

*These notes are written simply to help comrades prepare for one of the aspects of the Review discussion on Dogmatism and Sectarianism taking place on 19 and 20 July. They are designed to stimulate discussion and are just notes, not a document of policy.*

### **Not a few blind spots but a fundamentally flawed tradition**

2.1. Did the CWI have some blind spots or was the CWI fundamentally flawed, with a narrow, limited, and inadequate version of Marxism? The inability of the CWI to analyse or deal with the issues and complications thrown up in this unprecedented period of capitalist crisis, suggests it is the latter.

2.2. There are some positives to register, but it is much more the case that we have to recognise the incorrect and bad aspects, in which we have been trained over many years and which we have to remove if we are to move forward on the basis of a better and deeper Marxist approach. Something needs to be overcome, not just in the past but in our present, and that can only be done with a very

conscious approach and hence the importance of this discussion.

### **A defence of the working class**

2.3. Supposedly a hallmark and the key positive about the CWI was its defence of the working class as the agency for fighting capitalism and achieving socialism. The famous example of how Peter T challenged Mandel on this issue at a meeting in London in 1968 was repeated regularly enough in the CWI. The general context was the poor approaches of the forces in the Fourth International, where the different groupings and leaders had put forward the idea that the working class was no longer the agency for change and had now been replaced by students or by various national liberation struggles, or even that some of the newly formed Stalinist states. They also focused on the issues of oppression or a combination of these and represented them as the basis for the future of the revolutionary movement.

2.4. We should resist the temptation to take the historically poor and imbalanced positions of the Fourth International at the time as a basis to overstate the strengths politically of the CWI in correctly defending a basic tenet of Marxism. It was important that such a defence was made, but in defending the agency of the working class it seems there existed/developed a prejudice against issues of oppression as if such a focus constituted a deviation from Marxism.

2.5. When the IS of the CWI produced a document in the context of the dispute in 2018/2019, they included a really rigid and dogmatic analysis of students, and how students are not working class. How once they step into a college, even if they come from working class backgrounds, they change in that instant. This at a time when many, many students are not only from working class backgrounds, but who work while attending college/university.

2.6. In the same dispute, the CWI basically argued that women were very close to achieving equality. How unbelievably backward, but also detached from reality such a statement was. Considering that it relates to the circumstances of half of the working class, such claims undermine any boast of being completely connected to the working class.

### **Economistic/workeristic**

2.7. The CWI was working class in its composition and it played important roles in working class struggles in some countries, but there were also really problematic tendencies/approaches.

2.8. There was a tendency to go from the historic general role the working class would play, to believing it was appropriate to tolerate backward attitudes that might exist among some layers of the working class rather than challenge them as part of the need to try to raise consciousness. We should look at the arguments of the CWI against affirmative action for minorities, for example, and question whether they were rooted in maintaining the status quo for current workers, but displayed little appreciation or sensitivity to the realities of the discrimination that minorities faced.

2.9. There was a tendency to only put forward things that you felt workers could unite around and not deal with issues that might be contentious or might be divisive. Did this help create or was it reflective of an economistic and workerist approach?

2.10. In an Irish context, did we sometimes not deal with sectarian or backward attitudes from one side for fear of alienating some working class people and supposedly thereby damage the prospects of workers' unity?

2.11. In a glaring way, the inability of our former comrades in Israel to call what was happening a genocide and in a much more clear and direct categorise and challenge the actual reactionary attitudes that exist in Israeli society at this time are fundamental errors and is an example of where such an approach can lead.

### **Perspectives and the need for a critical Marxist analysis**

2.12. If you read through much of the material of the CWI, there is often an absence of a scientific or critical assessment of the working class and its consciousness, and in this it often is in contrast and of a different quality to that of Lenin or Trotsky or other writers, when they are trying to estimate a particular situation or the attitudes of working class people. At discussions in the CWI, if you were trying to critically assess a situation or pose questions regarding the position or consciousness of the working class, there was often a pushback on the basis that you're being too negative and you're actually undermining the working class itself by raising such points.

2.13. The CWI fell into the trap, particularly in latter years, of mistaking the task of trying to develop perspectives on a Marxist basis, with the promotion of its basic programme, which is a positive advocacy of the role the working class can play.

2.14. Instructive is a quote related to the controversy that existed in the Labour Party in the 1980s about whether black sections, platforms where people of colour could organise in the Labour Party etc, should or should not be established. The Militant opposed black sections. This is from public material: "Many of the filthy prejudices that thrive in capitalist society must inevitably rub off onto some workers...The labour movement, however, by its very nature does not base itself on these prejudices, but stands implacably opposed to them."

2.15. This is basically implying that the labour movement is able to defy the laws of political gravity and doesn't reflect the racism of capitalist society, that the Labour Party is organically and inherently not racist. This points towards a romantic view of the working class and the organisations of the working class, and borders on an idealist view, as if these questions had become articles of faith. It is an attribute of Marxism to be positive and to be able to point a way forward. However what existed in the CWI and the Militant/SP in Britain went beyond that and led to a distortion of analysis and increasingly to an inability to assess and develop an accurate perspective.

2.16. In general you can still go forward with such "positivity" when the working class movement is strong and consciousness is going forward. However, things can become difficult when there are defeats and retreats, as there is a predisposition not to fully recognise the negative, at least not in a formal and public way. The defeats that the working class, and indeed the Militant suffered in the 1980s, and in particular the collapse of the Stalinist regimes from the late 80s and early 90s, completely challenged the idealised view that the Militant had of the working class and movement.

**Defeats and the ongoing impact of the collapse of the Stalinist regimes - a wrong perspective and a wrong framework**

2.17. The CWI did not understand the significance of the defeats of the 1980s, nor understand the significance and the ongoing impact that the collapse of Stalinism has had. What essentially opened up in the 1990s was not what was expected. This was the time of the factional battle with Ted G etc, and of the "Open Turn". But if you read the documents on the Open Turn, while they were politically correct in analysing the changes in the Labour Party regarding the feasibility of successful entrism work, in general there was an absence of a developed analysis of the broader conditions in which the International would be taking its open turn into.

2.18. While the CWI relatively quickly registered the setback to class forces that the collapse of Stalinism represented, it completely underestimated the depth of the impact this would have on the organisation and the consciousness of the working class, factors that are still present today. The material produced during the open turn debate barely mentioned this broader context, and the impact of the collapse of Stalinism. For a while Militant in Britain in particular put forward the slogan, "Forward to the Red 90s".

2.19. The International never recovered from the wrong perspectives and framing of perspectives that developed around this time, including the increasingly rigid and imbalanced model of the "Dual Task". This is one of the many issues from our past that is potentially in our present. Does an unMarxist wishful thinking exist in any of our analyses or approaches re the labour movement or the working class. Have we fully replaced the kind of 1950s portrayal of the working class with a real understanding of the modern working class with all its diversity etc, much or most of it unorganised?

2.20. Completely underestimating the actual knocking back of consciousness, the CWI proved incapable of actually having a discussion about the problems of consciousness, particularly in the 2000s, but also in the 1990s.

2.21. The CWI and the SP in England and Wales inevitably became increasingly disconnected from the working class. No amount of positions in trade unions, that were themselves becoming increasingly removed from the working class, compensated for this but instead acted to camouflage the disconnection. In such a situation, perspectives inevitably became dry and routinist repetitions. How can you develop a perspective for the working class you are disconnected from, operating off an idealised view of the same class?

2.22. This is not to mention that this bias, this workeristic view led to an inability to see or an aversion to the development of struggles around oppression and the new feminist wave of the last fifteen years or so.

## **Examples of dogmatism and sectarianism of the CWI**

2.23. The perspectives that were put forward in regard to the dual task were in general not realised. They were expecting the dynamics of working-class struggle of the 50s, 60s, 70s and 80s to be a repeated, failing to take account of a new period. Economic crisis would lead to struggle, struggle would lead to radicalisation, that would lead to a desire for political organisation, and the difference this time being that instead of going to a compromised LP, the working class, mostly via the trade unions, would establish new parties.

2.24. Towards the end of 2015, by accident, Jeremy Corbyn was elected the leader of the Labour Party. Essentially within the following year, the membership of the Labour Party had surged, and there were more than 600,000 people in the Labour Party in Britain, mostly young people. Obviously, this was hugely significant, but the SP in England and Wales did not in any decisive way turn to these young people and to this situation. There was a tendency to be dismissive of this radicalisation; there was reference to most of the young people being middle class. The assertion was made, unsubstantiated with argument, that a new party was imminent out of the mess that would inevitably unfold in the LP when the rightwing fought back.

2.25. Jump ahead two years to 2018 and the dispute between the IS and the Irish section around the issue of abortion and repeal of the ban on abortion in Ireland. To remind comrades, the party in Ireland, Rosa and our comrade Ruth C, were absolutely essential to the achievement of abortion rights in Ireland, probably the biggest social victory in the history of the State. And it's an example of sectarianism that can barely be matched that within weeks of this, the IS had launched an attack on the Irish organisation precisely because we played a role in such a victory for women and they feared that Rosa groups would now be established throughout the International, which for them and their biased orientation, would have been a disaster. So the socialist feminist work of the Irish section had to be challenged and undermined.

2.26. There is a quote from a document that they produced, "Probably a big majority of the young people who became active in the repeal movement would not have seen the trade unions as relevant to their struggle. Nonetheless, as part of educating them about the role of the organised working class we think it would have been important to have had a concerted campaign to put demands on the trade union leaders to organise campaigns and action for the right to abortion, along with campaigns in the workplaces."

2.27. So, just as a reminder, we played a critical role in a campaign that won. And if we had implemented what the IS advocated after the event, as they made no comment

before or during the actual battle, we would have gone into a cul de sac, wasted our precious time and energy and possibly detailed our very focused approach, and not had the victory that we had. This kind of insistence on conducting struggle, regardless of the circumstances, through the trade union movement is a definition, a case study in the most abstract dogmatism and sectarianism.

2.28. What was supposedly a strength - a defence of the working class - became a distorted caricature of the working class and reflective of an idealist view, rather than dealing with reality. And if you're not connected to the working class, how are you going to develop real perspectives for working class struggle or development or general perspectives? And as time went on the CWI proved incapable of doing it, increasingly the perspectives were completely hollow repetition of an outdated framework for perspectives.

### **We should have challenged the IS/CWI at a much earlier phase**

2.29. To quote a document that some comrades in the Platform in Belgium wrote, "Any Marxist thinker or tendency can commit errors of perspectives and analysis. However, failure to acknowledge this openly, analyse it and correct it, elevates the error to the rank of bad method." To be clear, this is correct, but what flows from this is that all comrades who were active over years in the CWI are guilty of the bad method being referred to, because this character in the CWI was there for decades and we didn't challenge it.

2.30. At some point in the 1990s and certainly by the 2000s, there was the basis to challenge the bad approaches and the political weaknesses. Why that did not happen should be thoroughly discussed. However, the fact that such a struggle was not waged was a reflection of our political and theoretical weakness. In a sense it is a comment on the character of the CWI, but we must take responsibility for our own mistakes.

### **Exaggeration and top down methods**

2.31. There was a massive political arrogance, similar to that which develops from religious certainty, as well as a real issue with ego in the leadership of the CWI. The leadership believed that Marxism, but also the Militant had achieved historic conquests, and that they, the IS and PT in particular, constituted a leadership capable of carrying through the revolution, it was just a question of being patient with events.

2.32. What is being outlined here was most developed/exaggerated as the approach in the leadership of the CWI, the SP in EW but also existed to one degree or another in all the sections of the CWI. If you went then into the different sections, there would be reflections of it, but it would be in degrees, with some very heavy reflections of it, some to a lesser, but still to a significant degree.

2.33. This was connected and led to a top down version of democratic centralism. They felt they had something to protect, the modern day representation of Lenin and Trotsky and the Bolsheviks - and it was a question of not losing it. They did not do this by waging a political and theoretical struggle. There was no real openness to engaging on different political issues. Doing that might run the risk of the reintroduction of bourgeois or petty bourgeois ideology into the movement. So there was a tendency towards being insular and more a closed and undemocratic approach.

2.34. There was talk of the idea of building collective leaderships, but very little in practice. Instead there was the extolling of the virtues of the PT model/type of general secretary, overly personalised and operating over several decades. There was actually a focus on "leaders" or working through people designated as those who would become the leaders in different countries, usually male.

2.35. There were definitely strong cultish elements and cult of personalities in the CWI. While there was an approach of discussing the work politically, there was also an approach of undue pressurising, and guilting people re the work and the tasks in a way that was not necessarily or at all commensurate with what flowed from the objective conditions. The way in which financial collections were done inside the CWI was cultish. You can still make all the points about the necessity for sacrifice and all the political points, but this idea of calling out names of those who gave large donations was an attempt to manipulate the mood in the room and maximise a collection, it is cultish.

### **Away from a genuinely transitional approach**

2.36. At certain stages. there was a good working class composition and orientation and there was a good implementation of a transitional method and programme. Again, that began to change, and particularly from the 2000s.

2.37. At a discussion/debate at the National Committee in Dublin in 2016 about programme there was a particular discussion about whether a key aspect of the transitional method and programme was the need to link or root the key issues of the day to capitalism, exposing that capitalism was responsible and had to be defeated etc. Representatives of the IS at the meeting argued that such an expose of capitalism was less important than the need to mention socialism in our material, as part of popularising it and the ideas of socialism.

2.38. However, if you just deal with issues on the one hand and then jump to the mention of socialism on the other, you are not really raising the consciousness of workers and young people on the need to resist, organise and defeat capitalism itself.

There is not a strong and developed understanding of what capitalism is, consciousness has been pushed back compared to earlier periods.

2.39. In fact there tends to be a significant underestimation of capitalism by people broadly, so this is a crucial aspect of the work of a revolutionary party and of the transitional method. Also it is only possible to build a developed understanding of what socialism is or what a socialist approach is, if first there is an understanding of capitalism - one flows from the other.

2.40. Essentially this approach points backwards towards the minimum maximum approach of social democracy, which the transitional programme transcended. If you go and look at the public material and certainly the electoral material, for example, produced by the SP in EW, you will see this tendency, a focus on immediate issues, little explanation and then perhaps a mention of socialism with little attempts to develop the bridge or lines of argument of a transitional approach.

### **The need for a theoretical struggle**

2.41. "What is to be done" in many ways seems to be becoming more relevant as time goes by. In it Lenin spends an amount of time talking about the need for a constant theoretical struggle, that a revolutionary party needs to be guided by the most advanced ideas, "Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement." This approach was absent in the CWI, particularly experiencing a theoretical decline from the 1980s on.

2.42. So one of the things we need to do, in a balanced way, is to break the idea of frenetic activity, which was part of the CWI, and have a more balanced political approach that is sustainable and developed. There is a backlog of issues that needs theoretical consideration, and ground conquered fifty or a hundred years ago needs to be reconquered in this period

### **In summary, the CWI in a few paragraphs**

2.43. The CWI claim as a badge of honour that they defend the working class as the agency for defeating capitalism and for socialist change. But their view of the working class in reality was rigid, conservative, superficial and became idealist in character.

2.44. They could get away with this political weakness because they had made good decisions regarding orientating to the mass organisations of the working class, and so were well positioned to grow substantially when there was a radicalisation and crisis in these organisations in the 70s and 80s.

2.45. However, when the Labour and Social-Democratic parties went over completely to capitalism and the active link with the working class was broken, and the trade union leaders refused to fight, the CWI increasingly lost its connection with the working class and was not capable of finding new paths to the most radicalised and active elements and in general first suffered a decline and then stagnation.

2.46. While the CWI recognised that capitalism had been restored in the USSR and Eastern Europe, it completely underestimated the depth of the blow that this would have on an ongoing basis to working class consciousness and organisation. In a deterministic way they expected that economic crisis would propel the working class and youth to fight, creating a recovery of consciousness and organisation. The idea of the Dual Task had a basis but was a superficial expectation that previous working class dynamics would repeat themselves, but this time not via the traditional parties, but via the establishment of new formations. While some new parties were formed, in general this perspective did not materialise, and what was formed did not prove to be vehicles for mass struggle or radicalisation.

2.47. From the late 1990s on the CWI in general was characterised by a theoretical, political and organisational decline and an inability to analyse consciousness and perspectives except on a very superficial basis. As their perspectives again failed to materialise, they retreated to an increasingly dogmatic point of view, refused to orientate to or didn't see the new movements that developed and increasingly broke with a genuine transitional method and adopted more a minimum/maximum approach to programme.

2.48. After an initial and limited battle against the IS of the CWI, the leadership of the ISA, who rode the opposition to the IS so they could secure the leadership of the new international, stunted political discussion and a real Review of the real lessons of the split. This was because they wanted to become the new leadership but they in fact in general agreed with the politics and methods of the IS/CWI. Their own dogmatism was demonstrated in their own idealism re the working class - "The working class is back" and in regard to their very rigid portrayal of the New Cold War relations.