

REPORT ON I.S. CONFERENCE - JG

The 1975 I.S. Conference was different from previous ones in several ways. The number of delegates was reduced (1 delegate to every 30 members instead of 1 to every 15). The purpose of this was to make the conference less of a rally and give delegates more chance to participate: this was criticised as undemocratic but I think it was successful - in fact, speaking time was continually being reduced because there were too many delegates wanting to speak. The conference lasted 5 days: because of this, and because delegates were coming from districts rather than branches (thus, a member of a factory branch could only attend if he was chosen as a delegate by the district), it might have been expected that the working-class participation would have been low. However, this was not so: judging from the delegates who spoke, the KN conference reflected the class composition of I.S. accurately. The number of workers speaking well, showed that I.S. has become a workers' organisation in fact as well as in its attitudes, and a real worker leadership is emerging in the districts. The workers' speeches had a tendency, however, to say: "This is what we've done" or "What should we do in this situation?" rather than to put forward new ideas.

The conference was structured around subject areas, and the resolutions which had been tabled were not proposed or voted on individually. Delegates wanting to speak to a particular resolution had to wait their turn in the general debate. Very few speakers, in fact, mentioned the resolutions. Partly, this was because most resolutions had come from branches and there were no branch delegates to propose them. However, I feel that the method adopted meant that issues were not posed concretely to the delegates. Instead, at the end of each day a drafting commission was appointed for each subject area discussed (or two drafting commissions where there was substantial disagreement). The next morning, the drafting commissions presented composite resolutions on their subjects; delegates could then put forward amendments, and the composite resolutions and amendments were voted on in the afternoon, by which time it was difficult to ~~remember~~ remember what had been said in the debate. It was the first time this procedure had been used, and it was confused and experimental. I feel that it tended to polarise the conference into two camps and delegates ended up voting by instinct for the composite resolution supported by the leadership, rather than getting to grips with the real differences, which were smaller than they looked.

Apart from the leadership, there were two factions. The Left Faction called for a programme, for building a more independent rank and file movement, for abstention on the Common Market, for a working-class cost of living index with £1 increases for 1 per cent rise in the cost of living, against women's work concentrating on economic struggles, for more commitment to the Irish question and the Troops Out Movement. As they had only one delegate to the conference their views were barely mentioned.

The other faction, called the Platform or the I.S. Opposition, included Jimmy Grealy, Mike Heym, Jim Higgins, Hugh Kerr, Roger Protz, John Palmer and Harry Wicks. They were bad at arguing their case, which was often a good one, and were soundly defeated on each vote by 4 or 5 to 1. However, on many issues the leadership had moved closer to the Platform position during the pre-conference discussions.

I will go briefly through the debates. On general perspectives for the deepening crisis, it was agreed that the phoney war was coming to an end, and the ruling class was obliged to take on the working class by an open or disguised coalition. However, the reforms being advocated by Benn, although not socialist, were raising workers' hopes and might lead to a centrist movement in which Benn's leadership would be backed by more militant workers. The I.S. leadership believed that I.S. should wait until a centrist movement emerged on to the political arena; the Platform believed that centrism was ~~AK~~ already a current among workers on the shop floor and that I.S. should encourage it along by ~~IKX~~ placing demands on the Labour government and especially the Left.

On the racial question, it was agreed that the high level of militancy among black workers could make I.S. emerge as a prominent organisation in black areas. The question must be treated more seriously, ~~AK~~ even in areas where there were few black people, as a firm fight against racial chauvinism often meant that I.S. members' views on other matters would be listened to.

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A proposal had been made that I.S. should stand a candidate in the Walsall by-election (Stonehouse's seat). The conference voted (with only 1 against) that candidates should be put up some time, but the majority felt that it was premature. From the picture given of the state of I.S. in Walsall I feel it would have been adventurist.

On the social contract, it was recognised that there was a general ideological acceptance of the principle of wage restraint. However, most workers did not accept restraint on their own wages. The trade union bureaucrats were swinging to the right and this must be combatted. The current occupations in resistance to redundancy were the bitterest ever; Management were now being physically ejected. This was the essential fight: it was far more difficult to organise the unemployed once they were outside the factory. Employers were learning lessons too: redundancies were if possible replaced by natural wastage; or employers would remove machinery before an occupation could be organised. The conference advocated "nationalisation without compensation, with shop steward control of manning, jobs, conditions, and a militant wages policy."

A discussion took place on the cuts in public expenditure. Since social services formed a "social wage", these were really wage cuts. Great strides had been made in organising workers in education, health and the social services, and new ways must be worked out of linking these workers in danger of redundancy with the communities who would be deprived of their services. Such a fight is particularly useful in exposing reformism.

The discussion on women failed to get to grips with the spectrum of opinions ranging from those who emphasised women factory workers to those who emphasised more general issues of women's oppression. The two rival resolutions presented in the end, did not say different things. On this subject more than any other, the leadership seemed to change its approach coming into conference.

On rank and file organisation, the difference of opinion centred on the independence of the movement from I.S. The leadership argued that the rank and file movement must be effectively led by I.S., and could not be built without I.S. or it would collapse. The Platform, who were joined on this occasion by Andreas Nagliatti, said that people had got browned off by the excessive I.S. influence in the rank and file movement, and that it must include independent militants in order to be credible. The two sides moved closer to each other during the debate, and there was general agreement that more effort should be put into getting direct affiliations to the Rank and File Organising Committee by factory or combine shop stewards' committees where I.S. had influence. The local shop stewards' committees at Kirkby and Speke should be copied elsewhere.

The conference was agreed that I.S.'s periphery should not just be organised in the rank and file movement, but that connections must be built up with people who were not willing to join I.S.; thorough categories like "supporters" giving money regularly, non-members selling Socialist Worker, readers' meetings, etc.

On workplace branches, it was reported that in December there had been 38 of these. Since then, 18 manual workers' branches had collapsed, but 6 new ones had been established plus 14 white-collar branches. Increasingly, I.S. would operate with small workplace cells rather than full branches. The total number of workplace units had doubled over the past year, and they now covered 60 per cent of the membership.

On the Communist Party, it was felt that I.S. was now ~~NINETEEN~~ able to offer an alternative leadership, and the Party was demoralised and inclined to indulge in witchhunts. Because of I.S.'s strength there must be more emphasis on attacking the Communist Party. The shift to the right by the Broad Left meant that I.S. should frequently cease to participate in it and should put up its own candidates in union elections; to do this it was necessary to strengthen the I.S. "fractions" (by which are meant the organisations of I.S. members within individual trade unions). Efforts should be made to involve non-I.S. members in fighting within the unions, but these people were not necessarily to be found in the Broad Left. The Platform group argued, unsuccess-

fully, that it was premature to get out of the Broad Left, where many important layers of workers still were. On this they were defeated by between 3 and 4 to 1.

The discussion on national organisation reflected a split. The leadership argued that recognition should be given of the fact that effective leadership was in the hands of the Executive Committee (up to now elected by a 40-member National Committee elected by Conference); the Executive Committee should therefore become a 10-member full-time Central Committee elected by conference, and the National Committee should become a mainly advisory body composed of delegates from the districts and trade union fractions. The Platform admitted that the old National committee meeting once a month had often been little more than a rubber stamp, but maintained that it was necessary as a check on the full-timers and as a means of involving the worker leadership who would not be on the Central Committee; they proposed it should meet 6 times a year as a National Committee and 6 times a year as Commissions on specific subjects. After a chaotic series of votes the conference accepted the leadership's proposals for a National Council meeting 4 times a year, but reduced the Central Committee to 6 members on the grounds that there were only 6 outstanding leaders. It was agreed by a narrow majority to elect the Central Committee on a "slate" basis, that is, no representation for minorities.

The debate on Ireland was short but reflected the more serious attitude now being adopted by I.S. Mike Heym introduced the debate, describing the growing crisis in the North and the need for a mass campaign in England. I spoke ~~XX~~ on the way in, which a withdrawal of troops would affect the situation and the importance of class politics both in England and Ireland, and of the practical contribution I.S. could make in terms of finance, returning emigrants, and links to the Northern Protestant workers. Various delegates spoke about the T.O.M. and the need to link the working-class movement to it. Neil Davies spoke of organising workers on building sites against the Prevention of Terrorism Act, and the need to direct agitation towards soldiers. A Glasgow delegate pointed to the failure to link the Irish issue with the troops scabbing on the dustcart drivers. Both during this debate and outside the conference I was made aware of the stalwart work I.S. members in the Birmingham area had done in cooling the situation after the bombings and limiting the spontaneous outbursts of the workers; the most important part of this was accomplished before any I.S. organ had time to meet to impose a line.

The international debate emphasised that the situation in Portugal provides the first possibility of workers' states in 50 years. Solidarity and liaison were crucial, and I.S. could contribute material and ideological resources. Fraternal delegates who had not already spoken addressed this session.

A meeting with fraternal delegates was held after the conference, attended by representatives of I.S.(G.B.), I.S.(U.S.), P.R.P. (Portugal), Kommunistisk Forbundet (Sweden), Kommunistisk Forbund (Denmark); S.W.A.G. (Australia), Independent Socialists (Canada) - S.W.M., and a Chilean exile. (Delegates from Lutte Ouvrière and Révolution had gone home.) The meeting discussed the role of the Party as allowing the working class to break with the ruling class's ideology; the struggle against social democracy and against the substitutionism of the Fourth Internationals; the question of probationary membership and the revolutionary organisation's periphery; the organisation of industrial solidarity with Portuguese workers.

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The sixties in Ireland have been called the Decade of Upheaval as far as industrial relations are concerned. In that period the average wage increase escalated six and a half times; from 60p in 1959 to an average increase of £3.93 in 1969. We topped the world strike league once or twice. After 1967 we had one of the highest rates of inflation of hourly earnings.

All this seems to add up to a very impressive picture but in fact with the arrival of wage agreements we have seen the complete reverse. The Irish strike figures are one among a few countries which show a drastic fall. While this fall in strikes is mainly due to the demoralisation of the working class due to unemployment, talk of the national interest etc, there is also another reason for the sharp contrast.

The push in the mid sixties in Ireland contained a number of weaknesses. The major process at work was the wage round. The wage round is defined as a general upward movement in wages which is usually completed in an active bargaining period of about 6 months either by central negotiation or by a key group of workers setting the pattern. B) Wage rounds occur periodically at regular intervals C) Typically it covers all bargaining groups D) results in roughly the same increase.

The wage round served as a compensation for the cost of living and so it was looked on as the minimum. However two other factors made the situation peculiar to Ireland. The unemployment rate the period remained at 4/5 per cent, which means that there was no real shortage of labour except in the craft sectors. This helped to prevent the rise of shop floor organization using the wage round as the basic minimum from which they could push up their earnings. Unlike Britain there was no wage drift amongst the general mass of manufacturing workers.

But there was also another process which was analogous to wage drift — that of supplementary claims. The problem of the wage round from the craftsman's point of view was that they were flat rate increases ~~against~~ which over a period cut his differential. Being in one of the few groups where there was labour shortage he was able to achieve temporary reverses and increase the differential. But because the customs of Irish industrial bargaining were based on comparability, because the bosses resisted the supplementary claims on the basis that they would spread the increase to the unskilled — thus widely publicising the increase — the supplementaries became the basis of future claims. And so the process begins again.

Therefore in Ireland the real push behind the working class advance was not the shop floor organisation, instead the real push came from sectional interests of the craftsmen. The point about this is that even in the craft union the rank and file were united around the union bureaucrats since it was often the bureaucrats of the small craft unions who pushed the claims from inter union rivalry, or from fears of loss of membership.

The strategy that the authors of this booklet recommend the government is interesting. The government must get a voluntary incomes policy which cuts the link or relativity between the skilled craftsmen and the unskilled. This will be achieved by bribing the skilled with high increases so that they don't come out and set the whole process rolling. This seems to lie behind the change from flat rate increases in the first agreement to percentage increases in the second NWA. This was in response to rumblings of the craft unions. To sum up, while the pursuit of pure sectional interests ~~was~~ achieved advances at a certain period the whole history of the sixties is a great lesson in its weakness.

Portugal is as industrialised a country as the Irish Republic, with a large services sector. 28 per cent of the working population are in agriculture (25 per cent here), but the majority of these (unlike the situation here) are agricultural labourers, and there are a large number of tenant farmers. The size of the working class is, therefore, much greater than in Russia in 1917.

What follows is derived from 2 speeches and 2 discussions given by the P.R.P.'s fraternal delegate to the I.S. Conference. Comrades should also read his fraternal address as reported in Socialist Worker, 14 June, page 11. It should not be assumed that I agree with the entire analysis. In particular, I am inclined to think the P.R.P. under-emphasize the need for the party and over-emphasize the revolutionary potential of the left-wing officers.

A revolutionary situation exists in Portugal. The present balance of forces cannot continue to exist. Many factories are occupied by the workers, and have been put back into production under workers' control. Peasants have seized land from landowners or rich tenant farmers, and in some cases are cultivating it co-operatively. Politics is discussed openly, even inside the armed forces. The elections have solved nothing. The stock exchange has been closed for over a year.

The P.R.P.-B.R. (Revolutionary Party of the Proletariat/Revolutionary Brigades) is about the same size, proportionately, as I.S. is in Britain. It originated inside the Portuguese Communist Party, and its first activities were acts of sabotage against the fascist regime. (These acts took no lives except those of two members.) In internal debate they have successfully struggled against and rejected two tendencies, one leading towards militarism and the other towards spontaneism or anarchism. They now view themselves as a cadre party, although all members do not have a high level of ideological knowledge: one of their chief problems is the lack of "medium cadres" intermediate between the leadership and the ordinary members. They have inherited from the underground days a tendency towards self-preservation - towards a static internal power-structure - and recognise the need to make workers the key element of the Party structurally. At the last count, more than 90 per cent of the members were workers, and the majority of these were manual workers. Since this count there has been an influx of students: they do not encourage this, but do not refuse to admit them. They have factory branches and barrack branches; members not in these are organised in smaller cells. District committees comprise delegates from the factory and barrack branches, plus one delegate to represent all the other cells. Of the 70 members on the Central Committee, 53 are manual workers. Recruitment is oriented towards workers' committees, tenants' committees, and land occupation organisations. Militants are admitted immediately without any candidate membership. The attitude towards organising sympathisers is at present confused. Recruitment has not been higher because of workers' fears of committing themselves to the Party, and because of the economistic nature of the struggles in progress. They are considering the use of internal documents to unify the Party, as the paper has not played a major role in this. The paper has rather been oriented towards the public, with one or two pages devoted to Party news. The paper sells 25,000 copies. 6 months ago, the majority of these were from shops, bookstalls, etc., but there is now greater emphasis on sales to militants (e.g. at factories). The Party is aware of its weakness. It believes that the developing situation will draw to it many rank and file militants from the Socialist Party and from the Maoist organisations, which will be destroyed. The Trotskyist organisations are unimportant. The Communist Party and Socialist Party do not have internal tendencies and will not therefore split, but will eventually collapse.

A debate is in progress in the working class, focussing on two rival concepts:

(1) Mass organisations called Councils of Reconstruction, the reformist solution, backed by the Communist Party, and based on absorbing the working class (through devices like workers' participation) into a drive to increase production and stabilise the economy, enabling investment of capital to take place with a view to entering the E.E.C. The P.R.P. believes that, through breaking the struggles of the working class, this would lead to fascism.

(2) Revolutionary Councils of Workers, Soldiers and Sailors, the revolutionary solutions. The P.R.P. is the chief organisation advocating this, but they are backed by many rank and file supporters of other parties. The Revolutionary Councils would be composed of delegates from each factory and barracks, meeting initially on a local basis. A few Revolutionary Councils exist now in embryo form, some of the delegates being genuine representatives of a factory and others coming from rank and file pressure groups inside factories which have not yet as a whole accepted the idea. They are co-ordinated by a national federation which includes, as a minority, representatives coming directly from political parties of the Far Left and from trade unions. The aim of this direct representation is to prevent parties from using the elections inside the factories in order to ensure that their voice will be heard.

This type of manipulation killed the Inter-empresa, a committee of delegates from several large factories in Lisbon which existed earlier this year, but which was used by a Maoist group, the U.D.P., to push their politics rather than to organise the working class. As a result the workers lost interest; but the U.D.P. made recruits, and are quite satisfied with the operation.

This is the reason why the P.R.P. stresses the necessity of having autonomous organisations of the working class. They admit that their propaganda may have over-emphasized the need for autonomy, but this was a question of bending the stick away from the manipulation of organisations. Members of the P.R.P. are as active as possible in the autonomous organisations, especially the embryo Revolutionary Councils, they try to take a lead, to build a majority, and if they won a majority they would use it to build the organisations in accordance with their perspectives. Meanwhile they accept the dominance of whoever wins a majority. The P.R.P. accepts that genuine autonomous organisations of the working class cannot be built without the party. The autonomy required is autonomy from the bourgeoisie. They function autonomously, but the parties intervene in them. (The P.R.P. does not claim to be the only party whose intervention could be useful.) The idea of Revolutionary Councils comes up spontaneously in the class even before the P.R.P. puts it forward. The idea has been particularly promoted in the Lisnave shipyard and in the glassworking town of Marimã Grande.

The M.F.A. (Armed Forces Movement), which has been the official leadership of the Portuguese revolution, is increasingly split. A rightward trend among army officers has been countered by bringing N.C.O.s into the Movement. The M.F.A. is reluctant to surrender its power to the less radical forces of parliamentary democracy. There is a section backing the reformist Councils of Reconstruction. There is another section which gives verbal support to Revolutionary Councils of Workers, Soldiers and Sailors: they think that a left-wing military regime can use these Revolutionary Councils as a mass base; they talk of arming the working class to defend the revolutionary process; they do not want a dictatorship of the proletariat, and they naïvely think that they can balance on top of the Revolutionary Councils, not realising that the Revolutionary Councils could move on without them to take power for the working class; they think that the Revolutionary Councils could absorb the energies of the working class; they ~~XXX~~ need the Revolutionary Councils as a counterweight to the reformists.

It is the P.R.P.'s analysis that such a left-wing military government is the most likely outcome of the present situation. Such a government will oppose the dictatorship of the proletariat. But it will introduce new contradictions which can be exploited in a revolutionary direction. The non-existence of a mass revolutionary workers' party can be made up for by the building of a bloc of workers and soldiers, to assault political power: neither the workers nor the soldiers can take power alone. But the soldiers recognise themselves as workers in ~~XXXXX~~ uniform.

Such developments raise the danger of an imperialist intervention. This intervention is already taking place in Angola, where the only force representing the Angolan people, the M.P.L.A., has been split and one of its leaders has gone over to the Zaire- (and American-)backed F.N.L.A. The danger of an intervention in Portugal ~~(XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX)~~ itself (possibly via Spain) creates a special responsibility of solidarity from socialists in NATO member-countries.

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