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(2nd copy to Doug)

In Reply to Samuels and Connolly by Tyson and Alida

(Late appendix to Bureau Minutes No. 19, May 18, 1978 -- Special Joint Meeting with the Toronto Branch Executive around Latin American fraction discussion at the Toronto Branch Conference)

While there are aspects of both Samuels' and Connolly's reports we can agree with, they both end up presenting highly simplified and one-sided views of a very complex situation.

What Samuels fails to take into consideration, except in a few brief sentences, is the difficult problem which the branch executive had been unable to resolve over several months. We agree with her that the executive made errors in its handling of the question and in its proposal to dissolve the fraction. But by exaggerating the nature and the consequences of those errors and by presenting only one side of the problem, some of her valid criticisms become lost. On the other hand, Connolly, while explaining the problem which confronted the executive, ignores the negative consequences of the executive's report and focuses on what he considers to be the main problem: the supposedly disastrous interventions by Samuels and Morgan.

The executive had spent a great deal of its time over several months in attempting to conduct a political discussion with the Latin American fraction, and to solve serious problems in its functioning.

More time was spent discussing this one question than any other going into the branch conference--more than Quebec work, trade-union work, and women's liberation work put together.

We did not feel that Latin American work justified such a disproportionate allocation of the branch's resources, and we had every reason to believe that the situation would deteriorate further, since the comrades proposed to expand the scope of their intervention.

Samuels agrees that was the main issue. But she strongly disagrees that the executive should have introduced the problems with the fraction's functioning in order to explain its proposal to the branch. But this is the only way the problem could have been explained to the branch.

The majority of the comrades in the fraction and in the immigrant and ethnic committee felt that the argument was over what they considered to be the executive's rejection of the importance of work in the immigrant communities, defense work, and Latin American work. But these were not the main points in dispute.

As the executive report explained, no one was proposing that we scale down our work in the Ukrainian community, or the defense of East European political prisoners. We were also proposing the establishment of a viable immigrant and ethnic committee to centralize and coordinate the branch's overall work in this area, developing our analysis and propaganda, and bringing the political discussion into the branch as a whole. Included in the mandate of the immigrant and ethnic committee was the Latin American discussion and intervention. Other mechanisms were also proposed to continue this work, including the bureau subcommittee.

This is not to deny that there are differences on the importance and nature of work in the immigrant communities. But since we have only begun to discuss this question, it is not at all clear yet what the nature and scope of those differences are, or in what way they relate to our work among Latin American political exiles.

The question facing the executive was how to organize our immigrant and ethnic work and discussion most productively, while continuing a more limited and viable Latin

American intervention. It should have been clear to everyone, and certainly was to most comrades in the branch, that there was no intention of suppressing the political discussion.

What was involved here was a specific problem in the work of our Latin American fraction which the executive believed could not be resolved except through the expenditure of enormous time and energy.

It decided that it was necessary to present this problem to the branch conference; especially since the amendment which the comrades were putting forward would have required a significant expansion of the scope of the intervention. Yet the fraction had already proven unable to implement much more modest tasks. In addition, the comrades themselves argued quite strongly that these questions could not be delayed for a series of discussions following the branch conference but had to be decided then.

Those were the considerations of the executive which led it to decide to set aside half a day of the branch conference to allow a full discussion of these issues.

The problem was, and here we agree with Samuels, that the branch as a whole was not in a position to properly assess the executive's concerns. It had never had any previous discussion on Latin American work (although two reports on the fraction's work had been printed in the branch bulletin). More importantly, underlying the executive's major differences with the fraction on questions of the norms of a democratic centralist organization were important political questions which the branch had never seriously discussed, i.e. the nature of defense work. These differences, particularly on norms, touch on the different traditions and opinions within the ex-ISA and ex-RIG. It was for this reason that the final vote broke down along ex-organizational lines, with only a few exceptions.

It seems quite clear to us that the report and discussion did not help to clarify and solve the problems with which they were concerned. Had the executive's proposal been voted on and had it carried despite significant opposition and confusion, the results would have been even more counterproductive.

As it happened, over the week leading up to the branch conference, several comrades on the executive had second thoughts about the advisability of making the proposal to dissolve the fraction, including Connolly and Alida. But under the pressure of preparing a very extensive branch conference these concerns were never adequately considered by the executive as a whole. When the discussion at the branch conference took the course which some comrades had initially feared it might, we should then have called an executive meeting to discuss what to do.

The fact that the executive meeting was held because Comrade JC gave us notice that he was going to move referral, and the fact that Comrades Morgan and Samuels informed us that they would support his proposal, is not the main point here.

Connolly argues that the intervention of the two bureau comrades was destructive and that it undercut the ability of the executive to lead the branch: "To deny branches and branch executives the opportunity to make decisions on difficult questions is a sure-fire prescription for producing weak branches and branch executives." But in our view the executive discussion held in the middle of the discussion on the Latin American fraction dissolution proposal did not deny the executive or the branch the opportunity to make "decisions on difficult questions."

Eight comrades on the executive concluded that we should press ahead and vote on the dissolution of the fraction. Five comrades supported a motion which Tyson put forward that the issue be referred back to the executive for further discussion and

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that a discussion be held between the bureau and the executive to consider the concern of some comrades that questions of norms were involved. A small majority of the branch agreed with this proposal.

Apart from Connolly and Tyson, who presented the majority and minority reports, several other executive comrades spoke in the discussion, including comrade Alida. Comrades Morgan and Samuels did not speak. In what way then was the executive or the branch undermined by their meeting with the executive?

The executive was divided on the issue and had been from the beginning. JC's intervention, as well as that of Morgan and Samuels, merely gave the executive an opportunity to reconsider its proposal and discuss alternatives.

Four bureau comrades at the meeting supported the executive majority. One of these comrades (Foco) was not assigned to the branch either and had already spoken in the conference in favor of the executive report (as we knew he intended to do). Three other bureau comrades (Tyson, Samuels, and Morgan) did not. Is it correct for bureau comrades who are members of the Toronto branch to intervene only if they agree with an executive majority? Of course, bureau comrades who are not assigned to work in the branch must take particular care in how they intervene in the branch. But in this case we think that Morgan and Samuels did just that.

In any event, comrades on the executive made their decision on the basis of their own evaluation of the problem and of the discussion itself rather than lining up behind one or another group of bureau comrades. The main point is that the views of Morgan and Samuels were hardly the decisive factor. Nor was their intervention at the executive meeting in any way destructive, a view that we hold in spite of the fact that we strongly disagree with aspects of their position.

The discussion between the bureau and the executive was another matter. The purpose of the meeting was not to evaluate the proposal of the branch executive to dissolve the fraction but to discuss whether or not its report violated any norms. Since several comrades on the bureau or in the executive thought so, it was obvious that we needed to discuss their concerns. We have never had a discussion on this question in the RWL; the RWG and the ISA had very different traditions in this respect, and the particular concerns expressed in Samuels' report were extremely serious.

Most comrades on the bureau and on the executive did not agree that the report to the branch conference was a violation of the comrades' democratic rights. (The question of the "norms" of the discussion is quite a different matter.) The way in which the discussion was polarized at the joint bureau-executive meeting prevented a discussion of the serious concerns of Samuels, Morgan, and some of the branch comrades.

Samuels weakens some valid arguments in her report by exaggerating her case. Her most serious criticism is that "the report and discussion made a series of accusations against the comrades in the fraction without naming them and without allowing them any real opportunity to respond.... Such functioning endangers the democratic functioning of the organization and intimidates comrades from taking oppositional positions.... There is no place in the organization for making charges (of breaches of discipline) without backing them up and giving the comrades an opportunity to respond in an appropriate body."

In the first place, no charges of breaches of discipline were made against the fraction or any individual in it. The executive report pointed out that the fraction had proven unwilling or unable to collaborate with the executive and to implement its decisions prior to the branch's ratifying or rejecting the executive view.

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For example, the fraction continued to hold meetings with Latin American political organizations on questions of Latin American politics. Despite the fact that it was explained to the comrades that such discussions had to be under the direction of the bureau subcommittee and that the KWL had never discussed our line on these questions, the fraction continued to carry out this work without even collaborating with the other comrades in the fraction, one of whom was a branch organizer and on the bureau, two others of whom are on the national subcommittee on Latin American work. The majority of the fraction organized these discussions and must assume collective responsibility for them.

Were the actions of the comrades a breach of discipline which warranted charges being laid? The executive's approach was not to charge anyone with breaches of discipline but to establish that fractions do not have the autonomy to make such decisions themselves. A similar point was made in regard to the fraction's efforts to launch a defense committee despite the fact that the proposal had never been discussed with the executive and on which it knew there were serious disagreements.

We opposed the proposal in the fraction's amendment that part of its tasks should be to address the perspectives for the Latin American revolution and proposed alternatively that this be done through the bureau subcommittee in collaboration with the Latin American comrades in the branch.

Our experience had been that we had been unable to resolve this and similar problems with the fraction. We were convinced, and had previously argued in branch bulletin No. 8, that this method of functioning damaged our relations with other organizations. Therefore, we concluded that the problem should be laid before the branch so that it could decide which approach was correct.

Wasn't the branch, after all, the appropriate body to make such decisions? And why couldn't the comrades respond to the executive's criticisms and political positions? Why had they also avoided answering them in their balance sheet of the Blanco tour, which we argued had been a near disaster in Toronto, yet successful almost everywhere else?

The comrades of the fraction didn't respond because, in bulletin No. 8 as well as at the branch conference, they decided to centre the debate on their proposed perspectives rather than to address our criticisms directly. As to whether the report intimidated comrades from taking "oppositional positions," there certainly has been no indication of that; either at the branch conference or since.

Over the course of many months in trying to conduct a political discussion on some of our differences either within the Blanco Tour Committee of the branch, in the Latin American fraction, in the immigrant and ethnic committee, or with some of these comrades and the executive, comrades were accused of being bureaucrats, of having broken discipline, and worse. The executive felt that this mode of discussion was intolerable and extremely destructive. Again it decided not to proceed by laying charges but rather to place a problem which it had been unable to resolve before the branch.

It was not a violation of the comrades' rights that the report did not name the individual comrades involved in the specific instances which were detailed in it. The report argued that the executive was not interested in assigning individual responsibility for these problems which it felt were characteristic of the fraction's functioning. We wanted to avoid centring the discussion around particular individuals.

Obviously, we did not succeed. Therefore, we have reached the conclusion that the executive report did not lead to achieving political clarity but instead exacerbated an already difficult situation.

The RWL is quite heterogenous in terms of norms of functioning, branch organization, the role of leadership, etc. We have found differences on these issues to be far more contentious than on most questions of political perspectives and program.

We had never had a general discussion on these issues in the branch but instead had operated with a basically pragmatic approach to questions of branch organization and norms. It was clear to the executive that the time had come when the branch had to begin to discuss these questions and decide on some very limited, but basic aspects of our functioning.

However, to attempt to deal with political, normative, and organizational questions within a single report, especially a report whose main conclusion was to dissolve the fraction, inevitably led to an extremely unclear discussion.

A significant number of comrades in the branch found it very difficult to come to grips with the report and discussion. Eventually, a small majority voted to refer the whole question back to the executive, while a large majority voted against the fraction's amendment on tasks and for the executive proposal.

Furthermore, by including a series of examples of what the executive considered to be unacceptable actions by individual comrades in the fraction, the stakes were raised even further. We don't think that whether the comrades were named or not was the main problem here. The point is that this problem should have been dealt with in another discussion which was completely separated from the debate about our Latin American work.

Instead, the nature of the executive report put the comrades in the fraction and in the branch in a very difficult position—especially since it centred on a proposal to dissolve a fraction. While the members of the fraction must assume a great deal of responsibility for the executive's inability to discuss, much less resolve, the problems in this area of work, the executive still had the main responsibility for leading a discussion which would allow the membership to come to terms with the political questions involved.

We agree with Samuels that we must not conduct our discussions in this manner. To say that is one thing. But to suggest that the report was a violation of comrades' democratic rights is quite another.

In a branch of this size, with a whole number of key political and organizational questions yet unresolved, it is very difficult to be able to ensure that the entire branch can assume political responsibility for our interventions and our collective functioning. For example, the executive had tried on several occasions to get the discussion on the Hugo Blanco Tour balance sheets into the branch, but couldn't—either because the comrades in the fraction weren't prepared to give their report, or because other discussions intervened. For example, at one meeting where the balance sheet report was scheduled, the branch, including the comrades in the fraction, voted to cancel it in order to have more time to discuss a report from the immigrant and ethnic committee. Because of the unwieldy size of the branch and the number of interventions, we have often been faced with such difficult choices.

This situation is not the most conducive to our ability to maximize the democratic functioning of the branch while maintaining our ability to act decisively. The executive has been quite conscious of that contradiction though it has not found it easy to resolve. Undoubtedly, it has made errors in this regard and will probably do so again in the future.

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Comrades must feel free to be critical of executive proposals when they disagree--as they certainly have up until now. But we will not go very far in assuming collective responsibility for coming to terms with a very difficult situation, if "blame" is laid on individual comrades, on the branch organizers, or on the entire leadership. Nor does it help either when comrades make sweeping generalizations about these errors, nor when those criticized respond in a defensive or self-justifying way.

Perhaps now that the initial heat has died down all comrades will seriously reconsider their positions and approach discussions of our differences and our problems in a more balanced way.

An additional note

Connolly suggests that comrade Mackenzie was "in essence asking the branch to act as a faction against Tendency A" and that he argued a "certain course of action in order to prevent the growth of Tendency A." This is a very serious criticism which is based on Connolly's interpretation of what Mackenzie was saying "in essence."

Comrade Mackenzie argued that the discussion around the norms of functioning of the organization was not only a discussion of the problems of the Toronto branch but was a major debate in the IOR. He felt that a decision to dissolve the Latin American fraction would exacerbate that debate and be widely misinterpreted in the organization. His argument was that this was a factor which the branch executive should take into account, especially given that such a tendency might well become pan-Canadian in scope.

We agree that Mackenzie should not have introduced this question into the executive's discussion. However, we also agree that the fact that the differences around questions of leadership and branch functioning are so contentious throughout the organization should have been considered by the executive. To interpret Mackenzie as asking the branch to act as a faction against Tendency A is, in our view, completely unjustified. It raises the stakes in this debate even further and does nothing to help us resolve the problems in front of us.

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