

March 2013 ● Socialist Workers Party pre-conference

BULLETIN

For members only
SWP NATIONAL
CONFERENCE,
SUNDAY 10 MARCH

Dear Comrade,

Welcome to the SWP's Internal Bulletin for our forthcoming conference. I hope you will read and consider the submissions.

Every registered member with an email address on our system receives this bulletin by email. Printed copies will be distributed to delegates at conference.

Comrades have written in with submissions and all those received before the deadline are printed here.

The Conference Arrangements Committee (CAC) has received a number of motions for the conference. They are printed in this bulletin. The CAC will propose a procedure to deal with these at its first report to conference at 11am on the day.

Childcare: the question of childcare is an important one for all comrades, but particularly for women. Given we live in a society where the ruling ideas say that women are expected to bear the main burden of looking after children, it is women who are hit hardest when there is no consideration of this issue.

Districts should make sure that childcare is available to delegates who need it.

Access: The conference venue is fully accessible. If delegates have any additional requirements, please contact the National Office and we will seek to help.

If you have any questions about conference please contact charlie@swp.org.uk or phone 020 7819 1170 or write to PO Box 42184, London SW8 2WD.

Charlie Kimber, SWP National Secretary

In a small number of cases we have had to edit some of these documents where there are issues of libel or confidentiality.

We have also, as is our usual practice, removed full names from all the pieces in this bulletin.

The views expressed in particular articles are those of the contributors only.

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PERSPECTIVES FOR THE SPECIAL CONFERENCE

Since the SWP national conference, held in January 2013, the party has seen serious division and a faction has now formed in opposition to the central committee (CC). We have taken the unusual step of calling a special conference to resolve this matter. Whatever the specific issues that have been raised in recent debates, the CC believes that we now face decisions about what sort of party we are and the way the party's democracy operates.

As the motion proposed by the CC, and passed by 39 votes to eight at the National Committee (NC) on 3 February said, "The SWP stands out on the left by the fact that it has a history of genuine democratic debate without permanent factionalism. We have developed democratic and accountable structures from our branches, elected district committees, the national committee and disputes committee, central committee, party councils and conference.

"In the recent period these structures were re-examined and strengthened by the work of the SWP democracy commission. We have full confidence in these structures and the method of democratic centralism."

This method works. For example, the party had a sustained debate over whether to support Len McCluskey or Jerry Hicks for general secretary of Unite. The party Unite fraction was split between the two candidates almost equally. At the conference we had a serious debate and then voted to back Hicks. As a result virtually all our Unite members, whatever their original views, hurled themselves into backing Hicks. This has contributed strongly to him winning over 100 branch nominations. There will now be a serious debate over several weeks in this important union. We could never have had this impact if each of our members had done what they individually believed was best, or had refused to accept the decision of conference.

Democratic centralism—full debate before a decision, united implementation afterwards—is what enables the party to punch above its weight. We are against permanent factions because they institute a regime of permanent oppositions and of continual divisions on a factional basis. Every issue becomes a matter of "our" faction's victory or defeat. This would hamper our ability to engage in serious debate and discussion.

Yet within days of the NC's overwhelming vote to reaffirm the decisions of the January conference and to offer a way forward to resolve the debates inside the party, a faction had been formed outside the pre-conference period.

If it had been allowed to operate as it wished, it would have meant 11 months

of a faction inside our party, with all that involves—factional meetings, speaking rights at district events and the distribution of documents to members. It is likely that other factions would have formed on the same basis, turning our party away from external intervention and towards internal matters.

The faction has embraced every shade of opposition to the central committee, including people such as Richard S, who have played a destructive role. It then held a five hour meeting that was closed to party members who were not members of the faction. It had a wide-ranging political agenda, including "The IS tradition", "Student work", "The disputes committee and proposals to change it". Our tradition has always been that faction meetings should be open to all party members, so they can debate the major political issues the faction raises, although a section can properly be set aside for a "faction members' only" caucus to discuss its tactics. That was the procedure followed at the annual conference in January and by the "Left Faction" that formed in 2009.

We have called the special conference because we need a swift decision about the way forward. This is simply too urgent a moment to be divided. The economic crisis grows worse and the attacks on working people intensify. The trade union and Labour Party leaders continue to hold back struggle, but there are signs of a shift in the pace and scale of resistance. There is not yet a generalised fightback, but 250,000 civil service workers are balloting for a national strike and local strikes can take on a new importance as they focus the widespread feeling that there ought to be more resistance.

There have also been significant mobilisations in several areas in against NHS cuts, closures and privatisation, from the extraordinary march of 30,000 people in Lewisham, south east London, to the 600-strong meeting against cuts at the Whittington hospital in north London and the rally of 1,000 people in protest at the planned closure of Blaenau Ffestiniog hospital in Gwynedd.

Local cuts groups that have been dormant or simply going through the motions are infused with new determination and life as more and more people see the fearsome toll of the local attacks and are forced to fight or see their services torn away.

The sustained student occupation at Sussex University is a very welcome sign of the potential for renewed struggle in the universities and colleges.

New issues are emerging such as the fight against the bedroom tax—already leading to big meetings in Liverpool, London and Leeds. Hundreds of thousands of people are bitterly angry at the damage the Tories are doing to their lives. An issue such as the bedroom tax can suddenly focus that feeling.

Meanwhile the fascists seek to make new efforts to profit from the crisis and the disgusting racism peddled by the mainstream

political leaders. Inspired by the growth of Nazi groups such as Golden Dawn in Greece, the depleted ranks of the British fascists are trying to regroup along with their European allies. That is why Marine Le Pen from France's National Front came to Cambridge University last month.

There is much to do, much to debate, much to organise around.

However, it is clear that a section of the party has never accepted that the decisions of our national conference were legitimate.

We do not believe that once a vote is announced at conference that an issue is automatically won throughout the party. It often takes months to explain and convince party members. And we have to subject decisions to the test of practice. But we have to begin from accepting the decisions. That is why more is at stake than the decisions or procedures of the disputes committee. Yet we cannot ignore the questions this has raised—partly because we take such matters seriously but also because the case has been hedged around with so many lies and so much misinformation.

The Disputes Committee

The faction is far from homogenous in its motivations or what it seeks to achieve. But the immediate issue that led to its formation was the handling of a disciplinary case in which a comrade, known as W, brought a serious accusation against someone who was at the time a member of the central committee, known as X.

The case was referred to the disputes committee in line with W's wishes. This is an elected body, independent of the central committee, which considers disciplinary matters. The disputes committee made a careful consideration of the statements from the parties involved. It also listened to all those who had been called by those involved.

On the basis of its deliberations, members of the disputes committee reached a finding that they did not think that the accused comrade had raped W. They also found that all other areas of sexual misconduct they investigated were not proved and that no disciplinary action should be taken.

Conference heard the report of the disputes committee and, after what was generally agreed to be a calm, serious and fair discussion of the content, voted by a small majority to accept it. By the close of conference the vast majority of delegates, including most of those who voted against the disputes committee report, felt that the matter was now resolved. How did this unravel?

One claim made by a hard minority of the opposition is that we were unable to defend our position once SWP members, and the wider left, heard about the disputes committee session. But some of those making this claim never sought to defend the party.

Within days of conference, one member had spoken to a journalist, who wrote a critical article in the *New Statesman*. Another had gone public on his blog to criticise the decision of conference and campaign against it. A number of leading intellectuals associated with the Historical Materialism project, who have previously spoken at our events, wrote a letter claiming they would no longer speak on our platforms; they did so after consulting comrades, who were, at the very least, unwilling to argue for the position taken by conference.

A second claim, again, made by a hard minority of the opposition, is that the leaking of this matter to the bourgeois press, with articles appearing in the *Independent*, *Times* and *Daily Mail*, was inevitable given modern technologies such as Facebook and Twitter. We disagree. Comrades have run websites and email lists since the early 1990s. Never before has a transcript of a session of conference been leaked on the Internet by a delegate within 24 hours of the conference ending, as happened in this case.

It is disgraceful that someone at the January conference took this step, abusing the trust of all involved. Not only did they distribute a transcript of the debate, they supplied full names, which are still available on some websites. This provided the raw material for the *Daily Mail*'s witch hunting article against women members of the disputes committee. This is not a game. It can affect people's livelihoods and jobs.

The transcript was not inevitable, nor was it inevitable that a journalist on *Socialist Worker* (who had never raised a word of criticism of the party's position beforehand) would resign immediately after the conference and write a lengthy article for a sectarian publication attacking the party. But it is these two "leaks", along with a small minority of comrades who have breached party discipline to campaign against the decision of conference publicly, that supplied the ammunition used to attack the party.

Some of those within the faction formed to oppose the CC would probably agree with our condemnation of the leaks and public attacks on the party. But, they say, they feel disarmed in defending the position taken by conference. Yet lots of members of the party have been able to explain the processes we followed, our position on women's oppression, and the serious way in which this case was handled—and in doing so have managed to maintain good relations with those working alongside us in the unions, on campuses and in campaigns.

This has included our members in unions in which there are sharp debates taking place and in which this matter could be expected to be used to attack the party.

That is not to say that the issue hasn't been and won't be taken up by some people hostile to the party; it has and will. But what matters is how comrades respond.

When someone says, "The SWP has acted

disgracefully. The leadership are sexists and the process was a sham" you can explain how we took the case seriously, defend our record of fighting for women's liberation and rebut the lies. Or you can agree with the person making the criticism. If you do go along with their attacks, don't be surprised if there's further denigration and the SWP's name is in tatters around you.

The action of a minority of the opposition who have publicly attacked the party has made it far easier for our critics and far harder for comrades who genuinely want to defend the outcome of conference.

Setting the record straight

Before considering the steps we wish to take and the wider political issues at stake, it is necessary to respond to some of the mass of misinformation now circulating as "fact" in order to arm comrades involved in discussions in the outside world.

One criticism aimed at us mainly by those outside of the party is that we were not competent to handle an allegation of this kind. The implication is that the case should have been handed to the police and courts to resolve. Our position is that in these kinds of cases (and we know of only one other that the party has dealt with in recent memory—we do not know where the figure of "nine rape cases" that has circulated on the Internet comes from) is that it is up to the woman to decide whether she wishes to take the matter to the police.

There would rightly be an outcry if we responded to such a complaint by refusing to refer it to the disputes committee or pressured the complainant to go to the state.

It is alleged that the line of questioning faced by W was inappropriate. There was one question asked of W that has been contentious, and the disputes committee made clear at conference that it concerned clarifying a piece of written evidence brought to the dispute. Contrary to some claims that have circulated W was never asked about the clothes she wore or her drinking habits.

Another accusation is that the members of the disputes committee must have been biased in favour of the leading member of the party, and a different disputes committee should have been chosen, perhaps involving those outside the party.

We do not feel that involving non-party members would help. The strength of our method is that it involves choosing a group of experienced members who share a common political approach, are keenly aware of our understanding of women's oppression, and who are accountable to conference.

They are elected at the start of the year without any knowledge of the cases they will oversee. Perhaps, it is argued, other party members should have been involved in this case. It is unlikely in a party of our size that experienced members could have been found who did not know a leading member of the party.

But whatever one thinks of the pros and cons of co-opting more members, we reject the notion that "unconscious bias" in these matters cannot be overcome. We hold that, on the basis of their political commitments, comrades can operate in an unbiased manner. Indeed they took special care at their hearings to consider this factor and to overcome it.

Of course, this does not mean that the disputes committee is infallible. Principled comrades, acting in good faith and with a shared understanding of the issues at stake, can reach different conclusions from one another. That is why the decisions of the disputes committee are put to conference, rather than being automatically binding on the party.

But that does not mean that conference hears all of the evidence and effectively reruns the case. Confidentiality of the parties involved, and the need for a great deal of time to examine the case, does not allow that.

Only the disputes committee hears the full evidence and statements. It is for conference to decide whether they are confident of the basis on which the decisions were made. In this case, conference decided it was. Comrades must accept that they will never hear all the evidence in this or any other disputes committee case.

It has been alleged that those who brought, or acted as witnesses in, the case have been accused of being motivated by political considerations. This is not true. They too are comrades in good standing. At no point have they been accused of lying. We oppose any smears against either party to this case. We also condemn the extent to which information in this case has leaked out in the run-up to conference.

It has also been claimed that the CC is planning a mass purge of members or a split in the organisation, and this claim has motivated some of the experienced members who joined the recently announced faction. However, a simple question should be asked: where is the evidence for this? The breaches of party discipline by a hard minority of those in the opposition are among the most grave in the history of the party—without question we could take the firmest possible action against some of them if we wished. Plenty of members are clamouring for us to do so. We have not. We want to defeat the hard minority who oppose us on a clear political basis, and we want to win those with genuine concerns to a position where they can confidently defend the outcome of the January 2013 conference.

One final accusation that has been taken up and used against the party is the notion that "feminism" is used as a term of abuse by leading members. This is not the case. We remain committed to working with feminists against women's oppression. Our theoretical position on women's oppression is a Marxist one, distinct from the positions taken by the various strands of feminism today and historically.

We want to fight for leadership within the various movements to challenge the oppression of women. But given that Marxism is a minority position within these movements, we would be foolish in the extreme if our starting point was one of denunciation of either convinced feminists or those who call themselves feminists without holding a firm theoretical position.

This approach has informed our intervention in, say, the recent “slutwalk” movement, the Abortion Rights campaign, our meetings and our recent theoretical writings on the subject.

The steps to be taken

The degree of contention surrounding the various issues arising since conference has become such that sections of the party are finding it hard to function in a constructive and unified manner. Some branches and districts have become extremely inward-looking in the weeks following conference.

We have sought to engage with comrades’ concerns and end the partial paralysis, through conference report backs, discussions at branch and district level, by meeting individuals who have raised issues, and through a national committee that upheld the positions of conference and the central committee. But it has become clear that without a settling of accounts by the party as a whole, we will not be able to move forward. That is why we have called a special conference.

We hope that the conference will establish six things.

First, we are asking for the special conference to uphold the decision of our annual conference in January 2013 and of the NC in February. Comrades in the faction say they have no problem with the decisions of conference, in which case this part should be uncontroversial. It is extraordinary that the NC’s vote should have been so brusquely swept aside. For a long period there has been discussion about strengthening the role of the NC, something the CC has supported. Yet here we have a freshly-elected NC, a record attendance of its members, an 83 per cent vote for a motion—and the faction says it is irrelevant.

Everyone formally accepts that the specific disputes committee case is closed. It cannot be closed if people seek to reverse the outcome or overturn in its entirety the process that resulted in the decision. This means, among other things, upholding the position that all parties to the case are comrades in good standing in the party with a right to partake in political activity under the direction of the leading bodies of the party.

Second, we need to agree that we are for democratic centralism, against permanent factions and for an interventionist party. We are for a leadership that leads, rather than reflecting the unevenness of the class and sections of the membership.

Third, we accept that some comrades have genuine concerns about the workings

of the disputes committee and its perception in the wider world. We have proposed to establish a body that will consider how the future confidentiality of disputes committee proceedings can be safeguarded and how future findings of the disputes committee should be reported to conference. Examining these issues would also provide an opportunity to clarify our disciplinary procedures more generally and propose changes to these procedures where necessary. We hope this will help to re-establish unity within the party.

Fourth, we propose some changes to the party’s constitution to clarify a number of questions that have proved contentious in recent months, especially to reiterate that factions are allowed only during pre-conference periods.

Fifth, we will seek to turn the party outwards towards the urgent political questions that are emerging.

Sixth, we expect everyone to abide by the votes of the special conference. This means that at the end of the conference all factions must be permanently disbanded. It means that the mailing lists and the blog sites created by those opposing the decisions of our annual conference be closed down immediately. It means that every member is bound to uphold and defend the decision of conference in any public forum in which it is discussed, including online. If these norms of party behaviour are breached, we expect comrades to support and defend disciplinary action up to and including expulsion to enforce the will of the party as a whole.

The wider political questions

Many comrades are merely concerned with the specifics of the debates over the last few weeks. The special conference should allow those issues to be discussed in full and resolved. But as the situation has developed, it has become increasingly clear that there are, for some, deeper political questions at stake. The wider debates will not end with the special conference, and nor should they. We are committed to taking these up in our meetings and publications in the months ahead.

In our view, some of the issues are the result of frustration felt across the party due to the failure of struggle to break through after 2011. Indeed, the wider problem of the downturn in industrial struggle that took place several decades ago, and which has not subsequently been wholly reversed, despite many hopeful signs, is implicated in the internal crises the party has faced since 2007.

Three splits—first, by a very small group of comrades who sided with George Galloway during the Respect crisis; second, by the group that broke away to form Counterfire; third by the group concentrated in Glasgow who broke to form the ISG—reflected, in different ways, attempts to find shortcuts to overcome the low level of workers’ struggle.

Forms of voluntarism, whether expressed through electoral shortcuts, movementism, attempts to substitute students, unemployed youth and a supposed “precariat” for workers, and so on, are a price we have paid for a long period of a generally low level of class struggle. The revival of ideological radicalism, in a context where organisations orientated on workers and socialism are especially weak, and the halting pattern of one-day strikes, can reinforce these tendencies.

But this frustrating context does not mean that there are no real issues worthy of consideration. Our tradition is not static. That does not mean that we simply accommodate to the existing ideas on the radical left. Our tradition is well worth defending and taking as a starting point in developing our theory. If we had simply accommodated to the mood among newly radicalised students in the wake of 1968, with powerful tendencies towards Guevarism, Third Worldism, voluntarism, and so on, it would have been impossible to create even a very small revolutionary party with roots in the working class.

But we are not dogmatists. We have, for example, begun a debate about the relevance of Leon Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, and Tony Cliff’s deflected permanent revolution, in the pages of *International Socialism* and at a number of meetings. We have held a number of day schools to debate issues such as the nature of the economic crisis and the question of class in the contemporary world. This has been educative and useful for all involved.

Some specific areas we now need to discuss and debate include, but are not limited to:

- The nature of the working class today.
- The relevance of Leninism in the 21st century.
- The latest phases of the struggle over women’s oppression and the new feminism, along with the relationship between exploitation and oppression more generally.
- The radical left, the united front and the party.
- The role of students and intellectuals in the struggle.
- The value of the new electronic media in the ideological and organisational work of the party.

We feel these debates, if handled correctly, can help to educate members new and old, and sharpen our understanding of our politics.

Our student work

Since conference, one area that has proved especially controversial is our student work. There are general reasons why a gap can open up between student and non-student members in a revolutionary organisation. Students occupy a distinct position in society. They are not subject to the discipline

of full-time work or the need to win the majority around them in a trade union if they want to organise struggles.

Their main focus is over ideological and political questions, which they are able to discuss at greater liberty than most workers, and when they act they can do so as a radical minority without the discipline of having to win a ballot or vote in a workplace meeting. This gives us certain advantages among students in periods of radicalisation, which is why we have recruited quite large numbers since 2008. They have brought into the party a wealth of new experience, ideas and energy. This growth obviously also necessitates a higher level of debate and discussion about our theory and ideas, as any influx of new members would.

This is, of course, a good problem to have; but it reinforces the need for a serious programme of education, and a culture of open debate and polemic within the party.

However, these general arguments don't fully explain the issues we have faced. In reality we are paying the price for a mistake made by the leadership of the party in early 2011. The preceding months had seen the largest student movement in Britain in decades; suddenly we were pulling around us the highest number of students we have seen in a very long time.

But the government's attacks that provoked the movement passed through parliament, and in early 2011 the movement rapidly collapsed. This should have marked the point at which we made a sharper turn towards theoretical argument and ideological meetings based firmly on our political tradition in order to try to win and bind a section of this collapsing movement to our party. We did not make this turn firmly and clearly enough and we certainly did not win this position among our students.

The "Milbank moment" has remained a central point of reference for many of our students, but it no longer fits in conditions where the struggle is likely to be more fragmentary and localised, against particular attacks and over particular political issues.

It no longer fits, for instance, in the National Union of Students, where our strategy was premised on being able to unite with others to mount a serious left challenge to the leadership. Today, of the two main components of the student left beyond our ranks, one is in relative decline and many leading members of the other have an orientation on breaking with the NUS altogether. In this context we cannot carry on in the old way.

Through 2011 there was enough going on—the Arab Revolutions and a series of major one-day strikes—to conceal these problems. By 2012 this was no longer the case. We are now trying to correct the problems that have developed, but we are doing so in far less favourable circumstances.

In response to these arguments some SWSS groups have effectively declared themselves autonomous of the party. A number have unilaterally published

statements distancing themselves from the party and, more recently, members of our student committee have sought to veto changes to personnel in the student office and our candidates in NUS elections, and objected to the timetable for our national student events. Our student members are, of course, entitled to disagree with our analysis and our tactics.

But a newly elected central committee has every right to try to implement its approach. If, having tried to implement that approach, it proves unsuccessful, student members, or anyone else, would have every right in the run-up to next year's party conference, to challenge that approach and put forwards a different one, or propose changes to the leadership.

We must reassert the simple fact that our student work is subordinated and accountable to the party as a whole. The reasons for this go to the very heart of our politics.

We do not accept that our student organisations are autonomous, any more than our union members or our caucuses or fractions are autonomous. The day to day work of the students is subject to the authority of the leading bodies of the party—conference, and between conferences the CC, NC and party council—which are charged with securing the interests of the party and the working class as a whole, rather than the sectional interests of particular groups.

Conclusion

Whatever criticisms comrades may raise about the January 2013 conference, a lack of democratic debate certainly cannot be one of them. There was an extremely high level of debate—both in the conference hall and at the various meetings organised by the temporary factions that were created.

We welcome debate. We face a number of serious political challenges in the months ahead that will necessitate further discussion, and if the level of struggle rises, as we hope it will, we will need a lot more.

But over the specific issues arising from the recent disputes committee, we feel that the special conference must mark the end of a period in which that debate has consumed most of the party's attention.

We have sought to set out a basis on which we think the party can continue in a unified manner. We urge those who agree with us to fight to uphold these positions through patient but clear debate, so that we can emerge from this crisis and focus on the challenges that lie ahead of us.

Central Committee

THE SWP AND WOMEN'S OPPRESSION

The fight for women's liberation is central to the struggle for socialism. But how do we win that liberation?

The record of the SWP on the question of women's oppression has been put into question by the inclusion in the faction document of a section on feminism.

The SWP leadership is accused of seeing "feminists as our enemies". The faction has included in their statement an appeal for us to engage in debate with feminists and not to let disagreements with feminists about how we can change society "prevent us taking united action against women's oppression".

What is the record of the party on these questions? Let's look at the facts.

Involved in the struggle

First on united action. In the IB document on women's liberation before this year's national conference the CC wrote, "We have argued before in these bulletins the importance of engaging and working with such activists who are getting politicised by the experience of sexism. These are people who are angry about capitalism, inequality and oppression. They are a part of our audience and are often open to socialist ideas.

"We should use every opportunity to work alongside such people while fighting to win them to a socialist analysis of the roots of oppression and how to fight it. If we don't attempt to shape these new forces we will miseducate an emerging generation of activists."

This approach of working alongside the new generation of feminist activists while debating how to tackle women's oppression is hardly a new one.

Back in 2010 Judith Orr wrote in the ISJ, in a piece entitled "Marxism and Feminism", "Socialists need to start from what unites us with newly politicised women identifying with feminism—their rejection of sexism and anger at injustice and discrimination, and a willingness to fight. We can win a new generation to revolutionary socialism, but not by shrilly denouncing feminism..."

"Many of the young women who declare themselves feminists, who sticker over sexist ads or set up new websites and feminist groups, are far from hostile to socialist ideas."

"We need to join together with such women in the struggles we face, whether it's against cuts in education or the Tories' potential attempts to attack abortion rights."

As in any campaign we have a united front

approach where we fight for unity in struggle but maintain our independent political views.

We have done this whether it in the Abortion Rights campaign, fighting raunch culture on college campuses or working alongside women workers in the trade unions. This is why we got it right when it came to the Slutwalks.

Much of the left didn't get the importance of the Slutwalks and some feminists dismissed them because of the attempt to reclaim a sexist term. But we recognised that the mood of anger over establishment figures seeking to blame rape on women had tapped into the mood of revulsion against sexism, and we threw ourselves into them. When we attended the demonstrations our publications, the paper and the placards we produced for the marches went down well.

Marxism and Feminism

Debates between people who have some form of feminist ideas and Marxists go back to the 19th century. The German revolutionary Clara Zetkin wrote eloquently about the political differences between feminist ideas and the politics of revolutionary socialism and class.

She saw feminists at the time as fighting solely for "equality with the men of their class", because they saw gender as the most significant divide in society.

In contrast Zetkin argued that the burden of women's oppression fell heaviest on working class women—"she gets only the crumbs that are dropped from the table by capitalist production". This meant a unity of interests across all women, including rich and ruling class women was impossible.

For a woman worker, "The end goal of her struggle is not free competition with men, but bringing about the political rule of the proletariat."

But we have argued for some time that it is not enough to recycle the arguments from the past, even from the recent past of the 1970s and 80s. We have been developing a theory of "new sexism" and the "new feminism" since 2007.

As Judith Orr wrote in the article cited above,

"Although the problem may appear familiar, it takes place in a different context to the debates of the 1970s and 1980s and so needs a different political response..."

"It is vital that we engage with the new debates. Some may think we can simply rehash arguments we had decades ago. That would be a mistake. Activists coming to these ideas have had a very different experience than women in the 1960s. There are women in many areas of life that were barred to them 40 years ago. Today's generation have lived through a period when they have been spun the lie that they have it all."

But while the context of the debates are new, sometimes a false and mechanical view of the feminism in the 1980s is presented. This depicts the feminism of that period as solely a turn away from struggle and a bridge out of class politics.

Feminism has always been a broad church. You could be a Labour councillor on a women's committee with a budget of tens of thousands, you could be a manager or you could be marching against bigoted Tory anti-abortion bills and spray-painting sexist billboards.

In fact many leading women SWP members who joined in the 1980s became revolutionaries having been politicised by feminist activism.

Of course, winning women to the party in the 1980s was not an automatic development. The key was that they were won to revolutionary socialism by a process of argument and experience, a process that led all involved to a sharper and more profound understanding of the issues at stake. We should reject the patronising notion that the women who engaged in these arguments have nothing to offer those seeking to understand women's oppression today. We want all those in the party—whether long established members or new—to be involved in a common effort to develop and apply the Marxist method to the current situation faced by women.

The situation today

Today there is still no single feminist movement or theoretical perspective. Instead there are a variety of feminist groups, on both college campuses and in towns, there are writers and bloggers and numerous websites.

There are growing numbers of femsocs and women's groups in the universities, there are women's committees within unions. In the past four years several large feminist conferences have taken place.

Many of those involved will be people we can win to our politics. Certainly, because the general period is one of growing political generalisation and increasing radicalism, many will be open to what we have to say. But again feminism today is not automatically a bridge into revolutionary politics.

Women's oppression cuts across class divisions. This means socialists can face arguments that because our theory is based on the centrality of class that it is not capable of fully understanding oppression. The impact of postmodernism and poststructuralism means that the notion that the classical Marxist tradition is "reductionist" continues to have a strong resonance. The implication of these arguments is that we reduce oppression to a question of class. But this is not the case; what we argue is that oppression can't be understood without reference to class—the systematic discrimination against women is rooted in the rise of class societies.

So class is not just another identity, it's not a category we allocate because

of economic inequality. It is both the fundamental division in society, a social relationship between exploiter and exploited and the place where we can find the power to resist.

But this Marxist approach is held by a minority of those who are involved in the struggle against women's oppression. The assumption is often that Marxism can be a useful tool to explain the economy and exploitation, surplus values profits etc but that oppression acts in a different and separate sphere.

So feminism is often the first stop for newly politicised activists, but serious and patient discussion over these kinds of issues, along with common activity, is vital if we are going to win wider layers of those involved in fighting against oppression to our politics.

Of course, many of those who call themselves "feminists" are simply asserting that they are against sexism.

It doesn't necessarily mean that people adhere to or are even familiar with established feminist theory. As the CC wrote in an IB in 2011, "In many cases young women angry at the way they are treated see feminism as being the obvious political response. In fact they are open to socialist ideas and do not come with ideological baggage of separatism and radical feminism."

So the call for the party to change course in terms of working alongside and engaging in debates with feminists is entirely based on the false premise that this is not what we are doing already.

The current debates

We must address the new expressions of sexism in a world that is very different to that of the 1970s. But that doesn't change the core theoretical bedrock of our theory of women's oppression.

One recurring argument is that men benefit from women's oppression.

This view asserts that women's work in the home is servicing men. So even if in the long term unity between men and women is desirable, so the argument goes, men have, at the very least, a short-term interest in women's oppression. This is because the women's role in the family means she is expected to take responsibility for cleaning, cooking and child-rearing in the home, relieving men of this burden.

This feeds into an argument that women's oppression is due to the imposition of male power, a power that all men hold over all women.

This view, commonly referred to as patriarchy, reflects the way society appears but it does not help us understand the true roots and nature of oppression.

Is it really the case that all men have a common interest in the domination of all women? Is that enough to explain the situation in modern capitalism?

It can seem to fit how society appears. After all, the commonsense view is that it

is not the system that buys porn or commits domestic violence, but men.

But the commonsense view of how things work in the world cannot be the whole story. As Marx wrote in *Capital*, “All science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided.”

Do men benefit from the fact that child rearing and domestic labour takes place inside the privatised family? Or that men’s role is still seen as the main provider or that the family is eulogised as the place where all our aspirations of love, happiness and security will be met?

The answer is no. The family as an institution serves the interests of capital not individual men.

This is a role that is increasingly being laid bare by the imposition of austerity measures. The burden of cuts in welfare provision, subsidised childcare, benefits, etc, will fall on the nuclear family.

This goes to the heart of explaining why women’s oppression is shaped by women’s role within the family. Even though the actual families people grow up and live in are very different to 50 or 100 years ago, the ideology is still potent and the economic burden still critical.

David Cameron put openly how important the economic role of the family was when he said, “You know the best welfare system of all; it’s called the family.”

During the debate about equal marriage, Maria Miller, the equalities minister, referred to heterosexual marriage as the gold standard. Why? Because for the ruling class the role of the family both ideologically and economically is about reproducing the workforce.

This is not about how to deliver benefits to men; it is about minimising the cost to the ruling class of reproducing the next generation of workers. The family is about ensuring we take responsibility for the next generation (and the elderly, the sick and others who cannot work) in our atomised nuclear families, rather than the burden being carried by society as a whole.

This burden falls disproportionately on women because of their role in the family but it also increases pressure on men to provide for their family. Men have no interest in increasing this burden, either in the short or long term.

Furthermore, the extent to which the government can get away with their attacks will depend on the balance of class forces, not the attitudes or the assumed power of men as a gender.

If the long-term interest of working class men is to have the maximum unity with women in the organised working class then there is no benefit to them in maintaining or supporting oppressive structures or policies that divide men from women.

It is not possible for male workers or any other section of the working class to have short-term interest that directly contradict the long-term interest in unity. This is not

about the consciousness of male workers; this is about their objective interest.

Privilege and identity

To understand oppression it is necessary to see society as a totality and understand the material basis for oppression. This means avoiding the dangers of seeing the roots of oppression in interpersonal relationships rather than those relationships as being the expression of oppression.

This is the mistake that those that argue for a form of privilege theory make. Privilege theory is not new but is gaining an audience as a way of explaining discrimination and prejudice.

It relies on the idea that if you are white or male, for example, you gain privilege simply by being perceived as being part of a “dominant” section of society. So a working class white man supposedly benefits from the privilege of being white in a racist society. This approach reduces questions of structural inequality and oppression to relationships between individuals. It is disarming in terms of a strategy for resistance as it designates those who are seen as having more privilege – white people, men, straight people – as inherently part of the problem and not potentially part of the solution. The best they can do, as the popular blog puts it is to “check their privilege” and admit their supposed advantage over others.

The logic of this emphasis on identity is that it implies a unity of interest across gender and race where none exists. It entrenches divisions and fragmentation within the working class. It sees oppression as being an unchanging feature of human society with no route out, no possibility of change.

If you follow the logic to its conclusion then a unity of interest of all white men, for example, means that all women should organise separately. It also means that all black women should be separate from them and so on.

Revolutionaries should always point to ways of fighting back that maximise our strength. Separating into ever diminishing circles around specific forms of oppression leads us into a cul de sac and diminishes our collective power.

The experience of oppression does not automatically lead to unity among the oppressed or with other oppressed sections of society. Suffering sexism or racism does not by definition mean you feel unity with LGBT people or with recent migrants, for example.

Fighting oppression

That is not to say that oppression isn’t experienced in different ways by different people. As a product of class society the burden of oppression is greatly affected by your class position in the system. For instance, ruling class women may be able to hire someone (usually a working class woman) to help with the burden of childcare. Nonetheless,

socialists should oppose sexism regardless of where it happens to be directed.

As Lenin put it, over questions of oppression, a socialist should model themselves not on the trade union secretary but “the tribune of the people, who is able to react to any manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects”. This is both to demonstrate to the oppressed that socialists take their liberation seriously and because any form of oppression can be used by our rulers to divide the working class.

But in these struggles we also have to, as Lenin went on to say, “generalise all these manifestations and produce a single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation... take advantage of every event, however small, to set forth before all his socialist convictions”. When we talk about class we don’t mean a box that someone is allocated into because of their income or job description. It is a social relationship between those that have to sell their ability to labour and those that profit from the surplus that the labour of others creates.

Exploitation is another burden faced by women in the workplace, but being exploited also means you are essential to the system. That is why the social force that offers the hope not just of fighting for reforms within the system but also challenging the very system itself is the collective power of workers.

The contradictions intrinsic to the system ensure struggle in some form is a permanent feature of capitalism. This means workers are forced into struggle whatever their level of class consciousness and ideas.

Workers objective interests are to win the greatest unity of their side in order to take the struggle forward. This means workers are forced by their objective circumstances to unite across the many divisions in the working class, the division of gender being the oldest and most deeply rooted.

This is a process: prejudice doesn’t get swept away in a one-day strike. But the very act of struggle changes people and this is what offers the possibility of creating a society free from oppression.

Historically the fate of women is tied to the fate of the working class. This is not about the working class leading a struggle on behalf of women or other oppressed sections of society. Instead it is within the organised working class that the mass of women find their power.

The struggle to abolish class society and fight for socialism is intrinsically linked to the fight to destroy the material basis of women’s oppression.

We need to win a new generation of all those angry about sexism to revolutionary politics and our proud tradition of fighting for women’s liberation.

Central Committee

THE PARTY AND OUR STUDENT WORK

Throughout most of the history of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), and its forerunner, the International Socialists, students have played an important role. They continue to be a vital component of the organisation, which is why the recent debates surrounding our student work are of interest to the party as a whole.

Our general approach to student work starts from the position of students in society. Students are a layer of society in a transitory situation. Increasingly today they are drawn from working class backgrounds, and increasingly they are preparing for a life as part of the working class.

Nonetheless, students are not workers—they lack the collective economic power of the working class. Many, though still a minority in most of the older universities, do have casual or part-time jobs alongside studying, and a minority combine university study with more stable full-time employment. But the fact that they are workers some of the time does not change their position when they are organising on the university campus.

At the same time, universities tend to be highly ideological places—whatever the actuality, students often arrive at their university expecting to gain a more profound understanding of society. Even though there is increasing pressure on students to produce coursework and sit exams in order to compete on the jobs market once they graduate, even though there is increasing pressure on staff to get ever larger cohorts of students through their studies, students still tend to have greater freedom than workers to discuss and debate political or ideological questions.

When they radicalise around these questions, they can do so as a minority. Students do not have the discipline of the workplace or union branch. While they might aspire to win votes in their students unions, which are rarely representative of the student body as a whole, it is not necessary to win the majority of students in order to call a political meeting, organise a demonstration or even occupy a university building in protest. Small numbers can act, and in doing so hope to draw wider layers of students behind them.

But having moved into struggle, the very limited power that students have, means that their struggles often have a highly episodic character. “The student struggle,” as Tony Cliff used to say, “rises like a rocket and falls like a stick”.

Despite this, students are important to the party for two key reasons. First, their freedom to organise and fight as a radical minority can impact upon wider society, influencing the wider working class and helping to promote its struggles. Second,

recruiting students on the basis of revolutionary socialist politics has been one of the ways in which the party has historically grown. In certain periods student members have been crucial in allowing the party to relate to—and recruit—workers. And given the large number of university graduates in the contemporary working class, building among students remains central to the future of the SWP.

Students and the party

The different material conditions that confront students and workers already imply that there can be tensions between our student work and the wider organisation.

That is why it is important that our student work is accountable to the party as a whole—which has to collectively debate and take a position on the interests of the party and the wider working class movement. The same is true of our work around other groups, such as our LGBT or anti-racist work. It is also the case with our trade union fractions. Sometimes, the party as a whole will overrule the position taken by a particular fraction, prioritising the needs of the class over the sectional interests of a specific group.

For instance, at the January national conference of the party, we voted to back Jerry Hicks as our candidate in the Unite union’s general secretary elections, overturning the narrow vote in the Unite party fraction to back the existing general secretary, Len McCluskey. This was an issue that concerned the party as a whole. In exceptional circumstances, the elected leading bodies of the party, the central committee (CC) and national committee (NC), might also overrule the decision of a particular section of the party. They are able to do so because they are elected by and accountable to the party as a whole, and they will face the party at its annual conference, which decides whether to re-elect them or not based on their record.

So too with our student work. The day to day running of this area of our work rests with our student office, which is appointed by and answerable to the CC. Our approach is not to simply instruct our students to behave in a particular manner. It is always preferable to win people through political conviction. But, in the final analysis, we expect our student members to abide by the decisions of the leading bodies of the party. Those decisions should be tested in practice. Naturally, if our student members think them to be bad decisions on the basis of this experience, they have the same rights as other members to contest the decisions and oppose the leadership at the party’s annual conference, to fight for a different approach and to elect a new leadership.

We don’t agree that going outside of the party structures to try and influence it and its perspectives is a better method of operating. Statements from SWSS groups online, attempts by some groups to either

act autonomously of the student office or to simply boycott it have been some of the issues we have faced.

In recent years we have built Socialist Worker Student Society groups in universities. These groups are often broader than the members of the SWP in a particular university, but they are not united front organisations and nor are they independent of the SWP.

They are support organisations of the party with membership based upon acceptance of the ideas and positions contained in our newspaper Socialist Worker. Our SWP members should be at the core of the SWSS groups and should fight with other SWSS members to win the totality of our politics and to recruit to the party.

One other point follows from our general approach. While our student members should focus their activity on campus, where they can most effectively build, and should not be drawn into the day to day running of party branches, they should have a relationship with non-student members in a locality.

At present this should involve: attending branch and district events, especially larger public meetings and aggregates; where appropriate attending public and industrial paper sales; taking part in the educational programmes being adopted by many districts; coordinating over important areas of united front work. Certainly there must be debate and discussion between branch members in any locality and the student membership.

Millbank and after

The student movement of late 2010, the biggest in decades in Britain, was prefigured by a series of explosions of student struggle. These stretch back to 2003 and the widespread school student walkouts that greeted the invasion of Iraq. Since then there have been other episodes, such as the wave of university occupations in response to the Israeli invasion of Gaza in 2009.

But the eruption of a national movement in 2010 was on a far larger scale. It came in the wake of an enormous National Union of Students (NUS) demonstration in London called primarily over opposition to a tripling of student fees.

The demonstration culminated with activists, many of them socialists or anti-capitalists, leading an occupation of Millbank, the Tory party headquarters. The demonstration was followed by a wave of street protests. In London and other cities, groups of students, many of them working class school and college students protesting against the removal of the Education Maintenance Allowance, took to the streets almost nightly to confront lines of police officers. University students occupied on a large number of campuses. The politics of the occupations varied. For instance, at the core of the UCL occupation were a group of extremely capable activists, many of

whom were informed by autonomist-influenced conceptions that permeated through anti-capitalist and campaigning movements over recent years. They nonetheless ran a large occupation. At other universities, socialists were able to more strongly shape the character of the occupations.

While the movement was going up, the different approaches could be partly pushed to the background, even if there were plenty of sharp debates, for example over whether decisions should be taken on a democratic or consensus basis.

Whatever the differences within it, the emerging movement was characterised by an extremely high ideological level—the protests were taking place in the wake of the greatest capitalist crisis since the 1930s at a time when ruling class ideas generally were being called into question. We were able to very effectively intervene to draw large groups of students around us. At Manchester University, for example, we were by late 2010 having regular SWSS caucuses of 50 or so students.

In early 2011 this movement collapsed. The government's attacks on students passed through parliament and the national student movement quickly ran out of steam. SWSS was, quite rightly, one of the last forces to leave the battlefield. But in early 2011 the leadership of the party committed an error.

What was required was a sharp shift in our approach. This would have involved two things.

First, a recognition that, with the collapse of the national movement, there would now be a more episodic and uneven pattern of struggle, with particular issues taking precedence in any given university at any given point.

Second, we ought to have focused more on the general politics associated with our tradition in an attempt to win and bind to the party a minority of those students who, in the struggles of 2010, had identified with us as the best militants. This is not simply a "shift towards ideological meetings". In a general sense, running ideological meetings has been a feature of our student work since 2001, and especially since the crisis broke in 2007-8.

With the relative decline of student struggle, something more was needed—a cadre of people who could grasp not simply our politics on this or that ideological question, but who were thoroughly won to our general theory and perspective, who could effectively contest the rival ideas in the movement that now came into sharper opposition with our own.

In those universities where, by a combination of good fortune (always a factor in the universities given the high turnover of students) and hard work, our students had drawn around them such a cadre, we fared relatively well; in some others we saw our groups decline.

The problems were not obviously apparent in 2011. The decline of the student movement coincided with the Arab Spring and with the beginnings of a series

of one-day strikes involving, among others, university and college lecturers. Mobilising around these questions helped to maintain a level of student activity. But by 2012 our student recruitment had halved compared to the year before or 2010.

The new shape of the struggle

We are now attempting to correct our error and present a clear orientation for our students. This involves three main elements.

First, there will be episodes of struggle over particular attacks, for example, the recent large occupation at Sussex University. In some cases our students will be participants in wider struggles over austerity—for instance, students at Goldsmiths in London organised a feeder march of hundreds of students to attend the 30,000-strong protest against the planned closure of the local hospital's A&E ward.

Second, in other cases there will be particular political issues we want to take up. For instance, at Cambridge University, students had to organise to oppose the presence of French fascist leader Marine Le Pen at a debating society; the following weekend saw a protest against the presence of the English Defence League, which students were involved in building. Here building through Unite Against Fascism (UAF) was the key question, and given the likelihood of far-right activity in most towns and cities, creating a UAF/LMHR presence on campus is something that our student groups ought to do.

Third, we want to recruit and develop students on the basis of our general politics, through sales of Socialist Worker and other publications, and through our SWSS meetings. Here we should be clear that our audience is not limited to the existing left on campus or the clubs and societies that exist within a given university. Over recent years the growing political generalisation has created the terrain on which we have been able to work with other societies over a range of issues. If we can organise a joint meeting with the Femsoc over women's oppression or the Palestine campaign over Gaza, that is clearly advantageous to us.

But we should not assume that it will always be possible to work with such groups, and historically this has not been our main orientation. There are wider layers of students who are radicalising and are open to our ideas—they might not all be pre-existing members of the various campaigns and societies. The highly ideological nature of the period means that we can attract an audience over quite general political questions and win a section of that audience to the party's politics.

In addition, when we engage in united front activity we must remember that there needs to be tension between the party and the wider movement. Organising a SWSS meeting on "Trotsky and the Fight Against Fascism" after an anti-EDL demo or on "How can Palestine be Free" after a

broader meeting in solidarity with Palestinians is not sectarian. Nor is taking up these issues with the people we are working with. The united front implies unity over certain questions, debate and discussion over others. Only in this manner can united fronts be a bridge into the party.

The NUS and student unions

The change in tempo and scope of student struggle involves a shift in our approach to official student bodies. We remain committed to work in the NUS, despite its limitations and cowardly leadership.

But the basis for a united left-wing challenge to the leadership of the NUS is much reduced since 2010-11. We need to consider therefore how we use the NUS.

Our approach should be to see the elected positions we can win as being a platform from which to build our organisation and strengthen struggle in colleges and universities. This means returning to the approach whereby we stand someone who can work full-time for our organisation and use the position accordingly.

There has been widespread criticism of the decision to remove one candidate from an election to the NUS executive and to stand another. However, the CC always considers and if it deems necessary changes our candidates for such positions, whether in trade unions, the NUS or in united front campaigns—they are, after all, running for those positions as representatives of the SWP.

In student unions we will, in some cases, stand candidates for sabbatical and executive positions. But this must always be done in consultation with the CC. Winning such positions imposes powerful pressures on even the strongest members of the party. In general, it is a mistake to be in that position without the presence of a strong SWSS group that can hold the elected student to account. We do not stand in elections primarily to run student unions; we do so to build the left and our presence on campus. That means using elections as a forum to promote our politics. It means, too, that we stand as open members of SWSS, even if we are part of a wider formation, and that the student office should discuss election propaganda. In those cases where we consider running as part of a wider left slate, again this needs to be subject to discussion with the CC, just as it would in a trade union election.

More generally, whatever the hollowing out of student democracy over recent years, as forums such as general meetings have been curtailed and unions have increasingly oriented on providing services, we want to use "official" channels to promote our ideas—whether that means writing in the student newspaper or moving motions at union meetings.

SWSS activity

What should our student groups look like? Along with involving itself in wider struggles

and debates on campus and beyond, each SWSS group should have a weekly routine that consists of three things.

First, there should be a weekly caucus that can discuss the activity over the coming week. This should be where any problems and tactical questions can be raised.

Second, every student group should organise a sale of Socialist Worker. This is important in giving us a presence on campus. More generally, we need every SWSS member to take and sell our paper on their course, in their halls of residence and during activity and meetings.

This ensures that comrades are in a relationship with those around them and are forced to discuss political questions with those they do activity with. Sales of the paper should be reported to the caucus each week, with someone responsible for collecting the money and recording sales. Of course, our other publications—Socialist Review and International Socialism—are also vital to satisfying the demand for radical ideas among students and in order to develop the ideas of existing members.

Third, there should a SWSS meeting based on the kind of topics proposed by the student office each week in its national mailing. This should be advertised through posterage, leafleting, email and online, and by phoning round and discussing with our contacts. SWSS groups should prepare seriously for each meeting, encouraging our newer members to make contributions and thinking through how we can use the meeting to build our group.

Punishing or praising?

One of the more damaging claims made by the faction is that the CC is planning to drive out or punish our student groups, and we would like to take this opportunity to respond. This is simply untrue. Moreover, the attempt of the faction to act as a “buffer” between the CC and the students, or to argue that the CC is “out to smash SWSS”, is deeply damaging.

We are extremely happy that there has been, in recent years, an influx of new student members and that many are playing an important role in building the party. We welcome the new political and theoretical challenges that recruiting a new generation of students brings.

We do not develop our student membership by praising or damning them. Much has been written and said by faction members in recent weeks repeating that students are in general often strong-willed, sometimes ultraleft and are, nonetheless, crucial to the future of the party and need to be encouraged. But it is deeply patronising to leave it at that. In the wake of the student struggle of 1968, there was also tension with the student recruits to the International Socialists.

There were, as many will attest, sharp arguments about the need to orientate on workers, to take the students from the London School of Economics to sell at the

gates of Ford Dagenham, and so on.

This cut against the grain of the prevailing ideas among many students, including the milieu we grew out of, which was heavily inflected with Third Worldist, Maoist and Guevarist ideas. But the students also brought with them a wealth of new ideas, experience and energy, that helped to fuel the early growth of what became the SWP.

Anyone who joins the party develops through activity and through debate and discussion with other members of the organisation. There are structural reasons, which we have set out above, why the orientation of our student membership can be different from that of workers, just as the experience of particular groups of workers can be quite specific to them.

That is why our tradition is one of collective debate followed by unity in action. And it is why the elected leading bodies of the party must seek to lead in tension with the wider party.

The tension means both that we learn from and seek to generalise the positive experiences of those fighting back and that we seek to overcome the sectional limitations that particular groups of comrades face. The leadership also had to argue, for example, with many of our leading workplace militants in the aftermath of the end of the pensions dispute, a time in which many trade unionists became deeply pessimistic about the prospects for renewed struggle.

We hope that following the special conference we can create the terrain on which the party can move forwards together, and that our student members can continue to play a role in developing and fighting for our perspective and analysis.

Central Committee

DEMOCRACY, DISCIPLINE AND OPENNESS IN THE REVOLUTIONARY PARTY IN THE AGE OF THE INTERNET

The reinstatement of a sacked rep defeated by indiscipline and individualism of an SWP member on the internet.

For 10 years I was one of three senior union reps in an outsourced IT collective bargaining unit of 230 people. Thanks to consistent application of the party's politics we had managed to build up 92% trade union membership in our private sector white collar unit.

One of the other senior reps by-passed a process in his job and the company seized on this as an opportunity to sack him. The

members and the union jointly regarded this as a completely disproportionate disciplinary sanction and clear victimisation. We met in the car park of the headquarters of a major bank (our previous employer and then the client) and voted unanimously for an industrial action ballot. The union gave the official notice of the ballot whilst the appeal hearing was heard.

At the appeal hearing the company backed down and offered the following two options – both of them removing any disciplinary sanction from the rep:-

- The senior rep would work on a different account for 3 months and then return to our workplace with the same job title and grade but working for a different team
- The senior rep would sign a compromise agreement and take one years pay but would leave the employ of the company with a healthy reference.

Two conditions of the offer were that it was subject to confidentiality and that the offer being made was dependent upon us calling off the industrial action ballot.

The full time official accepted this and called off the ballot.

I successfully persuaded the senior rep to take the first option. His walking back in to the office 3 months later with a clean record would be a total victory.

Unfortunately a leading lay member of the SWP heard about the victory from a non-party rep texting him and decided to put it on his/her web site.

Once I contacted the comrade concerned the offending article was removed but the company seized on its appearance in the public domain as a breach of the agreement (which it was) and removed the offer of allowing the senior rep back into work. The senior rep was completely demoralised by this whole affair and accepted the offer of the money to leave.

This was not a defeat but it was a setback. *A setback snatched from the jaws of victory not by the trade union bureaucracy but by the indiscipline and individualism of a leading party member.*

A breakthrough in a major industrial dispute thwarted by indiscipline and individualism of an SWP member in print.

In 1992 Asian women working at the Burnsalls metal working factory struck for trade union recognition and the material benefits such recognition would bring. The company supplied metal parts to the midlands motor industry. A key part of winning the strike would be the campaign to get unlawful boycotting of the Burnsall's company products in the car industry. A party member then (and still one in our branch today) was the ACTSS (TGWU) convenor at one of the major car company customers of Burnsall's. Through a publicity campaign awareness of the dispute was high in the workforce.

The company agreed to boycott Burnsalls' products on one condition – that the

agreement to do so was completely confidential (i.e. the company would claim there were other reasons for cancelling the contract). The union accepted this deal as in the end it was bound to leak out, probably from Burnsalls itself, that a major order had been revoked. This was a major breakthrough in the dispute and could have led to other major car companies following suit.

Unfortunately a leading party member journalist got hold of the news and decided to put it into print. The Car Company's reaction was fierce, the cancellation of the contract with Burnsalls was revoked, and our comrade was put under disciplinary action for leaking the news (he hadn't).

The disciplinary action was defeated but the boycotting of Burnsalls products was never re-instated. This was a setback for those strikers, who did eventually go down to defeat and all lost their jobs.

A setback snatched from the jaws of victory not by the trade union bureaucracy but by the indiscipline and individualism of a leading party member.

Lessons learnt.

What happened here is that two comrades, from very different generations using very different media tools, made unilateral and entirely individual decisions to make something public.

Neither of them contacted the party members involved in leading these two campaigns. It was just their individual decision. In their heads they did have that right to make that decision. For each of them it was a "matter of judgement". They got the judgement wrong this time (sorry), but it was their call to make that judgement. And in that they were and are both entirely wrong. The class fights collectively not individually and this applies to the decision to make things public, just as it applies to going on strike.

What these two examples show is that indiscipline and individualism do hurt the workers movement. Not in a theoretical way, but in a practical working class losing your job sort of way.

They also show that it is not the internet per se that is the danger but the lack of discipline and prevalence of individualism in some comrades' behaviour which is the danger.

This behaviour is now being repeated across the internet by a small group of comrades. The comrades around the Lenin's tomb website and the International Socialism blog have taken the unilateral and individual decision to discuss internal party matters in public. Their process is exactly the same as the two comrades above.

It is their judgement and their judgement alone based upon their individual conscience to make things public.

In addition we have the leaking of the central committee's motion to the last national committee before the NC met, the leaking of the statement from the "In defence of our party" faction before most comrades outside that faction realised it

even existed, and the leaking of details of the recent ISJ editorial board meeting to the internet.

It is part of our tradition to conduct party debates in public. The debate over the downturn was conducted in the ISJ. The debate over patriarchy was conducted over several issues of the ISJ. But it is up to the Party to decide to have these debates in public via its democratic structures or their appointed editorial boards.

It is not up to individuals to impose their choice of a public debate on the rest of the membership. This is individualism, and is the opposite of collective democracy. The decision to make something public from an organisation has to be the decision of the entire organisation, not a decision which individuals can just make on the basis of their own judgement.

Trotsky on party discipline

Trotsky criticised this individualism in his debate with "democratic" opponents in the American Trotskyist movement in 1940. He criticises opponents for wanting "an ideal party democracy which would secure forever and for everybody the possibility of saying and doing whatever popped into his head"

The whole text is worth reading and is completely relevant to the situation our party now finds itself in:-

"The Petty-Bourgeoisie and Centralism ... you seek an ideal party democracy which would secure forever and for everybody the possibility of saying and doing whatever popped into his head, and which would insure the party against bureaucratic degeneration. You overlook a trifle, namely, that the party is not an arena for the assertion of free individuality, but an instrument of the proletarian revolution; that only a victorious revolution is capable of preventing the degeneration not only of the party but of the proletariat itself and of modern civilization as a whole.

You do not see that our American section is not sick from too much centralism – it is laughable even to talk about it – but from a monstrous abuse and distortion of democracy on the part of petty-bourgeois elements. This is at the root of the present crisis.

A worker spends his day at the factory. He has comparatively few hours left for the party. At the meetings he is interested in learning the most important things: the correct evaluation of the situation and the political conclusions. He values those leaders who do this in the clearest and the most precise form and who keep in step with events.

Petty-bourgeois, and especially declassed elements, divorced from the proletariat, vegetate in an artificial and shut-in environment. They have ample time to dabble in politics or its substitute. They pick out faults, exchange all

sorts of titbits and gossip concerning happenings among the party "tops." They always locate a leader who initiates them into all the "secrets." Discussion is their native element. No amount of democracy is ever enough for them. For their war of words they seek the fourth dimension. They become jittery, they revolve in a vicious circle, and they quench their thirst with salt water.

Do you want to know the organizational program of the opposition? It consists of a mad hunt for the fourth dimension of party democracy. In practice this means burying politics beneath discussion; and burying centralism beneath the anarchy of the intellectual circles."¹

Maybe many of our factories today are white collar, but Trotsky's argument is still relevant today.

Collective decisions not individual decisions in workplace politics

This collective discipline is taken for granted by the best workplace trade union organisations.

In my own workplace for the last 12 years now we have had the following policy re union meetings:-

"Who said what in the meeting and what was said in the meeting stays in the meeting, the outcome of the meeting will be delivered only by the reps to the company, unless the meeting specifically decides otherwise. Anyone who feels that they cannot stick to this policy has to leave the meeting."

This rule was requested by a group of rank and file workers, who approached me after a mass meeting to raise this issue. They asked for it on the grounds that they wanted to be able to speak entirely freely in a meeting without being worried that they would be identified to the company as being the people criticising the company or specific management.

The first time I proposed this to the next mass meeting; it was unanimously adopted and has been at every union meeting ever since. But three union members almost immediately left the meeting. Afterwards I chased after the three to find out what was wrong. They were quite happy with the rule, but their job involved them in disaster planning. They were worried that professionally they'd be asked about the contents of the union meeting (industrial action being a possible disaster) and to avoid that conflict they simply decided to absent themselves from the meeting.

Since then as we've got stronger we've told management to keep their noses out of our meeting, but the respect that those three union members had for the discipline and confidentiality of their trade union stands

¹ Trotsky In Defence of Marxism - An Open Letter to Comrade Burnham 1940. This document is well worth every comrade reading.

in stark contrast to the behaviour of the aforementioned comrades.

Some years later my members voted in a mass meeting on a “bottom line” which I and my other senior stewards had to stick to. Anything less than the “bottom line” and we had to recommend strike action. This “bottom line” was relevant for about 3 months. (In fact we ended up winning our top line of RPI+1.5% for 4 years, but that’s a different contribution.) During those 3 months, the “bottom line” was never leaked. No-one face booked it. No-one tweeted it. The management sitting in the same office as us never got wind of it. Absolute 100% confidentiality maintained by these private sector white collar workers. Now how can it be that a group of workers with trade union consciousness – given our 92% coverage statistically some of whom must vote Tory – can show greater discipline and greater respect for each other and their collective organisation than comrades in the revolutionary party?

I’ve discussed this with other workplace comrades in my geographical SWP branch. From white collar to manual workers, from private sector to public sector and they all have the same rule as my workplace. For exactly the same reasons.

A more recent example. The union in our workplace has just won a small victory for one team in the call centre. We have recruited a few new union members from this section. They have all asked that when I send out union emails that I blind copy them rather than make their union membership public. Now this shows the lack of confidence in the section concerned, despite a clear victory. But I have to accept where they are at, not where I’d like them to be. So blind copied they are. What would they think of the SWP and its internet leakage? On the basis of the last few weeks would they trust our party to respect their wishes? Would you in their position?

We all talk about learning from the class. Maybe it’s about time we put it into practice.

Lenin on party discipline and the working class

Lenin puts it well in One Step Forward, Two Steps back, “The crisis in our party. The New Iskra. Opportunism In Questions Of Organisation”;² where he argues very clearly that the working class has no problem with party discipline:-

“For the factory, which seems only a bogey to some, represents that highest form of capitalist co-operation which has united and disciplined the proletariat, taught it to organise, and placed it at the head of all the other sections of the toiling and exploited population.

And Marxism, the ideology of the proletariat trained by capitalism, has

been and is teaching unstable intellectuals to distinguish between the factory as a means of exploitation (discipline based on fear of starvation) and the factory as a means of organisation (discipline based on collective work united by the conditions of a technically highly developed form of production).

The discipline and organisation which come so hard to the bourgeois intellectual are very easily acquired by the proletariat just because of this factory “schooling”.

(The intellectual)... thinks of the Party organisation as a monstrous “factory”; he regards the subordination of the part to the whole and of the minority to the majority as “serfdom”; division of labour under the direction of a centre evokes from him a tragi-comical outcry against transforming people into “cogs and wheels” ...mention of the organisational Rules of the Party calls forth a contemptuous grimace and the disdainful remark (intended for the “formalists”) that one could very well dispense with Rules altogether.”

Democracy is essential

The workers movement must have democracy. This is a practical not an ethical statement.

If a shop stewards committee is discussing the balance of forces vis-à-vis the company and the union it must be able to have an open and honest discussion. Questions like “Will we win the ballot, if yes by how much, which sections are stronger, which are weaker, etc.?” “all have to be addressed openly and honestly.

If the answer is “This section is not up for it”, then the leadership need to know that and take it into their calculations. Hiding behind macho bluster “Oh yes we’re all up for it!” if it’s not true is a positive disservice to the movement. (As would be the opposite.)

Likewise, if the ballot is won and the discussion now moves onto what action to take and what will be supported, that discussion has to have the same level of openness and honesty. *That democracy is crucial to enable the best decisions in the interests of the class to be made.*

But there are two other requirements of this discussion. They are that any vote once taken is acted on and that the content of the internal assessment of the balance of forces is kept from the boss class.

The last two requirements are completely absent from the current behaviour of the comrades around the Lenin’s tomb website. As far as they are concerned anything and everything can be put in front of the boss class purely on the basis of their individual judgement and their individual conscience. (Everything made public is put in front of the boss class.) What other discipline other than their own judgement do they accept?

If these comrades continue to act on the basis that it is their individual freedom to

publish what they want when they want irrelevant of the party’s rules or policies, then why have this special conference? Indeed why have any conferences? Why have any aggregates? Why have any votes at aggregates? Why have any debates at these aggregates? Indeed, why have a party at all?

The comrades who are posting and leaking these public disagreements with the party have in fact intellectually already left the party. For they are no longer guided by the collective but just by their individual conscience and judgement. They may not be self-aware of this yet but it remains true. Our job is not to expel them. Our job is to re-recruit them intellectually back into the party, whilst at the same time protecting the vast majority of the party from being held to ransom by their public disparaging of our organisation. (Which by the way means the public disparaging of most of us – for the Party is just a collection of people).

Democracy is not possible without discipline. The picket line is the discipline necessary to enforce the strike vote. The party has to fight to win this understanding throughout the organisation. We have to argue the political case for discipline and not take it for granted. We need to raise the party’s understanding of discipline to at least equal that of the best organised work places.

Winning the fight for a disciplined party in the SWP

The aim should be not to expel any-one but to win all comrades to an understanding that democracy without discipline is a mirage. If the faction wins presumably they expect those who disagree with them to accept the democratic decisions of conference. In other words to show discipline.

To start with, this emergency conference should start with a vote on a version of my union meetings as follows:-

“Who said what in the meeting and what was said in the meeting stays in the meeting, the outcome of the meeting will be delivered only at the direction of the elected leadership of the party, unless the meeting specifically decides otherwise. Anyone who feels that they cannot stick to this policy has to leave the meeting.”

The vote at conference should be *by everyone* attending that conference – not just the party delegates but the full time staff and bookmarks staff etc. as well.

Because it is a vote about the conduct of the meeting. Indeed comrades who disagree with this rule should be invited to argue their case. If the conference then votes this rule down at least everyone there knows where they stand.

Then conference has to support the motion from Coventry SWP. This motion is just a start, but we have to have start somewhere. It would be naive to expect one motion and one debate to win this argument for discipline. But at least the

² A pamphlet very relevant to our current situation – you can get it on the internet – I couldn’t find it in Bookmarks!!

motion will create a clear framework for the party to work around.

It seeks to set up a commission to establish proposals for rules governing the internet, Facebook etc. for the 2014 conference to debate. We need this because we need to recognise that for some people Facebook is the equivalent of a phone call or a chat down the pub.

But because it's written down and could be open to a wider public, it is in fact quite different from them. We need to agree how to manage this for internal party discussions. It seeks in the meantime to call a halt on all the leaking and the internet chatter on internal party matters. It does *not* propose retrospective disciplinary action on comrades for actions in the past. We want to win people to correct politics not lose them to Leninism for ever.

But from the emergency conference onwards discipline has to be applied equally to all comrades, irrespective of their standing in the party or the class or the intelligentsia, and it will be up to the CC to apply this discipline.

The intention is to allow time for the argument about discipline and class politics to be won with those comrades who clearly do not understand it. But there has to be a time limit on this. We can't go on for much longer with a minority in the party holding the rest of us to ransom with their constant leaking to and posting on the internet etc.

And all comrades are being asked to do is to cease their internet chatter till the commission on the internet reports to the pre-conference period for the 2014 conference. Surely comrades can resist typing away about internal party matters for just a few months? Is that really that burdensome?

Like the vast majority of comrades I am not a super star and don't want to be. I don't write books, don't speak at Marxism, and don't run a website. I'm a reasonably hard working anonymous party member who's just spent my adult political life organising in the workplace, selling the paper on the Saturday sale, pay my national and local subs, visiting contacts, using my car to give lifts to branch meetings for comrades, being involved in united fronts (e.g. raised one thousand pounds in my workplace for Coventry LMHR) etc. In this I am no better or no worse than countless members of the party. We do what we can when we can.

Well if party discipline has to apply to me and those like me (and it does!) then it has to apply to every other party member, even the on-line superstars of the party, the famous authors etc., etc.

"Non-super star members of the party unite; we have nothing to lose but the public disparaging of our party, we have our party to win back!"

Richard (Coventry)

FEMINISM AND THE SWP

Criticisms of the handling of the allegation against X now seem to have been extended to a wider questioning of the party's position on feminism and women's oppression.

It is unfortunate that there is not more clarity about whether the suggestion that 'feminism is not our enemy' refers to careless language on the part of some comrades or deeper reservations about our politics on women's liberation.

Although it is not possible to fully outline the arguments in this short contribution, it is important to assert some of the basic tenets that inform our politics. There are two strands of thinking that are central to our thinking and core to our understanding of women's oppression and that have critical consequences for how we organise and who we organise with.

First, many, if not most, women that regard themselves as feminists are serious about and active in fighting for women's equality. We work with them over a range of issues such as in defending abortion rights and in our trade unions on the equality agenda. But there are differences in the way that we understand women's oppression and therefore respond to it. Many feminists believe that oppression can be addressed through a series of reforms within the current system.

Of course we fight for reforms in the here and now; they are part of a wider struggle and we recognise that in themselves they can represent genuine and important improvements in the lives of women. But ultimately women's oppression is rooted in class society and genuine economic, social and personal liberation for women (and men) is not possible until that system is destroyed.

Second, Richard S's suggestion that patriarchy could be incorporated into our analysis needs to be addressed. In short, theories of patriarchy see the source of women's oppression as lying in individual men and the collective domination by men of the institutions that shape our lives.³

It leads to the conclusion that men benefit from women's oppression and in extreme cases that all men are rapists. The logical extension of this analysis is that women of all classes have more in common with each other, than do working class men and women in struggle against the system. It is absurd to think that the millions of women in the public sector fighting to defend their pensions, have more in common with middle class women than they do men in the trade union movement.

Fundamentally, such theories lead to the conclusion that a separate struggle against

oppression is required, they divide the working class and therefore help to sustain the conditions under which the oppression of women is maintained.

Our critique of both patriarchy and the view that suggests that women's oppression can be reformed away within the current system are not 'old fashioned' ideas that can be jettisoned and replaced by some new 'better theory' that can be taken from the intellectual smorgasbord. It is the foundation of our analysis and stands on the shoulders of giants such as Alexandra Kollontai⁴ and Clara Zetkin who were champions of the fight for women's emancipation, and who saw this as rooted in the wider class struggle.

We read in one faction document that more work is needed "on developing and updating our traditional perspectives on women's oppression and liberation". It is the case that manifestations of oppression vary in different periods, but our analysis and traditions are revitalised and revisited in response to these - but not rewritten altogether- for example, Judith O's writing on raunch culture.

Some issues are challenging and not fully resolved - witness the open debate about sex work, which spanned five volumes of the International Socialism journal.⁵ Further, our organisation has engaged in a comradely way with new generations of feminists by debating with them at Marxism or reviewing their books (Nina Power and Judith Butler for example).

We have also encouraged engagement with longer-standing Marxist feminists such as Hester Eisenstein. Forthcoming articles in International Socialism and Socialist Review will look at other Marxists and feminists whose ideas are being revisited, such as Lise Vogel, Martha Gimenez and Raya Dunayevskaya, as well as new works looking at Marxism and oppression.

There is certainly more work to do here, but our tradition is able to address and organise against new manifestations of women's oppression as they arise and has not shirked from discussing issues where there may be some disagreement. Given that a significant number of faction members are on the board of the International Socialism journal I am left puzzled as to why they have not taken the opportunity to raise the new arguments, over and above the ones already identified, with which we should be engaging.

Finally it is worth noting that women's oppression is even more evident in intellectual life than among activists. In particular, left wing political theory is a space that continues to be almost exclusively the preserve of men (with very few exceptions).

Conferences of left wing intellectuals testify to this, and the domination of these

⁴ See Alexandra Kollontai (1909) 'Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai, Allison & Busby, 1977. Available on <http://www.marxists.org/archive/kollontai/1909/social-basis.htm>.

⁵ See International Socialism journal volumes 125, 127, 128, 129 and 130.

³ See Lindsey German (1981) 'Theories of Patriarchy', International Socialism, volume 12, available on the website.

circles by older men has been replaced by a new generation of younger ones. In contrast, the International Socialism journal is acutely aware of the lack of confidence women have in this sphere and has tried to address this – as a result one in three members of the board are now, mainly younger, women. This does not mean that there is not a long way to go to encourage women's intellectual confidence and for them to fulfil their potential, but it is a start.

If it is the case that the term feminism has been used in a pejorative way – then this is completely unacceptable. We argue about ideas, we don't bandy labels as a substitute for this.

We relate to feminists in a concrete way through unity in action - by defending abortion rights and equality at work and engaging with them in wider debates about how to get rid of women's oppression.

This doesn't mean bending to their ideas, it means debating in the hope of winning them to our analysis of the central role of class. Inside the party, in line with the CC and other contributors, this highlights the importance of education to ensure a sound understanding of our tradition - not as an ossified set of ideas, but as living theory that develops understanding of new manifestations of oppression.

Jane (Home Counties)

A FACTIONAL PARTY – A SCOTTISH EXPERIENCE

The SWP was part of such an organisation, when we were part of the Scottish Socialist Party from 2001 until 2005. The SSP had many factions (aka Platforms). The SWP was the Socialist Worker Platform.

The SSP was an organisation where every branch meeting, every paper sale, every district meeting and every Executive meeting was a faction fight.

It was an organisation where branches were dominated by differing Platforms e.g. the city of Dundee had two branches – one dominated by the CWI platform the other by the SWP platform.

Even within a branch, some members would spend more time fighting their rival platform in the branch than intervening in the outside world.

In Glasgow the old Militant dominated the district i.e. the full timers and the head office. This resulted in the district organisation being used in a factional fashion against branches that were seen as being controlled by a rival faction.

People recruited to the SSP by a rival faction were regarded with suspicion and ignored. Alternative membership lists were held. New SSP members were withheld

from the branch secretary, who happened to be in the other Platform, in case they were recruited to the 'enemy'.

The editorial board was often split over what response the SSP's paper (Scottish Socialist Voice) should take to events e.g. the Twin Towers resulted in a major argument on the editorial board whether to blame Al Qada or to blame imperialism. The result was a fudge.

The Annual SSP conference was more a ceremonial battle between the factions than an open discussion of the party's experience and what was to be done.

Even though as the SW Platform we took little or no part in the factioneering, (we always argued for an open inclusive organisation), the very existence of the factions made for a sour, divided organisation. Faction fights always drive the undecided out of the organisation. People would come not so much to discuss politics or to find out and participate in what activity was happening in their area, but more a place to 'do over' the opposing faction. This factionalism reached such an extent that one SSP faction appeared in court for the Murdoch press against one of their erstwhile comrades, who in their eyes, was defecting to the SWP.

Comrades should really consider if this is the party we want the SWP to be. Do we want a situation where every member will have to carry around a copy of the constitution in case they get ambushed at the next branch meeting? Where the organiser may be in a different faction to the rest of the district and will cultivate her/his own factional 'followers'? This is not a fancy, this is exactly what happened in Scotland when the ISG split.

Do we want a party where all the positions in the organisation: SW organiser, branch sec, membership sec, where even the titles of meeting, will be contested between the factions? The inevitable result will be that the branch (and the Party generally) will become more obsessed with winning internal factional positions instead of being an outward looking interventionist organisation.

You say oh but the SWP wouldn't be like that, but if we have permanent factions there is nothing to stop it being exactly like that.

The experience of the SSP (alone) indicates that the existence of permanent factions will create an internalised and bureaucratic SWP that would be paralysed at all levels. Let's not go there comrades.

Duncan (Glasgow)

NOTES ON A CRISIS

Our document called 'Notes on a Crisis' was circulated in a limited way on January 25th. It was obviously written as an early response to the gathering blogstorm and

the response from the CC.

We limited circulation to try and avoid as long as possible its appearance on hostile websites and to try and generate a more sober discussion than the one that was already developing on the internet. It was sent to the CC at the same time but there was no response. Looking back it seems like a lost opportunity. Now, with nearly 500 people signed up to a Faction document which echoes many of the points in our document (though neither of us were involved in drafting that document), it seems our concerns were justified.

Most importantly, the strong sense that the overwhelming majority of comrades were concerned above all with clarifying our responses, and with making clear that the hostile comments on the internet did not reflect the concerns of what has come to be called the 'middle ground' in the party.

The very use of the term points to our concern that a polarization was taking place which left a very large number of comrades with nowhere to go. It is our view that the formation of the faction and the document which it published were a determined, and very timely, way of bringing the discussion and the disagreements into the party, and resolving them there.

The number of supporters it has gathered suggest that that was what around half the active membership of the party wanted. It is to be hoped that the CC can still recognize that and open a debate on the 10th that does not start from the assumption that the faction members are enemies to be defeated but comrades to be debated with in a common purpose – to strengthen the SWP.

That document follows:

For us, as for many comrades, the attacks on the SWP coming from every side are distressing. As even our many critics acknowledge, the SWP has played a central role on the left in Britain and has always been present where struggles have emerged or resistance has grown.

The bourgeois press is very fond of describing, with characteristic contempt, the role of the party in the struggle against fascists, now and in the past; we have consistently looked for ways to work with others, without preconditions, in the trade unions, in the student movement, and wherever resistance grew. The anti-war movement is a shining example. Our publications, Socialist Worker, Socialist Review and International Socialism have won respect from comrades outside the party for their openness and consistent commitment to telling the stories that others will not tell.

As even the most hostile comments recognise, the only interests that would be served by the destruction of the SWP are those who hope for the disappearance of the left and the defeat of socialist ideas and practice. The beneficiaries would be cackling in their private clubs and dinner parties. It is important to underline that we

are arguing for the defence of an idea, a tradition, and a practice for which the SWP has always stood.

It would be absurd to suggest that we have not made mistakes in the course of our history. Marxism and socialist ideas are not holy writ – they are instruments for understanding and responding to a reality that shifts and changes all the time. And those ideas grow and deepen in a constant dialogue with that reality.

It is a process of argument, testing and challenging our analysis against the experience of our comrades and many others in the movement. That debate and internal discussion is the lifeblood of any organisation that sets out to respond to the real world, rather than closing in on itself in an endless picking over the documents of the past. It is not inconsistent to defend the party from external attack and internal factionalism and to insist at the same time on openness and discussion within the organisation.

Whether we like it or not, the debates at our conference have gone public. The sectarians and the assorted enemies of the left are licking their lips with pleasure at the prospect. What matters is not what they are saying, but that our own comrades are disoriented by these attacks. In fact the majority of comrades posting on the internet insist they don't want to leave the party and simply want clarity. Most of all they want to be armed with a convincing response when they come under attack and be able to recover their confidence in the party.

Unfortunately the CC's response to the crisis has been to batten down the hatches and assume a defensive posture, instead of responding to the discussion and the questions it poses. And other comrades, in supporting the CC, have launched aggressive attacks against those who disagree, using a language of exclusion and denunciation all too familiar in the history of the socialist movement.

This is unhelpful in the extreme and will serve only to further polarise the situation and drive many comrades whose instincts are to reject much of the factional argument into at the very least passivity and bewilderment, if not opposition. What is critical now is to open the debate within the organisation, examine the mistakes that have been made and look for solutions.

The conference debate on the Disputes Committee Report, published by Socialist Unity with purposes that had nothing to do with left unity, in fact shows the party in a good light.

It was a well-conducted and disciplined debate that aired the issues, difficult as they are. There was a vote with a very large minority. The issue here is not really about formal democracy – this conference produced some of the closest votes (by elected delegates) in the party's history.

The issue is that a number of people did not agree with the Disputes Committee decision. The Disputes Committee proceedings were probably flawed, not because any

of its members were dishonest, but because there was not sufficient distance between the committee and the people whose cases were being discussed.

Let's accept that it was a mistake to let that happen and discuss a different way of electing a disputes committee in the future; perhaps the National Committee could suggest a pool of comrades from whom a disputes committee can be selected in each case, avoiding the kind of difficulties that occurred this time.

We would suggest that it is composed of respected and experienced members, and should report to the CC only at the end of its proceedings.

What then is the problem we are facing? What is the source of the anger and discontent that emerged around this issue?

It was noticeable that the Conference discussions were very internalised; yet we believe that the origins of that internal crisis lie in the wider society and our place within it. That is the important debate, and it should be conducted in the fraternal and open way that other debates have been conducted in the past, through the Internal Bulletin or the ISJ for example.

Some people will certainly argue that having had the conference, we should now turn our attention to the outside world and not waste our energies on more internal discussion.

This is a completely false dichotomy. We are in a period that is difficult and contradictory; our debates will inform our practice and vice versa. It is essential that we discuss aspects of our work and our theory while being engaged in the outside world. This is part of our tradition, not a navel gazing exercise. What does need to be said to the comrades who supported the factions at conference, however, is that the absence of any discussion about the objective circumstances in which we are working and the influence of the outside world on us, ensured that the whole debate was thrown in on itself and descended into mutual recrimination. People became individually responsible for collective decisions and errors.

The crisis can be used as an opportunity for the party to conduct some rigorous and honest debate, including analysis of the period we are in and the balance of class forces, the centrality of Leninism and what that means in practice in this new period.

The world has changed; the working class in this country is currently in defensive mode. The Tories are weak and crisis-ridden, though vicious; Labour have collapsed politically (the most recent rumour is that Miliband is looking for guidance from Nick Clegg!) and the trade union leadership has in almost every case followed suit, collaborating with the neo-liberal project, either because there is no political alternative that they believe in or because they think that global capitalism cannot be fought.

It's hardly surprising that the working class is disoriented against that background. The student revolt was fantastically militant

and creative, but it did not ultimately succeed in stopping the introduction of tuition fees, which is an understandable source of frustration, as is the fact that the movement was ahead of the working class in its militancy.

We have an analysis of why that happens, but we have to go beyond cries of betrayal to explain to comrades why, at a time of the lowest ever levels of working class struggle in Britain, we insist on the centrality of the working class. It's an argument that has fallen away, just at a moment when social movements – the indignados, the Occupy movement, and the student movement here, for example – have arisen and taken the central role in the resistance. The problem is that these movements are characteristically hostile to politics and form around specific issues. All this takes place against a background of a generalised suspicion of political parties and of Leninism in particular since the fall of Stalinism.

The current internal debate in the party reflects at least in part a frustration born of this 'down like a stick' trajectory of the student movement and the relative passivity, or perceived passivity, of the working class.

It is the job of the leadership to listen to, relate to and understand that frustration, while attempting to address it and move comrades beyond it. This is not simply reflecting the class, or the movement, but recognising that we are all affected by the world we live in and that the party needs to exercise a counter-pull based not purely on discipline, but on theoretical commitment.

Theory and discussion are the only protection from going up and down with movements – this isn't news. It is also the only way that the teachers can be taught. Some members will not be won, but many can be and they will be central to the future of the party.

We will not win and hold comrades by 'smashing' them for expressing ideas that may come from inexperience or just growing up under capitalism at this point in its development, but which are also at root opposed to that system and its effects.

Socialists always start from the general interests of the class, organising around a militant minority who can carry revolutionary ideas into the working class. The revolutionary socialist tradition took from 1917 the confirmation of the perspective that the working class was the most powerful instrument that could challenge capitalism, and that its struggles would in turn determine the success of other struggles of the oppressed – i.e. be the tribune of the people.

The party therefore reflected and organised that advanced minority and its ideological and political allies with a political instrument that could keep its eye on social revolution and recognise and respond to those moments when the capitalist class was weakened or demobilised and the revolutionary class at its highest level of preparedness. That was necessary because the revolutionary crisis is never

predictable and usually brief – the crack opens and then closes again

Democratic centralism is a combination of the greatest openness to the class and the strictest disciplined preparedness. It is not a military discipline but a political one. And it is also necessary, paradoxically, to ensure the openness of socialists to the reality of working class life and the wider culture.

Without that the party closes in on itself and becomes a sect. But the other side of the equation is that that openness also makes socialists susceptible to the influence of the best of the workers, who are themselves vulnerable to demoralisation in times of defeat as well as militant and combative at times of heightening struggle.

As that relationship moves and changes with the rise and fall of the class struggle, the party needs to be constantly aware of how that affects it and its members, as well as its effect on the wider movement.

The curiosity of recent years is that struggle, resistance and protest have emerged in unexpected places and ways in the face of the persistent and widespread attacks on the gains that have been made over the previous century by the working class movement. Yet the class itself is demoralised and disarmed; we know the reasons why.

The question that then arises is how to avoid making long term adaptations to short term crises, as Raymond Williams once put it. We have to demonstrate why the theory of working class revolution remains as powerful and clear as it was in the period of industrial expansion and growth in the west. That is an argument we have to win in the face of a generalised disillusionment with politics that has not and will not itself produce an alternative political strategy, because of the nature of the protest movements.

These are reactive and pragmatic, driven by immediate attacks and confrontations and largely dissolve as a result. Yet they have been very successful in mobilising people. That's the contradiction.

The theory of autonomism is absolutely in tune with the way these movements have emerged, which it generalises from, and with their pragmatism, which it sees as a virtue – but a virtue because there is no associated political project, which in the anarchist tradition is seen as the source of corruption and misdirection of the movement. So it is a theory that specifically rejects a societal project.

Our tradition stands on the need to struggle for the overthrow of the state – as opposed to ignoring it or creating liberated spaces – in order to replace it with an alternative political instrument, the workers' state, that can transform society and end capitalism.

Faced with the absence of workers' struggle some socialists react in one of two ways it seems; either by responding to the political crisis by adapting to the ideas that prevail within the movement at that moment rather than challenging them, or by seeing the party leadership as responsible for a failure that is far beyond its

control. These are uncomfortable times for socialists in Britain, but it's not the first or the last time we will find ourselves swimming against the current.

What the party and its leadership has to do now is to patiently explain, to wage a comradely political campaign that will be won with the power of ideas and not by appeals to party loyalty. The loyalty we have to achieve is the conviction that the tradition in which we stand represents the best interests and the clearest vision of the working class. The Central Committee has to win that back. Discipline in a revolutionary organisation comes from conviction, not loyalty – loyalty follows conviction, not vice versa.

What has happened here has been a double tragedy – weakness and indecision plus evasion followed by an essentially bureaucratic response to the internal crisis. And a substantial minority of the party has not yet been persuaded of the authority of the revolutionary socialist tradition.

Many of the newer layer of comrades have come from the student movement, precisely because of our central role within it. They have brought with them the ideas that prevailed in that movement – autonomist, anarchist, lifestyle politics. They need to be won to the revolutionary socialist tradition and our arguments against those currents through discussion and argument, convincing them rather than berating them.

One of the areas in which we have to make our case is in relation to feminism. Denouncing young women who regard themselves as feminists, as has happened at a number of recent meetings, is wrong and foolish.

Comrades come into the party from a hundred different directions. Today it is less likely than it used to be that they will bump into socialist ideas on campuses or in the movement or in their workplace.

So the first encounter with politics might come over racism, or women's oppression, or environmentalism; the point is to work to make the connections with socialist ideas and class politics starting from where they are.

In the specific case of feminism it is simply wrong to say that we resolved the question last time around – we need to address the 'new feminism' and develop some more detailed and nuanced theorising of the position of women and the rise of a new women's movement almost fifty years later, which is in no way tantamount to being 'soft' on feminism.

On the contrary, listening to and engaging with this movement, as with others, can help to integrate righteous anger against sexism with the revolutionary socialist tradition and to strengthen and develop our analysis and increase our political weight among those fighting for women's rights.

A proper internal discussion on the question of rape is probably necessary – and should be conducted without continual triumphalism. As a party we should make a clear declaration. We are implacably

opposed to sexual violence in any form, inside or outside the party. And we expect our comrades, and especially our leading comrades, to hold to those values. That is not open to discussion.

Confidentiality is an issue, but we do need to have a clear position on such violence. It seems clear to us that an accusation of rape has to be dealt with by people qualified to understand the issues raised and to give proper support to the victim.

According to the DC members at Conference, the woman comrade concerned chose not to take that route. The party must have a mechanism for protecting female comrades – it is simply wrong to state that no Disputes Committee should have been held. At the same time, the composition of the DC should have been carefully considered – widened perhaps, or reorganised to remove as far as possible any risk of divided loyalties.

We cannot assume that by virtue of being leading socialists, comrades have somehow overcome the conflicts and contradictions that affect people in our society. They can't be exempt from the rules of behaviour we demand of everyone else. If the CC had made that clear from the beginning and taken a clear position when this issue first arose, we would not be where we are now.

Where should this process of debate take place? It will not happen at a conflictive delegate conference that will exclude the majority of comrades. Instead we need to actively promote debate and involve as many people as we can, and we should not be afraid of genuinely open discussions about our tradition and our theory.

Yes, that should be in the branches, but we should also look for creative ways to draw in the large proportion of comrades who don't regularly attend branches: local day schools, conversations in someone's house, picnics (well in the summer anyway), a conversation over coffee during the day. Whatever form they take such discussions should be well-organised, welcoming, genuinely open environments with ample opportunity for comrades to express their own ideas and be heard and answered patiently.

This is intended as a contribution to the discussion that is already happening across the party. We are not asking for signatures or names to add to it.

Megan (Waltham Forest) and Mike (Glasgow)

THE ROOTS OF THE CRISIS

What is a faction? It is based around two basic ideas, firstly a group of comrades who have a different political vision for the party, and secondly it should be acting as a

“leadership in waiting” with a distinctive political outlook.

Therefore, if the sole justification of a faction, is to challenge a single disciplinary case and the way it was handled by the CC, what basis does it have in being formed?

Here I want to present a basis for why comrades have generalised from a single case, why this has happened, and what alternative political outlook we can offer.

The disputes case was handled badly. No matter how hard the DC or the CC tell us of their qualifications or suitability to conduct such an investigation, no matter how much they tell us they tried to be accommodating, the simple fact nobody can deny is that a woman feels “highly traumatised” by what happened, and others are unwilling to come forward with allegations while the current DC exists in its current form.

This is an utter failure on the part of the DC, and then the CC to regulate this, no matter how good their intentions may have been. When disputes cases are brought from women, our starting point should be, how happy and secure does a woman feel after the case has been conducted.

That is not to say you cannot be rigorous and thorough. It does not mean we find everyone guilty with every allegation. But it should also mean, we don’t leave women feeling “highly traumatised”, after all they feel they have been through enough.

However, no matter how poorly the case was handled, disagreement with how one case was handled is not the same as an entirely different political vision.

Of course, we have to accept the DC and the CC can make mistakes, and we would hope they could rectify mistakes in future. It is here where the crux of the issue lies for me.

Firstly, there is a feeling of distrust and outrage towards the leadership from a majority of young members. We no longer trust the CC to deal with such cases amicably. Secondly it shows up wider concerns with how our internal procedures work, and if our attitude to the outside world have hindered the process. These two questions are central to any structural problems that mean the same mistakes could be replicated.

The parties structures

Alex C pointed out at conference that we needed secrecy within the SWP, their had to be some things that are kept secret. This may have been an acceptable way of operating in the 1970s, indeed it may have been the preferred option for the Bolsheviks.

However, as a party we have always prided ourselves in unorthodoxy. This means that we start from a position of not what Lenin would have wanted, using his works as our starting point, but we understand Lenin as pragmatic and able to change to adapt to the conditions he encountered. We stand in the tradition of Lenin, the tradition of adaptation, change and renewal is central to this.

Do we need secrecy? Has the idea that secrecy on certain the issue of rape allegation benefited the class, and indeed the party and its position within the class? To the first, the general public have never been as distrustful of organised political parties. Whereas once, when the Tories and Labour took 98% of the vote, and had membership running into the millions, by the size of the vote, the turnout and their membership figures have shrunk.

People now view secrecy as being symptomatic of an elite who have a separate agenda to the general public. We should avoid secrecy at all costs. We should try and be open and accountable as possible; as Marx famously said, we have “nothing to hide from the class”.

If there is no alternative, we need to think long and hard about whether the secrecy is justified for the benefits of the class. Was that really the situation here? The continued attempts to bury this issue, starting in 2011 when the CC voted not to put the case to Disputes Committee but handle it as a CC “in house”, it is apparent that the CC was thinking of their needs, not the needs of the wider party never mind the wider class.

The working class, increasingly distrustful of the realpolitik of the main 3 parties, does not need to be dished up more of the same in Trotskyist organisations. Saying we are different because we are a “revolutionary organisation” unlike the Lib Dems, or the NHS means very little concretely.

It means very little if you are a young woman who feels harassed. The attempts to try and keep this case secret where not putting the working class first, they were putting the interests of the CC first, trying to minimise embarrassment.

Going forward, the party is going to have to have a thorough examination of its procedures, to try to eliminate the conditions with which a leadership body is able to behave in such a manner. I fear without this renewal, mistakes could be repeated continually.

The outside world

There has been some attempt to smear those who are in opposition, most shamefully referring to people as MI5 agents. Perhaps more damagingly, there has been an argument to suggest that those in opposition are “creeping” or “self proclaimed feminists” or autonomists not win to the position of orthodox Leninism.

The fact we use feminists as a dirty word, to be fought against internally shows an attitude that is routed more in 1970s sectarianism than 21st century unorthodox Leninism.

Like our internal procedures, the outlook of the world is stuck in an era that predates the changes of neo-liberalism.

When older members criticise autonomism, feminism, LGBT politics (as we have heard at some aggregates) what they are really criticising is a new layer of activists who have been forged in the 21st

century. It displays a conservative attitude to the outside world that will continue to hold the party back.

Neo-liberalism has tore apart working class communities, and the growth of the political movements are a reflection of this destruction. There is a high political anger reflected in the arab spring or the Occupy movement, (or in Britain, the Hillsborough fiasco, reclaim the night, the expenses crisis etc).

Unfortunately, this has yet to transfer through to the economic/industrial. Union membership has yet to rise dramatically, strike days remain low with very little rank and file self activity. The growth of “creeping feminism” is not a result of a few female activists with a chip on their shoulder, who need to be educated in a rebels guide to Lenin. It is a product of growing political anger from women in the outside world, but women who are yet to be won around to the need for political organisation.

We should be relating to these people in a manner that is not sneering condemnation, but understands the wider political changes, and generalises a political strategy to suit the needs.

The question of youth

The problems the SWP is experiencing are not new problems for Trotskyist organisations. Many have suffered such conflict. There have been two resignations from the SWP in recent years, which had significant young members within them. Other groups such as Workers Power have also suffered a split.

It is clear that the dividing lines for the different sides of the debate are based largely around the question of age. That’s not to say same older members aren’t in opposition or younger members aren’t in support the CC, but 15+ SWSS groups condemning the CC’s behaviour publically shows us there is a large generational element.

This is in the context of former CC members at conference telling us that the solution to this problem is for young members to “grow up” and another long serving CC member informing us we needed to trust the CC because of their “40 years of experience”. They cite a defence of Lenin, within the paradigm of Cliff for these attitudes. However, it is highly unlikely Cliff or Lenin would have supported such an analysis.

If we look firstly to Lenin, he himself argued for the Bolsheviks to be a party of youth “leave the over 30s to the liberals” or “shoot on the spot anyone who doesn’t say we should be recruiting young members”.

There is also a now famous story of Cliff, when being approached by older members demanding that young people should not be allowed to conference, they should have to apply for re-entry, (I am sure certain members may favour such an approach for this conference!) Cliff responded that it was an excellent an idea, but any member who was in the organisation over 5 years should

be made to re-apply for membership of the party!

Now neither Lenin nor Cliff had such an attitude to youth because it was trendy, or good sloganeering for SWSS groups, but because they had a concrete understanding of what young people could bring.

Both accepted the world changed and presented continual challenges to their organisations. Both also understood that when turns needed to be made, older members would become slower on these, and more conservative to the changing requirements of the class. Both understood, that a layer of young people, could keep the organisation invigorated, and help push through the changes the party needed to be relevant in a changing world. It was a counter-balance to the conservatism of older members.

It is hard to think that either of those people would have been as keen to denounce 15 plus SWSS groups for condemning the way the CC have operated, or held an attitude they should “grow up”. There has been some acknowledgement from CC members that the students changed after the demoralisation of 2011, and haven’t been won around to the different perspectives of the party, based around the needs of working within unions. Sean V spoke of the problem of autonomism of the students.

However, can we not reverse this argument? Perhaps the students are relating to a changing world effectively, and the rest of the party have been lagging behind on this question, including the CC. *If* we accept the basis of Cliffite Leninism, we should be learning from the newer members, not scorning them for not being won round to a political consensus shaped a generation before.

The Minority Movement

There is simply not enough time to go into the full problems of the Minority Movement (MM), and what that brought with it with UTR here. However, it should be noted that Cliff, Lenin and Trotsky were all opposed to such a policy.

It was an outlook supported largely by Bukharin and then the Comintern led by Stalin, and later Stalinist organisations. The basis of the idea, is that after the 1919 general strike, the CPGB had a policy that they would differentiate how they worked within Trade Unions being conditional on their outlook to the Labour Party. They would work more closely with the “left” bureaucrats over the right bureaucrats. It was an attempt to split the union bureaucracy over the question of reform or revolution.

It contrasted Lenin and Trotsky where pioneering a different policy around this time, based upon the premise of the UF, arguing that revolutionaries needed to work with reformists as the time for imminent revolutions was passing, and would only come again when the bankruptcy of reformism had been shown.

The MM policy ended badly, when

the left bureaucrats, supported the right bureaucrats who sold the strike out. However, while much more could be said about the problems it had in 1920’s Britain, the problems of such a model in 2013 are far greater. It leads to far too great an emphasis on trade union work, without understanding the wider political movement against capitalism that exists.

In trying to split the unions into right and left, we find ourselves working heavily within public sector unions, and having to neglect younger more potentially volatile workers within the private sector. Rather than engaging in a debate with them, we end up writing them off in the need to remain secure with the left leaning leaders.

The problems that have emerged in Britain have been that the left Union leaders have sold the strike out. When you use left unions as your reference point, you are always likely to base your slogans on an unrealistically high level which cuts you off from the majority of the trade union movements.

Slogans such as “all out stay out” or the continued reference to the “hot autumn” of 2012 looks like ambulance chasing of the worst. Hoping the left unions leaders can call some action to justify what is a volunteerist model, which you claim as your own pressure from below. When the action eventually stops, it was always going to lead to a demoralisation, anger and confusion. Lashing out at the students for not being won round to such a position is missing the point.

The problem came with the hugely adventurist statement, that gave an unrealistic hope to our trade union activists. Many probably felt they had magically cracked the challenge when the public sector strikes were called, but were left questioning unnecessarily themselves when they were called off. Many people have asked me the question, why did the unions leaders sell out? The answer is quite simply, because they can. The real question the left has to answer, is why is there not a strong enough rank and file to prevent this, and secondly how do we go about building it.

People’s Assembly

The MM model, encapsulated within UTR is not going to build the rank and file network we require. More importantly, it is not going to connect the political struggles to the much needed industrial action.

The CC have to accept we need to have a United Front Against Austerity, that begins to try and tackle the neo-liberal consensus that has dominated since the late 1970’s. Fighting back, on a case by case basis (ie pensions) without winning a wider political argument about why austerity and the markets are wrong, is going to destine you to lose more actions than you ought.

While I empathise with the position that a United Front against a Labour government would have been precarious, I feel a United Front against the Condem government becomes a much more viable project.

It is within this context that we should throw our weight behind the People Assembly initiative, which has an impressive group of signatories, from a variety of campaigns and unions.

Our ability to bring trade union members will be invaluable to the conference, and could start a process of left renewal which is much needed on the left.

When we talk of the need to give people a vision of something different to the neo-liberal austerity agenda, we have to have more to say that arguing for revolution or all out indefinite strikes. You will win some people to these ideas, but unlikely the most or even the best people will be won to these ideas. Until we can beat back the neo-liberal advances, at an agitational level it is pointless trying to win people to a revolutionary position.

I am sure many people will say the above has little to do with the conference, or indeed the disputes case, but to me it is central as to why we have allowed the “in the bunker” attitude to prevail, and it’s political basis.

We have to acknowledge that any organisation can make mistakes. However if the same mistake keeps being repeated, we have to start looking at the structural reasons for this.

I believe a combination of distrust towards the outside world and the movements (resulting in a economic union centred industrial policy) combined with internal structures based in the 1980’s have heavily contributed to the continued handling of this case. Going forward, it is these issues that need to be addressed urgently, to prevent this situation being repeated again.

Andrew (Kent)

IN DEFENCE OF THE DISPUTES COMMITTEE

Like, I believe, a great many SWP members and, importantly, sympathisers outside the Party, I have watched recent events within our organisation and their, often distorted, publication online and in the bourgeois press with a mounting sense of alarm.

I accept that, given the pressures which have built up since conference in January, the CC had no choice but to call a special conference, in the interests of Party unity. Indeed, I think that many of the comrades involved in the faction calling for such a conference are motivated precisely by a desire, as they say, to avoid a split in our ranks.

As the special conference is intended to deal with this crucial internal matter as quickly as possible, so that the Party can re-stabilise itself as a democratic centralist, Leninist, class combat organisation, I

would like to address one key point which has been raised within the bourgeois press, and which I believe is a matter of some confusion within the Party.

The DC is accused of setting itself up as a “court” with the right to decide upon an accusation of rape against X. Further to that, it is then asked what the DC would have done had it found X guilty, given that the DC has no powers at its disposal which go beyond expulsion from the Party.

Given the sensitivities of the case, it is, perhaps, understandable that this issue has not been clarified sufficiently. However, I think it is important that it be clarified fully now. I hope that the CC can confirm that the following appraisal is correct.

The general position regarding the DC is this. It is not a court, and claims for itself no legal powers. Its powers, under the constitution of the SWP, are internal; namely such sanctions as removing a Party member from an elected position within the SWP, or of suspension or, ultimately, expulsion from the Party.

One of the core duties of the DC is to determine whether or not a Party member is fit to continue as such. In that sense, far from considering itself “above the law”, the DC operates a burden of proof which is actually lower than that of a law court; i.e. a Party member can be expelled for activities which would not actually lead to conviction in a court of law.

With regard to accusations of rape or other criminal behaviour (such as serious assault, for example), the Party’s suspicion of and hostility toward the legal system of capitalist society notwithstanding, the SWP does not take the ultra-left position of proposing that Party members (or anyone else) should never seek justice in those courts. Indeed, one of the best known members of the SWP, the investigative journalist Paul Foot, spent much of his career advocating the conviction of the guilty in the courts, as well as seeking justice for those wrongly convicted by those self same courts.

In the specific case in question, the comrade making the allegations against X chose not to go to the police. For any bourgeois political party, that would have been the end of the matter.

However, because the SWP is a revolutionary Marxist organisation which takes women’s oppression seriously, the case was referred to the DC; not to determine whether or not X had committed rape (as the DC does not have the legal power to make such a determination), but to determine whether X had behaved in a manner which was at odds with the SWP’s principles regarding women’s oppression (a determination which, as I write above, carries a much lower burden of proof than a rape allegation in a bourgeois court).

The issue here is not whether members of the DC knew X well (given X’s role in the Party over many years, he was well known to many, if not most, SWP members), but whether comrades trust the integrity of the

DC. Some Party members seem to be saying that they respect the integrity of the DC members as individuals, whilst refusing to accept their collective judgment. A position which is simply perverse.

It should also be pointed out that, not only would no bourgeois party investigate and determine upon a case such as this internally, but no bourgeois party would give over a session of its national conference to explain those deliberations to the elected delegates. Far from doing too little to address this matter, it seems to me that the SWP has gone to considerable lengths to ascertain whether or not X is fit to be a Party member.

I hope that my thoughts on the role and actions of the DC will help to clarify matters for some comrades who have, hitherto, been confused or uncertain on these points.

Mark (Glasgow)

SOME POINTS ON THE CURRENT SITUATION

This is the first factional statement I have signed since 1969, so I am hardly a natural factionalist. After conference I said nothing for four weeks, and only after a great deal of agonising agreed to sign the statement, in the hope of preventing either a split or a serious loss of members. Bear in mind that I did not draft the statement – I only signed it the day before it was issued. If I had drafted it I might not have used exactly the same words – that is the nature of any collective statement – but I agree with all the main points.

Since conference I have been seriously concerned that the CC are not offering a proper response to the crisis the party finds itself in. Let me just give two examples from my own experience.

a) Two weeks ago I attended a Marxism planning meeting. It was a very positive experience, and briefly I thought I had probably spent too much time on the internet and that this was the “real world”.

There were over fifty comrades present, young and old, and nearly all spoke with useful concrete suggestions for meetings etc. Among many other themes two that were mentioned were a debate with Owen Jones and the need to relate to the Historical Materialism milieu. Both seemed to me to be good ideas. The next day Owen Jones publicly rejected the invitation, and a number of the key figures in HM issued a statement saying they would not participate in Marxism. So my momentary optimism rapidly disappeared again. Of course it is easy enough to denounce these individuals. But our ability to draw them into our debates at Marxism has been part of our strength. Last year’s Marxism was excellent – full of faces I’d never seen before

and a very good level of debate. I was really enthused by it.

But unless we resolve the present crisis this year’s Marxism risks being very much smaller and less successful. I hope I’m wrong but I don’t believe the CC have a strategy for getting us out of the present mess, which I don’t think they foresaw. I have the impression of a very weak leadership panicking but unable to break out of a purely defensive stance.

b) At the beginning of December we had our pre-conference aggregate in North London. The CC speaker was Hannah D who set out the perspectives and introduced a very concrete discussion on how we could implement the perspective in various activities in North London.

Clearly Hannah was there as the trusted spokesperson of the CC. After conference I learn she has been removed from the CC. There has been no explanation to the membership of the reasons for this about-turn and dismissal. (Cliff had huge arguments with Chris Harman, but never tried to remove him from the CC.) Then five days ago Mark B resigned from the CC. I know this only through a pirated statement on a hostile blog. Again, no explanation to the membership. I am expected to trust the leadership, and yet I don’t even know who they currently are.

I welcome the CC’s decision to call a special conference. I’m quite sure this wouldn’t have happened if we had not formed a faction. If the CC is prepared to take a conciliatory position (rather than the macho defensiveness of Charlie’s initial response) then I think this could take a lot of the heat out of the situation.

I think if the special conference recognised that there had been serious problems with the DC procedures (nobody’s fault – it was a totally unforeseen situation) and set up a commission to produce revised procedures (in consultation with lawyers and others who could give specialised advice), that would open up a constructive way forward.

Let me say first that I am not blaming anybody. If I had been on the CC/DC I am sure I should have made the same mistakes if not worse. But in view of the harm that has been caused to the party, we need to look back retrospectively in order to improve procedures and ensure that something similar never happens again. Obviously the complainant had to be listened to. I think (with the wisdom of hindsight) someone should have carefully discussed with her the consequences of dealing with the matter through party channels and helped her consider possible alternatives.

Rape is a serious criminal matter (akin to GBH if not murder). Suppose X had been found guilty would expulsion have been a satisfactory and adequate sanction? I don’t have a neat and tidy solution. But I don’t think the implications were considered before the case was taken on. We can’t reopen the case. But we have to do a lot better if it ever happens again.

Obviously the identity of individuals has to be respected. But in fact the identity of X is probably known to virtually everyone on the British left. That is the problem when someone in a senior position faces such an accusation.

Despite the confidentiality certain questionable aspects of the procedure – the composition of the DC, the appropriateness of certain questions asked of the complainant etc. – have become well-known and have been much discussed. Apart from the identity of the complainant (which I don't know and have no desire to know) confidentiality has failed.

Rumours were rife long before the conference. Any attempt to keep it secret would have made things worse. I deplore the publication of the transcript, but I am actually glad it was made public, because otherwise the rumours would have been far worse. While I don't go along with those comrades romanticising the internet, I think the CC have not fully appreciated how much things have been transformed by new forms of communication.

To call anyone in the SWP a “rape apologist” is deplorable. I've read a lot of blogs (far too many) over the last few weeks, and I don't recall coming across it anywhere. We don't even know whether rape took place and nobody has attempted to justify it. (Though I'd add that some comrades defending the CC have used equally intemperate language.)

Presumably somebody from the branch leadership should speak to anyone who says such things and explain that such language is not acceptable. I think immediate expulsion in the present climate might just lead to further losses, but I suspect someone who uses that sort of language has no future in the party. But at the same time we have to remember that sexism/rape do (rightly) arouse very strong feelings. If the CC were showing some recognition that the disputes procedure was less than perfect it would greatly help.

Of course if someone circulates malicious lies that is legitimate cause for a disciplinary case. But such accusations need to be clearly documented and are quite separate from legitimate discussion of matters that are of genuine concern to many members. And we have to be clear what lies are. Alex in his SR piece refers to “a highly distorted account of the disciplinary case” being circulated. But most of us read (even if we deplore its leaking) a transcript of conference proceedings. How was that “distorted”? In fact the CC has encouraged rumours by not circulating more information. If the CC had circulated a proper report of the NC, then we rank-and-file members wouldn't need to consult malicious blogs.

If the suggestion for setting up a commission to review the procedures is agreed, then it will be next year's conference before it can be agreed anyway. But if we leave it till 2014 before initiating the procedure we won't get any changes till 2015. We need to

be seen to be doing something immediately in order to allay the very legitimate anxieties of comrades inside the party and to assuage our critics outside who can seriously damage our relations with our periphery.

Whether or not the procedures that operated around the Disputes Committee have worked well in the past, they have signally failed this time round. Even Pat S, who drafted these hitherto successful procedures, now thinks they are inadequate and is supporting the faction. He has written a very good statement about this.

The decision of the DC was indeed flawed. Indeed it was unfair to X, because even if he was wholly innocent, nobody will ever believe that.

I don't dispute the “high standing” of the DC. I have known most of the comrades for many years and I would trust them totally to show honesty and integrity – I don't question that.

But why should a new member who has been in the party six months and knows none of them feel such trust? How can we reasonably ask them to give uncritical trust on the basis that these are our old friends and comrades?

We want to recruit rebellious youth – we urge them to distrust their bosses, their lecturers and their trade-union leaders. How can we then ask them to trust us unquestioningly. A fortiori people outside the party. We are asking people to join us or to work alongside us in united front activity. We can't say to them: “This is an internal affair, nothing to do with you. I trust the DC and you ought to do so too.”

None of us is perfect, and I'm sure I have acted irresponsibly at times in the last 50 years. But someone in a senior position needs to consider the consequences of their actions. Just as a militant shop steward has to be very careful about his/her timekeeping – not because we have any sympathy with the boss's rules, but because the boss will use lateness to sack them.

But one result of the fact that the DC procedure was so visibly flawed is that X can never clear his name. Indeed, from what I've heard (and it is only hearsay) I think it extremely unlikely that X was actually guilty of rape, and even less likely that any court would have found him guilty.

It is not a question of punishment. Indeed I have a certain sympathy with X. But he has acted irresponsibly and is now (for better or worse, but you can't go back to pre-internet days) notorious.

Many other comrades, as you well know, have been removed from positions and dismissed from party employment, even without being “guilty” of anything, because they were thought unsuitable for the job. Hannah, to take a recent example, has lost her employment after twelve years working for the party, just because she disagreed with the CC about one point. So for X to vanish into obscurity does not seem to me unreasonable.

I opposed the NC resolution because it

threatened disciplinary measures to confront what were and are serious concerns among a large section of the membership, and because it offered no recognition that there was any problem with the disputes procedure. The resolution appeared to license disciplinary proceedings against all critics. (I supported Jim W's position) That doesn't mean I reject every line of it. I am in favour of education and debate on the issues listed above.

Obviously we are not calling for a blank cheque for anyone to do anything. Calling a comrade a “rape apologist” is deplorable. And I have not been happy with the tone of some of the comments made by the Richard S-China M group, and I have told them so. It's also true that some of the CC defenders have used some unfortunately intemperate language.

A faction cannot refuse membership. Once a statement is issued, it must be open to all party members to sign it. Otherwise you are back with the situation with Matgama's group in 1969, which had probationary membership for a faction inside IS.

We are not rejecting democratic decisions. Since conference, a situation has developed inside and outside the party which was apparently totally unforeseen by the CC. It is a serious situation which, as Alex conceded, could lead to the “collapse” of the party, and is likely to produce serious losses of membership. The CC fought like cats at conference to retain the leadership, but do not seem to be offering any way forward.

On permanent factions there are probably different opinions within the faction, since it is not an issue we are raising. So I can only give my personal view.

As far as I know, Fred L and myself are the only two surviving party members who have been in a permanent faction. Personally, on the basis of my own experience in IS, and observation of the LCR/NPA, I am strongly opposed to permanent factions, which I think actually impede healthy debate and generally lead to splits. The Bolshevik experience I think is not terribly relevant.

I also support the slate system, not with any great enthusiasm, but because the alternatives are worse.

Rumour and innuendo can sometimes be used to marginalise critics. To be honest, I don't quite know how to stop such practices. And often it isn't the CC's fault, but young comrades trying to prove their loyalty. So it's a matter for a long term change in culture.

Ian (North London)

DEMOCRACY IS NOT AN OPTIONAL EXTRA

In the Communist Manifesto Marx makes two contradictory assertions:

1. The ruling ideas in any epoch are the

ideas of the ruling class

2. The emancipation of the working class is the act of the working class itself.

When the SWP founder member Tony Cliff spoke at meetings he often used this contradiction as a starting point before going on to make a concrete analysis in any given situation. It is a useful starting point for us today.

At our forthcoming Special Conference, at the heart of the debate is the question of democracy, how we make decisions, and what sort of Party we are.

I believe that there is no legitimate political basis for comrades to organise to challenge the decisions made at our annual conference over the competence and composition of the newly elected Central Committee CC, the Disputes Committee DC, and the National Committee NC. I will argue that their challenge is anti democratic and harmful our ability to operate as an 'interventionist' Party.

The 'battle for democracy'

'The Communist revolution is the most radical rupture with traditional property relations; no wonder that its development involved the most radical rupture with traditional ideas. ... We have seen ... that the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class to win the battle of democracy.' (Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, 1848)

For Marxists the final 'battle for democracy' will be won when the working class takes state power. As revolutionary socialists we are fighting for workers power, for a new society based on the needs of the many, not profit for the few.

The hegemony of ruling class ideas

We operate in a sea of hostile ideas based around the assumption that only the existing rulers are capable of running society. 'The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class,' explained Marx. That is as true today as it was in 1848.

The world we live in today is one shaped by decades of neoliberal political ideas, and a low level of organised working class resistance. Ruling class ideas are very pervasive. We can see how the ruling class have taken what was progressive in the political demand for 'democracy' - and turned it into the negation of democracy.

Now 'democracy' can be imposed by military force, with bombs and missiles. Results of referendum are routinely overturned. When the people of Denmark and Ireland voted against entering the EU, they were made to vote again until they got the 'right' result.

Elected governments have been replaced with the rule of technocrats or bankers in Greece and Italy. The NHS is clearly not 'safe in Tory hands' despite their pledges, and we all know that Lib Dem politicians said they would abolish fees and then increased them.

The reformist parties negate democracy too. No matter how many times delegates to the Labour Party conference voted for the re-nationalisation of the railways, Labour leaders and MP's ignored these conference decisions.

The negation of democracy has also infected our trades unions. Elected delegates to the NUT Conference supported resolutions to strike - but they are ignored. Strike ballots that show majorities for action are ignored.

We have all heard the excuses for inaction, the majorities are not big enough, or the turn out was too low. Our comrades in the unions argue that when votes are won action must be taken.

Working class self emancipation

When workers fight back they find that some of the ideas once held, ruling class ideas, are challenged in the very process of struggle. Workers discover they can make speeches and organise solidarity. Racist or sexist ideas are challenged as people unite and fight back together. People change their ideas in struggle. Consciousness is contradictory.

Those fighting back make up the vanguard of the class. The uneven nature of the class struggle across the class means we need a revolutionary party, one that orients on those engaged in struggle, the 'vanguard' of the class. Unevenness in the Party, as well as the need to totally reject ruling class ideology, means we need a central leadership in the Party.

'Punching above our weight'

Collectively we have built the SWP over decades as an effective 'combat party.' We have developed a method of organising that has produced a party capable of 'punching above its weight' (as Owen Jones described us in *The Independent*)

How is this possible?

Colin B explains it well. He gives a clear explanation of what democratic centralism in practice means in the SWP.

'Democracy without centralism will fail'

In a series in *Socialist Worker* explaining the meaning of the *Where We Stand* column (Issue: 1902 dated: 22 May 2004) Colin explains:

'There's a key principle involved in democracy. Once a plan of action has been debated and decided, we should stick to it. That doesn't just apply to parties, but also to movements. An anarchistic "do your own thing" mentality produces unnecessary defeats.

'Workers vote before going on strike. If a majority votes for the strike, they rightly expect the minority to abide by the decision. That's what picket lines, developed over two centuries of working class experience, are for.'

Colin is right to argue that "Democracy without centralism will fail."

The democratic processes in our Party are not optional extras. We maintain them neither out of a desire for fairness, nor out of formalistic concern over rules.

It is the application of democratic centralism in practice that enables our Party to 'punch above our weight' in the class struggle.

If we engage in maximum discussion, followed by the united implementation of agreed decisions, we are able to intervene, and to learn whether the agreed course of action is the right one. We learn lessons from our intervention in the class. Only by applying democratic centralism can we ensure that our cadre have the potential to develop the knowledge, as well as the respect and ability to lead in the class struggle.

Conference decisions really are supreme!

The minority that lost the arguments and lost the votes cannot be allowed to negate decisions made at our annual conference.

The minority that seek to overturn the majority decisions replicate the behaviour of vacillating trades union leaders, and bullying elites. However hypocrisy and anti democratic practices are not the central reason they are wrong.

The central reason they are wrong is that to reject our agreed decisions prevents us from operating as an interventionist party.

The SWP is not one big seminar group that has endless discussion, but no decisions on action. Nor are we a fudge of competing opinions and priorities, a heterodox of views.

Our comrades do not pay subs to the SWP to operate as a workers co-op for full time organisers. Our subs are to pay for party workers to operate under the direction of our elected leadership.

A few comrades may pine for a broader left front type of party, one composed of a collection of the best militants, campaigners and intellectuals, a looser party where a wider spectrum of political opinions co exist, a party that permanently balances competing political views.

Comrades proposing this have a vision of, and a plan for the construction of a very

different type of party than the Socialist Workers Party.

To be most effective a combat party such as the SWP must have an elected political leadership, a central leadership, one that is coherent.

Our CC were elected at our Conference on the basis that they were the best comrades that the Party had produced, they won the battle for political leadership, they won the vote. We elected them to lead the Party in 2013.

If new better cadre becomes available in the future, then no doubt we will elect a new CC and a new NC. Until such a time we should allow our leadership to get on with it. That means implementing the perspectives that we together agreed at Conference.

Our DC were elected unanimously. Defending them is not an option. They are in the frontline of the attacks on our Party. Their lives and jobs are at risk. Solidarity means we support them, the decisions they make, and the processes we agreed they should follow.

Winning the battle for democracy inside the SWP is essential if we are to continue to be a democratic centralist party that is able to give a lead in the class struggle.

Mark (Manchester)

THOUGHTS ON A CRISIS

The piece below was originally written as a document from me to the CC. In it I was both stating my views to them on the crisis facing the Party and informing them that I could no longer stay silent.

After I sent it to them I sent it to a small number of trusted comrades, and after the faction was formed I agreed that it be shown to all faction members... regretfully, but inevitably it ended up on line.

As I wrote it, it became increasingly clear that it was no longer possible to remain as Chair of the Disputes Committee. I never had, nor indeed would I ever, use that position as a focal point for opposition.

At the time I wrote it I had no thoughts of joining a faction. I have been in the Party for just short of forty years and had never joined one. I had forged no link with either faction before conference, but as you will see from the document below I was deeply concerned about the CC's handling of the situation.

My breaking point came at the NC. I went there hoping that some real attempts would be made to resolve some of the problems outlined below, but instead we got 'more of the same' with knobs on. Not only the content - 'case closed, matter finished, shut up' - but the tone was deeply distressing. It seemed that for many there the possibility of losing lots of (mainly

young) members was not a problem.

So after some hesitation and deliberation I signed the founding statement of the faction. Since that time everything I have witnessed has persuaded me I was more and more right to do so.

This row exploded over a Disputes Committee case, as I state below it caused a major divergence at conference. My document was a plea to the leadership to step back, witness the divisions and take all the necessary measures to try and heal them. However there has been little or no sign of that approach. Despite the very limited demands of the faction, none of which fall outside our tradition, attempts have been made to demonise those involved, manoeuvres carried out to make it as hard as possible for a serious debate to take place.

One of the background arguments throughout the debate has been about the nature of Democratic Centralism. In volume iii of Cliff's Lenin he describes it as a mixture of 99 per cent conviction, one per cent discipline.

I have to say that coming out of conference our implementation has seemed greatly at odds with this approach. If 48 per cent of a conference votes against a measure and over 500 people (at the time of writing) join a faction, conviction is clearly a problem, and the leadership must either convince or strive to reach agreement. Ours have done neither.

Rather they have tried to just tell the 48 percent of the conference-the 500 plus members of the faction) to put up and shut up.

Furthermore the approach since emergency conference was called has amplified this approach.

Aggregates where the CC get a 25 minute introduction, a ten minute summing up and an extended contribution whereas the faction speaker gets six minutes and no right of reply, hardly suggests a process of fair open discussion. Apparently the speaking ration will be much the same at the conference itself.

Furthermore is drawing up delegate election lists in a way that seeks to ensure the 40 per cent will be woefully under-represented at conference really a good example of democratic centralism in action? Or is it likely to lead a whole swathe of younger members to think that the term is just cover for bureaucratic manoeuvre. (It also suggests a very brittle and unconfident leadership, but that's another question.) If that conclusion is drawn the CC will have done our tradition a huge dis-service.

Finally surely there must be an understanding that many good, loyal and dedicated comrades have signed up to the faction. Is the way to debate with them really to throw up red herrings: Richard S, China M Straw men: a closed caucus-anti democratic centralism, mistreatment of Chanie R (this last one a complete invention) rather than deal with the substance of the issues?

Debating tricks may be all very well in the Oxford Union, or indeed in set public

debates, but we are fighting to hold together our Party and secure its future. We should not ape football crowds chanting abuse at one another, but rather engage as serious revolutionaries in a serious discussion.

I sat on the Democracy Commission that sought to pull us away from bad habits, right now it feels that all the good intentions and vital lessons that body put forward are being forgotten just at the point when they're most needed

None of the Faction's positions fall outside the tradition of our tendency-our debate should be conducted with that in mind. We are all comrades from the same tradition, and the overwhelming majority of us want to emerge from this with a stronger united Party. How the debate is conducted may well determine how likely that is.

Bits of the piece below are now out of date, but I would not want to be accused of editing selectively, so I have left it in its original form:

Thoughts on a crisis

Since conference I have been contacted by a number of longstanding comrades to find out where I stand on things. Due to my position as chair of the DC I have tried to be very circumspect in how I reply, and obviously have not discussed the ins and outs of the case (and in fairness none of these comrades have asked me to).

Like everybody else I am sure I have observed the goings on since conference with feelings of alarm and dismay, and feel I cannot simply say nothing when comrades seek my view. In light of that I feel I should make clear my views to you/the CC at the present time.

My starting point is that I want the essentials of our politics to be maintained whilst loss of membership is minimised. I realise getting that balance right is going to prove very tricky to say the least. Anyway, here goes.

After the vote at conference on the DC report I felt there needed to be a real awareness on the part of our leadership of how narrow the vote was and what measures had to be taken to reflect the genuine concerns expressed by the minority.

I felt that to do that three steps needed to be taken.

The first was to acknowledge that many people were uneasy, to say the least, about the processes of the DC and to either set up a commission to review them or at the very least commit the CC/DC to look at the whole process and see if there were things we would like to change. (With that wonderful gift, the benefit of hindsight, there are a number of changes I would want to examine, especially for cases of this sort). I drew up most of the processes and have to admit that looking back some of them were far from ideal for this case.

I also felt (though you won't agree, and it is too late to change it now) that in light of the closeness of the vote the CC should

have accepted Joseph C's unity slate. I think it would have sent out a message that we were serious about healing wounds, and if it turned out that the 'nuanced' (to quote Alex) political differences were rather more than that, we could have had those debates in the open between now and next conference. Instead the CC seemed to be declaring war on the minority and, in my opinion, in the process were allowing people with very substantial differences to leap into the vanguard of those comrades who were troubled, unhappy and unsure.

Finally, I am truly puzzled that X is still playing a prominent role. Surely after the closeness of the vote there had to be a recognition that very many members were unsure of his behaviour and that (for a period of time at the very least) it would have been wise and appropriate to ask him to step away from all public activities and engagements.

To not do so is to tell the large body of comrades who are unhappy or unsure, 'we don't care about your concerns, like it or lump it' (defend or resign is what I believe some comrades were initially told). If for no other reason than putting the interests of the party first it seems to me X has to be asked/told to step away.

Looking to the immediate future I have real concerns about the case about to be brought against the 'Facebook Four'. This is not to do with their guilt or otherwise, rather that things have moved on so rapidly that their offences seem almost trivial compared to the bloggers and their very public allies.

I believe the CC have very wisely not rushed in to disciplining Richard S/China M etc, but if I were one of the four I would certainly question the fairness of being disciplined when those comrades aren't. My own view was that it was always a tactical error to move against them before conference, and perhaps if we hadn't we would have some wriggle room now.

My real fear is their case will be the next big cause celebre to set the bloggers off once more and probably trigger resignations. I think a lot of comrades would like some respite from the filth that is out there (here I'm talking about non-party bloggers), but these expulsions will only give that filth fresh impetus. If there is any way for the CC to step back from this I feel they should take it. For the same reasons I am against taking disciplinary action against Richard S.

What about the longer term? Here I feel that true and calm leadership may prevent us losing a huge chunk of our young recruits, and with them demoralised older members.

Any influx of young members presents challenges that we have to be able to respond to. I was on a student committee that openly rebelled about the punk paper, carried out a policy of non co-operation with Paul H (his 'grow up' contribution brought this memory flooding back) when the CC took Chris Harman off student work because of his stand on the paper. (As an aside It is worth noting that Chris, and indeed for a period Steve J, remained on

the CC long after their differences became very far from 'nuanced').

We fought the CC over our attitude to the Afghan rebels, and were all over the place on the downturn, Women's Voice, Flame etc. The party combined vigorous debate with great patience, and most of us ended up on the right side in these debates and two or three ended up on the CC with others being organisers and longstanding members.

We had a healthy scepticism and distrust of all authority, which was partly why we became revolutionaries in the first place, and we carried some of that bloody-mindedness into the party and directed it at our own leaders.

I think any large scale recruitment of young members will find both a distrust of leadership, and an impatience for it. Such attitudes present challenges, such as the leadership having to earn the trust of young members because they weren't there for many of the battles and lessons that earned that leadership the trust and respect of many older members.

Indeed, such scepticism and impatience are necessary elements if these members are to become the next generation of leaders. The alternative is to 'leave the young people of 29 to the liberals'.

What, though, of the political differences; democratic centralism, feminism etc?

Never has the need for patient explanation been greater. Partly some of the difficulties have been of our own making. Identifying democratic centralism with one type of slate system, or one very messy Disputes Committee case is a grand folly of miseducation.

Nevertheless there is a real 'throw the baby out with the bathwater' tendency among some of the bloggers and some who put their views in the IB. I believe the genuine core of democratic centralism has to be defended, but I believe it has taken a hammering (particularly over the case). So let's use the pages of the journal to have the argument over the next 12/24 months. Of course there is the pre-conference period, but the downturn and Women's Voice debates lasted at least two years, they were argued out in the ISJ, at Skegness etc, not just in the formal pre conference period. We have to learn that lesson and repeat it.

Similarly over feminism. This year's women's discussion was largely uncontroversial, but last year's felt like a dialogue of the deaf. The young women cadre were attacked by the older women cadre who merely seemed to brush off their 'Women's Voice' debate notes and repeat them in a condescending and haranguing style.

This will not do. If we are to patiently explain, then we must also listen. The new feminism emerged from the wasteland of 'post feminism'. It emerged against the background of new laddism, an exploding internet porn industry, and dubious models of girl power and raunch culture. This background made many radical women

refuse to use the term feminism in case they were seen to be man-hating humourless oddballs. This was not a progressive or left wing rejection of feminism.

Therefore to have a new generation of women calling themselves feminist is a good thing. In articulating itself it frequently does not look or sound like the feminism of the past, and can seem on the face of it to be completely compatible with revolutionary socialism.

Our essential difference with it, however, is that it cannot achieve genuine women's liberation. That has to be a serious debate, taking on the feminism of today, not that of yesterday (whatever the core similarities between them). It needs to be done in a comradely and serious way, again using the pages of the journal to invite all-comers as we seek to clarify.

We certainly have to get away from treating it as a nasty problem to be eradicated.

Finally, I think the leadership needs to 'take a chill pill' over social media. It seems alien to me, but perfectly normal to my nieces and nephews, that the pages of Facebook are used to share almost everything bar the darkest secrets. To them it's as natural as it was for us to meet a bunch of people in a pub (or at a dinner party for the more sophisticated) and give vent to all our frustrations and disenchantments.

At conference an older comrade said to me we've got to 'stop all this Facebook stuff' I told him that if the ruling class had understood the internet before it was too late they would have seized and controlled it. If they couldn't we sure as hell can't and neither should we want to.

I feel this attitude was typified by the majority of the CC's response to the internet debate last year. I remarked to somebody that the leadership sounded like aging CP'ers in the late 50s and early 60s denouncing Rock and Roll as an evil expression of American capitalism.

The times they have a changed. If we want young comrades to take us seriously, we need to seriously listen to them about this stuff, instead of panicking about what a seriously run website might do to the review, the journal or even the paper; we have to instead ask is it serious not to have a well run website that is absolutely central to our political/organisational priorities.

My point is that in all the 'patient explaining', and 'politically educating' we should keep at the forefront of our minds that famous maxim of Lenin's: 'Who teaches the teachers?'

As I say, I have remained as quiet as possible throughout this whole process (though I know some would have liked me to be one speech quieter than I was), but I think we are now fighting for the party's life and to say nothing is no longer possible.

Pat (Central London)

FACTIONS, PROGRAMME AND BUREAUCRACY

After nine months I am still a 'national' member of the party. I am not allowed to attend my local branch meeting. Nor am I allowed to sell Socialist Worker or otherwise participate in normal party-life. I have had my membership reduced to a second-class status and as such I am only allowed to attend events like Marxism. Such a humiliation is clearly a bureaucratic gagging-order.

Since becoming an SWP member I have always done my best to "work within and under the direction of the appropriate party bodies of the organisation" (constitution, point 1). In my case that meant being a humble rank and file member, which, as far as I'm concerned, does not imply acting like some blindly enthusiastic, unthinking minion.

Apparently, I have been 'disciplined' because I failed to vote for a motion at my Unite branch. I have appealed to the Disputes Committee to review my case. However, thus far they have only just begun to review the issue (I presume other matters are more pressing). If I have really been suspended merely because of my failure to vote the 'right way' at a Unite meeting, that would be a ludicrously over the top reaction.

Surely such matters ought to, in the first place, be dealt with at a branch level after an honest process of criticism, which includes self-criticism if necessary. For the central committee to suspend me over this 'storm in a teacup' incident displays a deeply worryingly bureaucratic mindset. I am sure that most activists in the workers' movement would not consider my behaviour to be in any way deserving of punishment.

No, instead of going down the well-trodden road of disciplinary action, the central committee should have intervened ... on my side. The central committee should have used its authority to calm things down and ensure that my rights were defended against a branch secretary lacking leadership skills.

Perhaps I was mistaken not to have voted for the motion, though I remain convinced that it was politically flawed. Appealing to the trade union bureaucracy to call an 'All out, stay out' general strike was a combination of political foolishness and leftist posturing.

Were we really calling upon the TUC to lead an insurrectionary general strike? Or was this position merely intended to distinguish us from those calling for a '24 hour' general strike? Instead of this frivolity, the SWP ought to be putting forward a bold programme of working class struggle within and against the European Union.

We need to rebuild the organisations of the working class in Britain and across Europe and work towards having a mass

revolutionary party organised on the basis of the European Union. Instead the central committee has either indulged in self-defeating anarchist-style posturing or put forward illusory left-nationalist Keynesian solutions to the capitalist crisis.

Anyway, I strongly suspect that I have been made into a second-class SWP member with no redress because of my well-known political differences with the central committee. Incidentally, comrade Charlie K actually wrote to me urging me to resign from the SWP, as if having political differences was a thought crime. Is this what we should expect from the national secretary? Instead of offering political solutions to political problems, almost instinctively he turns to organisational (bureaucratic) methods.

When I joined, I had no idea that to disagree, to question, to dare to think differently would be counted as a disciplinary offence. To be honest, I expect leaders of a revolutionary organisation to help its membership rank and file to think for themselves. Instead I see our thinking being done for us in narrow debates at stage managed conferences and see the central committee and its loyalists attempt to intimidate, bully, exclude and silence me. Now I know better.

Though I would not claim to have fully mastered the "revolutionary communist tradition of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky" that we claim to follow, I have learnt enough to spot, despise and resist the bureaucratic "social democratic and Stalinist traditions."

The way that the central committee has treated me is worthy of the Stalinist tradition. The way the central committee treated the Facebook four is what I'd expect from the Labour Party right. The X case is equally a disgrace. A trial by mates over a *charge of rape* has nothing to do with the revolutionary communist tradition. Attempting to "draw a line" under this is simply untenable.

The left press and blogs are writing about it, as are the mainstream bourgeois media, the Daily Mail, Independent, Guardian, New Statesman, etc. What are we meant to do when our workmates, fellow trade union members, etc, ask us about X? Say that the central committee has drawn a line under the question. That's an absurdity! This brings nothing but discredit to our party and the wider left.

Anyhow, let me once more use this opportunity to present my main areas of disagreement.

1. The SWP ought to equip itself with a fully elaborated Marxist programme. Paris T was absolutely correct when he too suggested this.

Adopting a Marxist programme would be to really stand in and develop the "revolutionary communist tradition of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky." Shunning such an elementary task certainly opens the door to all manner of opportunist blunders.

A couple of examples - the disastrous popular frontism of Respect and the

anarchistic call for an 'All out, stay out' general strike. Without a programme the organisation lacks not only a grand strategy and direction, but crucially it lacks a binding commitment to basic Marxist principles. The central committee is left free to pursue almost any will-of-the-wisp "stick-bending". Certainly the membership has no commonly agreed point of reference with which to judge, assess and hold the leadership to account.

2. We should be fighting for a mass, working class party solidly based on Marxism. As a first step the much-divided Marxist left needs to be united into a single organisation.

Given our weight, connections, history, etc, the SWP can play a pivotal role here. True, without full faction rights even that unity would be impossible to achieve. So,

I believe that we should immediately drop the ban on "permanent factions" (constitution, point 10). Of course, in effect the central committee constitutes itself as a permanent faction and the only tolerated one.

This must change if we are to become a united organisation and not "two parties" (ie, the central committee, the apparatus and its loyalists vs the rest of the membership). I certainly believe that the Facebook four should be immediately reinstated and the IDOO Party and Democratic Renewal factions should be represented on a new, proportionally representative, central committee.

Factions should be given polemical space in party publications, not least Socialist Worker. That would be genuine Leninism (the Russian communists only introduced their "temporary" ban on factions amidst war threats, etc, in 1921 - we have no such excuse).

Any attempt to reaffirm a ban on "permanent factions" is, I am convinced, a bureaucratic alienating approach and owes everything to Stalinism and social democracy. Nothing to do with the "revolutionary communist tradition of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky."

3. The stipulation that to be a party member one must "agree" with the 'Where we stand' column must go too (constitution, point 2). Even as things stand today, this "agree" stipulation is just one step removed from madness.

After all, the January 2012 conference reformulated the column (carried each week in Socialist Worker). Does that mean that the majority of conference delegates would previously have failed our test? It would seem so. Incidentally, after thinking about things, I have come to the conclusion that there are many things wrong with the 'Where we stand' column.

The formulations on wealth, nature, religion and Russia and eastern Europe being 'state capitalist' are, I believe, unMarxist theoretically. That aside, when it comes to programme - even in the famished form of 'What we stand for' - we should follow

Lenin and the Bolsheviks and replace 'agree' with 'accept'.

4. A mass working class Marxist party must not only require members to carry out basic duties (paying dues, attending branch meetings, etc). There must be rights too.

Complementing the duty to unite in agreed actions, there must be the constitutionally enshrined right to *openly* disagree. From my recent studies, I find that none other than Lenin himself defended this principle.

In his 1906 'freedom to criticise, unity of action' piece, he refused to go along with the Menshevik attempt to impose a ban on anything other than internal criticism. Lenin insisted upon the right of himself and his co-thinkers to openly fight against wrong positions. Even if these positions had been agreed by a properly constituted RSDLP congress.

Of course, because of my suspension from branch activities and meetings, I am denied the right to argue for my politics with my comrades. But I am sure that central committee loyalists have found me a damned nuisance before I was suspended and made into a national member. Yes, I plead guilty to raising political differences when appropriate. That, however, is in my opinion a duty.

The "revolutionary communist tradition" of Marx, Engels and Lenin could be described as an "argument without end". That is why, in this vastly unequal relationship of power between the members and CC, instead of trying silence myself and other critics the central committee and the SWP needs a cultural revolution. Argument, discussion, thinking should be considered inevitable, natural and healthy.

Justin (Cambridge)

PUT POLITICS IN COMMAND

The SWP has reached a very important stage in its history. The crisis that has engulfed the Party since our conference precipitated by a leaked transcript of the Dispute Committee (DC) section of conference, and the public resignation letter of one of our journalists, has the potential to destroy our organisation.

The actions of those who refused to accept the democratic decisions agreed at conference and then decided to attempt to overturn them by continuing to factionalise, in particular those doing so publicly outside of party structures are diverting the party from implementing the perspectives that were agreed at the party conference.

Although many comrades have sincerely held concerns about current DC procedures, what the signatories to this piece find most disturbing is the lack of clarity and focus

on the underlying political and organisational disagreements that have exacerbated such procedural concerns into a full-blown political 'crisis'. It is these fundamental issues - primarily ones of political perspective and the application of democracy in an interventionist revolutionary socialist organisation - which we think the current debates need to address.

It is clear that those most publicly vocal against the CC, have, as we have seen from the blogs and innumerable comments on the Internet, in fact have significant disagreements with Party perspectives. For example, Richard S, China M, 'Mayo' and Tom W have raised quite fundamentally different views from those of the Party on issues that range from the nature of the working class today, the character of oppression and the nature of a Leninist party.

All of these are interesting issues to debate but the position being advocated by these members (and recent ex-members) constitutes a clear break from our tradition. Moreover, their decision to address these issues in the public domain raises the question about why these members choose to remain part of an organisation which they harbour such evident contempt for.

Many of those who have organised the latest faction also have significant disagreements with Party perspectives on a range of issues from our student work, to trade union work and the united fronts that we are trying to build. That is the case even though those political disagreements have not yet been clearly spelled out to the bulk of Party members. It is beholden on them to articulate the precise nature of their disagreements so that the whole of the Party membership can take part in that debate.

Faction fights in the organisation play an important part in the life, formation and direction of a revolutionary party. They don't happen often but when they do it is because one section of the Party believes that the Party leadership has taken a wrong turn. The central point of a faction fight is to realign the revolutionary party to the most advanced sections of the working class. Lenin, in April 1917, did precisely this. He broke from the leadership of the Bolsheviks because he thought that they were too conservative.

He went over the heads of the existing leadership to appeal to the membership of the Party, and to the militants of the working class, to force the leadership to prepare for revolution. He did not do this by focusing on disagreements over the procedure of committees, and manoeuvring to take the high moral ground on questions of internal democracy. He took a political perspective to the membership which clearly showed why the leadership was wrong.

Similarly, although not with such high stakes, in the early 1980s the SWP had a faction fight which also came out of attempting to realign the Party to the most advanced sections of the movement.

Then the argument was between those,

on the one hand, who believed that the upturn of the 1970s was not over, that working class confidence was continuing to rise, and that the Party must organise itself to reflect this objective situation, and, on the other hand, those who did not believe this.

Those who did not, believed instead that the ruling class had picked itself up off the ropes from the battles of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and had launched a new offensive which coincided with the election of Thatcher. The previous Labour Government and the trade union bureaucracy had managed to incorporate sections of the working class, and managed to lay the foundations for the ruling class offensive of the 1980s.

These two different analyses of the balance of class forces led to two very different approaches to what the Party should be doing, and how it should be organised. These arguments played themselves out in a number of different ways. For example, debates over the dangers of movementism in a period of retreat opened up further debates: one about the roots of women's oppression and the role of organisations like Women's Voice; another about our specific publications and about whether we should maintain an organisation for black members of the Party and their supporters.

The argument within the party therefore needs to be about how best to align the Party with the most militant and advanced sections of the working class and student movement. And that means it is incumbent on the faction to put forward their political/theoretical differences with the CC instead of hiding those differences behind issues of procedure and internal democracy.

The way forward

Below are five areas that we believe the Party needs to unite around to be able to move forward. This statement will not seek to attempt to provide a political analysis of the underlying arguments.

Sean V and Mark C elsewhere (see 'Leninism in the 21st Century') have made useful points in attempting politically to locate the disagreements that have emerged within the Party. Neither will this statement rehearse the arguments about democracy in the Party, although it does make some points about how our structures need to develop to facilitate more engagement with debates about strategy and tactics in relation to the movement. On the issues mentioned above we are firmly in the camp of all those who wrote articles in IB3 defending democratic centralism.

1) A perspective: assessing the balance of class forces - an outline

i) From 1999 Seattle onwards we have seen a revival of significant resistance to the attempts of the international ruling class to drive down the living standards of working people across the globe.

The ongoing Egyptian revolution is an inspirational reminder that the period of the

1980s when the ruling class had regained the upper hand is over. The attempt by different imperialist powers to open up new markets continues to drive them to military conflict. The latest imperial foray led by the French in Mali is just another example in the last 13 years of leading imperialist powers vying for power around the globe.

These imperialist battles are a part of the wider attempt by the ruling class across the globe to protect their profits. Their austerity offensive is part and parcel of that wider global offensive to maximise profits and stabilise international capitalism since the collapse of the banking system in 2008.

ii) The offensive against the welfare state in Britain reflects the attempt by the British ruling class to stabilise their part of the system. The continuing divisions within the Tory party over Europe, Gove's U-turn over the E-bac, the split over gay marriage not only reflect a Party that is deeply divided and weak but also the divisions that exist within the ruling class about how to deal with the deep seated and prolonged nature of the economic crisis.

iii) It is important to see not only the key moments of break in the developing movements over the last thirteen years - Seattle, 9/11 and the subsequent mass movement against imperialist war, collapse of Lehman Brothers etc - but also the continuity.

Clearly there have been ups and downs within the resistance to the international ruling class's attempts to shore up and expand their system, but when the resistance comes out of a trough it does so with greater resilience, determination and creativity. There is a deepening process which is reflected in the distance between the resistance of Seattle and the Egyptian revolution, both of which spring from the same global neoliberal offensive and subsequent crisis.

iv) The British working class suffered very significant defeats in the 1980s. The effects of these defeats influenced and over-shadowed working class resistance throughout the 1980s and 1990s. However those defeats no longer have the same disciplining effect on the movement today.

The mass psychological effect of those defeats has eroded over time. No longer can Trade Union or Labour leaders rely on it as a disinclination to fight, along the lines of 'if the miners couldn't win then neither can we'.

Today it is the structural and legal consequences of those defeats, in both the anti-union laws and pervasiveness of market ideology that underpins the defeatism of the trade union leaders. What stops workers from fighting is not the fear of going down to defeat. It is the combination of a bureaucracy that has effective control of the union movement and is fearful of risking defeat in defending existing conditions, and a lack of examples of victories, the success of independent working class

action, that would be the foundation of rank and file movements which could challenge for the leadership of the movement. This is the key reason for the lack of confidence amongst workers to act independently of their trade union leaders.

v) For the new generation of workers and students the power that workers have at the point of production has not been demonstrated. Mass strikes like N30 gave this generation a glimpse of that power, and has begun a process of winning a new generation of activists to seeing the workplace as the central place to organise to bring about real change.

That glimpse was choked off by the trade union leaders, however, and its full potential was not realised. This has slowed the recovery of the organised working class. The street rather than the workplace is still, for most of the new generation, the key terrain of struggle. Although our politics has at its centre the working class as the key agent of change it does not mean that we dismiss these movements as not important or a waste of time because they do not involve industrial strikes.

The Party has ever since the Seattle protest placed itself at the heart of all these struggles. It has taken initiatives to attempt to build united fronts to allow these social movements to have the maximum impact on defending working class life, both here and internationally. The street protests and movements have also been important, and still are, in giving inspiration and confidence to the rebuilding of workplace organisation and trade union organisation that derives from that.

In fact, the key to building successful workplace organisation is how activists bring the political radicalisation of these social movements into the workplace and use it to shape and develop the level of workplace radicalisation.

We can for example see how mass street protests involving service users and the wider community to defend local hospitals could very quickly feed into and give confidence to those who work in the hospitals to use their power to defend the health service. The pension strikes demonstrated how this wider political radicalisation can help shape the rebuilding of workplace organisation and that in turn can strengthen the 'street' movements by rooting them around the organised working class.

vi) The trade union bureaucracy has historically played the role of holding back the struggle of working people. At the heart of Reformism is the separation of politics and economics. This means in practice that, for the trade union bureaucracy, political change cannot come about through the struggles of working people themselves to defend their living standards but instead only through the election of a Labour government.

It is this that drives the TU leaders to jet-tison strikes in support of getting Labour

elected. This does not mean though that TU leaders won't call action. The twin pressures of government attacks and angry rank and file members, especially where this has been given expression, can and has forced them to call action. Thus revolutionaries work with and against the TU leaders. It means we will do all we can to implement official calls for action as key to building structures and networks that can give workers the confidence to go beyond one-day strike calls.

vii) Unite the Resistance (UtR) crystallises all the complexities of the period in relation to the rank and file and the bureaucracy. In a situation where the rank and file do not have the organisation, and lack the confidence to act independently, they look to their trade union officers/officials to give a lead before they will act.

When these 'leaders' call action they respond magnificently - as we saw demonstrated on the 30th June and 30th November strikes in 2011. This is why, unlike some of the ultra-left sects who believe we have sold our soul to the devil by working with some sections of the bureaucracy via UtR, we understand that to get more industrial action off the ground - which itself has the potential to lay the basis for real rank and file organisations to emerge, we need to forge a genuine united front where possible with sections of the left bureaucracy. Of course complex positioning by revolutionaries is needed within such a united front to ensure that clear leadership is given to the rank and file element within it - especially when the left union leaders vacillate or worse, such as what happened over the pensions dispute.

Too often this debate is a sterile one: either we simply denounce the trade union bureaucracy; or we simply ignore the fact that certain left trade union leaders are doing absolutely nothing about putting their fiery words into practice. Both are wrong. We need to learn to be both with, and against, the left trade union bureaucracy based on a concrete understanding of where the struggle is at at any given time.

viii) There never has been a time in which the need for the left to be united has been greater. Nevertheless, the left in Britain is currently divided and fragmented. Whilst recognising that we cannot wish such a new realigned left political formation into being, it will take a much wider and sustained movement against austerity to do this, we do need to ensure that we continue to fight for a realignment of the left as part of our overall strategic thinking.

2) What do we mean by an interventionist party?

What follows from the above perspective is the need for an interventionist party. Most comrades would agree with that conclusion. An 'interventionist party' means different things to different comrades, however.

Today it means that every comrade needs to be won to implementing the United

Front. It is a permanent feature of our work. Every comrade needs to be working within one or other of the united fronts, building and broadening them. To be able to do this successfully the party must develop its structures to facilitate this.

i) Party branches are at the moment the central places where comrades meet and discuss their interventions. It is clear, although uneven, that party branches have become far more connected to what is happening in their localities over the past year.

They also play a key role in educating new and older comrades alike about our tradition and how it applies today. However geographical branches are not sufficient structures on their own to be able to allow the party to build the movement coherently.

ii) The party needs to develop fractional organisation both for our union work and for comrades that work within united fronts. Of course the party formally acknowledges this and many do work much better than they use to.

For example our ability to lead in the way we did during the pensions dispute is a testament to that. However they are not seen as an essential structure within the organisation that needs to be built by the party as a whole.

Fraction meetings should not simply be on a national level but a local level too. They should happen regularly and non members should be invited along. It is in these meetings that comrades can listen and discuss the twist and turns of how we need to approach a particular campaign. The party needs to have a systematic approach to implementing the building of fractions on a local and national basis as a key structure within the party that fit with the needs of the period.

3) Dispute committee review

We believe that the DC report was conducted fully within the DC's currently agreed procedures, in a proper, thorough and correct manner. We believe the comrades who served on the DC acted with complete integrity and within procedure, and as such we, like conference, support their conclusions.

As registered by the faction, and as accepted by the CC, the NC and the conference, the case investigated is now completed, and there is no intent on any side to see it reopened.

However, following a case such as this, where the DC had to deal with very serious charges against a leading member, lessons should be learned and where appropriate applied to any similar cases in the future. It is for these reasons that we think there is a need for a review of the DC's current procedures and remit. The findings and recommendations of such a review should be brought to the earliest possible NC meeting, and adopted in the interim until confirmed by the next Conference.

4) Role of social media – the uses and abuses

One of the arguments that has emerged in recent debates concerns the role of social media. Social media have transformed the way people communicate, and it is something that revolutionaries welcome.

The role that the social media can play, and has played, in fomenting social revolution is a contested one. It is clear, nonetheless, that it is a huge asset in organising more quickly and efficiently than earlier methods.

Paul Mason and others overstate the role it played in the Egyptian Revolution, almost locating the causes of social revolution in the new generation's embrace of technological advance rather than in the class antagonisms inherent within capitalism society. It is important that the Party ensures that it does not get left behind in its understanding, and ability to use, the methods that new activists use to communicate and develop their ideas.

Therefore the issue is not one of being for or against social media. It is a fact of life for any serious activist. Revolutionary organisation should be comprised only of those who share a revolutionary perspective on social change.

This is the case not in order to remain uncontaminated and pristine but in order to ensure that a coherent set of revolutionary ideas is part of the broader working class debate. Currently those with revolutionary ideas, and the relative impact of those ideas, are very much a minor part of the movement whilst reformist ideas dominate within the working class.

The issue is rather one of understanding and acknowledging that large sections of social media (e.g. the Socialist Unity site) are hostile to revolutionary socialism. Simply asserting that there is a need for greater debate, and then proceeding to organise that debate through any number of social media sites, does not reflect or acknowledge that reality.

In these circumstances, the use of such social media does not allow greater debate within a revolutionary organisation, it simply allows those who don't share the same set of revolutionary ideas to shape that debate in ways which would not be possible if the debate had been had within the structures of the Party's own organisational communication networks.

In discussing crucial questions of perspective, or internal disagreements, we understand that the pages of the Daily Mail, Daily Mirror or even Red Pepper would not allow us to have a meaningful debate based around revolutionary ideas. Why then could it conceivably be acceptable to organise such a debate in and through social media sites that represent alternative, and often overtly or hostile, political ideas?

The issues around the use of social media are not about its use or otherwise; it is rather about what Party members can and cannot raise on social media platforms,

that are de facto in the public domain, and what procedures the Party has if or when a Party member abuses her or his position as a member in the use of social media. This issue is not specific to a revolutionary organisation. Most organisations have rules about bringing organisations into disrepute.

The party must reaffirm that breaches of confidentiality, whether supplying information to our enemies directly, or doing so indirectly via hostile or rival organisations, or by social media that are in the public domain, are incompatible with Party membership.

5) Positioning the party to take a lead on the debates arising within the movement

As the Left tries to come to terms with why the struggle against austerity first takes off and then falls back, a number of theoretical issues are emerging.

There is a surge in new literature from a range of theoretical positions engaging with a series of pivotal concerns for our party: issues concerning the concept of class, and what it is that the British and global working class looks like, and whether it remains a key agent of social change; issues concerning the re-emergence of claims for national self-determination in post-colonial societies; issues concerning the nature of political identity and organisation in a 'new information age'; and, crucially, debates about oppression and women's liberation, and the extent to which Feminist or Marxist ideas are able to address these issues.

Although branches have meetings on some of these issues they can't make an impact in the same way as bigger district meetings on these issues could.

Our annual Marxism event creates the kind of atmosphere in which the richness of these debates is understood in a climate of fraternal debate that the whole of the left has recognised and benefitted from in the post Seattle era.

Obviously we can't rerun Marxism every month but we should seek to reproduce the kind of atmosphere and purpose of Marxism on a local level at more regular intervals.

We propose that party hold a series of debates/forums on these issues. They should be district wide and London wide events.

Geoff and Sue (Tyneside)

Alan (Nottingham)

Mandy (South London)

Kate and Dave (Barnsley)

Jane (Home Counties)

Tom (Brighton)

Andy, Suzanne and Fergus (North London)

Richard (East London)

Laura (NC and Leeds & West Yorkshire)

Carlo (Dundee)

Karen, Ed and Tony (Manchester)

Malcolm (Huddersfield)

Sean and Mark (NC and North London)

Xanthe (NC and South London)

SOME DEEPER PROBLEMS

International Socialists' and SWP founder Tony Cliff was fond of making serious political points in two widely contrasting styles.

One was through a folk-style tale – meant to throw light in an amusing way on an important issue. A second was through a very direct, more accurately blunt, confrontation of a key issue underlying some detailed argument.

In both cases Cliff's argument was, in part, that the point he was making was valid whether or not those taking part in an argument fully realised this is what they were doing themselves.

Two such points spring to mind in the face of the current crisis in the SWP – one from each category.

One was Cliff's oft-repeated tale of a couple who start rowing about the amount of salt in the dinner. To be sure the issue of the salt is not unimportant, and needs to be addressed. But when serious rows erupt on such matters you can be certain there are deeper problems behind them.

So it is today. We have plunged into a crisis which started around the issue of the Disputes Committee. This is an important argument – which others in many debates, no doubt in this bulletin and at the special conference will deal properly and at length with.

For our part we believe the disputes committee handled a difficult case to the best of its ability in the best democratic traditions of the party. This was accepted by majority vote at the annual conference, the committee itself was unanimously re-elected, and all this was then upheld by a 5-1 majority by the newly elected national committee. That is good enough for us.

But the plain fact is that it is simply impossible for any serious Marxist to believe that the depth and fury of the crisis in the party is fuelled only by disagreements over this issue. There are deeper questions at stake – whether or not all of those taking part in the arguments fully realise it. Some have portrayed our attempts to draw these deeper arguments as the raising of “straw man” arguments. We think that this dismissal of our arguments underestimates the seriousness of the issues at stake.

If you read Leon Trotsky intervening in arguments among US revolutionaries over democracy and centralism in the 1930s, or read Chris Harman describing aspects of the crisis of the European revolutionary left in the late 1970s you cannot help but be struck by a resonance with many of the arguments we hear and face today. Is this mere coincidence? That conclusion would be mysticism unworthy of serious revolutionaries.

We believe there are a series of underlying political debates behind much of the current crisis – and we also believe these

debates have a basis in how revolutionaries seek to understand and operate in the recent period.

Here we simply sketch what we think the key issues are, and outline where we think they arise from – though we think each of these points and the wider analysis of the period and its problems demands a much fuller treatment – one which we hope our publications will address in the coming months.

There is firstly an issue of what we mean by democracy and centralism – and in particular what our Leninist model of democratic centralism means and its continuing relevance today.

We have heard in recent weeks comrades sincerely declare they accept democratic centralism – but then go on to in practice reject it. The point about democratic centralism is precisely the need for votes to be binding on all members – especially those who were in the minority.

This flows not from some moral or abstract principle – but rather from the vision of a revolutionary party as an interventionist, combat party seeking to act in the world in order to try to change it in both small, and hopefully in future, bigger ways.

You cannot pick and choose with democracy or democratic centralism – you will accept it if the majority is bigger than this but not if it is less than that; or you will accept it on some issues but not on others. You either do or don't accept it.

We have heard people argue that we must seek to convince the whole party and not simply say that 50 percent plus one means that the debate is over. This is true – winning a vote alone cannot compensate for winning a political argument. But this is only half of the picture. When the vast majority agree on an issue, there is little need to take votes. We often find ourselves in meetings where there is overwhelming consensus. It is precisely in times when there is not full agreement, that votes matter most.

Does this mean a minority has to change its views, or give up all rights to return to an argument? No. It does mean accepting that once conference has decided then all party members should work to implement what is agreed. It means accepting that the proper time to raise any arguments is not weeks after conference, but in the next pre-conference period when the whole party can then examine any arguments in the light of the experience of seeking in the intervening period to implement the majority decision.

We have heard many supporters of the current, and previous factions – though there is a large overlap in membership – proclaim that they have no truck with the argument that their vision of the party would be a break with the existing interventionist model and a slide towards a Fourth Internationalist talking shop riddled with permanent institutionalised factions.

No doubt many are sincere, just like the Catholic who sincerely proclaims the Catechism on a Sunday but whose behaviour

on Monday to Saturday flies in the face of such declarations.

If it is OK to form a faction within weeks of conference seeking to overturn decisions of conference and of the elected national committee, why then would it not be OK to do the same weeks after any decisions reached by the special conference?

And if the faction won at the special conference why, on this logic, should not the supporters of the current CC respond by themselves forming a faction and campaigning for another special conference to overturn these decisions in turn? The political dynamic and logic drives in that direction regardless of the original intentions of those who start it.

Once you abandon democratic centralism you slide, whatever you may wish, inexorably towards precisely permanent factions, with all their paralysing effect and a consequent radical shift in the nature of the party.

Many have argued that the current situation is unique, that it wouldn't arise again, that it is so unusual that they have had to form a faction so shortly after annual conference. The problem is, however, that many questions can feel unique and urgent, and we are now in danger of institutionalising a way of argument that is very alien to our tradition. Once we head down the road of forming factions outside of the conference period, it becomes a method that is easier and easier for people to adopt in the future.

At first we were also told by many that the only issue in the current crisis was the Disputes Committee. Yet when challenged to say that they would accept the vote of the special conference on this issue, whatever it was, some faction supporters have been less than forthcoming. And then we hear that “well it's not just the disputes committee, there is a problem with the student perspectives too”. Will they accept the vote of special conference on this issue? Again evasion and prevarication has been the response far too often.

We have heard that our model of democratic centralism needs “refreshing” and “updating” and that we “must learn” from the social movements. When challenged on what this means we have heard noises about new forms of democracy, allowing divergence of opinion, seeking consensus.

We are always in favour of renewing and testing our traditions against the changing world in which we operate and against the ultimate test of experience. But the kind of learning that we believe is being proposed by many leading figures within the faction, is better, and more accurately, known by another name – adaptation to the politics of these movements.

The apparently democratic norms which have gained currency within a significant number of social movements are in fact not especially democratic at all. Consensus decision making, is great when there are no sharp debates or discussions and where everyone agrees to act together. However,

when things are more tricky or contentious, consensus decision making is a recipe, not for reaching a democratic decision but for endless debate and discussion. At best, this form of 'democracy' leads to a muddled gravitation towards a compromise somewhere in the middle.

This is the opposite of any serious working class form of democracy. Debate is fine, but debate has to reach a conclusion, not in some woolly compromise or consensus but in a vote and an agreed course of action. The point of democracy, and democratic centralism, is above all to lead to effective action.

Interminable debate is not democratic at all, but privileges those with the time and resources to engage in it, whether through endless meetings or, more often, permanent sessions in front of their computer. And it disadvantages those- the majority- who have the tiresome burdens of going to work, earning a living, taking on family responsibilities, seeking together with workmates or those in campaigns they are active in to actually do something to affect the world.

When you are at work and you have to decide, for example, whether to strike or not, you may have a one hour meeting at lunchtime or after work. There may well be furious debate and argument, but you can't have a consensus between those for and against and say we'll have half a strike. You have to, within an often tight time limit, listen to debate and then vote and everyone does what the majority decides – whether they agree or not.

We expect nothing less in the party than we do every day at work.

We have also heard much in recent weeks about the rights of full time party workers. The vast majority of such comrades, now as in the past, are exemplary and dedicated revolutionaries for whom we have nothing but admiration and praise.

But some, however talented and important they may be, should also remember that they only play the role they do as appointees of the elected central committee – and they are not themselves elected by anybody. It is comrades in the party who pay the wages of all party employees and there is an expectation amongst those comrades that party employees will carry through the agreed perspectives of the party, working under the direction of the elected central committee.

Full time workers have a right, as any other comrade to take part in discussion and debate, but their prime function is to implement the democratically agreed policies and perspectives of the party and support the elected leadership.

We have heard much too in recent weeks about the supposed attempt by the CC and its supporters to demonise and label people as feminists. This too is nonsense. We are proud of the SWP's tradition on fighting for women's liberation as a necessary part of the liberation of humanity. Indeed, it is a lie and slur on the party to suggest that we use the term feminist as a term of abuse.

We are proud to, and always will, stand with any women standing up against sexism and oppression, regardless of their political and class background. No serious socialist can or should do otherwise.

We should unite with all those thrown into political activity today by their rejection of the disgusting new sexism, sometimes labelled "raunch culture", which permeates all too many areas of society in particular colleges and universities - though it would be wrong to think it does not also reach into plenty of workplaces too.

And of course we agree that fighting against women's oppression or LGBT oppression, just as fighting other forms of oppression such as racism, can be a bridge into revolutionary marxist politics and a wider fight to change the world.

But equally it has always been part of a marxist understanding that politics based on fighting oppression does not automatically lead to a fight to challenge capitalism or to revolutionary marxist conclusions.

In fact, movements against oppression often throw up forms of politics which are hostile in a political sense to revolutionary marxism. This is true not just of feminist theories new and old, but also for example of the politics arising from anti racist movements over the history of capitalism.

Does this mean we stop working with people who hold to such views? Of course not. We unite with them in the fight against oppression but equally we argue, often very hard, against their political ideas and in favour of our revolutionary marxist ideas.

We believe that there is immense confusion about this among many of those supporting the current faction. Instead of both uniting in struggle but then polemicising about ideas – and often the argument about ideas has real implications for the struggle – we hear all too often only the uniting part, and a shying away from taking on the deeper arguments.

So on women's oppression is it the case that women have always been oppressed or did this oppression arise only as part and parcel of the rise of class society? Is women's oppression today bound up with and maintained by the central role that the family plays in the privatised reproduction of labour or do its roots lie elsewhere?

Should women organise separately and see all men as , at least in part, part of the problem. Do all men benefit in some way from women's oppression? Or should women instead see working class men as their allies in the fight for liberation?

These and many more questions are real and important – and lead to different conclusions about how to organise and fight - and should be at the centre of the rows, yes rows, we are having with those feminists we are uniting with around specific issues and struggles.

These questions are of absolutely central importance because just as we believe there can be no socialism without women's liberation, we also believe that there can

not be women's liberation without socialist revolution. Not to argue for our politics inside of the women's movement would be to accept the pull of reformist politics upon us. Feminism is a type of reformism and just as we do in all other areas, we seek to work both with and against the reformists at the same time, all of the time.

We have been dismayed and saddened too in recent weeks to hear comrades talk about people "bullying" or "intimidating" people, when what they actually mean is that they disagreed with them. Comradely, but often sharp and firm, argument and disagreement is the lifeblood of any serious revolutionary organisation – without it we cannot test arguments and ideas and arrive at conclusions about how to act.

It is not bullying, but honesty without which we cannot operate, to say "I disagree with you comrade, let me explain why..." or "I think you are wrong comrade, because...". In fact to think a comrade is wrong and NOT say so openly is the road to dishonesty, Machiavellian manoeuvring, gossip and tittle-tattle instead of proper debate.

We shudder too when we have heard comrades in recent weeks talk about a "bureaucracy" in the party and compare it to the trade union bureaucracy. This shows a woeful lack of understanding of what we mean by the trade union bureaucracy and why it acts as it does – primarily because of its social role in mediating between capital and labour - and to transpose this analysis to the elected leadership of a revolutionary party is almost laughable.

It is the social role and material circumstances of people and groups of people that shape how they behave – any serious examination of the party's leadership would instantly reject such silly arguments – arguments which are insulting not just to the leading comrades but also to the vast bulk of the membership.

Why do all these underlying issues emerge now? What is their root?

We believe they, in part at least, flow from the nature of the period we have lived through.

We are NOT in a period of downturn like that of the late 1970s and 1980s – when the working class in Britain (and internationally) was retreating from the massive upturn in struggle of the late 1960s through to the mid 1970s.

Though that downturn was punctuated by great battles, it was a period of politics moving to the right, of declining confidence, or defeat.

Today we have a new generation of workers being battered by the effects of capitalist crisis and austerity. This is provoking huge anger and a strong current of radicalisation to the left (and in parts of society to the right too). The working class has not been defeated in open battle by the ruling class.

The underlying mood is shown by almost every official strike vote or ballot- which returns massive majorities for fighting.

Nevertheless the legacy of the last decades is a low level of confidence, especially to act independently of the trade union leaderships – and among the trade union leadership itself a quite woeful timidity born of the last decades too.

This has combined to mean that despite important local eruptions of struggle, and very important large scale one day strikes on pensions in 2011, there has been no breakthrough which could allow the underlying anger to flow through a victory into an upwardly building cycle of confidence and combativity.

The actual level of open class struggle in the form of strikes has been over recent years at a very low level historically – though the underlying mood means this could change rapidly with any decisive breakthrough in battle or victory in a major strike.

Against this background we have not though seen a quiet last decade or so. Rather we have seen the eruption of often large scale social and political movements – from Seattle, through the anti-capitalist movement, the anti-war movement, and more recently movements like the student revolt of 2010-11, the Occupy movement (and elsewhere the Indignados in Spain etc), and within these have emerged new movements against oppression too, with the so called new feminism.

One aspect of these movements has often been hostility to traditional parties – including those of the left. This is hardly surprising given the role all established political parties (left and right) have played in running the capitalist system and presiding over war and austerity – and all too often corruption too.

It is equally true that the continuing legacy of the collapse of Stalinism and the political impact arising from it has, however unjustifiably and historically outrageously, had an impact on those seeking to build politically from the traditions of Lenin and the Russian Revolution.

These movements have thrown up all sorts of political ideas – on how to organise, what democracy means, the nature of capitalism, on oppression and how to fight it and much else. It is also true that “reformism” has – as it always will this side of the revolution – re-emerged in every one of these movements in various guises.

Sometimes this takes the form of a renewed faith in Labour (much more powerful than many comrades believe and a key driving force behind the behaviour of the trade union leaders, including the lefts, in the last year or so – the strategy adopted by Len McCluskey is a case in point). At other times it can be more nuanced (a la Owen Jones) or sometimes it can be with new non-revolutionary formations and eruptions – Syriza in Greece being the example most often cited as a model to look to in current debates.

None of this is surprising, or new – as any serious study of history would confirm.

Throughout this period the SWP has always tried to throw itself into every such movement, seeking to work alongside all those engaged in struggle.

This is why it is simply wrong of comrades who left the party a number of years ago and who now operate around Counterfire, or for some comrades in the current arguments in the party today, to argue that there has been any kind of retreat from “united front” work to an approach they dub “abstract party building”.

At every point we have both argued for, and put into practice, working within any serious movement and with anyone who wants to seriously fight. Does this mean that we don’t recognise that movements rise and fall and we have to take that into account? Of course not.

It would be the height of stupidity to pretend that the anti-capitalist movement today, even despite the inspiring example of the Occupy movement, was anything like that of the great protests from Seattle to Florence or Genoa. Equally is the anti-war movement today the same as on the eve of the invasion of Iraq? Or is the student movement of 2013 the same as that at the time of the Millbank protests?

Movement rise and fall and we have to relate to and be part of them, but also understand the changing scale and reality of each movement over time.

That means understanding when an emphasis on agitation within a movement – pushing on for the next mobilisation – is the key, and also when in a different phase of the movement much more emphasis needs to be put on the ideological debates and arguments within and around the movement.

Interestingly those, inside and outside the party, who argue this mistaken analysis – that the problem is that the SWP has somehow retreated from working in movements or working in a united front approach with others – completely and routinely ignore the most successful recent example of putting this approach into practice, of working with everyone prepared to fight on a particular issue while maintaining our distinctive arguments and analysis and fighting within the movement for the strategies they lead to – the success of Unite Against Fascism in, for now, defeating the EDL.

As we engage in all these movements we hope to build a bridge over which we win people to revolutionary Marxist ideas and organisation. There is no contradiction whatever between seeking to be part of and build a movement whilst simultaneously seeking to win people to our ideas and organisation.

But it is also true that every bridge can be crossed in both directions. We saw the reality of this with the movement of John R and Lindsay G, away from the SWP and towards the politics of movementism and want to try and explain why we think this is happening.

By being involved in movements, as we must, there is always the possibility that the politics of the movements will pull comrades away from revolutionary Marxism and the

party in various ways – that comrades adapt to the politics emerging from the movements.

In a period when the working class is openly fighting, and even better winning, it is that much easier to win people from the movements towards our politics, about the central role of the working class, and all our arguments about oppression, the type of party we need and so on.

You could feel that in 2011 when from the spring to November when we saw large scale one day strikes the pull was towards the working class as the centre of social change – and everyone who sought to build knows that made arguing our politics that much easier.

But equally the prevailing situation of the last decade or so, and especially since the huge retreat by the union leaders in December 2011 over the pension struggle, has been one of a very low level of strikes. This has meant that the pull is more in the other direction – towards the politics of the movements.

Even the best of comrades are not immune to such pressures. But when such pressures exist the only guarantee that we counter them and instead continue to pull people across the bridge towards our ideas is a firm and often sharp fight for our traditions and ideas, coupled with sharp accountability of all comrades to our collective democracy.

If we don’t do this the danger is that instead groups of comrades – through a molecular and sometimes almost unnoticed process – begin to adapt to aspects of the politics of the movements, internalise these ideas and then carry them inside the party. They then begin to see parts of the party’s politics, traditions, strategies and ways of organising – or even individual leading comrades – as a problem and then focus on this as the key political issue.

This is what happened in the crisis in the party in 2008 over the faction fight with those comrades led by John R and Lindsey G.

The leading comrades – John, Lindsey, Chris N and Chris B – had adapted to the politics of the movements they had been central in building and leading on behalf of the party – and this led them eventually to break with the party.

Anyone reading some of these ex-comrades recent writing will be also struck by how far they have now strayed from our traditions and arguments – becoming little more than a ginger group to cheer on left union leaders and parliamentarians.

We believe the crisis now in the party is a continuation of the same process. It is rooted in a layer of comrades who – because of the pressure on them in the current situation – have adapted in varying degrees to aspects of the politics of the different movements described above.

They then internalise this political view, at last partially, and then from that standpoint begin to see aspects of our ideas, traditions, strategies and ways of organising as a problem to be attacked.

There is no magic formula for

withstanding such processes and pressures by some act of will – but only an insistence on collective accountability and the firmness of fighting for our politics and traditions.

Part of the problem, we believe, is that we as a party have been far too slow to recognise this problem and seek to deal with it by the necessary sharp political argument – and that is something that for the health of the party needs to change in the period ahead.

In the current crisis we believe the most important thing is not to focus on the (perhaps needed) discussions about internal party issues and procedures and constitutions, but rather to address these underlying political issues, where they come from and what we need to do politically to address them.

In conclusion, we wish to return to Cliff. His second mode of arguing was often to very bluntly confront comrades with what the logic of their position was.

And Cliff always argued that if you form a serious faction you are – whether you admit it or not – fighting for leadership.

In that spirit let us state quite plainly that the current faction is, whatever its adherents may sincerely believe, an open challenge for the leadership of the Socialist Workers Party.

You cannot have a conference which elects a new CC and NC and which then five weeks later faces a direct and serious challenge headed by 3 people who were on the CC until conference and by 8 members of the NC who overwhelmingly lost the recent NC vote without that being the case.

It is not serious politics to pretend otherwise – and if the comrades don't see that the only people they are fooling are themselves.

We hope the faction is soundly defeated at special conference. But if it were to win there is only one possible political consequence – the current CC and NC would have been overturned and defeated and those leading the faction would have to take responsibility for leading the party.

We believe the evidence is clear that if that were to happen it would be a disaster for the SWP, and would lead to a radical change in the kind of party we are.

Those are now the stakes. That is why we urge all the comrades who have supported the faction to think and reflect very seriously, both on the arguments that we have raised here and we are sure others will raise much better elsewhere. But also we urge them to understand and reflect on the fact that in politics there is a logic, a dynamic which once set in train goes beyond what many of those who started it ever intended.

Unless you are prepared to see the leadership of the faction become the leadership of the party – with all that entails – you should not support it. Simple as.

Paul (East London and joint NUT fraction convener)

Jess (South East London and joint NUT fraction convener)

Doug (Birmingham and joint NUT fraction convener)

OUR STUDENT WORK

Introduction

In the period since conference there has been a growing crisis in the student work in the party. This is a crisis that has developed due to the response of the leadership of the party to the concerns that comrades, including many student comrades, have raised in the period since conference in relation to the case involving comrade X.

The impact on our united front work

When students returned to campuses after the Christmas break they found themselves at the sharp end of the backlash and criticism of the party over the handling the case involving comrade X.

Important political relationships that have been built up over a number of years have been damaged. On a number of campuses our united front work has been directly affected. Across campuses our relationships with the women's societies have suffered. At Goldsmiths the invitation to a CC speaker for International Women's Day has been withdrawn. This comes after a successful year of working with the women's society, for example organising a joint meeting which allowed the party putting forward a socialist perspective on women's liberation to a wider audience.

At Manchester University two days before the UAF rally building for the March 2nd counter-demonstration the SU women's officer – previously a key ally willing to work with the SWSS group on anti-cuts campaigns – pulled her support citing comrade X's role. The SWSS group offered to arrange a meeting with SWP comrades to discuss it but she refused.

This followed public denunciations of UAF by other previously friendly activists as well as the anti-fascist periphery, who subsequently decided to build for the demonstration with unbranded publicity.

At the Reclaim the Night event – which involved hundreds of angry, young women as part of a growing campaign on campus against sexism – a SWSS member leafleting for UAF was shouted down and told to leave in no uncertain terms. The SWSS group has thrown its energies into building the demonstration but our ability to lead has been damaged due to the response on campus.

The networks that we have developed in the Palestine solidarity groups – many of which the party was at the centre of building since the 2006 Israel invasion of Lebanon and the occupations in 2008 – have been damaged or broken. Israel's latest brutal assault on the Palestinians shows the necessity of maintaining these networks as they still retain an important capacity

to mobilise students onto demonstrations at short notice. Our interventions in such campaigns have allowed us to raise revolutionary ideas with a layer of students.

The boycotting of the party by a group of left-wing academics creates other difficulties on campuses. SWSS groups regularly host public meetings with many of these academics and use their names to build both broad meetings with a theoretical focus and united-front type meetings.

Not being able to host such meetings potentially weakens our ability to shape an ideological current within the universities. Many students – both inside and outside the SWP – engage with these academics and their ideas and the lack of response or leadership about how to handle this is problematic.

The connections that have been developed through engaging with a layer of left-wing academics have also been important for our work in UCU in the universities, helping to draw people into trade union activity. The severing of this connection with a layer of academics who regularly work with us in our universities can undermine the student worker solidarity that SWSS groups have been fighting for.

The argument that these problems are a product of the influence of "feminism" and "autonomism" amongst student comrades, or rooted in a disagreement about democratic centralism, obscures and diverts attention away from the real issues. The real issues at hand relate to the concerns that students, and many others in the party, have raised in relation to the handling of the disputes committee case involving comrade X.

The perspectives from conference

The debates and commissions that are voted on at SWP national conference set the perspectives for our organisation for the following year. We seek to re-affirm this year's commission on the student work. The commission states that the three pillars of our political work are:

- a) building a revolutionary socialist current by holding weekly SWSS forums and paper sales as well as bigger events, teach-ins, local and national debates.
- b) building the anti-capitalist and student movements through our united front work inside of the NUS, Education Activist Network, DTRTP, Unite Against Fascism, Palestine work etc.
- c) building solidarity with workers in struggle, for example, the sparks' revolt and local UCU strikes.

The CC unanimously backed the student document in the pre-conference period and it was overwhelmingly endorsed by conference.

The post conference period has seen a series of changes implemented in the student work. The failure to engage with the

real issues at stake is being compounded by the sudden changes made to student perspectives.

The CC has changed the personnel in the student office, removing one of the student organisers who disagreed with the way the Disputes Committee was handled. It removed a candidate for the NUS NEC elections only 48-hours before the nomination deadline. Subsequently, it has emerged that the nomination for another candidate in the NUS NEC election was not submitted.

The comrade only discovered she was not standing when another comrade was informed of this by a non-member at a NUS NEC meeting. The student office – with the new CC member – agreed with the strategy and negotiations for the NUS election immediately after conference.

Our intervention inside the NUS is not the sole focus of our student work; however there is a risk of undermining our intervention while there is a serious argument taking place in the left about disaffiliating from NUS.

Furthermore our intervention in the NUS does not take place in a vacuum; other forces on the left will move to fill the spaces we have left. This is particularly important considering the removal of the FE candidate. The way elections are organised at NUS means that it is easier for FE candidates to get elected as they have reserved spaces on the block of 15. The only other organised left candidate is a member of the AWL, who will likely get elected onto the NEC with the left vote now.

The CC has substantially changed the character of the Revolt/Ideas to change the world event removing most of the student speakers. Last year's event, Students for Revolution, acted as a showcase for our student cadre who played a central role in the organisation of the event.

Further, it provided a valuable opportunity for our student cadre to develop ideologically through reading for, preparing and giving a meeting. The replacement of the student speakers is only one part of the problem; the student cadre have also been excluded from any discussion about shaping the event. In the student commission it states:

“Titles such as ‘Why the working class?’ do not reflect the experiences of students. Instead we need to conduct the argument of the centrality of the working class by taking up historical examples of working class power” Yet the event now includes a course with the exact name the commissions warns against: ‘why the working class?’ and a meeting titled ‘the role of students in the class struggle.’”

These and other actions have served to escalate the tensions within the student work following conference. They appear as punishment for students having opposed the way the Disputes Committee handled

the case involving comrade X. There has not been a serious attempt to try and win people politically to the changes that have been made. Instead it appears that the internal arguments are the source of both the changes internally and changes to our external perspectives.

The “turn”

There is a narrative emerging from the CC and the student office that the student office – since the pre-conference internal bulletins and the commission voted on at conference – now requires changing. This is signalled clearly in the student section of the CC motion:

9) Student work has always been the lifeblood of the SWP, and the Special Conference expresses its pride in the successes of our student comrades during and after the movement of November-December 2010. But it is clear that our student work has been disoriented by a failure sufficiently to recognise that this phase of the movement has ended and to focus on ideological and political struggle.

The debates that have been developed must be pursued patiently and on a political basis. Nevertheless, this Special Conference reaffirms that the Socialist Workers Student Societies are support organisations of the SWP and that student members of the SWP are bound by the decisions of party conference and other leading bodies. The Central Committee has the authority to direct student work, as it has over all areas of party work.

The disorientation mentioned by the CC does not stem from the phase of struggle ignited at Millbank ending, after all, large sections of our student cadre were recruited after this. The hot autumn that was frequently referred to in the SWP's publications last year never materialised, which had a demoralising affect on students, as well as other members of the organisation.

The student commission argued for the “need to make a tactical shift in regards to our anti-austerity work inside the universities.” The struggle against austerity in higher education is manifesting in different ways: instead of national strike action by the UCU we are seeing the emergence of local struggles at institutions like London Met, Sussex, and UCLan.

The issues that SWSS has mobilised around in the past year have involved agitating around tax avoidance, housing, Palestine, anti-fascism, NHS, and solidarity action with workers in the UK and abroad. In particular SWSS members regularly attended the early morning sparks protests proving that “building solidarity with workers on strike has been one of SWSS's hallmarks.”

There has been much talk of the need to make an “ideological turn” in the student

work. However to claim that over the last period there has not been a systematic attempt to develop people ideologically is false. We agree that ideas have a high premium, however in recent weeks the leadership of the party have drawn into question their commitment to developing our student cadre ideologically by not taking up the opportunities to do so, such as having students speaking at the Revolt festival.

There has been a consistently high level of student recruitment as a proportion of overall recruitment. The development, growth, and expansion of SWP student groups on campuses shows a visible renewal of the party in terms of the new, young cadre which has emerged.

There has been an emphasis on attention to detail given to building SWSS meetings on a range of issues. In addition to the regular SWSS meetings there has been an impressive attendance at a number of SWP student political events such as the Why Marx was Right events. On the tour Terry Eagleton and Alex Callinicos spoke to audiences of 350 at Manchester, 350 at Oxford, 180 at Kings, 170 at Essex, and 100 at Sheffield. The local SWSS teach-ins at Essex, Leeds, Goldsmiths, and in central London addressed ideological questions at a high level.

The aim of SWSS has never been to build “support organisations of the SWP.” SWSS groups are essentially the student groups of the SWP. They are organised and built around the politics of the SWP.

In recent years we have been able to get our wider periphery more actively involved in SWSS and in some cases have been successful in building broader groups, however this has always been organised on the basis of SWSS operating as a bridge into the SWP.

SWSS has been focused on the need to build an organisation on campuses that seeks to intervene in and lead the struggle, but also building the SWP, our tradition, and renewing our cadre. The interventionist character of SWSS sets it apart from others on the left, for example the Marxist propaganda groups built by groups like Socialist Appeal.

We re-affirm the call in the student commission to:

- a) Agitate for general meetings inside of unions to discuss the call for a General Strike, re-affirming the No Platform for Fascists Policy, and Boycott, Divestment & Sanctions (BDS).
- b) Hold local rallies, demonstrations and skype link-ups in the universities on days that Greek/Spanish workers strike.
- c) Get comrades to stand for NUS delegate positions and strengthen the organised left inside of NUS on a national basis.

This is not to say that there is not room for strengthening and improving our work in this area, or that there are no debates about the student perspective. However perspectives have to be developed with reference to changes and developments in the real world and through a process of through debate and engagement. The supposed

“ideological turn” appears to be based entirely on the dynamics of the internal crisis in the party.

The logic of one “ideological turn” does not reflect the realities of the student work over the previous years. The student work has been characterised by a series of turns, whether around the Palestine occupations, towards the local struggles in universities, the national movement against the tuition fees rises, supporting national strike action, to the period we are in now.

What would the intervention have looked like in 2011 if we had bent the stick further towards the ideological? There were successful interventions on picket lines and demonstrations on N30, at Goldsmiths mobilising 300 students to join their lecturers.

Instead our intervention has been characterised by a high level of ideological engagement throughout this period. Moreover if this has been a problem for some time it poses the question of why the concerned CC members did not raise this in the pre-conference period, the IBs, the national student meeting, national conference, or indeed the student commission.

Democratic centralism

Similarly whilst there are clearly debates to be had in the party about democratic centralism, oppression and other important issues, these will be had more effectively if they are not conflated with arguments related to the dispute.

The real danger otherwise is that rather than going through a period of ideological clarification inside the party we will go through a period of obsfucation based on caricatured positions, which no one learns from. Referencing democratic centralism to limit legitimate debate on the handling of the dispute, or justify sudden turns in student perspective, for example, will win no one and be more effective in driving people away from the party.

Conclusion

In a period when on the left in universities, ‘autonomist’ ideas dominate, we should be proud that we have won many students to the ideas of revolutionary socialism, the centrality of the working class and to the SWP. Students don’t join the party because they have autonomist tendencies - they join because they have broken with autonomists in argument, generally in debates about strategy and tactics.

We have won a whole layer of revolutionaries who will consistently argue for an orientation on the working class, and pull the weight of the student movements behind them in solidarity with workers struggle. The Party was not necessarily the ‘most attractive’ choice - people were won not on the basis of being the most radical, or sometimes even the most active, but on the relevance of revolutionary party and Leninism in the 21st century.

Over the last few years the party has developed a new cadre who have been at the heart of the movements and played leading roles in the party. To lose this layer of comrades would be devastating to the organisation. It would damage to the party for many years to come, making it extremely difficult to recruit new student members to the organisation. Students do not remain students for ever; in one, two, three years time those comrades who are students now will go into workplaces. To lose a layer of students now would mean we risk losing a new layer of militants going into workplaces in the future.

In any serious revolutionary party the challenge of how to integrate new people into the organisation, while at the same time learning from them and benefiting from the experience they bring will exist. It is not a challenge we can afford to shy away from, but instead is a crucial part of how we build the strongest party we can.

In Defence of Our Party faction committee

THE “MILLBANK GENERATION”: SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

1. Introduction

The current crisis in the Socialist Workers Party centres around the dispute. But it has been exacerbated by a number of arguments made by the Central Committee regarding the party’s student work. A national perspective over students was debated, agreed and voted on overwhelmingly at January’s national conference. Yet within days the CC tore up this perspective, throwing our student work into disarray.

The CC has tried to justify its about-turn by arguing that students have not been won fully to the party’s traditions, that students are disoriented by the defeat of the “Millbank movement”, and that students lack integration into the party and are pulled by political currents such as autonomism and feminism. This, it is claimed, is why student members are so critical of the CC’s handling of the dispute.

We strongly contest these claims. A serious examination of our record shows just the opposite: that our student members have a strong understanding of the party’s political tradition, that they fight for revolutionary socialist perspectives within the wider movement, and that they understand the dynamics of the student struggle post-Millbank far better than the CC gives them credit for.

The criticisms against students are not rooted in reality. They are being cooked up *because* students generally oppose the CC’s position on the dispute. This is but

one example of how the CC’s intransigence over the dispute is distorting the party’s wider perspectives and damaging its ability to effectively intervene in struggle.

What follows is a detailed analysis of our student work over the past five years—the period following the outbreak of the global crisis of capitalism. We do this in order to dispel the myths that Millbank came out of nowhere, or that student struggle has since dissipated into thin air.

We are in favour of critically assessing our student work and making sharp turns where necessary. But this has to be done on the basis of assessing the actual movement and our actual record. We hope what follows can form the basis for an honest discussions of our perspectives over student work. We also hope that the wider party can learn more general lessons from what we have achieved, and from the difficulties we have faced.

2. Looking beyond Millbank: students and the economic crisis

The CC’s arguments pivot on the notion that the party’s students have remained in thrall to the “Millbank moment” of late 2010, a phase of student struggle that has long since past, and have failed to make the sharp ideological turn necessary to carry through Marxist political in the wake of that struggle’s defeat.

Of course Millbank and the student movement associated with it is a crucial reference point for both student politics and more general resistance to austerity in Britain.

Millbank kicked off the most sustained and politically focused student movement for generations. This movement shook the government to the core and severely damaged the Liberal Democrats’ electoral prospects. It continues to be credited by many in the trade union movement for “breaking the austerity consensus”.

Millbank marked the beginning of a period rising struggle in Britain that led through the TUC’s half a million strong anti-cuts demo on 26 March 2011 and climaxed in the mass public sector strike of 30 November 2011.

Nevertheless it is unhelpful and inaccurate to frame the student movement and the party’s work within that movement in terms of “pre-Millbank” and “post-Millbank” periods. This gives a false impression on two counts: it underplays the rise in student militancy leading up to Millbank, presenting the latter as a sudden and inexplicable explosion of militancy, and it fails to grasp how students themselves have reacted to the movement’s failures in the wake of Millbank and reoriented themselves as a result.

It also runs the risks of obscuring what Millbank tells us about the potential for similar explosions in the future, and of the links between student struggles and wider resistance. In 2009, for example,

the student occupations and protests over Gaza were part of a wider volatility shaped by the crisis which saw workers' occupations and wildcat strikes. Participants in the August 2011 riots cited the student movement as an inspiration. They named unemployment, the abolition of Education Maintenance Allowance and tuition fees as key issues for their anger alongside racism and police harassment. Chants of "Whose streets? Our streets!" were audible on riot footage from Hackney.

We have to be prepared for volatile and unexpected explosions of anger that can become a lightening rod for a more generalised anger in society. This does not mean we orientate our whole perspective on hoping for such an explosion. Nor is it any substitute for recognising the current terrain where attacks on students taking a more fragmented and localised form.

Today struggles are just as likely to break out over political issues such as Palestine or sexism as over on jobs, courses and conditions on campus. In this context we have to avoid two pitfalls. We must not overestimate the movement in an adventurist or substitutionist manner. But neither should we write students off based on a superficial reading of the situation that sees no possibility of a revival of struggle.

This fits with our overall perspective that the cycle of struggle against austerity in Britain is ongoing. That cycle, as we have seen across Europe, will involve ebbs and flows, steps forward and back. It will see initiative shift from students to organised workers and to anti-cuts struggles, from the street to the workplace etc. We understand the central strategic importance of winning and building working class action to that struggle. But we seek to shape and lead every arena of struggle.

The means recognising the distinct political role that students play, its value and its limitations. As Tony Cliff wrote in the aftermath of 1968: "The rebelling students have at one and the same time great strength and great weakness. They are a small minority of the population. They are outside production. They are not the big battalions that can overthrow the social order. Being outside production is a source of weakness, but it is also a cause for quick advance, as it is so much easier for the students to move into action. If a small minority of the university community wants to act on an issue, it can go ahead and do so... The temperature bringing students into combustion is incomparably lower than the one necessary to inflame the workers. But unfortunately the lifespan of their fire is also shorter."

Cliff added: "It is in the interests of the ruling class and its hangers-on to separate the students from the workers... It is at the same time in the interests of the rebellious students to call on the heavy battalions of the working class for supporting action. The synchronisation of student rebellion and working class revolution is one of the most important things confronting the

revolutionary movement in the advanced industrial societies."

What's more the character of student struggle is intensely ideological. The contradictions among the ideas they are taught become more intense in periods where ruling ideology comes under strain. That is why students continue to be a very valuable source of renewal for revolutionary organisations. They are the future cadre of the SWP—both as theoreticians and as socialist militants who can go on to lead in the workplace.

And that it why it is such a grave mistake to propose a student perspective that counterposes ideology to intervention, that calls for a turn towards theory and away from practice. This move will inhibit our ability to make our party and its traditions relevant to a new generation of potential revolutionaries in the colleges. It also risks creating a schism between our student and wider party work.

3. The first years of the crisis: Gaza occupations and the G20 demo

The student movement of autumn 2010 was a visceral, explosive response to a major national attack on education by the Tories. But it was more than that. As we wrote at the time in the Internal Bulletin (2010):

"The response to these attacks on education is being fuelled by a much wider, generalised anger at the injustice of the government's austerity measures. [It reflects] the crystallisation of a wider political mood in Britain that has been shaped by the last decade: the illegal wars, greedy bankers, MPs expenses, broken promises (from Labour and now the Lib Dems) and the economic crisis. The chants of 'no ifs, no buts, no education cuts' became more determined as the movement built, but were also increasingly accompanied by 'one solution—revolution', 'no justice, no peace, fuck the police', and 'what we need is a general strike'."

There had already been indications before Millbank of a new student movement emerging in response to the economic crisis. The freshers fairs of 2008, for example, took place against the backdrop of the collapse of Lehman Brothers. Socialist Worker sales and recruitment were high and SWSS meetings were well attended.

The fallout from the crisis shaped the scale and character of the response to Israel's assault on Gaza in early 2009 which moved tens of thousands on to the streets in anger. As was pointed out in the 2009 Internal Bulletin:

"Against the backdrop of major demonstrations and battles with the police outside the Israeli embassy, students decided to 'bring the war home' to the universities. In the process we contrib-

uted to an unprecedented isolation of the Zionists on campus and won real solidarity with the Palestinians.

"But the new mood amongst students was also being shaped by a growing economic and political crisis. This generated a climate in which the moral and political authority of those in power was being further thrown into question. One student occupying for Gaza at Manchester Metropolitan University bought his own handpainted banner reading 'Capitalism fails'."

SWSS groups took the lead in putting forward a political strategy which sought to deliver international solidarity by organising mass meetings and calling for occupations.

Within two weeks 30 universities were occupied and were putting demands on the management. This led the national press at the time to talk of a "seismic shift in the universities". An internal document commissioned by university vice chancellors advised them to watch out for warning signs of occupations such as "copies of Socialist Worker". Little did they know what was to come two years later.

The occupations were focused around giving solidarity with Gaza but they also raised much more fundamental questions about the control of universities, democracy in education and the possibility of organising and coordinating students nationally.

SWSS was at the heart of linking the question of financial and military support to Israel abroad with the crisis at home. It initiated meetings and debates on a range of theoretical and political questions and raised the importance of making demands on local managers.

This required patient and strenuous arguments against autonomist arguments that were already influential at the time which tried to keep "politics" and "parties" out of the occupations and saw occupations as an end in themselves rather than as a tactic of struggle.

The occupation wave over Gaza also enabled us to build SWSS and the party, and to extend our networks and influence. The experience and the political perspective we developed were critical in shaping the student movement of autumn 2010 and our ability to lead it after the Millbank explosion.

This is one reason why it is so politically dangerous to think we can simply replace our current student cadre with a new layer drawn from next year's freshers fairs. We cannot afford to throw away the valuable experience built up by our student cadre in the course of the last few years or undermine it through expedient revisionism about the recent past.

The student occupations also impacted on our ability to deliver solidarity to the workers' movement in Britain. Visteon workers went into occupation in 2009, followed by workers at Vestas. SWSS organised collections and delegations in support of the occupiers. We won a net-

work of students—some initially motivated solely by outrage at the oppression of Palestinians—to building support for workers' struggle. This is just one example of how we pursued political arguments about how these struggles connected.

At that years Marxism (2009) 1,429 advance bookings came from students, over 40% of the total Marxism bookings and significantly up from previous years (1,254 in 2008 (35%) and 1,169 in 2007 (35%)). A number of SWSS groups recruited and grew significantly such as the University of East London, Kings College London and Sussex University.

This was particularly impressive given the party had missed a very important political event which resonated especially strongly with students: the G20 protests in April 2009.

While tens of thousands massed on the City, the party had prioritised a relatively small and docile Stop the War demonstration instead. This flowed from our failure to fully reorientate to the new period. Many of our students had warned that we were getting it wrong in advance of the G20 protests. It was clear to them that lots of their peers were planning on going to the event in the City. This is one example of a situation where it would have been useful to listen to students and their experiences rather than dictating perspectives to them from on high.

4. Student-worker solidarity in the battle for education

The next academic year (2009-10) saw the first signs of growing anger over the attacks on education. The struggle at Tower Hamlets College was widely seen as a success that could boost confidence and be generalised. The universities that saw militancy over Gaza and had built strong SWSS groups also played a significant role in a series of local disputes over jobs, education services and privatisation.

In universities such as Sussex, Leeds and KCL we saw the combination of workers on strike, student occupations and student-worker solidarity. SWSS groups argued for solidarity with lecturers, brought delegations to picket lines and organised strike fund collections.

Universities without local action sent support delegations to those universities in dispute. We sought to develop local struggles into a national network and engage in ideological arguments over the attacks on education—ideological arguments that could help give localised struggles some cohesion.

The Education Activist Network played a very important role in this, providing a hub for a wider network of activists to build practical solidarity, to encourage unity between students and lecturers and to develop political arguments and ideological alternatives to the attacks. Some 300 students and lecturers attended the founding national conference in

early 2010 which brought together key fights with strong ideological arguments about the nature of the attacks.

Throughout this period SWSS continued to push out through weekly meetings, sales and political events and initiatives. A 300-strong debate organised at KCL between Martin Wolfe and Alex Callinoc was just one example of how we sought to engage with and win over a wider audience. Following that event a successful Capital reading group was formed at KCL.

We also recognised that the potential audience for radical ideas wasn't confined to activist circles. We put efforts into promoting SWSS meetings in libraries, lectures, seminars and halls. We also hosted a series of well attended "radical revision" sessions on a range of questions such as historical materialism, combined and uneven development, Marxism and philosophy, and alienation.

At the same time we played closer attention to educational development of student comrades. In early 2010 we organised a series of educationals at Bookmarks involving CC members to tackle the basics of our tradition—questions such as Engels and women's oppression, or our understanding of Gramsci.

We went on to deal with more advanced arguments on topical questions such as fascism and the economy. These provided an arena where comrades could raise difficult questions or challenge things they didn't agree with—something that could be difficult in open SWSS meetings. The Bookmarks series encouraged students to buy from our recommended reading list. It was a good precursor to the national educational programme implemented the following year.

By building organised, ideologically confident SWSS groups we were also able to take a lead on a number of political fronts, including the mobilisation against Nick Griffin appearing on Question Time and campaigns against sexism on campus. The national postal workers' strike that year also saw an effective solidarity operation organised by students across many campuses, spanning collections and cake making to scab-busting minibuses trips to picket lines.

The national networks of solidarity built around local disputes allowed us to put serious pressure on the NUS nationally. Then NUS president Wes Streeting said in early 2010 that students needed strikes by lecturers "like a hole in the head". But a successful SWSS motion at national conference a couple of months later mandated the NUS to support all strikes against the cuts and call a national demonstration over education which was supported by UCU.

The six month dispute at Sussex gave a particular flavour of things to come, with occupations against 115 job losses, mass mobilisations in support of picket lines and hundreds of pounds of donations.

The victimisation of six students over an occupation against job losses generated a solidarity campaign that brought together

over 1,000 students and staff members. It again raised the level of student and worker unity and pointed to wider political radicalisation against repression—a political question that has remained at the heart of the student mobilisation ever since. That year also saw a high profile occupation at Middlesex University over the closure of the philosophy department that also indicated what was to come.

These first waves of resistance helped SWSS, alongside others, to commit the NUS to a national demonstration on 10 November 2010—a demo that gained sharp focus when the government announced its attack on EMA and the tripling of tuition fees. The support of NUS and UCU was critical to achieving the numbers of 52,000 on the day. But so were the networks on the ground that we had built up in the preceding period. Just ten days before Millbank, EAN hosted a 450 strong conference with activists from around the country, including 10 NUS national executive members.

5. Millbank and the fight for political leadership

This growing political radicalisation and deepening organisation in the student movement laid the foundation for the explosions of autumn 2010. Millbank and the student revolt were not an aberration that came from nowhere. They were a high point—sparked by a particularly vicious national attack by the coalition government, but drawing on a much more general radicalisation and crisis of hegemony that had been taking place for a number of years.

The roots SWSS had built in this period enabled the student party members to anticipate and lead the explosion of protests around Millbank. In contrast these protests came as a surprise to all the political commentators, the NUS, the police—and, in truth, to much of our own CC.

We have to acknowledge the breadth, dynamism and political depth of a student struggle that bought hundreds of thousands onto the streets and made the streets of London feel ungovernable. The militancy and determination of those fighting back was expressed by one kettled school student who defiantly declared: "We are going to riot and protest until they are bought down."

But we should be aware of the danger of caricaturing this period as nothing more than a flurry of agitation where SWP students submerged themselves into activism. This is not the case. We had to fight for political leadership in the student movement and prove the relevance and worth of our ideas against competing currents. As Cliff once put it, our theory had to rise to the level of practice.

The arguments waged against competing currents in the movement deserve particular attention. On the one hand, NUS and many local student union leaders joined in the attacks on student protesters

and retreated from the movement. On the other, some of those angry at the timidity of NUS leaders and buoyed by the experience of Millbank wanted to charge ahead in ever smaller numbers.

The influence of “soft autonomism” was especially strong in university occupations where arguments rehearsed during the Gaza occupations came back. We had to fight off attempts to place limits on political organisation in occupations, or to impose consensus decision making instead of voting. We had to argue that occupations were an organising base and a political focal point rather than a being a “liberated space” of value in and of itself.

It was in this context that we fought for a strategy which sought to galvanise the militancy of the most radical students, while at the same time winning over broader layers and pressuring official sections of the student movement to support the fight. The national demonstrations and Day Xs were a key element of this. The occupations also served to help as an organising hub for involving people—both students and the wider community—in activity and debates over strategy.

The new movement bought new tests for the EAN, but it was able to play a major role in winning wider networks to this strategy. That is why it became at that time one of the hate figures of the tabloid press. The relationships which had been built, via EAN, with lecturers and official elements of the student movement also formed the basis for our response to the arrest and victimisation of students (“we need unity—defend the Millbank protesters”). This later led to the launch of Defend the Right to Protest.

SWSS also sought to use our networks in the unions and among SWP members to do delegation work and spread the new mood of the student movement into the workplaces. Student members have always been encouraged to be active in their local branch, but in the period following on from Millbank there was a particular push for this to happen in order to bring the discussions and experience into the wider party and to give ballast and support to the students.

6. Raising theory to the level of practice

Student comrades didn’t just fight for political leadership on the level of strategy, but also sought consciously to engage with broader political and ideological arguments. As was reported in the 2010 Internal Bulletin:

“Those moving into struggle don’t automatically see the need to confront the system in its totality. The anger at the Lib Dems, for example, is not just about fury at lying politicians. The Lib Dems were the last ‘common sense’ solution for many people who were angry at Labour but also hated the Tories.

“We have to learn how to turn that anger at betrayal by the current system into a good sense understanding of why parliamentary democracy fails. We can explain how their involvement in the movement can be part of building a socialist alternative if it is linked to the power of the working class. Such explanations will be in competition with other ideas—this is a period where all kinds of political traditions and organisations can grow—so we have to take the ideological battle very seriously.

“Now that larger forums are opening up in which we are able to take up some of the immediate political arguments in a very hard and visible way, there is no point repeating these questions in SWSS meetings to smaller audiences.

“The week after the Millbank protest our SWSS meetings on why we defend the protestors were quite small, as the argument had already been had. In contrast, we have held a series of very successful meetings in the occupations. At the Sussex occupation 50 came to the SWSS meeting on state and revolution (this followed a smaller meeting hosted by the autonomists), in Sheffield 40 attended the occupation SWSS meeting on 1968, 33 in Manchester and 20 in Newcastle. We have had SWP speakers in to address plenary teach-ins on the economic crisis or debating Labour members on reformism.”

The growth and radicalism of the movement therefore created a space for much more advanced SWSS meetings. Leeds and Newcastle SWSS had some of their best meetings of the year on the subject of Lenin’s State and Revolution. These deeper educationals—“Rosa Luxemburg and the Mass Strike”, “Gramsci, Consciousness and Ideology”, “Trotsky, Internationalism and Russia”—complemented the more immediate polemics that SWSS members were pushing in public forums.

Even in the heat of the struggle, our strategy was one of seeking to win our ideas and the relevance of our traditions and organisation in practice and through argument and conscious intervention. We did this on the street, in kettles, in mass meetings, in the occupations, in SWSS meetings, by linking students with our comrades in the trade union movement.

While it is right to discuss the reorientation of student work post the defeat of 2010, it is crude to describe this as an “ideological turn”: the nature of the period meant that the character of struggles was already profoundly ideological.

At one important national meeting that term we discussed how, in the current period, we should operate as revolutionaries trying to lead a student movement and distinguish ourselves in a way which created a pole of attraction. In 1968 questions of state capitalism were a central defining feature of the IS tradition around which we pulled people. In the period after 2008

we had to become experts in explaining the crisis and the political alternative to capitalism. We discussed how while we no longer dealt with the Soviet Union as such, there was a widespread suspicion of political parties in general—but that we could undercut this by working with and arguing alongside people in struggle.

One of the reasons for this attention to recruitment was because, although we were fighting to win, we did not know what the outcome of the struggle would be. We were also well aware that the afterglow of Millbank would not last forever. As we argued at the time:

“Precisely because of how the student struggle charges ahead, there can be a danger that students are pulled towards variants of voluntarism and substitutionism. This can be especially dangerous when, as will happen at some point, the initial burst of energy driving the student struggle subsides, leaving those without a wider perspective exhausted or demoralised.

“The SWP is uniquely placed not only to take on these political arguments but to use our roots in the working class movement to win them in practice. SWP founder Tony Cliff once said the student struggle goes ‘up like a rocket’ and this rocket can help to lift the whole political climate in Britain. But we also know that it can ‘come down like a stick’ and that ultimately students alone have neither the economic power to defeat austerity, nor the social weight to overcome the hold of the trade union bureaucracy and labourism on the working class.”

That term we recruited in significant numbers. The presence of a strong, confident student cadre was widely commented on at the SWP conference in early 2011.

7. Dealing with the defeat of Millbank

In the early days of 2011, following a small protest outside the education ministry, our NUS national executive member at the time Mark B was already tweeting “down like a stick”. It was obvious very early on in the New Year that the momentum of the student movement had dissipated and that this required a reorientation of our student work.

In general terms, we had to win an interpretation of why the students had lost and what that meant for future strategy and perspectives, while fighting to recruit and pull people around the party.

Defeat removed the unifying pull that had created a sense of collectivity and forward movement, despite all the arguments and competing currents at play. It sharpened and hardened distinct political groups and ideas amongst students.

One such trend was the hardening of various expressions of a soft autonomism

in which much smaller communities of students experimented with smaller scale occupations and initiatives. Others channelled their organisation and efforts into actions and arguments designed to create an alternative to NUS.

This was not, however, a downturn perspective. Despite the bitter anger and demoralisation among many activists, a much wider section of students now identified with the left in a broad sense. They rejected capitalism and its political representation in parliament. This meant we had a larger audience to win to revolutionary politics and to the need for a revolutionary party.

The wider context was favourable to this. Between the momentous battle of Parliament Square in December 2010 and the much smaller education demonstrations of the New Year, the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions intervened, bringing the actuality of revolution into the 21st century and sparking solidarity meetings and protests across the campuses.

The national student demonstrations over education in London and Manchester at the end of January were small in comparison to what had come before. But the militant and thousands strong breakaway to the Egyptian embassy served as an indication of a sizeable radicalised minority. At the same time the announcement of the 26 March 2011 TUC demonstration and agitation for strikes in the UCU and public sector was raising the prospect of the organised working class moving on a scale that young people had never seen in Britain.

So in the student work we had two tasks. We had to use the immediate window that comes with any defeat or major shift in struggle to win political arguments and build our organisation. At the same time we had to help turn students outwards to building solidarity with the wider struggle against austerity emerging in Britain and across the globe.

8. Building the party

We fought to both encourage the political development of comrades running the SWSS groups while making them open to the involvement of socialist students that were friendly to us, but not yet ready to join.

This process had started before the student revolt in places such as Sussex, Manchester and KCL and we recruited to the SWP off the back of it. Early in 2011 we generalised this approach in places where we had big SWSS groups. This allowed us to build significantly large groups in several places like UEL, Oxford or UWE. At the same time we circulated reading lists on key subjects and organised reading groups to go through Marxist theory and strengthen our cadre. We also reemphasised the importance of students being part of the political life and activity of their local branch.

We continued to pitch our SWSS meetings at a high theoretical level. Special effort

was made to get students to the SWP schools and events organised in 2011 such as the day school on LGBT and women's liberation, the day school on Lenin and the one day conference on the Arab revolutions. The SWP educational programme launched that year was uneven in its success, but made a real difference in places like central London where the experience consolidated some key comrades into KCL SWSS group.

In this vein of developing and relating our tradition to a wider layer of students, we organised Students For Revolution. This was a two day "mini-Marxism" led by students with an eye to building SWSS nationally.

We had CC speakers, other leading party speakers, big names from the movement (e.g Terry Eagleton, Nina Power). We made an effort to have as many students leading sessions as possible. In the build up to the event, we paired up students with CC members and leading comrades to help them prepare and build relationships with more experienced comrades. Courses on the IS tradition, Leninism and Marxist economics were well attended.

One reflection of the success of this work, was the high level of student recruitment in 2011—standing at 596, over 50 per cent of overall SWP recruitment that year. Given the challenges experienced in the wider party that year (for example, the very low levels of recruitment on the 30 June 2011 strikes and protests), this was an important achievement that illustrated the particular opportunities among students at that time.

9. Solidarity and struggle in 2011 and 2012

But none of this was done in a vacuum. Students mobilised large delegations for the 26 March 2011 demo. They also mobilised impressive solidarity for the strikes on 30 June and 30 November that year. Networks built though the student revolt were turned to building solidarity with their lecturers and public sector strikes.

Once again on the days of action students joined picket lines and demonstrations all over the country, bringing imagination and flair with them. A strike festival at LSE attracted hundreds of people. SOAS and Edinburgh occupied. At Goldsmiths a "flying picket" van toured picket lines then held an outdoor teach-in. This was an important political change from the UCU marking boycott in 2006 when some universities saw anti-strike protests by students. In the wake of the 30 June strike, a Guardian poll showed support for the strikes was highest among under 25s.

Students also played an important role in mobilising solidarity with the electricians in their long dispute starting in autumn that year. In Leeds, Manchester and London SWSS organised student delegations to join weekly demonstrations, strengthening the confidence of electricians in direct actions and on picket lines.

During the dispute the national student demonstration in November 2011 served as a further illustration of the decline of a student movement when a mere 10,000 people turned out. But the political mood was hard and radical—not primarily about education but about neoliberalism, capitalism and austerity. This time the direct action took the form of a street sit down in solidarity with the sparks who had been kettled by the police trying to join us after their own protest earlier. The students didn't leave until news came the sparks had been "unkettled"

In 2011 the initiative shifted to the working class, but resistance was also shaped by elements that developed in the preceding phase of struggle. On 26 March the inspiration of the students was again recognised by Len McClusky who called for the police to "keep your sleazy hands off our kids".

The size and scale of 26 March was the critical factor in lifting the confidence of our side and building a unity behind the central power in society—the working class.

But the UK Uncut occupation of Forum & Mason against tax evasion also had a big political impact in raising concrete arguments for "alternatives to austerity".

The August riots were more complicated and divisive in their impact, but raised important political arguments amongst students and workers about police brutality, racism, class and resistance. The Occupy movement, although small in size, helped to generalise political arguments "for the 99 per cent against the 1 per cent" in the run up to the 30 November strike. On campuses all over the country it raised important debates about the nature of democracy and agency.

In the universities, local political questions also opened up new avenues for mobilisations such as the 200 strong demonstration at Sussex University on International Women's Day as a response to the management covering up and refusing to act on a series of cases of sexual violence on campus, and a mass meeting (250) which unanimously passed to build solidarity with imprisoned student protester Zenon.

The opposition by lecturers and students to the White Paper, put pressure on the unions (NUS and UCU), and forced a tactical retreat by the government. The growing campaigns against police violence and state repression was another avenue of political tension which was felt deeply on most campuses.

Nevertheless the party's main narrative of resistance was focused on the pensions battle. The whole party had moved every sinew to achieving a break though on this front. The betrayal of the pensions strikes, as with other sections of the party, had a demoralising impact on students.

Into 2012 efforts were made to strengthen and help students relate to a more complicated and challenging period were opening up which required continuing to find ways of building a socialist pole of attraction, and relating to, shaping and offering leadership to agitation

over a range of political issues and local struggles.

In order to increase the relationship between students across the country and maintain a coherent political perspective able to build in a more fragmented political terrain, we strengthened the national student committee and set up Northern and London student committees.

This helped build a broader layer of cadre that could carry arguments inside our student groups beyond the student office. The committees allowed us to build up a more independent cadre in central London which has historically suffered under the over-weighted presence of the apparatus. This year they have contributed to rebuilding groups in universities in the north of England.

We also organised debates in universities with Jeff Weber, Peter Thomas and Peter Hallward, designed to pull a wider layer of people into our orbit. The biggest tour we organised was the “Why Marx Was Right” debates between Alex Callinicos and Terry Eagleton. Over a thousand people attended in five universities, with the highlights being 300 in Oxford and 270 in Manchester.

These are important examples of how we again sought to relate to a broad range of students across campus (not seeing things through the prism of an activist core). Over £1000 of books were sold at the Bookmarks stall in the course of that, 31 signed up to Marxism and 7 joined the party.

Through this we continued building sizeable SWSS meetings (illustrations 2 week period include Stephen Lawrence and the fight against racism- 45 at Goldsmiths 70 at Manchester, 30 on How can Palestine be Free? at Queen Mary and 26 at Portsmouth, 26 on LGBT liberation at UWE and 25 at LSE).

At that years marxism we showed an ability to attract both students who wanted to seriously engage with Marxist ideas on a theoretical level, as well as key activists in the student work. In the recruitment figures printed to end of Oct 2012, students made up 311 out of 750 (41.5%) who had joined the SWP (Internal Bulletin 2012)

These developments were made inside our student work in recognition that our members could not survive and build politically well enough by being simply good activists, and that we had to engage with the “new left” from the student revolt on a much higher ideological level.

Our students needed the weapons which our tradition offers to take these arguments on and win people to revolutionary socialism and the SWP. We also acknowledged that the nature of students means that they can often move quite quickly over political questions, so that winning people to our politics and pulling others closer puts us in a stronger position to shape and lead particular flash points when they arise.

The complicated nature of the period also reinforces the need for ideologically confident and coherent SWSS groups with a consistent, systematic and imaginative

approach to building the party and the influence of our ideas—one which is attuned to the possibilities of recruitment, but also pays attention to retention and education.

In the new term of autumn 2012, for example, students along with other comrades had initially been geared up to the party’s perspective of a hot autumn which centered on “three pillars of resistance”: the TUC’s 20 October demo, coordinated strikes and the national student demonstration (November 2012). Although 20 October was important, the hot autumn did not materialise—again because of the cowardly behaviour of the bureaucracy.

It was obvious way before the student demonstration that in this changed context, the demonstration would be very small. The appalling route, pouring rain and routed NUS rally perhaps meant it was even worse than even we had anticipated. This did not mean students didn’t build the demo, but it was hardly central to our perspective. We did however manage to deliver a sizeable, vibrant SWSS delegation which raised solidarity with Palestine during the latest assault on Gaza. And through that term continued to build some very impressive SWSS meetings (eg 70 at Leeds on sexual violence, 60 at Manchester on Malcolm X, 60 at Cambridge on Marx, 30 at Essex on Gramsci and later alienation) alongside relating to local struggles national party initiatives: UAF, UTR, DTRTP.

10. Where next in the period ahead?

The reason we write this piece is not to claim that the last four years of student work have been flawless. Indeed, we welcome the CC’s declaration that there will be a greater engagement with student work.

But it is remarkable to hear from members of the CC that they have held concerns over student work for the past two years yet failed to raise them—especially given the significance of student struggles and recruitment to the party. Ironically this comes at a time when comrades in the faction are accused of “hiding real political differences”.

It is true that the party’s student work would have benefited from a greater degree of engagement from the CC and better attempts to involve the whole party in such discussions. In the years described, for example, there has not been a single session at national committee or party council on students (apart from one called after the student session at the 2009 conference was cancelled due to the Gaza demonstrations). Had this engagement taken place in the past, it could have seriously strengthened our intervention at high points of struggle such as Millbank.

But we reject any attempt to shift the blame for the current crisis in the party onto an imaginary version of our recent past and away from the particular dispute in the present. We must not use the fact that so many student members are angry

about issues surrounding the dispute as a justification for a strategy that amounts to retreating into building Marxist discussion groups in isolation and tearing up important networks and political relationships that have built up over the years.

This strategy would severely harm the SWP’s ability and position inside the student population—as it already damaged us inside the NUS over the past month. It would cut us off from wider resistance developing in Britain and destroy our ability to lead struggles rather than tail them.

The first term of this year has been full of local flashpoints, such as the No Platform campaigns in QMU, Leeds and Cardiff, solidarity mobilisations with the A&E and fire station closures at Goldsmiths, campaigning against the deportation of international students at London Met, and the “reclaim your education” mass meetings in Sheffield. There was also a wave of December meetings, motions and demonstrations in solidarity with Gaza. These point toward a continuity rather than a break with the last few years. The economic crisis and the political crisis of legitimacy for the ruling class are still ongoing. And therefore there is still the likelihood for significant local campaigns as well as national explosions over political issues on campus.

It would, therefore, be a grave mistake for the CC to continue this forced turn in our student work. Despite low levels of struggle inside the working class, there are important struggles taking place and we must be ready for them. We cannot say the opposite inside our student work. These artificial divisions do a disservice to the party as a whole, and to our student work in particular.

The new term of 2013 illustrates this. Hundreds of students have been occupying buildings at Sussex university for three weeks now, holding regular meetings between 200 and 400 people and attracting national attention. At Essex University 150 students stopped the Israeli ambassador of giving a talk to the Tory society. In Cambridge students played an important role in building the 200 strong demonstration against Marine Le Pen and the 1,000 strong demonstration against the EDL. At London Met the campaign of solidarity with the victimised trade unionists continues.

Student members of the SWP are playing a leading role in stoking up resistance and building a revolutionary current on the campuses. We cannot allow internal differences to be used to break up an experienced interventionist cadre; one which may prove crucial in shaping the struggles to come.

Mark (South London)
Hannah (Central London)
Sai (East London)

WHY I RESIGNED FROM THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE: A LETTER

On Monday 4 February I resigned from the SWP central committee and from my role as a national student organiser for the party. I would like to outline my reasons for this decision, which was not one I took lightly.

As comrades may be aware, I have disagreed with positions taken by the central committee, and more recently by the national committee, over the handling of the dispute concerning X.

I made no secret of these disagreements at our national conference, and debates at that conference were in my view conducted in a comradely and fraternal manner. Despite misgivings, I agreed to serve on whichever CC slate was elected.

Since conference, however, there have been a number of developments that run against both the spirit and the letter of the decisions taken there. These developments have not just made my position on the CC untenable. They also threaten the integrity of the party. This has left me with no choice but to resign from my positions in order to voice my concerns to the wider party membership.

At conference we decided to “draw a line” under the dispute and move forward in a spirit of unity. Instead the CC has decided to “draw a line” right through the middle of the party. It has misinterpreted the vote over the disputes committee report as an “exoneration” of X and as an expression of total confidence in the disputes committee process.

The effect of this, consciously or otherwise, has been to exacerbate the tensions that existed inside the party prior to conference. More worryingly, differences over the dispute are now being dressed up and rationalised as political differences. This threatens to severely distort both our perspective and our wider political practice.

What has happened in the student office since conference is a case in point. Up until the days immediately before conference, the CC did not express any concerns with the student office, its work or its political direction. Now the CC warns that students are “pandering to feminism and autonomism” and insists on the need for a sharp “ideological turn”.

This change in direction is based solely upon the CC’s position regarding the dispute. In my view, the charges of “feminism” and “autonomism” are baseless. Their aim, consciously or otherwise, is to split the party. Instead of addressing the widespread concerns over the way in which the dispute was handled, the CC has attempted to shut down discussion and create artificial political divisions over it.

Here’s just one minor example of this. One of our leading student activists was barred from standing again for his position on the NUS national executive committee. The only reason given for this decision was his disagreement over the dispute. This CC decision was sprung on him two days before the nominations deadline. It ignored negotiations with other left forces in the student movement.

We cannot dismiss the widespread and serious disagreements over the dispute, its handling and its fallout somehow amount to a “break with the IS tradition”. Nor can we pretend that these disagreements stem from a rejection of revolutionary socialism or of Leninist democratic centralism.

The new CC is set on a course that will do immense damage to the party and its work. If it pursues this direction further the inevitable result will be an irreparable breakdown in relations within the party and with wider forces on the left. This has already created huge damage among our student groups. It now threatens to spread much further.

I still believe it is not too late to reverse this course. I continue to be an active member of the Socialist Workers Party. I continue to fight for socialism from below and for the revolutionary party as a tool for working class self-emancipation.

Mark (South London)

OUR CONCERNS WITH THE CONDUCT OF THE DEBATE

Although an argument has raged inside the SWP over the last few months, our experience (away from internal discussions, blogs and Facebook) has been that the outside world hasn’t noticed our ‘crisis’.

No one has refused to work with us: quite the opposite. One of us has managed to collect over £500 for the Mid Yorks Hospital strike, at various local and national teacher union meetings; others of us have been involved in the Campaign Against the Bedroom Tax via Hands Off Our Homes.

Key trade unionists, who are not SWP members, continue to be involved locally in UtR and UAF. Our individual paper sales have increased, as we are now asking more people to buy Socialist Worker.

We do have a number of concerns arising from the way in which the debate following Conference has been conducted:

- There seems to be an excessive pre-occupation with social media and disproportionate weight given to views expressed via social media. Facebook and blogs are not an open, democratic forum accessible to all, precisely because of the possibility of comrades (on either side) being open to victimisation by employers as

a result of their postings. This is not about being conservative but being careful.

- We are extremely concerned about the activity of the individuals who recorded and transcribed Conference. Identifying speakers for the benefit of the bourgeois press and employers exposes them to sacking and blacklisting. It is contemptible. It erodes our confidence that comrades will be able to contribute freely to debate at the Special Conference. Rather than promoting ‘transparency’, it serves to curtail democratic discussion within the party and plays into the hands of black-listers and witch-hunters.

Sally, Kate, Alex, Sue, Liz, Rosa (Leeds & West Yorkshire)

THE IMPORTANCE OF MARXIST EDUCATION

I have long bemoaned the fact that thoroughgoing Marxist education of our members, particularly the new ones, seems not to be a priority for the Party. I suspect this is a factor aggravating the current dissension in the Party, with differing attitudes to democratic centralism, personal behaviour etc.

Years back, when we had big branches, the member’s minimum duty was to come to the weekly branch meeting, sell the paper on Saturday, and attend a weekly (maybe fortnightly) Marxist education class. The lesson was not introduced by a visiting speaker, but by an attending branch member, assisted (if necessary) with reading matter and structure by a more advanced member.

The syllabus had been prepared by Tony Cliff: dialectics, historical materialism, bourgeois economics, state and revolution, state capitalism, etc. – all of which a member needs to be intimately conversant with in order to be a revolutionary socialist.

That was how my branch worked, and I think most did.

The result was that all members were theoretically convinced Marxists, who could bolster the theory with practice, by being active in their trade unions, and in particular, solidarising and discussing with strikers on picket lines; strikes, as the saying goes, being the ‘hydra head of revolution.’

The relevance with the present situation pertains mostly with students, who, like most members are probably not only failing to get a thorough Marxist education, but with the addition of not belonging to trade unions, possibly not visiting picket lines, and selling the paper mostly to other students, large numbers seem to have joined the dissenting faction, unlike our more working class non-students.

Also, when students leave university without adequate Marxist theory and practice, we lose them anyway.

I think things might not have become so

difficult if all our members had been better trained as educated Marxists. We therefore need to regulate our Marxist education more thoroughly.

Chanie (Hackney)

CONSENT IN A REVOLUTIONARY PARTY

As a revolutionary socialist organisation that prides itself on being at the forefront of women's liberation, with a strong tradition in that area, we cannot depend on a legal definition of rape, and by extension a legal definition of consent, that is based on a bourgeois conceptions of gender and violence.

The legal definition of rape has always been and continues to be inadequate, not until 1994 was rape within marriage and penile penetration of the anus included within the legal definition. The point is that any definition used within any organisation, institution or legal body is also subject to the constructed normalisations of the society based on that time period.

We understand that women under capitalism are oppressed. Kollontai states that women suffer from 'heavy chains' under capitalism, and therefore 'special agitation' is needed to counter the disproportionate effects of capitalism on women across the world. The bourgeois court fails to account for the systemic oppression of women, as Bukharin said it is an institution that carries on "under the guidance of laws passed in the interests of the exploiting class."

The legal definition still fails us because it fails to provide clarity regarding what consent is and incorporate an analysis of women's oppression. Specifically, it fails to account for how the objectification, commodification and availability of women's bodies - contributes to power structures that affect consent.

Therefore it is woefully inadequate for socialists to hope to use the legal definition of rape and consent as a particularly valid starting point, or to hope to 'expand the remit' given by the legal definition of rape by the standards of a revolutionary organisation, particularly one in the IS Tradition.

While our theory on women's liberation is a pinnacle of the party, this does not mean that it is without improvements. Much of our theory on women's liberation was written in the 80s. Since then new arguments are being debated in the movement. In the current climate of austerity, with women facing unprecedented attacks in the home, the street and the workplace, coupled with an alarming rise in sexual violence, it is crucial that we are expanding our analysis using the foundations of our theory on women's oppression.

In doing this, we can engage effectively in the contemporary consent debates. Over the last year, the SWP were on the streets, protesting and participating in the Slutwalks against 'slut shaming': questioning the way women dress, the relationships women hold with men, how many sexual partners women have had, how much women have had to drink - SWSS engaged and confronted these arguments across the country, but these arguments are yet to be won.

We must actively confront the demonization of working women. These debates and arguments are also ongoing outside the party, in recent protests in the UK, and mass protest movements across the world in South Asia, America and Europe. When we intervened on the 'Slutwalks' our placards were clear: "no means no" but it is essential that we ask ourselves, does 'yes' always mean 'yes'?

As Marxists, our analysis of how and why rape happens differs dramatically from that of more traditional ruling ideas. We do not use moralistic ideas of 'bad men'. In fact, we reject this idea entirely - seemingly very 'good men' can assault women and the normalisation of sexist violence under capitalist society makes this an entirely possible scenario.

However, we reject the caricature of the 'bad man' not only because of the implication of strangers in dark alley ways deeply harming women that are raped in their own home by their partner, constituting the majority of rape cases, but because it is not an adequate materialist analysis of the nature of sexual violence.

We understand that through exploitation of our labour we become alienated, from ourselves and from each other, and thus are able to commit violent acts against one another. We also understand that capitalist property relations demand that women, unlike in precapitalist society, are oppressed first in the home and then in the workplace.

They provide not only cheap labour for the capitalist class, but free labour for the 'family unit' and thus constitute an oppressed group within the already exploited proletariat. This allows us to see rape not as a sexual act, it is the express denial of sexual agency, or related to arousal or gratification, but a violent conclusion of the power relations at play between men and women, and in many cases reaffirming a position of power or a traditionalist view of masculinity.

As long as dominant cultural hegemony refuses to accept this analysis of the societal role of women, their perception of rape and sexual consent will not be adequate. Because of this we must develop our own more nuanced analysis of sexual consent, sexual coercion, sexual agency and rape that uses our analysis of women's oppression.

At the same time, we must not forget that socialist organisations are a microcosm of wider society and are still subject to the influence of the dominant ideas perpetuated under capitalism. Sex is not necessarily less likely to be abusive or violent just because

it is between members within the party.

An act does not become radical or anti-sexist simply by virtue of radicals or anti-sexists doing it. There is therefore a danger within revolutionary socialist circles of assuming that issues of consent can be examined as abstract from sexist society - for instance, that lines of inquiry when examining sexual impropriety are negated of the sexism that would be attached to them in bourgeois court of law, simply because they are asked by socialists.

The implications of asking questions concerning sexual history or drug and alcohol use are universally unacceptable, not only unacceptable to the capitalist class and their courts of law.

On the one hand we must not assume that 'leading comrade' and 'sexist' or even 'rapist' are mutually exclusive terms, but on the other we should not assume that a Marxist understanding of rape, which indeed accounts for alienation and sexism within capitalist society excuses rape or alleviates the necessity to view it as a violent and gendered act.

We need to address the specifics of the consent debate in the wider periphery, but firstly and more importantly- inside the party, Women can be raped in the family home, by their husbands, with or without them knowingly consenting.

As it stands the debate within the party around this issue is stifled by caricatured arguments that this debate is derived from feminism, therefore it puts feminism above class and divides the workers. We reject this rebuttal. It is not an adequate materialist analysis of the nature of sexual violence. The arguments around consent essentially help to raise the political level of the debate, helps to create space for the party to agitate and form new networks, gives us the chance to argue more broadly on the class distinctions with feminists if need be, while actively tackling sexism, raunch culture, pornography and sexual violence.

It is imperative that Marxists do not see anti-rape campaigning as an issue for 'feminists', as divisive to the class, or as lacking in class politics. Rape is a crime against working class women, women now accounting for over half of the global working class, and thus inherently a class issue. Women are integral to the struggle of the working class. Zetkin notes that Lenin stated "There can be no real mass movement without the women... We cannot exercise the dictatorship of the proletariat without having millions of women on our side. Nor can we engage in communist construction without them. We must find a way to reach... the mass of women, who feel themselves exploited, enslaved and crushed by the domination of the men"

Statistics provided by the NHS show how women from lower income backgrounds are three times more likely to be raped (based only on reported rapes) than those in more financially secure situations.

Sexual assault is also more common

for women living in inner-city or urban areas and for women living in social housing. While rape is a violent crime against any women and should be condemned without exception in all circumstances, women within the ruling class are far less likely to be in a situation where they are vulnerable to repeated sexual violence such as the inability to leave an abusive sexual partner due to financial insecurity or want of safe refuge.

Simply put, women's issues do not deviate from class struggle, women's issues are a vital facet of class struggle, particularly rape, which is perpetrated disproportionately against working class women.

Should concern around those appointed in a position of power, including those who have power that is derived from their age be completely dismissed? It is not simply a question of bourgeois moralism when age is one of the biggest risk factors for someone to become a victim of a sexual offence.

Recent statistics have highlighted sexual assault crimes disproportionately affect women aged 16-19, as they are four times more likely to be the victims of rape. It is widely accepted that it is inappropriate for a teacher to have sex with an A Level student because they are in a position of power, and generally substantially older, and therefore consent cannot necessarily be given.

People should not be judged automatically over age within relationships but we need to recognise that power imbalance isn't absent from the social context, and to understand it instead of ignoring it. Our society is governed by power imbalances that, unfortunately, run across a gradient of age: an appreciation and understanding of this is good political engagement with reality, not moralism.

Age is not the only indicator of power, and in any given scenario, due to their position in a work place, a political organisation, and educational institution or many other formal frameworks, a man can afford certain structural levels of respect, authority or power which can result in a power imbalance, which has to be recognised. For a man to have sex with a woman that he can exert power over can be said to be coercive, even if the woman verbally gives consent, she is not giving true or full consent, because she may not feel comfortable, or more importantly powerful enough, to say no.

Of course this is not always the case, but must be taken into account when men in positions of power are accused of rape. Focusing on whether the woman has explicitly said no does not give them all the power. It puts the responsibility on the woman, which is especially difficult when she is in a vulnerable position. By focusing on whether the answer is "yes" or "no", we ignore the questioner. And if the questioner is in a position of power, it becomes more difficult to distinguish whether consent has been freely given or simply manufactured.

Given the questions around what constitutes consent, it is important that we confront the difficult questions that arise

when accounts as to whether sex was consensual differ.

When sex has been more covertly coercive rather than outright forceful or physically violent, these questions can become more difficult and as a vanguard party we must not shy away from them, but be at the helm of dealing with the difficult issues that they throw up.

Often the woman's perception of sex as having been clearly unwanted can lead to considerable trauma, regardless of the position that the man involved takes and in this way the legal framework of 'consent' becomes entirely inappropriate.

Legal notions of consent suggest that the man must know that consent has not been given, and as previously discussed this puts a great deal of pressure on the woman to make clear whether or not she consents, rather than the responsibility being on the man to ensure that it is consensual. As socialists we should wholly reject the idea that as long as a man perceives consent to be present, he has not raped his sexual partner. To properly account for women's oppression means that the sexual agency of the woman must be at the heart of the question of consent.

The SWP has a strong tradition of being clear that sex without consent is not necessarily an act of physical force, but is always an act of rape. The party proudly broke with many on the left and in asserting that rape allegations made against Julian Assange were to be treated seriously, and defeating arguments about the women involved voluntarily inviting Assange home with them, and engaging in consensual sex in one instance constituting consent in any other instance.

As socialists fighting for women's liberation, we know that consent is given on an instance by instance basis and can be immediately revoked when given. If sexual consent is obtained with dishonesty, is obtained in spite of inebriation, is conditional and the conditions are not met, is obtained under duress or pressure, is obtained at an earlier time that has since passed, is obtained through exploiting channels of societal power or dominance then it is not consent.

Assange highlighted that rape allegations cannot be ignored simply because the alleged rapist had a celebrated political record prior to the rape. What constitutes consent is never variable and does not depend on the alleged rapist. The party took a strong and politically principled line on the Assange case and it is imperative that it is applied to all cases of sexual violence on the left.

Aamna (East London and QM SWSS)
Ellen (East London and QM SWSS)
Arnie (UEL SWSS)
Shanice (Central London and KCL SWSS)

THE FACEBOOK FOUR – A DEFENCE

On 12 December 2012, four party members – Adam M, Charlotte B, Paris T and Tom N – received emails from SWP National Secretary Charlie K.

These emails informed them they had been summarily expelled from the SWP, claiming that "The Central Committee has received absolutely clear evidence, via a Facebook chat, that you are part of, and helping to organise, a secret faction." (a couple of days later the CC added the claim that this had also been a permanent faction).

The emails go on to state that "The unanimous view of the CC is that you are expelled from the party with immediate effect. This means you cannot take part in any party activity or event, or attend any party meeting." All four comrades have confirmed that this is the only contact they received from the CC regarding the matter – not so much as a telephone call was made to them.

No-one involved in the conversation was contacted by the CC for an explanation at any stage, nor was anyone contacted by the CC to ask us to stop communicating in this way or around the issues we were discussing. The CC did not ask for the Disputes Committee or any other party body to investigate the matter in any way. It just sent out-of-the-blue emails to these 4 comrades.

The Facebook conversation referred to in the expulsion emails took place between 28 November 2012 and 3 December 2012, a period of just 5 days. Those who took part in it were all SWP members. It brought together a number of comrades who had got wind of a disputes committee investigation into an alleged rape by a CC member.

These comrades shared their concerns with each other, regarding their alarm at the seriousness of the allegations, and were keen to make sure the matter was dealt with adequately at Party Conference, their clear worry being the damage that could be done to the party if the matter was not dealt with and if this later became public knowledge.

The discussion that took place on this Facebook conversation (note, a Facebook conversation is only visible to the participants by its very nature – in the same way as an email conversation or conferenced telephone call is) therefore was purely around making sure there was adequate time given at conference, and that the complainant and her supporters, who we had heard had serious misgivings regarding the way the investigation had been handled by the DC, was to be given adequate time to express this in front of conference. Note – this is not a factional purpose. Simply seeking to ensure a fair political debate is not a factional position – it is some socialists should strive for in all components of political life.

It is true that comrades in this conversation raised the question of whether a

faction should be formed – but this was decided against after very little discussion on the subject. Discussing whether to form a faction is not the same thing as operating as one – indeed if it were deemed to be then a faction could never actually be formed.

A faction is a formally-constituted organisation of people committed to a platform and a coherent set of ideas that they would wish to make party policy. A secret faction is thus the above, but one that organises in a manner that is deliberately excluding of the party at large. A permanent faction would be defined as one that did not disband after a party conference had voted in favour or, or against, the policy of that faction.

A group of people discussing the possibility of forming a faction is not a faction. A group of people discussing broad issues that they feel are of concern within the party is not a faction.

A group of people that happen to agree on loose principles is also not a faction. During the course of the offending Facebook conversation, the above and no more, when all is read in context and appropriately, is what happened. The formation of a faction was discussed and ultimately rejected. IB motions were discussed, but there was no voting process, no universal agreement, no debate as to a coherent strategy.

Even the most potentially factional comments that were made issued from individuals in their capacity as individuals, and were throwaway comments that were certainly not tactically binding. Indeed, the evidence is that in reality little was achieved from this conversation.

The evidence cited by the CC in claiming that this was a secret faction is patchy, and this is unsurprising, as various quotes from the conversation were taken utterly out of context and manipulated – this is a tactic of the state, not of our tradition, and is not an example of political honesty.

So the CC raises the fact that at one point in the conversation, Charlotte B, one of the later expelled comrades suggests that comrades should not raise the issue at aggregates, and should wait to raise it at conference instead.

This is not a position based on a desire to act covertly – rather it was based on the fact that where comrades had attempted to raise the matter in branch meetings or aggregates, they had been stopped from talking about it; as well as being based on a desire not to undermine the confidentiality of the complaint.

And the proof of the pudding is that a number of those who took part in the conversation ignored this suggestion and raised the matter at their aggregates anyway; indeed Tim N, one of the comrades expelled by the CC, seconded a motion over this matter at his aggregate, and the CC responded by summoning him to a Disputes Committee – hardly evidence of covert behaviour on his part.

Another quote the CC has manipulated is the remark from Paris T that “There’s

nothing stopping a faction post-conference if it all goes Pete Tong”. However, the context to this is crucial. It follows a discussion that concludes that we were not in a position to put together a faction pre-conference. The reference to post-conference is foresight – we recognised that if conference did not deal with the issue at hand adequately then we may need to campaign for a special conference afterwards (as per the constitution) and if we were successful in doing so then we could revisit the question of forming a faction during the pre-conference period.

Far from breaking the constitution, we were following it to the letter – this is why the constitution contains provisions for special conferences and factions after all. And it’s worth noting that this is the only point in the conversation in which the possibility of forming a faction in these future circumstances is even mentioned – hardly indicative of some grand plan.

The CC’s other main claim to ‘evidence’ is where it insists that ‘non-members’ were ‘willingly’ added to the conversation. Again, this is a utter distortion – at one point a comrade who had recently left the party was added by mistake by someone who did not realise they had resigned.

Other comrades clarified, and the ex-member left the conversation having taken no part in it or discussed it with others. Elsewhere, Adam M stated an intention to contact another ex-member, who it was believed had resigned from the party in relation to the matter investigated by the DC. However, although it was stated as an intention, it was never acted upon, so once again the matter was not discussed with non-members, despite the CC’s insistence that it was.

The claim the CC later added that this was a ‘permanent faction’ was based on a fleeting reference from Paris T that he had met up with some comrades in a pub on a Friday before conference the previous year, and proposed doing so again. But this is not evidence of a permanent faction.

Rather, Paris had met up with some comrades (not involved in the Facebook conversation) to discuss the similar motions that they had submitted – this is an example of fraternal political practice, not of factionalism. One would expect comrades to seek work together around motions to conference, and to attempt to win others to supporting them – and all of this falls within the party constitution.

Indeed, the document the CC went on to release on the eve of party conference, ‘For an Interventionalist Party’ clearly states that “Members of the SWP are of course free to discuss face-to-face or online and, particularly during the pre-conference period, to get together to seek the outcomes that they want to achieve... There are many cases of this happening, usually quite informally, during the party’s history.”

It is most peculiar that the CC released this, having recently expelled 4 comrades who had acted precisely within the spirit of it. It is reassuring that the CC is capable of

grasping that in the modern day, comrades may discuss online rather than face-to-face; but why then did it expel these comrades?

The question of why these 4 comrades were expelled, but the other participants in the conversation were not, also remains.

When asked about this, CC members have responded that the 4 expelled were “all ex-party organisers, who would all have an understanding of our democracy”.

But this is not a sufficient explanation. Other comrades who took part in the conversation were also long-standing party members, and some of these were ex-full-timers. None of us have been contacted by the CC to discuss our conduct regarding this matter. So this rationale does not stack up. And it suggests therefore that firstly, the CC didn’t feel confident to expel all participants, but instead chose 4 to make examples of (similar to the then CC’s actions in expelling Clare S a few years ago); and secondly, that these 4 were probably picked for specific reasons.

On this, it is notable that both Paris and Tim had written IB articles critiquing aspects of party democracy. At the same time, the author of another critical IB article who stood to be delegated to conference was slandered at their aggregate when other comrades had got up and openly accused them of factionalism, despite having no evidence to support this assertion. This did ensure that they weren’t delegated.

My contention is therefore that the CC was acting in a bureaucratic way to silence dissenting voices ahead of a conference that was likely to contain some hotly-contested debates and votes.

It is also worth noting at this point that a faction was later formed specifically to oppose these expulsions – the Democratic Opposition, of which I was a member.

However, despite conference taking an indicative vote on the question of the expulsions, it should be pointed out that the DO was denied any right to speak on the matter at conference, and was not allowed to present a petition signed by around 170 party members opposing the expulsions.

In short, a fair political debate on the expulsions was not held at conference; it is my hope that a fairer one will be held at the impending special conference.

Looking at the party’s recent history, it is also the case that the CC has not always acted in this way. In 2008, for example, Joseph C took part in a far clearer example of a secret faction, which organised to remove Chris B from his then position as the editor of Socialist Worker.

But neither Joseph, nor any of the other participants in this were expelled or disciplined in any way. In fact Joseph was added to the CC following this episode. So any claim by the CC that it must expel anyone it views as factionalising again simply doesn’t stack up.

This affair also raises the issue that the CC believes it has a right to intercept the private conversations of party members. I

do not accept that it has any such right.

Whether online or in person, comrades are entitled to a degree of privacy in their lives – the hypersuspicion towards the membership from the leadership and the belief it should spy in this way owes more to the Stalinist bureaucracies than to any reading of the IS tradition. In short, this behaviour should be ceased. It is a point of irony that the final remark in the Facebook conversation was from Paris, who said “Sick of paranoid Facebook conversations. We’re in the SWP, not North Korea.”

Sadly it appears the CC has decided we are in fact in North Korea. Comrades, please reject this and support the reinstatement of the Facebook 4; so the party has a chance to move forward in a united way.

Andy (Hackney)

IMPROVING THE WORKING OF THE DISPUTES COMMITTEE

In September 2012 a Disputes Committee (DC) hearing took place in which a woman party member made an accusation of rape against a male comrade. Following a DC hearing, a further woman member came forward with allegations of sexual harassment against the same comrade and gave evidence as part of the first case.

Those of us involved in the case felt from the first hearing onwards that there were serious failings in the process which had to be addressed. We are raising proposals for future cases based on our experiences in this case and are not calling for an overturning of the DC decision or for a new hearing.

We do not believe that the comrades on the DC deliberately went out of their way to make the mistakes we touch on here. That is why we did not propose a different DC at conference. Rather, we believe the mistakes reflect that we do not deal with such cases regularly and have therefore not had the opportunity to test and modify our procedures.

How we approach rape cases

We believe two things need to shape our thinking when it comes to rape cases or cases dealing with sexual violence or assault: firstly, the DC is not a court of law and cannot behave as one, and to do so could seriously undermine the organisation and holds serious legal implications; secondly, our approach in such cases must reflect our political understanding of rape and women’s oppression.

We rightly reject the way in which the courts, police and media trivialise rape and

blame the victims. Combined with the traumatic nature of their experiences and for many women feelings of self-blame, this means that many women find it difficult to accuse their attackers and often only come forward years after their assault – cited as the key reason that Haven sexual assault referral centres now keep rape evidence for up to 30 years.

As revolutionaries, we argue that the trivialisation of rape is partly why convictions are shockingly low (6%). SW articles going back years expose the hypocrisy of the criminal justice system, for example the case involving Lord Justice Moses who cut a rape sentence claiming that “the girls had ‘wanted sex’ and that this was ‘what young people do’.” (<http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=29418>)

The system is structured to entrench women’s oppression and to force women into silence: as late as 1994 a judge advised a jury in a rape case that “women and small children tend to lie about these matters” (<http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=29418>). It is unsurprising then that while some 23% of women will experience sexual abuse in their lifetime, 40% tell no one, and surveys by Rape Crisis and Women’s Aid show that over 80% of women do not report their rape to the police because they do not believe they will be taken seriously. We’ve seen the reality of this with the Savile case more recently.

Because we reject this hypocrisy and sexism of the system, when challenged with allegations of sexual assault in our own organisation the decisions that are made about the case must reflect our politics on women’s oppression and party members must have the utmost confidence in the decisions made.

To rebuff some recent accusations: we do not simply say that any woman who comes forward must be believed. Rather, we argue, that we must take in good faith and with the utmost seriousness their coming forward and do everything possible to ensure that they are heard and taken seriously. We would do this, for example, if a comrade or anyone else for that matter approached us with an allegation of racism.

Without prejudging their decision, and while recognising that the DC in such cases must make decisions on the basis of facts and their judgement as elected and trusted members, it is vital to recognise that facts in rape cases are highly contested and all too often the women is at an unjust disadvantage to prove her case – a context which is vital to our approach in such cases.

Finally, we believe that our understanding of rape should shape our approach to the charge of rape itself particularly in contested cases. Where it is difficult to prove the charge – when there are no witnesses to an event, where it is one comrade’s word against another – we believe that the job of the DC is to avoid acting as a court of law, but rather should make a judgement as to whether or not inappropriate behaviour has occurred

and to politically judge whether a comrade has acted in a way which has brought or will bring the party into disrepute.

Proposals

1. Clarifying the remit of the DC in rape cases

We do not agree with some suggestions and commentary in the bourgeois media that our duty is to direct comrades coming forward with such charges to the police.

More importantly, we do not believe that the DC is in a position to make a decision over the guilt or innocence in rape cases. The DC is not a legal body equipped with the skills to investigate such claims. Yet the DC in this case began by reading out a legal definition of rape, and proceeded to try and ascertain whether or not rape occurred. In our view the taking of a legalistic position without the ability to conduct any kind of investigation of this nature led to the problems which followed.

In our view the role of the DC in such cases is to make a judgement as to whether or not inappropriate behaviour has occurred and to politically judge whether a comrade has acted in a way which has brought or will bring the party into disrepute.

We therefore propose that the role and function of the DC be clarified for future cases of this nature, listening to those of us involved in this case but more broadly taking on board the wealth of talent across the organisation.

2. Awareness of procedures:

Comrades making an accusation should be made aware of the DC’s procedures, and be kept informed of the progress of the case. In this case the comrade was not aware for example that the comrade she accused had been suspended from normal party activities. It was also not explained that she could remain anonymous.

3. Access to information

Everyone involved in the case must have equal access to information. In this case, the comrade making the accusation did not know which witnesses were called by the comrade she accused, and she never saw/heard the accused’s response despite him having access to her statement weeks in advance.

The only time she heard any of his response was through lengthy questioning by the DC after he had given evidence, and she was expected to respond to it immediately.

4. Support

People involved in DC cases, particularly those involving rape, may need support. Making an accusation of rape and giving evidence about traumatic experiences can be extremely stressful.

In such cases the DC has a duty of care towards the comrades involved to ensure that they have support. In this case the DC did not check that the comrade making the complaint had support: they expected her to liaise

with them directly. She finally asked for a DC liaison person from her own witnesses, which was agreed to by the DC. This should have been offered from the beginning.

5. The DC members involved in a case must not be closely associated with either party

Cases that come to the DC are not heard by all its members: a smaller number of them are chosen to hear each one. The DC also has the power to co-opt members should they deem it necessary.

As far as possible, members should be chosen in each case that have no particular track record of friendship or close political work with anyone involved. In this case, the comrade accused of rape knew all of the DC members through longstanding personal friendships and political relationships lasting decades, while the comrade making the complaint knew no-one. There were also no DC members in her peer group represented.

If cases involve CC members, then no CC member should be allowed to sit on the DC, as this can pose a conflict of interest. This is not about implying that DC members or CC members are corruptible and untrustworthy, far from it.

Rather, it is recognising the enormous pressure such cases bring to bear on the individuals who have to potentially continue to work closely with the comrades involved in the case. In this case, 5 of the 7 members sitting on the DC panel were former or current CC members.

5. The DC must not put witnesses under unnecessary stress

In this case, the comrade making the complaint was kept waiting for four hours before she was called into the DC to give evidence: this added stress made it harder for her to put her side of the case.

She had told the DC many weeks in advance that in the two-day period of the hearing she would need to work several hours each day. It was late at night on the first day of the hearing that she was told that the DC might make a decision while she was at work, and that in this case most DC members would have left by the time she returned to hear it. She felt marginalised and disrespected.

6. Comrades making accusations of rape should not be asked about other personal relationships

One of the most disgusting aspects of the courts' treatment of rape victims is that women are implicitly blamed for rapes based on an exploration of their previous sexual activity, while the perpetrator's sexual history remains unexplored.

Sexual history is not relevant in rape cases and there is no place for such attitudes in a revolutionary party. Yet in this case the comrade making the accusation faced questioning about past relationships, about gossip concerning relationships with other male comrades and was asked

to account for the fact that she went for a drink with the comrade she accused.

She was not told why she was being asked these questions even though she had been assured that she would not be questioned on gossip and was also assured that any questions asked of her after the DC interviewed the accused, would be put into context for her. She felt humiliated by these questions, and told her witnesses that "they think I am a slut who asked for it".

In the second hearing in this case, the comrade raising an allegation of sexual harassment against the same male comrade was asked whether or not it was true that she likes to drink. If this were to happen in cases we were reflecting on in our publications, for example the sexist comments made by the policeman which sparked the 'Slut Walks', we would rightly view them as completely unacceptable.

7. The DC must explain to those involved how it has reached its decision, and what they can say about the case:

In this case, the DC made a one-sentence decision – that the allegation of rape was unproven – with no further explanation. They then left the building. As might have been expected, the comrade who had made the accusation was extremely distressed. The DC took a full two weeks to provide a statement. By this time the second woman comrade had raised allegations of sexual harassment against the same male comrade.

Yet the DC's statement did not explain why it did not accept the account given by the two women comrades, why it did not regard the statement of the second woman as relevant to the case, or why it failed to make any criticism at all of the male comrade's behaviour.

The DC did not explain to the comrades involved in the dispute what they could say to others about it, and what should be kept confidential, or what confidentiality meant. Given our concerns regarding the way the case had been handled, we expected to have this discussion and repeatedly asked the CC to clarify our right to raise our concerns. This discussion was never facilitated.

8. People involved in a dispute must abide by party discipline and be held accountable for their actions

In this case, the comrade against whom the complaint was made broke discipline – the CC had instructed him to give up his normal party activities, but he spoke in a public meeting and travelled to the city where the comrade making the complaint lived in the week before the hearing, which she and her witnesses found intimidating.

Both incidents were raised with the DC and the CC, and both bodies confirmed that these matters would be dealt with, yet it seems that no action has been taken.

9. The outcome and fallout of such cases must be considered:

Contested cases always have the potential

for creating discontent no matter what the charges. In this case, given the seriousness of the charge and the clear concerns expressed before, during and after the hearing about the process, the CC should have taken immediate steps to ensure that the comrades involved were engaged with about their concerns and to address them.

More importantly, in rape cases the CC must ensure that no comrades who come forward are slandered, attacked or criticised for doing so. In this case the comrade bringing the rape charge has had no support or advice about how to engage with members in her district or how she can be active in the party. Given the discussion surrounding the case, she feels unwelcome at party events. The role of the comrade she accused has never been clarified with her.

This is not a question of guilt or innocence or taking sides, it is about ensuring that when comrades in such cases come forward, even if the outcome is the same, that they are supported and able to have a full political life in the SWP.

Simon and Sadia (Birmingham)
Rita and Viv (Hackney)
Comrade W
Jen (East London)

DISPUTES COMMITTEE PROPOSALS

The primary need for the Party is for a far-reaching commission to look at the question of Disputes Committee reform. This should be part co-opted (to include comrades with a relevant background e.g. as lawyers or working with Women's Aid or Rape Crisis organisations); and partly elected. It should include a CC representative. The commission should consciously seek to undertake an open and broad examination of all aspects of the DC's work, taking submissions and contributions from party members who want to contribute, with the results to be reported back to the wider Party. Transparency will help to repair the current divisions within the Party.

There cannot be a completely prescriptive approach to the work of the DC, because of the very broad range of cases that may occur (and the diverse political implications of those cases).

Some general principles, however, should be considered by the commission:

The DC is a political body, not a court of law. Its role is to uphold the integrity and reputation of the Party. It cannot seek to replicate the work of an entire legal system, and should not seek to do so.

The principle of 'natural justice' should apply – as we would demand from an employer or where disciplinary complaints are made within a trade union.

The composition of the DC should reflect this principle. There must be no appearance ever of a 'kangaroo court'.

Accused comrades should be given the charges against them in writing in advance of the hearing.

Both comrades, the accused and the complainant, should have the opportunity to be accompanied by a friend or supporter.

The findings of the DC and the reasoning behind these should be carefully explained to the complainant and the accused at the end of a hearing.

Following recent controversy, two areas require particularly careful consideration:

1. Charges of serious sexual misconduct or rape (or comparable charges of personal misconduct)

i) The role of the DC in cases such as this very clearly cannot be a quasi-legal one of judging individual guilt or innocence, and the limitations of the DC's role must be carefully explained to a complainant in advance of any formal investigation.

Rather, the DC's role should be to consider if it is likely that the behaviour of a comrade is at odds with the politics of the Party, or could affect the ability of other comrades to participate in the Party's work, or that the accused comrade is likely to have behaved in a way that will otherwise damage the practice of the Party or the Party's reputation.

ii) A starting point for the DC's work should be a recognition that is difficult for women to make allegations of rape or sexual harassment, and rare for these complaints to be made falsely.

iii) In these infrequent complex cases, consideration should be given by the Chair of the DC to co-opting an experienced comrade with relevant knowledge and experience.

iv) Cases of this nature are distressing, and the DC must seek to ensure appropriate support for all comrades involved.

v) Particular care should be taken to ensure that the complainant has the support of a comrade of their choice throughout, and that the complainant and their supporter are kept informed of the progress of the case.

vi) There will of course be no question of putting a complainant under pressure not to pursue a route outside the Party, and complainants will be supported within the Party if this is their choice.

vii) In line with recent practice, the complainant and accused comrades should not be expected to meet.

viii) The accused comrade will of course have the opportunity to hear and challenge the written evidence of the complainant

and their witnesses. The equivalent opportunity must be given to a complainant, with enough time that they can properly consider what has been said. The approach should be one of equal access to evidence.

ix) Care should be taken (as has happened in the past) that questions to the complainant are put by a single member of the DC, to make the situation less stressful and difficult. Prior preparation of likely questions will reduce the need for long breaks during a hearing, and will therefore reduce the stress experienced by the complainant and the accused.

x) The nature of the questions put must be carefully considered by the DC. Questioning around the sexual history or social behaviour of a complainant is exceptionally unlikely to be appropriate.

xi) The DC should explain carefully to both comrades how it has reached its decision, and also explain to comrades what can be said about the case. The principle is one of confidentiality, in order to protect individuals, but not secrecy. The Party has nothing to hide. It should also be recognised that a complainant may well have confided in friends or family outside the Party, and should of course not be prevented from doing so.

xii) This final area is the responsibility not just of the DC, but of leading comrades nationally and at district and branch level. Great care must be taken that comrades who bring a complaint of this nature are not treated detrimentally as a result of having done so. Similarly, comrades who have supported a comrade in bringing a complaint must not be treated detrimentally.

2. Cases where the accused comrade is a CC member

i) The DC in such cases must not include CC members or comrades who have worked very closely with the accused comrade.

ii) The Party is entitled to expect the highest possible standards of personal and political behaviour from CC members. The findings of the DC should reflect our high expectations of leading comrades.

In Defence of Our Party Faction Committee

DISPUTES COMMITTEE: SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

I was chair of the Disputes Committee for over ten years, and have no doubt that the party needs such a body to look after its wellbeing, ensure that comrades act within

the spirit of Party membership, follow party discipline and instructions etc.

Throughout most of my time the cases were largely uncontroversial and the session at conference usually went off with very little discussion.

Much of the time the case would be where someone was actively and deliberately hindering party work, entryism from another group, occasionally it would be about taking union positions when told not to, sometimes it was more personal; violence, domestic violence, sexually inappropriate behaviour.

It is quite right that a body other than the CC should deal with this. The Party has to have its own rules, and expected standards of behaviour and an independent body to ensure such standards are maintained

My belief is that the Disputes Committee procedures need a thoroughgoing review of the type proposed by the IDOOP faction, and I am not here prejudging any question or outcome such a body would reach. However I do have some thoughts on areas of DC work that do need reviewing. This is not a comprehensive review, but some initial thoughts of areas a commission should look at, and outcomes it might want to consider.

During the Democracy Commission I was tasked by the Commission with reviewing the procedures of the (newly renamed) Disputes Committee.

Having chaired the Committee for a number of years it had become increasingly clear to me that many of the procedures were unsatisfactory and were weighted very heavily in favour of the complainants (most often the complainants were the CC, as most complaints either came directly from them or were passed through them).

The charged comrade would often face a vague catchall charge like 'bringing the party into disrepute', and would receive no written clarification of the charge.

This meant on the day they turned up, they would verbally receive the specifics of the charge for the first time, and were not allowed to be in the room to hear the main complainant or any of the witnesses.

It was against this background that I proposed that from now on the recipient of the complaint must be able to have written details of the complaint, and (except in exceptional circumstances-usually complaints of a highly personal nature) be able to stay in the room to hear the complainant, and all witnesses.

The problem was that this process was (wrongly as it turned out) based on the assumption that in the main the CC would be the complainant rather than one of its number being the accused.

Had I considered the situation where a case was brought against a CC member it seems to me a whole number of other measures would have had to be considered, and indeed should have been. Furthermore there was an assumption that the committee had the experience, know how, and political knowledge to deal with any charge.

This case has led me to question those

assumptions and elements of the procedure. I am more than willing to take the burden of the blame for procedural shortcomings, a fact that some CC supporters can't seem to get their heads around, as if admitting mistakes is an incomprehensible path to take. However admitting your mistakes is only really worthwhile if you are willing to look at how they may be corrected.

So what do I feel are the main areas for review: I think there are two areas that especially need consideration:

1. What should the procedure be if any case is brought against a CC member?
2. What if the charge is one of the sort recently dealt with.

First of all a general point: At no time in the recent case did I, would I, or should I or any other member of the Disputes Committee exert any pressure either way on whether the comrade should take the case to the police. That advice was never sought and therefore never given. I would guess that if the person involved wished to get such advice they would have gone to those closest to them.

Returning to the two points above, I now think for things to look transparent and clear if a case is brought against a CC member the CC should not have the right to have members on the panel.

This will remove all charges of cronyism, and as a by-product may often avoid the outcome seriously fracturing the CC itself.

The point about cronyism isn't an allegation against anyone, I'm just arguing that it completely removes any chance of that charge being levelled.

On the nature of the case: If the case is a complaint of sexual misbehaviour the DC should use it's already existing ability to co-opt comrades with legal, or relevant counselling experience, and ensure there is sufficient distance between the panel and either party.

Furthermore with the case we heard it was agreed in the interests of protecting the complainant from having to deal with a barrage of questions coming at her from all angles, that all questions should come through one person, this meant a huge amounts of time were spent drawing up questions, making sure the wording was right, that the questioner was clear as to what was being asked etc. In retrospect it is clear that if such a procedure were to be adopted again the DC should meet in advance of the day of the hearing to draw up all primary questions, thus easing the stress on complainer and accused who had to sit around for hours waiting for things to happen.

It is also clear that the system of giving evidence did not work fairly in this case. The complainant/and indeed the second witness never heard the case for the defence, and therefore had no idea what the committee was told and were therefore unable to challenge specifics.

I think any commission should also look at whether somebody accused of something has to submit their defence in writing.

I believe that in these cases where you cannot normally have both parties in the same room, that both sides be allowed to have a friend/advocate present to hear what the other side is saying. Obviously there would have to be strict rules as to the behaviour of such advocates, but it seems to me this would allow both sides to be fully aware of what the other is saying.

Finally proper time at the end of the hearing has to be given, not just announce a verdict, but also explain it. If that is not possible for any reason, the DC should reconvene to announce and explain its verdicts.

I think though there is a wider question for consideration. The charge of rape is a very serious criminal charge- it puts enormously onerous pressure on comrades to declare someone guilty of rape. Of course we have a set of politics that separates us from bourgeois courts, but we also would not have at our disposal tools that a legal case would have, forensics, private detectives, aggressive cross examination, psychological reports the ability to recover deleted texts and emails. Furthermore the ultimate penalty at our disposal is expulsion, nothing else.

It seems to me it would be unthinkable to tell a woman comrade we will not hear a case, but we ought to say we will deal with general charges of sexual misconduct, abuse of position, behaviour that falls short of standards required of a party member or party leader (for whom the bar has to be set high).

Any or all of these could potentially lead to expulsion from the party, removal of position etc. If the comrade then wanted to pursue the specific charge of rape they would have to take it to the police, and of course would have every right to do so.

At the post conference National Committee the CC wanted to limit any review of the DC procedures to 'the leak' question. Of course we have to be in favour of protecting the confidentiality of all parties (particularly the potential victim), but we have to also be aware that 'leaks' cannot be the main issue in such a case. Let's just take an example of where leak frenzy becomes ridiculous. If someone believes they have been a victim of a sexual attack of some sort, and confides in non-party friends who then leak it, are we seriously going to discipline the complainant. That is surely not tenable. We have to strive to ensure confidentiality, but guard against that becoming the major pre-occupation with the case.

Finally, and this really shouldn't need saying, but in light of events I believe should be put in the procedures; In the event of any hearing it is a party member's duty to come forward with any information they think might be relevant, and under no circumstances should any member suffer victimisation, abuse, or become ostracised as a result of having done so.

In an earlier case a woman comrade received abuse from some comrades for giving evidence on behalf of someone charged with a serious breach of Party rules.

In the recent case, many of the comrades closest to the case have been isolated by other comrades, the subject of at times vicious gossip and speculation, and one woman comrade in particular seems to have become the brunt of much of the anger of those who believe they are being loyal to the CC.

Such behaviour is wholly unacceptable and the Commission will need to make that clear to all comrades.

Pat (Central London)

ON THE CRISIS

The crisis currently enveloping the party has thrown up many questions. Our politics on rape, our democracy and how we view those who criticise us have all been the focus of attention. This entry seeks to deal frankly and honestly and politically with how we arrived at this point.

The politics of rape

The SWP has a proud track record of supporting women's liberation. Whether it's throwing ourselves into pro-choice campaigns, fighting objectification, or refusing to trivialise rape in the Assange case, we have proven again and again that our Marxist analysis of women's oppression is fit for purpose.

There have been suggestions that we may need to update our analysis of women's oppression and particularly our critique of feminism. It is indeed unacceptable that the term feminist has been used as a slur by some comrades during the crisis. But our fundamental analysis of women's oppression, patriarchy theory and capitalism has stood the test of time.

It is for these reasons that the approach sections of the Party has taken to allegations of rape and sexual assault, has deeply shocked so many people both inside and outside the organisation.

It must be said frankly and honestly that not every rape allegation ever made has been true, and not every allegation that is made in the future will be true. Those accused do indeed have the right to put their version of events forward.

However this is an inadequate starting point for Marxists. It is well known that reporting of rape is very low. Only 15% of serious sexual offences against people 16 and over are reported to the police and of the rape offences that are reported, fewer than 6% result in an offender being convicted of this offence.⁶

Bourgeois moralism blames rape survivors for the crime carried out against them. Women in particular are made to feel responsible because of what they were drinking,

⁶ <http://www.rapecrisis.org.uk/mythsandfacts2.php>

what they were wearing, or where they were. From the media, to the police, women (and sometimes men) are routinely failed by the system. This is grimly highlighted by the decision of Lord Justice Moses who slashed the two-year sentences of six men convicted for the rape of two 12 year old girls. He described one of the 12 year olds as “the more sexually experienced”.

She was raped by five of the men, while the other girl was raped by one. In his judgement Lord Justice Moses ruled that the girls had “wanted sex” and that this was “what young people do”.

When Socialist Worker reported this case it had this to say:

“It’s not just the court system that’s deeply flawed. The police’s failure to take women seriously when they do report rape means that few cases even make it to court. Statistics show the police often declare that ‘no crime’ has been committed.”⁷

An infallible Disputes Committee?

Some comrades point to the experience and record of the members of the dispute committee as a way to argue that their conduct could not have fallen below expectations.

Some cite the fact that the vast majority of the DC is made up of women to reinforce the idea that mistakes couldn’t have been made.

But since when did we in the SWP argue that women can’t sometimes get it wrong on questions of women’s liberation?

Since when did we in the SWP argue that those with proud and long records of building the Party can’t sometimes make mistakes? John R and Lindsay G anyone? And what do we say to new and younger comrades who don’t have years of experience working alongside members of the DC. Who haven’t had a chance to make any judgement on their political records?

It is not good enough to simply say ‘trust these people because they have been in the party a long time and have a great track record on building the party.’ Trust has to be constantly earned and maintained by people’s actions being tested in concrete circumstances.

Moving forward

Nobody involved wants this case to be re-opened. Nobody is calling for the case to be re-opened. But what we must do when we move forward is to assess how we have dealt with a situation and whether or not we can avoid any mistakes in the future.

Was the Disputes Committee really set up in order to make a judgement as to whether or not a rape had taken place? Would people feel comfortable with the DC making the same judgement in a case of alleged murder?

This is not to say that the DC does not

have an important role to play. Even if the women involved had wanted to go to the police, it is still vital that the DC makes a decision on how we as a party of revolutionaries, sanction anyone found to have their behaviour lacking. And herein lies the key point. The role of the DC is to resolve disputes. It is there to assess whether the behaviour of a comrade has fallen below what is expected of them as a member of the SWP and or a member of its leadership. It is not there to cast judgement as to whether a woman was raped anymore than to prove someone guilty or innocent of murder.

This is the root of the crisis. Not fantastical allegations of hidden agendas, not secret plots to destroy the party, and not naïve students being manipulated by external forces.

So let’s vote for the faction motion that seeks to improve the DC and let’s move forward in unity to defeat the real enemies of our class: the Tories and the bosses.

Hanif (Tyneside)

SOCIALISM AND THE STRUGGLE FOR WOMEN’S LIBERATION

The current debates in the party have included discussion of our politics around women. We last had a major debate in the party on our approach to women’s liberation in the 1980s.

The political principles underlying our position, then and now, remain the same. Marxism is a theory and practice which fights for human liberation, in both economic and social terms, including the liberation of women and other oppressed groups.

While women have been oppressed for thousands of years, women’s oppression under capitalism results from a key institution of capitalist society, the family. The family is so important to the ruling class because it is the site for the reproduction of the working class: the next generation of workers is raised in the family, and many of the old, ill and disabled are cared for there.

This link between capitalism and women’s oppression means that women can only be liberated with the end of capitalism. We therefore seek to build a party which opposes every manifestation of sexism – a party in which women play as full a role as possible, and in which male workers fight alongside female workers for women’s liberation.

These principles are the basis of our approach both in the past and today. But the political situation has changed enormously since the 1970s and 80s, and we need to assess how this impacts on our theory and practice. Women in the 1970s were less likely to have jobs: the number of women in work has risen by about half since 1971. It only became illegal to pay a woman less

than a man, or sack a woman because she was pregnant, in 1975. Only a quarter of students were women in the early 1960s, and women were excluded from most Oxford and Cambridge colleges until the 1970s.

The British women’s movement of the 1960s and 70s had arisen in the context of a high level of workers’ struggles and widespread political radicalisation. In this milieu, Marxist ideas – though in a distorted, Stalinist form – were influential, though there were many disagreements and debates. The International Socialists, as the SWP was then called, responded to this situation by establishing a publication, *Women’s Voice*, in 1972 and later setting up *Women’s Voice* campaigning groups for women members and women close to the party.

After the election of Thatcher in 1979 it became clear that the radicalisation of the 1960s and 70s was in retreat – the level of strikes peaked in 1979, but afterwards declined. Several political trends emerged in the women’s movement. One was to move rightward to reformism, and join the Labour Party as part of the Bennite left.

Another, characterised by the pessimism typical of the time, was separatism – for women to reject political work with men. Some separatists ended up adopting reactionary positions: in Indianapolis, Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon succeeded temporarily in getting pornography made illegal, with the enthusiastic support of the religious right.

There was a degree of overlap between the reformist and separatist positions, with many women on the left arguing that some degree of “autonomous” organisation for women was necessary. Those who took this “compromise” position were often associated with the term “socialist feminism” – though this is no doubt a confusing label, and the distinctions between different positions were never simple. It was rare for involvement in the women’s movement to lead women towards socialism: mostly, it led them away from it.

The decline in the level of struggle (“the downturn”) led to a wide-ranging debate in the party about our perspectives. Eventually it was agreed that we should retreat from certain activities: *Women’s Voice* groups closed, and finally the magazine ceased publication in 1982.

Debate in the party around our politics on women, particularly on the issue of whether men benefit in any way from women’s oppression, continued to the mid-1980s. These discussions were reflected in party publications: Tony Cliff wrote a book on women in 1984, and between 1980 and 1985, fifteen ISJ articles about women were published, many of them debating with articles in previous issues.

The issue of whether men benefit in any way from women’s oppression remains crucial. Of course, women face oppression and men do not. On average, for example, men’s pay is higher than women’s. But there is no reason why this benefits men – if

⁷ <http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=29418>

women's pay falls, men's pay doesn't rise. If a woman cannot get an abortion, how does that benefit men? There is no denying that some men in the movement and the working class behave in oppressive ways towards women. If you just look at people's personal lives – and in a period of low class struggle like the 80s, that was a dominant trend – it can look as if they benefit.

But in reality, they don't: from a wider perspective they are not acting in their own best interests, and they do not benefit from such behaviour. Instead, they divide the movement and the class along gender lines and so weaken it, and weaken their own position as part of it. We argue that men should oppose sexism not out of an altruistic desire to take the morally better position, but because opposing divisions between working-class men and women benefits the class as a whole. Men do not benefit from women's oppression; they benefit from fighting alongside women to end it.

The political context we face now is very different from that of the 1970s and 80s. Half of all students have been women since the 1990s, and the majority of trade union members are now women. Women's increased participation in colleges and workplaces has made it easier to win some arguments against sexist ideas and behaviour. Our claim that men and women should organise together politically makes sense.

But there are also new problems, such as the rise of "raunch culture" and the commodification of women's bodies in pornography, now much more widely available than thirty years ago via the internet. These issues have led to the radicalisation of a new generation of women, for example in the "Slut Walk" protests.

Women – and men – involved in such protests encounter SWP members there – we quite rightly took part in the protests even though were based on political traditions quite different to ours, and many party members found the word "slut" troubling. Involvement in women's politics can bring them towards socialist politics, rather than taking women away from socialism, as it so often did the 80s.

Con-Dem cuts also affect women disproportionately – both because more women work in the public sector, so more women's jobs are destroyed, and because cuts in public services put pressure on the family, particularly women, to provide the vulnerable with support. The fact that women are affected disproportionately by the cuts makes it clear, again, that women's oppression is rooted in capitalism and class issues, rather than in the behaviour of individual men.

The political ideas which dominate the broader radical movement arise in a world where Marxism is frequently judged politically irrelevant since the collapse of the Soviet empire, as well as incapable of explaining oppression, and where levels of workers' struggle are at a historic low. Ideas such as autonomism have therefore often been dominant in the movement. The radical

left since Seattle has also been characterised by a desire for unity, and at times an explicit rejection of 1980's-style separatism.

The real question is the terms on which that unity is achieved. For example, many movement authors mention class, but only as another oppression alongside sexism, racism and so forth – the complex overlapping of these different experiences being described by the term "intersectionality".

Typically, class is not seen as the key dynamic in explaining society and achieving social change, or the basis for unity in struggle. There is some pressure for all activists to forget their differences and unite in acceptance of a progressive "common sense" which brings together the struggles of workers, students and women but fails to clarify some of the harder questions that alliance raises.

For example, what is the political role of middle- and ruling-class women? In some ways this is a more pressing question than in the 1970s: women are now the majority of new entrants to middle-class jobs such as solicitor, and two of the last three Home Secretaries have been women.

We need to argue that while middle- and ruling-class women experience oppression – so that we would condemn sexist attacks on someone like Theresa May – we can have no solidarity with her. Or again, how do we respond to the often-repeated claim that Muslim men, because of their acceptance of sexist ideas, present a real danger to women's rights?

Here part of our response must be to stress the day-to-day experience of working-class women who work alongside Muslim men, and whose experience isn't that of the media stereotype. At a theoretical level, we have to respond in detail to concepts such as "privilege" and "intersectionality", which are widely referenced in academic discussions of oppression. Most of all, we have to break with the movement common sense which sees class struggle, and the building of a revolutionary party, as irrelevant and outmoded.

How do we best take up these arguments? In the pre-conference IB3, in a piece called "Women's Liberation – Argument Outside and Inside the Party", three comrades addressed this issue. They argued, quite rightly, that "The only way to have these clear arguments is to debate them fully, and not shy away from them." Unity based on fudging difficult questions will quickly collapse under pressure. They criticise – again quite rightly – the book "Beyond the Fragments", which argues against building a Leninist party like the SWP. But the problem with their argument is that "Beyond the Fragments" was published in 1979. Very few people now politically active have read it, so a polemic against it does nothing to win people to our politics today.

And the problem with simply reaching back to the ideas we developed in the 1980s is that it makes our thinking look like a dead orthodoxy – just as the opponents of

Marxism claim – rather than the result of involvement in the world today.

In the current political context, new books are being written, and writers who first became prominent in the 70s are being read by new audiences. We need to respond to these works. In some cases we can strengthen our tradition by learning from them – in others a sharp disagreement or a nuanced debate will be required.

Relevant works here include Silvia Federici's writing in defence of wages for housework; Lise Vogel's "Marxism and the Oppression of Women", first published thirty years ago and about to be republished; "Marx on Gender and the Family" by Heather Brown; and the newly popular work of Raya Dunayevskaya. We should respond in more detail to Laurie Penny's "Meat Market: Female Flesh Under Capitalism". Articles on some of these authors, and the issues they raise, have already been commissioned.

We need more discussion and debate throughout the party on these questions. Much of the work we have done in the past can be adapted and brought up to date, but we will need to spend time doing so, and addressing any issues that have got uncovered – for example, the last theoretical piece we published on pornography appeared in the ISJ in 1989: since then the internet has transformed this issue.

We also need to spend time winning layers of comrades to our politics on these questions. Many comrades have joined since the debates of the 1980s, and all the written materials from that time are out of print. A small number of members don't accept the party's politics on these questions. Many more must wonder if we really need to go through these arguments in such detail – isn't anyone angry at women's oppression really on our side? Of course, we have to relate to anyone fighting sexism – but we do also have to be aware of the political complexities those struggles can involve.

Finally, a word on terminology. For most people, "feminism" is simply about opposing women's oppression – in which sense, every party member is a feminist. Marxists have a different way of using the word, however – to describe a political tradition different from our own.

Marxism sees class as central to history – as Marx says in the "Communist Manifesto", "the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle." Women's oppression is the result of class society. Marxists have used "feminism" to describe a political analysis which sees gender, not class, as the basic motor of history. In this sense, Marxism and feminism are incompatible, so that party members are not feminists, and reject feminist ideas.

In a similar way, terms like "socialist feminist", as described above, are often used as labels for particular sets of ideas, and so mean something quite different from the apparent meaning of the words.

There are, no doubt, real political

differences among members, and between that of the party and the wider movement, concerning our politics on women. But there has also been confusion. Some members have rejected “feminism” in the sense of a non-Marxist set of ideas, but other members and non-members have then understood them to be rejecting the political importance of fighting women’s oppression, or even thought they were using “feminist” as an insult.

For some members to talk about “creeping feminism” has been particularly unhelpful. The political phenomenon the term describes – the pressure on Marxists to fudge their politics and join in an unsustainable and confused unity – is real. But the slogan, to anyone with a common-sense understanding of “feminism”, sounds reactionary. Even to those who understand that it refers to “feminism” as a non-Marxist set of ideas, it simply acts as a rallying call for those already won to a certain position, and does nothing to persuade those who are not.

The fight against women’s oppression has become a key political issue, seldom out of the news – whether the news concerns slut walks, Julian Assange, George Galloway or the gang rape case in Delhi.

We need to deepen the understanding of all our members of the political issues involved, so that they can defend and develop our tradition. Such a process of debate and discussion can begin to overcome the sometimes grave divisions which have arisen between comrades in the last few months. And it is vital if the party is to take forward the struggle for socialism and women’s liberation.

Fraser and Estelle (South London)
Sara (Cambridge)
Hannah (Central London)
Megan (Waltham Forest)
Colin (Hackney)

THE DISPUTES COMMITTEE CASE AND OUR POLITICS ON WOMEN

At the time of writing, the main news items are as follows: the sexual allegations against Lib Dem Lord Rennard and claims of a cover-up by the party leadership, the deliberate urging by the London Metropolitan police to women rape complainants to drop their complaints so the police can boost their clear-up ratings, and the ongoing case of the alleged murder of the girlfriend of Paralympian Oscar Pistorius.

To these can be added allegations of sexual assault against underage girls by a famous Coronation Street actor, and the recent brutal sexual assault and murder of

a woman vet. These cases are just the latest examples of a string of incidents over the last couple of years concerning rape and violence towards women.

This all makes for depressing reading, but it is not the full picture. In response to what appear to be increasingly backward attitudes towards violence against women, we have also witnessed a rise in outrage and mobilisations against such attacks, including the SlutWalks in 2011, which quickly spread around the globe, the mass mobilisations in Ireland against the death of Savita Halappanavar who was denied an abortion, and the national demonstrations and protests against the gang rape and subsequent death of a female student in Delhi, which subsequently spread across India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Violence against women is proving to be a hugely polarising issue.

The recent disputes case involving serious sexual allegations against a senior party member has proved to be an equally polarising issue for our own organisation. The core of the original disagreements on the Central Committee (CC) and the prime motivator in the formation of a faction so soon after the January conference were based on the handling of this case and the conclusions that were drawn. This contribution aims to go through some of the key problems that have led us to the impasse we find ourselves in now with the aim of opening up the debate and finding a way of moving forward in a united manner.

Firstly, it’s worth reconfirming our defence of our Party’s right to investigate disciplinary matters with our own Disputes Committee (DC). The reason we have no faith in the bourgeois legal system to deliver justice or liberation for women is not because we operate our own ‘system of justice’ outside of the law (the ‘sharia court’ allegations in the bourgeois press) but, quite simply, because the facts on this issue speak loud and clear for themselves. Out of the minority of women who report sexual attacks, only around 6% of allegations result in conviction. Women’s oppression means that those women who do come forward do so against a prevailing background of ‘common sense’ beliefs that a woman who is raped must have played some part in her attack (too much drink, flirting, ‘slutty clothes’, etc) and a legal system that does not prioritise such attacks. Women complainants often complain of feeling as though they are the ‘ones on trial’, with their lifestyles and habits under scrutiny.

As stated in the introduction to the Disputes Committee session at conference, the DC is not a court of law, nor does it seek to replicate one. This does not mean that coming forward with such allegations against a fellow comrade, especially one in such a leading role, is easy – the experience of women’s oppression is not washed away with party membership – but one would expect our record on the fight against women’s oppression to mean that comrades have

some confidence that they will be taken seriously and not be vilified in the process.

However, the outcome of this particular disputes hearing raises questions as to how our internal DC should deal with such allegations. We believe there were some serious shortcomings with the approach adopted that we should consider with a view to rectifying our processes in the future.

Not a court of law - but a legal definition adopted and a ‘verdict’ passed

Our disputes committee is not set up to mimic a court of law, to adjudicate over X versus Y and to deliver a verdict and, if necessary, a sanction. Rather, we listen to disagreements and disputes with a view to finding political solutions that are in keeping with our tradition and are in the interests of the individuals concerned and the party as a whole.

It must also be seen to stand up under scrutiny within the wider movement, and under such scrutiny, our solutions must be seen to be of the highest standards.

Part of the problem with this case was that from the outset the remit was confused and compromised by a reliance on the legal definition of rape. Given that the legal system which uses this very definition, and which relies on forensic evidence and invasive investigation techniques, results in so few convictions, one must ask why a revolutionary socialist organisation would start its hearing here.

Some individuals, now former party members, have concluded that we are in no position to really investigate such cases so these must, therefore, be reported to the police. This is the wrong conclusion. We must respect those women who choose not to go to the police and put themselves through such an ordeal. At the same time, the party should in no way attempt to dissuade the woman from taking the case to the police. We should clearly and pointedly reassure the woman that the party would support her decision either way. If the woman decides she would like to have her allegation heard by the DC, we should also ask ourselves honestly what should be the party’s remit in such cases.

Due to the nature of such cases, where the perpetrator is usually known to the victim and is often a family member or close friend, it is exceptionally difficult without concrete evidence or witnesses to find in favour of the complainant. We understand as socialists that this points to a flawed system, rather than that 94% of those women who report rape either do not understand whether they have consented or not or, worse, are deliberately lying.

For this reason, our approach should not hang on whether rape has taken place or not, since that is bound to result in us being incapable of delivering a ‘verdict’ based on anything other than one person’s word over another’s. The DC should avoid using words like ‘guilty’, ‘not guilty’ and

'innocent'. We believe our remit should be to establish whether conduct could be seen to have been inappropriate or not, based on all the information provided.

Unsatisfactory outcome

Disputes committee decisions must also deliver a satisfactory outcome. This is especially true for those who submit the complaint, but also for the wider membership.

The current divisions within the party point towards a lack of political clarity around the dispute. What's more the handling of the dispute has led to the two women comrades who brought complaints feeling extremely unhappy with the procedure and outcome, as well as with the hostile treatment they believe they have since received from some fellow party comrades.

Our organisation has also lost members and seen, the formation of a faction. The repercussions also go beyond our own membership. In order to be an effective interventionist party, we must continually seek to work with those to the right of us, whilst maintaining and arguing for our own politics.

We now know that a number of people such as Owen Jones and Laurie Penny will no longer share an SWP platform with us. Such figures should not be easily dismissed. Whilst the above repercussions have all taken place since conference, that such things would occur was predictable to those of us with serious concerns about the dispute even before the January conference (i.e., we cannot simply put this down to the DC report transcription being posted on a hostile blog). This in turn has exacerbated the feelings of frustration amongst layers of the membership.

'Internal' matters versus 'external' politics

Perhaps one of the most bewildering arguments put forward by the CC is that this is simply an internal matter and therefore not about politics in the external 'real' world. The examples cited in the opening paragraph should clearly call this position into question. Violence against women is a central issue in the 'real' external world, and one that is, of course, related to the wider economic and political situation.

By continuously referring to the DC report as an 'internal matter', the CC is simply adding to the perspective of some that the Left fails to take such issues seriously, and more generally that Marxism is inadequate at explaining and dealing with oppression.

By insisting that members focus on the 'external' world, where 'real' politics are taking place, comrades within our organisation and those we work with in our periphery can be left with the impression that how we deal with oppression within our own organisation is seen of secondary importance compared to industrial matters or fighting fascism. But this is a false dichotomy. With more women involved in

the workforce than ever before, with the number of female trade unionists higher than that of their male counterparts, women's oppression is very much part of the broader industrial picture.

Our position on such issues must be seen to be watertight both inside and outside our organisation. The 'outside world' is watching to see how we deal with such matters, and our inability to recognise this is damaging our ability to intervene successfully.

Procedure over outcome

Bureaucratic bodies can in part be defined by their preference for elevating procedure above outcome. This has also come to characterise the CC's approach to defending the DC report.

In the absence of a convincing political explanation for how the DC conclusions were reached, comrades have instead been told to defend the procedure and to recognise the integrity of the comrades who participated in the DC. The CC's response may have been adequate response for some party members, but many have found that simply asking a member of our periphery on the left to 'trust the integrity of the disputes committee comrades' does not allay their concerns.

There has also been an emphasis on technical aspects, notably whether there were two women complainants or one. Only one woman submitted a formal complaint – this is true. However, a second woman came forward to give supporting evidence, stating she had also been at the receiving end of inappropriate behaviour.

Whatever the technical 'status' of their complaints, here is a situation where two women have reported incidents of what they believe to be inappropriate behaviour towards them.

Whether or not the second woman gave her 'evidence' as part of a separate complaint, or supporting the initial complaint, it makes no sense to deny there have been two women bringing complaints of inappropriate behaviour. Indeed, the 'second woman' even spoke at conference to state that she had given evidence of what she considered to be inappropriate behaviour.

Lack of political clarity regarding the outcome

The outcome of any such dispute has to deliver a satisfactory resolution to the issue for the individuals concerned, but also for the party membership and to the wider movement. This has clearly not transpired. The extremely close vote at conference showed this (239 for the report, 209 against, 18 abstentions) The lack of any clear political explanation has left a not insignificant layer of comrades in a position where they do not fully understand how the DC reached its conclusions and therefore feel unable to 'defend the line' amongst our periphery and in the movement.

We don't automatically believe the woman in such cases. However, we do understand the nature of women's

oppression, and that many women choose not to come forward because of concern they will not be believed or, worse, will be vilified or accused of ulterior motives. Whilst we accept this could happen, we would expect there to be a clear explanation as to why a woman/women who bring such serious accusations have not been found to be raped. This is not just some idealistic standard we set ourselves; it is what is also expected within the wider movement.

Whilst the DC chose not to just investigate whether rape had taken place, but also sexual assault, harassment and whether the relationship as a whole could have been considered abusive, the conclusions have proved to be problematic. Whilst the entire panel concluded that rape had not taken place, all other areas were left 'not proven'. The problem is: what does this mean? We know that some CC members have quite clearly proclaimed that X has been 'exonerated', a term which implies 'free of blame'.

On the one hand, rather than provide a clear political solution, the DC has instead delivered a 'verdict', again tending towards the functioning of a bourgeois court. On the other hand, it has led comrades to question why the DC did not believe the complaints brought forward by the two women?

One possible conclusion is that the DC's interpretation of sexual harassment or inappropriate behaviour is different from that of the two women concerned, and if so, we should understand what these differences are.

Another is that the two women are unable to recognise inappropriate behaviour, or worse, have deliberately fabricated a story against a fellow comrade.

Tragically, this has been the conclusion of some comrades attempting to explain what has happened; more than one comrade has suggested that one or both of the women lied. Alternatively, if the DC simply did not think there was enough evidence, is it good enough to take a position in which no action is taken?

Creating mistrust

This has resulted in genuine confusion amongst a wide layer of members. The CC has argued this is due to members being unwilling to accept the DC decision. We believe the reason is that the outcome of the DC is unclear and does not provide comrades with a position they can confidently argue within the wider movement.

This in turn has created a crisis in the party, and a lack of trust amongst comrades. We have a situation where some comrades insinuate that the women must have had sinister motives, other comrades have felt their only way to express their disquiet is on blogs and other social forums, and many others are placed in a situation where they do not feel capable of defending the party's position on this matter. Quite simply, many members are not convinced and simply ordering them to 'defend the line or consider leaving' provides no useful way forward.

Conclusion

We welcome the calling of the special conference and the mention in the CC's motion to conference to look at the DC procedures. However, we believe that further steps need to be taken.

The last time a special conference was called was in the aftermath of the Respect crisis. At that time there was recognition from the CC that, despite the different views over what had gone wrong, the party structures needed to be opened up to a debate to resolve the intensity and division in the party.

Was the approach adopted at that point different because the crisis was seen to reside in the 'real external world of politics' rather than our 'internal matters'? Whatever the reason, we believe the leadership would do well to adopt a similar approach to the present crisis, to learn from past mistakes and make the necessary changes in order to bring together a united organisation that can fight to take its rightful place in the leadership in the struggle against women's oppression.

Sara (Cambridge)

Hannah (Central London)

Megan (Waltham Forest)

Colin (Hackney)

WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT RAPE

We have always argued that the struggle for women's liberation goes hand in hand with the struggle for a socialist revolution. It is not a side issue separate from the 'real' arena of struggle. Rape, sexual abuse, and sexual harassment are depressingly commonplace. The way that they are dealt with is typically poor. Together, they have a devastating effect on women's lives.

The Sapphire Unit is a specialist police sex crime unit that has recently been criticised for failing to officially record some reports of rape. Yet it has policy that women are to be believed 'unless there is compelling evidence to the contrary'.

The only reason an institution like the police could have this policy, even though it's not always implemented, is because of the long years of hard struggle by women and men fighting for women's liberation.

Has the SWP membership not been won to that position? Some of the comments I have heard from members across the country suggest not: Comrades have said that power relations are an irrelevant issue when it comes to rape; that if a woman talks to a man after a rape, then the rape could not have occurred.

There have been slurs against the woman.

Comrades, we obviously have a problem within our party and we need to admit it,

talk about it, and deal with it. The SWP does not exist in a bubble outside of capitalist society – we are affected by the same bullshit that everyone else is. But where we are now is not acceptable. We must do better. We have to admit there is a problem as a first step to dealing with it.

In the recent dispute case, *no* explanation was ever given to the complainant, or to conference, why the Disputes Committee decided that the complainant's accusation was not upheld.

In a case where it seemed to have been decided to believe one person's word against another, the complainant was never told and still doesn't know what the accused's version of events even was. I find this deeply shocking.

But what I find much more disturbing is that the Central Committee and many leading cadre are refusing to recognise or acknowledge that there was any sort of problem with any of the procedures used in this case. Indeed, they expect members to defend them. Many of us would find that impossible to do. Unless we admit that our procedures were grievously lacking and seek to rectify this, we will not have an organisation where women feel that they can come forward if something happens to them.

We will not be an organisation that can 'punch above its weight' in the struggle for women's liberation. In fact, in a few years I doubt that we will have much of an organisation at all. To continue to get this wrong is a tragic betrayal of our tradition and the class.

Kim (Birmingham)

AN ACCOUNT OF THE 1979-1982 YEARS IN THE PARTY BY THOSE CENTRALLY INVOLVED

In the weeks following the call by the CC for a special conference, faction supporters have attempted to make a case for their arguments by referring back to the years 1979 to 1982. We, as long-standing members centrally involved in those years, want to place on record a fully rounded account of the political disputes inside the party in the years 1979-1982.

Far from those years being halcyon days of calmness and tolerance, debate and argument raged within the party, as we attempted to come to terms with a rapidly changing political landscape in Britain.

The new political environment led to a phase of sharp debate and healthy argument – started by Tony Cliff and a minority of the CC – about the changing nature of the period. The arguments about the downturn in struggle, the decline of shop stewards organisation, the folly of pursuing a rank and

file strategy in the face of a sharp retreat; of trying to build workplace branches ran on for two years before it was resolved.

The debates around an array of issues were by their very nature highly charged, hard and polarised as well as passionate. These were all serious questions for revolutionaries if we were to keep winning individuals to revolutionary Marxism. In the aftermath of the disputed questions, many of us, (including signatories to this document) were hardly on speaking terms!

Nevertheless, in the end, the political arguments over the period were an invaluable process for all of us, including the hundreds of younger workers and students who were members of the party. They strengthened the organisation and made it possible to become a very serious and effective force while others on the left failed to adapt to the changing circumstances.

The leadership seldom went unchallenged. In 1979, the leadership was defeated (wrongly) over the issue of Scottish Devolution. However, within months, reality forced the SWP to change its position - vindicating the CC and our model of democratic centralism. Political units of the party became diametrically opposed to each other. The Glasgow District Committee with some of the party's leading car worker militants were fiercely opposed to others, including our industrial militants from the Newcastle area and one CC industrial organiser.

Cliff had first been drawn to the downturn analysis because of the stark contrast he saw in patterns of strike activity in industries where shop stewards organisation was traditionally strongest (engineering, docks, mining, the print). Whereas massive victories punctuated by the odd defeat characterised the period 1970-74, by contrast this totally reversed in the second half of the 1970s with a series of defeats punctuated by the very occasional victory.

However, the 'downturn argument' did not end debates within the party. The eventual acceptance of the downturn analysis led us to re-assess a number of other critical questions. We set about a re-evaluation of Marxism, oppression and separate organisations (Women's Voice groups), Flame groups) within a Leninist organisation.

The arguments about the roots of women's oppression, patriarchy theory, separate women's' organisation and the task of building a women cadre were conducted in a long running debate in the International Socialist Journal (ISJ) as well as meetings of the Party and resulted in two excellent books on women.

The arguments against building a separate women's organisation based on the fight against oppression were initiated by a minority of the CC quite late in this period and were finally won over two years. A further debate emerged around the issue of 'Do men benefit from women's oppression' in the mid-1980s. This too was debated in the ISJ, at party meetings and decided at a party conference.

When our conferences reached a conclusion, John Molyneux, having lost his political position, spoke to conference to affirm his acceptance of democratic centralism, stating he would now abide by the majority decision. This kind of debate is the essence of the SWP tradition.

To build on the educational value of the debate, Lindsey German wrote 'Theories of Patriarchy' and Chris Harman wrote 'Revolutionary Socialism and Women's Liberation'. By the mid-eighties, Sheila MacGregor and John Molyneux debated over, 'Do Men benefit from Women's oppression'. All were essential in politically arming old and new members alike.

Debates always remained within the democratic structures.

The period faction supporters refer to was indeed a very important period for the organisation. However, they leave out one very important element; all the debates took place within the democratic structures and internal life of the party over those years. Political discussions and debates were very sharp, hard, heated at times, and extremely polarised. Cliff debated Steve Jeffries (a CC member) with the 'Balance of Class Forces' in ISJ Autumn 1979 and Jeffries 'Striking into the Eighties' over the downturn'.

Yet, every comrade respected and abided by the decisions reached by the different conferences, even when comrades embraced deeply held beliefs. At no time did comrades who fiercely disagreed with a decision, organise a faction or instigate an open and public campaign against majority decisions. Arguing out differences through the mechanism of factions is not in our tradition. The experience of the last three months has been divisive and damaging in many districts, creating the possibility of lasting mistrust between comrades.

All these arguments and debates were highly political and motivated by our work with other people and changes in the real world. They did not start from organisational matters or from internalism borne out of frustration and disappointment with the state of the struggle. Argument and debate are the lifeblood of the party – but only so long as we argue and debate to engage better in the struggle.

At the January Conference 2013, at the subsequent National Committee and since then, the majority of the party has backed the Central Committee and rejected the attacks on the party's record and its leadership. A minority has refused to accept Conference decisions because they lost the vote. Instead of the party uniting, the faction wants to prolong an internal debate, while claiming to accept the perspectives of the conference.

The relationship between the membership of the party and the full-time apparatus is not that between dog and lamppost. If the organisation is to work effectively, there should be a constant interaction between CC members, journalists on the paper, district organisers and ordinary members in the workplaces and colleges so that they learn from the mem-

bership and vice-versa - they cannot be in constant opposition to each other.

In recent times the leadership has played a crucial role in turning the tide against both the BNP and the EDL. It has done a good job in bringing together the best militants in a number of unions to fight the cuts and build the resistance over other issues; and it has provided a great measure of intellectual clarity as well as practical assistance over the Arab Spring. For all of these things, it should be congratulated.

It is time to draw the real lessons from the 1979-1982 period. They were years of intense and heated argument, but when decisions were reached they were respected by all, whether comrades liked them or not. A majority remains a majority, however close a vote might be and regardless of the issue. That is the democratic tradition we are proud to stand by.

Dave and Laura (Sheffield)
Sheila and Jack (East London)
Jeannie (Chesterfield)
Iain, Dave and Helen (Glasgow)

SOCIALISM AND FEMINISM

A restatement of the revolutionary position on women's liberation

The faction statement says that we should recognise that feminists are not our enemies, but our potential allies. Yet it has never been a policy of the SWP to regard feminists as any kind of enemy. However, whilst we work with feminists, we also have a critique of feminist ideas.

We work with the feminists who organise campaigns to defend abortion rights, equal pay and child-care services. We organise in our unions alongside men. We fight for economic independence, and the right to control our lives and bodies. We speak for ourselves, and expect to be listened to when we do. Many women today identify themselves as feminist when they start to challenge oppression. However, feminism rests on the theory of patriarchy, the idea that women of all classes are united in being oppressed by all men.

Many socialist feminists agree with us when we point out the class divisions between women. However, revolutionaries take this point further. We argue that the origins of women's oppression lie in the historical development of class society. Further, we argue that working class women are part of the class that has the potential to liberate the whole of humanity, and that this liberation depends on the liberation of all of the oppressed.

There can be no socialism without an end to women's oppression. In this, we differentiate ourselves from the best socialist

feminists. We do not separate class struggle from the struggle for women's liberation. We argue that men do not benefit from women's oppression. We are not feminists, but revolutionary socialists. This last point is missing from the faction statement.

As Marxists, we know that sexual abuse is part of women's oppression, and we have a political analysis of this. But we aim to build a party of leaders, and this of course includes women. So, how have we achieved a party where women lead in all areas of our work?

Certainly we have not done this by tolerating any form of sexually abusive behaviour or language. Nor has it been achieved by constantly treating women as victims. Rather, we emphasise women's role and history in the class struggle, and take pride in the achievements of our women comrades.

Celia (Manchester)

THE CRISIS IN THE PARTY

The SWP is going through one of its most difficult and turbulent crises. One of the points made during the course of the current debate is that the party's ability to 'punch above its weight' is predicated on 'how we organize ourselves'. This is an important point.

Some comrades have argued that internal matters are the polar opposite of 'intervention', counter-posing time spent on such issues to that spent on engaging in struggle. But if our capacity to do the latter depends to an extent on our form of internal organization, then the two are surely interlinked. A lack of clarity on internal matters impedes our ability to function. This article looks at some of the issues raised by this fact and outlines some initial thoughts on why the current crisis has exploded in such a way.

The International Socialist tradition

The SWP is in many ways a unique organization. From its early days as the Socialist Review Group and then the International Socialists it developed a number of theoretical perspectives that challenged the orthodoxy of post-war Trotskyism.

The theory of state capitalism, of deflected permanent revolution and the permanent arms economy all drew on the classical Marxist tradition, but had to go against the grain to reassert it. This represented a challenge to orthodox Trotskyism's reliance on dogma.

The most distinctive theoretical aspect of Trotskyism, permanent revolution, was

deployed to provide a compelling analytical framework for understanding the nature of the Soviet Union and of national liberation struggles. At its core was an assertion of the self-emancipation of the working class as the cornerstone of revolutionary socialism. Important analyses were also developed on the economy, the changing nature of reformism and women's oppression.

Our tradition, then, has its roots in heterodoxy, drawing on experience to relate theory to changing circumstances. Theoretical advances were made by the IS tradition, not least because they were rooted in the 'here and now', in concrete politics. As Tony Cliff put it in 1968, it was necessary to 'raise theory to the level of practice.'

The International Socialist tradition is also one that resists sectarianism, working to forge unity with others in a whole range of impressive networks and campaigns, from the Anti-Nazi League to the Stop the War Coalition and Unite Against Fascism.

Throughout these activities, and in our student and trade union fraction work, our members strive to work alongside others without shedding our political independence.

Essential to maintaining this independence is a culture of debate and argument within the party. This is important not just in holding those with responsibility to account, but also in ensuring that the party is alive to changing patterns of struggle and their implications. Without this 'friction with experience', as Alex Callinicos has argued, theory may preserve its integrity but 'at the price of the loss of any explanatory power' ('Trotskyism', 1990).

At times this friction has resulted in sharp debates, over Cliff's analysis of the downturn, over the party's decision to close down its Women's Voice groups and newspaper, and over the question of whether men benefit from women's oppression. All these questions were robustly debated in party publications and branches, at Marxism and at the party's annual outing in Skegness. Other arguments, over LGBT liberation, state capitalism, culture, Althusser, Ireland, and various other subjects, were also part of internal debates in the party.

The present crisis

Given all this, then, why has there been such resistance, and at times hostility, to those who have raised issues since conference over the party's handling of allegations of rape and sexual harassment against a leading member?

In part this is due to the nature of the issues at stake, which are dealt with at length in the rest of this bulletin. This article argues that a process of dislocation has taken place within the party, a process that threatens the viability of the organization unless it is addressed. It has exploded into view as a result of the current crisis, but has deeper roots.

For many comrades this dislocation is

exemplified by a detachment of the central committee from the rest of the party. There are other examples of this elsewhere in the bulletin – of a defensive attitude that has tried to shy away from a political reckoning over the handling of the dispute and its aftermath.

When a central committee has to exclude a member of its own election slate, along with other leading comrades, from a meeting of its 'supporters' at conference, this point does not need to be laboured. Leadership in a revolutionary party, however, is the product of interaction between different elements. If our leadership is detached, it does not bear sole responsibility for this.

Democratic centralism

The party, as comrades on both sides of this debate have argued, punches above its weight. We play a key role as a lynchpin of the radical left in Britain, linking together a whole series of alliances, not just in significant networks like UAF, Defend the Right to Protest and Unite the Resistance, but in a myriad of local and national grass roots campaigns, associations and movements.

In the trade unions, our fraction work is impressive, returning a proportion of NEC officers in a number of unions that is way beyond our actual weight in terms of party membership. More importantly, we also play a significant role at branch and regional level, as we have seen over the past few years, driving arguments for action through the unions and delivering. Alex Callinicos attributes this ability to 'how we organise ourselves':

'Our version of democratic centralism comes down to two things. First, decisions must be debated fully, but once they have been taken, by majority vote, they are binding on all members. This is necessary if we are to test our ideas in action.' ('Is Leninism Finished?' SR, January 2013).

Over recent weeks this reading of democratic centralism's wider political usefulness, in providing a mechanism for revolutionary independence within a wider movement, has been conflated with its application to matters of an internal, disciplinary nature. This has produced a number of problems. Democratic centralism at times involves sharp polemic and argument.

However, there is a difference between waging an argument, for example, that the party's Unite fraction should support Jerry Hicks, and declaring that comrades should vote for a disputes committee (DC) report that involves allegations of serious sexual misconduct. Perhaps forgetting these differences, the CC outlined its position on the dispute before conference in a document the whole party was asked to sign up to. Conference, it argued,

'...should endorse the DC report. To

take any other decision would have no basis in how the DC actually addressed this case. It would also show a quite unwarranted lack of confidence in the capacity of the party and its structures to maintain and develop our tradition on women's oppression.'

What was going on here? The CC was asking comrades to express public allegiance to a document containing a judgment on a case hitherto and emphatically not regarded as an appropriate subject of debate, for reasons of confidentiality.

In other words, before the conference debate had even taken place, the central committee was urging the party to sign up to its claim that anyone voting down the report would be demonstrating a groundless lack of faith in the ability of the entire party apparatus 'to maintain and develop', not just its disputes procedures, but its entire tradition on women's oppression.

'Decisions must be debated fully.' Yet in this instance comrades were made aware of what disagreement amounted to - heresy. Not heterodoxy, but heresy. Such an approach to a DC matter would be questionable at the best of times. But when it concerns allegations of rape and sexual harassment against a leading comrade it is more than a little inappropriate. Or, to put it another way, it is a travesty. A travesty both of the party's commitment to the two young women and their supporters, who had a right to a debate without preconceptions, and of the party's tradition of democratic centralism.

The dispute

The DC report covered serious allegations made by two women against a leading member of the party. The CC publicly declared on the eve of conference that those who voted down the report would be casting unreasonable doubt on the party's capacity to deal with women's oppression.

In this way, the CC twisted the concept of democratic centralism. After conference the same kind of loaded interpretation of what the vote meant continued. A frequent argument was that democratic centralism means that once decisions 'have been taken, by majority vote, they are binding on all members'. Yet no decisions were taken at conference about dealing with the consequences of the dispute.

The CC did not return after the disputes session, as requested by the complainants' supporters, with a response to the detailed proposals submitted prior to conference by the complainants and their supporters. Instead it chose not to address the question of procedures at all. An uncontested vote for the individuals charged with their implementation was interpreted as a vote of confidence in the procedures themselves.

Likewise, when it came to making political judgments about the role of comrade X, the subject was not mentioned at conference. Instead, the notion that the DC had

not recommended any disciplinary action was taken to mean that comrade X should be exempted from any political consideration of his role.

The CC had already accepted his resignation and has since announced that he would not be given a paid party role or be standing for the UAF steering committee. Later, at National Committee in February, a commission was established to look into some aspects of disputes committee procedures, although not those that could be considered political priorities.

Does this mean that the CC and NC had defied conference decisions that were 'binding'? No – it simply underlined the extent to which the 'binding decisions' taken at conference on these matters were in fact non-existent.

The CC tried to establish the terms of debate around a conception of democratic centralism that was becoming increasingly narrow. It conflated an internal matter relating to the handling of a dispute with the party's general political perspectives that arm comrades to intervene in the wider world. One of the arguments deployed in the CC statement prior to conference had come from a 1978 ISJ article by Chris Harman:

'But what then happens when the 'democracy' of the party fails to reflect the experiences of the most advanced sections of the class? When the party members have become routinised and cut off from new upsurges of spontaneous struggles, or when they come from milieus which have no real contact with the factories? In such cases ... the party leadership cannot simply sit back and reflect the 'democratic will' of a party that is lagging behind the class. It has to campaign vigorously for the sudden turns in the line of the party if necessary reaching to forces outside the party to pressurise the party members to shift their position.

(*'For Democratic Centralism'*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/harman/1978/07/democent.htm>)

Harman goes on to argue that 'the history of any serious revolutionary organization ... is not just a history of linear growth from conference to conference, but also of "lurches" in one direction and then in another, and on occasions of splits and expulsions.'

Leadership

Sometimes splits and expulsions occur as a consequence of the need to shift in response to changing external circumstances. Harman was not talking about the need to lurch the whole party behind the defence of 'a line' on a controversial and contested internal dispute.

This conflation of internally and externally driven imperatives gave rise to clumsy comparisons, with the vote on the DC report, and its binding nature, being compared to

trade union votes for strike action. The CC's January statement argued that,

'Leadership in this approach is not merely the arithmetical expression of the balance of opinion within the party. On the contrary, the leadership actively intervenes in the class struggle outside and the organisation within in order to shift the situation in a direction more favourable to the revolutionary forces. This is a form of leadership that is not afraid to conduct sharp arguments within the party if these will clarify our understanding of the situation and of the tasks we must address.'

It is difficult to see quite how the CC's intervention within the organisation on the matter of the dispute and its aftermath has contributed to our intervention in 'the class struggle outside' or to shifting 'the situation in a direction more favourable to the revolutionary forces'.

Its principal function has instead been to shore up the leadership's position by insisting on disciplined affiliation to its contested interpretation of what the vote meant (no review of procedures, no restrictions on comrade X's role, etc). One powerful element in its ability to do this has been the invocation of 'democratic centralism' as the process giving legitimacy to the CC, casting dissent as irresponsible or destructive, or even as a break from Leninism.

This downgrades the role of leadership in the party. A dynamic process of interaction between comrades is reduced to a one-dimensional imposition of authority on a 'like it or lump it' basis. The elevation of the stakes in the dispute to a question of the future of Leninism and the entire International Socialist tradition thus runs the risk of impoverishing that tradition.

Those leading comrades who have compared the need to defend comrade X's right to play a leading role in the party's united front work with the Bolsheviks' defence of Lenin when faced with accusations that he was a German spy take matters out of all proportion.

A narrow, inward-looking and defensive approach that evokes an entire tradition and matters of world-historic importance to justify a contested position on an internal dispute is a perspective that is out of kilter, whose trajectory tends towards dogmatism.

This is a collective problem. What are its origins? Let's go back to the argument about why the party 'punches above its weight'. One explanation, discussed above, is that our democratic centralist structures allow us to do so.

But the party does not exist in a vacuum. The end of the Cold War, the erosion of the activist base of social democracy, the lack of sustained working class struggle in Britain and the historic leaden influence of the trade union bureaucracy have also played a role.

Over the past two decades the labour movement has lost thousands of militants

from the two dominant forces of the left in the 1970s, the Labour Party and the Communist Party. Other possibilities for regrouping activists have been thrown up, but the terrain is one where we play a disproportionate role, partly due to our resilience and combativity, but partly also due to the decline of other forces on the radical left. A danger in this context then, is substitutionism: the party plays a significant role and punches above its weight, but is stretched, with a heavy burden falling on the most active layers of the party, not least its full time apparatus and in particular its leadership.

Branches and accountability

A powerful counterweight to this is the ability of the party to hold its leadership to account, within our fractions, our branches and at national meetings and conferences.

This was one of the concerns of the democracy commission, indeed it was one of the reasons why it was set up. The current crisis has brought comrades back into branches in significant numbers.

But it has also laid bare the dislocation that exists between different elements in the party. There are many examples of this. The most frequently commented on has been the tendency of some comrades to take debates online rather than to their branch.

But another is the way in which comrades raising concerns over the dispute have been met with various forms of denial. 'You are trying to overturn conference decisions' has been the most common refrain. Other variations include, 'You say you are seeking a review of our disputes committee procedures/clarity over the role of comrade X, etc, but really you are pulled by feminism/autonomism/want permanent factions/to undermine democratic centralism/to break with Leninism/to destroy or split the party.'

Once the initial phase of denying the validity of the debate by referring to the need to respect conference decisions was overcome, problems remained.

The concerns of many comrades were met with contributions that outlined what was wrong with Laurie Penny's feminism, or Sharon Smith's criticisms of the SWP line on women's oppression, or that stressed the need for an 'ideological turn' in our student work. Many comrades simply felt the need to express their anger that the debate was taking place at all.

The fundamental questions, about how we apply our politics on women's oppression within our own organisation, the possibility that mistakes had been made and might need to be addressed and the request for greater clarity on how issues of conduct were seen to be taken up by the party beyond the rejection of 'bourgeois morality', or quasi-legalistic references to 'verdicts', were seldom engaged with.

Instead, concessions on some key questions were accompanied by condemnation of the faction's existence, its imputed 'real'

intentions, and its alleged defiance of the spirit of the party's constitution. No coherent political explanation for the concessions was offered.

A crisis of this magnitude requires a political reckoning. Over 500 comrades, a minority of whom were students and a majority of whom had never before joined a faction, signed up to IDOOP, making it the biggest factional organization the party has ever seen.

The aims of the faction were to address the immediate issues of the post-conference period and to contribute to a regeneration of the party's political culture of debate and argument. In difficult circumstances, it achieved a degree of progress on the first point. The second point is an open question. It will take time to find the answer.

Political culture

One of the first steps to doing so is perhaps to ask, how did the dialogue of the deaf that characterized much of the present debate come about? During the Respect crisis many comrades argued that although they had concerns about the party's handling of the entire episode, they would postpone raising them for debate since the party was under attack and needed to be defended.

This reflex is a testament to the commitment and discipline that characterizes the organization. It underpins a much greater achievement simply than an ability to 'punch above our weight': almost alone of the major organisations of the European revolutionary left the SWP has held together and continues to act as a focal point for resistance at the heart of wider radical left currents. It is a rooted, tenacious, combative tool for the movement and its viability is important for the left as a whole.

Thirty years ago the party would 'intervene' in the wider movement, playing a role in major campaigns and struggle, but not consistently at the forefront as it is today. Political differences with other left groups were clearly defined, and flowed from diverging analyses of the Soviet Union, which established clear lines on questions of working class self-emancipation, the role of the state and, fundamentally, the issue of reform or revolution.

The collapse of the Eastern Bloc opened up new possibilities for realignments on the left. It also coincided with an increasingly entrenched neo-liberal offensive. The mainstream consensus around the role of 'the market', along with the continued lack of significant industrial struggle, gave credence in public debate to the idea that class struggle was a thing of the past and allowed social democratic parties to shift to the right in the name of 'realism'.

The draining away of the activist base of the Labour left, in particular, meant that the SWP increasingly found itself in the position of playing a federating role, often successfully, in various new alliances, in both campaigns and elections.

The development of a revolutionary party is of course shaped by the shifting patterns of class struggle. An analysis of the relationship between party and class over the past few decades is unfortunately beyond the scope of this article, but will no doubt form the basis of debates to come.

One major consequence of the party's reaction to the new situation was a renewed emphasis on the importance of the united front. Anti-fascist work was re-oriented by helping to establish Unite Against Fascism and the party played a leading role in the huge Stop the War Coalition.

Party caucuses, which in the 1980s had stressed the need to 'differentiate ourselves', now focused on the need for unity. The shift in orientation meant that the party was able to cohere a political organization out of the Stop the War movement, Respect, which offered the possibility that the radical left in Britain would emulate Rifondazione in Italy, or the LCR in France, in offering a viable political alternative to the social-liberal mainstream left. This was a shift like the one Harman describes, when a radical re-orientation of the party, breaking from its established routines, allowed it to seize new opportunities.

Sections of the party, however, were left behind. A majority of comrades never joined Respect. The episode created disarray in the branches, which were dissolved for a period. The concept of the 'united front of a special type' left many comrades unconvinced. Was it the right thing to do? Yes. But mistakes were made and addressed only belatedly, partially and, in political terms, inadequately. These are issues for further debate. Cliff's approach to such matters was that when faced with a choice, the important thing was to choose. If the decision was wrong, then at least lessons could be learnt. The political reckoning over Respect has never taken place, which partly explains why deeper issues have emerged during the current crisis.

Political differences

One of the effects of playing a major part in such initiatives was that striving for unity took precedence, understandably, over asserting political independence.

The wider consequences of this are beyond the scope of this article but one effect on the party's internal culture was to stifle debate. This derived from need to preserve the party's federating role. Since we had a disproportionate influence in these alliances, and tended to play the leading role in them, the scope for asserting political independence was limited.

The imperative of unity meant that differences within the party over our strategy remained hidden, not secretively, but often simply because the needs of the initiative demanded that they be deferred. This meant that comrades who dissented tended simply to drift away, or into inactivity. The branches were generally no longer the hub of the party's

activity, since its energies were directed, often very productively, elsewhere.

'Hidden differences' became a feature of the splits that occurred in the aftermath of Respect. Deep political differences with Lindsey G, John R and Chris B have become glaringly apparent recently, but were never properly aired within the party before they left.

The failure to raise and resolve political arguments meant that divisions became entrenched but the reasons for them remained elusive. This culture remains.

Since conference only one decision has been reopened - the party's student perspective. Just two days after the student commission had been adopted without a whisper of opposition, the entire student perspective - outlined in the party's internal bulletins, the pre-conference aggregates, the conference debates and the post-conference bulletin - was revised by the CC. This is dealt with elsewhere in the bulletin. Leading central committee members have since argued that far from concocting a disingenuous 'turn' in response to newly discovered autonomist tendencies revealed during the vote on the DC report, they have held 'hidden' differences over the student perspective for the past two years.

What is significant here is not the veracity of such claims. It is the fact that it is considered plausible for central committee members in a revolutionary organization that has put itself at the forefront of struggle in this country throughout the political ferment of the past few years, notably in the student movement, to 'keep quiet' about their differences over a key element of our work for a full two years after the ebbing of the student movement.

Two days after they had overseen a unanimous vote endorsing a strategy that they had apparently harboured secret disagreements with all along, these qualms were finally revealed. An organization that condones such an approach to political argument by its leadership is in trouble.

The party urgently needs to regenerate its culture of political debate. Straw men, logical fallacies, hostility and denial may be useful as debating techniques, or as techniques to obscure debate, but they do not aid political understanding.

Our party needs to come to terms fully with the situation we find ourselves in. 'Our theoretical tradition and our democratic structures,' argues Callinicos, 'will allow us to arrive at the necessary political clarity and to learn the lessons of the disciplinary case.'

Our democratic structures have been tested over the past few months, to the extent that a faction had to be formed in order to ensure that issues arising since conference from the disciplinary case began to be addressed.

Whether lessons are drawn and political clarity achieved will depend not just on the party's tradition and structures but on whether our political culture is able to provide the means to apply them to the issues

at hand, and to the wider, longer term problems that this crisis has brought into focus.

Jim (Central London)

THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIALIST TRADITION AND THE CURRENT CRISIS IN THE SWP

This document was discussed and agreed at the caucus of the In Defence of Our Party faction on Sunday 17 February.

The SWP has been built through decades of struggle. We are the most serious force on the revolutionary left fighting for human liberation and socialism from below.

We have a proud record on oppression and have been at the heart of every major campaign. We grew rapidly through the radicalism of 1968, built the Anti-Nazi League to smash the National Front and played a pivotal role in the movement that led millions onto the streets against the Iraq war. Importantly we have also shaped and developed a large network of revolutionary socialists inside the working class able to lead strikes, challenge the union bureaucracy and fight as tribunes of the oppressed.

We have a political tradition that has been developed by challenging established orthodoxies, distinguishing us from those with illusions in the Soviet Union or who have abandoned the working class as the agency of change. Our engagement with the changing world has informed our analysis of the revolutions in the Middle East, which is unmatched on the left. It is our politics and experience of struggle that have allowed us to build a revolutionary cadre of thousands. It is this cadre and our politics that make the SWP a significant voice on the far left internationally.

Why has the crisis developed?

After conference many comrades had questions about the dispute, notably over how our politics on women's oppression had been applied in dealing with allegations of sexual harassment against a leading member. Qualms were brushed aside with calls to defend the party's structures and procedures and trust the comrades on the committee. No adequate political response that could unite the membership in defending our party was provided.

The recording of the disputes session and the leaking of the transcript to a hostile blog were a disgrace. But in a conference of hundreds it was inevitable that some information would leak onto the internet and find its way to the press. In response, the CC statement conflated criticisms inside the party with external attacks and as a result

dealt with neither satisfactorily. It lacked the political basis to be successful outside the party. Comrades, rightly proud of our record on fighting sexism, were left struggling to defend the party's handling of the dispute.

The CC's interpretation of the disputes votes at conference contends that:

- The uncontested re-election of the Disputes Committee means that there are no fundamental issues to be addressed concerning the party's procedures for dealing with cases of rape and sexual harassment or cases involving leading members.
- The DC report found X not guilty and that no disciplinary action should be taken against him. This means that the question of his role is not a matter for debate.
- The vote on the DC report means that the case is closed. Comrades need to unite around this as they would any other vote. Conference votes cannot be overturned immediately following conference.
- Any alternative view marks a break from democratic centralism and is a threat to the future of the party and the revolutionary left

The problem here is that while the case is indeed closed, the conclusions to be drawn from it are a matter of interpretation, as illustrated above. It is the CC's interpretation that we are contesting, and the assertions and actions flowing from it:

- The processes underpinning the DC must be reviewed in the light of experience. To conflate the individuals who sit on the committee with its structures and processes is to ignore the political framework established collectively by the party and the CC. Disputes Committee members do not act independently of these processes, nor are they the sole bearers of responsibility for their functioning. A defensive refusal to learn lessons (positive and negative) from the handling of an unusual and extremely difficult case is not appropriate.
- It is important that the political decisions taken by the CC around the dispute are addressed. The question of whether it is appropriate for X to continue to represent the party in its united front work is as legitimate as the question of his role on the CC. Both are matters of political judgment, not disciplinary action. The party takes such decisions in relation to comrades who have never been the subject of disciplinary allegations.
- Attempts to politically undermine comrades who have contested an internal DC report, rather than our general political perspective, is exacerbating divisions and preventing 'a line being drawn'.

Distorting our democracy and culture

These issues need to be addressed and brought to resolution. This faction has been formed in order that the specific issues arising since conference from the CC's

handling of the aftermath of the dispute are resolved. Several hundred comrades, including many who have never even considered joining a faction before, have resorted to such unprecedented action in order to achieve this.

This indicates that something has gone wrong beyond the immediate issues of the dispute. Claims that raising concerns or criticism on these questions represents a challenge to Leninism have impeded serious debate. The net result of this over the past few months has been a narrowing and a hardening of the CC's conception of leadership and democratic centralism.

The role of a revolutionary party is to fight for leadership in the class struggle. Democratic centralism is based primarily on conviction rather than discipline. The shared political perspectives required to underpin united political action are not something to be imposed, but are achieved through engagement in debate and argument and informed by experience.

We are seeking an engagement with the widespread concerns being raised so a political resolution can be achieved, restoring comrades' confidence in the party's ability to deal with serious issues.

We raise these points not because we believe the faction can provide all the answers but to underline what there is to fight for. The question of leadership is not reducible to the CC or its most talented members.

Leadership ultimately rests on our ability to build a cadre capable of acting collectively around shared politics. A party of our size and roots has taken decades to build. We took the unusual step of forming a faction both to challenge the CC over these questions and to fight for the SWP as a united political force in a way that leaves all comrades feeling they have a stake in its future.

In Defence of Our Party faction committee

ON THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE

At the most recent Wandsworth & Merton branch meeting, Kris S proposed a motion on the CC. To be clear, losing the vote was no surprise – nor was losing it quite so very badly. But it was important to bring the motion, and to explain why to branch comrades.

While there are many reasons why we are where we are, we believe that the overwhelming majority of the blame for our predicament lies with the Central Committee.

In the beginning, when questions were raised about the behaviour of X in relation to a young woman comrade, the CC had the opportunity to deal with the issue openly and transparently. It chose instead to engineer a deal.

When conference came and X's standing down as National Secretary had to be explained, the CC could have been open and honest with comrades. It chose not to be.

When an allegation of rape was made, the CC had the opportunity to show some leadership and give some political guidance to the Disputes Committee. It chose not to.

When comrades in advance of annual conference 2012 sought to explain their misgivings to the party, the CC decided not to allow them to. When those comrades sought to form a faction, as they are entitled to under rule, they were barred from doing so by the CC.

When Comrade W sought to address conference, to explain her dissatisfaction at the process she was put through, the CC chose not to allow her to.

When conference voted by the slimmest of margins to accept the DC report, with dozens of comrades feeling unable to vote either way, the CC could have taken the cue to begin a process of healing. It chose instead to go on the offensive. To demand comrades not even report the discussion back to their branches. To insist all mention was forbidden. To allow X to represent UAF at a meeting in Hackney and to lead a UAF delegation to Greece.

Since then, the CC has demanded NC endorsement of its plans to discipline comrades then failed to carry out its threats. It has said it will not allow a special conference and then called one. After a CC member accepted the right of comrades to form a faction over a decision at any time, the CC then claimed it did not recognise our right to do so. Except at the same time it did recognise exactly that. The CC also attacked comrades for using the tools available to us to argue – and did so using the tools available only to the CC (Party Notes and Socialist Review) to do so.

We are sure other comrades have written at length on how the CC has manoeuvred to win delegates to and votes at this special conference. Suffice to say that, as the CC announced the outcome of this conference weeks ago, no-one is going to be surprised at the decisions made.

Is all this incompetence and control-freakery down to the individuals concerned? Would things be better if we swapped a few names in and out? We don't think so. It goes much deeper than that.

The CC setup we have now is simply not suitable to the task. We have a small group of mostly full-time party workers who live in or around London. The periphery of this group comes and goes as their stars wax and wane. The inner circle remains unless and until a serious fracture occurs. This inner circle has reserved to itself the right to do the party's thinking.

Perspectives emanate whole from the CC and are pushed through the party without any genuine discussion – most often via a Party Council or National Committee, with very little if any notice given before approval is required. This is the model of “an

interventionist leadership” which we reject wholeheartedly. Instead the party needs a CC which builds the cadre and encourages members to play a full part in shaping the party's perspectives and practice.

Our leading committee needs better to reflect the membership. In age, in experience, in opinions, in geography and in position in the class. We need a leadership group which can learn from the party and from the wider movement, as well as seek to intervene.

Currently, the vast majority of comrades, with all their talents and experience, are excluded even from being considered for the CC unless they are prepared to give up their job and any trade union role (i.e. their actual position in the working class) and move to the capital. The CC needs to be enlarged and should reflect the range of roles and activities which members perform as trade unionists, community activists, students and intellectuals, and in united fronts and campaigns.

Any CC is likely to require the membership of a small number of full-timers – perhaps for example in the post of National Secretary or of editor of Socialist Worker – but these must be kept to a minimum. The CC should not be in place to do the work of the party on behalf of the members.

And while we are on the subject, the Democracy Commission recommended that the CC share its disagreements with the party. The CC has ignored this, except when it has seen a factional advantage in revealing a split. We need to enforce this on the CC if it is unwilling. In the same way as we need to enforce the resolution conference passed on holding debates in our publications. The CC cannot be allowed to ignore party decisions.

We have copied the text of Kris's motion below. You won't be able to debate it at the special conference, unfortunately. But we do hope there is a CC slate for you to vote on:

“This branch believes that the crisis that now faces the Socialist Workers Party was caused by the Central Committee (CC) and has at every stage been made worse by the CC's actions and inaction.

“The widespread consternation among comrades over a clearly flawed Disputes Committee process – overseen by the CC – could have led to welcome changes to our practice in this area. However the CC has not used the opportunities to resolve the issues but has instead chosen to attack those members who have refused to hide that consternation. In doing so, the CC has ignored the very real concerns of those on the left who have worked closely with us in the past. In fact the CC has tried to pretend that such concerns do not exist, or that they have been whipped up by “disloyal” party members.

“The goal of every comrade is to build a strong party that is seen to be fair in its internal dealings. Splitting the party and driving the class and long-standing party allies away in disgust over this matter is not the way to achieve this. If the SWP is to pull back from the brink of ongoing attrition and a slide into irrelevance and

disrepute, the party needs new leadership.

“However, simply replacing the current CC with another similar group will solve very little. In our leading bodies we need a wider base of experience, we need more implantation in the class, we need fewer full-time party workers, we need more robust theoretical discussion – and we need the party as a whole to know what is happening within the CC. We also need to ensure that differing views within the party are represented. We therefore call on comrades to come together in a spirit of cooperation and join in putting together a new, expanded CC.

“Conference:

- 1) Has no confidence in the Central Committee elected in January 2013
- 2) Calls on that Central Committee to resign

“Conference resolves:

1. That the Central Committee be made up of 25 comrades
2. That a maximum of six of these comrades will be full-time workers for the party
3. That a maximum of four members of the Central Committee elected in January will be eligible for election to the Central Committee
4. That a commission be elected from this conference to investigate and report back to the next Party Council on how best members can be kept informed of and contribute to CC discussions”

Kris (South London and IDOOP, DRP) and Julian (Merseyside and IDOOP, DRP)

IN DEFENCE OF LENINISM: POLITICAL CLARITY AND ‘THE CRISIS’

I support some of the aims of the Faction and consider myself part of the ‘Oppositionist’ current in the SWP which has been outspoken since December.

This current is fighting in defence of Leninism, not against Leninism. To defend the analysis which has led me to this position means defending it as a Leninist analysis, so it must start with the facts.

Therefore it is vital to fully understand the objections being raised about the Central Committee (CC), the last Conference etc and I will attempt to clarify these. This article is not a formal accusation; rather it is an attempt to set out the criticisms which have largely gone unspoken.

It is important to note that the following problems, which the Oppositionist current seeks to solve, can all be traced to circumstances and material factors. These might include the experience of many older

comrades through the 20+ year period of 'the Downturn' prior to 1999, when it was essential to tightly control the SWP to hold it together.

Another possible factor is an increasingly 'desperate' mindset among comrades in response to the current period of economic crisis for capitalism: the unpredictable shifts in the class struggle have been alternately exciting and disappointing for comrades and this has led, in some cases, to urgency combined with lack of perspective.

Clarity: the charge

The CC and the entire existing party structure, as maintained by full-time activists/ those unwilling to challenge CC decisions, stands accused, by a significant proportion of comrades, of acting as a self-interested bureaucratic layer within the party.

This accusation includes, but is not limited to, the accusation that the CC would try and has tried to protect the reputation and position of a CC member by influencing the formation/procedure/outcome of a Disputes Committee.

Possible explanations for such actions by the CC might include a loss of perspective on the class struggle, where realistic understanding of the relationship between party and class might be replaced by a determination to defend at all costs the CC as the core of the party containing the 'best' comrades.

Another reason might be an unspoken abandonment of revolutionary objectives in favour of a conservative, 'careerist' approach which seeks (in a manner comparable to the Trade Union leadership) to contain revolutionary aspirations within a party which does not actually threaten capitalism in reality.

In either case the implication would be that other comrades would be less important than CC members and could be manipulated, bullied, expelled or otherwise silenced for the convenience and protection of CC members and to maintain the CCs line on any given issue.

This is what many comrades believe is happening: the Facebook exchange which included the four comrades expelled last December may be partly understood in this context, as might the expulsions themselves. A further implication in either case would be that the CC might place women's rights second to the reputations of prominent male activists.

Many party full-timers and 'loyalists', who have been referred to as 'hacks,' stand accused of uncritical obedience to the CC: an obvious failure to maintain the principles and practice of real democratic centralism and of Leninism generally.

This obedience, or deference, is apparent in a zealous determination to assert the rightness of the CC in practically all circumstances, leading to heavy-handedness in dealing with party administration and attitudes which are far from political or democratic.

These accusations, levelled at a much larger number of comrades throughout the UK, include (but are not limited to) bullying behaviour, threats, insults and interrupting/shouting over people. These attitudes may be as 'unthinking' as they often seem, or may result from a lack of political perspective and may to some extent be blamed on the party's experiences and decisions in the recent past.

What is certain is that this 'loyalty' has damaged and continues to damage our party's democracy both for longtime members and those recently joined; it therefore has serious implications for the fundamental business of recruitment and retention and this problem is apparent in the discontent felt by many comrades.

In my opinion, these accusations add up to a severe critique of the SWP's existing structures/culture; the Oppositionist current is emphatically not *against* democratic centralism, rather it raises the alarm that democratic centralism is not being implemented effectively, due to some combination of self-interest/outrageous behaviour/routinism from the CC and full timers and a lack of questioning among wider layers of comrades. Among other things, this would certainly bring the January 2013 Conference into question among serious revolutionaries; the 'binding' nature of our annual conference is dependent on exactly the kind of free and open debate which *many* comrades believe has not taken place and is still not.

Democracy: open discussion

The suspicions and concerns I have outlined must not be brutally crushed, using the urgency of the current period as an excuse; nor can they simply be waved away following any conference, the democracy of which is one of the factors under suspicion.

In fact these suspicions and concerns must be dealt with seriously and openly to ensure the future of our party and it is not possible to set a date after which comrades are required to be content. As a Leninist party, questioning and open criticism from all perspectives must continue to be part of our year-round activity and I assert that this should be both comradely and visible (as opposed to 'secret').

Leninism: a living tradition

Leninism is incompatible with chauvinism; sexist comments such as "creeping feminism" should always be challenged and comrades who use such language should acknowledge their mistake.

The point has been made that this Oppositionist current has so far failed to clarify a political position. As a contribution to this, I offer the following outline perspective on Leninism and our party.

The abuse of Leninist language is a factor in the SWP's problems. We rightly value clear, political communication, but here

again the danger of routinism is apparent.

There is a style of speaking and writing common in the party which comrades believe to be 'political' or 'polemical' and adherence to this is perversely considered more important than realism or facts.

For example; I contend it's perfectly obvious that every comrade wants an interventionist party that engages the class and takes part in activity.

However, if my writing doesn't include references to this (essentially 'lip service'), I am liable to be accused of not caring about intervention, not being political enough, even if I have assessed reality in clear terms. Such accusations were apparent at Conference in January and since.

A less realistic, or even meaningless, contribution may get comrades' approval, purely on the basis that it *sounds* political. So, in direct opposition to material analysis and Leninist strategy, our language can become a way of obscuring the facts instead of clarifying them. When faced with reality, some comrades dismiss it because they don't find it 'polemical' enough. I think this is one of several flaws in our present application of Leninism.

Also: Lenin may not have specifically discussed behaviour or social skills. Maybe he didn't think it was important - or maybe he thought it should be obvious that revolutionaries have a responsibility to communicate effectively with the working class, to earn the respect and trust of other workers and even to inspire them.

But as a Leninist today I think this is one of the most crucial issues facing our party. Since Lenin's time we have seen the rise of consumerism, mass awareness of psychology and parallel to these, an emphasis on 'individual choice' to which the left is of course not immune. This absolutely does *not* make Leninism irrelevant to the 21st Century, it simply means that we must take current attitudes into account when applying Leninist strategy to the present circumstances.

Whether we succeed at this is shown by our behaviour when interacting with workers both in and outside the SWP and it is in our behaviour that so many people will locate the reason why they have not joined/ have left/keep the SWP at arm's length.

Many, many comrades urgently need to make a conscious commitment to truly effective communication and appropriate behaviour, whether at meetings, paper sales or the social activity which is often so important in developing our members and cadre. I refuse to define 'appropriate behaviour' and this refusal does not mean I am being woolly or un-political (see my point about language earlier). The reality is that the right type of speech, actions, attitude etc, varies depending on the circumstances and judging this correctly is something most people learn to do as they go through life - revolutionaries in particular should recognise the importance of getting this right and not be satisfied with polemic alone, which repels other workers

at least as often as it attracts.

When comrades get this wrong, the implications are dire for recruitment and retention. During my efforts to counter such problems in my own branch, it has become apparent that our current interpretation of Leninism has no 'lever' which might compel comrades to improve their effectiveness in the social/political sphere. We are simply told to sell more papers, which doesn't solve the problem.

Towards a strategy

Many in the Oppositionist current are proposing structural solutions to the party's problems, new slate systems etc. As I have attempted to outline, I think there is a deeper behavioural/ideological problem. But what I am certain of is that if we can't change the way the party functions and the way many comrades act towards members and non-members alike, if we can't get this *right*, we can't hope to recruit or retain, or prevail in our struggles.

The last few months have shown what can happen if we as a party don't get this right; students, workers and activists of all ages need to feel inspired and to see that the party is honest. We must renew our commitment to truly democratic revolutionary politics, as a party and as individuals.

Sam (Nottingham)

THE LIFEBLOOD OF DEMOCRATIC CENTRALISM

Respect decisions to intervene effectively – the lifeblood of democratic centralism: A view from South Yorkshire.

The SWP stands at a crossroads. Either the party remains an organisation based on our long-standing tradition of democratic centralism or we follow the slide of more recent left formations into the morass of permanent factionalism and dismissal of the Leninist model of a vanguard party.

What is at stake has never been starker. National Conference is the supreme body of the party. Conference delegates agree the perspectives for the coming year. Our most recent conference debated and agreed a set of perspectives.

Commissions included, The World in Turmoil, What Sort of Party We Need, Anti-Racism, Anti-Fascism, and Fighting the EDL, The Fightback in the Workplaces and Unite the Resistance, Building the Party, On the Fight for Women's Liberation and On Students. They all received majority support. Delegates also supported the Disputes Committee report.

Conference also voted into position individual party members to sit on the Central

Committee (CC), National Committee (NC) and Disputes Committee. Once conference reached its decisions, those decisions are binding on all members of the party.

Our agreed perspectives arm every party member to intervene effectively and to increase our political influence within movements, workplaces and colleges. That is why we support the decisions taken by our 2013 national conference and the motion overwhelmingly agreed by the last NC meeting.

However, a minority of party members have refused to abide by conference decisions and as a result; their actions are debilitating, and obstruct our day-to-day political intervention.

They have continued to campaign against conference policies, with some resorting to destructive public attacks on the party and individual comrades both locally and nationally via blogs and social media – effectively trial by internet.

At one time, it was a common to use the phrase, 'don't believe all that you read in the press' – that should now read, 'don't believe all that you read on social media sites'!

This unaccountable, uncomradely and anti-democratic behaviour has no place within our democratic centralist tradition and can only breed distrust. The direct consequences of this activity have resulted in media stories such as the deplorable article in the Daily Mail. As the struggle intensifies, absolute confidence between members is vital for any challenge to the state to be successful.

We believe that Democratic Centralism is the highest form of democracy. The tradition of our Party, of the fullest and most open debate and of decisions, which are then acted upon by all members as a disciplined body, cannot be caricatured as a, "fossilised," or a static democratic form and is a living, breathing method of working class participation.

Seizing the time

Major opportunities for revolutionaries and their organisations to effect real change in our society come about very rarely. The history of our own organisation, from a small group to the formation of the SWP in the 1970s was all about preparing ourselves to seize one of those junctures.

Today, with the capitalist system in economic turmoil, we either move forward in a united manner to face up to the serious challenges and possibilities ahead or we follow in the footsteps of many other missed opportunities that have beset the world revolutionary left.

The revolutionary Arab Spring, the mass movements across Southern Europe should be an inspiration for all of us. However, the rise of the fascist right in Europe should also set off alarm bells and be a warning that failure to seize those moments will have serious consequences for the working class. The SWP has and has always shown unlimited responsibility in the fight against

the far right and developing solidarity with all those fighting across the globe to bring about revolutionary change.

However, many comrades may feel extremely frustrated at the slow tempo of events in Britain. It is true that we have experienced the dissipation of the student revolt of 2010. We had a brief glimpse of the revival of working class struggle in Britain with three million on strike in November 2011 over pensions. However, the trade union bureaucracy too easily smothered this. In such circumstances, it can be all too easy for revolutionaries to turn inwards and passive, at the expense of effective intervention in the struggles we continue to face.

The 25,000 that demonstrated in Lewisham in defence of their local hospital highlights how quickly the underlying hatred and anger against the coalition can explode onto the streets. The strike of healthworkers in West Yorkshire and the national ballot of PCS members give a glimpse of the opportunities we have in building working class resistance to the Government's austerity agenda. The major success of Jerry Hicks in getting on the ballot paper offers a tremendous opening to conduct a serious political argument among one and a half million members of the UNITE union.

Implementing the perspectives in South Yorkshire

Since national conference, attacks on local services have provoked an outburst of anger against austerity cuts. This has led to sizable demonstrations against the local council and stirred a leading Labour political, David Blunkett to attempt to deflect this anger away from Labour to the coalition.

This has opened up a political debate on how we can resist the onslaught. It has allowed our comrades in the NUT, to initiate and succeed in getting the GMB and UNISON to sponsor a public meeting at the beginning of March.

In Doncaster, the intervention of comrades around the SITA Refuse Workers dispute and the Tesco Drivers strike were central to opening up the argument of the relationship of rank and file workers to the trade union bureaucracy and in injecting a confidence and militancy to the activity of the workers involved.

Comrades have been able, acting as revolutionary socialists in their workplaces and trade unions, mobilised very large numbers of Council and other workers in industrial action against the cuts and austerity and are now active in developing a functioning UtR group.

The response to the South Yorkshire Unite the Resistance (UtR) conference has been exciting and puts pay to the claim that the furor surrounding the Disputes Committee has led to important parts of the trade union movement shunning joint work with the party. The reality is rather different.

Aldous Huxley once stated; “Facts do not cease to exist because they are ignored”. The minority should take note, although on recent experience – we doubt it. To date, as we write this article, the following is a list of the support:

NUT branches; Sheffield, Doncaster, Barnsley
UCU; Yorks & Humbs UCU, University of Sheffield, Barnsley College UCU
PCS; DWP HO, Barnsley and Rotherham
Sheffield GMB S38 (local govt) branch, Barnsley GMB
S Yorks NUJ
BFAWU (Bakers Union)
Sheffield SWP PCS Branch,
Unite 302/25 (Olive Grove bus depot) Branch,
BFAWU South Yorkshire area are sending a delegation of 10.
Sheffield Trades Council, Rotherham Trades Council, Barnsley Trades Council
Sheffield Anti-Cuts Alliance
Sheffield Save Our NHS
Barnsley Save Our NHS campaign

Although UNISON branches have to tread carefully, the conference has received a good deal of support from branch officers in a number of important branches.

Moreover, it is the SWP members that have fully embraced an outward looking perspective that have been central to building the conference and laying the basis for a real and lasting rank and file solidarity network.

Building the branches and developing our political theory

Like most units of the party, we have struggled to adjust after the highpoints of the political radicalisation over the last decade. However, our branch meetings and organisation continue to improve since conference. We have had significant improvements in turnout.

Those comrades who have always argued our politics at work or in a variety of forums have become much more engaged in branch meetings.

Over the last few years, they have not been fully integrated into branches or the work of the party. We now have the structures to improve integration with functioning district and branch committees that are trying to get to grips with the many areas of work we need to embrace.

The importance of every member is something we have always taken seriously. That is why in Sheffield, we have worked ceaselessly through district, branch and many informal forums over the last four months to engage in a political dialogue to discuss through disagreements and concerns raised by a number of members.

It is through this method that we in cement members, old and new to our long-held theoretical positions. This is why we have initiated a series of district educationals centred on the basic tenets of our theory.

The first two were Marxism and the Crisis, and Marxism and Oppression. Both have been extremely successful in numbers and the quality of debate. Unfortunately, most of those that support the faction in South Yorkshire have failed to attend.

Anti-Leninism

Yet at the same time, the minority want to continue to drag our meetings down to the latest, ill-informed, tittle-tattle on unaccountable blogs and facebook sites.

Their behaviour runs counter to our practice of open and honest debate and then when a decision is reached – uniting in action. They show total disregard and respect for the majority of the membership. We believe they are using the controversy over the Disputes Committee as a pretext, for a more fundamental attack on democratic centralism.

They reject our tradition and the notion of a Leninist vanguard party being relevant for the 21st century. They act as a bridge for rightward moving forces, attempting to transform our party structure towards the Syriza model in Greece, rather than Leninism. This has to stop.

Lenin argued that; “There are decades when nothing happens; and there are weeks when decades happen.” We are no longer prepared to allow a minority to subvert our democratic decisions and continue to disarm the party as we gear up for the coming period in Britain. Whether we engage in the class struggle, build solidarity with revolutionary movements across the globe or fight the rise of the far right, we are an interventionist democratic centralist party.

We call on the special conference to re-affirm National Conference decisions, ratify the majority vote of the National Committee, and demand a halt to permanent factionalism.

We believe that the special conference should be the final word on the disputed questions. In addition, we believe that anyone that continues to ignore those decisions, places himself or herself outside the SWP constitution.

Jill (South Yorkshire district secretary)
Phil (Rotherham branch secretary and NC member)
Dave (District educationals organiser)
Bea (District membership secretary)
Sharon (District SW organiser)
Trevor (District treasurer)
Jim (Doncaster branch secretary)
Rebecca (Sheffield South branch secretary)
Leroy (Sheffield North branch secretary)
Andrea (Sheffield South membership secretary)

ON STUDENT STRATEGY

Major problems have emerged in the Party’s student strategy. Although not the most immediate issue facing our party, pre-existing tensions in our student work have been exacerbated in past months.

An assessment of the 2010 movement is already overdue, and a war of interpretation over this period is now emerging. Contributions to this debate have already been made by Mark C and Sean V. This contribution aims to analyse the causes of the crisis in our student strategy. It will deal with the Party’s student strategy in its totality, from 2010 to the present, including the successes and failures. We hope more will be written on this in due course.

The criticism of students by some (usually older) comrades usually follows the same logic. Students need to be ‘won’ to ‘our tradition’, by a ‘long process’ of ‘argument and polemic’. Others have put it more crudely in slurs of ‘feminism’, ‘autonomism’, ‘scabs’, or worse.

The implicit reasoning of these positions is clear. Apparently the comrades who purport these ideas believe themselves to manifest the tradition of Cliff, Lenin, and Trotsky in physical form.

It is, however, very easy to proclaim yourself as the material embodiment of a tradition when those who created it are dead. After all, they can’t answer back. This self-indulgent train of thought is the cause of much of the problems.

Those who wish to ‘win people to our tradition’ start first from the standpoint that there is no argument to be had: those who aren’t *them* do not embody the ‘tradition’ and are therefore wrong. This is the logic of scholasticism, coupled with a hint of narcissism, and all tinged with a mild dose of Stalinism. No-one *owns* the Marxist tradition. It is a living and breathing thing, dialectically contested, and always asking questions of itself and the world around it. The truth is not already apparent before the argument has been conducted – the tradition is not a line in the sand that you are either for or against. Using this logic to deal with younger comrades has been grossly patronising to the point of farce. Argue with us, do not lecture us.

The Millbank movement drew a new layer of young people into the party. Although revolutionary socialism was not the ‘common-sense’ position of the student protests, it is this ‘Milbank generation’ that still forms the basis of our SWSS groups.

Whilst any organisation must consistently renew itself through younger cadre in order to be sustainable, the recruitment of students has a higher importance than this.

Although we stress the working class as the revolutionary agent, we recognise that struggles against capitalism can originate

in areas other than the workplace. Student struggle can have knock-on effects for other social sectors, both beyond and including the main area of capital accumulation.

The struggles of the street and the workplace exist in a dialectical relationship. It should be noncontroversial that this necessitates revolutionaries to be rooted in civil society organisations beyond the trade unions.

Lenin made it clear it was the 'energetic young people' that could both breathe life into the Bolsheviks, while in 1917 one third of the Bolshevik Central Committee had been party members since the age of 15. Rank and file members of the German KPD made young people a priority in their recruitment, even after rebuttals by the leadership.

A mechanistic historical logic is of no help in contextualising the student movement of 2010. Despite the attempts by Mark C and Sean V at playing down the idea of 'student's as detonators', it seems in 2010, they were. Students had moved first, and were followed, in time, by mass working class action. The two should be seen as related. Of course, the sequence of events isn't enough to demonstrate this. But the fact that the student movement was cited by Trade Union leaders like Len McCluskey as 'putting trade-unionists on the spot' should be. Students are not simply the next generation of workers or party apparatus fodder. Students are a social stratum that revolutionaries should pay attention to in their own right.

The rapid expansion of the university system after the Second World War transformed the potential of student struggle. Unlike in 1968, around 50% of young people now attend university, while almost all those under 19 are in Further Education. Much of our theoretical understanding of the role of students and their struggles is derived from the 1960s.

This is the correct place to start, and if anything the student movement has suffered from a lack of understanding of this period. However, the 1960s should not be fetishised. It seems to be from the lessons of the 1960s that some are attempting to justify the strategic orientation towards winning the centrality of the working class with students. This was a key focus in the 1960s for historically contingent reasons. This idea needed to be won because it was not yet 'common sense'. 'Red bases', Situationism, and unaligned anti-authoritarianism were key arguments revolutionary socialists had to deal with.

Either by a slip of memory, or by active inattentiveness, Mark C and Sean V would have known that SWSS members were central in arguing against the implicit or explicit autonomism, youth politics, and fetishism of spontaneity, which emerged from the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (NCAFC), Bloomsbury Fight-back, and the Labour left.

Mark C and Sean V claim "the setting up of the Education Activist Network (EAN) as a joint student and worker united front...

was a mistake" as it was a "mechanical attempt to win students to see the working class as the key agent for change." It remains obvious that when we have to nationally co-ordinate student struggle, we need the utmost unity amongst student activists.

It is true that a student united front in 2010 *could* have provided better leadership and co-ordination. Yet Mark C and Sean V forget that unity between EAN, the NCAFC, and other groups was attempted a number of times. Many SWSS members tried unsuccessfully to achieve unity between the groups. In concrete terms the various groups – co-ordinated by the London Student Assembly – acted in unison during the protests.

When the NUS refused to lead, other grass-roots organisational structures took its place. EAN aimed to unite the whole education sector in the fight-back (which included schools and FE colleges), not just university lecturers and students.

Although taken up partially by the Industrial Office, NUT comrades neglected calls for action, citing lack of time due to running strike ballots.

Criticising EAN in retrospect, while forgetting the conscious or unconscious undermining during the two months in 2010 (when the movement's success was in the balance), remains unproductive. The key issue during the protests, overlooked by Mark C and Sean V, was not so much organisation, but that the movement was cut short by the vote on fees and the winter break.

The momentum of the movement was critically extinguished before a real democratising of student structures, and a truly mass movement, nationally co-ordinated by rank-and-file student groups, could emerge. The failure of the movement to continue after December meant the question of hegemony within the traditional student organisations was never forced, unlike in Quebec. The right within the NUS was able to reconsolidate its power at the following national conference when the movement had lost momentum.

The likelihood of future nationally co-ordinated student struggle depends on a number of contingent factors. Unless there is another sustained attack by the government, conducted on a national level against students (such as another increase in tuition fees), the likelihood of a mass movement occurring seems slim.

The impact of cuts and privatisation, however, will be felt very sharply on individual campuses. The recent occupation and demonstrations at Sussex over 243 potential job losses is a pertinent example of this. The national struggle may be weak or non-existent, but the potential for radical mass movements on individual campuses are real.

This process is likely to be repeated across the Higher Education sector as individual institutions implement the cuts and privatisation agenda set by the government. Some universities, like London Met, will feel this more than others. Our overall

student strategy must be ready for this.

Whatever direction the struggles take, organisational forms, be it EAN or local anti-cuts groups, need to be central in uniting students and workers on campuses. Here the role of EAN *does* come into its own, even if there is an argument over its role in the longer term. After all it was formed out of the defence of the Roehampton University Philosophy department six months before Millbank. These practical struggles can draw people into the party if we show leadership: if SWSS proves it can unite theory with practice.

An "autonomist common sense" in the student movement, however rooted it was in 2010, did not lead to a failure to understand the "centrality of working-class agency". The problem for student comrades across campuses is not around convincing students of the centrality of the working class, but over the need for revolutionary organisation. This is no minor distinction, but a central nuance lost on many non-student comrades.

These issues need to be explained using an analysis of student's unique social position. The working class, on a day to day level of interaction on campuses, remains an abstract entity. It is, however, very easy for students to generalise strategically and seek common links to other social groups.

Student grievances can be generalised very easily when material realities make it obvious that more groups than them (including their own parents and friends) are being attacked. To convince students on an abstract and strategic level for working-class self-activity is, we have found, almost a common-sense position for our periphery and beyond. The problem lies in convincing students to the centrality of the party: to unite theory with practice. Having won virtual hegemony of the slogan 'Students and Workers - Unite and Fight', the sell-out of the pension dispute in late 2011 demoralised students, our periphery, and the wider party. With the concrete possibility of further strike action repealed, our hereto successful ideological intervention was held back, not by our lack of trying, but by the level of class struggle.

This, we believe, should be done not only on an ideological level through meetings and reading, but through the practice of our politics. We have found this can work best through a movement, campaign, and the interaction with organised workers in struggle (such as the Sparks dispute).

There is certainly anger on campuses over a range of issues and a willingness to engage with new ideas. Yet there is also alienation and a sense of powerlessness. SWSS and the wider party must fill this gap intellectually, politically, and socially.

The centrality of an organisation that unites student and workers, acting as a 'memory' for both, and a functional tool for changing the world, has to be the central. Abstract arguments about Leninism - although remaining fundamental in our arguments to win students - are not going

to win them overnight to the party. These overtures are almost always met with cynicism by many students as a reflex reaction. In practice how we have convinced students is through putting those same ideas into a political practice. The ideas become reality, and preconceived prejudices disappear, when the individual experiences their usefulness in action.

Rather than seriously assessing the role of students in the current period, Mark C and Sean V have attempted to find the evidence to match the slurs thrown at students in the current faction fight.

We reject the current baseless accusations of 'autonomism' thrown at SWSS members, for which no real evidence is cited. In fact student comrades have been central in arguing for a revolutionary party on campuses and campaigns dominated by forces that self-identify as autonomists.

Students have to deal with these ideas incessantly and have developed the arguments and the political level to challenge them and win. To suggest 'creeping autonomism' has infiltrated students through an osmosis effect is patronising and offensive.

By the same logic one could accuse party trade-unionists, including Mark C, by their proximity to union structures, of catching a strain of bureaucratism through a process of contagion. Maybe friendships with non-party members could posit the same debilitating effects. All this would of course be ridiculous. The logic of these accusations rest again, as has been discussed previously, on the assumption that a pure and unadulterated ideal party-member, uncorrupted by the outside world, can exist. Of course this is compounded by the fact that the accusers believe *themselves* to be the Leninist answer to Peter the Evangelist, without the slightest trace of humility.

An emerging narrative seems to be the 'failure' of the party's student work to deal with the 'disorientating' decline of the Millbank movement. Presumably if only the party had 'consolidated ideologically' after the movement, and exorcised its students of their 'autonomism', then they wouldn't have been so angry over the DC report. This is all a fallacy.

SWSS hosted the 'Students for Revolution' mini-Marxism, as well as a multitude of other theoretical meetings and events after the movement declined.

Attempts to explain-away the anger students have expressed in how the DC case was handled has led to questioning of the student perspectives set out, and voted unanimously, at the previous three conferences.

In the process there has been a re-writing of the great success of this generation of SWSS members. The brunt of the leadership's new-fangled 'ideological turn' is to be found in this year's student mini-Marxism - Revolt! (re-named - for reasons we cannot discern - to 'Ideas to change the world').

In order to win the wayward students, a speaker list, composed of every member of the CC and four full-timers, has been

constructed. Originally this event was conceived as student-led. This was founded in a recognition that political development isn't just about being lectured, it also about giving the lecture. Now only four students are being allowed to speak. Students expressing opposition to current events are mostly absent.

An originally timetabled Defend the Right to Protest meeting has been dropped because of the perceived need to focus on the working class, despite good evidence to indicate that this is an important united front worth developing with students.

A number of original headline speakers are now refusing to speak because of the DC issue. This has been dismissed as 'not a problem'. Rather than being outward looking towards our periphery, the event is now likely to be considerably smaller than originally conceived. Punishing SWSS groups seems to be the primary motivation for these changes. A level of demoralisation resulting from these last minute changes to an event to which students felt they had ownership was inevitable.

A second issue compounds this. Our failure to enter in to a student-focused united front means the student left remains fractured. One effect of this is to complicate the left interventions in our national union, the NUS. Each year there is an attempt to piece together a left-slate through a (messy) negotiations process. A slate of 6 stands for full-time positions, and each year the SWP stands 2 candidates for the NEC. For the past 3 years we have 'topped the block', by which we mean gaining the highest number of votes for an NEC place.

One of our current incumbents, and leading NEC member, has - at the very last possible moment - been told by the Party that he cannot contest his position again.

Another less politically inexperienced student, and one of only a handful that support the CC's position, would be standing in his stead. The removed comrade has been leading in our SWSS work, and the political networks he has built up have been invaluable.

The degree of respect he has attained meant he was readily accepted in negotiations with our allies in the movement. The CC argument that this was a political decision based (at least partly) on the fact the candidate is a post-graduate is bizarre.

The candidate was a post-grad when he successfully ran for the same position last year, while Mark B was also a post-graduate when he was on the NUS executive. This hard work is now to be scuppered, for no reason other than that he has been prominent in opposing the handling of the DC case.

Further compounding this is the fact the CC/Student Office failed to hand in the candidate forms for our other candidate for the NEC - this time for FE students - in a scandalous act indicating either negligence or active sabotage. This candidate had also been critical of the handling of the DC case.

Not only have these manoeuvres been disorientating within SWSS but they

threaten to throw relations with our allies into turmoil. We negotiated certain candidates to stand in good faith, the same good faith we would expect from others.

Now our allies feel we have turned around and betrayed that agreement and the hard-won trust that had sustained it. This has resulted in what is known as a 'wrecking candidate' being stood against us for a full-time position, and we are guaranteed to hear - from the platform, in front of the entire NUS national conference - a raft of very severe criticisms of the Party's current position.

No matter how much the 'line' is toed (or, perhaps, no matter how much it is not), this damage will not be easily undone. These changes were neither discussed with students by the CC, nor have they been mentioned, proposed, or voted on, at either conference or a national student meeting.

All these errors made in student strategy were entirely avoidable. A proper analysis of the 2010 movement - what came out of it, where we are now, and where to go next is needed.

But this must be based on thoughtful argument, not slurs and an inward-looking siege mentality.

The changes to Revolt! and the crude dumping of our NEC candidate have been interpreted by students - correctly in our view - as a punishment for daring to speak out.

They threaten to cripple our SWSS work: demoralising students, forcing them out of the party, paralysing work on campuses, and ruining our hard-won reputation within the movement.

Some in the party, as they have made clear, are reconciled, if not relishing, this development. At every step, no student input has been taken. When students have forced the issue they have been rubbished.

The CC and its supporters are pursuing a scorched earth policy in regards to student strategy. Young people are central to a revolutionary party, and should be treated as such. The leadership's student strategy must make a turn from its current trajectory.

Matt (Oxford SWSS) and Ross (LSE SWSS)

A CALL TO THE OPPOSITION TO STAY IN AND FIGHT

In the weeks leading up to this special conference a number of members have resigned from the party, due to the increasingly bleak situation our leadership and their supporters are throwing us into.

Pre-conference aggregates have in large part been dire. In one district a member of the faction resigned after he was singled out for criticism by three different loyalists and compared to a scab. This was not

challenged by the CC representatives who were there, despite the ground rules they set out in Party Notes, that “It is very important that everyone involved in the debate acts in a fraternal manner. Insults, slurs and denigration of other comrades are completely unacceptable”.

In other aggregates several members who have been completely inactive for years have been encouraged by loyalists to turn up in force to prevent leading members in the district from being elected due to their affiliation with the faction.

At the same time bureaucratic manoeuvres have been put in place to prevent faction members and supporters from taking part in the debate. One member who recently rejoined the party - before the special conference was announced - was told that he was “not on the membership list” despite attending several party meetings before this discovery was revealed by the CC.

In another district, an active member of SWSS who recently joined the party was told that they too are unable to take part in either the party aggregate or conference. The reason given was that they had joined the organisation in a pre conference period. This rule is news to many and has not been implemented in respect of previous conferences. The only difference here appears to be that the leadership is being challenged.

The way in which speaking rights and allotted times have been decided by the CC is also completely undemocratic. Some districts have refused to accept this particular bureaucratic manoeuvre, for which we salute them.

From all of this we need to ask ourselves: Why do members who have been inactive for years have more rights than new and active recruits? Why is the CC using this level of bureaucracy to shut down debate and democracy?

This is all happening as criticisms on the party intensify in the outside world, and it is unsurprising that it is driving further people to leave. In one district two active students recently left the organisation. In another district a member who has played a leading role in their party’s interventions also resigned. This seems to be increasing day by day and is being repeated across the country - in Leicester, in Bristol, in Leeds to name but three.

In this context holding back our criticisms is not an option. The quieter we are, the more comrades we will lose - and we didn’t have enough to start with. While there is always a risk of alienating a middle ground, we must address undecided members openly and honestly, and win them to our perspective by explaining the crisis the leadership and their supporters are creating.

Even in the few days remaining to us between publication of this IB - disgracefully the only one allowed in this period - and the special conference, we need to hold on to as many members as we can. So this is a call to undecided members of the party. Your leadership is driving people out of the

party and purposely steering towards a split. This will lead to a complete destruction of our party’s reputation and will leave it unable to effectively intervene in class struggle. Join our demand for members to listen to these concerns and act on them now. Contact your delegates to the special conference and make sure they understand the issues.

And this is a call to members of the faction. Stay. It’s our party. We will fight as hard as we can up to and at the special conference. We must stick together. It is clear that the CC is doing everything it can to stitch up the result of this conference. It seems likely they will succeed.

But that will not give them the right to impose their will on the party, on us as revolutionary socialists. Not only is our organisation being torn apart, but the reputation of the whole IS tradition we have built and fought for is at risk. We cannot allow this to happen as the stakes are too high. If we drift away as individuals, we abandon our tradition to a leadership determined to destroy it. We cannot allow revolutionary ideas to be tarred with this shame.

They may well try and break us and they may try to drive us out. As socialists we know our strength is in numbers. Let’s stay and fight together. Let’s keep our flame of dissent burning.

Martin (Sheffield and IDOOP, DRP)

WHY ARE WE HERE

The questions of why we are in the crisis we are in, why some comrades thought it necessary to form a faction, why we are having a special conference are important ones. The CC and supporters of it’s position would have you believe that it is due to creeping autonomism in the party. That members of the faction all secretly hate the SWP and want to destroy it. That we want change it into something different. That we don’t care about the class struggle and just want to sit around endlessly debating structures. None of those reasons are why we are in this situation.

We are in the situation we are because of the fallout from a disputes committee investigation. Any organisation that receives serious allegations against leading members of the party is bound to have some degree of crisis afterwards. Look at what is happening to the Lib Dems currently. Look at what happened to Wikileaks after the allegations against Assange. The test for our organisation is how we respond to these cases.

In the run up to our annual conference different people had heard different rumours about the disputes committee case. No one was allowed to know what was happening. Yet all sorts of partial facts were known. This was not sufficient for most people to have a debate about what lessons

could be learnt for the case. For many, in districts not so tightly connected to the centre, barely anything at all was known. All that was known for definite was that a number of leading comrades in the organisation had their doubts about how the disputes committee had handled a mysterious case.

In the lead up to conference it became clear something serious was going to happen at the conference, but it was still very unclear what had happened. Then came the debate on the disputes committee report. For many in the room this was quite a shock. There was an unprecedentedly large vote against the disputes committee report. The report was passed with a small majority. Many of us went away from conference hoping that the CC and DC would realise that many people had concerns about the handling of the case. That the vote in favour of the report was not a sign that the party shouldn’t discuss how things could be done better in the future. We were to be disappointed.

People join the SWP because they are socialists. They join to fight against the Tories and the bosses, to fight for a revolution. Part of our politics is that the working class should be tribunes of the oppressed. That workers should respond to the oppression of any groups in society whoever they may be. If we are arguing this we need to have confidence in our own party.

Living in the world we live means we can’t stop people having sexist ideas. We argue that people consciousness is determined by their material circumstances. That no one can be truly free of oppressive ideas until we have got rid of class society. Be that racism, sexism or whatever. We do, however, want to fight for a party that represents the best elements of our class. The most advanced workers. This means we want to be able to say with confidence that we don’t tolerate rapists in our party. In order to be able to say this we need to have a solid disputes procedure. One that is capable of removing rapist from our party, whoever they may be.

Serious doubts had been raised about our disputes procedure at conference. These are supported by a large number of comrades. In this situation the only sensible step is carryout a review into these procedures. Yes, a majority of comrades may feel that they have served sufficiently so far. This could be a valid conclusion of any review. But as long as doubts remain about the procedure, doubts will be raised about it’s results.

The comrade who was accused felt they needed to step down from the CC. It is of no benefit to those who are accused of these things to have doubts raised over the body that deals with such complaints.

The CC and it’s supporters like to think that people raising them must have some ulterior motive. We must all want permanent factions forever. We must only be doing this because we want to be on the CC. Our students must all be secret autonomists. Their arguments are concentrated on these side points. Why? Because they have no good

reason not to hold a full review into the dispute committee procedure. Because they have no answers to the criticisms made other than ‘you couldn’t have done a better job yourself so shut up’.

Yes the party has been, and is being, damaged by this argument. Our enemies will use this against us, the same as they would use anything. This does not mean we should not raise concerns we have. This does not mean that those raising the concerns are the ones causing the damage. We don’t care what the Daily Mail thinks of us. We do, however, need to be satisfied in ourselves that we are doing the right thing.

In the process of forming a faction, in the course of opposing the central committee, all sorts of other questions come up. The defensive and punitive reaction of the CC provokes all sorts of further side disputes. These questions and these disputes will need solving in time but they are not the central question.

The central question is the disputes committee. To call ourselves Marxists, to call ourselves socialists, to call ourselves Leninist is saying we are part of a tradition. A tradition that is proud of it’s record of fighting for women’s liberation. To be part of that tradition means we must be confident party does not allow rapists in it. To do this we must be confident in our mechanism of dealing with them. This crisis indicates many are not. This criticism must be answered. The procedures must be re-examined to ensure they are fit for purpose. This is the central question. We must deal with it.

Dom (Merseyside)

IS LENINISM FINISHED? NO, BUT WHICH LENINISM DO WE MEAN?

Introduction

Personally I find it absurd that the CC take it as a given that the reason a huge number of SWP members remain concerned about how an issue of rape was handled inside the Party and are unhappy about the massive negative impact this has caused outside the Party is because they are not Leninists. Notwithstanding the bizarre logic of the CC position I will comment on some of the issues raised.

The Leninist Party

The CC seems intent on placing its own conception of the Leninist Party at the heart of the debate. The Alex Callinicos article ‘Is Leninism Finished?’⁸ seeks to defend

Leninism from a “flood of attacks” from both the left-Labourite Owen Jones and from some in the SWP. As Paul D’Amato has remarked, “Leon Trotsky once described this debating technique as an “amalgam” – linking two separate things together in order to create guilt by association. Callinicos not only avoids having to respond seriously to the issues raised by SWP members, but he is able to declare them opponents of Leninism like Owen Jones.”⁹

Alex also uses other conjuring tricks. He tells his readers that some inside the SWP want a “different model [of democratic centralism]” which apparently equates to “a much looser and weaker leadership”. They want “internal debate that continually reopens decisions already made” and they also want “permanent factions”.

According to Alex, if all this comes to pass “the SWP would become a much smaller and less effective organisation, unable to build broader movements”. Alex’s argument fails on a number of counts, most particularly on the counts that a) what he says his opponents want is not necessarily true and b) even if it were true a different model of democratic centralism doesn’t mean looser/weaker leadership; more and better internal debate doesn’t mean you continually reopen discussions and c) factions (permanent or otherwise) have a long and honourable history within Leninism and the politics of Lenin himself.

On the subject of playing “fast and loose” with reality it’s also worth briefly mentioning here the “Central Committee Statement” of 9th February. That CC statement manages to contain an untruth, a red-herring and an unjustified presumption, all within one short paragraph.

The untruth is that “the [IDOO] faction document is extraordinarily unpolitical” – no SWP member, including on the CC, will actually believe that. I’m in the company of both Lenin and Cliff in stating that a party must be able and ready to learn from its own mistakes and to be self-critical. The red-herring is that the faction document “has nothing to say about the economic crisis and the fightback, the battle against racism and fascism, the union bureaucracy and the rank and file, Unite the Resistance, anti-imperialism, building the SWP – or much else.”

The answer is, “of course it doesn’t”, the faction document is absolutely clear that the faction has been formed “to argue for a rejection of some CC and NC decisions taken since our conference closed on 6th January 2013.” The unjustified presumption is that “presumably the faction supporters think the party is getting all of that [the economic crisis etc] right.”

Well, obviously, the faction’s supporters may have a variety of views on all these things, as will all SWP members, but given that they are all outside of the purview of the faction and have thus not been discussed then any such CC presumption

must be misplaced.

Let us, however, return to Alex’s article. Alex seeks to persuade us that the current SWP model of democratic centralism, one that has been largely unchanged for over 40 years, is a direct descendent of that of the Bolsheviks in 1917. This is just not true. That Bolshevik leadership was not elected by a slate system; Bolshevik internal debate was intense with differences in the public domain on fundamental questions e.g. it is well known that Zinoviev and Kamenev, two members of the Bolshevik CC, publicly opposed the insurrection on the eve of October 1917 – they were not expelled. If you doubt this read Cliff (1960)¹⁰ who gives this example and a whole host of others.

Finally, the Bolsheviks saw factions as fundamental to their true democracy. Trotsky makes his view on party democracy, internal debate and factions absolutely clear in his 1936 work “The Revolution Betrayed”. Indeed, John Molyneux call this Trotsky’s “completely unequivocal exposition of his views on party democracy”¹¹. Trotsky wrote:

“The inner regime of the Bolshevik Party was characterised by the method of democratic centralism. The combination of these two concepts, democracy and centralism, is not in the least contradictory. The party took watchful care not only that its boundaries should always be strictly defined, but also that all those who entered these boundaries should enjoy the actual right to define the direction of party policy. Freedom of criticism and intellectual struggle was an irrevocable content of the party democracy. The present doctrine that Bolshevism does not tolerate factions is a myth of the epoch of decline.”

In reality the history of Bolshevism is a history of the struggle of factions. And, indeed, how could a genuine revolutionary organisation setting itself the task of overthrowing the world and uniting under its banner the most audacious iconoclasts, fighters and insurgents, live and develop without intellectual conflicts, without groupings and temporary factional formulations? The farsightedness of the Bolshevik leadership often made it possible to soften conflicts and shorten the factional struggle, but no more than that.”

Mark Thomas, of our own Central Committee, described the book “Leninism under Lenin” by Marcel Liebman¹² as “one of a handful of outstanding studies of Lenin”¹³ and if anyone is truly interested in the Bolshevik Party in 1917 that section of

¹⁰ Tony Cliff. 1960. Trotsky on Substitutionism. International Socialism Journal (First Series) No. 2 Autumn 1960.

¹¹ John Molyneux. 1986. Marxism and the Party (Third Edition), Bookmarks, London.

¹² Marcel Liebman. 1985. Leninism Under Lenin. Merlin Press, London.

¹³ Mark L. Thomas. 2010. Book Review of Lenin’s Political Thought by Neil Harding. Socialist Review No. 347 May 2010.

⁸ Alex Callinicos. 2013. Is Leninism Finished? Socialist Review No. 377 February 2013.

⁹ Paul D’Amato. 2013. The SWP Crisis and Leninism. Socialistworker.org. 11th February 2013

the book is required reading.

Here you get a picture of the real Bolsheviks with differences being argued out in public, minority views being engaged with and brought into the party apparatus, Lenin disagreeing with the policy of the Central Committee and taking his arguments outside of that committee to other parts of the organisation and the rank and file, major decision making being opened up to the membership and much more.

What is to be done?

Nobody can seriously say that the only appropriate model of democratic centralism has to be the one we formulated over 40 years ago and still use today. The political landscape has changed enormously over the last 40 years, the class struggle ebbs and flows, ideas gain and lose ground as does how we communicate and interact, both individually and as groups.

The question therefore becomes how do we organise ourselves in any given period, and, more particularly, how do we need to organise today?

It ought to be clear to everybody that our present arrangements are not provably fit for purpose. Either that or we are the unluckiest party in the world having suffered a string of crises (Respect, Counterfire, IS Group, Disputes Committee) in rapid succession. In a situation like this there can be a tendency to “batten down the hatches”, seek internal scapegoats and meet internal criticism with impatience, censure or even disciplinary measures.

Regrettably I would have to say that this is how I see the current CC acting. In my view this evidences a defensive attitude borne of insecurity and lack of political vision. It is 100% the wrong response.

There is a lesson to learn from Tony Cliff here. Cliff was well aware that, in a properly functioning party, discipline is political – not administrative – and is fundamentally a matter of conviction. Indeed, writing in Lenin Volume 4, Cliff states in relation to democratic centralism, “if “staff” [leadership] and “troops” [members] are well integrated, discipline follows 99% from conviction and only 1% from mechanical obedience. Where such conditions do not exist bureaucratic fiat will inevitably take over. After all no organizational rule can, in practice, rise much higher than the political base on which it rests.”¹⁴

It has become increasingly clear to me that our Democracy Commission held in 2009, whilst being a start and managing some small improvements inside the party, was nowhere near radical enough to embed the changes required.

The CC will, no doubt, continue to say that we should not be spending our time looking internally when there are massive political battles to be fought outside. The irony is that it is the CC that are the

inward-looking ones, because they see the present crisis in terms of party procedures, and not in terms of how it is perceived by our periphery and allies.

It is the fact that is concerned that our current dispute is damaging our united front and other work. The CC position is also highly unpolitical. Combining democracy and centralism effectively has no organisational formula; rather it flows directly from the tasks of the party and the current state of the class struggle.

It requires the highest level of politics to achieve the right combination in practice – but achieving the successful combination of the two is bound to lead to more effective interventions in the political battles. In short, it is an internal debate that must be ongoing and grounded in reality.

These are some organisational areas (there are many other areas to debate including feminism, autonomism, the role of students etc) where I think we currently fall short of what is needed to make us a more successful and effective Leninist party.

a) Central Committee – Composition and Election

Our current method of electing the CC has much in common with the bureaucratic rituals of “dead-man’s shoes” and “Buggins’ turn”.

When an existing CC member dies, resigns or is deemed inappropriate for some reason, the remaining members of the CC will choose a replacement. That replacement will generally live in London, be an ex-student and be an employee of the party.

Most importantly from the CC’s point of view, the person selected will be someone who agrees with their own current perspectives. What we end up with is a CC with limited experience of the world outside of the hothouse of National Office or student politics. In normal circumstances that CC will then carry on relatively unchanged until the next person dies, resigns or is deemed inappropriate.

Lenin was always adamant that leaders are only there because they have earned that right in the struggle and they have to continually re-earn that right. What we need is a leadership with experience of real struggles in the real world and a method of nomination and election that achieves it.

b) Confusing meetings with democracy

The CC make great play of the fact that the SWP has a highly developed democracy on the basis that we have branch meetings, district committees, national committee and annual conference etc.

We do, indeed, have these meetings but democracy is, in Trotsky’s words, about the “right to define the direction of party policy”. Annual conference is where the party is supposed to set its policies for the year ahead but, as far as I can tell, conference decides very little. My views on this subject are actually well expressed in an article

on the International Socialism blog:¹⁵

“According to the theory, conference discusses and decides (democracy) and then comrades, including those who opposed the agreed position, carry out the decisions (centralism). Fine: but what does conference actually decide? It is presented with a series of general perspective documents which are usually so bland and platitudinous that it is virtually impossible to disagree with them: the economic crisis is not going to be resolved, times are hard but there are also opportunities, we must not be complacent over the threat of fascism, and so on.

“To agree with this kind of statement is not to make a decision over strategy or tactics, or anything specific enough for the CC to be held to account. The real decisions about actual policy – to establish united fronts, to join electoral coalitions – are almost always made by the CC itself between conferences, with conference asked to ratify them after the event.”

Clearly, the CC does have to make important decisions during the period between conferences and yes, not all of these can be the subject of extensive debate.

But we have to find ways to make annual conference more relevant and democratic. We also have to understand that politics doesn’t happen in a neat annual cycle with a January start-point and sod the rest of the year! We desperately need methods by which the membership can not only be engaged with real developments in the real world as they happen, but also methods by which the membership can play a part in directing these developments.

c) Secrecy vs openness

It seems to me that as time has gone on the party is moving away from a position of relative openness as regards debating our politics in public towards a position where the leadership much prefers to keep anything in the least contentious “under-wraps”.

There is a manifold problem here. Firstly, in these days of instant news, the Internet, social media etc it is more difficult than ever to keep things confidential. Secondly, I have always found that the best way out of a situation is to discuss it openly, fully and frankly. Thirdly, and most importantly, a revolutionary party should actually be encouraging involvement in its debates. Cliff was following Lenin when he wrote:¹⁶

“Since the revolutionary party cannot have interests apart from the class, all the party’s issues of policy are those of the class, and they should therefore be thrashed out in the open, in its presence... Let the mass of the workers take part in

¹⁵ Various. Is Zinovievism Finished? A Reply to Alex Callinicos. International Socialism Blog 29th January 2013.

¹⁶ Tony Cliff. 1960. Trotsky on Substitutionism. International Socialism Journal (First Series) No. 2 Autumn 1960.

¹⁴ Tony Cliff. 1979. Lenin Volume 4: The Bolsheviks and World Revolution. Pluto Press, London.

the discussion, put pressure on the party, its apparatus and leadership.”

Why shouldn't our periphery and comrades in united front work have a right to see our discussions? We need to make a strong turn towards openness and this will need to involve a proactive engagement with the way people communicate with each other today.

d) Factions

It is a statement of categorical fact that factions were an integral part of Lenin's party. It is also a statement of fact that the IDOOP faction has been fantastically important in helping to clarify the political arguments around the rape case, in helping to prevent the ensuing crisis from spiralling out of control and in breaking the logjam caused by a paralysis of leadership after our January conference. Factions are clearly an important component in any Leninist party.

We need to find ways to harness the power of factions effectively, not only in the pre-conference period, but also whenever they are politically justified.

Conclusion

I have been very careful to only highlight the main organisational areas where I think we need to look in terms of becoming a more effective Leninist party.

I have deliberately not attempted to provide suggested actions or answers, although I do, of course, have my own views. I have, however, deliberately included copious quotes from the likes of Lenin, Trotsky and Cliff concerning what a properly functioning revolutionary party meant to them at key political junctures.

Others can, no doubt, cite alternative quotes – and that's the whole point – there is no one Leninism or Leninist party. We need to find the right party for us today and be prepared to change it as political circumstances change.

These issues around the Leninist party are not going to be resolved at the special conference. They need to be thought about and debated in the cold light of day, inside and outside the party. They will certainly be major items at our next annual conference, and probably for some considerable time after that.

I am certain that things in the SWP do have to change and I am equally certain that we can work together to change them.

John (East Devon, Somerset & Dorset)

YOU SAY KAMENEV, I SAY BOGDANOV

During the course of the present faction dispute the model of democratic centralism

being operated currently by the SWP has come in for criticism from within the party.

An article posted on the International Socialism blog put forward a view that not only is it not the model of the Bolshevik revolution but that it is in fact a Zinovieite distortion adopted in the mid-1920s. (See *Is Zinovieism Finished? A reply to Alex Callinicos*).

But how historically accurate is this argument? The problem with castigating our party model of Democratic Centralism as a 'fake Leninism' invented by Zinoviev and other leaders of the Comintern is that it ignores the fact that the Comintern Theses in question – 'The Organisational Structures of the Communist Parties, the Methods and Content of Their Work' was put forward not in the mid-1920s, when Lenin would have been conveniently dead but in 1921 when he was still very much alive; albeit with bullet wounds from assassinations attempts.

Moreover not only was he alive but the theses were put forward at his insistence. Paul Le Blanc, the author of 'Lenin and the Revolutionary Party' has written that: "Lenin helped to shape the Theses, (which included a substantial emphasis on democratic centralism) and defended them after they were adopted".

He further contends that the section of the 1921 document dealing explicitly with democratic centralism contains nothing to contradict what Lenin was saying in 1906, when he first pinched the term from the Mensheviks at a time when they were temporarily moving to the left in the wake of the 1905 Revolution.

The term "democratic centralism" was first put forward and adopted at the Menshevik's All Russian Conference on November 20th 1905, it included these statements:

- The RSDLP (Russian Social Democratic Labour Party), must be organised according to the principle of democratic centralism
- All party members take part in the elections of party institutions.
- All party institutions are elected for a [specified] period, are subject to recall and obligated to account for their actions both periodically, and at any time upon the demand of the organisation, which elected them.
- N.B. It should be noted that this component was firmed up somewhat at the April 1906 Unity Congress of Bolsheviks and Mensheviks to include the clause – An extraordinary congress must be called by the Central Committee within two months upon the demand of not less than one half of the party membership.
- Decisions of the guiding collective are binding on members of those organisations of which the collective is the organ. Actions affecting the organisation as a whole (i.e. congresses, reorganisations)

must be decided upon by all members of the organisation. Decisions of the lower-level organisations are not to be implemented if they contradict decisions of the higher organisations.

By 1906 the Bolshevik faction in the RSDLP had fully accepted the term "democratic centralism". Lenin explained:

The principle of democratic centralism and autonomy for local Party organisations implies universal and full freedom to criticise so long as this does not disturb the unity of a definite action; it rules out criticism which disrupts or makes difficult the unity of an action decided upon by the Party.

Now of course, as with any quote in history or in this case specific reference to what Lenin did or did not do – it must be subject to context and full debate and analysis.

For example if we take the above quote Paul Le Blanc suggests the strong possibility that Lenin's emphasis on 'full freedom to criticise...' even at public meetings may well have been not unconnected with the fact that the Central Committee emerging from the Unity Conference had a Menshevik majority and therefore he did not want to be too hidebound by those he believed to have a 'petty bourgeois nature' or tendency to accommodate to the liberal bourgeoisie. Lenin finally ditched the Mensheviks at the 1912 Prague Conference a Conference they refused to attend.

Returning to supposed Zinovieism. It is true that having described the 1921 resolution as excellent Lenin would certainly appear to have had strong reservations in the following year by saying we "made a big mistake with this resolution... we blocked our road to further success."

But here again as always with Lenin quotes they have to be set in context. Looking at Lenin's full remarks in John Riddell's 'Towards the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International 1922', we find Lenin actually saying that: "The resolution is an excellent one... I am prepared to subscribe to every one of its fifty or more points... the resolution must be carried out." The "big mistake" is foreign comrades have adopted it without understanding it, because: "We have not learnt how to present our Russian experience to foreigners."

The point Lenin emphasised is that "they must assimilate part of the Russian experience" in order to be able to implement the resolutions in their own countries and contexts (Riddell p304-305).

Now people can argue whether Lenin was right in saying this or whether he was wrong but it was him actually saying it not Zinoviev. Indeed it can be seen that it was Lenin not Zinoviev who was the prime mover of the resolution on Organisational Structure of the 1921 Congress.

Elsewhere in the - 'Is Zinoviev Finished'

article, reference is made to Zinoviev and Kamenev publicly opposing the 1917 insurrection but not being expelled from the Party.

Indeed although it is not mentioned leading figures in the Bolshevik military organisation were similarly not expelled for the July Days debacle when they called for an armed demonstration in support of the Soviets against the wishes of the Bolshevik leadership.

On the first issue it has to be said that Lenin certainly wanted Zinoviev and Kamenev expelled from the party – but all this was occurring on the very eve of the Russian Revolution, an event that both Zinoviev and Kamenev threw themselves into once it had begun.

One suspects at this point a formal of process procedure for their expulsion was hardly a matter of priority given the world shattering historical events that were breaking around them.

Similarly with the leaders of the military wing; following the July days Lenin and most of the Bolshevik leaders went on the run and were forced into hiding for many weeks. Again, not the most auspicious circumstances to conduct a disciplinary procedure leading to expulsion; although Lenin is supposed to have claimed that they should have been horsewhipped. I think we can assume this to be a tongue-in-cheek expression of anger rather than policy.

Missing from the examples given of Lenin's seeming 'live and let live' approach to party discipline (was he a Leninist at all?) is that of Alexander Bogdanov in 1909. Presumably Bogdanov is left out because he doesn't fit the narrative.

Although there were a number of issues behind the split between Bogdanov and Lenin it focussed on Bogdanov's opposition to Bolshevik participation in the new Parliament. Bogdanov was an impressive figure with a widespread base of support in the Bolshevik faction. Convinced that he would win a majority, he demanded a general conference of the Bolshevik faction. Lenin and the majority of the Bolshevik centre refused to agree and instead confirmed Bogdanov's expulsion at an extended editorial board of the Bolshevik newspaper Proletary.

Incidentally, it is true that there was no ban on factions within the Bolshevik faction but the only one that could be described as a having a 'permanent' presence was that of Bogdanov and Krassin which lasted some 18 months and as we can see did not end very happily.

When insisting on how Lenin's work can only be read with an eye to the conditions in which they were written, a former editor of the ISJ – Nigel Harris made the point many years ago: "It is as if one day seeing that it was raining as I prepared to go out, I said "I must wear a mackintosh" and that by some mischance these words were recorded so that some future archivist exploring the mysterious sect of Mackintoshists was able to assert authoritatively that "Harris was always in

his life a profound believer in the virtues of the mackintosh; for example, he said at one stage 'I must wear a mackintosh'." The parallel is not exact but the point is true.

We can all choose our selected quotes and our examples, from the history of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, as I have done here and there is nothing wrong with robustly presenting a case.

However, what is questionable when trying to read the present into the past, for example over the issue of whether we want a tightly disciplined or a looser more pluralist organisation is the danger of either not contextualising the historical material that is selected or going for quick scoring academic points rather than teasing out the wider complexities and spelling out in some detail the practical steps and conclusions to be drawn both in terms of the strategy and tactics that would be required and the implications for the party's overall future political trajectory.

Kevin (East London)

SOURCES OF OUR CRISIS

In attempting to resolve the continuing internal crisis in the Party, I fear that the CC and NC are underestimating the danger of a major, damaging, and unnecessary split which would badly set us back.

Despite the defeat of the two factions on every issue at the January Conference, followed by the dissolution of the factions and an agreement to unite around the agreed perspectives, the crisis in the Party has re-emerged and grown.

At first sight this is a mystery: many of us continue to have very busy campaigning lives, paper sales and attendance at party meetings are buoyant, there seems to be a rise in interest in socialist ideas and a lot of anger against the Con-Dem assaults to which we can relate. Prospects for the class struggle are uncertain, but prospects for the growth of the SWP should be favourable.

Yet we who are away from the main centres of the Party's internal crisis are assured – and it is credible – that the crisis is serious, has been growing, and is dangerous. We are all being drawn into it.

Considering that all the substantial issues were supposed to have been settled by the January Conference, where the mood seemed to be optimistic and conciliatory at the end, what is behind this new crisis which is feeding upon itself?

In my view the renewal of the crisis has two sources:

1. The requirement to draw a line under the Conference debates immediately after the Conference was not achievable, because even with the best possible will among

the returning delegates, up to 90 per cent of Party members did not attend the Conference, nor did the many socialist and militant non-members of the Party with whom we are in contact. Therefore a big job of winning the arguments in the Party and the class remained to be done after the Conference was over;

2. At the core of the divisions at the Conference was the horrible dispute, involving a former CC member and national secretary, about which there was distress and disagreement throughout the Party, but also about which we were justifiably prevented from considering, discussing or even knowing the key facts.

Although there was no attempt to deny that the Disputes Committee had been composed of the most suitable comrades, and that, as the report on the case described, they had dealt with it with great care, nevertheless almost half the Conference remained unconvinced after the report and the debate that the resolution of that dispute had been correct in all its main aspects.

That probably represented a majority of delegates since some other comrades almost certainly set aside misgivings in order to express confidence in the DC (I myself was tempted to do this but decided not to).

With such a fragile majority inside the Conference on the central specific issue, and a need to avoid discussions about the facts of the Dispute, it was difficult to defend ourselves against the criticisms and attacks in the weeks afterwards.

This background means that the Party, and especially the Central Committee and its supporters on this issue, face the current internal crisis from an unusually fragile position.

This is why I broadly agree with the specific proposal of the faction document – to withdraw X for the moment from full-time positions in or representing the Party insofar as that is practicable.

This would not be punishing the innocent: not being an official organiser or representative of the Party is not a punishment. Few comrades respect and admire X more than I do, but such appointments have to be decided in the light of the political situation, not just the qualities of the individual.

His withdrawal would not be a tacit admission of guilt and I would not want any formal undertakings to exclude him or any other members in good standing.

The four former full-time comrades who were expelled behaved really badly and undemocratically before the national Conference, and I supported their expulsion despite some doubts about its timing and severity.

But despite all their disagreements and their breaches of discipline, they do want to be members of the Party, they are building the Party, and they help bring other people into the Party's orbit who may be lost to us if those comrades are kept out.

If we were in a stronger position after

the DC case, there might be an argument for such a draconian penalty; in the actual circumstances it looks like the overreaction of a leadership which felt vulnerable.

That is understandable but it has not worked well, and it would be a good idea to reconsider it in the interests of party unity.

The whole Party had every right to be angry with the four comrades, but we still need them. We should persevere with the debates when appropriate, and only if breaches of discipline are seen by the whole Party and our allies to be provocative and intolerable should we consider cutting them adrift permanently.

Roger (Huddersfield)

LOCATING THE CRISIS: SEEKING THE SOLUTION

Introduction

Let me start by saying that in the run-up to our January Conference I did not endorse, or belong to, either of the two factions. Equally, I did not sign the statement circulated in support of the Central Committee (CC).

Rather, what I did is what I have always done when at Annual Conference or Party Council. I listened to the debates, weighed up the pros and cons of the arguments and voted accordingly. The upshot was that at our January 2013 Conference I voted with the CC line, I voted against the CC line and I also abstained, depending on the relative merits of the questions before me. I can say here and now that, should I be elected to attend the Special Conference, my voting will be grounded in exactly the same principles.

There is, however, now one difference. For the first time ever I have signed-up to a faction statement – the “In Defence of Our Party” (IDOO) faction statement.

The reason I have done this is for me very simple – and I write this as someone who seldom reads and has never contributed to the political blogosphere – the Party is in danger of both a damaging split and of losing its credibility with a significant layer of our current and future natural periphery. I do not pretend that I agree with every single word of the IDOO faction statement – but I certainly agree with this part 100%:

“It is clear that comrades on all sides of the present debate are discussing it in various combinations and using a variety of media, both online and through the internal circulation of documents. It would be better to bring these discussions inside the party’s democratic structures, within a framework that is open and facilitates participation. A faction can help clarify the political

arguments in this way – far better than the current situation, which is in danger of spiralling out of control and further damaging the party.”

Having elaborated where I am coming from in all this I want to first explore how we seem to have arrived at the current sorry state of affairs – locating the crisis – before turning to the way in which we can move forward together – seeking the solution.

Locating the crisis

To my way of thinking both the CC and the two pre-conference factions were correct to see the cause of their internal arguments as involving some important political differences. That said, I am convinced that all sides have, for their own purposes, overlaid the breadth and depth of these differences.

To date I have seen or heard CC and NC members (individually or collectively) locate the crisis in the following places. I list them in no particular order but they include – “pandering to autonomism”, “being soft on feminism”, “members not accepting conference decisions”, “opponents of a Leninist party”, “the two pre-conference factions”, “the IDOO faction”, “the internet”, “Facebook”, “the Historical Materialism Editorial Board”, “Richard S”, “blogs and social media”, “those who want a wholly different sort of party”, “certain female members with an axe to grind” and “our students”.

I would describe this as the scatter-gun approach to politics. The CC seems to believe that if they aim at enough targets they might just hit something!

There is really only one true root-cause – the Disputes Committee (DC) – and this is what I want to deal with.

Disputes Committee

I have been a trade union representative for much of my 37 year working life. To me it is self-evident that, however you dress it up, it could never be appropriate for our Disputes Committee (by definition made up of people who knew the “accused”) to hear a case of this gravity.

The debate is not about whether the DC undertook a thorough investigation, whether they gave appropriate support, whether they asked the right questions or whether they came to the right decision – we were not there – we cannot know.

The questions are i) who in their right mind thought the Disputes Committee could deal with the matter under the existing processes and procedures? ii) who in their right mind thought that the decision of the Disputes Committee would just be accepted internally or externally to the SWP?

Whether the DC did or did not come to the right decision is, and always was, going to be irrelevant. The famous saying probably says it all – “justice not only has to be done, it has to be seen to be done”.

Asking our Annual Conference to vote on

simply accepting or rejecting the DC report, on the basis of did the DC, as one of its members said, “carry out the processes correctly, politically correctly, democratically....and to the best of our abilities”, might, on the face of it, be a democratic question, but it is profoundly the wrong question.

To compound the errors made both before and at Conference, and in light of the entirely predictable furore caused by the DC report, the CC motion passed at the National Committee on the 3rd February simply beggars belief.

Calls to acknowledge the concerns raised and to review the procedures of the Disputes Committee, particularly in relation to allegations of rape and sexual harassment were voted down!

I heard from a member of the CC that this was because the CC didn’t want to show weakness in their defence of what happened before and at Conference.

I could not help but recall that Cliff was fond of quoting Lenin’s dictum from “Left Wing Communism – An Infantile Disorder” on a political party’s attitude towards its own mistakes (see e.g. Cliff, 1974¹⁷ and Cliff, 1975¹⁸).

Lenin wrote, “frankly acknowledging a mistake, ascertaining the reasons for it, analysing the conditions that have led up to it, and thrashing out the means of its rectification – that is the hallmark of a serious party.” I, along with Cliff, thought we were a serious Leninist party!

Seeking the solutions

My interest is in protecting our party. In that respect I see the Special Conference as being about sorting out the crisis engendered by the Disputes Committee debacle and the response to it since 6th January.

Questions about Leninism, feminism, autonomism and the rest will need to be tackled over time, although the process should start now in terms of updating our analyses, day schools, sessions at Marxism, educational material etc. The key is therefore what we do about the Disputes Committee and I believe the following is the minimum required:

1. We must publicly acknowledge the concerns raised about the handling of the dispute – this is vital in terms of rebuilding bridges internally and externally, nationally and internationally
2. We must instigate a full review of Disputes Committee procedures – this has to be a member-led review of the purpose, policies, procedures and end to end processes of the DC. It needs to pay particular attention to rape/sexual harassment cases and cases involving members of the CC

¹⁷ Tony Cliff. 1974. Lenin: His Ideas are the Future. Socialist Worker No. 359.

¹⁸ Tony Cliff. 1975. Lenin: Vol. 1. Building the Party, Pluto Press, London.

3. X must stand down from any paid or representative roles in our party or united front work for the foreseeable future – this is not a matter of disciplinary action, rather it is a long held tradition that the CC will place people in the most appropriate roles using political criteria. It is not politically appropriate for X to hold the roles stated at the present time

4. No disciplinary action to be taken against comrades who have publicly expressed concerns over the DC's conduct and findings – we now need to move forward as a united party

5. Full support, now and in the future, for those comrades who made the complaints – it took enormous courage to do and they deserve our utmost admiration

It has to be said that the CC motion to the special conference is a profound disappointment. The CC proposals as regards the Disputes Committee are ridiculously non-specific and partial. In no way are they adequate to address the enormous damage caused to the party, internally, externally, nationally and internationally.

Conclusion

As a member who has never before joined a faction I found it a difficult and traumatic thing to do. I had been deeply concerned by what I heard at annual conference concerning the DC but managed to "hold the line" until I heard about the dereliction of duty by the National Committee on 3rd February with their failure to acknowledge the issues and instigate a proper review of our DC procedures.

That said, I attended the IDOOP Faction Caucus in London on 17th February along with over 150 other comrades. It was an inspiring experience with sessions on the "IS tradition and the current crisis in the SWP" and "Why the SWP tradition matters" both led off by comrades with enormous stature in the party.

Alongside these were working sessions on the current situation with fantastic contributions from FE students, university students, trade union activists, community activists, party workers – all members whose commitment to the SWP is undoubted.

We now need to do the right thing by instituting the DC work shown above so that we can continue to be proud of the party we all belong to.

Carol (East Devon, Somerset & Dorset)

BUILDING AN ACTIVE BRANCH

Since 2010 the Leicester Branch of the SWP has undergone a transformation from a small inward looking, mostly male, branch with a visible membership of 7 to 8 to an outward looking confident branch made up of both new and long established members who have returned to Branch activity.

The members now actively involved in regular activity number around 24. Attendance at our branch meetings has increased to the point where we are looking for a larger room to meet in. Regular attendance is now between 15-20 with more at public meetings.

We have also started publishing and distributing a monthly newsletter which serves two purposes – to show people that we are an active local branch which meets regularly and intervenes, and to compel new and existing members to write reports about events they have attended and analysis on the political situation or just why they joined the SWP.

This transformation has been achieved both by the sheer hard work of party members and as a result of the party's national perspectives. The SWP nationally under the leadership of the current CC correctly argued that it was essential that our organisation built strong robust united fronts around opposing the BNP and the EDL and around anti cuts movements.

The importance of being in a national party with a clear united perspective came into its own during the anti EDL struggles, particularly with EDL demonstrations in Leicester in 2010 and 2012 and more recently the local issue over an Islamic group's use of community facilities in the city. The branch was well supported by UAF nationally and Leicester was able to benefit from the experience of other such mobilisations against the EDL that had occurred in other parts of the country.

The consequence of this work has been a massive improvement in the branch's morale. Following on from the confidence gained from the united front work a number of female comrades took on active roles within the branch, including branch secretary and a number of long standing comrades came back into circulation after a time of inactivity, bringing with them valuable experience.

The Branch was able to recruit a number of new members through the different United Front work and began to develop the beginnings of industrial roots in a small but significant number of trade unions.

The increased confidence of the branch and the concurrent shift in events in the outside world meant that in Leicester we now intervened more effectively in external events.

For example a new comrade became

involved locally in leading UK Uncut initiatives and as a consequence other branch members became involved in Uncut protests. In addition we were able to intervene directly into the small occupation camp based in the city centre. Those interventions led to the Branch not only recruiting young enthusiastic members but also ensured we built a layer of respect amongst a number of young activists who had gravitated towards the Occupy Movement.

Trade unions

The party's national perspective over both the Pensions Dispute and opposing the government's austerity measures has ensured that the comrades in Trade Unions have been well equipped for the arguments posed by the Trade Union Bureaucracy. Over the past 2 years the comrades who are Shop Stewards in Leicester City branch of UNISON has risen from 2 to 5.

In the summer of 2012 the City UNISON Branch unanimously nominated one of our female comrades to represent the branch for the regional executive. It also unanimously nominated 2 of our comrades to represent the Branch at the forthcoming Women's Conference.

This represents a major step forward in the respect shown for the work undertaken by comrades in UNISON Leicester City Branch. Recent Branch interventions in a local dispute involving BAFWU members became a springboard to establishing good working links with this union.

As a direct result we were able to organise a joint Trade Union Rally in the build-up to October 20th. This first meeting brought together a number of different trade unions under the banner of Unite the Resistance. A Local Unite the Resistance conference is planned for the first half of the New Year to build on this initiative, with a number of trade unions from across the East Midlands, as well as the Derby and Nottingham branches of the SWP already actively involved.

As a result of contacts made in Unite Against Fascism work, one of our comrades has been invited by a Labour councillor for a council estate in Coalville to speak at an anti-bedroom tax meeting.

Development of the membership

More recently the Branch has begun to organise a series of educational meetings for new members and this has been well supported with a number of National Speakers leading these discussions. There are further meetings planned both for new members and also for more established members of the branch.

At the beginning of the academic year, comrades from Leicester held stalls at both local universities and 60 students signed up to our local SWSS group. There are a

number of students who have since joined the party as a result and the SWSS group holds regular meetings of its own.

Party democracy

In contrast to those within the organisation who feel that the direction of the party is incorrect, and that party structures need overhauling, we want to make it clear that Leicester Branch has flourished and grown as a direct result of party perspectives.

There is still a lot of work to do but we now try to identify problems and implement practical solutions to rectify them. We are trying to build locally around concrete issues – this means maintaining a focus on the class.

As we push out we are developing networks of those who want to fight back. Workers, the unemployed and students who have a sharp awareness of the fights ahead and want to do something about that in an organised way. We identify the fighters and develop a working relationship with them.

But to locate such fighters it means we have to test the political water by pushing out and experiencing the arguments, sufferings and hopes of workers and students. These experiences can then be brought back to our meetings making them more relevant and representative of our actual activity.

In response to calls for changes to the democratic structure of the party we wish to reiterate our support for a democratic centralist, revolutionary party and to highlight the important role that the current structure has played in the development of this branch over the last 2 years. We fully support the leadership of the central committee, the national council and the decisions made at the last conference along with the current direction of the party.

We wish to remind individual comrades that decisions made at conference reflect the wishes of the wider membership in a democratic way and are binding on all party members. If we are to meet the coming challenges of the future a strong unified party with a disciplined membership is vital. After conference we will need to focus on the potential in our local area. We invite all to join in to make the branch a combative organisation that is so needed in the coming struggles.

Jacqueline, Becky, Sally, David, Cath, Mike, Alan, Do, Bob, Andy (Leicester)

FOR DEMOCRATIC CENTRALISM. OPEN UP THE PARTY'S PRESS

The Democratic Renewal Faction is a faction based on breathtaking political dishonesty: It claims it does not want to reopen the decisions of conference as they accept these yet demand in effect that X be removed from any paid/representative role, it wants the readmission of the expelled 4 comrades despite their clear factionalising (a reading of the entire email discussion leaves no room for doubt) and elements associated with it (such as Richard S and China M) still want to overturn the current form of democratic centralism.

What is more they claim as a minority that the CC and the majority are waging war on them - look at Richard S's International Socialism site with it's vitriol against the CC or (in some branch meetings) the supporters of X being denounced as rape apologists.

No it is a minority hell bent on declaring war on the CC that has fed the very bourgeois and sectarian press that they claim to be so concerned about that we need (in part) to have this special conference. This list could go on.

The CC have in effect been labelled as ruthless by the faction. In one respect they are right. And flowing from this a most obvious question that has never been posed in this entire debate - why is it that the CC who have been so ruthless in the past that they have been prepared to have an almighty ruck with John R and Lindsey G that saw their departure in order to save the SWP from making a huge mistake (an orientation towards rebuilding the party rather than a continued orientation towards the declining movements), a parting of the ways with Chris B have all of a sudden stopped being ruthless in order to cover up their mate?

Are the CC so soft that they decided to keep their mate in the party knowing full well when it got out the SWP would go into crisis? No the CC are ruthless enough to have pushed for the expulsion of X immediately if there was any doubt as to being guilty of rape or sexual harassment in order to preserve the SWP. The CC are not prone to sentiment.

In fact the CC are too soft - a sign that they are prepared to bend over backwards to politically discuss these differences.

The faction has been constituted outside the pre conference period. By their very signing up to this faction everyone on it could constitutionally be expelled. They haven't been. The special conference did not have the required support in the party and yet it has been called.

Even this has not been enough to quell

Richard S and China M who are obviously asking to be expelled with their openly provocative posts- now Richard S's International socialism is complaining about the special conference not having a 3 month pre conference period when there is not the required support for it in the party, where the CC have been held to ransom in calling for it under the implied threat to in effect have the faction run all the way to conference 2014 (in effect a permanent faction) - they say they don't believe in calling for factions every time they don't get their own way yet this is exactly what they have done.

This is our 1903 moment. Supposedly, two issues of no deeper political content other than what you see on the surface (one on the serious issue of rape and sexual harassment the other on party members being expelled) mask deeper political differences.

Giving way on X and the four expelled ex-full timers will not quell the opposition. These two issues are really being used as a trojan horse to push for the real aim - the liquidation of our model of democratic centralism.

And why do they no longer see our model of democratic centralism as relevant? They see it as outdated - it has become very fashionable to attack Democratic Centralism whether in the pre-conference bulletins or in a more hostile form on-line. This is the first step not only on the road to the abandonment of a party of the Bolshevik type but of our distinct theoretical tradition and practice (this is reflected most clearly in the resignation letter of former CC member Donny Mayo who goes from an attack on the current way we operate democratic centralism to abandoning our entire political tradition and practice.

It merely theorises what his co-thinkers in the SWP are stumbling towards - posted on Counterfire, the same organisation the said CC member went up against when he was on the CC when they were constituted as the Left Platform). While denouncing the CC and it's supporters as dinosaurs for holding onto the current democratic centralist form they are the ones who want to take us back to a mythical golden age when the IS operated a federal structure which gave way to the current way of working in order to ensure a small revolutionary party was effective.

They also, erroneously, make reference to the Bolsheviks and the KPD federal structures with year round factions etc - the point they miss is that these organisations were in their 10s and 100s of thousands and so to adopt our form of democratic centralism would have been unworkable. Instead of sound historical analysis they use revolutionary romanticism.

However, the faction itself is not a homogeneous bloc. There are clearly signatories on it of serious intellectual weight and other activists who are committed to our particular model of democratic centralism

who I believe are part of the faction out of a deep concern for the future of the SWP. They must be taken seriously and three of the signatories I have enormous political respect for.

It is for this reason that I do not support mass expulsions or individual expulsions as much as I would like to see Richard S and China M expelled as well as various well known bloggers for their outrageous breaching of the spirit and practice of democratic centralism. As the Marxist cliché goes: everyone favours democratic centralism until it applies to them.

However, this constant internalisation over X and the four expelled cannot and must not be allowed to continue - invoking the past over Woman's Voice etc is incorrect. These debates were over political perspectives and connected to party building where as the current ones are inward looking and debilitating. After the special conference it needs to end. This madness cannot continue. The issues of X and the four expelled should be laid to rest. The factions have to disband in words as well as practice.

However, serious questions have been raised (even though some - a minority - are using them for their own ends) and it is these that need to be fully debated within the party and in front of the class.

The party's publications need to be opened up in a much bigger way than currently exists to those party members who find themselves differing with the CC/majority: we would all benefit from a vigorous debate over such issues as feminism, the internet and democratic centralism.

This would also negate the need for those who disagree with the CC/majority to constantly form factions or worse still post stuff on blogs and Facebook - bring these debates "in house" which is not only democratic and accountable but would be of enormous political benefit to those of us who build the party in our various branches, trade unions and united fronts.

John (East Anglia & Norwich)

NHS AND BUILDING THE PARTY

The NHS is at a turning point. The 'reforms' due to be implemented in April with the growth of fund holding GPs and greater private sector involvement in hospitals is the beginning of the end of the NHS. Charging for services and widespread hospital closures are likely to follow soon.

Fewer, larger hospitals will provide a better potential for profit making leaving patients and families with far longer journeys. The Winterbourne View and Mid-Staffs outrages are another clear example of what is to come.

In this context I believe that to build a national campaign of opposition is not only desirable but essential. The foot dragging of the UNISON leadership is not only a disgrace, but entirely predictable. Other union leaderships use this as cover for their own inaction except where they can poach members without fearing a loss of control to the rank and file.

Leadership is a practical question. The sales of Socialist Worker on the question of the NHS have been reminiscent of the Stop the War period. Over 80 in Bristol last Saturday, around 150 in 3 days at various sales. The demonstration in Lewisham of 25,000 people shows the potential. There already exist a number of vehicles which could be used to call a National Demonstration. Keep the NHS Public, 38 Degrees, London Health Emergency could be used.

I believe that the Party should now throw the kitchen sink at it. We should aim to leaflet streets, hospitals, workplaces and communities. Motions at union branches and anti-cuts groups, posters and electronic means are all essential.

We should approach it in the way we approached the Stop the War Demo of 2002. In doing this we would strengthen the hand of our comrades in the health unions to overcome the passivity in the bureaucracy of the unions, whether it is left leaning leaders or right.

However, I believe that we must learn the lessons of the Stop the War movement. We must not drop the profile of the Party. We must aim to build Socialist Worker supporters groups in every hospital. We must aim to build Socialist Worker sales at new workplaces.

We need to find the militants who we can pull into Unite the Resistance and this could be the perfect vehicle. Let's create the resistance on the NHS which can then be spread to other aspects of the cuts, attacks on pay and jobs. This cannot be the preserve of comrades in particular unions, it is a task for the whole party.

We are therefore calling on the Central Committee to find the most effective way to call a national save our NHS demonstration through whatever united front vehicle is able to act quickly and effectively. The attack on national pay and the oncoming changes in April make this an urgent task.

Pete (Bristol)

IN DEFENCE OF BLOGGING

Three failures of analysis by the leadership

It should be obvious by now but, if it isn't, let's spell it out: the current crisis of the

SWP was not caused by 'the blogs'.

The narrative of the CC and some of its supporters holds that the party's recent misfortunes have been exclusively generated by a minority unwilling to live with the decisions of the majority at conference. The line goes that some of that minority used the internet to cause a crisis, and bring the right-wing press to the party's door. Sometimes, that story has been augmented by other equally false claims. That individual comrades 'encouraged' Laurie Penny to write her New Statesman article on the party's handling of rape allegations. That some comrades 'encouraged' people to sign an open letter denouncing the CC's handling of this case. That 'the faction' or someone in it leaked the transcript of the Disputes Committee session. Or that faction members have encouraged the isolation of the party internationally. And why would comrades behave like this? This question has precipitated a search for miscellaneous political deviations or deficits, with the primary assumption of the CC being that faction members must have a problem with democratic centralism.

This line is untenable, and its supporting claims are completely unfounded. It is based on a fundamental failure of analysis in three ways:

1. It fails to grasp why so many comrades are angry with how the CC has handled this affair. Because of this, the CC was unable to anticipate the possibility of resignations after conference, and accompanying resignation statements. It was unable to anticipate that not only members, but also many figures and organisations on the wider Left, would have a problem with what the CC has done. Recently, the CC has begun to acknowledge the existence of 'legitimate debates'. We could have done with such an acknowledgment back in January, when members were being told that the matter was concluded and that they must either defend the line or leave the party.

2. It completely fails to understand how the internet works. The CC unfortunately seems to have believed that this controversy, if it did spill out of the party, would be confined to a few low-reach blogs. The reality, as some of comrades tried to explain before conference, is that even if no one had leaked a transcript of the Disputes Committee session, this was going to spread. There were not only blogs to ensure this. There were the conveyor belts of social media, and movement-oriented journalists such as Owen Jones and Laurie Penny making use of them to find and share information. The first sign of Laurie Penny's interest in this case appears to have been when she re-tweeted Tom W's resignation statement to her 80,000 followers. The buzz on social media about this was very shortly followed by the interest of other mainstream journalists. It became clear that the Independent was pursuing a

piece, as its journalist was tweeting Andy N for quotes.

SWP members only intervened in this online discussion *after* the debacle had gone public, as we had predicted it would. They did this not because of any desire to damage the party, but because they felt the party leadership were damaging it terribly, and that their online interventions were vital to minimising that damage. Comrades can, of course, consider this calculation to have been quite wrong, but it is vital that they understand the motivations in question - which were in defence of the party and the IS tradition.

3. It fails to register one of the most salient features of the last year's political landscape which was the dominance of issues of sexual violence and women's oppression, from the Saville revelations to the Delhi gang rape case.

Some of the most radical rebellions since the 'Slutwalks' of 2011 have been women's rebellions against the culture that normalises, covers up or abets violence against women. We joined these rebellions. We rightly spoke out about George Galloway's comments. Irrespective of the facts of the case, it should have been obvious that the smallest appearance that the party had dealt with this issue in anything but a principled way would be lethal. The reckless tactics of refusing to apologise for DC questions such as 'is it fair to say you like a drink?', of vilifying the opposition, denouncing 'creeping feminism', suppressing a legitimate faction before conference, and then attempting to impose a general gagging order after the most divided conference in the party's history, showed that this lesson hadn't sunk in.

The real role of blogging in this crisis

So what, then, is the real role of blogging by SWP members in this crisis? As stated, comrades started to post materials about this online only after the issue had already gone public. It was clear from the Independent's reference to 'socialist sharia courts' that a very nasty, right-wing narrative about this case was going to be propagated. The only way to intervene in this debate with a principled socialist position - which, sadly, the CC was not in a position to do - was to make it clear that very many party members stood in solidarity with the women at the centre of this case who have been treated so shabbily.

In a short period of time, a number of party members set up the International Socialism blog to explore the underlying sources of grievance with the handling of this case, from the cover-up at the 2011 party conference to the proceedings of the Disputes Committee itself. It also looked at the surrounding political issues, from women's liberation to the party's democratic

structures. It reported statements by SWSS groups critical of the CC. It carried numerous critical pieces by individual members, and group pieces. In addition, since the CC availed itself of Party Notes and Socialist Review to impugn the opposition without any right of reply, the International Socialism blog facilitated rebuttals.

The blog has thus been aimed at providing an open forum for a debate that the CC had attempted to shut down. It has addressed two main audiences: party members who have been angered by the leadership's actions, and who might have left rather than taking up the arguments within the party; and those in the party's periphery who may mistakenly believe that every member signs off on how this case was handled. To reiterate a crucial point, its aim (whether one agrees with the tactic or not) has been to recover some of the honour of the party that has been so disgracefully tainted by the CC's actions. What's more - and this may be hard for critical comrades to credit - this has not been completely unsuccessful. The Faction has heard testimony from several comrades, mostly but not exclusively younger and student members, who have made clear that they would have left the SWP were it not for the presence of a visible and vocal opposition, which they encountered online.

The CC would have it that the blogs have been used to disregard democratic norms by going 'outside the party'. The truth is the opposite. The IS tradition is not one of concealing our debates from the working class. This is a point we made on the International Socialism blog, quoting Cliff:

"Since the revolutionary party cannot have interests apart from the class, all the party's issues of policy are those of the class, and they should therefore be thrashed out in the open, in its presence. The freedom of discussion which exists in the factory meeting, which aims at unity of action after decisions are taken, should apply to the revolutionary party. This means that all discussions on basic issues of policy should be discussed in the light of day: in the open press. Let the mass of the workers take part in the discussion, put pressure on the party, its apparatus and leadership."

It may be argued that this is all very well, but there are confidentiality issues, and security issues, which constrain how much information we can share with the class. Indeed, 'confidentiality' has been the bromide used to justify drawing a veil over this discussion, both inside and outside the party, in pre-conference aggregates and since. Yet not a single confidential detail has been disclosed on the blog.

One of the most unfortunate tactics has been to merge the blogging with the wider noise of online and offline discussion

- not just on other blogs or on Facebook and Twitter, but actually the bourgeois press. Thus, it is implied that there is a direct relationship between the blogging and personalised attacks on comrades in the Daily Mail. In fact, there is no such relationship. Anyone reading the Mail's attack would realise that the contributing journalists - apart from harassing individual members of the party - had only done the bare minimum of Google research, and certainly had not wasted any time on the International Socialism blog. This is the point that the CC urgently needs to understand: *no one outside the party needed our encouragement to attack it*. They already had the motive, and the actions of the CC gave them more than enough material.

Blogging and 'the real world'

Aside from failures of principle, the miscalculations by the CC reveal a profound misunderstanding of the internet and its relationship to ideological dissemination and political organising.

Having previously spent considerable time arguing against taking online activity seriously on the grounds that blogging was essentially irrelevant and silly, the CC now argues that it has somehow become capable of bringing into crisis an otherwise utterly healthy party. They have gone from seeing it as utterly inconsequential to malevolently powerful. Both positions, of course, are wrong. We live in a world where Egyptian protesters use mobile phones and social media to help organise; where an Italian comedian successfully used social media to help launch a populist (if at times reactionary) electoral campaign; where London students use Facebook groups and mobile apps to organise and run rings round the police; and where Chinese workers outwit the bosses by using secret online forums, or break the ideological monopoly of the ruling party and the capitalist class by getting information through the internet. Yet it still seems that underlying the CC's strategy is a basic dichotomy: there's 'the blogs', and there's 'the real world'. How else did they sail so calmly into this disaster?

It is quite right to resist the allure of cyber-utopianism, which often boils down to boosterism for unrepresentative minorities. The puffery about Wael Ghonim, the Egyptian Google executive, is a case in point. Nor is it useful to overstate the novelty of new media. After all, the popular newspapers in the era of the Russian Revolution constituted the social media of their time. And nor is the conceptual clutter surrounding this subject - 'information society', 'knowledge economy', 'network society' - necessarily very useful. But that certainly doesn't mean we shouldn't apply rigorous analysis to delineate the real capabilities and limitations of the internet - an analysis currently lacking in our organisation.

The characteristics of social media that

we want to accentuate for this discussion are: *engagement*; *unpredictability*; and *celerity*.

Engagement. It is very clear that the relationship between consumer and producer of information in the use of social media is fundamentally different to that in the use of mass media. Whereas mass media consumers are largely passive, their input restricted to complaining phone calls, eviction votes or letters to the editor, consumers on social media are also themselves producers. They are actively and creatively engaged in the production and dissemination of information, often mixing heated political argument with a Bakhtinian parade of memes and parodies.

Unpredictability. While individual users may have determinate lists of ‘friends’ or ‘followers’ whom they can communicate with, individual posts, tweets, hashtags and memes can spread in unpredictable ways. The result is that it can no longer be assumed that any individual, or group, has a definite, limited reach. Their potential reach depends upon the context, and the information they want to spread. Ultimately, anyone’s potential reach is the whole of the internet population.

Celerity. Even before the development of social media such as Twitter, information could spread very quickly through blogs. In 2006, the release of Craig Murray’s documents via a number of left-wing websites broke a media blackout very quickly. Today, if Wikileaks publicises a document it almost instantly gets circulated all over social media, and is reproduced in hundreds of mirror websites and blogs. The very speed with which information can be passed on, reproduced and multiplied affords no mercy to anyone whose life is made easier by secrecy.

There are negative aspects of these developments. While engaging people in creative activity, they also exacerbate a tendency toward individualising political engagement. The celerity of the internet can be liberating, but this very feature is far better exploited by large companies and states than by activists. Social media can help unsettle dominant ideologies, but it can also reinforce them in new ways. We saw how this worked when a Facebook page calling for support for the Metropolitan Police gained a million supporters during the England riots. Negative or not, however, these developments have very real and urgent effects on how political struggles are organised, and understood. They must also, of necessity, have an effect on how political parties operate.

There is a generational aspect to this discussion. Younger activists are growing up who use social media almost as second nature. Little headway will be made insisting that they cease doing so: the party needs to adapt. It is simply becom-

ing untenable to demand that students, for example, (and others too) cease blogging or Facebook posting, with any credibility. Such injunctions look increasingly silly, and if blogs and social media continue to be treated as problems, online discussions as ‘factionalism’, crises such as the one we are in will occur ever more regularly. It would be vastly preferable to adapt to the situation now, and change our understanding of these online discussions.

Whether we like it or not, beyond the state, the days of watertight organised secrecy are numbered. Even states can’t be sure of what will happen to their emails or internal communiques in this day and age. It is possible to see how people of good will can keep certain things *private*, certain details *confidential*. However, the idea that a political party could have a blazing row, or a major internal scandal, and this would not find its way onto the internet and thus to a potentially massive audience, is not credible. In reality, secrecy has never been a desirable way of doing business as a revolutionary party.

This is not to say that everything communicated with the membership will automatically leak online: it is, however, to be clear that it is very likely to, and it would be a terrible mistake to assume that any particular communication will not. We should assume, even if we decry it, that party documents and discussions will not remain hermetically sealed in the party. This is simply the new terrain. The only plausible response to this situation is twofold:

- 1) Transparency in all party structures, minutes of meetings, and the publication of party debates. Where possible, documents written for the attention of members should be posted up on the party website rather than circulated through selected email contacts.
- 2) Complete probity in the handling of serious allegations, and transparency as far as confidentiality permits, so that the whole party can openly defend its record in public. This should include a willingness to take criticism with humility when something goes wrong.

Unfortunately, the attacks on ‘the blogging’, and the attempt to scapegoat a small number of people posting online for this crisis, indicates that the leadership is a long way from understanding these implications.

Richard and Sam (North London)
China (North West)
John, Gonzalo and Jake (Central London)
Alex and Penny (Thames Valley)
Steven (Merseyside)
Andy (Hackney)

IN DEFENCE OF OUR DEMOCRACY – A REPLY TO THE FACTION

“The biggest internal crisis” is how the IDOOP faction document characterises the current situation in the party. In many respects they are right. For example, women comrades from the Disputes Committee (DC) have had their names, workplace details and photos splashed across the Daily Mail.

Sectarian bloggers salivate over the prospect of the party splitting or falling into terminal decline. Disgracefully, some comrades have fed this frenzy by leaking details of internal meetings and publically attacking the party on the internet. If a lie is repeated often enough it becomes a kind of ‘truth’. And now the party has been consumed in an unprecedented faction fight.

The faction charges the CC’s handling of the DC case as evidence of high-handedness and riding roughshod over the concerns of members. The CC did not ‘handle’ the case. It was the DC, elected every year at conference that dealt with this. The CC is implementing the decisions of the conference, which is what we elect them to do. The faction claim they are not challenging the decision of the DC but their motions and documents call for X to ‘step down from any paid or representative role in the party or united front work for the foreseeable future’. This was not agreed at conference. X decided to stand down from the CC in October and this was printed in IB 1 in November. So he does not work for the party and is not paid by the party and everyone in the party knows this. The comments made by some faction supporters have been vitriolic in terms of wanting to remove X from any party activity – to make him a non-person. It is not in our tradition to ever ‘airbrush’ any comrade from the history of the party, not even former members. Why should X not be entitled to have a political life inside the party, just like any other comrade? The real reason is because some inside the faction do not accept the conference decision and so they attempt to muddy the water under the guise of ‘his role is a matter of political judgement’ when in reality their judgement is that he should have no place in the party.

The faction has a motion calling for a commission on the DC but this is already in the CC motion to conference and in fact the CC composition of this committee is far more democratic as it calls for 4 elected NC members, 4 elected from the special conference, 2 from the disputes committee and 1 CC member. So why have a motion? Even more perplexing: why have a faction? This demand could have been raised at a party council or at an NC. This is how our

internal democracy works and members could have had thoughtful and political discussion on this through our existing democratic structures. To organise a faction over this seems to be a misuse of what the faction facility is for.

Faction supporters have expressed concern over some comrades being marginalised, particularly students. They point to the change in tone and format of 'Revolt!' and the removal of a student comrade from standing for the NUS executive. The faction concedes that it is the job of the CC to oversee this. So why the objection to the CC's actions? The comrade in question, Jamie W, refused to accept and implement conference decisions. He did not want to carry the party perspective. If that is the case the party expects the CC to re-think who will be put forward to stand for NUS elections. That is part of the political job we elect them to do. To do otherwise is an abdication of political responsibility.

The so-called student rebellion inside the party is further justified on the grounds that it is an expression of 'healthy scepticism and distrust of all authority'. Most young comrades when they come towards the party are rebelling against authority - capitalist authority. A revolutionary party is not the same as capitalist society. Our party exists for one chief purpose - to organise a politically conscious minority to fight for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. It seeks to win a majority of the working class to achieve that aim. Revolutionary leadership is not the same as bourgeois leadership. The authority which flows from the collective democracy of a revolutionary party is not authoritarian. If comrades do not understand these basic differences then I, for one, am puzzled!

The question of women's liberation and socialism has been at the root of much of this discussion, and the CC are criticised for attacking the 'younger' comrades. Last year's conference debate (2012) is caricatured as the older women cadre 'merely dusting off their women's voice notes in a condensing and haranguing style'. The haranguing and condensation came in the form of not allowing any 'debate' from the floor which challenged the deep moralism, tokenism and grandstanding of several contributions.

Eventually only two women comrades were called (Sheila M and myself) to challenge the completely apolitical attacks on the ISJ and the question of childcare. The young women today describing themselves as feminist in relation to raunch culture and bourgeois society are progressive and those who fuse a range of feminist ideas with anti-capitalist politics represent a new radical development. But that is not the same as a revolutionary Marxist understanding of women's oppression.

Our tradition has always worked alongside a variety of radical activists. What unites us will be more than what divides us but we want to win the best of these activ-

ists to our politics. We can only succeed in that if we challenge and argue - patiently and politically. But we have to challenge.

Last year I was told by two comrades (both faction supporters) that the 'new' radical feminism was nothing to do with patriarchy theory or debates around 'male benefits', which was 'so 1980s'. Recently in some branches older women comrades have been told (in a very hostile and uncomradely fashion) that they have absolutely nothing to contribute to today's debates around feminism! All arguments are historically specific. The ways in which discussion and argument come up about women today are different to how they have arisen in the past.

We do not have the large, vibrant women's movement of the past, with its political coherency around liberal feminism, separatism, political lesbianism or socialist feminism. The point about radical feminist ideas on campuses today is that they are quite diffuse.

But that does not mean that they are so 'new', 'unique' 'original' and untouched by past ideas and experiences. The discussions I have come across recently range from a desire for women's only meetings, notions that rape culture pervades all aspects of society, belief that men are privileged and gain materially and emotionally from women's oppression, wages for housework, demands for women only protests to defend abortion rights, etc. I am sure I cannot be the only person who feels a sense of 'déjà-vu'! No one in the party holds feminism to be a swear word. If comrades are to be confident in arguing our politics they need to be steeped in our theoretical ideas. The tragedy is that some layers in the party are not and/or do not want to be. We want to engage with the most militant activists to win them but engagement means debate and argument - not silence and acquiescence.

Debate and disagreements inside our party have always been robust and argued openly. This has been through our internal democracy of branch meetings, aggregates, conferences, in pubs and cafés after paper sales and meetings and in our publications. The turn to using blogs and facebook to conduct political debate (and attack the party) has been one of the most pernicious developments in this period. If people want to post on blogs and have facebook friends and conversations that is one thing. But this cannot be a substitute for honest face-to-face political discussion or activity.

The sectarian blog 'Socialist Unity' and the 'International Socialism' blog really do make for unedifying reading, and to think the latter is authored by comrades is truly despicable. Since when did innuendo, rumour, half-truths, personal attacks, point scoring and inflated egotism pass for political dialogue? Many of those leaving comments on such blogs don't even have the decency to supply their real identities but are more than prepared to attack others

by name. It seems that anonymity applies to some but not others!

The faction is made up of quite disparate forces. Some have genuine concerns but some people's motives are very dubious. So there are those who would like the party to abandon democratic centralism, elect the CC by individual elections, and / or have some loose federal structure whereby semi-autonomous groups of students, intellectuals, different trade unionists and regions organise themselves (much of this was raised at conference and defeated decisively).

In short, they want us to move away from Leninism and instead become part of a left milieu that accommodates and adapts to whatever fashionable idea is being floated as 'new', 'radical' and 'original'. They are entitled to that position, but let's be clear: This is the politics of Counterfire and the ISG, not the Leninist tradition of building a revolutionary combat organisation.

Talat (Edinburgh)

STOP THE WITCH-HUNT

Over the last several months there has been a campaign against a leading member of our party. This campaign has been carried out by a minority of comrades and shocked and appalled the majority of us. Although the campaign has been carried out by a minority it has done serious damage to the party as a whole, forcing us to focus on internal matters to the detriment of building the fight against austerity.

The campaign has been a key element of all the factions formed, including the secret and unconstitutional ones. The campaign has to stop and stop now. Consequently, we propose that any comrade or groups of comrades continuing with it in the branches, via social media, blogs or in any form must face sanctions. These sanctions may, regrettably, have to include disciplinary action up to and including expulsion from the party.

The Disputes Committee

The Disputes Committee, and before it the Control Commission, investigates and handles disputes between comrades and breaches of party discipline. And, as our constitution states, "The Disputes Committee reports to Conference, where its activities are subject to endorsement or otherwise," (SWP Constitution, Section 7, Disputes Committee). It is the custom and practice of the SWP, and suggested by our constitution, that the findings of the Disputes Committee are made public for the first time at Conference.

The secret faction

Therefore, we were greatly surprised to read before our Annual Conference that a number of comrades had formed a secret faction (for which they were correctly expelled) at least in part because they disagreed with the handling of a case heard by the Disputes Committee involving the comrade. These people took their action before they had heard the Disputes Committee's report and so one can only assume that they based their opinions on hearsay and speculation. It is hard to see how facts and reasoned argument could have played a role.

Factions

Unfortunately the secret faction was only just the beginning of the campaign. Both statements of the factions formed in the run-up to the Annual Conference made reference to the case. The faction statement of the 'Democratic Opposition' claimed that "It is disturbing that the comrade concerned did not voluntarily step down..." This was an absolute disgrace. (It is not clear what 'steps down' means here because the comrade had announced that he would not be standing for re-election to the Central Committee.)

Again it should be made clear that these factions were formed without actually hearing the report of the Disputes Committee. (By this time the Central Committee (CC) had made a statement to a National Committee meeting which was subsequently summarized at a number of aggregates but the statement merely made members aware that an allegation had been made and that the Disputes Committee would present a report at our Conference.)

At Conference the Disputes Committee offered its report, which found that after a detailed and rigorous investigation the complaint was not upheld and thus no disciplinary action was taken. A debate took place concerning the Disputes Committee's handling of the case after which Conference voted to accept the report and the decision of the Disputes Committee. And that should have been that. Unfortunately, the campaign against the comrade showed as little respect for democracy as it did for facts or reason.

In the branches

Having failed to force the leading comrade from an active role a number of comrades tried to pass motions in their branches calling for a Special Conference. The pretext here was a number of articles in the national press.

A key demand of many of these motions was to continue the campaign against the comrade requesting that, for example, he no longer do paid work for the party. Those driving the campaign failed to get the 20 per cent of branches required to call a Special Conference, showing the lack

of support for their campaign against the comrade and their political perspectives. What they were successful in doing was causing the party to become increasingly polarised.

The unconstitutional faction

Having failed to force the comrade out of a leading role in the party and our united front work a number of comrades launched an unconstitutional faction. (As the CC rightly pointed out at the time "The CC does not accept the right to form factions outside the three month pre-conference discussion period. Such factions open the door to permanent factions and permanent oppositions, making it impossible to unite and intervene effectively," (CC Statement).)

Many of the people who formed the faction are so focused on their campaign against the comrade that they are prepared to go the length of breaking our constitution to demand that the comrade "...stand down from any paid or representative roles in our party or united front work for the foreseeable future," (Faction Statement).

Stop the witch-hunt

Let us be clear that this comrade has been found guilty of nothing. Yet he has faced a concerted campaign over many months to oust him from a leading role in the party. A campaign that has seen people form a secret faction, launch two factions, attempt to call a Special Conference and, finally, break our constitution. It has been a campaign that has paid little heed to fact or reason but rather has been built on hearsay, speculation and sometimes downright lies. It has been nothing short of a witch-hunt. But it is a witch-hunt that has to stop. And it has to stop for three reasons:

- (1) If the disputes procedure is ignored, or subverted it makes it impossible for any comrade to be confident of fair treatment, either if they are a complainant or are complained against. Every comrade must have the right to make a complaint if they so choose, and no-one is above being questioned, criticised or disciplined. It does a disservice to all of us if a proper system of investigating and adjudicating on such matters is destroyed. That is the danger of the way the faction has approached the issue.
- (2) It does a grave injustice to the comrade.
- (3) It has thrust our party into possibly the biggest crisis it has ever faced. It has forced us to focus on internal debate during the longest economic depression in modern times when we should be focusing all our energies in building the biggest possible fightback against austerity.

No more

Consequently, we propose that any comrade or groups of comrades continuing with it via the branches, social media, blogs or in any form must face sanctions. These sanctions may, regrettably, have to include disciplinary action up to and including expulsion from the party.

**Terry (North London)
Penny and Donny (Edinburgh)**

STOP DIGGING

We are in a mess. Since the disputes committee case was heard at conference in January our party has been trashed in the national press, some of our periphery have written open letters "appalled" at their perception of our behaviour and we have been criticised from the podium at union conferences.

Within the party, the level of debate around this has descended into cheap jibes, slurs and shouting matches in meetings. We have lost members and could well lose an awful lot more. Our leadership have failed utterly to give the membership confidence in their arguments and provide a political leadership that would recognise the concerns of a large number of comrades.

Instead they seem set on a course of encouraging division within the party, for instance by radically changing the way our student work is organised without discussion. This piece seeks to locate some of the problems we face within the context of debates around feminism and women's oppression, point to some mistakes and offer some potential solutions.

In the CC motion to special conference they outline seven debates where we need to "urgently... assert, develop and win our political tradition". These range from Lenin's conception of the party to the use of electronic media. One of these seven points is "oppression and capitalism". "Feminism" or "women's oppression" do not get a specific mention. We would argue that this is an incorrect prioritisation. The root of the mess we find ourselves in is the fact that there is a widespread belief that we have mishandled an allegation of rape and sexual harassment against one of our leading members, and in doing so have demonstrated a lack of commitment to, or indeed an active opposition to, fighting women's oppression.

This is why Suzanne Moore, for example, can write an article in the Guardian mentioning the SWP in the same context as the Liberal Democrats, the Catholic Church and the BBC as an institution complicit in abuse. This is the question we need to answer, and to answer urgently.

The context for this is a rising wave of feminist activism over the last few years.

Activities ranging from 'slutwalks' to large protests against anti-abortion campaigners to campaigns against raunch culture on university campuses have demonstrated a significant resurgence in radicalisation over this issue.

The young women (and men) involved in these campaigns are the people we have been working with in the student movement, in Occupy and in anti-cuts work. They are people we should be engaging with and winning to our politics.

Our reaction to these movements has been good, in places – we have been centrally involved with some of them and have attempted to intervene in most of them. Within the party, however, differentiating ourselves from feminists is too often given priority over relating to the movement and winning activists to socialism. This often seems to be a re-run of a debate we had in the early eighties around the closure of 'Women's Voice'. The world has moved on somewhat since then and our approach needs to move on as well.

One of the things which has done us most damage in the past two months is the idea that the SWP uses the word 'feminist' as an insult. We should be proud to be called feminists, and to call ourselves feminists, in the sense that we should be the best fighters against women's oppression.

Of course we have big differences with many others who would also describe themselves as feminists - we believe that liberation can only be achieved as part of a revolution. But it is important to understand that the word feminist shouldn't be used interchangeably with 'someone who believes in patriarchy theory'.

Feminists who believe in patriarchy theory need to be argued with (and won around where possible), but many don't believe this.

We need to remind ourselves sometimes that women's oppression is the oldest and most rooted form of oppression, that we see it as crucial to the workings of modern capitalism and that we know that you cannot have socialism without women's liberation, and you cannot fight without the active involvement of women.

Being the best fighters against women's oppression means that we have to take certain issues extremely seriously. Rape is one of those issues. We are not against rape simply because it is a 'bad thing' which wrecks lives and traumatises people. We are also against rape because we should recognise that rape, the threat of rape and 'rape culture' are a key part of the way women are oppressed under capitalism, and the way behaviour is controlled.

We should recognise that this is one of the most important reasons why the bourgeois justice system does such an appalling job of protecting women from rape, and why many women are disbelieved or discredited when they say they have been raped, if they ever feel able to report it at all.

We know that rape is not something that just happens when a stranger attacks you in a dark alley. Indeed most women know their attackers, and rape within relationships is common. Issues of consent and coercion are something we should consciously, actively seek to educate ourselves about as we have a responsibility to make absolutely sure that we uphold the highest standards when it comes to our own membership.

It is concerning therefore to find a comrade stating at National Committee that she was 'disturbed' that people in our party are saying that when a woman says she has been raped she should be believed. It is concerning that when a question was submitted to the disputes committee session at conference about why we wouldn't make a presumption of belief on the part of a woman who says she has been raped, this question went unanswered and remains unanswered.

Answering that question shouldn't be about reopening a case which is closed, but is a hugely important part of making sure we do better in the future. We believe the answer should be a recognition that women do not come forward with such accusations lightly.

The tiny number of cases where women do invent stories must not be allowed to outweigh the much greater number of cases where women do not speak out, partly because they do not feel they will be believed. When a woman says she has been raped, the presumption should be that she is telling the truth.

It is not only on this question that we sometimes seem to dismiss concerns, for example at the 2011 party conference several comrades used the session on women to give examples of sexist behaviour and language within the party and what they saw as barriers to women's participation within the party.

Rather than having these concerns dealt with in a sensible manner, the comrades were accused during the debate and afterwards of not understanding our political tradition on fighting women's oppression. The term 'feminist' was used as a slur against these women.

Since then people have been accused of calling the party in general 'sexist'. We do not think the party in general is sexist. However we do not believe that the party exists in isolation from the rest of society and the sexist ideas which inevitably arise within it.

We need to challenge these when they come up, without believing that doing so is a concession to liberal feminist ideas. While we do not believe that the SWP is a model of a future socialist society, we do believe that the SWP should be a model of the best that we can fight for under capitalism. This means our anti-sexist ideas have to be applied internally, that all members should be held responsible for their behaviour and that the CC and leading members

should be held the most responsible.

Our commitment to taking these issues seriously has been tested over the last few months, and we have failed this test and failed it badly, for which the CC and leading members have to take most responsibility.

We are in a hole. The first thing to do when in a hole is to stop digging. In this context, stop digging means not allowing the leading member against whom the allegations were made to play a public role in the party at the moment.

This is not a question of his guilt or innocence, purely a question of the political situation we are in. It means a stop to bullying of members who are raising concerns. And it means a genuine recognition that something has gone horribly wrong and that we need to change things for the future.

If we can manage to do this, the next thing we need to do is to start building some scaffolding to get us out of the hole. This scaffolding has several aspects, but a key part of it will be a genuine openness to the discussions currently ongoing around women's oppression.

A recognition that while our tradition and the ultimate way we see the world changing will remain the same, we have things to learn from a broad spectrum of our own membership and from those around us, many of whom describe themselves as feminists. If we can't construct this scaffolding, the hole we're in could start to look a lot like a grave.

Lovedeep (West London)
Steven (South London)

MARXISTS AND FEMINISTS – WORKING WITH, ARGUING AGAINST

One of the stated demands in the faction document is for a recognition that 'whatever our disagreements [with feminists], they will not prevent us from taking united action against women's oppression'.

Quite why the faction felt it necessary to include this statement of the obvious is not made clear.

Those members of the Party who support the decisions of the SWP Annual Conference and of the National Committee have much experience of united action with feminists, whilst arguing against them and trying to recruit them to a Marxist understanding of where women's oppression comes from and how to end it.

What we fundamentally object to is any attempt to suggest that we should soften our stance in order to adapt to what has sometimes been referred to (without supporting evidence) as a 'different' and 'more

progressive' feminism.

Perhaps the members of the faction felt the need to tell us that feminism can lead people to 'reject society as a whole' because they think that the feminists we worked with in the past could not be pulled in that direction, which would be very mistaken.

Certainly the more experienced members of the faction know this to be untrue, and if they are allowing their newer members and students to believe this that would be irresponsible. Judith O has written at length about the changing nature of feminism from the suffragettes to raunch culture, in particular in ISJ 127 taking on many of the arguments of the 'new' feminists.

It is not my intention to go into that in any detail here, but I do think it is worth looking at a couple of practical examples of working 'with and against' feminists to illustrate the possibilities and dangers inherent therein.

The first example is the campaign for abortion rights. The National Abortion Campaign was set up in 1975 to defend the 1967 Abortion Act from a number of private members bills.

The women involved in NAC came from a variety of backgrounds, including those calling themselves feminists, members of the Labour Party and Communist Party, and revolutionary socialists including members of the SWP.

Inevitably arguments took place within the movement, with some women being opposed to working with the male-dominated trade union movement. When the Corrie bill threatened to undermine the 1967 Act, socialists argued for a united front with the trade unions and the Campaign Against Corrie was launched.

This culminated in a hugely successful march of around 80,000 men and women, led by Len Murray and the TUC that saw off the Corrie Bill. The march didn't happen by magic; socialists put motions through Union branches and made sure that coaches were booked to the demonstration.

Key to winning was the argument that abortion was a class issue and that we weren't going to allow working class women to return to the backstreets while the rich continued to visit their private clinics. This was an argument that had to be fought for and wasn't always accepted by the feminists. Some even tried to physically prevent the TUC from leading the march.

However many of the feminists involved in NAC were won to the idea of working in the unions, and some of them called themselves Marxist-feminists. Some had come to the Womens Liberation Movement through supporting strikes for equal pay. The SWP engaged in a polemic with these women about patriarchy theory, even though they were often close to us politically. The feminists understood that we would argue with them and they would argue with us, each trying to win the others' periphery.

The National Abortion Campaign underwent a split following disagreements between different strands of feminism, and eventually merged with other organisations to form AbortionRightsUK, which our comrades are still an active part of.

Comrades who have read the latest Party pamphlet on abortion will see that as well as continuing to be part of these campaigns, we are still putting hard hitting arguments about the class nature of abortion, and why socialist revolution is essential for women's liberation.

The second example I want to look at briefly is the experience of students intervening in the miners' strike of 1984/5, particularly around the Miners Wives Support Groups.

The women's movement had started to fragment by the mid 80s, and many earlier strikes involving women from that decade were largely ignored. The self-organisation of women around the year long strike was impossible to ignore though, and it drew many young feminists, particularly in the colleges, into political action. For these young women – indeed men too – this was their first experience of real class struggle.

Women from the mining communities were invited to speak in the colleges, and students held regular bucket collections to take to the community centres where women organised food kitchens, speaking tours and pickets.

SWSS groups also organised minibuses to go to the early morning pickets, and members of Women's Groups would come along too. These were not radical feminists who refused to work with men, but women who had been attracted by patriarchy theory and were now beginning to question what they thought as they saw women fighting back and challenging sexism alongside the 'macho miners' in a collective fight for their communities.

On returning to campus, feminists and socialists would sit and argue day after day. In this way, at Leeds University for example the entire activist core of the Women's Group were recruited to the SWP, and remained members decades later.

The key is that they were won on the basis of hard political argument over a long period of time. Never was a concession made because they were closer to us than other groups of feminists, on the contrary we argued harder to try and win them *because* they were becoming radicalised by the strike.

I have heard faction supporters imply that there is nothing to learn from the experience of working with feminists 30 years ago. Quite apart from this being a completely un-Marxist view (should we not bother studying the Russian revolution? After all, that was nearly 100 years ago!), it would lead us to miss some important lessons.

As our comrades continue to campaign over abortion rights, to take on the question of lads mags and pole dancing in the

colleges and respond to the arguments around Julian Assange the question of how we work 'with and against' feminists remains crucial.

Working with those to the right of us carries two dangers. One is that we sit and denounce those that don't agree with us and go off and pursue our own course of action in a sectarian manner. I hope I have shown that that is clearly not part of the history and tradition of the SWP when it comes to working alongside feminists.

The second danger is that we adapt our politics to suit those we work with in an opportunistic manner. I worry greatly that this is behind the reluctance of some of our student comrades to argue hard with feminists in the colleges.

Where our student comrades are new to our politics, experienced members should be giving them the confidence to defend our tradition and win new recruits. If our students are accommodating to feminism, if they believe for example that men benefit from women's oppression, or that all men are potential rapists or that Leninist parties are macho and undemocratic then they will never build a revolutionary socialist current in the colleges.

On the contrary they will adapt to a softer option based on the politics of autonomous movements. If we are to keep our students and recruit from the feminist movement we would do well to learn some of the lessons of the past.

Sue (North London)

REGARDING THE DISPUTE COMMITTEE

It is to be welcomed that the CC motion to the special conference has incorporated a section on the Disputes Committee that takes note of the concerns that have been generated by the DC report.

However it is not enough to say that this will "... provide an opportunity to clarify our procedures more generally and propose changes to these procedures where necessary." There has to be a thorough-going examination of those procedures dealing with a whole range of issues, and not just those of sexual misconduct. And it has to be a *commission*, drawn up along the lines that the CC proposes, with an emphasis on the commitment to include members drawn from the special conference.

I would suggest the starting point for the Commission should be where the Democracy Commission left off in 2009. There were only four submissions to the two bulletins that were published at the time, but all four were quite instructive in their different ways.

The one penned by Pat S. acknowledged that there were certain shortcomings to the

DC procedure at the time, one of which was that there was nothing written down! Pat's proposals were adopted almost line for line in Democracy Commission Bulletin 2, but, with the value of hindsight, they left certain situations unaddressed.

The main ones seem to me to be:

1. A member with a grievance against a CC member could take the CC member before the DC directly; Pat did not really get to grips with the full implications of what would happen if this was the case.
2. He itemised situations where cases could be ruled out by the DC. There was one crucial omission, cases where there was serious *criminal* behaviour involved (of which more later).
3. Ratification. He dealt with the possibility that the CC could refuse to accept the DC's decision; he neglected to consider what would happen if the membership refused to accept the DC's decision!

In the same bulletin, Sasha from Hackney identified how a comrade who was referred directly to the DC and disciplined would then only have the option of lodging an appeal to conference, which Sasha identified as extremely problematic.

It is worth quoting what he had to say about the handling of sensitive cases.

"And while it is appropriate for political differences or factional matters to be hammered out at conference, it is not really viable to expect comrades involved in individual disputes over conduct to make an appeal about matters that might be a) very complex and b) personally distressing, to a hall full of people."

In Democracy Commission Bulletin 2, Steve from South East London identified a case where an individual member (himself) had a tangle with a CC member, and clearly came off worse. Whatever the rights and wrongs of this particular example, there are echoes of the case that has been in the eye of the storm that has wracked the party in recent weeks.

Martin and Anne from West London, writing in the same bulletin, had a similar tale to tell, and in the paragraph entitled "Who is listened to?" clearly summed up the concerns of many party members in 2013:

"It would be simple if the failings we have described could be eradicated by just tightening the procedure. However this won't address a problem that goes much wider than the Disputes Committee, and that is, who has the voice in the party, and who has not. This is a cultural problem and its eradication is much in the spirit of the current drive to greater democracy."

I believe there has been a huge improvement in the culture of the party, but in this particular area, as I asserted at the beginning of the contribution, there needs to be a thorough-going examination of the processes used to deal with *all* allegations of misconduct.

The one area that I believe requires particular attention is the need to focus on the difference between misconduct and criminal conduct. The opposition, whether they be the IDOOP or the Democratic Renewal platform, veer between references to sexual misconduct and references to rape, depending who they are talking to and with what purpose in mind.

The point that I would like to make is that the DC should be able to deal with accusations of sexual misconduct internally, in the way that other organisations deal with such matters of misconduct, but it categorically should *not* be dealing with accusations of rape.

Rape, like murder; grievous bodily harm, fraudulent activity, etc.. is a serious crime and cannot be dealt with internally.

To do so not only leads to the kind of situation that the party is having to deal with now, but could also lay the organisation open to criminal investigations by the authorities, with leading figures in the party potentially facing charges of being accessories to a crime, or of attempting to pervert the course of justice.

Dealing with the problem in the way that I have suggested will have a two-fold benefit:

- It will reassure the membership that the party is serious about addressing their concerns and taking steps to insure that the likelihood of any such future occurrence is minimised.
- And it will remove the stick that the opposition continue to bludgeon the leadership with as they seek to impose their own agenda on the party, in the most disingenuous and dishonest fashion.

Steve (Brighton)

A WARNING FROM OUR RECENT PAST

The IDOOP faction has made considerable efforts to appeal to a broad swathe of opinion in the SWP, while focussing on the conduct of the Disputes Committee and the status of X.

They have been able to capitalise on the very real feelings of frustration at the overall political situation (well discussed elsewhere) which the party finds itself in. This is partly due to their claims that they share the political perspectives of the Central Committee.

In this respect as in several others,

the current crisis is a replay of the John R/Lindsey G split of 3 years ago. It is worth reminding ourselves of some of its features.

It started with the censure of John R a year beforehand, at the 2009 annual conference. This was over a large donation from a businessman he had accepted on behalf of Organising For Fighting Unions, a united front initiative set up by Respect and others on the left. With this censure following the split in Respect after Galloway's attack on the SWP, Lindsey and her supporters claimed (including among non-party members) that John was the victim of a 'witch hunt'. They insisted that the only issue at stake was his treatment by the CC, and that they had no differences with the party over perspectives.

It was only when several of John and Lindsey's supporters were disciplined for breaking party rules (two were expelled for factional conduct outside the pre-conference period) that a faction proper was declared and the real political differences began to emerge. Then John and Lindsey re-wrote the SWP's recent history. They claimed that the party was abandoning united front work (particularly in Stop the War, now well past its peak as a mass movement), had been lying about membership figures for years, and was retreating from work in the movements into sectarian party-building. Then as now, the impressive facts created by Unite Against Fascism were conveniently ignored in order not to upset the theory.

This all took place prior to the big public sector strikes of 2010-12 and the trade union leaders' subsequent blocking of further action. However, the all too evident decline in Stop the War's mobilising ability was accompanied by a similar mood of frustration to that of the present.

Then as now, some comrades saw the political impasse in the wider world as due to perceived failures on the part of the SWP's leadership. The default politics of autonomism and movementism on the left, particularly in the universities (at that time a response to the perceived failure of successive mass demonstrations to actually stop the Iraq war), is if anything wider and deeper today.

The faction around Lindsey and John (and a year later those around Chris B) claimed that the SWP was broken, and that a new revolutionary party had to be built.

Their achievements since have been unimpressive. Counterfire (and its Scottish cousin, the International Socialist Group), characterised primarily by a politics of opportunism and adaptation to prevailing political fashions (in the ISG's case, left Scottish nationalism), have failed to attract any significant new forces. Their Coalition of Resistance, the odd big conference aside, has proved a handy political vehicle for left trade union leaders, particularly Len McCluskey.

It was their repeated refusal to be

held accountable to the rest of the party for their actions which set Lindsey and John's faction on a trajectory out of the SWP, declining to put their leadership to the vote in the CC elections at the 2010 annual conference. The conduct of several faction supporters in the period prior to that conference – with vicious and highly personalised attacks on the CC and its supporters – made it extremely difficult for them to rebuild bridges with the rest of the party after the faction's decisive defeat.

In a similar way, the actions of several of this current faction's leading figures are putting at risk any prospect of them regaining the confidence of their comrades following what I hope will be a thoroughly decisive defeat at the special conference.

In 2009, leading figures in Lindsey and John's faction called the CC and its supporters 'intellectual pygmies'. This time around, I for one cannot call anyone a comrade who calls supporters of the CC 'rape apologists'. It is to be hoped that the many faction supporters who abhor such thoroughly rotten politics will have sufficient principle to break with such voices and leave them behind us.

Beyond these similarities is the central issue of what kind of party we need. Three years ago, and again, even more so now, democratic centralism is seen by much of the left as a method of organisation imposed from above by a doctrinaire and dogmatic party leadership intolerant of dissent. There is little sense of its real roots – as the basic means of organisation and democracy discovered and embraced by workers in struggle.

The mass meeting, the show of hands, the picket line, the strike committees, and indeed workers councils; all are powerful expressions of the need for workers to act as one united and disciplined body against the bosses and their state. We argue, we vote, we act as one. It will take some significant victories before that culture is reabsorbed by wider sections of the working class – hopefully influenced at least to some degree by the intervention of revolutionaries.

These significant victories are above all what we are currently working towards. If we are to be successful, we need to build an SWP which is fit for purpose. That means remembering our past the better and more clearly to shape our future.

Roddy (East London)

THE SWP WILL NOT COME OUT OF THE CURRENT CRISIS UNCHANGED

What kind of party

The SWP will not come out of the current crisis unchanged. Our future is on a knife edge and a considered response is essential.

Whatever the truth of the accusations which precipitated the current crisis, the only way to come out of it in good shape, with our able to fight alongside wider layers around questions of oppression threatened least, was for the accused to leave leadership positions. I recognise that such a decision would set aside considerations of justice for the accused in the event that the accusations were false but it remains true that this course would have resulted in the least damage.

I believed the party was faced with an almost impossibly difficult situation and attempted to resolve it in good faith. The pre-conference expulsions do make this belief wobble. Any attempt to resolve the crisis by attempting to close down debate using administrative means would be a monumentally disastrous error and will at the very least seriously damage the party.

In 1940 Trotsky advised the SWP (USA):

"The continuation of discussion bulletins immediately after a long discussion and a convention is, of course, not a rule but an exception, a rather deplorable one. But we are not bureaucrats at all. We don't have immutable rules. We are dialecticians also in the organizational field. If we have in the party an important minority which is dissatisfied with the decisions of the convention, it is incomparably more preferable to legalize the discussion after the convention than to have a split.

We can go, if necessary, even further and propose to them to publish, under the supervision of the new National Committee, special discussion symposiums, not only for party members, but for the public in general. We should go as far as possible in this respect in order to disarm their at least premature complaints and handicap them in provoking a split."

Trotsky wasn't always right but here he was arguing for a process which put politics to the fore, which would not have happened by resorting to a petit legal approach.

I want to address some of the issues brought to the surface by the current crisis.

The party and sexism

There have been attempts to link democratic centralism with hierarchies that

can generate oppressive practices. Unfortunately just as abusive behaviours are experienced by women in society, women in various radical movements have also been subject to abusive and unwanted behaviours.

Participants in Occupy Wall Street reportedly had to deal with occurrences of assault, rape and various other forms of abuse. The forms of consensus decision making proved inadequate in dealing with these issues. Laurie Penny reported on a short film posted by a supporter of Occupy Wall Street called "Hot Chicks of Occupy Wall Street". Anarchist groups too are far from immune to similar problems.

None of this is intended to question the seriousness of such instances in our organisation, (Note: these comments aren't intended imply guilt in the case discussed in December at conference), but it does indicate that democratic centralism can't be the flaw which makes this type of event possible. Indeed democratic centralism potentially provides a solid basis for opposing such tendencies.

When I first joined the SWP the first activity I did was leafleting the old Plessey factory in Ilford in opposition to a parliamentary attack on abortion rights.

Later SWP members argued with miners who were using sexist language during the miners' strike. (The experience of women's activity through that strike obviously had more impact than our arguments.) Brevity prevents many other examples.

At no stage did the party condone, evade, apologise for, or ignore questions of women's oppression, whether around wider social struggles or around relationships within the organisation. The party has always been involved in all the campaigns and initiatives in opposition to all facets of sexism. Many of the blog commentators peddling the line that anyone in the party wanting to be involved in initiatives opposing women's oppression are attacked by the party are deranged fantasists.

Recently some of the documentation around the party debate carries accusations that the CC and/or its supporters have sidelined comrades around the opposition. If this is true as stated it is seriously misguided. As a defence mechanism it is like this: "I am being attacked by tigers. Tigers are afraid of fire. If I set myself alight the tigers will run away."

Failure to recognise legitimate concerns and any attempt to bury them unresolved will be fantastically destructive. Simply declaring the question closed can't change the reality.

The party and democratic centralism

Why have we proved vulnerable to attack? A number of contributors to the last set of pre-conference bulletins drew attention to our lack of, or very limited, growth. Over

the years many commentators, inside and outside the party have pointed to our high membership turnover. They hit the nail on the head. Centrally this is due to the low level of industrial struggle but given the fact very high numbers are today questioning the way our World is run we might expect to be a much larger organisation.

I think it is time to pose the question about whether our model of democratic centralism is fit for purpose. Specifically the current crisis has revealed a real brittleness but more generally we have to ask if our successes could not have developed into a wider influence in the movements and in the class.

There are two related issues. One is our relationship with the rest of the class. The other is about how we make decisions.

We are not the vanguard of the working class. The class contains many layers characterised by different levels of consciousness and different orientations to any struggles that happen. In addition the personnel of these layers and struggles changes continually. We overlap with the most militant layers but do not constitute them. We are way too tiny to be “the” party. If we are to become part of a future vanguard party we will have to win the trust of huge numbers of workers.

We will also have to win the trust of all kinds of other movements of the oppressed and win the workers movement to seriously take up and champion those movements.

In 1960 Cliff wrote:

The managers of factories can discuss their business in secret and then put before the workers a fait accompli. The revolutionary party that seeks to overthrow capitalism cannot accept the notion of a discussion on policies inside the party without the participation of the mass of the workers – policies which are then brought “unanimously” ready-made to the class.

Setting aside the reference to “the mass of workers”, recognising we are talking about the relatively small numbers amongst those who want to fight, our method doesn’t reflect this.

We have less influence because to an extent we tend to build a wall between us and others wanting to fight. We tend to make decisions in a caucus and “intervene” with it. To be sure, there is nothing sinister here. Inside the party the discussion focusses on how to strengthen the whole movement. But a revolutionary party need not be walled off from the rest of the class, entering it like a battle ship being launched. We can’t be surrounded by a wall but something more like a cell membrane which in biology actively moves nutrients and oxygen in.

Preconference Bulletin 2 carried an interesting article by Tim (Devon & Cornwall) ‘Rural Organising’. It describes a method which would both strengthen the

entire fight-back against current attacks on our class as well as our implantation within it. Although it is posed as relevant to people in rural areas it actually fits the current situation in towns and cities too.

There could be sharp divisions in such broad formation, eg around trade union struggles where left leaders drag their feet. If necessary we would agitate independently at work while attempting to pull as many others with us as possible. But whatever the strains there is a very large constituency for such a project.

The second issue is our decision making process. The Preconference bulletins reflected this partly in a debate about the slate system in elections.

The point has been made that the Bolsheviks didn’t use this system. From around 1915 as the Bolsheviks began to recover from the wave of oppression that WW1 brought, much of the leadership of the Bolsheviks was in the hands of their Petrograd Committee. This was pretty much organised on the basis of delegates elected in the districts. In no way does this method of election negate the democratic centralist nature of the arrangement.

Following the February revolution, it is well known that the ferocious debates of the time, and these were about the very nature of the revolution, were carried out very much in the open. Without getting distracted into a socialist balloon debate it is more than possible that a slate system for electing the Bolshevik CC could have hampered a correct position being reached in a timely way by the party.

It has been said that a different electoral system, ie one which more closely resembles that used by Lenin’s party, would lead to a popularity contest. This is a phrase which doesn’t help clarity. In the SWP people tend to become popular if they have something useful to say. I think there is little chance of someone ending up on the CC because they are a karaoke legend. Comrades should put their minds at rest on that score. There is no reason why even completely individual elections would lead to an unbalanced leadership. Socialist activists elected because comrades see value in their opinions and experience, discuss strategy, tactics and the rest with others elected on a similar basis and arrive at a synthesis.

There is no reason why electing, recalling and removing individual CC members should lead to instability. The opposite seems to be the case. Democratic centralism may be a leadership mode, more importantly it is a process. It can’t be equated with one single highly specific model.

What about factions? We have argued that the party makes a collective decision and then all members act on it. But there is no reason why debates and arguments need to be shut down after a conference. As Hal-las wrote 40 years ago:

...a party cannot possibly be created

except on a thoroughly democratic basis; unless, in its internal life, vigorous controversy is the rule and various tendencies and shades of opinion are represented, a socialist party cannot rise above the level of a sect. Internal democracy is not an optional extra.

Unfortunately some of the contributions in pre conference bulletins tend to devalue the initiative of members in arguing the value of leadership. There are very real dangers here.

At one point in pre conference bulletin 3 Gareth from Hackney suggests that only a centralised leadership can generalise from best experience. This is one sided. The experience of the Russian revolution shows that this generalisation involved a tension between leaders and the mass of members. Often the leaders got it totally wrong. Space prevents an account here of the many examples of just how bad sections of the Bolshevik leadership could be between the February and October revolutions.

Pete from Birmingham makes a similar point about the value of leadership. He uses the example of the Anti- Academies Alliance. The suggestion made is that the CC pushed for the Campaigners from Downend school to be put on the fringe meeting platform at the NUT conference rather than an Academy Head teacher. I’m sure there must be some spin here. Did it really require CC intervention? Almost anybody in the NUT would choose the Downend campaigners for a fringe meeting at conference over any kind of head teacher. Christine Blower would have made that decision.

It was a fantastic meeting btw. I know the advice and guidance of CC members is highly invaluable and any period of activity is likely to have demonstrated this but it is a mistake to exaggerate, particularly if the exaggeration is part of an argument which makes initiative from below harder. The experience of the poll tax carries different lessons.

The separation of pre-conference period and the rest of the year is arbitrary and works against the full conscious involvement of wide layers of militant workers in party activity. Of course the membership works collectively on the basis of decisions made by the party, but effective initiative in struggle is not undermined by continual analysis and debate.

Any tendency in that direction will reflect the conditions of the struggle in any case and will itself be best dealt with by discussion and debate. The crystallisation of permanent factions, parliament and opposition isn’t likely in an interventionist party like ours. But there are dangers in any method of organisation. Politics and leadership is about steering through these dangers.

Whatever the outcome of the special conference, a narrowing of party democracy, a tighter model of democratic

centralism would be a disaster. We need a period of appraisal of the kind of party needed in the current period.

Pete (Thames Valley)

DISPUTES COMMITTEE – PROPOSALS FOR DEVELOPMENT

This paper has been developed as an advance submission based on an assumption that some sort of commission will be set up to develop the processes of the disputes committee following the special conference. The points below are designed to be taken into account by that commission.

1. A review of the DC process is urgently needed due to the handling of complaints made in 2009 and 2011. The complainant has made it clear she wants the case to remain closed, so this article will focus on changes which could be made to ensure a more effective, fairer system for the future. We cannot fail to learn the lessons of the current crisis.

2. Whilst it may in some circumstances be appropriate to take an informal approach to disputes between comrades, e.g. after a minor disagreement, there are clearly some situations in which an informal solution is inadequate, can lead to injustice, and the silencing of serious concerns of 'normal' comrades where political concerns are regarded as more important, or there is an imbalance of power.

This line should be clearly distinguished in our constitution, so that comrades will know that certain types of behaviour, if reported, will automatically require a disputes process. Such behaviour may include:

- a. Sexual misconduct
- b. Misusing a position of trust or seniority
- c. Physical violence

These guidelines should extend to all comrades regardless of their position in the organisation – Central Committee member; full time party employee or lay member.

3. The Central Committee and Disputes Committee should be separate. The disputes committee must be able to view a situation objectively. No matter how good the intentions and the politics of those on the panel, comrades on the Central Committee are central to the political strategy of any moment. We expect them to argue hard to put forward our politics. It would be unreasonable to expect them to be able to switch this off when hearing disputes cases.

Members of the Central Committee should be able to make representations to a hearing in order to put forward their view of how it could be handled, but should not sit on the Disputes Committee or have any influence in making inquiries or decisions. A separation of duties between the two bodies provides a mechanism to ensure that the internal processes are less able to be abused.

4. No member of the Disputes Committee panel should be known to any parties of the hearing, beyond being an acquaintance. The panel should represent a range of members of different backgrounds and ages. For cases concerning sexual misconduct, it should be possible for a complainant to request an all-female panel.

5. There is no good reason for the Disputes Committee to be elected by a slate system. They do not need to function as a cohesive body which can act in unity, as with the Central Committee. They should simply be the comrades which members think are best placed to perform this task. This should be achieved by:

- a. The members of the Disputes Committee should be elected individually at conference
- b. The members of Disputes Committee should not serve for any more than 5 years in order to allow for rotation and, after serving five years there should be a gap of 3 years before re-election.
- c. Central Committee members must have at least five years off the CC before being eligible to sit on the Disputes Committee.

6. Disputes Committee hearings must not replicate court hearings. They should simply be a process by which it can be decided whether or not a comrade has behaved in a way which is considered by the panel to be acceptable within a revolutionary socialist party. This would be ensured by:

- a. Taking an inquisitorial rather than adversarial approach. Parties should not be cross-examined
- b. Using terms such as 'misconduct occurred' or 'found to have behaved in a way unacceptable within our organisation'. The terms 'guilty', 'not guilty/innocent', or 'not proven' are unsuitable for this process.
- c. After a complaint is received, if the Disputes Committee decides a hearing is necessary, they should make enquiries, speak with comrades, and do what is reasonably possible to investigate the substance of the complaint. Comrades should be obliged to take part in this process unless there is good reason for not doing so.
- d. Before the hearing, explaining the process fully in writing and in person. Anyone appearing personally in front of the DC should be allowed to bring a comrade with them for support.

Support agencies should be recommended where appropriate. Information

re: sources of free or low cost legal advice should be made available where the complaint is of a nature that the complainant may wish to consider it. Free or low cost counselling should also be recommended if appropriate.

e. At all stages, giving adequate time for all parties to consider the information given to them. Both parties should have access to the other party's accounts of the incident(s) that gave rise to the dispute.

f. Where there is an allegation of sexual misconduct or serious violence, the comrade against whom the complaint has been made should be suspended immediately until the Disputes Committee process is finished.

7. The DC should have the following outcomes available to them:

- a. No misconduct found.
- b. Uncertain whether misconduct occurred.
- c. Misconduct warranting:
 - i. Formal warning
 - ii. Removal from paid party work or public representation of any activity the party is involved in
 - iii. Suspension for set period
 - iv. Expulsion

8. There needs to be clear protocols for investigations and hearings. In no circumstances should the member(s) of the Disputes Committee conducting the investigation sit on the hearing panel. The size of the organisation is such that there should be no need for this type of cross over.

Members of the Disputes Committee must receive formal guidance before conducting any investigation or sitting on any panel. As a result of concerns around sexist lines of questioning in recent cases, we believe that all members of the Disputes Committee must make a commitment to abstain from any questioning that reinforces prejudice and/or stereotypes and thus contributes towards oppression.

9. A commission of comrades outside of the full time/paid structures with relevant experience should be set up to develop and implement guidelines and protocols for reform of the disputes committee processes based on the above principles.

Linda and Luke (Edinburgh)

FEMINISTS, FEMINISMS AND STRAW (WO)MEN

Over recent weeks I have been simply astonished by what comrades' pronouncements on the issue of feminism. Charlie K made a comparison between black

nationalism and feminism; that we stand with black nationalists against racism, but against them on separatism.

This confounding of feminism with a radical/separatist/lesbian form of feminism is made so often within the SWP (German 1989) that it prompts me to consider what function it performs? The creation of a straw (wo)man must have an ideological purpose, and that is presumably not its practical purpose of distracting party members from the real horrors of sexism.

At a seminar I attended as a first year undergrad on a social science degree c1990, for which I had swotted extensively, ready to argue for Marxist feminism against radical feminism, I was totally wrong-footed by the absence of any kind of feminism and the majority view that discrimination against women was rational as we take time off to have babies. Radical/separatist/lesbian feminism was a minor fringe of the woman's liberation movement in the 1970s.

To be a feminist in 2013 means different things to different people, with the fracturing of 'grand narratives', but the common denominator is that to be a feminist means to be against sexism.

So, to return to the analogy between race and gender, it would be more accurate for Charlie to say that we stand with anti-racists against racism, but against them on... well, quite. Revolutionary socialists should stand with feminists full stop. If you can't proudly say that you are an anti-racist and a feminist, then you aren't much of a socialist.

If older members of the party want to continue to disagree with radical separatist feminists, fine, but good luck finding one on campus or in workplaces. I've never met one of these mythical creatures.

Are there any sorts of feminism or feminists with whom we can disagree? Greer (1999) lamented that the 1970s' struggle for women's liberation had become the struggle for sexual equality, but in an unequal world, equality just means an equal right to exploit others, and to be against exploitation makes you that most old-fashioned and reviled category of people: a socialist. Clearly we are on the same page as Greer with this, but are we against gender equality? Even the worst kind of feminism shares our rejection of sexism.

It is a useful reality check on any political position to see who you are lining up with, and when I try and think what it means to be a notfeminist, or against feminism it really is the Christian right in the USA, surrendered wives, and maybe Playboy. Not great company for revolutionaries, if Theresa May calls herself a feminist, do we really want to position ourselves to the right of that?

I regularly attend lectures, take part in seminars and conferences, read papers and mark essays which deal with gender, and I've never met a radical feminist, although I have met plenty of radicals who are

feminists, and actually I've never heard anyone talking about patriarchy either. I have never made it out of a symposium without someone citing Judith Butler, though.

One example of the controversies raging in gender studies over the last decade or so is the questions of embodiment, with an extreme position on the social construction of gender arguing that gender only exists discursively. And what is the party line on this? Might not Marxists have something to say on materiality?

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which Fairclough (1993) describes as a Marxist method, undertaken for explicitly emancipatory purposes, has provided ideological tools to attack capitalism which we should not ignore.

A substantial body of CDA work is on gender, and this is relevant to all our everyday lives, and how we resist sexism. For example, Wendy Hollway's analysis in depth and detail on how the 'Male Sexual Drive Discourse' is deployed to explain and justify rape is deeply and practically useful to women. However, in striking contrast to the outstanding scholarship of so many SWP members on obscure aspects of the 3rd international, the entirety of scholarship of gender post-1980 is pretty largely ignored in the party.

The case of Ian Parker represents everything that is best and worst about the SWP for me. Parker, who has played a leading role in 'Psychology, Politics, Resistance' and founded the Bolton Discourse Network with feminist psychologist Erica Burman (and others) and has written widely-used textbooks on CDA, recently brought his critical analysis of power to bear on management practices in his own department at MMU.

He was suspended and his students and colleagues started an international campaign, which UCU Left and the SWP actively supported in our best traditions of solidarity. However, the party has never engaged at all with the content of his deeply political and practically useful work. I don't think either he or Erica Burman have ever been invited to speak at Marxism for example, and I believe most members had never heard of him before his suspension.

In the 1960s it was a good revolutionary socialist position to be for free sexual relations, to end discrimination against unmarried mothers, to legalise abortion and homosexuality. However, as Greer observes, one struggle of the 60s and 70s was for the right of woman to have sex, but a struggle of the 80s and 90s is the right of women to refuse to have sex. Since activists in the 60s demanded 'free love' we have learned about issues such as child sexual abuse, domestic violence and date rape, which were unknown or ignored back then.

Feminist psychologists, sociologists, social workers and criminologists have researched these issues and developed

understandings which have challenged the sexism of our society. Research on inter-generational relationships shows that they are rarely in the interest of the younger party.

Let's have a debate about what the party's position on sexism should be that manages to get beyond the founding premise; that men and women will both be liberated by socialism. On this much we can all agree, but it is the starting point of our debate, not the conclusion.

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Holly (Waltham Forest and IDOOP, DRP)

UNDERSTANDING A SERIOUS SITUATION

We are in a serious situation.

Statistics on rape are not reliable. There are about 3,000 active members of the SWP. Of those, probably about 300 have been raped, and another 900 are close to someone who has been raped. These people are on both sides of the argument within the party. Their experience does not determine their position. But their feelings can run high.

Moreover, cover-ups of rape and sexual abuse are being revealed all around us. There are the Catholic abuse scandals, Jimmy Saville, the music schools, the Delhi rape protests, and much more. It is very good that this is happening. But it means that comrades who fear there has been a cover-up in the party have to be persuaded not only has the SWP not done this, but that it is almost the only organisation they know of that does not behave like that.

Expulsions

Some comrades want to expel other people for how they have behaved over this controversy about alleged abuse. That is understandable. Some of the ways people have behaved on the internet would get them expelled from any organisation - the Labour Party, the Conservative Party, the Coop, my union and the Donkey Welfare Society.

However, think about the future. If people in your workplace are attracted to the SWP, they will ask others they know about the organisation. The received wisdom among those people will matter. We are in trouble if the short version of what they remember is that the SWP expels members who complain about rape.

Moreover, there is a danger in expelling

people for saying things on the internet. An “I am Spartacus moment” is only a click away. We could find ourselves expelling a cascade of one hundred people in a day. Or expelling the first twenty, and then not the rest.

There is also a danger of expelling people because you cannot get on together in the branch. Expulsion will not stop them saying hurtful things and doing damage. They will still say and do those things at the university or at the political events in town. So if you can't get on in the branch, it's maybe best to try harder.

Understanding

Millions of workers are feeling battered. The attacks on our lives and values keep coming. People worry hard about themselves and their loved ones. There is also deep frustration that we have not been able to fight back properly.

What do people in a family do in such situations? Unfortunately, sometimes they take it out on each other. Something a bit like that seems to be happening in the party at the moment.

And we have to understand the pressures on us in the party. The students were riding high after Millbank, and now things are much harder. Our workplace militants in the public sector have been on the defensive. Our leadership has been through gruelling, and weakening, fights.

So times are hard. But look around the world – struggle is breaking out all over. As a party we both have to adapt to hard times, and to be ready to fight at any moment. Not easy.

There is also a dangerous dynamic in the party. Positions and feelings are hardening. Students are found mostly on one side. Workplace militants mainly on the other. (I know there are many exceptions.) There is an edge of age, and an edge of class, to the differences.

I have now talked to a lot of comrades now on both sides. On the one side a narrative says that a small group of people hostile to the party are misleading inexperienced students who don't understand our tradition. On the other side, a narrative says that the CC is misleading people who are bullied or irrationally loyal.

If you support the opposition, realise that 600 or more comrades have thought long and hard and carefully about this, because it really matters to them, and they do not agree with you. They are not slaves, or bullied. They really think you are wrong.

And the other way round. Why do 500 people, who have thought long and hard, back the opposition?

Whichever side you are on, if you can't see why so many disagree with you, you can't understand what is happening. I don't mean you have to agree with them. I just mean that telling yourself they have been tricked is a way of not having to hear what they are saying.

Also, we need to be careful how insulted we allow ourselves to feel. Feelings run high – this is an explosive issue. But when you are insulted, or think someone is high handed, remember what you said or did to them. Or what someone they think is on your side said or did. If a person says you are naïve and don't understand the IS tradition, is that worse than telling them they want to cover up abuse?

Agreement

The nature of the issue makes agreement about the decisions of the January conference difficult. We cannot expect people to agree on something they don't think. On some issues, like who we back for a trade union general secretary, we can accept the outcome of a vote and then all argue together. On this issue, whatever the vote, people will find it difficult not to say what they really think when talking to close friends at work or at home.

What I do think we can agree on is this: “There was an accusation of rape and sexual abuse.

The disputes committee investigated this, as they do when there are such accusations about party members. They voted 7 to 0 that rape did not happen, and 6 to 1 that sexual harassment was not proven.

The entire conference of the party then heard and discussed the report of the disputes committee. They voted to accept the report of the by 230 to 200, with about 50 unsure people abstaining or not voting.

The whole conference was in effect voting on whether they judged that the disputes committee was biased. By a narrow margin, they did not.

That is the democratic way to deal with the issue, and we resolve these issues democratically.”

Finally

Finally, if I thought my party was covering up abuse, I would leave, and do damage on my way out. I don't. And look around the world. Hard futures await us if we can't act effectively. We desperately need a party big enough and radical enough to be at the heart of resistance. I don't mean we, the comrades, need that. I mean we, the workers, and we, humanity, need that.

Jonathan N

REFORMING OUR DISPUTES PROCEDURE

According to the Office for National Statistics, around 2 million people a year are victims of domestic abuse and 540,000 are victims of sexual assault, which equates roughly to around 7% and 2% of all women in the UK and 5% and 1% of all men. No trade union, no major party, is protected from having members who are victims or indeed perpetrators of these crimes. Claims of sexual harassment have caused one union General Secretary to resign already this year.

Socialists will inevitably be judged by how we deal with complaints of this sort. One wrong approach is to say that “Well, it is inevitable, you are always going to get rape under capitalism”. If socialists are seen to do too little, this will call into question our commitment to the very project of socialism. In ‘What is to be Done’, Lenin wrote that socialists should be tribunes of the oppressed, opponents of all injustice and all inequality. We are judged by our response to complaints brought by our members, and if our response is seen to betray a lack of solidarity with the victim, then we will be judged wanting by the movement.

Another wrong approach is to say, “Any party that could allow one of its members to rape another, is so lacking in decency that no socialist could be part of it.” Rape and sexual assault are only indirectly connected to the ideas a person has (or thinks they have). They happen for reasons relating to oppression, exploitation, and all the frustration of relationships that happens under capitalism. No party, no union is immune from having people in its ranks who behave violently or in a sexist way, and as revolutionary socialists we understand why this is. We cannot step outside the material reality we live in, with all the ideas which come with it.

The issue is not whether individuals will behave badly even in a revolutionary party, but whether the party is capable of responding to complaints in a way which is consistent with our politics. Any disputes procedure has to be constantly kept under review; in the same way that our perspectives are always based on changing conditions in society. There is no single “formula” which will be good for all time.

The authors of this piece are lawyers or law students. We also have practical experience of bringing and defending, sexual harassment complaints in employment tribunals, in the family courts and in the criminal courts. There are also different rules for complaints to unions or to professional conduct bodies under which people such as nurses or teachers investigate complaints about each other. All these legal

systems have different procedures from which we can learn. We focus on eight areas where the party's procedures should be re-thought.

This document is in no way written to suggest that in its decisions to date the Disputes Committee has acted in any way other than giving the most serious consideration to the issues before it, nor that the comrades reached decisions that were not ones that they truly believed were correct, but is in part prompted by the failure of its most recent decision to win support outside our ranks.

"Acquittal" by a process which is perceived to be flawed is a disservice to all the parties in a complaint and to our party itself.

1. Rejecting legal terms

Some comrades seem to want our DC to be authoritative "like a court" and to copy more and more details of what people see in the court system, right down to the language of "charge", "conviction", "evidence", "guilt" and "innocence".

We don't have the experience, finances or time to operate a shadow court system. Some comrades fail to fully grasp that there are in fact several legal systems, making different kinds of decisions, for different reasons.

Copying the Criminal Procedure Rules does not make it more likely that we will keep our internal disputes out of the courts (if that is our real purpose) instead it increases the risk that the courts will get involved. It would be inconsistent with our politics to seek to copy our procedures from a legal system which, as socialists, we recognise is part of the power which the state has to reproduce capitalist and oppressive relations.

At our last conference in January, we were told that the DC had used the legal definition of rape. Should we apply the definition of rape contained in the Sexual Offences Act 2003? Should we take into account the case law on consumption of alcohol? Should we follow the case law about previous consistent statements? Our legal system is complex, it has all sorts of checks and balances which are only barely visible to people who are not familiar with it. You cannot import only some parts of a legal system, without seriously distorting it.

Principles of justice borrowed from the legal system can inform our processes but it is wrong to speak about "charges", "evidence", "verdicts" and so on. Rather than pretend that our systems have some legal significance, we would do far better to admit that all we have the capacity to do is to make relatively simple decisions about whether or not members of the party have lived up to the standards of conduct that we would expect of our fellow comrades or not.

The focus should be conduct; not individual "charges", put very simply: was the

behaviour of a particular comrade worse than we would expect of a member of our party? If it probably was, action should be taken against them.

2. The relationship between internal complaints and police investigations

We know that if the SWP was ever to become a truly mass party, we would expect harassment from the police. Any revolutionary's first, instinctive approach, when faced with a criminal complaint, is to assume that involving the police will only lead to mischief. A problem with instinctive responses is that they are fundamentally apolitical, and some threaten to do the party harm if we persist with them.

The party might not recognise the police, but the police recognise us, and by carrying out investigations, we may generate evidence, we may even unwittingly interfere with evidence. One of the state's cornerstones is the idea that the criminal system has a monopoly when it comes to investigating serious crimes.

In future were our party to be faced with a serious complaint, and if comrades sought to persuade the complainant not to go to the police, there could be serious consequences. If, in future, the fact of serious allegations became widely known we do not doubt that we could attract the attention of the police, we only need to look at the SSP to see where that might lead.

Every other complaints procedure comparable to our disputes' procedure (unions' internal complaints procedures, professional conduct bodies' investigation procedures, complaints procedures of universities and students' unions, etc) encourages a complainant to go to the police *first* in serious cases, and only itself investigates them *after* the police have finished.

One major reason for this is that the police have vastly more resources, and some of the evidence which is determinative in a rape or sexual harassment complaint (eg access to deleted email or text messages, physical evidence of intercourse if sexual intercourse is disputed, etc...) will only be found by people who have vastly more time and money to obtain them.

Secondly, there is a "chance" that the outcome of the police investigation will be conclusive, e.g. because the person accused of a crime admits it, or is convicted. Where this happens, it reduces the burden of the subsequent non-criminal investigator to a minimum. Of course, this rarely happens, especially in cases concerning sexual offences. The police do not press charges; the Crown Prosecution Service decide not to prosecute, or juries acquit because in subtle ways the criminal system discourages convictions, causing the offended complainant to then ask their union or professional body or a civil or family court to

decide the matter differently.

Even where the result of police investigation is equivocal, a non-criminal investigator is better placed than they would be if there had been no prior criminal investigation: they may have access to the documents from the police investigation, transcripts of interviews, copies of other written evidence, etc. They make decisions based on something real rather than merely one person's word against another's.

There are other reasons which should be especially important for a party such as ours. A female complainant of sexual misconduct may be young, or may be vulnerable. It may be that the memory of the assault and of the treatment of complaint will stay with her for years afterwards becoming one of the most important and negative events in her life. When responding to her the party is in a relationship of trust not just with the woman of whatever age she was when the incident happened, but with the same woman at 30 or 50 or 70 years old.

A woman who says at 17, "I think it was assault, I don't think it was rape", may say at 19 "it was rape". A woman who says at a 19, "I want him warned, I don't want him punished", may say at 30, "He should have gone to jail". This is not because women redefine their experiences at will, but we live in a society where messages about what rape actually is are warped by oppressive social relations. If the party has failed to encourage the woman to take her complaint to the police for proper investigation as soon as the party hears about it, then her chances of subsequently obtaining a conviction will be diminished. We will have failed to protect an opportunity to obtain justice which may be important to the woman later.

We are well aware of the counter-arguments: that the police investigate rape badly, often fail to process complaints, etc. Among the authors of this piece, more than one of us has been in the criminal courts defending male perpetrators of sexual violence, and has seen the indifference that some prosecutors have for their own witnesses, the way in which the police will often charge serious sexual violence (broken ribs, massive bruising) as if it was merely the most trivial assault.

We have no illusions that police investigations or criminal charges "solve everything". But the party's investigation is easier after the police have been involved. The whole history of the women's movement in relationship to the police is of a series of attempts to force the police to take rape and sexual harassment seriously.

Reforms to the way victims of sexual offences are treated by the police and the courts, for example in the type of questions which can be asked and the way in which sexual offences are defined, the establishment of specialist units dealing with sexual offences, etc, do not go far enough but have been hard fought for and should

not be undermined by the party thinking it can do better. In cases of sufficient seriousness, we too must use the most appropriate resources available.

3. When should a police complaint take priority?

There is simply no good reason to think that due solely to our comrades' good politics the party is somehow immune from further, serious complaints of various kinds in future. Two of the authors of this document are in court frequently in cases between parents who break up.

In these sorts of cases, it is common for there to be evidence from one or both parties of domestic violence, and increasingly common one or other party will allege child sexual abuse. Allegations of child abuse are far beyond anything which the party could investigate. But, once such allegations have been made, they cannot be ignored. Doing nothing would leave our party looking contemptible; investigating badly (when we don't have the time, the experience or the skills to investigate well) would be equally destructive. In cases of this sort, we have little choice but to ask the complainant to take the matter to the police.

The party should not dissolve its disputes committee in favour of sending everything to the police and just "seeing what happens". But there is a threshold of seriousness for allegations which, if we investigate, may have significant legal and other implications that we ignore at our peril. If the issue is "Did comrade Y steal comrade Z's mobile phone?" then there are no reasons of principle why the party shouldn't investigate the matter as well as anyone else. Theft is a crime; but the crime is not of such seriousness as to make us incapable of investigating it.

The criminal system distinguishes between serious and less serious crimes. The latter are heard by Magistrates (i.e. non-lawyers) who act as both judge and jury. The former are heard in the Crown Court by judges and juries. At some point, we just have to grasp something like the same distinction. A fumbled investigation could expose individuals not only to ridicule but also potentially to investigation and criminal charges, and the more serious the allegation the greater the risk. We need to develop our own distinction between cases which we are capable of investigating on our own and others which we recognise are too serious for us.

A proper explanation of these difficulties is part of the party's duty to the comrades involved in a complaint to do what we can to make sure that it is investigated properly, we probably also have a duty to provide or at least encourage a victim to take legal advice, it has the added benefit of providing our party with a shield against any subsequent hostile police investigation.

Our party *cannot and should not*

pressure people with serious sexual complaints to take them to the police if they decide they do not want to.

Making a complaint and facing the prospect of a criminal inquiry can be traumatic in itself, no matter how well it is handled. In these circumstances, we probably have no option but to investigate ourselves, a complainant may well expect that of us, but our focus in this document is on the advice that the party should give to those who sit on the DC. The task of the members of our DC is to explain to comrades why the police, even if institutionally sexist may be better equipped to investigate serious complaints and that starting there would make our later hearing *all the more effective.*

4. What standard of proof should we apply in our investigation?

There seems to be a confusion in the party, and in the DC itself as to what standard of proof the Committee should operate (that is, how convinced a panel must be that a complaint is well founded in order to decide that a sanction is necessary), and upon whom the burden should fall (who has to prove what). Some comrades think it should be the criminal standard of "innocent till proven guilty", others that it should be the civil standard of "what probably happened". What is at stake is whether you want a system which guides decision-makers generally towards accepting, or to rejecting, serious sexual complaints.

The criminal system is almost unique compared to the other formal and informal legal systems that operate in Britain in that it operates the "criminal standard of proof", in other words a person is only convicted if the decision-maker (a jury or a magistrates' bench) is certain, if there is no reasonable doubt. Almost every other legal or quasi-legal decision maker operates the "civil standard" (i.e. a judge or a panel, or whoever) investigates in line with what they believe happened "on the balance of probabilities". If one side of a disputes is more believable than another, it is accepted. Civil courts have a less intrusive standard of proof partly because they cannot send people to jail. The criminal courts require a higher standard of proof because they have the power to take a person's liberty away.

This distinction between the criminal and the civil standard is central to each of the complaints procedures to which the party's processes can usefully be compared (i.e. trade unions' internal complaints procedures, professional conduct bodies' investigation procedures, complaints procedures of universities and students' unions, even employers' disciplinary procedures). Each applies the civil standard to reflect the fact that such bodies are not equipped to investigate to the criminal standard, and their punishments are less penal than the

criminal sanction of jail.

To give some examples: the trade union Unite's internal complaints procedure operates "with no initial presumption of fault on either side" (<http://www.unitenow.co.uk/index.php/View-document/123-Members-Complaints-Procedure.html?format=raw&tmpl=component>). By contrast the criminal standard begins with the presumption of innocence (i.e. that a complaint is untrue until it is proven). The civil standard starts with no presumption of either innocence or guilt.

The General Teaching Council applies the civil standard (<http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/129/1/teacherguidance1009.pdf>), employers in disciplinary or grievance procedures and Employment Tribunals operate the civil standard of proof.

The primary purpose of the DC is to protect the interests of the Party. If we always operated the criminal standard, that would make our mundane disciplinary procedures unworkable: people accused of political disagreements would be able to hide behind criminal procedures (the rule against hearsay evidence, the right to silence, the assumption that a person is innocent until they are proven guilty) which are not appropriate for 99% of party disputes.

We strongly recommend that the party apply the civil standard in future in all internal disputes that reach the Disputes Committee.

An investigation into the future of our disputes procedure may also find it useful to consider whether we ought to apply a particular "burden of proof" in certain kinds of case. Normally in civil litigation, the burden of proving any given fact falls to the person who asserts it. So while each side seeks to prove that its version of events is the most likely, if neither party is more persuasive, the right decision is to find the case unproved. Where the CC alleges conduct that could bring the Party into disrepute it would fall on them to show that that misconduct has occurred.

We know that women, especially young women, face an enormous social stigma for bringing complaints of sexual misconduct, with the result that such complaints are rarely brought without substance to them. Perhaps in the case of allegations of serious sexual misconduct it should fall to the person complained against to show, on balance, that misconduct had not occurred.

5. Confidentiality vs transparency

Confidentiality in serious sexual allegations is important, in particular for the victim. The courts also used to grant those accused of rape anonymity, and the Government would like to see that rule reintroduced. Socialists have fought for hearings not to be completely secret. Transparency encourages other victims to come forward, and seeing justice achieved gives other

victims hope. Socialists have also fought against the state's desire to keep certain proceedings confidential (secret) as in *R v Socialist Worker Ltd ex p A-G* [1975] QB 637 in which a certain publisher and an investigative journalist (Paul Foot) were fined £250 each for flouting restrictions on secrecy, because secrecy opens up the door at worst to abuse, or injustice, and at best to distrust.

Transparency in our proceedings, and their outcome, and that means clarity in the process and confidence that that process will be followed, need not compromise anonymity of the victim.

For this reason, we view with deep concern this part of the proposals that the CC has tabled for special conference. By focussing on the need for confidentiality and not recognising the equally important need for transparency our party is in danger of being seen as an organisation with something to hide.

6. Punishments should be decided according to the nature and circumstances of the misconduct, not negotiated between the parties

We are aware of a perception outside our ranks that, on occasion in the past, the party has tried to deal with complaints by circumventing our disputes procedures and seeking to negotiate a settlement between the parties on the basis of an "agreed position" that misconduct was not proven, but that the person subject to a complaint has voluntarily agreed to demotion, suspension, etc. This may or may not be a sensible way of resolving political disputes (and political disputes are not a focus of this article); it would be a wholly irresponsible way of dealing with sexual complaints.

Imagine if a member of the party brought a complaint that she had been sexually harassed by another member of the party, and (without any investigation) that member of the party was removed from certain, but only some, public duties. Inevitably, there would be an outcry. The right sanction can only be determined by the proper investigation of a complaint and establishing its substance.

By negotiating first, rather than investigating first, we risk fuelling a perception outside our ranks, that a comrade has in fact been found guilty of sexual misconduct but has only received a minor sanction. This mistake would be especially serious if the complaint was such, so that if we had in fact found the misconduct proven, the sanction would be a grotesquely lenient sanction for a complaint of this sort.

We should be self-confident enough in our politics to be capable of investigating even senior members of misconduct, properly investigating misconduct rather than negotiating a pragmatic outcome, and of finding misconduct when it happened.

7. Avoiding bias and the appearance of bias

All legal systems have simple rules for deciding whether a hearing was unfair because of bias. No person can be a judge in their own case; if a person owns shares or has some a financial interest in the outcome of a complaint, they cannot fairly be its judge.

But almost all legal systems go further, in holding that a decision is unfair not just if the decision-maker was biased, but if there was even the mere appearance of bias. The courts have developed their own "objective" test of apparent bias, so that, for example, jurors who know a party are excused. As socialists we would be outraged by an employer who had the same person investigating a particular disciplinary matter and then sitting on an appeal panel in the same investigation or hearing it as an Employment Tribunal case.

Outside our party, the composition of our present DC (largely composed, as it is, of present and former members of the central committee) makes it seem an inappropriate body to determine a complaint about a CC member.

It would not be good enough to argue that the comrades had relevant experience, were principled, have always acted in good faith etc, for how would they *know* if they were acting subconsciously on what they already "knew"? It becomes even more difficult where one party is known very well by a panel and the other is a complete unknown. We are an interventionist party, which means we must have a relationship with other socialists outside our ranks, and this means we must be seen to be accountable and just in everything we do.

What would happen if a second serious complaint was made about the same, or indeed a different comrade, in our leadership? In these circumstances, our view is that the party should use such opportunities as we have, whether national committee, or annual conference or a special conference (if one was available) to elect a one-off disputes committee, composed of persons extending if need be to our sister organisations who have not been on the central committee and have not had a close working relationship with the person who is the focus of the complaint.

There are plenty of comrades with experience of dispute resolution, rank and file disputes processes, and other relevant situations who would be barely acquainted with either of the comrades concerned. We would need to use this opportunity to show that we can create a fair disputes committee as part of a fair disputes process.

8. Questions

We were right to criticise George Gallo-way for his remarks comparing accusations of rape to complaints of "bad sexual etiquette". Unless we are very careful the

questions a witness is asked during a sexual complaint can themselves reflect damaging views about the nature of rape. Equally asking the wrong questions could potentially do our party, and those who ask those questions, and indeed the people of whom they are asked, very substantial harm.

A comrade investigating a complaint needs to have at the front of their mind the question: does the complaint indicate that a comrade has behaved inappropriately for a member of our party? Beneath that, they can usefully be asking themselves: did the complainant consent to sex, and was that consent freely given? The emphasis should be on the conduct of the comrade complained about.

A complainant of sexual misconduct should not be asked about her drinking habits. It may be relevant to ask whether she had consumed alcohol at the time in question, whether the comrade encouraged her to drink, as questions like these would have a bearing on whether his behaviour was appropriate, and whether any belief he claims to have had in her consent was reasonable.

Consider if during an investigation, comrades asked a witness, "Is it fair to say that you like to have a drink?" This question would reflect damaging ideas about rape, that certain behaviour by women mean that the woman "asked for it" and should not be surprised if she has sex without consent.

Consider if the comrades asked a witness, "Are you someone who likes to have a party?" This question would be even worse: any answer to the question could add nothing to the investigation. Merely asking it would reflect a stereotypical and hostile attitude towards a person supporting a serious complaint.

Anyone who has asked questions in court of people bringing a complaint of sexual harassment or rape knows how very difficult it is to get right. It is entirely normal for advocates preparing such questions to spend six or seven hours preparing them for every hour they spend actually asking them.

Comrades who are going to ask questions should be given a strong steer by the party as to where we collectively think it is appropriate to draw the line. A useful starting point would be something in the rules of the DC to make it clear that the party expects any questioning to be consistent with our general politics of socialism and women's liberation.

Alexandra (Central London)
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Mikhil (Manchester)
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THE FUTURE? ASSESSING THE ISG MODEL OF ORGANISATION

The form a revolutionary socialist party should adopt is one of the major issues at the heart of debates across Europe and is also reflected in the current factional arguments within the SWP.

In this contribution to the SWP discussions we seek to emphasise the necessity of a Leninist revolutionary party in any left formation. The whole point of the Leninist model of the Party is to contribute to working-class self-emancipation by uniting the most advanced sections of the class in order to challenge and overcome unevenness within the working class. It starts from the centrality of the working-class.

Two alternative approaches emerged in these discussions at Conference in January which were contrasted to that of the current model of democratic centralism operated in the SWP and have been features of left organisations in Britain in recent years. The first is one in which factional organisation becomes permanent as a replacement for the banning of factions (outside of the conference period) and the second one is one in which a looser federal organisation replaces the nationally elected structures of the SWP. In what follows we wish to examine the problems of factionalism and federalism in general and specifically as operated in the NPA in France, Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) and the International Socialist Group (ISG) in Scotland.

Factionalism and federalism within left organisations is formally presented as aspects of their democratic nature. Democracy is promoted by the allowance of a range of differing political views institutionalised into factions while representation was de-centralised to ensure a variety voices would always be heard.

In reality, the bureaucratic superstructure of the organisation, held tightly by the dominant faction (the International Socialist Movement in the case of the SSP or the LCR in the NPA in France as identified in the recent ISJ article), acts to ensure democracy is undermined by the promotion of sectarianism over activity.

As Duncan B highlights elsewhere all decisions become viewed from the prism of factional advantage which acts to stifle the party acting in a unified way over key issues. Similarly, federalism becomes a means to develop local fiefdoms rather than a national party. It was indeed the desire of some of the SSP's MSPs to have a higher profile than Tommy Sheridan that led them to the disgraceful position of going to the police to provide evidence against him.

In the case of calls for a looser coalition of activists around a set of socialist ideas,

a 'group', replaces a 'party'. Parties are no longer relevant in a society where, according to the pessimism of reformist ideas, and backed up by selective support from social attitude surveys, collective identity has been undermined.

Not surprisingly, that view of the working-class as weak and fragmented also results in a profoundly pessimistic attitude towards the potential for working-class struggle.

It is reflected in the radical left's opposition to the call for a General Strike; support for Len McCluskey in the current UNITE elections against a rank and file candidate and dismissive attitudes to the possibilities of trade union action. Simultaneously accommodation to the Trade Union bureaucracy leads others to see no contradiction in taking paid full time trade union officer positions, trade union executive and STUC youth committee places, and abstention from strikers who are critical of the trade union bureaucracy, namely in the sparks and Remploy strikes.

In these and other respects looser groups represent many of the aspects of reformist and autonomist ideas, in which democratic decision making is shunned and replaced by elite decision making for the group.

Looser organisations will result in the radical left becoming a bridge away from revolutionary ideas towards a new reformism rather than a bridge away from reformism towards revolution.

In summary models of factionalism and federalism do not represent an advance on the approach of the SWP as they will undermine the ability of the organisation to act in a united and national organisation in which the party is able to 'punch above its weight'.

They represent an accommodation to the ideas of reformism within the development of left formations. While revolutionaries participation within left formations is a tactical question (in 2000 the SWP in Scotland joined the SSP) the building of a revolutionary leninist organisation is a principle.

Part of the means by which a revolutionary party is built is through its papers and publications. While the Internet has become much more central to people's lives, as have social networking sites, the paper is a way of organising the Party, which is why Lenin described the Bolshevik paper *Iskra* as the scaffolding. It's also true that without that scaffolding of both paper and weekly meetings, there is no routine, people drift in and out and never really develop as a collective.

To give just one example the coverage of the Remploy strike in *Socialist Worker* allowed us to relate much more effectively to the workers involved. Selling papers gives revolutionaries a direct relationship with the person that matters – the reader.

In conclusion we have to suggest that the evidence from Scotland does not suggest alternative methods of decision making, organisation and action have demonstrated

their superiority to the democratic centralist approach of the SWP.

Instead they have suffered from additional problems in which factionalism and federalism have accommodated to sectarianism, autonomism and reformism. We have to return to the central issue that the biggest problem facing the revolutionary left in Britain today is not the organisational form developed by the SWP but the continuing link between reformism and pessimism which undermines the confidence of the self-activity of the working class.

Other left formations have failed to overcome the problems socialists face in British society where attacks on the working class are permitted to continue due to the lethargy of a trade union leadership who refuse to use the power of an organised working class to bring down a weak and vicious Tory government. There continues to be no short-cuts to revolutionary transformation of society.

Kate (South East London)

DEMOCRACY, THE KEY TO PARTY DISCIPLINE: THE OXFORD EXPERIENCE

For the SWP, as a democratic centralist party, to function properly, it needs two things: a healthy democracy, in which the membership debates issues and a sense of collective discipline. In the current dispute, the Central Committee has demanded collective discipline be maintained, and has focused on this issue in its resolution to conference.

In the abstract they are correct. We cannot function effectively if we are all working against one another. But the key to achieving this is not for the CC to issue *diktats*.

The key to discipline is for all comrades, or, more practically, for the overwhelming majority of comrades, to feel that party decisions have been correctly arrived at, whether they agree with them or not, and to feel that they have ownership of the decisions. And the key to this is for democracy to function well in the branches and for this to be reflected in the various bodies of the party – party council, conference, NC, CC or wherever.

The experience of Oxford branch bears this out. Here, broad differences of opinion in the post-conference debates have been bridged by allowing a full debate of these and votes on the options. This enabled us to continue working together on issues that united us.

Following the annual conference, two

things stood out within the branch. Firstly, there was unanimous acceptance of the party's general perspectives. This was borne out at the report-back meeting, and a number of practical decisions were taken as to how these could be implemented by the branch.

But comrades also held a variety of opinions on the Disputes Committee report, so a separate debate on this issue was held, after which a motion calling for a recall conference was overwhelmingly defeated.

A different motion on this subject was later submitted by another comrade and debated at a branch meeting. For this, a vote was first taken as to whether debate the motion. The vote was for a debate, which then took place. The motion was defeated, but the same meeting also voted for the setting-up of a commission looking into Disputes Committee procedures.

In other words, at every point, democracy was allowed to prevail, resulting in a clear position which was backed by the branch as a whole. We also all agreed, whatever position we held, that none of this was to appear on the internet in any form, and this has been adhered to.

In the weeks when these two debates took place, normal party activity carried on. Indeed, it could be argued that normal party activity carried on *because* these debates, with clear votes at the end, took place.

Strong opinions were held on all sides. But, because the debate was carried on in a fraternal manner, because all comrades, without exception, felt that their views were heard and, because votes were taken, everyone now knows the overall position of the branch. Whether we agree with the position of the branch or not, we can all move on. The debate has not poisoned our everyday work.

In these weeks, we took a leading role in organising a picket of the Oxford Union when Nick Griffin was invited to address it (and insisted he would turn up when the invitation was withdrawn). Our student comrades played a key role in organising the Oxford Radical Forum – a weekend of debates, in which, amongst others, Alex C took part – and, perhaps most importantly, our comrades are central to organising a regional Unite the Resistance conference, building on and, in some cases, re-establishing our links with trade union militants in Oxfordshire.

And, in these few weeks, we have recruited a construction worker. The debates did not frighten him off. He believes that he's joined an organisation whose members debate strongly-held opinions on the basis of mutual respect and come to democratic decisions. Let's hope he's not wrong.

The experience of Oxford over the last few weeks, since the annual conference, is a model of how the party should work. When all comrades are committed to debate and to the decisions taken, this creates the basis for establishing discipline. It creates a

sense of solidarity that enables us to move forward, even when differences of opinion are sharp. Lectures on discipline do nothing except create resentment and disunity. Debate, on the other hand, when handled properly, can create unity, and is the basis on which we can move forward.

John (Thames Valley and IDOOP)

OUR RECORD ON WOMEN'S OPPRESSION

The IDOOP faction has accused the leadership & the party of treating feminists as enemies. This does not match my experience.

We have an excellent tradition of working with feminists and others against women's oppression. Of course we argue our distinct politics with them. Below is a short account of how we have been working in a local campaign to defend abortion rights.

Last November we held a very successful counter demonstration against an anti-abortionist Vigil, which focused on the BPAS clinic in Stratford East London. For brevity I'll not give an account of the event but it was loud & lively with a wide variety of people. I do want to talk about how we built it and what has followed. I feel it is relevant to the on-going discussion about the SWP and how we work with feminists

Early in the year a local group mainly organised by the Christian People's Alliance had demonstrated against the (British Pregnancy Advisory Service) BPAS clinic and were trying to get it closed down. We didn't find out until after the event. The local paper had an article about it so I wrote a letter putting the case for abortion rights and the BPAS clinic. The letter was published with a photo of the anti-abortionists. It was very useful when we set up a 'Pro-Choice' stall the following Saturday. In an hour we had 114 names on a Statement of Support for the BPAS clinic. Most people also gave contact details to keep in touch. The stall was mainly run by SWP members (women & men) but we also had a couple of non-SWP women contacts

I also attended several AR events in central London, which attracted a range of people including many feminists. At one event, when I was selling SW, a woman launched into an attack on our position on Assange. Despite our sharp disagreements there was no hesitation on her part in coming and bringing people to our BPAS demonstration. She then wrote a positive report of the demonstration for national (Abortion Rights) AR group. She is currently working with others to set up an East London AR group and 2 of our comrades in

TH went to the initial meeting to support the initiative.

I am now also in contact with a Feminist Fightback group that has been defending the Marie Stopes Essex Centre. They got in touch with me after they had seen the press release of our demonstration at Stratford BPAS Clinic. I'm going to their next meeting and we can discuss possible future activity.

There is nothing very dramatic here but like lots of our other day to day political activities it shows how we connect with other people to make campaigns stronger. It is often easier to engage in meaningful discussions of politics and ideas when involved in joint activity.

Pam (East London)

CLASS STRUGGLE, ADAPTATION AND THE HOLLOWING OUT OF A REVOLUTIONARY PARTY

The SWP is locked in furious debate. Divisions have become deeply entrenched within the party to the point where the future of the SWP as a democratic centralist, revolutionary party is at stake. The roots of this crisis cannot simply be located in the recent and difficult disagreement over the disputes committee.

We either face the issues openly in order to clarify what is at stake, or allow them to eat away at the party, to emerge in ever more divisive form. We have a responsibility to articulate the divisions in the organisation politically and to examine the process by which they arose. The sound and fury over the disputes committee, however important in certain specific respects, is ultimately shadow boxing. The real issues are first, what is the *political* character of the split and how is the split rooted in the development of the party? Second, what type of party are we trying to build?

We cannot repeat the mistake of the Respect debacle of 2008/9. Four members of the CC left the party as a consequence of political adaptation arising from leading the mass anti-capitalist and anti-war movements. As the momentum of these movements ebbed these leading comrades flipped between sectarianism, substitutionism and opportunism in rapid order. The core tension of a united front strategy – that of fighting both 'with and against' opposing political traditions – crumbled.

Our response to the CC split was dominated by questions of party democracy, structure and the imputed flaws of individuals. Attention turned to the democracy commission discussions, which however

significant, failed to address the real problem. The pressures and dynamics of struggle that led to political adaptation on the CC were inevitably going to affect the base of the party in some form. We neglected to examine the warning signs.

The real underlying divisions are currently distorted through the prism of factional debate over the disputes committee. However, they are evident in the pre-conference IB discussion over structure and democratic centralism; over how to relate to feminism and our student comrades' reaction against any attempt at central direction by the CC.

Our student comrades have grown accustomed to a practice of 'leadership' in which they (and SWSS) are 'represented' inside the party and on its leading bodies through those CC members, full-time organisers and NUS executive members they feel hold the party's 'portfolio' for 'their' student interventions.

This is a practice which fails to acknowledge their accountability to the party as a whole, and the right of the party's elected leadership to direct their work. This cuts against our whole tradition. It inevitably opens the door to adaptation and has led to a breakdown of democratic centralism in relation to our student work, to political disorientation on the campuses (particularly after the fees defeat) and a failure to sufficiently cadreise our student comrades.

Members of the faction protest they are not departing from the principles of democratic centralism, Leninism or the politics of the SWP. Yet the faction pursues the disputes committee issue despite months of pre-conference discussion, debate, conference votes and a decisive NC. Not once have they attempted a political analysis of why the party should be split so deeply. It is presented as wilful disregard by a distant, autocratic leadership.

Yet, if leading, trusted comrades with a long, principled record as revolutionaries have compromised on such a vital question as women's oppression, where is the political explanation for such a departure from our politics? Indeed, where is the political explanation of how the party as a whole, and many leading women cadre, have compromised on a question so central as 'the tribune of the oppressed'? Is there something specific regarding our relationship to class struggle over a particular period that has led to such degeneration?

Or was there always a fatal weakness in our politics regarding oppression as so many of our political opponents on the left assert? On these questions the faction remains silent. Instead we are told the SWP is now an organisation in which friendship networks prevail over revolutionary principle! We must look elsewhere for an explanation.

It is in the nature of a revolutionary party, if it is not a sect, to fight 'with and against' those who, at any specific moment in time, adhere to traditions that are ulti-

mately opposed to revolution and Marxism. Principally, these are the reformist and centrist political parties, social movements and the trade union bureaucracy.

It is precisely the fact that these are completely opposing traditions that makes fighting 'with and against' them the greatest challenge a revolutionary party will face this side of the insurrection. Avoiding sectarianism on one hand and substitutionism and opportunism on the other requires continual, concrete re-assessment. Regardless of formally 'correct' theoretical positions, to simply focus on what to fight 'against' is to isolate oneself to a sectarian wilderness. However, to adapt *politically* in the name of unity and to blur fundamental differences is to hollow out the revolutionary party from within.

After Seattle, we avoided the sectarian response of our then sister organisation in the US, whose positions and criticisms are now favoured by the faction's bloggers. Yet in avoiding one danger we became prone to another.

Class struggle and the party

This side of the socialist revolution the revolutionary party constitutes 'a permanent minority'. This is a political fact that is easier to affirm than to endure, year after year, decade after decade through the rise and fall of the class struggle.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s the concept of a Leninist party and democratic centralism was won in the context of fierce debate over the industrial 'downturn'; the decline of rank and file organisation; the bureaucratisation of the shop steward movement; separate/autonomous organisation; the rise and fall of Bennism and arguments over our anti-fascist work. We developed a high level of politics and 'cadreisation', often in the face of unremitting hostility from the left.

Reference to 'the downturn' is too often shorthand implying passivity and an exclusive focus on theory. Nothing could be further from the truth. It was not lack of struggle that marked the 1980s but defeat. Even in the years with the lowest level of struggle, the number of strike days exceeded any since. Yet time and again defeat was snatched from the jaws of victory by the trade union bureaucracy.

We saw the urban riots, mass marches over unemployment, the great CND mobilisations over Cruise and sharp arguments with radical feminists around Greenham Common. On the international stage we faced the 1982 Falklands War, Solidarnosc, the invasion of Lebanon, the first intifada, the Iran-Iraq war and black workers' revolts against apartheid. Finally, the collapse of the Soviet bloc, put the theory of state capitalism into the spotlight, both distinguishing us from the rest of the left and enabling us to defend the revolutionary Marxist tradition while commentators declared 'the end of history'.

The reason for outlining the features of class struggle in the 'downturn' is not in order to invoke a superior wisdom. The point is this period was characterised by a sharp ideological fight to defend the Leninist and Bolshevik tradition from explicit, sustained and often highly articulate ideological challenge from every quarter of the left: from the movements, the Eurocommunists and an organised Labour left. We had to contend with significant Communist Party influence in the unions, CND and the anti-Apartheid movement.

We certainly did not get everything right but we succeeded in sharpening our theoretical understanding in the context of sharp ideological conflict on the left while building a party capable of serious intervention. We forged unity in struggle without giving ground (or keeping silent) on positions of principle.

Adaptation, opportunism and the faction

The 1980s came to an end with the great Poll Tax Riot and the fall of Thatcher. We entered a new period culminating in Seattle and the birth of the anti-capitalist movement. This was an exhilarating moment. Both Seattle and Genoa brought together the potential power of working class organisation and the enthusiasm, spontaneity and openness of the new movements. The world economic crisis further opens up possibilities for revolutionaries. The potential for wide scale class resistance is tangible and the Arab revolutions continue to act as a beacon of future possibility.

This is clearly not a 'downturn'. We are not in a period of defeats and retreat. However, the low level of industrial struggle and the failure of workers to make a decisive breakthrough, have political consequences for the left and us.

The anti-capitalist and anti-war movements have declined from their previous peak. The sell-out of the pensions struggle and the defeat over tuition fees in particular mean we cannot operate simply in the same way as before. This situation strengthens those who look to alternatives to class and revolution. Even before recent setbacks there were pressures to adapt. While the years since Seattle have been marked by some sharp ideological argument and debates over Marxism, we have not had to defend our tradition from constant and open ideological attack in quite the same way as we were once forced to do.

This is a damn good thing. It is a reflection of the fact that new layers of workers and youth have been radicalised and moved into struggle. However, it carries with it a potential for confusion and division. In many ways we have been able to agree to disagree on fundamental political questions with large sections of the left, while continuing to fight side by side for immediate, common aims.

However the danger is that 'agreeing to disagree' becomes an end in itself; we avoid challenging our allies in order to preserve 'unity'. Rather than seeking to break individuals from opposing traditions, we adapt, blur vital differences, import their assumptions into the party and avoid political confrontation.

As an interventionist revolutionary party our tradition is tested in struggle. Inevitably, we come under pressure to adapt politically to currents on the left. This was evident in the CC split of 2008/9 but these pressures exist across the whole party.

They are prevalent in academia, in the social movements, for comrades holding trade union positions. Many of us have been marked by the 'long haul' and an understandable desire to break out of 'the permanent minority'. This is compounded by passivity and a tendency for some prominent members to see intellectual theorising in our publications as their sole role in the organisation.

The pressures have been acute amongst student comrades, especially since the defeat over fees. For many of our students the SWP has been 'the only show in town'; we have been able to recruit very successfully on the basis of activity and intervention.

This is as it should be - on condition we systematically confront the assumptions carried in from other political traditions. This we have clearly failed to do. Many comrades have adapted and collapsed in the face of hostile attack from parts of the left, and many comrades now openly rile at democratic centralism *in practice*. The faction demands, quite mistakenly, that to preserve unity we must avoid confronting political adaptation within the party and adapt to those on our right outside.

The criticisms advanced by the faction amount to little more than individualism: the 'apparatus' apparently embodies a natural propensity towards authoritarianism while the rest of us are governed by blind obedience. These criticisms are not new. They have long been the 'common sense' of both friend and foe on the left and the staple diet of sectarians. Nor are they new within the party.

What is striking however is that when these criticisms were argued out in the 1970s they were framed within an articulate (but false) analysis of why democratic centralism no longer fitted the tasks facing revolutionaries in the current phase of capitalist development and the class struggle. The faction is a sickly relative of past debates but potentially fatal for all that. Once the fissure of adaptation and opportunism cracks open, what begins as a trickle soon becomes a flood.

Far from imputing political differences that do not exist, the questions at stake are there for any who wish to look. The faction's principal blogger, Richard S, argues at length for an adaptation towards left reformism and centrism in

Greece (for a critique see <http://left-flank.org/2013/01/29/greece-politics-marxist-strategy>); leading members of the faction and many student comrades have taken a completely one-sided position on notions of a 'new feminism', disarming comrades' ability to challenge feminist ideas.

A huge chasm has opened up over democratic centralism. Comrades argue for changes to party structure and party democracy while making major concessions to representative democracy and federalism.

Unelected full-timers, it is argued, should be free to organise independently of party democracy, the CC or conference decisions. Permanent factionalising is justified on the basis that this or that issue is never resolved, despite democratic votes. The faction is permeated by a restless individualism whenever polemic, political argument or party discipline is invoked.

One constant refrain runs through the faction: we must accommodate to comrades who disagree. The reason why democratic centralism has become such a central question is precisely because it brings such pressure to bear on the tendency to adapt.

In their different ways the four members of the CC who split from the party in 2008/9 and the faction are reacting against democracy in the party and for similar reasons. In both cases, comrades, as a direct result of adapting politically, have refused to accept that party democracy should be brought to bear on them. It is not 'democratic centralism' in itself that they object to (initially) but its political consequences. The extremely difficult issues around the disputes committee have now become a surrogate for a process of political adaptation affecting significant sections of our organisation.

The faction say they hold different views on a range of questions. Precisely. Failing to challenge those with whom they disagree is a unifying factor that holds them together. To raise fundamental political questions would split the faction apart. Unfortunately, it is those to whom we adapt whose political compass will determine our direction of travel. Therefore, the political logic of the faction dictates an inexorable path to compromise, splits or both. Opportunism reigns supreme.

The views of Owen Jones and Laurie Penny are invoked as the test of internal party democracy, despite their hostility to any notion of the Leninist party.

Meanwhile members of the faction committee can use their factional blogs to pour abuse and contempt on comrades who have played a key role in building the party. Not one serious perspective document has been presented by the faction; they are left only with ritual genuflections to Lenin, Democratic Centralism and the Revolutionary Party.

This process of adaptation has reached into the heart of the party. The party's Leninist traditions are being hollowed out from

within. Whole sections of the organisation have adapted to the political 'common sense' of the movements we have fought within and alongside. We have developed a deep resistance to challenging our own comrades politically.

No factional debate exists in a vacuum, isolated from struggle. The faction pretends that this is purely a debate concerning party democracy and structures. To claim the mantle of 'defending the party' is no substitute for articulating a political perspective on the split. The party is not an end in itself. Its only purpose is to defend the interests of our class. The question therefore is what type of party do we wish to defend?

At stake is the continued development of a revolutionary, Leninist, democratic centralist organisation capable of meeting the challenges presented by a capitalist system in crisis, whether it be the threat of reaction or seizing the opportunity for revolutionary change. The alternative is to join the long list of revolutionary organisations that adapted their politics and collapsed from view. This is the choice facing every comrade in the party and every single delegate to party conference.

Rob (East London)

THE CASE OF COMRADE X

I've been following the debate about the handling of the rape allegation against X with growing unease. I'm not convinced by either side and I am saddened that comrades have resorted to abusive polemics, innuendo and misinformation, that will serve only to hasten a serious split and set back the radical left for possibly generations.

The fact is that the comrades on the CC are not macho Stalinist manipulators, who covered up a rape, and their critics are not part of some undemocratic conspiracy to destroy the SWP.

On that, I think, the evidence is clear. Everything else is rumour, conjecture and speculation, that has no place in a comradely debate. If there is substantial evidence to the contrary then it should be brought to the attention of all party members and examined in the cold light of day.

But the case still raises a number of important issues and questions for the party. Firstly, should the SWP ever investigate serious allegations, such as rape?

No other membership organisation, whether a union or political party or NGO, would attempt to investigate an allegation that one of its members had raped another member. There are no provisions for investigating serious crimes in Labour Party rule book, the Unite union rule book or the Friends of the Earth constitution because it is unthinkable.

There are, however, references to disciplinary action for bringing the organisation into disrepute, working against stated goals, misappropriating funds or discriminatory practices. These are the kinds of issues membership organisation have the competence and resources to investigate, although they may involve the relevant authorities where and when appropriate.

Of course a critic might say the SWP, unlike all of the above, seeks to overthrow the bourgeois state. True enough - but the party cannot act as if it has or is in the midst of being overthrown, as if workers councils contested or controlled the British economy and workers militia patrolled the streets of London and Newcastle at night.

The reality is the Disputes Committee (DC) does not have the means to carry out criminal investigations into serious crimes, such as rape, child abuse and murder. The DC cannot, for instance, search for evidence, carry out DNA tests, check criminal records, view CCTV camera footage, make public appeals for information or compel and question witnesses. The list is endless.

The counter argument is that the DC had no choice but to investigate the allegation because W, the woman who accused X of rape, did not want to go to the police. This is difficult point to address because the details of the case are rightly confidential.

Still there are certain general remarks that can be made. Many women mistrust the police as they have consistently failed to take sexual crimes against women seriously and the conviction rate for rape remains incredibly low. But that is not an argument for setting up an inadequate shadow criminal justice system, it is an argument for fighting for justice within the existing one, until a revolutionary upheaval establishes a workers state or contests bourgeois state power.

That is why the SWP has supported the struggles of countless victims of injustice through the courts as well as on the streets and in the labour movement. To name but a few: blacklisted construction workers, Stephen Lawrence and Birmingham Six. It is also why the party says Julian Assange should face justice in Sweden providing the Swedish government guarantees that it will not extradite him to America.

In future the DC should explain to comrades complaining of serious crimes that, like any other party or organisation, it cannot investigate these types of allegations because it cannot come to a meaningful verdict.

A commission should be set up at the forthcoming conference to examine the details of such an approach, which could include referring victims to relevant women's agencies and charities.

This is far from an ideal solution but the alternative is worse; a meaningless investigation that satisfies no-one and comes to a meaningless conclusion, that divides and damages the SWP.

It is important to note that this approach would not stop the party investigating

misconduct, as the Liberal Democrats are currently doing in regard to its former chief executive, Lord Rennard (who denies any wrong doing).

The other main issue raised by the case is democracy inside the party. Specifically should internal debate be limited to the pre-conference period?

I do not have strong views either way but I think the party should examine it with open minds rather than knee-jerk defensiveness. The model we have now has in many ways served us well (the struggle against British fascism, anti-war movement etc) but neither has proved itself to be decisive, just look at our flat lining membership figures or our inability to challenge union leaders over austerity. So this issue should be approached with a little bit of humility not bombast. Defenders of the status quo need to reflect on these questions:

1. Is it realistic in the internet age?
2. Is it possible to enforce such limits without arbitrary disciplinary action?
3. Is it even desirable?
4. How could the internet improve our democracy?

The party's attitude to online debate appears inconsistent. Discussion about the state of the party and its current perspectives in pubs, cafes, restaurants or wherever is permitted whereas discussions about the same things online in various forums is frowned upon. This does not make much sense and risks the party falling out of step with young people, who are used to expressing themselves online.

Also, I think we must accept that the dividing line between fractionising (or organising for change) and just discussing perspectives outside the conference period is very hard to draw. When does a discussion about a mistaken or faulty CC perspective and the need to change it become fractionising?

Moreover, isn't it better to raise these differences than to keep quiet? In order for the party to distil and apply all the experiences and insights of comrades, it needs to have open communication channels. Why should comrades feel reticent about challenging a decision made at conference if they feel it is jarring with their own experience?

The counter argument is that any move away from such limits on discussion will paralyse the party preventing it from uniting and intervening effectively in the class struggle. But this can easily be turned on its head: preventing open and free flowing debate weakens the party's ability to intervene and can allow faulty perspectives to go unchallenged for up to a year.

United fronts such as Stop the War Coalition, Unite Against Fascism and the Right to Work campaign do not have such limits on debate and yet they manage to intervene effectively all the time.

Instead of seeing the web as a threat, as some in the party do, can we not use it to expand and deepen our party democracy? Why not consider having a secure site where

comrades can discuss perspectives and pool their experiences all year round? Why not have online votes of party members on contentious issues? This would allow comrades, who cannot normally take part in SWP's decision making processes because they have kids or disabilities or caring responsibilities, to contribute.

These observations and thoughts on party democracy are only sketched out - they are far from finished proposals. None the less I think it would be prudent to establish another democracy commission, as well as a disciplinary commission, to examine these and other ideas for improving party democracy.

I would end on a plea for the CC, which appears to have majority support, to resist the urge to smash the opposition. Instead the CC should engage with their concerns and seek a compromise. It would also be a good time to consider again allowing individual CC elections, to allow for minority representation.

The alternative is a much smaller, weaker party. This is the last thing we need as the government tears up what remains of the welfare state and goes on the offensive against the unions.

Tom (North London)

NO ATTEMPTS TO "UNDERMINE THE COMPLAINANT"

As comrades in Z district we object to the insinuation in point (e) of the faction's statement where they call for zero tolerance of attempts to "undermine the complainants". This assumes that there have been attempts to undermine the complainant. We would like to correct some of the lies and distortions that were told about our district at conference in January, and subsequently repeated in the Independent on Sunday and the Daily Mail.

We reject the description of Z District that was given by one conference observer. As no-one else from our district was called in that debate we were unable to respond to these claims at the time. In refuting these claims we are not merely trying to score political points. We believe that a lot of the mistrust around this Disputes Committee report has been fuelled by distortions. It is completely untrue that comrades in W's district have ostracised or victimised W. Comrades in her district have quite rightly sought to avoid discussions of the case with W.

We believe this is because they cannot see how such discussions could be anything other than very upsetting for her. No one in her district has ever had a bad word to say either about or to W, and nor should they.

We do not believe that the overwhelming support by the delegates of Z district at Conference for the decision taken by the Disputes Committee implies any ill feeling towards W.

Seven comrades from Z district committee – names not listed to protect confidentiality

WINNING COMRADES TO DEMOCRATIC CENTRALISM

Last week's thoughts

When we discuss democratic centralism there is one group in society that fails to get a mention – our ruling class. They may be a 'band of warring brothers' most of the time, but when their interests are threatened, then we see just what being centralised means! Just think of how they operated during the 1984 Miners Strike. When they are threatened they dispense with democracy very quickly!

But in the case of the revolutionary party democracy it is at the heart of how we must operate. If we don't act collectively and in a centrally organised way, how can we expect the 'working class', with all its disparate elements, to do so? But if we don't act democratically, how do we feed what we see happening inside the class back to our elected leadership, so they are better able to understand what is going on in the class?

I've been a member since the early 1960s and for me Marxism was a long learning process. One thing though was easy, all this talk about the 'working class' – I learnt what it meant at Tuesday evening meetings of Tottenham Young Socialists – in the Labour Party! When Tony Cliff and other leaders of the International Socialists came to speak they set the meetings alight for me, I instinctively felt myself to be part of it as I stood, with all these new ideas spinning around inside my head, in front of my lathe on a Wednesday morning, I was part of the working class.

Of course much of what they said went over my head at the time, but one thing I did get was, who and what 'we' were. 'We' were the working class: we did the work, we made the profits for the bosses – they could have all the machinery they liked, but without us there were no profits. We learnt that we would have to act together if we wanted our share of those profits. It was obvious there was no other way. Really we wanted the whole cake! You could be part of a confident working class based on the longest Capitalist boom in history.

At the time, every school-leaver was able to find a job (there were lists of vacancies in the Tottenham Herald every week).

Things have changed. Today the market is all and privatisation rules. In truth, we saw this coming. After the great struggles of the 1970s, Thatcher and the Tories set about to taking our social structures apart, Cliff analysed the period as one of a 'downturn in class struggle'.

In truth the situation was much worse than that, it was class war – but our side – the Working Class – did not know it! The scale of the sell-out by our union leaders has yet to be fully told, but maybe one day we will be able to hold some of those ex-trade union leaders sitting in the House of Lords to account.

Why should young people have any confidence in their future? And why should those joining the SWP today accept our structures without question? For instance, I respect the judgement of the various members of the Disputes Committee, I've known some of them for years, but why should new recruits? The fact that younger members don't automatically accept the view of the world as prescribed by the SWP should come as no surprise, and what's more they should force us to explain our position.

Their experience of the world around them demands a rejection of capitalist ideas – they rightly think the system is crap – but that doesn't mean they are going to automatically accept our version. Our ideas, and the way we organise, are still correct but have to be fought for.

Although, on the surface it can look a very different world to the one I experienced Capitalism itself has not changed in nearly fifty years since I joined nor has the Marxist analysis of it – as is obvious when we see the 'other side' in crisis measuring their ideas against those of Marx in the Financial Times.

The only thing the ruling class can do to rescue their system is to make us, the working class pay, for paradoxically because we have nothing, apart from waiting for next weeks pay packet, we must pay, for the past 30 years we have been paying – yet they are still in the shit. The problem for us is the 'we' bit: how do we revolutionary socialists convince those with the potential power that they can take on the ruling class? We have to win the battle of ideas to convince our class that they are a 'class'.

Sometimes even the cleverest among us – and there are plenty who believe themselves to be so – make mistakes, and there are plenty of examples of this, but that is why we need to be democratic, in order to learn from these mistakes.

It's not just because we are playing consensus politics; democracy is central to what we do and how we do it. At the same time, we must be clear about the role of the revolutionary party: it is not a microcosm of a future society; it is a fighting organisation trying to grow big enough to take on a vicious ruling class who, if they believe it necessary will stop at nothing.

The Nazi Holocaust in Germany furnishes an extreme example of a ruling

class smashing the working class and don't forget hundreds of thousands of Revolutionaries and worker militants went to the concentration camps before the industrialised mass murder of the Jews. Millions of people around the world are still paying the price for that defeat, not least the Palestinians. It remains the case that the only power we can call on to oppose the ruling class is held by those who do the work and make the profits.

But to do this, we must ask ourselves where many of our new young comrades come from today, particularly when compared with those like me who joined back in the 1960s. Some will have been attracted from the Occupy Movement, others from the student movement. Some, recognising the depth of the economic crisis and the damage to the environment, have started asking some fundamental questions.

They see we have answers – or at least they see that we are asking these questions too and we are up for a fight.

Most, however, will not have come from the sort of organised union background that I had. And they join for a myriad of reasons: some Asian and black youth join because they want to fight society's institutional racism; some young women because of the sexist behaviour they encounter around them, some who are gay because they daily confront homophobia and discrimination.

What unites these various aspects of oppression is the fact of class. It is our power as a class that will give us the cutting edge when it comes to taking on the ruling class in the battles to defeat racism, sexism and homophobia.

However, there is a problem: you feel oppression personally, in your guts, but the experience of class is not quite the same. It is a collective idea – and an abstract one if you do not instinctively feel yourself to be a part of it (as I did at my lathe).

So democratic debate and 'patient argument' within the Party is crucial to win these new comrades, our life-blood, to an understanding of the urgent need for democratic centralism, because, as I heard Tony Cliff say, 'the first working class leader of the London Soviet will need to be a 'gay black woman'.

Alan (North London)

MAKE YOUR OWN MIND UP

I urge you to read this and make your own mind up. First things first:

- I am a signatory to the IDOOP Faction statement, but this contribution to the IB is made in a personal capacity.
- I don't have a blog, don't have the time to read anyone else's blogs on a regular

basis, and whilst I do have a Facebook account, I hardly ever use it.

- I was at this year's Annual Conference where the Disputes Committee Report was debated and then agreed by a narrow majority of 51% to 45%, with 4% abstaining. Most other votes at Conference on contentious issues and motions went more along the lines of 33% in favour, 66% against. Clearly the Disputes Committee Report and the issues arising from and around it were a concern for more comrades.

The Disputes Committee and the sources of the crisis

The SWP is in a crisis that we can resolve without a split, or the loss of large numbers of members. The crisis has not just been whipped up out of thin air by bloggers, or outside opponents and enemies of the party, it has also been caused by the response of the Central Committee to the situation.

The recent Annual Conference narrowly endorsed the Disputes Committee Report on the case, but this Report did not address, never mind resolve the very real concerns, questions and criticisms that comrades had about the procedures and composition of the Disputes Committee.

After seeing how close the vote was, many who think there are important lessons to learn, and changes that need to be made, were optimistic that the Central Committee would take stock, and realise that comrades have genuine concerns that need to be addressed properly. They expected a considered, measured, political response: a recognition that things could and should be done better. But what did we get? A circling of the wagons, and a defensive, 'it's all over and done with', let's just get on with 'the real world', head-in-the-sand denial of reality.

The motion carried at the National Committee sees only one problem that needs addressing: how to ensure confidentiality of Disputes Committee Reports in future. Exactly how this can be done without ruling that in future the Disputes Committee doesn't actually report to Conference, has yet to be suggested.

Some might be happy with this, having suggested that we should just accept whatever report the comrades on the Disputes Committee makes, because we should just trust the integrity of those we elect. This would be a serious mistake. The Disputes Committee must remain accountable directly to Conference, and continue to report to it to enable this accountability. To insist on proper accountability does not necessarily mean anyone is questioning the integrity of the comrades elected to the Disputes Committee.

An open and broad examination of all aspects of the Disputes Committee's work must be undertaken. This is the route out of the current crisis. The results of this must then be reported to the wider party,

at Annual Conference, which will have a proper 3-month period to discuss and debate any findings and proposals. Any Commission set up to review the procedures and structure of the Disputes Committee must allow a broad spectrum of members to make criticisms of, and propose changes to, any aspect of the work of the Disputes Committee. If this Commission is made up of just those who see no problems with the current status quo, other than that of the confidentiality of reports to the party, it will not help to resolve the crisis.

The purpose of the Special Conference

The Special Conference must be a proper democratic debate. It must make meaningful decisions which address the real issues and resolve the underlying causes of the crisis. It must forge unity in the party. To do this, it has to involve members of the IDOOP faction as delegates.

A Conference made up solely of supporters of the CC's statements and motions would be an empty rubber-stamping exercise, and not resolve the crisis. Comrades disagreeing with the Central Committee should not be excluded as some kind of 'enemy within'. What the Central Committee should be focused on is resolving the crisis, not winning a pyrrhic victory.

Anyone who thinks that what the party needs is a rally to show loyalty to the Central Committee, after which everyone should just shut up, is seriously underestimating the scale of the crisis, and has no clue how to resolve it. Democracy and involvement of all sides of opinion in debates is not some luxury or concession to liberalism that can be ditched in times of crisis. Comrades of all shades of opinion must not only be allowed, they should be urged, encouraged and expected to take part. If comrades feel they have been properly involved in the democratic life of the party, but have lost the vote, they are likely to remain an active member rather than become demoralised or resign in disgust at being marginalised and ignored.

The Central Committee motion, combining a whole shopping-list of issues in one 'take-it-or-leave-it', 'all-or-nothing' 'loyalty test' does not allow for a calm and considered debate on very distinct and separate issues that need to be debated and clarified. It would have been far better for the Central Committee to present a report on the situation that Branches and Aggregates could then propose amendments to on different issues, which would then be voted on separately. We need more light to be shed on the issues, not just heated debate.

Democratic centralism and democratic culture

The improvements in the party's democratic

culture and practises made in response to the findings of the Democracy Commission need to be reaffirmed and defended.

Disagreeing with the Central Committee in democratic debate should not be used as grounds for the removal of comrades from party roles. This can only serve to inhibit open democratic debate and decision-making in future.

The core of democratic centralism is full and open debate within the party in order to decide policy, followed by unity of all members in implementing that policy once a decision is made, whichever side of a debate members were on. It is not a requirement of democratic centralism that those who lost the vote must then be excluded from party roles because they voted, or argued, or think the 'wrong' way.

Factions and minorities

I was astounded to hear a Central Committee speaker assert that the majority of members in the party are being dictated to by a minority of members who have formed a faction. The Central Committee has a responsibility to all comrades on this question, and should be careful about the implications of what it is saying.

By definition, a faction is always a minority of the membership, unless and until it succeeds in winning the arguments and votes on an issue, at which it becomes the majority opinion. To slam a faction for allegedly 'trying to dictate to the majority' is to argue by implication against the right of *any* faction to exist. This is not our tradition, as I understand it.

I think the party needs to start to deal more maturely about factions in the party: a faction is not always and necessarily a 'split in the making'. Maybe if we can 'get over' that, we might be able to overcome the 'splitting disease' of the left, and continue to grow after resolving our disagreements in a comradely manner.

The party rules allow for a minority of Branches requesting a Special Conference to be the trigger for calling one. Is this somehow an oversight or mistake by those who drew up the SWP constitution? No. It is there for a reason. Sometimes, comrades, what is at first a minority opinion in the party will become the majority, because they will be right, and will have convinced the party as a whole of that.

Given that this is the case, we have to have mechanisms that allow for a minority to win over the majority. Otherwise all we will ever have is split after split, like some restricted-growth amoeba.

Permanent factions?

Whatever individuals might think about whether the party should have 'permanent' or 'institutionalised' factions, the current faction as a group is not proposing that. Nor is the mere fact that a faction has been organised 'outside of the usual 3-month

pre-Conference period' any evidence to show that is being created is a 'permanent faction'. The party constitution states clearly:

If a group of party members disagrees with a specific party policy, or a decision taken by a leading committee of the party, they may form a faction by producing a joint statement signed by at least 30 members of the party.

And it goes on to say:

Debate continues until the party at a Special or Annual Conference reaches a decision on the disputed question. Permanent or secret factions are not allowed.

There is no mention of 'only within the 3-month pre-Conference period'. That is why it refers to the question of having a Special Conference to resolve the disputed question. To rule that the party can only ever allow a faction to form inside of the 3-month pre-Conference period would be a serious mistake.

Again, did those who wrote this constitution make a mistake? Did they really mean this rule applied for just three months of the year? No. And here's why: the party needs to respond to a serious crisis within it or a dispute over politics in a timely way.

The class struggle can move very fast comrades, and we cannot delay addressing important crises in the party until the next 'pre-Conference period'. History will not be so obliging as to wait while we do. To rule that we all must wait for October until we can address a crisis or major dispute in the party when it occurs inconveniently in one of the other nine months of the year would be the ultimate in bureaucratic idiocy.

Should we let everything fester for months until the next October? No. That is indeed exactly why the Central Committee has now called the Special Conference. But let us be clear, comrades, without the faction existing we would not be having this Special Conference.

Simon (Huddersfield)

ON SECTARIANISM AND DEMOCRACY IN THE PARTY

Comrades,

The recent crisis exposes problems with our internal regime and culture which we need to address. In the course of my contribution I'd like to highlight what I perceive the problems to be with a view that to recognise them is to move a step closer towards remedying them.

Sectarianism

In the Central Committee's official response to the expulsion of the Facebook Four, it mentions that "[s]ome were prepared to involve non-members in their discussions". This was another reason - amongst many - to justify their expulsion. The F4 comrades, in debating whether to form a faction, had inadvertently added some non-members to their Facebook discussion. To this I say - so what if they did? Why couldn't a non-member contribute something useful to the debate?

Political wisdom doesn't begin and end with the party and if comrades outside the organisation have something to say, let them say it. We can take or leave it, but there is no harm in listening.

Some may think I'm mad for thinking we might have anything to learn, say, from the Alliance for Workers' Liberty or other groups deemed 'hostile to us'. I disagree. I think if we want to be a serious and attractive force on the left, to build the struggle and the party; we need the SWP to be the least sectarian place on the left. At present, we're at pains to even acknowledge that other groups even exist!

We have a situation where the party insists discussion be held exclusively within its own ranks and encourages members to be distrustful of outsiders. But there is nothing to be afraid of. We can learn from the movement and even the wider left, but not if we accept this idea that everybody outside the party is out to get us. The sectarian malaise which afflicts the far-left has led to cultish practices which, as far as I can see, affect all organisations including our own.

What are the practical consequences of this sectarianism and why should we fight it? For one, it elicits a collective facepalm from those we want to win to our politics. It's alienating and frustrating. It's also a hindrance to building the kind of resistance we need. Consider the absence of a single national anti-cuts organisation, but instead a plethora of smaller initiatives.

Achieving the former would be a massive step forward for all those at the sharp end of austerity. But where are the unity talks? It seems to me that sectarian division and personal feuds amongst various leaders is preventing the unity we need. Now, we can't just wish away sectarianism, but we can make efforts to improve our own practice. The situation demands it.

Inadequate CC response

Another problem, something which has served to exacerbate the current crisis, is the wholly inadequate and predominantly mute response of the CC to fast unfolding events.

Comrades will recall the leaking of a transcript of the Disputes Committee meeting from conference to the Socialist Unity website. Comrades might also recall Tom W's (SWP journalist) resignation letter published in the Weekly Worker;

Laurie Penny's piece; Owen Jones'; the countless letters to the CC from worried members and groups of members; the serious questions raised about the conduct of the DC and the treatment of comrade W; the critical SWSS statements; the Serbian split from our international tendency; the various hostile coverage in the mainstream media; and so on.

Where was the CC response? Sadly, it was nowhere to be seen. These were very serious developments which were met with silence (bar one article from Alex Callinicos in Socialist Review and some light commentary in party notes). In not responding comprehensively to all this, the CC exposes itself to be out of touch, even arrogant. To say "we drew a line under all this at conference" is to ignore reality.

Let comrades 'walk and talk'

The CC and numerous supporters have generally been arguing that tackling the crisis at the upcoming March conference is inward-looking; a distraction from the real world and the class struggle.

At a recent National Committee Report Back meeting in Newcastle, Charlie K stressed the danger of this. "In Lewisham", he stated, "...comrades discussed the crisis for 2 hours and their intervention in the Save Lewisham Hospital campaign for 2 minutes at their branch meeting" (paraphrase). Events are passing us by, and so lay members shouldn't waste time with internal matters, even during a period of crisis.

Leaving aside the point that the demonstration in Lewisham was still massive and brilliant in spite of how little time our Lewisham comrades dedicated to discussing their intervention, in Middlesbrough we have had the critical discussions about the internal crisis *and* carried out normal party work. Things are slow in Middlesbrough, admittedly, but I still feel a well-rounded comrade has to be concerned with both internal and external affairs.

I put it to comrades that we are quite capable of walking and talking at the same time. We *can* consider internal matters *and* conduct normal party work. If we are to hold the CC to account and develop our internal regime, it's imperative that we do both.

CC and the membership

In considering recent events I've come to the conclusion that the CC has too much power. Two examples serve to show this:

1) The expulsion of the F4 dissidents. Only a CC so sure of its entrenched position and power would think that it could get away with such an outrageous move.

Any organisation with a robust democratic regime and culture would not permit its leadership to carry out such an act. It should be unthinkable. Our party rank-and-file needs to adopt the slogans "We are all

the Facebook Four!” and “An injury to one is an injury to all!” We need those comrades back inside our organisation, pronto.

2) Despite screaming calls for the CC to step forward and seriously respond to the crisis and the criticism, the CC refused.

They remained entrenched inside their bunker, ignoring the membership and leaving us to pick up the pieces. Isn't the leadership of a democratic organisation supposed to respond to its membership?

What does this lack of response say about the balance of power within our organisation? I think it shows that the CC has too much power and that we need to redress that balance in favour of ordinary members and harbouring a healthy democracy.

Some proposals

There are a number of things we could do to improve the standing of the membership inside our organisation at the expense of the CC. I don't claim to have a fully worked out solution, but at least I'm identifying the problem. We need more discussion; more than what is possible within one Internal Bulletin. Here are few proposals to consider in the meantime:

- Abolish the slate-system and elect the CC on individual merit
- Air differences on the CC openly.
- Regional elections for regional full-time party workers
- More IBs of shorter length, with less CC input.
- Greatly reduce the powers of the CC to expel comrades
- Make space within Socialist Worker and Party Notes for minority opinion within the party.

Some who disagree with my analysis might think I have some sort of vendetta against the CC, but they would be mistaken. I hold CC comrades in high regard; many of them inspire me personally. My gripe is not with the CC as individuals, but with their current untouchable position within the party. I think this is corrosive to our democracy and fueling the crisis.

Damon (Tyneside)

UNITE TO FIGHT OUR CLASS ENEMIES

As a comrade from a Branch where there are no major disagreements the current ongoing public debate within the Party is both frustrating and annoying. At a time when our class is being beaten up, these naval gazing arguments, undertaken with so much venom, need to stop.

Just to remind everyone of the world outside the Party:

- Out of work benefits are being slashed
- There is a growth of casual/agency work and underemployment
- In unionised workplaces most are trying to hang on to what they have
- Pay rises are on average below inflation and real incomes are falling for many
- Jobs are still being massacred, particularly in the public sector, whilst our union leaders largely dither into doing nothing.
- The very essence of the welfare state is being dismantled at an alarming rate, etc etc etc.

Just one small amusing example of what is taking place is that for the first time in 23 years at work I have had to organise a petition for more toilets! This is a reflection that more workers are being treated like shit (pun intended) being crammed into fewer workplaces where legal minimum standards are being applied rather than what is needed.

But there is no need for despair, because although facing an onslaught our class is not yet beaten. So in this example hundreds have signed a petition and the thought of holding a 'toilet' protest outside the Council House puts a smile on the faces of even the most miserable within my workplace.

Faced with so much shit from the Con-Dems it is incredibly frustrating that our union leaders, and labour movement leaders, have no strategy to stop the onslaught of attacks except to elect a future Labour government that will carry on cutting.

To try and break through these frustrations it is vital for our Party to be pulling together, organising together and fighting together to pack a punch above our actual weight in our movement – in true democratic centralist fashion.

That means stopping throwing seven shades of shit at each other through blogs, facebook or any other means. It means stopping the personalised insults and the spreading of rumours as facts.

Because whatever criticisms comrades have of the CC, it is the continued non-disciplined way some comrades have chosen to publicise internal discussions and their thoughts that have given our enemies so much ammunition to throw shit at our Party, thereby deepening internal discourse.

The fact that internal arguments seem to have degenerated into mud-slinging seems to suggest that there are no major differences with the political perspectives from conference and the CC.

Therefore I urge the CC and the In Defence of Our Party faction to attempt and seek some common ground before the March Conference so that we can all move beyond the internal 'shit' that has ensued.

Because when the demands of the faction are listed they look in part to have already been met. For instance the January Conference agreed to review the Disputes

Committee. X has already stood down from any leading positions. And the CC motion to the March conference announces a series of topics for extensive debate, which will inevitably include discussion on democratic centralism.

And when it comes to the creation of a better culture of debate there needs to be recognition that the use of public electronic forums for internal Party matters is unacceptable. That if anyone is concerned with what another comrade has apparently stated then comrades have an actual respectful face to face discussion, or even a discussion at/after a Branch meeting rather than criticise each other on social media.

And finally there needs to be an acceptance of decisions reached at conference and an understanding that those who continue to leak internal Party discussions or use blogs to discuss internal Party matters are actively undermining Party democracy. Therefore all such activity should cease immediately. Because if such activities continue and internal discussions constantly become public, that in itself will create a climate where frank and open debate within the Party becomes impossible.

Can we all please 'move on' to fight our class enemies.

Tony (Black Country)

EXPECTATIONS OF MEMBERSHIP OF THE SOCIALIST WORKERS PARTY

Membership of the Socialist Workers Party is a voluntary act. In the main, people initially join the SWP in order to be part of an effective organisation that challenges the logic of capitalism – of cuts for the many, profits for the rich, of war, imperialism and discrimination. The SWP however is much more than this. We are a revolutionary organisation that stands against oppression and is designed to help the working class achieve the overthrow of capitalism. It is based on the politics and theories of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky in particular.

Members of the Socialist Workers Party are expected to pay adequate subs, sell Party publications, recruit to the organisation and push our politics. Through meetings, publications, conferences, Marxism, fractions and more the politics and perspectives of the Party continue to be defined. We are clear that we operate using a model of organisation that is based on democratic centralism, the form of which has been debated, changed and decided upon at annual party conferences over the last 4 decades by majority vote. These decisions are binding on all party members.

The Socialist Workers Party exists to intervene in and help organise class struggle and campaigns. Our individual interventions are shaped by the politics of the Party and are accountable to the wider organisation. Selling Socialist Worker and recruiting to the SWP in work, colleges and universities, campaigns, union activities, united front work, to neighbours, friends, family and any other area is not just about abstractly building the SWP. It is also about attempting to win our perspectives, politics and strategy within these arenas and the class. But it also serves to hold our comrades to account to the wider party by associating themselves with the Party.

It is right that comrades' actions are held to account. We expect members in trade union and campaign positions to put the politics and strategy of the Party and vote or call for the action needed. This is because the actions of individual Party members matter. Whatever pressure may be on comrades within trade unions or the movement, their actions can have a wider impact both on the ability of the working class to fight back and on the Party (and thus each individual comrade) as a whole. Those who don't work with this strategy or refuse to do this should be held accountable to others. Inactivity has consequences in these areas. So too does the putting a wrong strategy or ones against the wishes of the Party. Comrades in positions on leading trade union bodies for example have rightly been held accountable to the Party. This has included disciplinary action, including making apologies in Party publications. Where offences or differences cannot be adequately reconciled these comrades have been expelled or left the Party.

This level of accountability must also be applied to the current 'debates'. The actions by a small group of people in the Party in publically attacking us in print, blogs, Facebook or through conversations with those who do not share our tradition should be treated no differently. They have chosen to bring the SWP into disrepute. They have shown disregard, whether deliberate or unintentional, to the rest of the Party members by circumventing the democratic processes within the organisation and publically attacking us. Whereas this disregard may have initially been without knowledge of the wider consequences, these comrades can surely be under no illusions following the attacks levied on the Party, and individual comrades, in the media.

Part of the spur for this is their alleged attempts by 'the Party to protect X'. Their argument has partly been that no individual is more important than the Party. They may believe that they are 'attacking hierarchy', 'corruption', 'attempting to save the Party from the CC/DC/NC/loyalists/splits/ageing/oblivion' etc but in reality they have missed the hierarchy of their own actions and exacerbated the 'crisis' within the organisation. They refuse to see that they are acting effectively as being

'more important than the Party'. Their own actions undermine the Party and every comrade within it.

It is therefore incredibly disappointing that the 'In Defence of our Party' faction readily accept such appallingly unaccountable logic. In doing so it doesn't defend our Party but instead applies a double-standard to accountability. So they assert in point C of their document that, due to concerns regarding the *unproven* actions against X that they should be removed from all posts in the Party and movement.

This effectively punishes a comrade, despite the DC investigation and the decision of Conference against this, for the 'unease' created for others in having an allegation made against them. But then, without seeing the irony involved, the faction asserts in point D that the continuing *actual* actions by 'comrades' on blogs, Facebook etc in criticising the Party shouldn't have any consequences. These double-standards cannot do.

One of the reasons given by some faction members for this lack of logic is that, by 'showing understanding towards this unease' and asserting that breaches of party discipline are 'politically handled and not disciplined/hectored' away, it will 'prevent a split'. Let's be clear, any comrade worth their salt was concerned when an allegation of such seriousness was reported. But we cannot 'politically' deal with such allegations with rumour, gossip or mistrust – precisely the starting point for a minority of comrades (after all the majority of comrades have neither decided to form a faction or engage in attacks on the Party on the internet). Instead this accommodates to and fans the immediate issue surrounding this – a belief that our organisation and the DC/CC/NC/loyalists etc would stand for, or even be prepared to, cover up such an allegation as has been so publically put. Their methods for dealing with this does not win comrades to our concept of democratic centralism. It fails to 'politically' deal with the issues, including breaches of discipline, while encouraging a chronic mistrust of the majority of members. All this does is store up arguments for the next 'big question' to hit us.

Politically dealing with this is to demand that *all* comrades are accountable. We must ensure that comrades use the processes of the Party rather than ad hoc actions which effectively holds the rest of the Party to ransom. Therefore, we must reiterate that membership of the SWP has responsibilities. Amongst other areas (including the faction rational) we should reject points C and D of the 'In Defence of our Party' faction document.

The blog sites/Facebook pages/Twitter/documents that should never have been put in the public domain attacking the SWP and its organs by members of the SWP should be removed or deleted. Where pages etc cannot be removed then the Facebook account/website etc that the Party

members control (such as the ill-defined International Socialists UK website) should be deleted in their entirety. Comrades who refuse to acknowledge that their actions, in maintaining these public attacks, have consequences on the wider Party have no place within the SWP. They should be honest and leave the Party or should be disciplined accordingly. We should reaffirm that it is the right and responsibility of the elected organs of the Party to use the agreed procedures of discipline against comrades who choose, by their actions, to show total disregard for the Party as a whole.

The SWP and our agreed processes must be built on trust. This trust will often be formed through struggle but must also be tested in continued discussions around theory and practice. Above all though, it means that when decisions are agreed *all* comrades attempt to carry them through to the best of their abilities in collectively attempting to build the SWP as a revolutionary combat party.

Doug (Birmingham)

SOME THOUGHTS ON OUR CURRENT PROBLEMS

(1) The declaring of a faction a month after conference is against the spirit, if not the letter, of the SWP Constitution. Of course, people might want to justify this by saying that we are in such a mess that exceptional measures are necessary.

But if people are in favour of changing our practice and allowing factions outside the usual pre-conference period of three months, then they should openly say so.

(2) If people have ideas for improving party procedures for future DC-type cases, then let's hear them. But let's not have a major split over the issue.

(3) I can only think of two possible reasons why the faction document calls for "X" to "stand down". The first is that the faction signatories think that "X" is guilty. If they have any evidence that this is so, then they should be arguing for the case to be reopened - but they are not.

Now personally I haven't a clue whether or not he is guilty of anything. But I do believe strongly that a person should be assumed to be innocent unless proved guilty. The second possible reason for the "stand down" call is that it is an attempt to appease people outside the party who are using the DC case as a stick to beat the SWP with.

(4) Of course it's worrying that people outside the party who we want to work with

are being influenced by distorted stories about the DC case and about the SWP's alleged lack of democracy.

The mud, bile and vitriol being thrown at the party are terrible. But it isn't as bad as that thrown at the Bolsheviks in 1917 after the July Days, during what Trotsky called "The Month of the Great Slander", when "Mud-slinging here became a political factor of major importance." And I suspect that there will be worse slanders against the SWP than those we currently face at some time in the future when we are seen as a threat to the ruling class.

(5) No matter what we do, we'll never satisfy those who are incorrigibly hostile to the SWP. As for those that we want to work with who have been influenced by the slander, I'm afraid I can't think of any alternative to "patiently explaining" to them what the true picture is.

(6) It's true of course that this issue has to be thrashed out politically inside the party. But I would not want to rule out disciplinary action against the handful of party members who have allied themselves with hostile people outside the party and supplied them with a distorted account of life inside the party, thus allowing the bourgeois press to jump on the bandwagon.

(7) I think that what the faction document says about feminism is a bit of a red herring. I don't believe that there is a real difference on this issue between most of the faction signatories on the one hand and the CC and the rest of the party on the other. (Though there does seem to be a very small group who mistakenly want to import some variant of patriarchy theory.)

I would think that the vast majority of SWP members would agree with a Marxist view of women's oppression as outlined in my points (8) and (9) below.

(8) It has been claimed in some quarters that the SWP has not been doing enough to proclaim its support for feminism. In fact the SWP has an excellent record of fighting against the oppression of women.

SWP members fight alongside all types of feminists in campaigns against the various manifestations of sexism and women's oppression.

But what about this word "feminism"? The problem is that different people use it to mean different things. If you are just using the word "feminist" to mean a person who fights for equality for women, then Marxists are by definition feminists.

(9) But in fact the word "feminism" is usually associated with some form of "patriarchy theory". Patriarchy does not just mean sexism and women's oppression; it means "rule by men" or "male power".

The problem with this is that it tends to lead to the conclusion that all men are the problem and that all women, whatever

their class, should unite to fight against male power. But society is not ruled by all men. It is ruled by the capitalist class. It is capitalism, not the whole male sex, which benefits from the oppression of women.

Indeed gender inequalities have always been linked to class divisions, ever since the rise of class societies. Working class women have nothing in common with ruling class women.

We need to fight sexism in the here and now, but the only way to end all types of oppression for good is for the working class – women and men – to unite in struggle and get rid of capitalism.

Phil (Lancashire)

BUILDING THE FIGHT BACK AND CONSTRUCTIVE USE OF THE INTERNET

Since party conference the internet has proved a powerful tool to our enemies, whether through appalling leaks or the continual undemocratic publishing of internal material for the ruling class media to easily pick up.

What must be emphasised is that the internet is not good or bad, it is how we use it that matters. Since conference it has been used in an undemocratic way giving a minority a disproportionately loud voice, this should not escape party discipline. What however it does show is what a powerful communication tool it is. We must learn, move forward and continue to build.

There is no hiding that this has been a difficult time for some party members, in Manchester while some have looked inward, the majority of comrades have stepped up to the plate to fill the gaps left by the few to intervene. We have seen comrades at the centre of community fights against council cuts locally, town by town and coming together in planning a Manchester & Salford against the cuts demo and the UaF demo against the EDL.

Personally I, along with a number of SWP comrades have been involved in the Levenshulme Library & Baths campaign, helping to shape a vibrant anti cuts campaign. The paper is on sale at every event we organise and there hasn't been a hint of us being shunned as seems to be the implication of faction members, as long as you discount Sir Gerald Kaufman MP (he's not been too happy).

To date there has been one static demo called within hours of the closure announcement this was mobilised via both twitter and Facebook attend by over 100 people, an official march which saw around 600

people attend then rally in a local park. A read-in was organised at the library, with a planned occupation that saw 40-50 people take over their library. The read-in continued the following day and then turned in to a die-in. Crime scene style body outlines were drawn on the road outside the baths and library, this action closed the road and turned into an impromptu march, which closed one of the arterial routes in to Manchester. The fight continues.

The actions of a few have done untold damage in their continual undemocratic use of the internet, where as in Levenshulme it has been used constructively as an organising and publicity tool.

In a Facebook closed group (to protect council employees) many of the ideas for actions have been initiated, with the flesh being put on the bones at the planning meetings.

All posters, flyers, petitions & letters have been made available for download on the groups' website and group members have been kept informed of the latest updates via a mailing list. Photos from every action have been available within hours of the conclusion of each event. The dedicated twitter account was viewed over 50,000 times during the Library occupation.

But the two most impressive feats must be the live video stream from the Library occupation, and being able to get 50 people to the Library for the end of the occupation at midnight on a Saturday using twitter and Facebook. This shows the power of the internet and how quickly you can inform and mobilise not only comrades but all forms of media as well, there was Live BBC & Sky broadcasts and extensive coverage on ITV local news plus lots of column inches in local press.

The internet is not a world on its own and we can not allow continual breaches of party discipline to go unpunished. We have now seen how much damage, can be done by so few, with little resources. What we must not do is allow this situation to taint our judgement, we need to formulate a structured internet strategy that is executed with discipline, this will allow us to become a more effective interventionist party.

Simon (Manchester)

OUR WORK IN THE WOMENS' MOVEMENT

A response to the emerging suggestions of conflict between the Women's Movement and the SWP.

Over the last few weeks and months I have been alarmed by the dialogue that seems to be emerging, pointing to a conflict of

interest between the Women's movement and the SWP.

I am alarmed by this because as a Woman a Trade Unionist and an SWP member I do not recognise many of the accusations and allegations that I have encountered from within the Party as a true reflection of our work and intervention's in the Women's movement over the last few years.

In the South Wales district we have over the last three years built up a good working relationship with those involved locally in the Women's movement.

In June 2011 local activist decided to organise a Slut Walk through Cardiff. This was the first major action staged by 'feminists' in Cardiff for a number of years. As a few SWP members had previously been involved with organisations such as Cardiff Feminist Network (CFN) and Cardiff University Student Women's society, through our trade union involvement we were invited to contribute to the organisation of the march.

As there had been no substantive action in the area for some time and for many of the key activists, this was their first experience of organising a demonstration, SWP members were asked for practical assistance in the organisation of the march.

We also debated with the group around the issue of having a 'woman only' demonstration. After much dialogue around the need for the demonstration to be broadened out to include men, our perspective that men should be included, because women cannot fight women's oppression alone in the same way that Black people cannot fight racism and fascism alone, won through.

The demonstration itself attracted around 300 plus and was lively and loud. I was proud that the SWP were central to its success. As a result of this and further discussion at CFN meetings we also won the group round to having a 'Women's block' on the 30th November demonstration in Cardiff to raise awareness of the disproportionate affect cuts have on women's services, drawing many into discussion around the issues facing working class women, rather than some of the more usual discussions that had previously taken place around abstract theories of patriarchy.

It was because of this solid work and relationship building between the Women's movement and the SWP in Cardiff, that when SPUC announced an anti abortion demonstration in Cardiff in March 2012, we were able to organise a counter protest of around 60 Pro Choice activists in the space of just a few short days.

Again this mobilisation was a broad and inclusive event bringing together people from the local Women's movement, Socialists, Anarchists and the Trades Council, who brought their banner along.

A similar turnout was also achieved for the UK Uncut day of action on 8th December 2012 to highlight the affect of cuts and tax dodging on Women's refugees.

Currently, '40 Days for Life' are holding an anti abortion 'vigil' outside a BPAS clinic in Cardiff for the duration of Lent. Again because of our solid relationship with the Women's movement in the area we have been able to mobilise a series of interventions every Saturday until the anti abortionists leave.

The first mobilisation on the 23rd Feb 2013, had at its height, around 120 Pro Choice activists, many holding SWP placards. Given the current emerging dialogue from within our own ranks and on the internet I was heartened that not one of the activists from the local Women's movement made mention of this and in fact when passers by asked who had organised the demonstration, on several occasions activists from CFN responded by telling them the demo was organised by the SWP.

I was also enthused that much of the discussion that was taking place on the day related to abortion being a class issue, testament to the hard arguments that the SWP in Cardiff have engaged in with other activists. It is for these reasons that I reject the assertions that the SWP is 'anti feminist'.

We have a strong tradition in the SWP of working within and alongside the Women's movement, on occasions this has involved hard discussion to win people away from identity politics and engage people in debate about wider class issues.

As a Revolutionary Socialist organisation it is imperative that one of our aims must be the eradication of all oppression, but we also understand that the root of oppression is Capitalism, therefore we must understand that the road to emancipation lies not in the individual emancipation of one or other specific group, but rather in the eradication of Capitalism.

To quote Angela Y Davis 'Radical simply means 'grasping by the root' Our agenda for Women's empowerment must thus be unequivocal in our challenge to monopoly capitalism as a major obstacle to the achievement of equality'

Marianne (Cardiff)

UNITED FRONTS, THE WORKING CLASS AND PARTY CULTURE

In his pugnacious article "Is Leninism Finished?", Alex Callinicos stresses the importance of what we refer to as united fronts: "we are committed to the politics of the united front. In other words, we will work, in a principled and comradely way, with political forces well to our right to build the broadest and strongest action for common if limited objectives".

It is hard to disagree with this objective, but is it adequate to build the political

capacity of Britain's presently fragmented and under-organised working-class? And was Owen Jones entirely wrong to suggest that the SWP's united front approach has all-too-often been marked not by 'principle and comradeship', but "sectarianism and aggressive recruitment drives"?

In his classic speech on the subject in 1922, Trotsky said that for a united front to be an effective revolutionary tactic "the action of the whole proletariat is necessary; this action must be guaranteed and the initiative for it must not be left to others." This would enable the superiority of revolutionary to reformist strategies to be demonstrated clearly, so that workers would be won to Communism in the turbulence of post-WWI Europe. In Communist parties numbering tens of thousands or even more, the value of such an approach was clear; as was the possibility of achieving a genuine leadership amongst the working class.

Over the three decades that have passed since the successes of ANL, what united front work has the SWP initiated or participated in that has *both* drawn in the broad mass of the working class *and* demonstrated unambiguously the superiority of revolutionary struggle?

It is difficult to claim that any of the various organisations, movements and activities the party has intervened in during the years of British neoliberalism have succeeded on these terms. Stop the War and UAF have evidently achieved substantial and important things for the working class, and that thanks to organising working class people instead of relying on the beneficence of elected politicians. Yet neither of these important campaigns were able to show the value of a specifically Leninist approach (as opposed to a sensible reformist socialism) – and nor did they swell the ranks of the SWP with newly advanced working class militants.

In understanding this predicament, experiences that I have heard from numerous socialist activists outside the SWP suggest some important lessons for the party that we would do well to take seriously. Since joining the party in (with curious timing) late 2007, I became ever more puzzled by a strange phenomenon which I found increasingly difficult to explain or ignore.

Far from the SWP winning respect for its commitment, principle and effective strategy from the people who participated with it in united fronts, I heard story after story of frustration and anger at specific instances of the party's behaviour. Bureaucratic manoeuvrings, suppression of democracy, frequently uncomradely debating conduct; the charges might be summed up in a single word of accusation – sectarianism.

Now the party provides its members with a varied and useful vocabulary to discount such experiences: reformist, politically immature, autonomist, 'unevenness in the class' and of course the counterclaim that it's the alleger who is sectarian, not us (no doubt there are those who do

justify such criticisms). Initially I had little difficulty accepting the explanation that guarding our revolutionary practice was a tough job, and we couldn't make concessions just because others hadn't grasped democratic centralism or were lacking the correct Marxist perspective.

But it became increasingly unlikely that the SWP was basically blameless in its widespread poor reputation amongst other socialists and more generally, the working class. The accusations from a variety of sources covered everything from Stop the War conferences to incipient local campaigns, from the many twists of the Socialist Alliance and Respect to the staleness and plainly misdirected focus of Right to Work.

At this point we return to Trotsky. For a party containing a majority of the working class' militants, whose influence extends throughout the whole proletariat, a level of confidence amounting to arrogance is justified and indeed imperative. The urgency of this situation is clear: and clearly in contrast to the ruling class' present security across *most* of the bourgeois-democratic world.

Now the SWP constitutes one part only of the revolutionary left in Britain, while the entire forces of working class organisation have little purchase amongst large sections of the class.

For this reason, the left is too weak to inspire mass struggle even during a crisis of capitalism which confirms all our important economic analysis. In such a situation there is a great danger of over-emphasising *intervention* at the expense of *(re)building working class resistance* (emphatically not necessarily the same thing as 'building the party'). Without doubt it is important to intervene in initiatives that have been built by others, but the examples I've noted share an opportunistic hubris that fosters frustration and mistrust amongst non-SWP militants. The same goes for initiatives launched by the CC without reference to other activities already underway on the left, or indeed to any debate within the party itself (only in very exceptional circumstances, such as after 9/11, do the benefits of this method outweigh the drawbacks).

In fact it is highly questionable whether "united front" is conceptually adequate to the task at hand – rebuilding the *prerequisites* of mass, militant class struggle in Britain. The many ways in which neoliberal transformation has fragmented working class consciousness is an essential matter, but one outside my scope here.

We know that as revolutionary socialists, our politics explain the madness of the system we're in. But most working class people feel such acute cultural disconnection from organised socialists that we rarely get a chance to explain how we're right! Part of this disconnection is an expectation of being marginalised, ignored or otherwise devalued by know-it-all political "experts".

We shouldn't be surprised as Marxists that a constant focus on "winning arguments" cannot change people's world-views in the absence of material gains (however modest initially) that demonstrate that we're fighting for something more than extra names on the party subs list. All too often the party's work is about rolling out a tried-and-tested formula, which prevents an organic participation in emergent class struggle. Meanwhile many socialists who share the fundamentals of our politics do not wish to join the SWP because their experience suggests the party to be oppressively monolithic, and self-serving. In both cases, a serious debate is needed about transforming the party into something much better deserving of workers' trust. Only then can we exercise effective leadership. None of this requires a new or significantly changes *form* of organisation, but it does demand a different type of discipline (which is focussed on united action in a context of debate, instead of united action whilst suppressing debate).

The motivation of members forming the largest faction in the party's history, and shortly after conference at that, isn't some frantic attempt to render the party a fruitless (if fashionable) "network". Many of us instead feel forced to do so, by the application of methods tried and tested against others to a substantial proportion of comrades in the party. Escaping from the SWP's present predicament will involve careful attention to John Molyneux's insight (ISJ, 2009):

"Party democracy is not something that can be guaranteed by any constitution or set of institutional arrangements (which is not to gainsay the necessity of democratic constitutions and institutional arrangements) but also requires the development and maintenance of a democratic culture based on frank and open debate in which party members are encouraged to speak their mind."

None of the problems I have attempted to highlight can be resolved by instituting permanent factions, still less by abandoning democratic centralism – though there are strong arguments that certain structural features of the SWP hamper its operation (e.g. CC slates).

Most important is to undertake a serious engagement with problems of party culture whose effects are increasingly apparent. The leadership bears a substantial responsibility for the practices and attitudes criticised here. The faction and platform which I am a part of is therefore pressing above all else for a culture where the leadership wins respect instead of instilling deference; where the SWP is the home for everyone who is desperate to organise the working class to end capitalism; and where theoretical orthodoxies have to be proved afresh as new forces of production transform societies. None of this is to say that

we haven't achieved big successes through UAF, for example, or union agitation. But can any comrade honestly claim that we're good at learning from our mistakes?

Andrew (York)

THE SWP AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Some of us have struggled for a long time, but oh so much more so recently with the party's self-aggrandising over the subject of women's liberation – 'we are the best fighters for women's liberation'; 'we have an unrivalled reputation as the best on women's oppression' and so on. It is reassuring to hear that 'we lead on the issue of abortion rights', but do we really? Or do we support protests that others have organised?

We are told to be proud of our presence on the slutwalks, but in fact there was some paralysis over the sudden upsurge in feminist thought at the time. There was confusion over how to approach the use of the word 'slut' and it took us some time to catch up.

Our positions on Assange and Galloway were correct, but we must not be seen to be merely reacting to the issues of the moment. If we are leaders we must be a part of the movement, learning from it and informing it, in short we need to be much better than we are. If there were to be a slutwalk this week, our presence on it would be uncomfortable to say the least given the recent approach to violence against women by the leadership. We need to reflect on that, our main input into a struggle of young women against their oppression would be one where we would find it impossible to defend our party's actions on the very subject that these women are protesting about.

We have a sound analysis of the roots of women's oppression and its particular relationship with capitalism that sets us aside from the majority of, but not all, feminists. This provides us with the *potential* to be the best avenue through which sexism and oppression of all types can be meaningfully fought in the interests of everyone.

Unfortunately this potential is currently combined with an analysis of feminism that is outdated and unsophisticated and which portrays feminism as a single monolith and which fundamentally hinders our own theoretical development and our relationship with women both inside and outside of the women's movement.

We need a renewal of the party's theoretical and political approach to women's oppression and in particular regarding violence against women. As well as

developing women's writing in our publications, the lessons of today must come also from members involved in struggle. Failure to do this risks resulting in a bureaucratic leadership, distanced from the class and unable to behave in a way which is in line with women's liberation.

We need to be better in our analysis, in our attitude and relationship to feminism and to women who call themselves feminists. In order to properly reflect that we understand women's oppression we need to be better internally.

At the very least we need this because at conference and after, leading members of the party struggled to understand the nuances and relationship to Marxism of current understanding of violence against women, what women say about it, its manifestations, the role of institutions, rape myths and numerous other aspects of the phenomena. Further, instead of showing a willingness to learn, the reaction of the leadership since the crisis has been to defend its actions and attack its critics. To be 'the best' on women's liberation we also need to be 'the best' internally when women come forward with allegations of violence. To 'have the best record on women's liberation' we need to hold ourselves to standards that we might not hold others to.

Assumptions about comrades based on a flawed analysis that 'we are the best' are what led us to one of the key problems in the party's approach to the recent allegations. The position of the CC is that the DC investigators were all long standing and well respected party members and because the party is against women's oppression the DC would somehow automatically investigate the allegations fairly and objectively. Firstly this argument is recursive - by this logic none of the parties involved (since they were all members of the SWP) could have done or experienced what they or others claimed. As a party do we really believe that all of our personal relationships with other party members exist without the trappings of historic oppression?

If we behave as if this is the case then any investigation by the party into violence against women in its own ranks is doomed, unfortunately this is something that the party stands accused of at the moment as a result of the handling of allegations in 2009 and 2011 and emerging information about the handling of other past complaints.

Therefore in addition to the development of our ideas and external relationships with the women's movement and the review of the disputes committee we need a thorough, open-ended, sweeping inquiry into the party's handling of past allegations of violence against women which is led by women members who are not employees or party full-timers. If we do not do this it will result in the party continuing to appear to be unaccountable for its actions and those of individual members, in other

organisations being reluctant to work with us, and potentially in woman comrades feeling unsafe as members of the party.

Ciara (East London)

Toni (Bristol)

Marco (Central London)

IN DEFENCE OF WOMEN'S LIBERATION AND DEMOCRACY IN THE SWP

We are deeply disappointed by the willingness of some comrades to believe the worst interpretation of events in the Disputes Committee case; to believe rumours as long as they justify a cynicism towards the SWP leadership; to repeat exaggerations of criticisms made of the process and to fuel attacks on the organisation in the press and the blogs.

We have confidence in the integrity of the comrades on the Disputes Committee, and believe that it is inconceivable that those comrades would not have taken the firmest action possible against any man they believed had raped a woman, whoever that man was. Whatever process had been followed by the Disputes Committee, as soon as the words rape and SWP were put together publicly we were bound to face press attacks. Comrades should know better than to fuel these attacks.

Comrades who have raised opposition to the handling of the Disputes Committee case repeatedly state that they don't want to re-open the case. However, despite claiming to accept the decisions of Conference, it is clear that the comrades in the faction effectively do not accept the decision taken by the Disputes Committee in this case. Comrades make this clear when they demand X be cast into the political wilderness. In essence they wish to change the result by effectively and publicly assigning guilt to X.

It is important that the process of looking at our disciplinary procedures does not become a proxy battle over this case.

The implication that the SWP sees feminists as enemies also needs to be challenged. We unite with feminists against women's oppression constantly, on a day to day level in confronting sexism at work and on an organisational level in groups like Abortion Rights. Furthermore we understand that for many women and men who term themselves feminists, they mean simply that they stand up against sexism, not that they necessarily agree with any version of patriarchy theory. However, feminism has a theoretical content. It is right that we arm our members to understand our view that working class men

do not benefit from women's oppression; that women's oppression grows out of the institution of the family in class society and not from ideas in the heads of men; that a cross-class alliance of women will not win women's liberation because ruling class women have more to lose than to gain from real liberation; and that it will take a united, class fight of women and men to end oppression.

An untrue impression is given of our organisation in the faction's document. We are presented as hostile to feminists, hostile to the complainant and to being prone to shut down this debate through disciplinary measures. In fact the organisation has been amazingly tolerant of its internal opponents - no one has been disciplined since conference despite the public attacks on the organisation by some of our own members. In Birmingham, as elsewhere in the party, far from shutting down discussion, we have had extensive debate since conference. We held a post-conference aggregate, then discussed the Disputes Committee issue again in branches where comrades raising motions critical of the handling of the dispute were given plenty of time to argue their positions. We have also held NC report backs in each branch. Our aggregate has voted for a motion that resolves to support the CC statement.

So finally, we appeal to those comrades supporting the faction to mean it when they say they will accept the outcome of this conference. We cannot and will not have our organisation paralysed and our branch meetings repeatedly derailed by this debate.

Helen, Bridget, Jenny, Doug, Matt, Pete, Charlie, Claudia and Geoff (Birmingham)

THE FUTURE? ASSESSING THE MODELS OF ORGANISATION

The form a revolutionary socialist party should adopt is one of the major issues at the heart of debates across Europe and is also reflected in the current factional arguments within the SWP.

In this contribution to the SWP discussions we seek to emphasise the necessity of a Leninist revolutionary party in any left formation. The whole point of the Leninist model of the Party is to contribute to working-class self-emancipation by uniting the most advanced sections of the class in order to challenge and overcome unevenness within the working class. It starts from the centrality of the working-class.

Two alternative approaches emerged in these discussions at Conference in January

which were contrasted to that of the current model of democratic centralism operated in the SWP and have been features of left organisations in Britain in recent years.

The first is one in which factional organisation becomes permanent as a replacement for the banning of factions (outside of the conference period) and the second one is one in which a looser federal organisation replaces the nationally elected structures of the SWP. In what follows we wish to examine the problems of factionalism and federalism in general and specifically as operated in the NPA in France, Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) and the International Socialist Group (ISG) in Scotland.

Factionalism and federalism within left organisations is formally presented as aspects of their democratic nature. Democracy is promoted by the allowance of a range of differing political views institutionalised into factions while representation was de-centralised to ensure a variety of voices would always be heard. In reality, the bureaucratic superstructure of the organisation, held tightly by the dominant faction (the International Socialist Movement in the case of the SSP or the LCR in the NPA in France as identified in the recent ISJ article), acts to ensure democracy is undermined by the promotion of sectarianism over united activity.

As Duncan B highlights elsewhere all decisions become viewed from the prism of factional advantage which acts to stifle the party acting in a unified way over key issues. Similarly, federalism becomes a means to develop local fiefdoms rather than a national party. It was indeed the desire of some of the SSP's MSPs to have a higher leadership profile than Tommy Sheridan that contributed to the toxic divisions that were to eventually tear the SSP apart.

In the case of calls for a looser coalition of activists around a set of socialist ideas, a 'group', replaces a 'party'. Parties are no longer relevant in a society where, according to the pessimism of reformist ideas, and backed up by selective support from social attitude surveys, collective identity has been undermined. Not surprisingly, that view of the working-class as weak and fragmented also results in a profoundly pessimistic attitude towards the potential for working-class struggle.

This has been reflected for example in the International Socialist Group's opposition to the call for a General Strike; uncritical support for Len McCluskey in the current UNITE elections against a rank and file candidate and dismissive attitudes to the possibilities of trade union action, that leads away from any serious orientation on the organised working class. The other side of this pessimism is that it lends itself to adaptation and accommodation to the Trade Union bureaucracy, in the form of focusing mainly on capturing full time trade union officer positions, trade union executive and STUC youth committee places.

Of course, revolutionaries are in favour of winning these kinds of positions in the unions but not at the expense of or as a substitute for building a rank and file strategy that can push the bureaucracy leftwards and act independently of it when the inevitable pressure to compromise and sell out asserts itself. More fundamentally it has led the rest of the Scottish left to abstain from strikes like the Sparks or the national Remploy who are critical of the trade union bureaucracy.

In these and other respects looser groups represent many of the aspects of reformist and autonomist ideas, in which democratic decision making is shunned and replaced by elite decision making for the group. Looser organisations will result in the radical left becoming a bridge away from revolutionary ideas towards a new reformism rather than a bridge away from reformism towards revolution.

In summary models of factionalism and federalism do not represent an advance on the approach of the SWP as they will undermine the ability of the organisation to act in a united and national organisation in which the party is able to 'punch above its weight'. They represent an accommodation to the ideas of reformism within the development of left formations. While revolutionaries participation within left formations is a tactical question (in 2000 the SWP in Scotland joined the SSP) the building of a revolutionary leninist organisation is a principle.

Part of the means by which a revolutionary party is built is through its papers and publications. While the Internet has become much more central to people's lives, as have social networking sites, the paper is a way of organising the Party, which is why Lenin described the Bolshevik paper *Iskra* as the scaffolding. It's also true that without that scaffolding of both paper and weekly meetings, there is no routine, people drift in and out and never really develop as a collective.

To give just one example the coverage of the Remploy strike in Socialist Worker allowed us to relate much more effectively to the workers involved. Selling papers gives revolutionaries a direct relationship with the person that matters – the reader.

In conclusion the evidence from Scotland shows alternative methods of decision making, organisation have not demonstrated their superiority to the democratic centralist approach of the SWP. Instead they have suffered from the problems of factionalism and federalism accommodate to sectarianism, autonomism and reformism.

We have to return to the biggest problem facing the revolutionary left in Britain today. This is not the organisational form developed by the SWP but the continuing link between reformism and pessimism which undermines the confidence of the self-activity of the working class.

Other left formations have failed to

overcome the problems socialists face today where attacks on the working class are permitted to continue due to the lethargy of a trade union leadership who refuse to use the power of an organised working class to bring down a weak and vicious Tory government. There continues to be no short-cuts to revolutionary transformation of society.

Carlo (Fife), Iain, Jim and Keir (Glasgow)

CENTRAL COMMITTEE'S MOTION TO SPECIAL CONFERENCE

1) The Socialist Workers Party stands out on the left by the fact that it has a history of genuine democratic debate without permanent factionalism. We have developed democratic and accountable structures from our branches, elected district committees, the national committee and disputes committee, central committee, party councils and conference.

In the recent period these structures were re-examined and strengthened by the work of the SWP democracy commission. We have full confidence in these structures and the method of democratic centralism.

2) This Special Conference notes that the commission on "What sort of party do we need?" that set out the democratic principles guiding our current practice was approved by 239 votes to 91 by annual conference in January 2013.

3) At the core of democratic centralism lies the understanding that we have full and honest debate among comrades in order to reach decisions followed by united action to implement and argue for those decisions.

4) We therefore condemn the actions of those members who have circumvented these principles by campaigning to overturn conference decisions outside the structures of the party, using blogs and the bourgeois media. Many of these contributions have been characterised by the use of slurs, abuse and un-comradely language that seem designed to stop serious debate and make joint work impossible, as well as damaging the party's reputation.

5) The debates inside the party have been fuelled by the outcome of the Disputes Committee report to conference. This Special Conference affirms its belief in the integrity of the comrades on the DC and of the investigation they conducted.

We note the DC was re-elected without

challenge at the January 2013 conference. The DC report was approved by conference and the case concerned must be regarded as closed. This means that both comrades involved in the case are members in good standing, with the right to engage in political activity as party members.

6) This Special Conference notes that immediately following the original DC hearing of this particular case, information about it was leaked to people, some hostile, outside the party. This helped fuel rumours and misinformation about the DC within the party.

This Special Conference also notes the disgraceful covert recording of the DC session at conference and the appearance of a transcript on a site hostile to the party, in addition to the reports and debates in public blogs and internet forums regarding these internal party arguments.

7) This has created difficulties for any future DC hearing. Therefore it is in this light that this Special Conference thinks it sensible to consider these issues, in particular:

- i) How the future confidentiality of DC proceedings can be safeguarded
- ii) How future findings of the DC should be reported to the party

Examining these issues would also provide an opportunity to clarify our disciplinary procedures more generally and propose changes to these procedures where necessary.

This should be the responsibility of a committee composed of the four members elected from the National Committee at its last meeting, four members elected from this special conference, two from the Disputes Committee and one from the Central Committee. This committee will report to a subsequent meeting of the NC, which will draw up proposals to be put to the next Annual Conference.

8) This Special Conference regrets the fact that, following the NC meeting at the beginning of February, some comrades decided to form a faction specifically around the Disputes Committee case.

Their use of a spurious interpretation of the party constitution represented a break with our traditions of democratic debate, which were reaffirmed by the annual conference in January.

The Special Conference demands that all factions and “platforms” disband immediately after the conclusion of this conference and instructs party members involved in producing blogs on internal debates such as the “International Socialism” site to take them down immediately after the conclusion of this conference.

9) Student work has always been the lifeblood of the SWP, and the Special Conference expresses its pride in the successes

of our student comrades during and after the movement of November-December 2010.

But it is clear that our student work has been disoriented by a failure sufficiently to recognise that this phase of the movement has ended and to focus on ideological and political struggle. The debates that have been developed must be pursued patiently and on a political basis.

Nevertheless, this Special Conference reaffirms that the Socialist Workers Student Societies are support organisations of the SWP and that student members of the SWP are bound by the decisions of party conference and other leading bodies. The Central Committee has the authority to direct student work, as it has over all areas of party work.

10) We believe that underlying many of the recent debates in and around the party lie a series of vital political questions where we need to seek urgently to assert, develop and win our political tradition. Some of the key debates include:

- a) The changing nature of the working class.
- b) Lenin’s conception of the party and its relevance in the 21st century.
- c) Oppression and capitalism.
- d) The trade union bureaucracy and the rank and file.
- e) The radical left, the united front and the SWP.
- f) The role of students and intellectuals in revolutionary struggle.
- g) The value of new electronic media in the ideological and organisational work of a revolutionary party.

11) The Special Conference supports the CC and the NC in their strong commitment to leading and facilitating extensive discussion and debate around such issues in every forum of the party. This requires a serious, systematic and urgent effort in all our publications, through branch and district meetings, wider party events such as Marxism and through educationals and day schools.

Central Committee

MOTION TO AMEND THE CONSTITUTION

This Special Conference amends the party constitution:

- 1) Insert “during a preconference period” after “faction” in the first sentence of section 10 of the constitution. This part of Section 10 would then read:

If a group of party members disagrees

with a specific party policy, or a decision taken by a leading committee of the party, they may form a faction during a preconference period by producing a joint statement signed by at least 30 members of the party.

- 2) Change the final paragraph of section 4 from:

A Special Conference may be called by the Central Committee or at the request of 20 percent of the branches. The decisions of a Special Conference are as binding as those of Annual Conference.

To:

A Special Conference may be called by the Central Committee, the National Committee (see section 6) or at the request of 20 percent of the branches. The decisions of a Special Conference are as binding as those of Annual Conference.

The procedure to call a special conference is as follows: If a branch passes a call for a special conference the branch must immediately inform the national office. The motion must include the issues that have led to the call for a conference. The national secretary must publish the motion calling for a special conference in the next issue of Party Notes. The National Secretary will also declare how many branches are required to meet the 20 percent criterion.

To call a special conference, 20 percent of branches must pass the same motion to the one originally passed, and inform the national secretary of this, within 28 days of the publication of the original motion in Party Notes.

Central Committee

MOTION TO AMEND THE CONSTITUTION

Amendment to the SWP constitution

The late and rapid appearance of 2 factions before the SWP conference in January left very little time for members of the party to consider the arguments, or debate the issues.

For those of us who wanted to organise to support the CC and oppose the factional arguments there was a constitutional question – do we have the right to do this? Whereas the rights of factions are defined in the constitution, there is no recognition of those who oppose them.

In the days before conference those of us who organised the list of supporters of the CC statement had a discussion about whether we should declare a faction

(although we did not disagree with party policy), in order to have the right to organise. Even the decision to circulate our statement the day before conference involved a debate about the constitutional rights and wrongs with CC members.

In light of this it is necessary to enshrine in the SWP constitution the right of the supporters of the CC to openly organise to debate with any factions that may be formed in advance of conference.

Add after Paragraph 2:

“Supporters of the Central Committee have the right to organise and distribute their documents.”

Passed by the Birmingham aggregate

MOTION IN DEFENCE OF THE EXPELLED COMRADES

This meeting rejects the bureaucratic use of expulsions to shut down debate. This meeting rejects the expulsions of the Facebook 4 (Charlotte B, Paris T, Tim N and Adam M) for ‘secret factionalising’ because of their involvement in a private online discussion about the possibility of organising a faction prior to the January conference.

This meeting calls on conference to overturn the expulsions and for the immediate reinstatement of the four named above to full party membership.

Passed by Thanet and Canterbury branches

MOTION ON EXPULSIONS

“We should not expel people from the SWP over the issues that this conference is addressing.”

Passed by the Thames Valley aggregate

AN AMENDMENT TO THE CC MOTION TO SPECIAL CONFERENCE

Section 7

Add:

“iii) How the future remit, membership

and operation of the DC can be organised to take into account potential conflicts of interest or perceived conflicts of interest.”

Passed by Wandsworth & Merton branch

MOTION FROM COVENTRY SWP BRANCH

This emergency conference of the SWP decides the following as SWP policy:-

I. That the decision to conduct internal SWP debates in public is a decision that must be made only by the party collectively through its elected bodies and their appointed editorial boards e.g. the CC, NC, ISJ editors, etc.

II. That given this proviso it is part of our tradition that important debates are conducted in public e.g. the debate about patriarchy and women’s oppression was conducted in several issues of the ISJ.

III. That in recent week’s individual comrades have made unilateral and individual decisions to conduct debates about the party’s internal issues in public via the internet and/or social media. Some internal documents have been leaked onto the internet.

IV. This has demonstrated the need for the party to agree and create standards, rules and protocols in the party for the use of internet and social and print media for internal SWP discussions. This conference therefore decides to elect a seven person commission to produce rules on the internet, social and printed media etc. re internal party debate.

V. This commission will be tasked to:-

a) Produce a set of rules which will seek to balance the reality of regular social media use with the principles that:-

i) It is up to the party collectively to determine which internal issues can be debated in public and which cannot, rather than that right residing in any one individual’s decision to publish whatever they want on the internet and/or social media and/or print media,

ii) That there can be no democracy without discipline to support that democracy

iii) That party discipline has to apply equally to every single party member

b) Produce its report to be published in the first internal bulletin in 2013 for the January 2014 party conference with recommendations for that conference to adopt as it sees fit

c) Produce immediate guidelines for the use of twitter and facebook etc. to be implemented under the direction of the Conference Arrangements Committee during the pre-conference period in autumn 2013 for the January 2014 conference

d) Will be elected on the following basis:-

i) Two people from the Central Committee chosen by the Central Committee

ii) Two people from the non-Central Committee members of the Disputes Committee - chosen by the Disputes Committee

iii) Three party members elected by this conference, at least two of whom should be from the faction.

VI. In the meantime till the decision of the 2014 conference on the use of the internet etc. and the till the guidelines produced by the commission for the pre-conference period the following interim rules re the internet, social and print media will be implemented by the party; -

a) All discussion on internal matters of the party on the internet and/or social media and/or print media by comrades must cease immediately (i.e. as soon as this motion is passed by conference and is then circulated to all party members) till the next pre-conference period

b) All articles already published by comrades on the internet without the sanction of the CC about the internal affairs of the party since 1/10/2012 must be removed from their respective web sites *wherever this is practically possible* as soon as possible but no later than Sunday the 7th of April 2013

c) It is the responsibility from this conference onward of all comrades to ensure that their comments about internal party affairs on any media (e.g. Facebook) are kept private to party members only

d. The international socialism blog must be closed ASAP but no later than Sunday the 7th of April 2013

Passed by Coventry branch

MOTION ON THE DISPUTE COMMITTEE

Special Conference notes

1. Dealing with allegations of sexual misconduct is often very difficult, but the party must strive to address both the political questions they raise, and also to learn from the experience to improve, where possible, the procedures for handling such complaints in the future. Taking these actions constitutes an appropriate political response

to the concerns raised.

2. Concerns relating to the composition of the disputes committee and potential or perceived conflicts of interest; the line of questioning pursued with the two women involved in the case; what approach the DC should take when a serious criminal charge such as rape is involved and how the DC addresses political questions of conduct when complaints of a sexual nature are involved.

Special Conference resolves

1. To elect a commission to look into all aspects of disputes committee procedures regarding cases of sexual misconduct.
2. That this commission should consist of 6 members elected at conference and one CC nominee, and one DC nominee.
3. That such a commission should have the powers to co-opt up to three comrades with appropriate professional expertise.
4. That this commission will take written and verbal submissions from comrades interested in contributing to the process.
5. That this commission shall present its recommendations in the first IB of the next pre-conference period, to be voted on at the January 2014 annual conference.

Passed by Brighton, Euston, Lewisham, Thanet, Rusholme, Canterbury, Leytonstone and Croydon branches

BURY & PRESTWICH MOTION ON THE DISPUTE COMMITTEE

Special Conference notes

1. Dealing with allegations of sexual misconduct is often very difficult, but the party must strive to address both the political questions they raise, and also to learn from the experience to improve, where possible, the procedures for handling such complaints in the future. Taking these actions constitutes an appropriate political response to the concerns raised.
2. Concerns relating to the composition of the disputes committee and potential or perceived conflicts of interest; the line of questioning pursued with the two women involved in the case; what approach the DC should take when a serious criminal charge such as rape is involved and how the DC addresses political questions of conduct when complaints of a sexual nature are involved.

Special Conference resolves

1. To elect a commission to look into all aspects of disputes committee procedures regarding cases of sexual misconduct.
2. That this commission should consist of 6 members elected at conference (*using the slate system to allow conference to ensure*

breadth) and one CC nominee, and one DC nominee.

3. That such a commission should have the powers to co-opt up to three comrades with appropriate professional expertise.
4. That this commission will take written and verbal submissions from comrades interested in contributing to the process.
5. That this commission shall present its recommendations in the first IB of the next pre-conference period, to be voted on at the January 2014 annual conference.

Passed by Bury & Prestwich branch

MOTION ON ROLE OF COMRADE X

1. We are for the unity of the party and believe it is vital that the Special Conference provides the opportunity for a swift, political resolution of the current crisis so that we can move forward with maximum clarity and minimum loss of members.

2. We accept the decisions of conference and are not seeking to have them overturned.

3. The outcome of conference was to confirm the Disputes Committee report. Conference did not clarify the role of Comrade X.

4. This lack of clarity remains a divisive issue and a potential flashpoint. This is not a matter of guilt or innocence. The question of whether it is appropriate for X to continue to represent the party in its united front work is a matter of political judgment. Such judgements are frequently made regarding comrades' roles and have nothing to do with disciplinary action.

Special conference resolves

1. That Comrade X stands down from any paid or representative roles in the party or united front work for the foreseeable future.

Passed by Euston, Lewisham, Brighton, Rusholme, Canterbury, Croydon and Thanet branches

MOTION IN DEFENCE OF PARTY UNITY

Comrades on all sides of the debate over the crisis in the party share one common aim – to defend the best interests of the SWP.

Disagreements over internal questions of this nature are not differences in perspective or a break from the ideas of Leninism. That they have been treated as such is a major cause of the crisis gripping the party.

The culture of debate was a central part of the democracy commission. The SWP must be capable of accepting, discussing and overcoming matters of political difference if we are to operate as an effective revolutionary organisation. These questions are best resolved through debate and argument rather than disciplinary measures.

Special conference notes:

Many comrades feel they have been marginalised because they have expressed concerns over the CC's handling of the disputes case and its aftermath. In a number of districts, and the party office, trusted comrades have been removed from roles as a result of opinions expressed internally over this question.

In particular our student comrades have experienced a fractious relationship with the CC since conference. The central committee has rapidly changed perspectives agreed at conference.

Our leading comrade in NUS was barred at short notice from re-standing for the executive. While the CC's has the right to change perspectives and remove candidates, it is highly unusual for this to be done without proper discussion or a serious attempt to win comrades to the new perspective.

The CC's actions appear to be driven by internal considerations relating to positions students have taken on the dispute. This has involved a number of false arguments about the problem of autonomism, feminism and the failure of students to take an "ideological turn" which has angered students proud of their record in fighting for our politics on campus.

It would be a disaster for the SWP if comrades were to continue to feel disenfranchised from party work as a result of positions taken over this question. We need to draw a line under the matter so the party as a whole can continue to discuss the broader questions raised by the crisis in a constructive way.

Special conference resolves:

1. That, as stated in the CC motion to the special conference, there needs to be an ongoing discussion through the appropriate party structures, events and publications. Whether comrades were supporters of the CC statement or the faction should have no bearing on their role in that discussion.
2. That the CC takes a lead in organising to overcome rifts that have opened up between comrades in some districts/branches over this issue and take practical steps to ensure no one feels marginalised.
3. That the CC takes steps to show student comrades that they are considered an integral and valued part of our party. This

should include facilitating a proper period of discussion about student perspectives.

4. That there should be no attempt to reorganise national, district or branch responsibilities in response to comrades' positions on the dispute and its aftermath if we are to maintain unity in our work locally and nationally.

5. That the report from the democracy commission provides the basis for the party to move forward and reassert a genuine culture of debate and discussion.

Passed by Lewisham, Canterbury, Euston, Rusholme, Bury & Prestwich, Croydon and Thanet branches and Merseyside Aggregate

THAMES VALLEY MOTION ON THE DISPUTES COMMITTEE

Thames Valley district submits the following motion to conference:

1. This conference notes the vote accepting the report of the Disputes Committee at annual conference and confirms it.

2. However, this conference believes that the members of the Disputes Committee were hampered by the lack proper guidelines relating to the allegation of rape made against a then member of the Central Committee.

3. Conference resolves that:

(a) The Disputes Committee is a political body, not a court of law. Its role is to uphold the integrity and reputation of the Party, not to determine guilt or innocence.

(b) That clear guidelines for investigating charges of serious sexual misconduct or rape, or comparable charges of personal misconduct be drawn up.

(c) That clear guidelines for investigating cases where the accused comrade is a CC member be also drawn up.

(d) That a commission be elected to investigate potential improvements to Disputes Committee procedures, that it invites and considers submissions from party members, and that it reports back to the next annual conference.

Passed by the Thames Valley aggregate

MOTION ON STUDENT WORK

Thames Valley district submits the following motion to conference:

1. This conference notes that in the period since conference there has been a growing crisis in the party's student work, with student members being at the sharp end of public criticism over the handling of the Dispute, and suffering damage to long-developed and important political relationships as a consequence.

2. This conference believes that internal arguments with students which identify 'feminism' or 'autonomism' as the root of current student anxieties are obscuring and diverting from its real origin in widespread internal dissatisfaction with the Dispute. While there are evidently internal debates to be had on, for example, our democratic structures and our analysis of oppression, there is a danger that by conflating these arguments with those around the Dispute we preclude the opportunity to conduct such discussions in a constructive and educative manner.

3. This conference believes that this failure to engage with the root problem of current anxieties among students is being exacerbated by sudden and unexplained changes made to student perspectives and organisation. The CC unanimously backed the student document in the pre-conference period, which was then overwhelmingly endorsed by Conference. Yet after Conference the CC changed the personnel in the student office, removing some of the organisers who disagreed with the handling of the Dispute. 48 hours before the nomination-deadline for the NUS Executive our widely-respected and highly-credible candidate was removed from standing for re-election, being replaced by a candidate with no social weight or political experience. Such changes have been accompanied by no political argument or explanation, and appear to be moved not by political considerations, but by internal motivations relating to positions taken on the Dispute.

4. This conference notes the CC is now stating the need to make an 'ideological turn' in student work, claiming that students have been pulled politically by the movements in the period after 2010. Yet if this is a sincere political judgement, why had this difference not been raised publicly until now? The claim is also contradicted by the real experience of building SWSS over the past two years, a period which has been characterised by high levels of recruitment, a politically and theoretically sharp programme of SWSS meetings and events, and a perspective which consistently sought to connect the most radicalised

students with workers in struggle. Again, this 'ideological turn' appears to be based entirely on the internal dynamics created by the Dispute in the party.

5. This conference believes that, given the predominance of 'autonomist' ideas on the current student left, the Party should take pride in having won over so many new students to revolutionary socialism and our tradition. Out of the past period we have developed an impressive new cadre, many of whom lead within the Party as well as on their campuses.

6. This conference resolves to take steps to avoid losses of a significant section of this new cadre.

Passed by the Thames Valley aggregate

DORSET MOTION ON THE DISPUTES COMMITTEE

Whilst relying on the complete integrity of the comrades of the Disputes Committee, we recognise that there has been a loss of respect in the process by a considerable number of comrades.

The Party is a voluntary organisation and expulsions should be the very last recourse to resolving a disciplinary or factional issue.

We propose that an additional tier be incorporated in our DC process, that expelled individuals (in the case of isolated disciplinary matters) or a representative (in the case of factional or linked expulsions - nominated by their constituency) be permitted 5 minutes to address Conference during the DC report.

In addition, in the case of individual complaints against a member's conduct by another member, under investigation by the DC at that Conference, the complainant be allowed, though not required, to address Conference for 5 minutes during the DC report.

We further recommend that all DC Report sessions at Conference be closed sessions at all times, with an anonymised written report in the Conference Report Back bulletin.

This should be subject to review after a year.

Passed by Dorset branch