

A PRELIMINARY APPRAISAL OF THE STATE OF THE STUDENT MOVEMENT AND OUR WORK WITHIN IT.

For the student fraction. Bezant, 21/6/79

Introduction

Part of drawing up this balance sheet is to develop our understanding and analysis of the nature and character of the student movement. Such an approach has underpinned much of the work of the student commission over the past year as we have tried to come to grips with the effects of the general downturn in the class struggle in the past period and the specific effects of the "democratisation" strategy of the leadership of the NUS. Our general approach to these has been put forward in previous documents to the fraction - "The student movement today and how we intervene in it" and "The development of our intervention in the student movement". Integral to such discussions is the ability of the IMG to implement the conclusions that are drawn. This constitutes another major thread running through the discussions of the commission, the initial conclusions of which were outlined in the document "A sober assessment of the state of the student work of the IMG". It is in this context that the present document should be considered.

The state of the student movement

At the beginning of the year we recognised that many politically conscious students were beginning to look outside of the union structures for a means to become involved in activity around the general political questions of the day. We saw this as flowing from the inability of the NU<sup>U</sup> leadership to put forward a strategy capable of defending students' interests. This was seen in a two-fold way. Firstly, the mass involvement of students in the ANL and in such mobilisations as that around Windscale. Secondly, in the failure to generalise the rent strikes at the start of this academic year, the failure to take a clear position in defence of student union autonomy in the face of the DES proposals. The local campaigns that were taken up tended to be around rent increases and canteen prices where students were asking for a "fair deal", i.e. that price increases should not exceed the rate of increase of the grant.

Despite the upturn in the level of working class struggle over the winter, this general demobilisation of the student movement continued through the second term. The overseas students occupations remained isolated, less than 3000 students turned out on the grants demo. The lack of activity in the colleges around the general election was not an exception but rather a continuation of the low level of activity in campaigns and the low level of involvement in structured political discussion. This latter is, in turn, seen reflected in the voting patterns nationally and locally. At national conference where the voting figures for both the SSA and SWSO were erratic, swinging from one to the other. In area votes, where the SSA has generally done somewhat better than the SWSO, the same thing applies. In the LSO elections SWSO tied with the BL for the sabbatical and the SSA got 2 ordinary seats. We have to be clear that these votes were cast against the BL and not for the programme of the SSA or SWSO. The general conclusion we draw is that the radicalisation that has taken place amongst sections of the student movement has not been structured by any of the existing political formations in the student movement. A partial exception to the assessment made above is found in the women's campaign. The development of the campaign against rape and violence against women which saw the NUS backing a women only march of the Women's Liberation Movement, and the establishment of the right of women to self-organisation within the NUS represent a significant step forward for the student movement through the success of a campaign of which we are the leadership.

Within the framework of this general assessment we need to pay more detailed attention to 2 developments - the Left Alliance and the shifts in the FE sector.

The Left Alliance

The formation of the Left Alliance marks the first organisational consolidation of the shift to the right contained in the strategy of the CP. The fact that the BE leadership not only succeeded in carrying this through but did so by dropping all reference to socialism, further watering down the position on student union autonomy, refusing to take any 'controversial' decisions (eg nuclear power) and attempting to drop any anti-imperialist perspective in international work indicates a number of things. Firstly, that they have succeeded in shifting the framework for political debate to the right and in so doing have taken the first step towards institutionalising the strategy of "democratisation". Secondly, that the new alliance is, at the present time at least, unstable. The political shifts, indicated above, that were made to draw in the ULS resulted in a fairly sharp polarisation mainly articulated by the Scottish BL but also involving some dissident CP members and

articulated by the Scottish BL but also involving some dissident CP members and some independants and NOLS members. More concretely, the Scottish BL refused to join the new alliance pending their own conference, and members of the leadership of NOLS indicated that they would not have the same kind of 'loyalty' to the new alliance as they had to the old BL. As well as these immediate problems of stability, it is clear that the Left Alliance could also face problems when faced with the need to pose practical initiatives to defend students from Tory attacks. However, a tendency to fragment is not the only result of the lack of a clear strategy. It also leaves ample room for left rhetoric. This would be very much the case if, for example, they considered they were in danger of being outflanked by the SSA on the issue of overseas students. We must also recognise the possibility of a resurgence of the anti cuts movement, particularly in relation to a possible alliance between the new LA and the TU bureaucracy eg the role of a 'Left', Kinnock, as shadow education minister. So, in general, whilst it is true to say that the new alliance is not very stable at the moment, it would be a mistake to underestimate their capacity to key into and derail an upsurge of activity against the Tory attacks.

#### The F.E. Sector.

The youth radicalisation of last summer involved many FE students, particularly in the ANL. Trying to take up this activity in their colleges led many into conflict with their college principals. The class character of FE students and the under-development of FE student unions has been discussed in some detail in previous documents. Suffice it to say here that in a number of cases the initial involvement in the ANL led onto struggles around the autonomy of student unions in the FE colleges, especially their right to discuss and organise around politics. The failure of the BL leadership to lead a campaign to defend and extend FE union autonomy led a significant, but not overwhelming, section of FE students to break sharply from the BL. In some cases, particularly in London, this has resulted in moves towards the self-organisation of FE students. The establishment of the Provisional LSO came from a deep hostility to the BL in the leadership positions of the LSO and a recognition of the fact that if the LSO was not going to support their struggles then FE students should support each other. Again, this is not based on any particular political programme and, in fact, cuts across a number of traditional divisions eg the Prov LSO involves independants, SSA supporters and SWSO supporters. That is, the main foundation is anti-BL sentiment. However, the national FE's conference which has been called by the Prov LSO indicates that there is an understanding of the need to extend this self-organisation and could also provide a means by which the SSA can demonstrate and win support for its politics. This involves mobilising the SSA in the areas to build the conference, to provide resources to aid the attendance of FE students and to make sure that SSA FE students go to it with a perspective of arguing for the transformation of the Prov LSO into a national FE's action group.

The importance of the FE sector as the decisive sector, politically and numerically, in the fight for the leadership of the NUS has been discussed elsewhere. Having recognised this some 2 or 3 years ago, we are now making some gains in those areas where it was possible to turn towards the FE's and the area structures. In this, the SSA has been more successful than SWSO but in reality all we have done is begin to relate to the opportunities which have been opened up by the objective situation. In no way do area elections involve the mass of students, nor are they likely to in the immediate future. Nevertheless, we need to recognise the opportunities that exist and develop a strategy for the FE sector.

#### The state of the SSA

The alienation of the mass of students from the union structures had its impact upon a substantial layer of the vanguard and was seen mainly in the pressures towards localism. After all, what is the point of fighting for the leadership of a national organisation that does not relate to the mass of students? In this framework, we recognised that the major weakness of the SSA was the lack of a central leadership capable of carrying through national initiatives and keying into new developments. The problems this caused came to the fore during the first term of this academic year - the lack of direction, the lack of internal leadership and democratic structures (functioning structures at least), the lack of policy for action as well as for submission to NUS conference, the failure to carry out any of the decisions relating to a unity offensive with SWSO. The lack of a clear political direction meant that the SSA was on the defensive in responding to accusations of being an electoral alliance, and failed to pose initiatives for linking up with broad layers

of students. All of this reinforced the confusion over the character of the SSA with many militants seeing it as a revolutionary group rather than as a pole of attraction for class conscious militants breaking with the collaborationist strategy of the BL.

Having recognised this, which is discussed in more detail in previous documents, we decided to go on the offensive around these political questions at the Manchester conference of the SSA. Generally what we tried to do was correct - to turn the SSA outwards through collective discussion on policy and national political campaigns. What we did not fully appreciate was the consequences of the lack of common political debate and perspective in the SSA. That is, that in the absence of discussion etc there is a tremendous pressure towards line ups taking place on the basis of who you know ie a tendency towards the development of cliques. So, when we tried to open up discussion on the political basis of the SSA that discussion didn't really take place. A major contributing factor to this was our failure to produce a paper outlining our political analysis and conclusions. An additional factor was that having decided to caucus openly at the conference we then made the error of being extremely cagey about what we had said at the caucus. These are the factors which led up to the explosion over the slate for the NIS executive elections, to the very public split in the SSA and the divided slate for the executive elections.

Although we would not have deliberately chosen to go through the split that occurred we can say that in many ways the experience has actually strengthened the SSA. The clearest example of this has been the way the SSA prepared for the Left Alliance conference with a national meeting to discuss the intervention, a caucus on the eve of the conference and a caucus during it to make a collective political assessment. This enabled the SSA to intervene forcefully in most of the debates at the conference to such good effect that attempts by various BL members to marginalise the SSA failed. What this marks is a move from decisions based on who you know to political discussion. This can be seen again in the emphasis that is being placed upon the policy working groups in the SSA, which means that the SSA is closer than it has been previously to having policy. What we have to learn from this is that preparation for the SSA conference in October has to begin now and the IMG has to contribute to the discussion on perspectives in a written form. The preparation for and experience of the next conference could be the launching pad for a new relationship between the IMG and the SSA.

Generally, we can say that the SSA is in a reasonable state to move forward. Certainly, it is in a stronger position than seemed possible 3 or 4 months ago. Yet, there is no basis whatsoever for complacency. The overall balance sheet is negative - no national campaigns, no unity offensive in practice, a decline in the involvement of women in the discussions and leadership of the SSA, no system of press. What we can say, however, is that the situation is now such as opens up the possibility of overcoming these problems. The steering committee is beginning to develop as a collective body. Working over the summer, the policy groups could prepare serious policy discussions and propaganda material for the SSA. The local groups have developed to an extent that it is possible to talk about a stable system of press, including pamphlets on specific topics. Electorally, the SSA is in a better position in the colleges and areas than SW30 and has a basis to implement central campaigns and develop a strong relationship with FE students. These are the tasks to which the national committee (in July) and the national conference have to address themselves.

#### The state of the IMG student fraction

The over-sectoralisation of the student fraction has been discussed at some length and written up as an assessment to the Political Bureau. Rather than repeat all the arguments what has to be said here is that there has been no fundamental shift in the relationship of the student fraction to the IMG as a whole. Although the IMG leadership recognises this ghettoisation as a serious problem and agreed to the proposals we put forward to try and draw together the fraction, the problems have not really been solved. In fact, the developments which we analysed as underpinning the ghettoisation of student work are going to grow even more rapidly than we first estimated. That is, the decision of the Central Committee to substantially increase our implantation in industry will further move the centre of gravity of the IMG away from the student movement. Integral to the decision to "turn to industry" is the decision to move forward to launching the revolutionary youth organisation. The role of the student fraction in implementing these decisions will be discussed out more fully in the item on students and youth. All that needs to be said here is that the ghettoisation of our student intervention has continued over the past year with the practical

consequences of destabilising the development of cadre, the counterposition of "student" work to "branch" work which has led to the demoralisation and fragmentation of the student fraction, and the continuing failure of a number of branches to put resources into building the SSA (more than 2 years after it was formed). Other consequences can be seen in relation to the SSA and the NJS as a whole. The conflict of priorities has hindered the process of rebuilding the student leadership which in turn has effected the work of the fraction to the extent that we have had no independent profile within the SSA or the NJS, nor have we had any clear organisational form for our periphery. However, it would be wrong to say that over-sectoralisation was the only reason. The downturn and the changes in the student movement have had their effect on our comrades leading to a disorientation which has been exacerbated by the isolation of our student work from the central debates of the organisation. The forms taken by the youth radicalisation, and the demobilisation of the mass of students under the leadership of the BL, left us in a situation where we did not have an appropriate structure in the student movement to organise newly radicalising forces specifically around our programme. That is not to say that we haven't recruited but that we have tended to recruit more politically sophisticated militants in the second and third year in the universities and polytechnics. We have failed to recruit amongst the new layers entering the political arena - first years and FE students. Those who have come towards the IMG have done so mainly through Revolution.

Overall, we have to say that we have managed to stumble through this year without a major catastrophe but also without making significant gains. The development of the discussion on youth has aided us in understanding the problems faced by the student fraction and, as with the other aspects of our work, we can say we have the opportunity to overcome the current problems and move forward.

#### In conclusion

The launching of the Left Alliance has shifted the political line up in the NJS to the right at a time when the student movement will be facing vicious attacks from the Tories on their standard of living, on the education system, on the right of students to organise. As yet, students and their organisations, the student unions, remain intact despite the weakening that has occurred as a result of the policies of the BL/LA leadership. The radicalisation of new forces particularly in the FE sector (albeit numerically small as yet) indicates that students retain the potential for organising in a mass way not only around their own specific demands but also around the general political questions of the day. Having gone through a process of political clarification, the new balance of forces in the NJS and the new situation in society following the election of the Tories place the IMG and the SSA (as the basis for the class struggle left wing) in a position to win over student militants to the strategy of an independent student movement based on mass action in alliance with the working class, and increasingly to the programme of the Fourth International. To carry out this potential we need to learn the lessons of the past year indicated in this balance sheet. That is to put politics first not only in discussions but in practice through national campaigns and the development of policy. Essential to this is carrying out the unity offensive, to involve SWSO and some of the dissident layers of the BL and CP in putting forward an alternative to the Left Alliance. Complementary to this, we have to transform the present 'practical' leadership of the IMG in the SSA (eg. the team organising the SSA intervention at last NJS conf consisted almost exclusively of IMG members by default rather than by choice) into a political leadership based on common experience of political discussion and campaigns. The new student leadership should spend the summer period preparing the student fraction to meet these tasks and there should be another meeting of the fraction in September to discuss out the perspectives in detail.

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