

This is the final version of the DC report as amended and passed by the DC Conference.

Commission on Party Democracy

STATEMENT OF GENERAL PRINCIPLES

The Democracy Commission was charged by Party Conference with reviewing the totality of the SWP's structures and processes of debate and decision making and producing proposals, to be submitted to a Special Conference, for improving and enhancing the party's overall culture of democracy and accountability.

The establishment of the DC reflected the widespread view in the party that recent events, especially with regard to the split in Respect and subsequent divisions in the Central Committee, revealed certain deficiencies in these areas and that as a result the CC had become to some extent out of touch with the membership.

The DC has undertaken a substantial survey of grassroots opinion in the party, receiving many written submissions from comrades and visiting every district (where possible with two of its members) to listen to members' opinions.

Democracy Commission meetings have been held in these areas: Aberdeen, Birmingham, Brighton, Bristol, Cardiff, Cambridge, Cornwall and Devon, Dundee, Edinburgh, East London, Glasgow, Hackney, Harlow, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, North London, North West London, Portsmouth, Preston, Sheffield, South London, South East London, Southampton, St. Albans, Swansea, Walthamstow, West London, Whitstable

This report is written on the basis of this survey and our own quite extensive deliberations. The DC has conducted this review within the framework of the political perspectives and policies determined by Party Conference, the party's sovereign body, and the revolutionary Marxist tradition, including the fundamental strategic aim of building a mass revolutionary workers party on Leninist lines (ultimately on a world scale).

We therefore reaffirm the principle of democratic centralism i.e. the ongoing

effort to combine democratic decision making with unity in action. Both these elements are essential not just for effective party organisation but because they correspond to the basic needs of the working class struggle.

Party democracy is essential because the working class, our class, is the democratic class, the principle bearer of democratic values and norms in society, and the overwhelming majority of its organisations (parties, unions, associations, campaigns etc) are conceived and constructed (at least initially) on democratic lines.

Democracy is essential because the emancipation of the working class is the act of the working class itself – an inherently democratic process. We stand for revolution and socialism from below. Democracy is essential because without democratic training party members will not be able to work, argue and lead successfully in the wider working class movement.

It is essential also for correct leadership: only on basis of democratic debate and input from the party rank and file can the party leadership or the party as a whole hope to estimate correctly the mood of the class, and the best way forward in the concrete situation.

Unity in action in implementing decisions is equally necessary. In its struggle against the bourgeoisie and its state the working class faces an enemy that is economically, politically and militarily highly centralised. To wage this struggle the working class must always strive to achieve the highest possible unity in its ranks: at the level of the workplace, the union, the industry, the nation and ultimately the globe. Likewise the party requires unity in action in order to maximise the effectiveness of its influence within the class and its struggle for the leadership of the class, especially against political opponents within the workers' movement, such as the reformists and Labourites who, ultimately, are agents of bourgeois influence within the class.

Unity in action i.e. an element of party discipline, is also an essential democratic principle in that it ensures that the will of the party majority is actually implemented. The Labour Party used to have reasonably democratic debates at its conferences but it was not a democratic party because conference decisions were routinely ignored by the party leadership. Democratic centralism means that democratic party decisions are binding on all, especially the CC and comrades playing leading roles in the struggle (unions, united fronts etc).

The essence of the principle of democratic centralism can be illustrated by means of the basic form of the class struggle, the strike. The workers concerned take a democratic decision to take industrial action and then the decision is binding – anyone who violates it is a scab.

But party democratic centralism operates not only at the level of the economic struggle but also in terms of political and

ideological struggle. If for example, the party decides, as it has done, to oppose the slogan 'British Jobs for British Workers', it is not then permissible for any member, especially a leading member, to support this slogan in a union branch, conference, student union, or other public forum.

The DC recognises the need for leadership, in the class and the party. The very project of building a revolutionary party is premised on the need for leadership, due to uneven levels of consciousness, confidence and organisation in the working class.

Obviously that unevenness does not end at the gates of the party. An effective revolutionary party needs all its members to try to lead in the class struggle and its most able members to lead inside the party at local, fractional and national level. Anarchist or libertarian rejection of leadership and authority as such leads only to unelected, undemocratic leadership and authority.

Leadership in the SWP contains elements of geographical and functional representation (the editor of *Socialist Worker* needs to be on the CC, the National Committee needs broadly to cover the country and major union fractions etc.) but fundamentally it is *political* not administrative or federal.

Just as Lenin led the Bolsheviks because of his politics not his location, so the likes of Tony Cliff, Mike Kidron and Duncan Hallas played leadership roles despite all living in North London and their lack of office management skills. Election of our leading bodies should, in the final analysis, be on a general political basis.

Also the class struggle creates many situations in which the party leadership has to respond very quickly, sometimes more or less instantly, and certainly before it is possible to organise a proper democratic debate, for example in the middle of a demonstration.

But precisely this necessity for leadership and initiative makes it all the more important that the leadership is held to democratic account by the members. This in turn requires not just formally democratic structures (we have always had those) but a genuine culture of democratic debate and decision making.

Clearly the very existence of the Democracy Commission is an acknowledgement of the fact that our democratic culture has had deficiencies and is in need of improvement. This should not surprise us and is not fundamentally the fault of individuals, on the CC or otherwise.

Capitalist society does its best to breed lack of confidence, deference and passivity in working people (just as it breeds confidence and arrogance in the children of the ruling class). This conditioning does not all evaporate on filling in a party membership form. Indeed the many pressures of daily life plus the pressures of the struggle (against the boss, the state, the media, the union leaders and so on)

can easily leave little time and energy for controlling the leaders of the SWP.

Moreover we have lived through a long period in which the main objective counterweight to these pressures, the confidence members get from leading their fellow workers and students in struggle, has been in short supply because those struggles have been in short supply. This is why the situation calls for a conscious effort to redress the balance.

The main form of democratic difficulty we have experienced has been reluctance, at all levels of the party, of comrades with sincerely held doubts and/or differences to speak up. One reason for this has been the tendency to put down dissenters so severely and comprehensively as to deter any repetition or imitation. This cannot be overcome by words alone and therefore this report will contain proposals for procedural change aimed to facilitate debate, but it seems appropriate to conclude this preamble with a clear statement of the democratic culture we want the SWP to achieve.

We therefore state unequivocally that within the boundaries of socialist principle and the party's basic programme, as expressed in What We Stand For, every member has a right, and in a sense a duty, to bring their criticisms of, or differences with, the party's policies or practice to their fellow members at branch, district and national level and to be heard with respect.

Obviously this right cannot be exercised without restraint or time limit – we debate in order to decide and act – and in no way precludes vigorous political argument, but vigorous political argument should not include personal denigration or abuse.

There should also be some regard for proportionality: comrades who happen to be in the minority should not be crushed to the point of humiliation. All party meetings – branch, district, national, CC, conference – should be conducted and chaired with this in mind. Nor should there be a fear as – with reason – there has been in the past, of exclusion, isolation or ostracism for the expression of dissident views. The Democracy Commission is united in calling for a more open, democratic culture in the SWP, conducive to the frank debate of political differences.

Of particular importance in the development of this democratic culture is the handling of disagreements within the Central Committee. For some time now the custom and practice has been for ALL differences within the CC to be hidden from the wider membership (except for close personal confidants) with all CC members presenting an image of more or less total unity until the last possible moment.

Obviously we don't want to go to the opposite extreme of every minor practical difference being brought to the NC or permanent multiple factions. But the responsible discussion of serious political differences when they arise would help educate comrades and train them in thinking for themselves.

Hand in hand with this should go the encouragement at every level – local, fractional

and national – of the practice of voting, for or against resolutions, delegates and candidates with the understanding that revolutionaries, in the party as in the wider movement, must expect to be in the majority on some questions and the small minority on others, without shame or bitterness.

The Democracy Commission attaches some importance to the question of timescale in all of this. On the one hand the intensive focus and debate on the party's structures and procedures should conclude at the 7 June conference which needs to take a series of decisions settling for the time being (at the least the next year) the main structural/procedural/constitutional matters. On the other hand the achievement of a genuine culture of debate by its nature takes time and this has to be regarded as requiring a sustained and continuing effort by the party as a whole.

What follows in this report are a series of specific proposals designed to achieve these general aims. The Democracy Commission reserves the right to make additional proposals in the light of the party discussion of its initial report.

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SECTION 1: LEADING PARTY BODIES

(i) The National Committee

The National Committee is one of the most important elected bodies in the SWP.

When it works it both reinforces the party's work and strengthens our intervention in the class struggle and the various movements we are involved in. Before comrades debate the role it plays it is important to establish its relationship with the other elected bodies of the party.

1) SWP Annual Conference and Party Council

The SWP's Annual Conference is the party's sovereign body. At present, districts elect their delegates to the conference at district wide meetings called aggregates. Every registered member of the SWP is entitled to attend the aggregate and vote. These aggregates are advertised as widely as possible. This meeting elects the del-

egates to annual conference on the ratio of one delegate per ten registered members

The Annual Conference debates party's perspectives and discusses how we as a party are going to implement them. The conference also elects the organisation's two leading bodies, the SWP Central Committee (CC) and the National Committee (NC).

Three or four times a year the SWP hold Party Councils. Made up of two members per branch (these comrades are elected at branch meetings by the members), these meetings give the party a chance to look at the changing political situation, assess how we are doing and further develop our perspectives.

Both the SWP's Annual Conference and Party Councils enable a large number of members to debate the general perspectives and allows the party to drive this through a wide section of the party.

2) The Central Committee

The Central Committee is elected once a year at the SWP's Annual Conference. In recent years it has been made up of between 10 and 14 comrades. It is a small body which, as a collective, implements and develops the party's political perspectives and organises the day-to-day running of the party.

3) The SWP National Committee

Just like the CC, the National Committee is elected at the SWP Annual Conference. The NC is not a static body and should always be reviewed in light of political developments. Democracy is not an abstract question for a revolutionary socialist party. In this political period our democratic structures have to be based around maximum participation and debate combined with the need to be the most effective.

The NC has varied in size from 50 members to 100 and is made up of comrades who either lead in the party or play key roles in their trade unions, the student movement or inside various united fronts. Comrades elect the NC at the annual conference, so ultimately the conference decides who is elected and the political shape of the body.

Broadly speaking the NC's responsibilities are threefold:

a) Raise, debate and clarify key issues facing the party.

b) Hold the Central Committee to account and raise with the leadership in a constructive way the problems facing party activists on the ground.

c) Play a leadership role inside the organisation, by both helping the CC implement the perspective and playing a leading role in the comrades' area of work and where possible in the branches and districts.

During the Democracy Commission's tour of the branches and districts a number of comrades complained about the failure of the National Committee members to

report back to their branches and districts and the failure of some comrades in reporting back debates and arguments.

The party has to make sure that NC members take their role seriously. That means every NC member is expected to and should be encouraged to raise their political concerns at NCs. It is part of their responsibility to give full reports of decisions taken and the debates had at the NC to branch/district reportback meetings.

The Democracy Commission believes that the party constitution should be amended make the NC's decisions binding on the CC. The political reality is that the CC could not ignore or defy NC decisions. Formally recognising this would help highlight the importance of the NC's role.

The Democracy Commission also debated what the size of the NC should be. Some comrades felt that it was too small and should be expanded to 100 members. Others opposed, believing that it should remain the same size. Consensus was reached that we should keep the NC the same size and not expand it.

This conclusion was reached because we felt if we want a more robust and dynamic CC, the NC has to be a size that allows comrades on it plenty of time to debate the issues raised and come back on arguments raised. If the body is too large, it limits the amount of time comrades have to debate and clarify the issues raised.

Last year we implemented a new method of electing the NC. In the run-up to Annual Conference nomination papers were published in our Internal Bulletins. Comrades were asked to get ten comrades to nominate them and send in a short political biography. This was published in IB3 and distributed to all delegates at the annual conference.

The NC is an important body, one that needs to represent many aspects of the party's work. It is hard to get a balance of NC members – young, old, student and trade union activist, movement campaigner and party builder – and importantly a geographical spread of delegates.

Rather than reduce the NC elections to a 'beauty contest', the DC would like to encourage the CC, fractions, student committee and districts to put out recommended lists (explaining to delegates why they should vote for 'Joe Blogs' or 'Mary Smith') to conference delegates. Obviously comrades would be free to vote for whom they wanted, but it would help comrades decide which newer members or trade unionists to vote for.

4) Some ideas on how to make the National Committee more effective

These ideas are offered very much in the spirit of Alan Walter's submission (see below), which was written only a few days before his tragic death:

a) At the beginning of the year the National Committee should elect a chair. This comrade would be elected for the year and

would work alongside the Central Committee drawing up the National Committee agenda. The chair would also be the first port of call for NC members to contact if they would like a particular issue raised at the NC.

b) NC members should be entitled to put other issues on the NC's agenda. This should first be raised with the NC chair and the CC. If the CC and NC chair do not believe the NC needs to debate the issue, the comrade on the NC has the right to raise it at the beginning of the NC and members of the NC should vote on whether the issue is debated.

c) The agenda for the National Committee should be sent out at least a week in advance of the body meeting. The Central Committee should also send out short documents outlining the issues the CC will be raising at the NC.

d) NC members should have the right to introduce sessions at the NC.

e) As raised above, fractions and districts should have the right to put out bulletins explaining why they are recommending comrades for the NC.

f) Fractions for our trade union and campaigns should be expected to report on their work to the NC. These should be included within general items for discussion or timetabled in over the year. Where this is not possible, written reports for the NC could be produced.

g) NC members should report back to their branches/districts after every NC. It is the right of every branch and district to have a NC report back. Any district/branch that does not have an NC member should contact the national office and it will provide an NC member to do a report back.

h) The National Secretary will produce a summary of National Committee meetings and send them to all branches. Should it not be possible for an NC member to report back to a branch the summary shall provide an overview of the discussion, issues raised and votes taken at the NC meeting.

i) NC members should be encouraged to play a political role leading and shaping our fraction and district work.

(ii) The Central Committee

The Democracy Commission agreed that the party needs a strong central political leadership but was unable to reach consensus on the best way of electing the Central Committee. Therefore they put two proposals to the vote at the DC conference. Proposal 2 received 88 votes. Proposal 1 received 130 votes and was therefore adopted.

PROPOSAL 1

We support the following proposal for electing the Central Committee, which was originally put forward by Alex Callinicos during the discussions of the Democracy Commission.

Under this proposal, the CC selects and

circulates a provisional slate at the beginning of the preconference discussion. This is then discussed at the aggregates where comrades can propose alternative slates. At the Conference itself the outgoing CC proposes a final slate (which may have changed as a result of the preconference discussion). This slate, along with any other that is supported by a minimum of five delegates, is discussed and voted on by Conference.

Here is a political explanation of why we support this proposal and disagree with the others that have been put forward or discussed. The current constitution of the Socialist Workers Party defines the role of the Central Committee as follows: 'Between Conferences the CC is entrusted with the political leadership of the organisation and is responsible for the national direction of all political and organisational work, subject to the decision-making powers of Conference.' This makes the CC an extremely powerful body – not through any abuse of power, but by conscious constitutional design.

The recent crisis in the party has exposed both serious mistakes by the CC and weaknesses in our broader democratic practices. In seeking to renew party democracy, one crucial strategic decision that we need to make is whether or not we want to do away with the centralised political leadership that the CC provides. In our view it would be very damaging to do so.

What the Respect crisis brought to a head was a tendency on the part of the CC to act on its own, in isolation of the rest of the party – as a vanguard that had lost touch with the rest of the army. What is therefore necessary is a rebalancing of the relationship between the CC and the rest of the party, and, as a crucial part of this, a major strengthening of the role and functioning of the National Committee. This stronger NC should be buttressed by the systematic use of fraction organisation in united fronts as well as trade unions.

But this necessary rebalancing should not be allowed to undermine the importance of the CC as a centralised political leadership that takes the initiative in 'the national direction of all political and organisational work'. For all the many mistakes the party and the CC have made over the years, the many successes we can be proud of derive crucially from having a strong political leadership.

Deciding where we stand on the strategic issue of what kind of leadership we want is critical to the question of how we elect the CC. There are two main criteria that any method of election we choose must meet:

(i) It must give the CC the authority to operate as a interventionist and collective political leadership of the party;

(ii) It must ensure that the CC is democratically accountable to the party as a whole, which means that elections to it can

be and are contested.

The present method of election, where the outgoing CC recommends a slate that Conference votes on, has apparently fallen down on criterion (ii). Two contested elections since the late 1970s is hardly impressive from a democratic point of view. But we doubt whether this is a necessary consequence of this method of election. The first time it was used in our organisation, in 1975, Paul H led a revolt by the organisers that knocked four people off the official slate of ten.

In our view the absence of contested elections is a symptom of other factors – the absence of serious internal disagreements during the height of the downturn in the 1980s and 1990s, the aura of authority that Tony Cliff cast over the entire leadership, and the relative weight of the centre in the party at a time when the level of class struggle was low. It is, as they say, no accident that the party has become more fractious at a time when, even though industrial struggles are still very weak, a wide layer of comrades have acquired authority through their role in leading different united fronts both nationally and locally. It is they who intervened decisively to help resolve the division that had developed in the CC as the result of the Respect crisis.

If this diagnosis is correct, then we should, rather than dismantle the present system, seek to preserve its strengths while improving it democratically. One of the main strengths of the present system is that it elects the CC as a collective. This means that comrades are elected who have a contribution to make but, because of their relative youth and inexperience, wouldn't win a popularity poll. It also means the leadership is elected as a balanced team of comrades who can make different contributions within what is a working body that operates according to a division of labour.

Our proposal aims at strengthening this system rather than partially or wholly dismantling it. It is largely a rationalisation of what happened in the last CC elections. We don't expect it to work miracles. As in the case of the last Conference, fights over the leadership can't be separated from bigger political antagonisms.

Our proposal would institutionalise the expectation that the composition of the leadership is a normal part of the discussion prior to and at Conference. We expect that, given the democratic renewal of the party that is already under way, the pre-conference aggregates and the Conference itself would closely scrutinise the CC slate, creating an atmosphere that would encourage the proposal of amendments and alternatives.

We need democratically to renew the party. But we need to do so without weakening or abandoning what has made us so effective as a revolutionary organisation.

FULL TIME ORGANISERS AND THE PARTY

The job of District Organiser is one of the most important and the most difficult jobs in the Party.

Lacking the collective responsibility and protection of being on the CC, DO's can frequently seem isolated and exposed if things go wrong in the District. At times they can feel the brunt of dissatisfaction within the District, at others the wrath of the CC.

The job is high pressure, and at times can feel thankless.

However it can also be immensely rewarding, and working for the Party, for the things you believe in most, for being a key figure in building the Party carries immense job satisfaction, especially when things are going well, a district is being turned round, the active involvement on the ground is growing.

The recent crisis in the Party though has exposed at all levels of the organisation a problem of accountability.

A number of comrades in written submissions, and in the meetings have expressed concerns about the role of District Organisers, who appoints them, who they are answerable to etc.

There was a time in the history of IS where organisers were local appointments/elections, however for many years the District Organiser has been appointed by the CC.

We believe that this should continue to be the case. The CC has an overview of the Party's needs, and will make judgements on who is best placed to go where. Would the best person in this District be someone recently out of college, does this District need an experienced organiser etc

Secondly electing organisers carries potential problems.

If we accept that the main role of the organiser is to push through the areas of activity prioritised by the CC, then the organiser must surely be, answerable to, and replaceable by, the CC, not the local comrades.

District Organisers must be able to win respect and support in their districts, but that is not the same thing as winning a popularity contest. If a section of the cadre of a district fall into opposition the organiser should ordinarily be fighting for the agreed national position, not that of local dissidents.

Having said that, a district organiser should be alert to the mood of their district, should have respect for the comrades within it, and be able to feel free to bring concerns from the district back to the CC.

If the perspective does not seem to fit, or an initiative does not seem to be working,

then the organiser must feel they have the freedom to say so without automatically facing denunciation or dismissal.

This does not mean they shouldn't fight to implement CC decisions, just that they should feel free to be open and honest about how those decisions are working.

A number of people have raised the question of a job description for a District Organiser. Given how much the role can vary from District to District, and from period to period this would be very difficult.

However CC input, back up and advice (particularly in the beginning) will be vital if an organiser is to survive. Similarly, regular organisers meetings, and day schools for both general political education, and the pooling of experience are essential.

Organisers should not be cut loose to sink or swim, or rather too many may sink, and burn out.

Finally some representations from members have talked about organisers not treating members with respect. It is vital that organisers take seriously Cliff's maxim that every member is gold dust. Members should be treated in a comradely manner at all times.

This does not mean that people shouldn't be fought politically, argued with, brought to task for not doing things they said they'd do and so on, however they should not be insulted, abused or be intimidated or bullied. Again to quote Cliff the Party functions on 98 per cent commitment, and two per cent discipline.

Having said that, this is a two way process. Comrades in Districts must afford the organiser the same level of respect and comradeship that they would expect to receive. Often the organiser will be young, dedicated, and enthusiastic but will not have the experience of some of the district cadre. However anyone using that experience to patronise, belittle, or undermine the organiser is certainly acting outside the spirit of our tradition.

To sum up, the District organiser should be

1. Appointed by and under the direction of the CC
2. See their role as fighting for the national perspective of the organisation in the locality.
3. Furthermore see their role as developing and building the district, developing cadre, encouraging recruitment, intervention etc.
4. Be a carrier of feedback from the District to the CC
5. Be open and honest about how well or otherwise an initiative is working
6. Be open and honest about how well or otherwise the District in general is performing
7. Treat Comrades with respect at all times, and expect to be treated with respect in return.

Finally a brief word about other full timers in the party and their ability to inter-

vene in the political debates of the Party.

Many very talented comrades work full time in a number of positions within the party- The Journal, Review, the National Office, Journalists, Bookmarks and so on.

If these comrades feel precipitating debates-or even intervening debates is inappropriate, or likely to earn them the sack, then our democracy is hindered.

To take an obvious example, Charlie Kimber was for a number of years a journalist before he was on the CC. Would it have helped or hindered us if Charlie thought something we were doing was profoundly wrong, but didn't feel free to say so? The answer is surely self evident.

There could of course be dangers of one set of workers becoming a factional block, but we have normal party rules to deal with factions, or to deal with those who refuse to carry out instructions-apart from those rules such comrades must be free, and perhaps more importantly feel free to speak out as long as they conduct the arguments in the appropriate places.

ANNUAL CONFERENCE

The Democracy Commission endorses Shaun's 'Some Reflections on Annual Conference', which were published in the previous Internal Bulletin.

We had a discussion at our final meeting about the desirability of replacing the practice of Conference voting on drafting commissions with more traditional motions and amendments. We were attracted by this change, but felt that its pros and cons required more examination than we had time left to undertake. We recommend that the CC and NC take up and discuss this particular question.

SECTION 2: UNITED FRONTS AND PARTY DEMOCRACY

The first half of this section will explain some of the difficulties with democracy and leadership in united fronts. The second half will suggest partial solutions.

We start with a basic contradiction. A revolutionary party will wither if it is not part of the class struggle. But a united front means an alliance with reformist full-timers at the top, and reformist workers at the base. And a revolutionary party that is not part of mass reformist action will never know how to be part of mass revolutionary action. So there are always two dangers for revolutionaries in united fronts - sectarian isolation and reformist accommodation.

The pull to the right bears most strongly on the leaders of united fronts. We know this from trade union work. There CC members try to advise senior union comrades - not an easy process. But in the last few years we have had experience of comrades, and CC members, in leading positions in united fronts. What follows is based on our experiences in Stop the War, Respect, Globalise Resistance, the European Social Forum and the Campaign Against Climate Change. Our problems have been most acute in Respect, but similar difficulties arise in all united fronts.

There is also a pull to the right on leaders of local campaigns. When a comrade chairs or is a speaker at a local Stop the War meeting, they don't sell the paper publicly. They are usually the most radical speaker, but they don't give the same talk as at an SWP meeting. And they spend a lot of energy trying to hold a broad coalition together.

The pressures are much stronger if you are in the national leadership of a campaign. Then you deal directly with the other leaders, usually full-timers in unions, NGOs or political parties. When compromises must be made, you make them. Some of them are a bit dirty, and all of them feel necessary. Some of the full-timers you work with act in deeply undemocratic ways, and the pressure to collude with this is intense.

The pressure is stronger if you also speak as the public face of the campaign. Then you deliver a reformist speech over and over again. What you say begins to limit what you can think. The pressures are still stronger working with NGOs than in unions, because the money does not come from workers. They are strongest of all in electoral politics.

Moreover, an effective leader of a united front needs friendships with other

leaders and a loyalty to the cause beyond your loyalty to the SWP. Without that friendship and loyalty, no one will trust you, especially in a crisis. And you have to be responsible to both the discipline of the SWP and the discipline of the campaign.

But leading comrades in united fronts, if they are any good, will pull the other comrades in the campaign to the right.

These pressures get worse once a CC member becomes a leader in a united front. They are under the same pressure from the right. But now comrades are much more likely to follow their lead in meetings. Where they don't, the CC member is tempted to instruct them. And it is more difficult for the rest of the CC to control them.

These pressures are worse again where two or three CC members are leading in one united front, or one member leads in two campaigns. They are worse yet when the united front is successful, and what it does really matters in the world. Sometimes neither the rest of the CC nor the members can control them.

So it's tempting to say CC members should not take on leading roles in united fronts, just as they do not do so in unions. But this ignores the other half of the contradiction. The party can also be pulled too far left and become isolated.

Think of an organisation led by people who did not want to lead the struggle. What sort of organisation would such pure keepers of the flame build? How would they learn? More important, the dangers and mess of a united front are worst at the top. For revolutionaries the rewards, and the joy, are at the base. Comrades look to leading CC members as models for what a revolutionary should do. If CC members abstain from united fronts, in each town the party will prize intellect and purity over struggle.

So the tension is real, and permanent. We must always try to control that tension. There is no one size fits all formula, but here are suggestions:

We should be careful of having two CC members in one united front, and extra careful when they are both part of the public speakers for the campaign. We should usually split forces, so one CC member is the public face, and the other an organiser. This means pushing 'lay' comrades as leading figures. That means moving beyond the idea that all the real leaders of the party will be on the CC, and that the CC members should necessarily be the speakers in big meetings.

CC members in united fronts should see coordinating the SWP intervention as a central job. They must talk, face to face, each week, to the comrades who work for united fronts. This includes comrades in 'office jobs', which are politically difficult. All comrades need to understand that we don't take on jobs in united fronts without agreement of the CC, just as we

don't take on union jobs without discussion and support.

The most important control, however, is a strong caucus in each united front. Serious tensions between the CC and leading members, or within the CC, cannot be resolved at the top level. For that, you need democracy. A regional caucus cannot provide democratic control of a national leadership. A caucus must be national. This is expensive, and time consuming. But the problems over Respect, for instance, would have surfaced much earlier this way.

Once comrades from different areas got together, their increasing concerns would have echoed each other. Pooled fares and a strong, elected, caucus executive between meetings, with conference calls, can help.

The caucus should also vote routinely, at each meeting. That makes votes more likely when there is real disagreement. But what happens if the CC 'line' loses the vote? That's not a disaster, it's the point. The CC member can decide to bend, or argue more. Sometimes the CC as a whole will decide to overrule the caucus and insist. But that vote is also a warning light for CC and the national committee that maybe something is going wrong here, and should be more widely debated.

Our best industrial fractions (a union caucus) already work in this way. They manage to discipline our national union figures in a way the CC could not do by themselves. We need to dump the idea that a CC member who loses a vote has failed. They have not. They have learned. This needs to be seen as a normal part of discussion and democracy.

Within a united front, at every level, we also need to make sure that we only win votes by persuading people. So party members must be at most a quarter or a third of any united front committee. This means, locally and nationally, that we will sometimes lose important votes in a united front. If this never happens, you are probably moving to the right, or controlling the vote by bureaucratic means, or both.

Losing a few votes, and having a strong caucus, also allows us to put forward a specifically revolutionary alternative within a united front. Too often we find ourselves as the best people at holding together a broad coalition. That is essential, but can't be all we do.

Finally, the most important thing of all is to understand that the mass struggle for reform carries both the pressure to reformism and the possibility of revolution. This tension is both healthy and dangerous. It plays itself out between individuals in any serious revolutionary party. That's not anybody's fault. We cannot deal with it without wide and deep democracy.

TRADE UNION FRACTIONS

Many of our trade union members are already in organised union fractions in the party. What follows is a summary of how we think our union work should be best organised:

1. Union Fractions play a key role in developing and guiding our trade union work.

2. All members of the SWP need to play a leading role in the working class movement and therefore must be a member of the appropriate trade union for their work place.

3. To develop the maximum effectiveness of our work in the unions, party members need to meet regularly both nationally and locally.

4. There should be regular national fraction meetings of union members. Once a year, comrades should elect a national union convenor and a national steering committee who will work with the CC and the National Committee and report to the National Committee to develop our political presence in the union at every level and in workplaces.

5. Locally, trade union members should meet regularly to support and develop our work in the locality.

PROPOSAL FOR A STUDENT FRACTION AND FRACTION COMMITTEE

1) Since the creation of the Democracy Commission, a number of fractions and fraction committees have been established in the SWP to ensure that members can have genuine input, via democratic forums, into various aspects of the SWP's work

2) This is a positive development, and should be extended more broadly throughout the SWP. One such area it could be extended to is student work. At present, students are able to have some input into the direction of their work through national student caucuses, usually held once or twice per term. On a more local level, many students also have weekly caucuses in their university or college.

3) While these are useful forums to share experiences, they are often not suitable places for students to have a serious discussion on the SWP's work at a student level. Thus, the direction of student work up until recently generally tended to be formulated by the student office and was then put to national or

local caucuses for discussion.

4) However, it is vital that a political leadership is created among students and young people in the SWP in order that we can better engage in the very serious battles ahead around free education and proposed cuts, as well as co-ordinate, nationally and locally, our work in various campaigns, and in the National Union of Students.

5) It is therefore proposed here that a 'student fraction' and 'fraction committee' be formally created, as in other areas of the SWP's work. The direction of the SWP's student work should be developed by the SWP annual conference and implemented by the Central Committee and student office.

In this sense, the fraction committee should help implement and politically carry the SWP's perspective, have a general political overview of student work and debate and discuss the problems we face over the year.

6) Student Fraction

● This fraction would meet, say, at least once per term, and whenever necessary. It would be composed of all students in the SWP, and the student office.

● Where necessary, the fraction meetings would be divided into different parts (e.g. NUS, Stop the War, fighting cuts, etc.), so students are able to share experiences, but also have input into the direction of work in these areas.

● An agenda, to which students would be able to have input, would be sent out in advance.

● In order to facilitate student involvement on important issues, fractions may also occasionally take place at a regional level (e.g. South, Scotland, North).

7) Student Fraction Committee:

● This would be composed of, say, 12 students, and the student office. This number is small enough so that concrete proposals can be formulated around student work in general, but large enough so as not to only include a very small number of students.

● Election to this committee would take place annually at the start of the academic year, and would take place on an individual basis, with, say, candidates putting themselves forward for election at the first student fraction meeting of the year.

● It would meet on a regular basis. If it chooses, it may elect a chair, and would also send out an agenda in advance of its meetings.

● Members of this committee would be held to account by the student fraction and the wider party as a whole. The committee meetings would be open to all students in the SWP.

● If it is clear that disagreements on aspects of the SWP's student work have arisen in the committee, then these should be taken to the appropriate internal bodies (e.g. National Committee, Central Committee), as with other fractions in the SWP.

SECTION 3: THE CONDUCT OF DISCUSSION

(i) Use of the Internet

The use of the Internet to circulate documents became an increasingly controversial question in the lead-up to the last Conference. It was widely felt that emailing documents to a limited number of comrades was completely incompatible with the best of our democratic traditions.

The Democracy Commission believes that the following document, which it commissioned from Pete (Birmingham) and Martin (Manchester), provides a good framework for approaching the issue:

This is primarily a political question

There has been a problem for some time now with access to internal bulletins. As the result of an increasingly busy political world, it is no longer possible to personally distribute SWP to every member, every week. As a result the distribution of the bulletin has become slow and sporadic. This contrasts with the distribution of Party Notes, which as a result of email becoming available to the majority of SWP members, is probably now more readily available than previously.

The leadership debate this year led to increased interest in the bulletins, but many comrades found the hard to get. Access to the IBs and the ability to discuss and contribute to them is a fundamental part of our Party's democracy.

The availability of some documents by email further skewed the problem. 'Contentious' articles were easy to come by for some of us, but the less contentious, and the CC bulletins, did not circulate. Some comrades openly complained about only receiving selected articles.

This was far from democratic and even further from being inclusive.

At conference and in the pre-conference IBs there has been some discussion about possible solutions to these problems using new technology, either through the increased distribution of the IBs and other internal documents via email, or by making such documents available online in some sort of protected way. In this contribution to the debate, we want to look at some of the problems with these ideas and some possible further ideas.

Problems with electronic distribution

However, this discussion precludes a wider debate. Historically, we have always seen the centre of our party's internal debate being our political structures – as our branches, our fraction organisation, national meetings and district aggregates.

Conference recently recognized that discussion in these arenas had become weaker than was needed in our party. We need to make sure that any discussion around using technology to improve access to information doesn't end up undermining the more important work of strengthening and building the party's basic structures.

There is a question, beyond the point of this contribution, about whether the bulletin should be selectively mailed to comrades. Comrades unable to attend their branches regularly, or engaged on work that means they are remote from a district might be prioritised for receiving internal documents through email/Internet. Though again, we must seek to improve and strengthen other sections of our organization (such as fraction meetings) to enable these comrades to take full part in discussions.

Much of the discussion about the role and the use of the Internet focus on technical features – secure sites, members only emails, discussion sites.

However the key to understanding the use of email and the Internet for the circulation of SWP documents is to consider the political angle. Any comrade who is given access to documents by email can forward them. Any access to secure Internet sites only works if you can trust everyone not to pass on access to others, or the documents they access.

For us, this is the largest problem with using new technology to improve access to the SWP's internal debates.

There are a number of obvious ways in which a leak could happen:

A disaffected existing member with a grudge. A new member who doesn't understand why we keep our debates to ourselves. A split in the organisation that leads to one side opening the debate to the wider movement. Someone deliberately entering the SWP to gain access to our documents and debate. A deliberate hack by someone hostile to the SWP.

The coverage given to SWP Internal Bulletins over the last couple of years shows that there is no longer any privacy for the SWP. Two years ago our documents were on the so called Socialist Unity site – they were scanned from a printed original. This year they were digital copies that had been leaked. However, while we cannot necessarily prevent this, we can do what we can to minimise the threat of material being leaked.

However we do have to accept that our internal discussions will be accessible to anybody, and we will not find a technical solution to this. This raises problems for democratic discussion.

Given the public availability of our documents this puts a number of comrades in difficulty. Contributing to them now raises the prospect of being googled by employers, union officials, workmates, Nazis. Some comrades may now fear their name appearing in a bulletin, in case their employer sees it. This all curtails our democracy.

Equally difficult will be our discussion about the role of other left wingers. An honest appraisal of the role of left wingers in a trade union or other campaign may lead to complications in our relationship with them.

Any references to comrade's names in articles could raise potential problems for that comrade. A comrade submitting an article should be made clear about this. There should be consideration given to a comrade's position before naming them in a document. The comrades compiling the IB should also be responsible for considering the sensitivities of having comrades named in articles.

Occasionally comrades need to write under pseudonyms – mostly where they travel to countries where they could be in danger, or put others in danger, sometimes because of their employment. Perhaps this should be considered under certain circumstances.

In summary the Internet has changed the political conditions within which our democracy operates, and we cannot go back. The public availability of our discussion documents is a fact. We have to limit the damage, and seize what opportunities there are.

Security and access

Almost everybody has email in the SWP. Many of us have several email addresses. Comrades are on Facebook and many other social networking sites. The potential for wide distribution of party literature, far wider than we have recently been able to achieve with printed literature, now exists. The question becomes: Which is the best option? And what would it be used for?

If we agree to electronic distribution of documents, certain questions occur. There would need to be rules on who could gain access to our documents. The biggest danger with this is creating a tiered membership structure. Do we give every new member access to our email/internet documents? Do we wait till they've paid one months subs, three months? On the other hand, do we want to exclude the keenest new members from the party's discussions?

Ordinarily any member who joins the party has equal rights in the party. So either upon joining you should be invited to register for electronic access to our documents, with all the security risks this entails, or you would have to have been vetted (by whom?), or have been a member for a certain amount of time, or paid subs... in which case there is some tiered membership being introduced.

We have raised these problems because we think these are real issues to be considered and debated. We do not necessarily think there is an easy solution to this.

Secure site?

We could build a password protected secure site where private documents could be available.

- When it was initially set up comrades could be invited to register.

- You would assume that at least a couple of thousand comrades would reg-

ister, which would be a significant task to administer on setup.

- There would then need to be maintenance of the site as new users came along.

- It would need to be necessary to remove people who left the party.

What would be done about those whose subs stopped? If they were cut off, would there be exceptions?

In all these cases there would be a price to pay – the financial cost of the comrade maintaining the website as well as the cost of operating it.

We raise this not to muddy the waters, but to explore how it would be maintained, and who would make the political decisions about its maintenance. Our personal experience of maintaining the SWP's databases makes us acutely aware of the time consuming nature of this activity.

If this was used to circulate IBs then how would comrades not on the system receive the bulletins?

The point of a secure site solution is to attempt to secure our IBs. It would take one breach to have made this fail. Clearly Weekly Worker have access to our Party Notes. If they have someone passing it on, this person could as easily pass on our documents, or their password.

It can be slow and time consuming to track down a breach of security, if indeed it can be done at all.

Email list

Comrades are already grouped in the membership database, by district and branch and union. If you are a paper organiser or branch secretary you can be emailed directly. Comrades can currently opt to get party notes by email.

As with the secure site solution we could ask comrades to register if they wanted to get IBs by email. The program can be written to exclude anybody who is unregistered. It could have rules built in about subs payment, if required. Once the program had been written then there would be the same necessary maintenance as above.

This system accepts that our bulletins are not secure. It concentrates on making sure that they get to as many comrades as want them. Though we again recognise that any such database carries with it an implicit cost, in time and money.

SWP rules of engagement

As already mentioned the distribution of documents by email became a free-for-all. The more contentious the comments, the more people passed it to their friends.

If we introduce a system of distribution of bulletins electronically then the rules governing bulletins should be extended. No comrade should be allowed to circulate documents during the conference discussion period except through the central procedure. There should be no exceptions to this.

There would need to be some definition of this. Where does a discussion amongst

like-minded comrades with similar ideas end and a discussion document begin?

Obviously it would be wrong to prevent comrades discussing pre-conference issues by email. But emailing documents to the wider membership should be seen as undermining our agreed procedures, with the implicit problems with accountability, accessibility and inclusivity, previously mentioned.

Regular bulletin

This is not specifically an IT item of discussion, more one about broader party discussion. Any decision on it could be completed by printed bulletins or electronic distribution.

Web based discussion

Many comrades have followed the blogs. Some run them.

There are some concerns about participation in blogs. Any member speaking in a public forum, meetings, demos etc, is accountable for their words and their actions. However when comrades participate in blog discussions there can be a loss of accountability, especially where the sites allow apparently anonymous contributors. Perhaps there should be some guidance to comrades about how they conduct themselves if they participate in these sites.

There are sites run by SWP members. Lenin's Tomb is well respected. Others are personal hobbies. Yet the question of accountability remains. Had an SWP member been running a site that became the focus of a discussion about the recent CC split, or had the site actively encouraged such a discussion, it could have had serious implications for the party – apparently legitimising a side in the split. How are comrades who run Internet sites or blogs to be held accountable to the wider party?

It is technically feasible to have an SWP members only discussion site. How it would be used, and by who, we would have to wait and see.

However the existing participation in blogs gives us some indication of participation. It tends to be by a smallish group of people with the time and the inclination. Regular access to the Internet is common in some jobs and not others, making participation uneven. Often the most active of SWP members are those least able or willing to wade through hundreds of emails or blog postings.

Additionally, such discussion sites often remove the debate from its context. In a branch or district meeting comrades can thrash out how a perspective applies to them. On the Internet, it can be harder to take account of differing situations.

This option would also only be as secure as the solutions discussed above. Anybody with a password could pass it on granting access to other people.

We think it would be a lot more trouble than it is worth. In times of crisis it may become a place where confusion could be

cleared up, or made worse. Surely at such times meetings are the place to deal with arguments.

However if we were to try a discussion site, it should be for a limited period, and its worth should be reviewed.

In summary

The Internet has changed the way in which we communicate. It is no longer possible for us to hold private discussions, if those discussions are written down. We have to decide how we are to deal with this.

Technical security is not really an option for an open organisation such as the SWP. Therefore we have to decide how to manage our use of the Internet.

(ii) Electronic Communication in the Party

Internal bulletins

1. Internal bulletins will continue to appear only during the Pre-conference period except in exceptional cases to be decided by the CC or NC.

2. Internal bulletins are the sole vehicle for general party discussions on perspectives. They are produced and circulated by the SWP National Office to ensure full accessibility to all party members.

3. The National Office will only ask for contributions to be edited for security, security of identity and libel.

4. Comrades are expected to maintain the conventions of fraternal debate, however polemical.

5. The IB will be sent out to email addresses (and in an electronic version for blind people) where the Centre has email addresses. Paper copies will be sent out on request.

6. Districts can make paper copies available to members as necessary.

SWP Web site

After Marxism a new SWP web site will be set up and maintained as an organising and information tool, and will include the following:

Party notes, Speakers' Notes, Socialist Review, ISJ, Marxism, Yearly Diary

(The centre will aim to produce a yearly diary so that comrades can plan ahead.)

(iii) Chairing meetings

The party organises a wide variety of meetings which range from small local fraction/caucus meetings to large rallies at Marxism, so chairing needs to be adapted to suit the needs of the meetings. Chairs should set the tone of meetings so that they are conducive to good discussion and debate. To quote from the preamble:

We debate in order to decide and act – and (this) in no way precludes vigorous political argument, but vigorous political argument

should not include personal denigration or abuse. There should also be some regard for proportionality: erring, i.e. minority, comrades should not in general be crushed to the point of humiliation. All party meetings – branch, district, national, CC, conference – should be conducted and chaired with this in mind.

Introduction

1. Introducing self, setting the framework of the meeting, explaining the agenda and how it is proposed the meeting will run.

2. If there are to be speakers slips, explain how this will work and that this is to ensure a balanced debate with all views being represented. The person responsible for organising the speakers slips should be introduced and visible to everyone.

Branch meetings

Everyone should be made to feel welcome and every attempt should be made to encourage new members and non-members to speak. This could mean allowing a little silence and not taking experienced speakers who should wait until discussion and discussions develop.

Time limits

These apply equally to all comrades. A speaker has the right to ask the chair for an extension and this can be put to a vote of the meeting.

Polemics without insults

If a speaker does start to rant about a comrade, they should be reminded that this is inappropriate and the chair should allow the comrade a right of reply.

Debates in the party

These need to be conducted according to the constitution and standing orders of conference.

(iv) Speaker slips

The speaker slip system has attracted a number of criticisms in the submissions made to the Democracy Commission. It may therefore be worth reiterating why the party started to use the system back in the late 1970s. There were two main reasons:

- To ensure a more balanced debate than if the selection of speakers were left up to the hit-or-miss process of the chair selecting those whom she or he noticed first among the comrades who stuck up their hands;

- To correct for the tendency of many chairs to pick people they know, which often introduces a bias in favour of older and male comrades.

The system has had the additional advantage at Marxism of avoiding the three members of the International Spartacist Tendency who stick their hands up immediately after the speaker being called one after another. (No system is perfect, though: once, despite the use of speaker's slips, three Sparts in a row were called in a big meeting in the

Logan Hall).

These are all good reasons, but there are still weaknesses in the system:

(1) It can look bad, appearing as if the debate is being manipulated by whoever is doing the slips;

(2) It can actually be bad: the debate actually is being manipulated;

(3) The spontaneity of a to-and-fro debate can be lost because comrades put in a slip early in a meeting to make sure they will be called and it's often hard to respond to points that come up in the discussion.

The Commission does not believe any of these reasons count decisively against the speaker slip system. Particularly at Marxism and at party Conferences and Councils a big effort is made to ensure that a broad range of views is expressed: indeed, a comrade who puts in a critical slip at any stage of the debate has a very good chance of being called.

But the problem of looking unfair is a real one. We suggest that this is addressed by getting the person doing the slips to sit at the front next to the chair and main speaker.

Then the selection of speakers is visible to all, and those who feel that they have a pressing point to make can identify the person whom they can talk to about getting called. This won't guarantee that everyone who wants to speak will be called (this is impossible in large meetings), but it will make the selection of slips less seem less furtive and hole-in-the-corner.

The Commission also believes that it's important to recognize that the speaker's slip system works best in specific contexts – that of big Marxism meetings and party delegate meetings. These are cases where selection of some kind is unavoidable and where achieving a balance among the speakers is important. In other cases the system can indeed be counter-productive.

In practice the party recognizes this – speaker slips aren't for use in smaller Marxism meetings – but we need to state the principles behind our practice more explicitly and make it more transparent.

MEMBERSHIP

Action

1. The Central Committee should continue to publish the Party's national membership figures in the Internal Bulletin (IB). From now on we should also publish the percentage of members who pay subs to the SWP.

2. The Central Committee should also continue to publish every month in Party Notes the number of people who joined the Party in the previous month, and continue to produce a table which breaks down recruitment figures by district, by

union (or if they are a student), the amount of subs they have agreed to pay and the percentage of members who pay by Direct Debit.

3. Every SWP branch and district should have a membership secretary.

If the SWP is going to grow and deepen its roots, every member has to take recruitment and retention seriously.

To help all of us assess how well the party is doing, it is important that comrades know the level of our membership, who is joining (students, trade unionists etc) and what financial commitment they are making to the SWP.

Over the past two years we have published the SWP's membership figures in the IB. We also publish every month in Party Notes the number of people who have joined the Party that month. We produce and publish a table breaking down the recruitment figures by district, by union, the amount of subs they have agreed to pay and the percentage of members who pay by Direct Debit.

Members have welcomed this. It enables branches, districts and fractions to assess how recruitment is going and identify problem areas. Never before has this level of detailed information about the party's membership been available to every member.

At present there are 5,800 registered members of the SWP. A registered member is a comrade who states that they wish to be a member of the organisation. Anyone who fails to pay subs or does make contact to indicate they wish to continue to be a member after two years is removed from our registered members list and placed on our unregistered list of members.

We now have a system whereby unregistered members are removed from our lists after they have been there for two years. We keep them on our records for this length of time in order to maximise the chances of pulling individuals back into activity. Branch lists are now a far more accurate reflection of our real membership.

Over the last few months we have seen a number of unregistered members return back to the organisation. There have been several examples of people who have been dismissed as merely "names on a list" until something happens in their area, a strike, occupation or protest, and suddenly these individuals reappear and throw themselves into activity and party work. We should never be in a hurry to write people off.

Last autumn, the membership department reintroduced the party membership card. This has gone down well with new members and a number of older comrades have asked for their own cards. On the card we have printed: "A member of the SWP is expected to pay regular subs and sell Socialist Worker". This is what we have to strive to achieve, but we don't want to turn away people or exclude from the organisation individuals who for what-

ever reason are unable to fulfil this.

At the moment 2,900 people, or 49 percent of SWP members, pay regular subs. This is too low and is something the membership office has worked hard at to improve (two years ago it was 41 percent). This figure is by no means the whole story. At any one time, a further 300 to 400 members subs are cancelled by their banks. The vast majority of these are for personal reasons - lack of funds being the most common.

If we are going to further increase the percentage of members who regularly pay subs, branches and districts are going to have to take this seriously. That means every branch should have a membership secretary. Their job is to promote recruitment, to help with retention of new members and last, but by no means least, to encourage members to pay regular subs.

Recruitment

Districts and branches have got to take recruitment seriously. That means once a month there should be a discussion on how recruitment is going, who are the key people we want to target to join us, and how to create a climate in the branch where recruitment becomes a major priority.

Over the last two years our rallies, public meetings and branch meetings have been an important arena for recruiting people to the party. We want to continue to organise such rallies and public meetings regularly in every district.

Our work among students remains central. As we have said time and time, again students and young people are the lifeblood of any revolutionary organisation.

We have to also re-learn to recruit on sales and demonstrations. There can be a danger that this can create a "revolving door" membership. But that does not have to be the case. The easiest way to make sure this doesn't happen is to ask people to fill out a Direct Debit and to get them involved in activity straight away.

The democracy commission has agreed that after conference, a new members' pamphlet will be produced.

It will explain, for example, how the party works, what the party's publications are, the party's structures and how to contact its various departments.

The pamphlet will be posted to new members along with the existing welcome pack.

Retention

Recruitment is only the first step. SWP branches have to fight to integrate every new member into the party. That means as soon as someone has joined they should be encouraged to (get involved in the day-to-day activities of the SWP. That means new members should be encouraged to sell Socialist Worker, attend and help organise

branch meetings and be encouraged to get involved in our united front work.

Our SWP branches are the key to retaining members, old or new. Without regular, dynamic and political meetings we will not hold members and we will not develop a layer of revolutionary cadre that can lead and shape the struggles of the future. Marxism, our day schools and educationals also play a vital role in educating members in the Marxist tradition and its application in the real world.

Branch meetings and the development of comrades

We should encourage more members to introduce branch meetings. As a rule of thumb, comrades should begin to prepare a meeting after they have been in the party for a year. This would lead members to read and so develop politically. More experienced members in their branch and district should give them help and support with this.

Districts - particularly those with organisers - should create speakers' lists, indicating what topics a comrade can speak on, and how experienced a speaker they are. Districts should swap these with neighbouring districts, and London organisers should collaborate on a Greater London list.

LGBT work

Fighting oppression is at the centre of our political tradition.

The last few years have seen renewed interest in our work on LGBT issues. We have increased coverage in our publications, organised stalls at Prides, held a members' school and initiated a mailing list. This work has developed a new layer of LGBT comrades.

We continue to intervene in trade union and NUS LGBT conferences, where we face sometimes complex debates, for example at NUS around queer politics.

Central to the success of our work has been the rejection of the identity politics that dominates much of the left. We don't accept that only those who experience and oppression can fight it, or that oppressed groups should be organised through special structures in the party. All members can fight sexism, racism and homophobia, and they have a duty to do so.

This approach will inform further work on LGBT issues. Among students we will prepare in more detail for NUS LGBT conference, and consider organising a college speaking tour about queer politics. We will publish a Rebels' Guide to sexual liberation. We will continue our work around trade union conferences, and will consider organising a second LGBT members' school.

Our goal in this is to promote our politics as the most effective way of fighting oppression, and develop a layer of confident LGBT members who can argue those politics in the movement.

3. General elections

General Election manifestoes of any electoral front in which we are involved must be discussed at draft stage by the NC, and agreed at final draft stage by the CC. If a General Election is called so suddenly that it's impossible or inappropriate to organise an NC, the final draft must at least be approved by the CC.

Why paying money matters

It is a fact that members who pay subs stick with the organisation. Two years ago we analysed the retention rates of those who joined the SWP. The results were startling. Around 90 percent of members who paid subs on a regular basis stayed in the organisation for more than a year. Conversely over 90 percent of those who did not agree to pay any subs left the organisation within their first year. Money matters - paying subs is a sign of new members' commitment to the organisation.

DISPUTES COMMITTEE

The Disputes Committee's is the body elected at National conference whose role is to oversee the discipline and general well being of the Party.

It will be made up of elected members and up to two CC nominees.

The cases heard by the Disputes Committee tend to fall loosely into two quite different categories.

One is breaking the rules of the Party by factionalising, disrupting, speaking in public against an agreed line, voting counter to party instructions at union meetings, taking posts against Party instructions etc.

The other is personal conflict, physical or verbal violence, domestic conflicts, sexual assaults etc.

These differences require somewhat different procedures.

At the moment there is no formal Disputes Committee procedure written down, and the body seems to have operated on a custom and practice basis. Some of this practice needs to be clarified or changed.

The areas looked at here are

1. Referral - who can do it
2. Can the chair/committee rule cases out.
3. Evidence presented in advance
4. Should the person who the case is against be able to hear the whole case
5. Non-party witnesses
6. Written report-summary
7. Should the committee meet and if so how often
8. Ratification
9. some general rules or guidelines

Referral

The CC should still remain the main point of referral. Problems in districts/branches or with individuals should first be examined by the CC and then referred to the Disputes Committee if they deem it necessary.

The exception to this would be if someone wished to take a CC member/full timer before the disputes committee where they could do this directly.

Ruling cases out:

The committee may rule cases out if it deems any of the following to be the case

1. The complaint is Frivolous
2. That based on the evidence presented in the case there is no case to answer
3. That the comrade concerned is trying to use the committee to win battles already lost in the democratic processes of the party.

Evidence in advance

There should be a written case presented in advance to the comrade being charged.

The exceptions to this being where there are very sensitive personal issues involved, or there could be wider legal implications for the comrade being charged. In these circumstances, the case should be presented orally to the comrade in advance of the hearing.

Should the person who the case is against be able to hear the whole case?

Whilst direct confrontation between a comrade being charged and a witness will not be permissible the comrade charged should be in the room when evidence is being given. The comrade being charged can request the right to ask questions of a witness. The Disputes Committee will then rule whether the right should be granted.

A witness could have the right to ask to give a particular piece of evidence in private and the Disputes Committee will give a ruling as to whether that is appropriate.

Again there could be cases of a highly sensitive or personal nature where the Disputes Committee could rule that it be necessary the parties don't meet.

Non-party witnesses

The Disputes Committee can in exceptional circumstances and where they deem it necessary agree to hear non party witnesses.

Written report-summary

The Comrade charged and the comrade/s making the charge should be given a written report on the Disputes Committee findings – it can also act as the basis for the conference report of the case.

Should the committee meet and if so how often?

The Committee should formerly meet at least once a year just before or at the beginning of conference, or shortly after when

the new committee is elected. This would allow the Committee to ensure procedures were reviewed and that the whole committee was up to speed with its activities.

Ratification and appeal

The CC provisionally ratifies decisions of the Disputes Committee. Findings can be appealed or finally ratified at National Conference

Some general rules or guidelines

Disputes Committee members should not become involved in debates about any individual's membership/behaviour if they believe it is likely that that individual will shortly be appearing before them, unless they are doing so in their role as member of the Disputes Committee.

Any member appearing before the disputes committee may state why they think an individual member of the committee should not be part of their hearing. The Disputes Committee will then rule whether that member be excused from being part of the hearing or remain part of it.

TWO MOTIONS ON "NO PLATFORM"

The first motion (BNP and No Platform) was passed by the NC and at October's Party Council overwhelmingly.

The second motion (In defence of No Platform for Nazis) was submitted to Party Council and was overwhelmingly defeated, with 11 votes in favour.

BNP and No Platform

1. The national committee notes the shock and anger when the BNP won two seats in the European elections earlier this year.

2. Since then UAF has been building up the pressure on the BNP with protests from the egging of Nick Griffin outside parliament to the kettling of the Red white and Blue festival in Codnor. There have also been two successful counter protests against the English Defence League in Birmingham.

3. The decision of the BBC to invite Nick Griffin to appear on Questiontime has led to a groundswell of anger.

4. The Labour Party will now drop its opposition to sitting on panels with BNP members—they will put a representative up on the Question Time panel.

5. The BBC has indicated that UAF may be invited on the panel.

6. SWP members in UAF will refuse to appear on a panel with Nick Griffin.

7. We will redouble our efforts to win the case for no platform for the BNP in the media and build the UAF campaign of protests and pickets to challenge the BBC's decision – "Pull the plugs on the BNP thugs".

In defence of No Platform for Nazis

Party Council notes:

1. The SWP is currently engaged in an important campaign to deny the BNP a public platform in the media and elsewhere. We are campaigning against Nick Griffin being invited onto the BBC's Question Time.

2. But at the last two National Committee meetings of the SWP a majority of the CC who spoke argued that the SWP should be prepared in the future to debate with members of the BNP in the media after Nick Griffin appears on Question Time on October 22nd, thus abandoning the No Platform position.

3. A majority of NC members who spoke supported this position, despite the fact that the last NC reaffirmed No Platform for the moment.

4. The only public reference to this change of position has been a letter from John Molyneux in Socialist Worker (13th June) arguing that we should abandon the No Platform position.

5. The justification for this reversal of the SWP's traditional stance is that the election of two BNP MEPs and the change in the policy of the BBC means that we have to change our tactics and debate with the BNP. John Molyneux argues that Gramsci had to debate with Fascists in the Italian parliament in the 1920s and that we should adopt the same tactic.

6. The BBC has never operated a No Platform policy for the BNP. The BNP have already appeared on the BBC main news, Newsnight, the Today programme, the Moral Maze and so on. The only change is to extend this policy to Question Time.

7. A large majority of people in the Metro newspaper poll supported the No Platform position. There have been letters and articles in the press from a range of people defending No Platform, including right wing Labour MP Denis McShane.

Party Council believes:

1. That the election of two BNP MEPs and the change in policy by the BBC does not mark a significant enough shift in the balance of forces between the left and the BNP to justify abandoning No Platform.

2. The return of the BNP to the streets in the guise of the English Defence League actually marks an opportunity to defend No Platform on the grounds that the BNP are really the street thugs that we always said they were.