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An Appeal to Members of the ISUS

25 February 1977

Dear Comrades

We have heard, with astonishment and disgust, reports that the 'majority caucus' of ISUS (which includes the present leadership) has taken a decision to expel the Left opposition before or at the beginning of your forthcoming Convention.

If these reports are true - and we sincerely hope that they are not, running as they do against the categorical assertions your EC made to the contrary at their meeting with Steve Jefferys on 19 January - then it has to be said bluntly that any such decision would mark a qualitative political degeneration in ISUS of such magnitude as to effectively rule out the possibility of its development as a serious revolutionary socialist organisation.

We can think of only one recent precedent for such an incredible proposal. It is to be found in the practice of the Healey organisation (the SLL-WRP), a bureaucratic caricature of a 'revolutionary' sect. The political incompetence of this declining sect - once by far the biggest and most dynamic organisation on the revolutionary left in Britain - is, of course, organisationally related to the uncontrolled and uncontrollable position of its leader and his clique. Their position has been maintained by the method of instant organisational measures against any internal critics.

Naturally, we do not suppose for one moment that the members of the 'majority caucus' intend or foresee such a development for ISUS. But actions have a logic of their own. Even the actual formation of such a phoney 'consensus' grouping as the 'majority faction' which then excludes others from full discussion about the future of the organisation is without precedent outside the 'loyalty factions' established successively by Healey or the practice of the Stalinist groupings. 'Consensus' factions have no connection with the genuine revolutionary tradition of political debate but instead lay the basis for the systematic destruction of such debate.

If the membership allows the Left faction to be summarily expelled, it will not be long before some other tendencies, including elements of the present 'majority caucus' find that they too are 'hopeless', 'irreconcilables', 'entrists' (an absurd and criminally irresponsible allegation) who have to be dealt with in the same fashion. And the inevitable political decline that such a regime guarantees will be followed by organisational decline too. That is the experience.

We are not defenders of permanent factionalism. Quite the reverse. We are opposed to unending wrangling that becomes a substitute for intervention in the outside world. And we understand very well the necessity for a decisive central leadership.

But such a leadership can only be developed on the basis of winning the political confidence of the membership, something that is patently lacking in the ISUS at this point in time. And something that will never occur if the political problem now confronting ISUS is resolved administratively. On the contrary, the expulsion

of the lefts would represent a disastrous evasion of the issues and a recognition by your leadership that they are incapable of winning the necessary confidence.

It has been suggested, we understand, that past actions of the SWP (ISGB) have involved peremptory expulsion of minorities. This is a complete falsification of the record. Never, at any time, has any such proposal as you are now facing even been considered, let alone attempted, in our organisation.

Quite the reverse. On only two occasions have we expelled organised political factions. In both these cases there was a prolonged discussion extending over at least two Annual Conferences, and this notwithstanding the fact that both factions were so-called 'orthodox Trotskyists' who disagreed with the majority fundamentally over a whole range of political questions.

Your present National Secretary, Glen Wolfe, was, for some two and a half years a member of the so-called Trotskyist Tendency within ISGB, a faction with its own dues, internal democratic centralism against the majority, separate publications and leadership. We did eventually expel this group on the grounds that they continued to maintain that our organisation was centrist, ie non-revolutionary. Comrade Wolfe, who had by this time left them, strongly opposed the expulsion, but to no avail. The membership had been convinced by extensive experience that they were truly irreconcilable and voted accordingly at a Special Conference held after yet more extensive debate within the organisation.

Were we too tolerant? What we gained was a much clearer understanding amongst the membership as a whole as to the real issues involved, and hence the expulsion did not undermine political confidence in the leadership and our direction. We did not suffer the inevitable damage caused by administrative purges. What we had to put up with on the other hand was a genuine entrust organisation operating in several of our branches.

In any case, it is absolutely certain that the Left faction, unlike the Trotskyist Tendency, stands squarely in the IS tradition, and accepts the discipline of ISUS. It does not characterise ISUS as centrist; it does not have a separate disciplined internal structure; it has not appeared from the outside to do entry work and break comrades away. Pure and simple. It is not an entrust group. It has emerged within the ISUS as a result of the political problems facing your organisation. It rejects 'orthodox Trotskyism' as did your whole organisation in 1973; it rejects the 'Trotskyite reformism' of the American Socialist Workers Party. It stands by our joint tradition: for building rank and file movements against the employers and the trade union bureaucracy; for building a democratic centralist revolutionary socialist party in the United States; on the central importance of the American working class in the revolutionary process; against both American and Russian imperialism; for genuine national liberation struggles against imperialism. To summarily expel the Left faction's members makes nonsense of that tradition. It is itself a decisive break with that tradition.

Such expulsion would also, as Steve Jefferys informed your EC on 19 January, mean the severing of links with us. We would not see the point of continuing relations with an organisation which tolerated that kind of bureaucratic regime. Does this mean that we in any way favour or have encouraged a split? Even at this late date we repeat: No. We do not believe a split is necessary or inevitable. We still oppose a split just as strongly as we oppose expulsions. Why? Because the right to political debate, the right to circulate dissenting views, and the right to organise around those views within the common tradition are not optional extras that can be thrown away when things get tough. They are essential to recruit and hold workers who want to build an organisation capable of overthrowing the oppression and exploitation of the capitalist system. And they are essential to the political development of an organisation which must structure itself so that political leadership is fought for politically and can be overturned.

The idea that somehow our tiny organisation, thousands of miles away with less cash resources than yours, could possibly adopt the strategy of forcing the creation in our own image of another tiny little group in the United States is pure invention. Not only do we believe there already exists - in the form of the ISUS - an organisation within our common tradition in the United States, but even if we didn't, the idea is absolutely preposterous. It is an unfortunate fact, for example, that the SWP can only afford (on half your wages) only half the number of organisers you have. Not only is there not an entrust faction within ISUS; there are also no British agents. If you expel the Lefts you are not expelling 'irreconcilable' 'outside' troublemakers. That particular ghost has been conjured up to avoid a discussion of the real political questions. What you will have done is to embark upon a bureaucratic course from which there is no return.

We appeal to the leadership, to the Convention delegates, and to the members of the ISUS to reject any such move. The health and future development of your organisation is at stake, and this is true irrespective of your views on the merits of the particular arguments put forward by the Left faction (with which we are in substantial agreement). Lopping off a substantial proportion of the membership is certain to be followed by further amputations when it is discovered that it has not solved the problem. What's more, the idea that an expulsion of 85 members from a group of 280-300 ends the matter, is also a mistake. The inevitable reverberations of such a move at this time will be to force double that number, if not more, out of your organisation. For all these reasons, this road is the road to sectarian irrelevance. This can and must be prevented at the Convention.

Yours fraternally

Tony Cliff
Duncan Hallas

For the Socialist Workers Party Central Committee