

Platform of the Democratic Centralist Faction

Adopted April 28, 1984.

The National Committee decision on April 14 to expel 36 comrades for the "crime" of having belonged to a previously dissolved Faction is unmistakable proof that the question of minority rights, democratic centralism and the internal organisation of the League is and remains a central political question. For the NC majority, some of whom have tried to downgrade its importance, the question of the party regime is now seen as sufficiently a matter of principle to justify such mass expulsions. For those of us opposed to such methods, the issue of the regime is also a matter of principle - without which it is impossible, no matter how formally correct may be the League's programmatic positions, to build a healthy organisation. By adopting the methods of mass expulsion, the NC majority has deserted the method of Lenin, Trotsky and Cannon and embraced instead the bankrupt methods of Healy, the Spartacists and the RNL.

The fact that the resolution proposing these expulsions was drawn up at a closed caucus meeting the night before the March 31 NC meeting confirms that those of us who wish to fight for democratic methods and norms within the League are up against a tightly-knit, undeclared factional grouping which is prepared to tear up any or every clause in the Constitution in order to crush organised opposition and secure its own political objectives.

For these reasons, it is necessary now to proclaim ourselves and demand our Constitutional rights as a Faction, based firmly on a platform of struggle for a Bolshevik, democratic centralist structure and against the sectarian, bureaucratic degeneration which has brought the WSL and its leadership to the present state of dire crisis. In the period between now and the WSL conference fixed for the end of June, the Democratic Centralist Faction will argue along the following lines:

1) The Fusion.

In taking the decision to join a revolutionary Marxist organisation, militants look to build not a tiny, lifeless clique of polemicists and propagandists dependent upon one or two individuals for political development: they look to develop politically in a revolutionary combat party which will seek to utilise the leadership potential of every member, and reach out to recruit, educate and mobilise thousands and hundreds of thousands of workers. To be capable of this, the organisation must fight from the outset against the pressures towards sectarianism which arise in small groups, and ensure that the leadership is able to work with comrades - whether they be individuals or organised tendencies or factions - who hold and argue strongly for views distinct from those of the majority on certain issues. If this is not solved while an organisation is small, there is little chance it will ever become large: nobody can seriously imagine a mass-based workers' party with the ideological homogeneity of a small faction: and only a sectarian would see such a vision as desirable.

This means that norms and methods of work must be established through which minority comrades can play - and feel that they are playing - an active, productive role in the development of the movement and its daily work.

When many of us participated in the fusion in 1981 of the old WSL and old ICL to form the new Workers Socialist League, we were convinced that we were taking a historic step in this direction. We saw the fusion as non-sectarian in two ways: its firm orientation to the organised labour movement; and our objective of creating a movement within which various different points of view would be held and debated without opportunist diplomacy on the one hand, or the

sectarian plague of unprincipled, subjective splits or expulsions on the other.

We saw this as a major blow against the sectarian strand running through the post-war history of Trotskyism in Britain, and as an example to the international Trotskyist movement: a fusion based on principled agreement and the clear delineation of unresolved differences which would be thrashed out after fusion.

But in practice the experience of the fusion has been catastrophic. The organisation is now down to less than 130 members - smaller than either of the two pre-fusion groups. Far from offering any example to the British left or the international movement, the rump Workers Socialist League can only be seen as a sectarian, bureaucratically-run organisation, which now conducts no international work whatever, and radiates its complete indifference to events outside Britain.

The degree of cynicism involved is shown by the use of the argument that the organisation could not afford to have a conference (or a pre-conference discussion) during a miners' strike - hence the need summarily to expel 36 members. By proceeding in this fashion, they have produced more disquiet and more incoherence than would have happened if a conference had been called or action had been left until after the strike. Rather than seeing the first major class battle since the fusion as an ideal opportunity to test and strengthen the organisation in struggle, it is used as an excuse to weaken it. One consequence is that the very time at which our paper should have been expanding its sales, coverage, and possibly increasing its regularity, has seen it unilaterally scaled down in size and quality by the EC majority.

This decline of our organisation can only be reversed by a tenacious fight for the type of regime elaborated first and put into practice by Lenin in the Bolshevik party model and organisational methods of democratic centralism. This same model, defended by Trotsky against its bureaucratic distortion at the hands of the Stalinists, was further developed by the struggle of James P. Cannon and the leaders of the American Socialist Workers Party in the course of their fight for a genuine proletarian revolutionary party against various petty bourgeois oppositions. Democratic centralism combined the disciplined, centralised implementation of agreed majority policies, with structures and mechanisms at each level to assert democratic control and the voice of the party's rank and file - including minority points of view - in the decision-making process, as well as the accountability of the central leadership to the Party convention.

We believe that - albeit in very different conditions in today's very different WSL - these norms and methods remain valid in general terms as guidelines for our party-building work. But they are quite the opposite of the present internal norms and methods implemented by the present majority leadership of the WSL.

Since it would be meaningless simply to assert such norms abstractly in the enforced absence of an opposition that has now been bureaucratically expelled by the leadership, the restoration of a healthy regime in the WSL demands the reinstatement of the expelled comrades.

2) Bureaucratic Centralism.

The type of regime defended by the NC majority's vote for expulsions is the opposite of democratic centralism. Though there is obviously no material base of privilege in such a small and crisis-ridden organisation, the method of the leadership follows the familiar lines of bureaucracies

elsewhere in the labour movement. Opponents are branded "disruptive"; rank and file committees are consulted only insofar as they are controllable; decision-making is the prerogative of one or two key people, relying on virtually automatic endorsement from political acolytes at lower levels in the apparatus; and all the day-to-day work of the organisation is (and always has been) controlled by full-timers from the core of the old ICL. Carolan and Kinnell enjoy similar control over the positions and the work of the WSL to that of any trade union General Secretary over even the most bureaucratised union.

Political decision-making in the League has been shifted to successively more select and tiny committees. Editorial control of the paper has been taken out of the hands of any committee, and efforts to reestablish an Editorial Board have been successfully resisted by Carolan. Now these same leading comrades have succeeded in overturning the Constitution in a series of brazen abuses of the rights of members.

(a) 36 members have been firstly suspended without notice, without being charged with any breach of discipline, and without any right to a hearing; and then summarily expelled two weeks later, still without charges, and still without a hearing. The sole basis of the expulsion of all 36 was their support for the positions of the Faction, which was dissolved on March 25; in other words, they were expelled for their political views. Every aspect of this procedure is in breach of the Constitution: yet those who pointed to this fact were contemptuously dismissed as offering only "lawyerly arguments".

(b) On two occasions, the Constitutional right of members to demand the convening of a Special Conference of the League on production of the signatures of 25% of the membership has been bureaucratically overruled by the NC majority. On the first occasion, over 50 signatories had their demand preempted by the suspension of the 36. On April 14, a further 34 signatories were told by Carolan that the support of 25% of the post-expulsion membership "does not impress me". The demand was again overruled. In total, close to 50% of the pre-expulsion WSL have now registered their demand for a conference to discuss the regime and the expulsions - and have had their constitutional rights vetoed by the NC majority.

(c) The EC has attempted to intervene in and hinder the operation of the Control Commission, an independent body elected by and accountable to Conference as a guarantor of the rights of members. The EC sought to muzzle complaints against the conduct of the EC majority.

(d) In defiance of the Constitution, the EC and NC majority have introduced a system of summary fines which stands clearly outside the established disciplinary procedures of the League, and are the exclusive prerogative of cde Kinnell as treasurer.

All of these moves, together with the top-level decision to split our organisation through mass expulsions, have been made in such a way as to exclude the League's membership from any voice, or even from hearing the two sides of the story. The NC majority, following Kinnell and Carolan, have walled off the members from any involvement, and deliberately presented comrades with a fait accompli in the form of expulsions. The fate of our organisation has been decided with no reference to the membership.

This is no passing phase of internal life in the WSL. It is the model of the party regime which the expulsions are designed to reinforce. If the expulsions are upheld, there is not the slightest prospect that any subsequent organised, vocal minority will be tolerated, or that the membership will ever have any real voice in the decision-

making of the WSL in the months and years to come. The experience of this bureaucratic expulsion will shape the whole existence of the WSL from now on.

It is no accident that the forms and structures which are moribund or lacking in the WSL are precisely those which should offer the means for the membership to be kept informed and hold their leadership to account. The lack of area and national aggregates reduces political discussion within the League to a fragmented level of individual conversations or at best Branch meetings (where they occur, and where there are Branches left). This has already led to tendencies in various Branches to go their own way with little reference to any centralised plans or campaigns - leading to the very "federalist" deviations of which Carolan accuses the old WSL. The lack of reports by the EC and OSC to the NC, and from the NC to the membership, together with the contempt shown by the leadership for the views of the members, combine to ensure that there is no scientific or objective analysis of the League's campaign work, slogans and day-to-day activity, nor any accountability of full-timers to the membership. The abysmal level of education, the lack of any formal structures to develop national or international work and analysis, and the lack of any serious international coverage in our paper restricts the development of members and leaves the conduct of international work and policy (insofar as there is any) in the hands of two or three comrades.

In place of democratic centralism, enabling the movement to draw on the experience and practical work of members at branch level, the Carolan/Kinnell model is one of bureaucratic centralism, in which branches and individual members are made dependent for their political development on two or three core full-timers at the Centre.

Without a fundamental change in this method, there can be no healthy development in the WSL.

3) Sectarian regression.

This degeneration of the regime runs hand in hand with (and itself compounds) a political degeneration of the League's leadership in a sectarian direction. One of the factors which appeared to draw the two pre-fusion organisations together despite their differences in 1980-81 was that each in its own fashion was seeking to break in practice from sectarianism in relation to the wider labour movement. The old WSL had carried this through most successfully in its trade union work in BL and a range of other struggles including the NHs; the old ICL in its work in the MO and in particular the R***. A common concern to build broad based campaigns that would offer a real struggle against the trade union and MO bureaucracy seemed a solid basis for unity and, for the first time, a Trotskyist organisation which would have a serious, interventionist orientation to the British workers' movement as a whole.

What has happened to this orientation? The present NC majority is proceeding to smash up our organisation in the midst of the miners' strike, and has driven out most of the comrades who led the trade union work of the old WSL. Meanwhile our line in relation to the MO has increasingly dissolved into confusion and ambiguity, such as on our attitude towards B* and our failure with regard to local government work. Since the September 17 Conference last year (an initiative first proposed by cdes now expelled or in opposition) there have been no serious labour movement

campaigns or initiatives, though the unions have been convulsed by a succession of struggles. (No doubt this will be blamed on cde Smith; but the NC Majority cannot be absolved of their responsibility for the work). A suggested recall September 17 Conference was voted down on the NC, and no campaigns are planned. Instead the NC Majority now seems intent upon crushing any opposition in the WSL in the run-up to the June League conference.

Worse still is the theory now being advanced by Kinnell to rationalise the expulsions. The minority, he declares, deserved to be expelled, because "they are not Marxists". With this handy turn of phrase, Kinnell now dumps the whole membership of the old WSL on the same scrapheap as every other member of every other tendency of the world Trotskyist movement. In Kinnell's view there is not a single political current or comrade outside the old ICL-Workers Fight tradition who is worth even the time of day. "They are all useless", he told our conference in February 1983 (helping to secure the defeat of the document he was supporting).

In this neat, sectarian world of solid blacks and clear whites, is it surprising that all those opposing Carolan and Kinnell can be so easily consigned to the outer darkness of non-Marxism? After all, if you are the only Marxists, then anyone who disagrees must be a non-Marxist. Non-Marxists don't belong in a revolutionary party - so anyone who disagrees should be - or could be, if they argue too much for their positions - thrown out. The outlook is pretty bleak for any future possible oppositions in the WSL.

But the outlook is equally bleak for those who accept this sectarian world-view. It becomes the onerous task for a tiny handful of "Marxists" (basically Carolan and Kinnell), accompanied by a loyal band of followers, single-handedly to rebuild the Trotskyist Fourth International against the opposition of quite large "useless" groupings, some of which have the advantage of not being confined to a single country.

We are also seeing a degeneration to the "holy scrolls" version of Marxism, where the belief is held that all is known, and no further work on analysis and development of Marxist theory is necessary. For some organisations this process stops with Lenin; for others with the Transitional Programme of 1938; for Carolan and Kinnell, it stops with the positions they have worked out over the years. This is the very opposite of Marxism/Trotskyism which as a living science must continually analyse and develop its understanding of the world.

The fact is that the political method which so scathingly dismisses all the different traditions and the record of would-be Trotskyists in struggle (often in conditions which Carolan and Kinnell cannot envisage) is a method which can only doom the rump WSL to perpetual and well-deserved isolation on a world scale. It is a method which can neither develop fresh forces nor relate to those already in struggle. Its logic is to assemble a tiny "cadre" of docile hand-raisers while responding to serious differences by denunciation, vilification, and a succession of unprincipled splits. Its logic is to reject serious fusions (with "non-Marxists"?) and instead seek cynical repetitions of the WSL fusion: as the supply of gullible groupings runs dry, its logic is then to resort to a view of party-building one-by-one, with each new recruit being vetted and screened for conformity to the ideas of the leadership. We have seen this model in operation elsewhere:

until now we have been all agreed in branding it as sectarianism.

Look at its consequences in the WSL. After nearly 3 years of fusion, Carolan and Kinnell have convinced nobody on the other side, and come out with a smaller, demoralised group, discredited on the left in Britain and internationally, and having themselves succumbed to the disease of sectarianism. Only an idiot would believe that these same bankrupt methods can produce any better results in the years to come.

4) The alternative

In rejecting these bureaucratic, sectarian methods of the present leadership, our Faction argues for the democratic centralist method outlined in the draft proposals of IB92; for the reinstatement of the expelled 36; and for a serious turn of our organisation towards the class struggle in Britain and internationally.

We urge those comrades who can see the dangers of the present dead-end trajectory of our organisation to join the Democratic Centralist Faction and work with us to develop further a balance sheet of the fusion and a programme to resolve the crisis of the WSL.

SIGNED;

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