But there is also a more fundamental issue.

"Professional factionalists" incapable of constructive work do exist. The Socialist Action is full of them. But for all that faction-fighting is a necessary part of the activity of a Marxist.

The "professional non-factionalist" is merely a "professional factionalist" without clear, defined politics. Parsons is an example of this species. But there are also comrades who are really, sincerely non-factional - whether from tiredness, bewilderment, a preference for the immediate living class struggle, or whatever.

But they are wrong. Their attitude is only a slight modification of the idea that all the left groups should get together and forget their differences. As Cannon put it:

"One cannot be an effective all-round revolutionist if he confines himself to mass work and agitation and leaves the internal affairs of the party, including disputes and faction fights, to others. No, that too is the task of the proletarian revolutionist. If his duty requires him to wade through controversy; if he has to learn to cope with... 'brawlers', and even to get smudged a bit with slander, he cannot ask exemption..."

( 'Speeches to the Party' p.307 ).

Faction fights are an inevitable part of building a revolutionary party. Our job is not to shy away from them but to conduct them in a Bolshevik way. Cannon again:

"Every serious factional struggle, properly directed by a conscious leadership, develops in progressive stages; it has a beginning, a middle and an end; and at every stage of the struggle the leadership is put to a test. Without a conscious leadership, factionalism can devour and destroy a party. Headless factionalism, sometimes even the smallest squabble, can tear a party to pieces..."

('Speeches to the Party', p.180)

Now consider. All the big political disputes since the fusion - Ireland, Poland, the South Atlantic war, the Labour Party, women, civilian bombings, and others - developed in the same way. First, we proposed a line. In some cases this was a commonly agreed line with the Smith group; in all cases, it was in no way factional or polemical. Never did we try to force an issue to a decision when there was no objective need. Then the Smith group reacted against us - changed its line (South Atlantic war) or after great dithering proposed a rival line to ours (Labour Party). Then the struggle developed.

What does the argument that we were too factional mean? It means that we didn't graciously defer and allow the Smith group to have their way on these issues. It means that we fought them, and tried to fight them in a Bolshevik way.

It is possible to understand how comrades could find the difference on the South Atlantic war an abstruse issue on which to disrupt the organisation, and partly blame us for the disruption because we stuck to our guns. But they are wrong. Abandon the fight for political clarity and you are lost as a revolutionary Marxist. Given an inch to the method of determining positions by deference and by trade-union-type negotiations, and you have lost your political soul.

The accusation against us of ultra-factionalism is not new. Personally I can well remember how, as a young IS/SWP sympathiser in 1968, I was first told about WP: these people, my local IS members told me, were insane factionalists, intolerant dogmatists, people who would argue you to death at the slightest sign of a political difference. Faction-fighting was all that interested them...

This slander, over the years, has been the routine charge against us by the IS/SWP and the IMG/Socialist Action. And it is nothing more than the age-old cry of every political mish-mash against Marxists. The fact is that we have been right on all the major issues against them; that we have a political record which is rigorously accounted for, whereas their record is one of instability, unexplained shifts, and self-imposed memory loss. They do not want political questions posed too sharply. So they cry 'factionalist'.

The same sort of charges were directed against Cannon and his so-called 'handraisers' by the oppositions in the SWP-USA; against Trotsky, the 'dictator from the heights of Oslo' and his 'one-man International', by all sorts of centrists; against the 'dictatorial', 'dogmatic' Lenin by the Mensheviks; against the 'authoritarian' Marx by the anarchists.

That doesn't prove, of course, that we have the same political qualities as Cannon or Trotsky or Lenin or Marx! But we can, I think, fairly quote Trotsky replying to those who charged him with 'sectarianism':

"Most of the time they have in mind not our weak but our strong sides: our serious attitude toward theory; our effort to plumb every political situation to the bottom, and to advance clear-cut slogans; our hostility to 'easy' and 'comfortable' decisions, which deliver from cares today, but prepare a catastrophe on the morrow".

( 'Sectarianism, Centrism, and the Fourth International' )

