

SOCIALIST WORKER REVIEW

CONFERENCE BULLETIN

MAY '78

(TO SLP MEMBERS ONLY)

INTRODUCTION

The first policy conference of the SLP represents a landmark for the party. Essentially, it will enable us to define our politics on a whole range of issues facing the Irish working class in a way we have not been able to do up to now. In this bulletin, the supporters of the magazine SOCIALIST WORKER REVIEW wish to outline their views on a number of specific issues raised in the policy documents as a contribution to the clarifying of the debate.

But it is also necessary to say something at the outset about the type of party the SLP can become. The character of the party is not simply or fully shaped by the resolutions that are passed at its annual conferences. If that was the case, the old Labour Party would be a much different type of party when it is in opposition than when it is in government. The real character of a party is also shaped by the traditions and methods of political operation that are developed in the local branches.

No matter how correct our policies or programmes, they can never act as a magnet that will automatically attract the broad mass of the working class to our party. We need real forces to argue for our policies -- real forces that have established credibility amongst their fellow workers.

That credibility is only won through the type of activity we engage in on a day to day basis. That is why we need to establish the tradition in every branch that it become our automatic response that we intervene in every strike and every other struggle in order to build support and solidarity. It also means that we must be consistent in our work of building up the sales of Socialist Labour inside and outside the factory gates, and on a door to door basis on the housing estates.

But there is also a need for national initiatives from the SLP which can help to guide our work and focus our activity. To be specific: There is a need for the SLP nationally to take the lead in the campaign for rights to contraception. Despite the fact that it has been extremely difficult to mobilise on this issue in the past, Haughey new bill which will restrict access to contraception for the young and unmarried, provides a real focus now. And a strong mass campaign on this issue will lay the basis for other attacks on the reactionary Catholic legislation enshrined in the constitution e.g. the bans on divorce.

There is a need for the SLP to become identified as the party which takes up the struggle against unemployment in an active fighting way. That means that we must take the initiative in forming a Right to Work campaign which can unite unemployed activists in the different groups with union militants who are prepared to fight for the 35 hour week and the ban on overtime and job cutting productivity deals.

And we must also make it clear that we are prepared to raise support for the struggle for political status in the North. We cannot shirk it simply because it has been regarded as a republican issue. In the South we need to explain the issues involved through organising a series of public meetings on the issue. We need to raise resolutions in the unions, particularly the British based unions, for a trade union inquiry into the conditions in H Block.

THE NATIONAL QUESTION

The debate on the national question is one which has divided the Irish left for over half a century. However, it would be dangerous for the S.L.P. to fudge the issues: the S.L.P. can build itself only by adopting a clear policy on this issue.

Unfortunately, several speeches by leading Party members have alienated anti-imperialists who could be attracted into the Party. At this conference, the Party's members must reaffirm the emphasis of the Party constitution: for a 32-County workers' republic based on the withdrawal of British troops and the overthrow of imperialist interests, but also on the unification of the working class throughout Ireland. We must steer a course between twin dangers: on the one hand, letting our revulsion at some of the Provos' activities make us forget that they, like us, are an anti-imperialist organisation; on the other hand, accommodating to the existing Republican struggle and neglecting the task of building among the working class on a socialist basis, as the only way in which workers - and especially Protestant workers - can be mobilised against imperialism.

A working-class approach involves distancing ourselves from the middle-class traditions of Republicanism and Catholic nationalism. We have to oppose any capitalist "solution" to the national question. We must make it clear that we are not a left-wing variety of nationalist, prepared to settle for a united capitalist Ireland as a stepping-stone.

A united capitalist Ireland - one which is fully independent from imperialism at any rate - is neither possible nor desirable. As resolution 13 points out, a united capitalist Ireland would require the smashing of some section of the working class: the Protestant workers in the case of a united capitalist republic. Working-class unity and socialism could never be built on such a basis. We therefore have to oppose a united capitalist Ireland, and not associate ourselves with any calls for a united Ireland (such as resolutions 14, 16 and 17) which do not specify a united socialist Ireland, since the idea of "a united Ireland" will be assumed by Northern Protestant workers to be a capitalist Ireland, which would destroy their marginal privileges like jobs and houses. While socialists stand for equal rights, it is always by bringing upwards those who have less; it is never a socialist solution to take jobs or houses away from Protestant workers.

Resolution 13 also deletes the document's call for a constituent assembly (repeated in resolution 11) - a totally irrelevant demand as part of a socialist programme in Ireland. There has already been a constituent assembly in Ireland (the 1919-22 Dáil Eireann), and to demand another one only turns people's attention to capitalist constitution-writing solutions.

There is not a choice of a socialist or a capitalist way to unite Ireland. There is no capitalist way (short of capitulating to imperialism). Section 5 Part 6 of the policy document does not make this clear, when it talks of a theory suggesting that a united capitalist Ireland "must" be achieved in advance of the struggle for socialism. Resolution 15 makes it clear that a fully-independent united capitalist Ireland is impossible, and that is why such a theory should be opposed. This resolution also explains why a 6-County workers' republic is not a viable demand: because the Border is simply a sectarian border, and makes no sense once working-class unity is achieved.

A socialist strategy based on the working class must insist on the participation by Protestant workers themselves in their own emancipation, as incorporated in the document (Section 7 Part 2) and emphasised by resolution 22. However, resolutions 18, 20 and 31 try to delete or modify this aspect: presumably their proposers would not stop short of imposing a socialist "revolution" on unwilling workers.

The last tactic which will impress Protestant workers is the formation of a pan-Catholic alliance. Yet resolutions 37, 38 and 41 delete the document's insistence on "a united front of working-class and anti-imperialist organisations", and create a perspective where we would find ourselves alongside the S.D.L.P., Irish Independence Party and Blaneyites. We achieve nothing by sowing illusions in such people. But we are too weak to struggle on our own, we need a united front; and therefore resolution 39, which deletes the united front, should be opposed. We have to be able to participate in a united front as socialists, within the working-class movement. But we should not make a pious call for a united front, and sit around waiting for other organisations to agree that it is necessary - a process which may take some time. We must engage in activities against repression by building from the bottom up, and this can be done by committing ourselves to working in the Trade Union Campaign Against Repression, as proposed in resolution 45.

We will turn now to the danger of forgetting our basic anti-imperialist stance. We have to remember that the origin of the repression and violence is British imperialist control of the economy of all Ireland, and direct political control of the North. The Provos are only a response to this (although they are using the wrong strategy to oppose it). Resolutions 25 and 26 omit to place the major blame on imperialism, while resolution 26 would suggest that the blame lies with the Provos.

Because the Provos are fighting British imperialism, we have to defend them (to defend them against state repression, not to defend their methods). We therefore should oppose resolutions 26, 28 and 30 which try to delete this. It is a historical fact that the Provos arose to defend Catholic working-class areas, although resolutions 26 and 28 seek to omit this fact, and thereby imply that the state has a right to crush them.

The British Army has no peacekeeping role to play. We have to demand its immediate withdrawal - not just an announcement of its intention to withdraw, as suggested by resolutions 39 and 40, because this amounts to saying "We don't want you to go immediately, because we need you to keep the warring factions apart." The British Army will go when it is forced out, or when imperialism is confident that it is no longer needed to protect its economic interests: ~~it is~~ to do that that it is in the North.

WOMENS POLICY DOCUMENT

The policy document on women tries to be all things to all people, and in that lies its major weakness.

Certainly everything is covered but in a most haphazard way, commenting on, rather than giving any lead on how to fight for the policies outlined. No priority is given to the policies which the SLP should be taking up in the immediate future. The party is not committed to any activity by this policy document.

Despite its weaknesses, we oppose a reference back, as this would leave the party without any policy at all, in an area of politics where we need to make a maximum effort to build.

The amendments which help to clarify the document, and enable the party to work out a campaigning program are numbers 4, 19, 23, 24 and most importantly 30, which is the only amendment to give a concise guide to activity which the SLP should take up ~~XX~~ immediately. We ask you to support these amendments.

We oppose the following amendments;

No. 10) we are against wages for housework because it institutionalises the concept of a housewife, as one who stays at home, minds the children cooks etc. It isolates the woman and prevents the development of a communal child-care and home help system. Women want Liberation not payment for oppression.

No. 11) We see no reason to tone down criticism of the social services in Ireland, as it is they they hardly exist.

No. 25 and 26) the problem with this addendum is, that it adds further confusion to an already confused document. It is not offered as an alternative to any section, but to be added on. Most of the better points are covered in amendments No's 4, 10, 30, which offer a better guide for the party than this addendum.

We oppose any program for activity which runs to 27 points or more.

We are in favour of branches being active around the following which should start in the immediate post conference period.

- 1) Campaign on contraception
- 2) Campaign on equal pay
- 3) Support and help in building women's groups
- 4) For an internal education campaign on abortion.

A WORKERS' GOVERNMENT ?

Socialists -- like most other people -- have often a tendency to use very vague formulations about their political philosophy. Most of the time it does not matter much -- but sometimes that vagueness can lead to extremely dangerous and mistaken conclusions. And it is all the more harmful to be vague when we are trying to specify how we are going to achieve socialism.

There are a number of amendments to the Economic Policy document which are based on using the term a 'Workers' Government'. But nowhere is there a real attempt to spell out what such a government would look like or how it is to be achieved -- is it to be based on the old cabinet system of the bourgeois states? is it to achieve power through elections? This is all the more puzzling because one branch, the Rathmines West branch goes so far as to state that the struggle for socialism must be conducted through a fight for a workers' government.

Let's be specific about what a 'Workers' Government' really means. It is essentially a government made up of the different workers's parties. In Ireland, in the present context, a workers's government is therefore one composed of the Labour Party, the SLP, Sinn Fein - The Workers Party and the Communist Party. The very act of specifying the component parties throws serious doubts about its practicality as a real perspective. It is extremely difficult, to say the least, to imagine the Labour Party being prepared to form a government with such forces to the Left of it.

Yet let us for argument sake, accept that it is a real possibility. Now, if there is one thing that revolutionaries can be sure of it is this: the Labour Party is a social democratic party off its very nature. Its whole tradition and political method is to work within the system to achieve gradual reforms. Therefore, any participation of the Labour Party in Government must be conditional on the achievement of power by electoral means. So when we talk about a 'Workers Government', let us, at least be honest about it -- it must be the product of a parliamentary majority.

The perspective, then, of limiting the struggle for socialism to the narrow channel of fighting for a Workers Government ultimately means a reversal to the emphasis on the role of the parliament and elections. If it was to become a real perspective for the SLP, it would mean gearing our work to forcing the Labour Party into an electoral coalition with our party. It would mean seeing the elections as the decisive occasions to be used to seize power -- rather than simply as vehicles for propaganda and agitation.

And it means shirking the real issue. There is an alternative to parliament -- the formation of workers councils. The creation of workers councils which begin to take a real grip of the production process and which puts an end to the bureaucracy and stagnation in the Labour movement is the necessary first step towards the transition to socialism. The proposal for a workers's government attempts to side step that alternative.

But the proponents of the Workers Government argument are not alone content to open the back door to parliamentarianism -- they also want a strong dose of utopianism. To put it simply, they want to have their cake and eat it. Just look at the resolution from the Derry Branch (Resolution 22). After stating that the Workers Government will be composed by 'all workers parties' it goes on to state that it must make provision for the arming of a workers militia. That it must, among other things, fight for a revolutionary international of workers' parties; disband the Special Branch; nationalise without compensation all firms declaring redundancies and grant rights to abortion on demand. etc etc.

There is just one problem with all that -- if the Labour Party is a social democratic party, then there is not the slightest chance that it will go along with that. In fact it will do everything to block any one of those measures. And the only time that the rank and file of the Labour Party will support such measures is when they have left the party.

What is really behind this incredible notion is a dogmatic and stereotyped view of history. It is attempting to impose a particular stage on the struggle for socialism on the basis of a number of specific experiences in Europe where there are large mass social democratic and communist parties. It is based on a view that the rank and file support for those parties can only be broken after the parties form a government; that the main block to the revolutionary advance is purely and simply the 'illusions' of the working class in their reformist leaderships.

The most charitable interpretation is that the demand for a 'workers government' is simply a clumsy exposure tactic i.e. that somehow people like Cluskey and O Leary are 'exposed' when we demand that they form a workers government in order to arm a workers militia. But unfortunately it is also a very dangerous perspective. It takes the focus off building a real revolutionary party in the here and now, through intervening in all struggles, and transfers it to the manoeuvrings of Left parties at election time.

That is why we urge you to reject:

Resolution 8 from the Rathmines West Branch

Resolution 22 from Derry

And also Resolution 6 from Galway West.

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