

Introduction

FAILURE OF A FUSION

ON MARCH 31 1984, the National Committee of the new WSL suspended Alan Thornett and 34 of his supporters from membership in the WSL. The NC told them that their expulsion would be proposed after the two weeks' notice required by the constitution had elapsed. On April 14, after the collapse of a Spartacist-like, but feeble, attempt by 20 or so members of the Thornett group to occupy the room where the NC was due to meet, and after the NC had heard a lengthy presentation from Thornett on behalf of himself and his faction, they were duly expelled. It was 33 months after the fusion between the old WSL and the I-CL.

Thus, what we described in 1981 as the 'bold experiment' of fusion between the I-CL and the old WSL has ended in defeat. The 'bold experiment' has been a failure.

The Thornett group had earlier rejected a proposal that the best way to resolve the conflicts which were paralysing and disrupting the new WSL, and which in March threatened to render us incapable of functioning during the miners' strike, was for the two antagonistic groups within the WSL to 'divorce' as amicably as possible, on the basis of an agreed division of the organisation's material resources.

But they felt it would best serve their factional interest for them to appear to resist a split and to present themselves as the champions of unity. They wanted to throw the responsibility for the split entirely onto our side of the organisation.

Now we did initiate the formal separation of the two groups. On March 10 we said to them, 'Enough is enough', and gave them the choice of agreeing to coexist constructively with us (without renouncing the right to argue their political criticisms), or of leaving the organisation. And when they replied to that, in effect: 'It will be business as usual', we expelled them.

But that is just the end of the story. For the previous 12 months at least, the split drive had come not from our side but from Thornett's self-designated 'worker leadership' group.

THE FUSION EXPERIMENT

The fusion was indeed a bold, perhaps foolhardy, experiment. The roots of the old WSL were in the SLL/WRP of Gerry, Healy, from which Alan Thornett and a group around him had been expelled in December 1974. Although they had moved some distance from Healyism since then, this movement was piecemeal, not worked out theoretically, and, as it turned out, unstable.

Some nine months after the fusion, in May 1982, they formed an opposition tendency within the new WSL. The issue was the Falklands/Malvinas war: halfway through that war they had changed their position from the one they shared with the new WSL majority, of opposing the war on both sides, to one of supporting Argentina. They took the organisation to a special conference on that issue in September 1982.

Immediately afterwards they opened up another faction fight, pressing for a sectarian turn on the Labour Party and on women's work. They did not formally declare a new faction until April 1983, but it was clear that they had an informal faction based on the core of the old WSL, mostly in Oxford.

Two further WSL conferences, in February and April 1983, showed that Thornett and his allies were clearly in a minority. After the April 1983 conference a group of old

WSLers in Leicester, who represented a more extreme sectarian position than Thornett but had allied with him against the majority, split to form the 'Workers International League', which has since collapsed.

After April 1983 the Thornett group were thus clearly in a minority in the new WSL. This position was confirmed at a further conference, in August 1983, where the main issue in dispute was Ireland.

After August 1983 defined political issues disappeared almost entirely from the Thornett group's factional agitation, in favour of organisational squabbles. In fact, however, another issue lay behind all the previous disputes — Falklands/Malvinas, Labour Party, women, Ireland — and explained the fury with which they had been conducted. That issue was the position of Thornett and his co-thinker Jones within the League.

The old WSL had been a peculiar organisation, built much more around the prestige of a couple of individual trade union militants than around definite politics. In fact its politics had been developed largely through a process of consensus and balancing between different inputs, with the 'worker leadership' as arbiter.

The 'worker leadership' wanted to continue as arbiter in the new WSL. Behind each dispute, the real issue for them was not so much their arguments on the Falklands/Malvinas, or the Labour Party, or whatever — these were generally primitive and unstable — but the implications for their own personal status.

That is why they were unable to accept the position of a minority — even a privileged minority. They became extremely alienated and rebelled against the WSL, blindly and incoherently.

AVOIDING A SPLIT?

Even during and after March 1984 they did not actually deny that a split was inevitable. "Nor do we regard a split as inevitable — certainly *not without a decision of the membership*", wrote Thornett in his appeal against the expulsion. In other words, they were not willing to live as a minority in the new WSL, but they wanted a conference rather than a National Committee meeting as the arena for their split.

"A split could have been avoided — and still could be", declared Thornett in the speech against the expulsions which he made to WSL area meetings across the country, "but it would require a fundamental change of attitude by Kinnell and Carolan to the old WSL side of the fusion and to the fusion itself. They would have to recognise us as revolutionary Marxist..." This 'change of attitude' was not to be expressed in definable minority rights — they had had all those, and more — but in a warmer appreciation of them. It was an unenforceable demand — "Kinnell and Carolan", or, more to the point, the National Committee majority, could have had definable rights for minorities imposed on them against their will (if that were the issue), but they could not have their political assessment of the Thornett group changed by any other means than convincing them.

In fact this question of whether or not we called them 'Marxists' was entirely spurious. We never rested anything on such generalities. We argued issues on their merits, and pointed out where (in our opinion) they departed from Marxism as the discussion demanded it.

As a factional ploy during the split they tried to compel us to say that they were "Marxists"; and when we said