

REAL PROBLEMS; QUESTIONABLE ANSWERS

The emergence of the document "Make the IS a Force in the Class" came as a surprise to most of us away from the center and not in IBT work. That it should come from leaders of our IBT fraction, our most important present industrial implantation, makes the matter even more significant.

The document has serious shortcomings. But it also identifies some real problems facing the organization one year after "the turn". It should therefore be welcomed by everyone. In fact, some of its analyses are likely to receive considerable and justifiable support within the IS.

Some of the problems posed by the document are very evident, and the EC seems to be aware of them. For example: the errors of economic analysis and of over-estimation of the strength of the employers' offensive, as well as the consequences of these errors (inflated expectations). (Though the lack of explanation for the source of these errors, from either the EC or the document, weakens the chance of correcting them, now or in the future).

But the document also offers criticisms of IS work during the past year which the EC will not concede, such as: that the EC arbitrarily imposed policy on the fractions without consultation (instead of the promised collaborative leadership); that the EC failed (refused) to provide reliable, accurate information about the organization's work (and its developing policies); the fact that the membership is not just uninformed, but misinformed (e. g., see the illusory figure of 50% for our past year's growth, which was actually closer to 15%). In addition, spokespersons for the document insist that the EC is politically exhausted and can not lead in the period ahead.

The document offers three solutions to resolve these problems:

(1) The first, on which there at least appears to be some agreement by the EC, revolves around the need to politicize WP and restore the Internal Bulletin. (Incidentally, it is not true that no articles were submitted to the bulletin; contributions were, in fact, discouraged).

(2) Recruitment: The organization's failure to grow as much as anticipated, as well as the disappointingly limited base of TDC/TDU at present, must naturally raise questions. But the document's response to this unpleasant fact is a contradictory one.

On the one hand, the document urges a "new focus" to recruitment. It points to the well-known phenomenon of workers-with-a-base as the key for us, and the real goal of recruitment. If one takes this goal seriously, the obvious conclusion (given the conservative pressures on this layer) is that our expectations for growth must be very low in the period ahead, so long as the economic crisis, and the working class' response to it, are not qualitatively accelerated.

But if so, then how can we in reality expect to change the IS into a workers organization (one in which worker leaders are central if not dominant) in the immediate period ahead? and can we blame the EC for its failure to do so?

To this clear, but unspoken, implication in the document, the comrades respond: we favor wide worker and black recruitment (i. e. non-priority) as well. This is a recognition of the fact that to date the IS still recruits and keeps people essentially because of IS work in the rank & file movement, and not through our work there. Yet wide recruitment has not, and will not, change the IS into a workers organization. In fact, it can even at times dilute the workers organization.

The document cannot have it both ways and retain its critical stance to the EC on the matter of recruitment (which does not mean that the EC recruitment tactics were beyond reproach). If the relation between recruitment and workers-with-a-base is central, then we face a period of slow transformation ahead. If it is not central, then what is all the fuss about?

This is all doubly the case since, in fact, the EC, for totally different reasons, is advocating a similar de facto focus: "recruit through the priorities" (as if we didn't want to or hadn't been trying to before). The difference is that the EC implicitly suggests that we will grow a lot this way, while the document implies the contrary.

If the document's sudden discovery of the importance of this new layer-with-a-base does not solve the immediate problem of worker recruitment, etc., then the document's emphasis on this new layer does raise some other questions.

Surely all would agree we should try to recruit from this layer and from a wider one. But when an issue similar to this one (which layer to recruit) arose in the British IS, it turned out to reflect serious underlying political differences. So if the matter is being made into an issue, it raises the possibility that what is really new is not the layer itself, but the danger of some sort of political adaptation to this layer. This is unquestionably not the intent of the comrades, and the not-so-new concept of recruitment based on "strategy" (is this really significantly different from IS current practice?) is meant to dispel this potential thrust. But it is not clear that it succeeds in this purpose.

Of course, the vague differences between the document and the EC on the question of workers-with-a-base could also be an expression of an old and inevitable tension between the "trade unionists" and the "politicals". The "trade unionists", on the one hand, reflecting the constant adaptationist pressures of their milieu -- a situation which is unavoidable and is, in fact, the most vulnerable aspect of all rank & file work -- and, on the other hand, the "politicals" on whom the need for "party building" can exert an ultra-left pressure at times.

But, if this is not the case, if the document's new focus does not have a political origin, then the injection of the worker-with-a-base concept (long familiar to us) is a pointless and sterile obfuscation. The focus on the new layer could be a trade union strategy. But it is hardly a strategy for the organization -- hardly a solution to the dangers which the document points to.

As for the placing of recruitment and training of members, as well as the formation of policy, into the hands of the fractions -- i. e. the formation of apparently quasi-independent fractions -- this, too, will not help solve the real problems posed by the EC's conduct. It will not produce what we need -- to force the EC to collaborate with the fractions, not dictate to them. Quite the contrary, the proposal will deepen our problem by fragmenting the organization, isolating each section, and opening the door to liquidationism.

(3) The third major proposal is to change the composition of the NC by bringing more fraction leaders into the NC. Desirable as this may be, it will also not solve anything. For, like it or not, in the present period, the de facto leadership of the organization rests, and can only rest, with the EC. An NC which meets quarterly can serve as a check on the EC (reason enough for existing), as well as a necessary sounding board for ideas (especially if the EC can get over its childish fear of not "carrying the NC"). Any other role at present is an illusion. Therefore, to the limited extent that organizational changes can be helpful, the document's authors would have had to propose first of all some changes in the EC, putting on some document supporters. (Especially someone from the union arena who could temper the EC and at the same time be tempered by the need to meet the overall tasks of the organization). Such an EC would probably be more responsive to the NC and, thus, indirectly, to the membership as well. And it would certainly be more responsive to the NC if the EC scrapped its self-discipline procedure, at least as far as NC members are concerned.

But, in addition to the questionable character of the document's proposed solutions, there remain its two other weaknesses:

First, the document fails to come to grips with the important political, not just organizational, expressions of the EC's mode of operation -- its lack of "communication" with the membership. In the long run (and even today) that could be as devastating to the IS as the difficulties pointed out by the document. Some examples:

(1) The EC's refusal to defend its view on Portugal against the criticism of comrades from abroad (while discouraging others from participating in the debate by raising obstacles to the distribution of their views internally).

(2) The EC has substantially (and correctly, in my view) reoriented the basic IS position on the black question. But it has done so without telling the membership, i. e. pretending that no break with the past views has occurred, while hiding behind the phrase, our policy is "rusty". What has happened to our one time official line on black caucuses in the unions (implicitly, silently killed by the current EC document)? What has happened to the IS position on "super-seniority" (so bitterly fought over just 18 months ago)?

(3) The EC has abandoned the IS views (again correctly, but belatedly) on NETWORK (auto and teamsters) -- both the publications and the concept which lay behind them.

Better, of course, to correct one's errors than persist in them. But not to explain an error or a change in line, and not to help the membership learn from it, to conceal it, teaches our cadres nothing, and can only demoralize us.

These examples of political policy changes, made without consultation or explanation, are also examples of the EC's refusal to "communicate", and of its manipulative relationship to the membership. The failure of the authors of the document to consider this political aspect of "non-communication" makes one wonder whether they appreciate the extent and full political impact of the EC's methods -- its refusal to play it straight with the members, to inform and to educate, to lead, not dictate.

A second structural weakness of the document lies in the fact that it never tries to locate the source of those EC organizational practices which it deplors. To my mind, that source lies in the EC's misconception of the role of leadership in a democratic centralist organization -- a misconception which says "elect us; do as we say; and then, if not satisfied, replace the leaders next time". This is not only a bourgeois conception of the relation between leaders and ranks, but it is also an insulting one. For we all know that whatever our differences with the present EC, it is, as a whole, the best we can produce, and so, in reality, we cannot replace it. That does not mean that it cannot and should not be corrected by the members. But, to do that effectively, the members need information and a climate which permits such a relationship to the leadership.

Refusing to tackle or even recognize the political extent or source of the EC's organizational mal-practice, it is not surprising that the document comes up with primarily organizational solutions to essentially political problems.

In conclusion, it appears to me that the document is groping for answers which neither the EC nor anyone else have provided. But this ill-defined groping cannot justify a confrontation within IS which is what this counter-resolution could easily become.

Instead, for the present:

(1) The organization as a whole needs re-politicization. Hopefully, there seems to be general movement in this direction. (a) An Internal Bulletin must, therefore, not just be tolerated, but encouraged. (That does not convert the IS into a talkshop. Our policy of intervention in workers struggles is the best protection against that disease). (b) WP must be politicized. (c) It must be made clear to the EC that its conduct on the international debate on Portugal was a gross dereliction of duty. (d) There must be an end to changes in policy which are carried out behind the backs of the membership, either by not informing them of the change or by not explaining why the change is necessary. (e) The EC policy of self-discipline contributes to the de-politicization of the organization. At the very least it should end as far as EC minutes to NC members are concerned.

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