

THE SOCIALIST PARTY OF GREAT BRITAIN

REPORT OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE AUTUMN DELEGATE MEETING, HELD AT BEDFORD HOUSE, LONDON, ON 13th AND 14th OCTOBER 1990

Saturday morning, 13 October

The session started at 11.10am. Comrade H. Vallar (Glasgow) was elected to the chair. The delegates from Central London Branch were given permission to sit under Rule 22 (branch formed within previous six months). Message was read from Swansea Branch wishing the meeting well, but saying they were unable to be represented.

2. In view of the encouraging start to the work of the Subcommittees Co-ordinating Group, what can now be delaying the full implementation of Conference decision 2.16? (Central London)

S. Coleman (Central London), opening, said some progress towards formulating and implementing a national strategy had been made, but the step of "redesigning Conference" to make it more of a body that planned future rather than reviewed past activity had yet to be taken.

1. Whether voting should be altered at Conference, from a form taken to Easter Conference with figures already decided, to a form being taken back from Conference with a report of the meeting for voting to take place at the next branch meeting (Eccles)

B. Johnson (Eccles) introduced this item.

R. Donnelly (Glasgow) opposed the idea on the grounds that it would add another layer of bureaucracy and emasculate Conference.

R. Cook (Birmingham): ADM was the proper place where discussion should take place before voting at Conference.

H. McClaughlin (Bolton): this should be formalised by laying down that no item could be put down on the Conference agenda unless it had first been put down for discussion at the preceding ADM.

4. Party Financial Planning (Islington)

Permission was given to P. Hope (General Secretary) to open on behalf of the branch.

R. Donnelly (Glasgow): Some branches seemed to have accumulated huge surpluses; they should send any surplus to their immediate requirements to HO, as Glasgow did.

S. Easton (EC Member): there was nothing wrong with branches having some financial strength so as not to be too dependent on the centre.

5. Collection of dues centrally via Head Office (E London)

D. Deutz (E. London) said that, as Treasurer, he had noticed that branches seemed to pay the portion of dues due to HO as and when they felt like it. He proposed that branches be invoiced quarterly or half-yearly for the amounts payable.

Delegates generally agreed that this would be desirable and that the Treasurer should go ahead with it. A number of delegates misunderstood the item as referring to the collection by HO of dues from individual members, to which they were opposed.

Saturday afternoon

6. Increase in dues to cover Head Office running costs (E London)

D. Deutz (E London): HO administration should be self-financing. In answer to a question, he said to do this dues would have to be increased by 50% from £2 to £3 a month.

P. Bennett (Manchester) didn't see why HO had to be self-financing.

7. Increase the price of the Socialist Standard to cover cost of production and postage (E London)

This item was taken in conjunction with the report of the SSPC.

R. Cook (Birmingham): what was the present print-run of the Standard?

A. Buick (SSPC): it was currently 2750 but the SSPC was recommending a reduction to 2250 as the effective circulation had been around 2000 for

some years now.

C. Begley (Islington) asked about the results of the experiment of circulating London newsagents, mentioned in the SSPC report.

A. Buick: over 50 newsagents in a part of North London had been circulated and 2 had taken up the offer of 3 free issues for 3 months.

B. Johnson (Eccles): could the number of pages be increased back to 20?

A. Buick: filling another 4 pages would not be a problem, but printing them would add another half-day to the work of the Print Committee.

D. Deutz (E London), introducing item 7, said that the price of the Standard should be increased to cover the postage costs of bulk orders (to branches, bookshops, Companian parties, etc).

S. Coleman (Central London) was against trying to balance the books with regard to the Standard. The increase to 50p was probably a mistake and we should be thinking rather of reducing it back to 40p.

A. Buick (SSPC) said further cost reductions were possible, as for instance if a member could be persuaded to take on the paste-up work.

C. Slapper (HOO) pointed out that the most it cost in postage to send the Standard to any branch was £3.50 a month (Glasgow).

8. General Election plans (London-wide) (Islington)

M. Browne (Islington): an election was approaching and we should already be preparing for it. A manifesto should be drawn up now not at the last minute. The branch would like to see the campaign in London organised by a committee from London branches rather than by a single branch. Islington North was the constituency his branch had in mind.

B. Johnson (Eccles): the more you planned ahead --getting lists of helpers, what they were prepared to do, etc-- the better would be the campaign. Eccles intended to contest one of the Salford seats.

C. McEwan (Glasgow) was against contesting elections at this juncture as this was a waste of our resources. So was H. Young (NW London), on the grounds that the number of votes obtained made us look ridiculous.

J. Usher (EC Member) was also against contesting now, but would participate in any campaign if this was what the majority wanted.

S. Coleman (Central London): with the demise of the CP and the yupification of the Labour Party, we would be the only party even claiming to stand for socialism. We should contest.

R. Cook (Birmingham) agreed. As a political party we had to contest elections.

R. Donnelly (Glasgow): contesting could be justified in terms of the free postal distribution alone.

C. Begley (Islington) suggested hiring a van to deliver leaflets.

E. Goodman (EC Member) wondered why ADM was discussing the principle of contesting the next general election when it had already been decided by Conference that one seat in London and one in the Provinces should be contested.

S. Coleman (Central London) and C. Trinder (Central London) moved:

"That an all-London Election Co-ordinating Committee be set up by the EC as soon as possible in order to prepare for the contesting of at least one London seat in the 1991 or 1992 General Election".
Carried 16-3.

9. The Socialist Party of Great Britain and the war in the Gulf (NW London)

H. Young (NW London) said we had an opportunity to find a favourable response to our anti-war position on the Gulf, unlike when we took up the same position during the Second World War.

10. The conflict between socialism as a practical solution to existing working class problems and socialism as an ideal futuristic society. (SW London)

11. Why "socialist prisons" will not exist (Central London)

P. Lawrence (SW London), introducing item 10, said that the Party still suffered from a deeply entrenched utopianism which had been inherited from the time it was founded, when the material basis for socialism had not yet been fully created. This had become institutionalised despite the fact that socialism was now a practical possibility --a world economy, a world political culture, instant world communications, and

world institutions that could be adapted, all existed. The Party should adapt its theory and practice to this reality.

S. Coleman (Central London), introducing item 11, said he did not have the same contempt for the word "utopian" as Comrade Lawrence, nor should other socialists either. There was no conflict between revolutionary socialist ideas and ideas about how human behaviour could change. His branch had put the item about prisons on the agenda in response to an incident at Conference when opponents of the idea of law continuing to exist in socialism had been asked if, on the establishment of socialism, they would release Peter Sutcliffe, the so-called Yorkshire Ripper, from prison. It was a silly question, but the answer was yes, whatever would happen to him, he and people like him would not be left in prisons.

J. Dunn (Yorkshire): we should be wary of utopianism. By relying on a vision of some future society we sustain the gap between "now" and "the future", so making the idea of a "transitional society" seem credible. Socialist society was being prepared by the development of capitalism; socialism was a necessity not an option.

R. Cook (Birmingham): socialism was just as possible in 1900 as it was today. Did being "practical" mean supporting developments within capitalism that would extend the material basis of socialism, which was a trap Marx fell into? Whatever we did, these developments would go on anyway. One thing we could say about socialism was that it would be a transition from a class to a classless society of democratic control and that this would mean that there would be no prisons and no police since you could neither pay nor force people to do these demeaning jobs. If socialism was only about providing "practical solutions" to the material problems of the working class, then it would be the same as the Labour Party used to advocate except that there would be no money, but socialism was also about changing the way we lived.

S. Pincher (Islington) agreed. Socialism was much more than solving, for instance, the housing problem. The actions of Peter Sutcliffe were a reflection of attitudes towards woman which would 'disappear' in socialism. Other crimes too, such as child abuse and child pornography, reflected values that had to change in socialism. So socialism was about changing values as well as solving material problems.

J. Bradley (Enfield & Haringey): the classical utopians had believed that if you changed conditions for people their behaviour would then change. This was not the Marxist position which held that there was a dynamic between changing understanding and changing behaviour.

F. Simpkins (SW London): apart from what to do about anti-social behaviour, there were two other cases where what the Party said was unrealistic in practical terms: the problem of the environment and the problem of absolute world poverty. Solving these would mean that full free access according to self-defined needs would not be able to be implemented immediately on the establishment of socialism.

C. McEwan (Glasgow): some problems could be solved overnight when socialism was established. All wars could be stopped and all homeless people housed, immediately.

C. Elworthy (Birmingham): human behaviour reflected economic conditions and so can and does change. We must say that socialism will involve a change of human behaviour.

S. Easton (EC Member): if you want to get somewhere, you must have some vision of where you're going instead of just dealing empirically with practical problems as they arose.

G. Skelton (non-delegate) asked if those who talked about law, etc existing in socialism really understood the Party case. William Morris had said that problems of violent behaviour would be able to be dealt with without police and prisons because in socialism there'd be a changed social consciousness. Even today most behaviour was regulated by social consciousness rather than coercive laws.

P. Lawrence (SW London), winding up, said that of course there'd have to be rules and regulations in a socialist society; in other words laws. Of course there'd have to be a formal system, independent of the democratic decision-making institutions, that would decide whether a rule had been broken, and a system of appeal against any such decision; in other words, courts and a judiciary. As to prisons, this was a red herring. Having been in one himself he didn't want to inflict this on anyone, but

socialist society would have to retain the option of separating some people who might behave violently from the rest of the community. The Party must jettison the extraneous baggage of utopianism and anarchism before the working class would take it seriously.

Sunday morning, 14 October

3. Do the EC have authority to decide the use of HQ Printing Press for non-Party purposes?

C. May (NW London): this item arose from the decision of the EC to print a Polish educational syllabus in return for a reduction in the bill for the Standard. The project had had to be abandoned as unworkable, but the EC was still insisting that it had the right to make such arrangements despite the Conference floor resolution saying that the Party's printing press should only be used for Party purposes. Polish education syllabuses (which were bound to be nationalistic), leaflets for trade unions, where would it stop if we began printing non-Party material?

C. May (NW London) and S. Ross (NW London) moved:

"This Delegate Meeting re-affirms the Conference Floor Resolution that the Party printing press should only be used for printing Socialist Party and Companion Party literature".

R. Donnelly (Glasgow) and H. Cottis (E London) moved an amendment: "delete the words 'Party and Companion Party'".

A. Buick (W London): his branch felt that the matter could only be resolved by an Instructed Conference Resolution, so there was no point on voting on another non-binding, Floor Resolution.

E. Morgan (Islington): we should be careful not to tie up things too tightly, as this might restrict us taking in outside work if ever we were to be in dire financial difficulties.

P. Johnson (Eccles) didn't see any objection to doing outside work as long as this was for working class purposes.

S. Ross (NW London) was shocked to hear comrades say we should prostitute ourselves by printing capitalist rubbish if we were broke.

M. Browne (Islington): the matter should go to next Conference, especially as there was no possibility of the EC doing anything on this before then.

R. Donnelly (Glasgow): this was the time and place to discuss what the EC had done. The issue was not about the use of the printing press for outside purposes (which he personally felt could be considered under some circumstances), but about whether the EC rather than the Party as a whole had the power to make such a decision.

P. Bennett (Manchester) and C. Pinel (Manchester) moved that the vote be taken. This was lost overwhelmingly.

L. McDonald (E London): why this suspicion of the EC? After all, they were socialists like the rest of us and could be relied upon to act responsibly.

R. Headicar (EC Member) said he too was annoyed that the EC's motives had been challenged. The EC had merely sought to make the best use of the Party's scarce resources in the absence of a Conference instruction either way.

P. Hope (General Secretary): the EC had not in fact ignored the Conference recommendation as this had been a factor in the EC not pursuing the matter of the mutually beneficial arrangement with the Polish typesetter; the practical problems of implementing this could perhaps have been overcome if we had really wanted to.

The amendment was carried 12-7 and the substantive resolution was carried 12-8.

13. Are we communicating with the working class at their level, with the use of Socialist language? Should we not be prepared to admit that even the educator needs educating? Are we willing to agree that for the ignorant it is difficult at times to understand your ignorance? Do we indeed accept that everyday life is a two-way experience? (Eccles)

B. Johnson (Eccles): the Standard and our meetings did not always correspond to the working class speech-patterns. Linguists talked of restricted and extended codes. Most workers used the restricted while we used the extended.

C. Pine (Manchester): the item was patronising as Party members were also workers.

S. Coleman (Central London): the rise of the tabloid press and of the electronic media had led to a decline in the way people were able to communicate with each other. This did affect us.

S. Easton (EC Member): what was this distinction between "the Party" and "the workers"? We were workers, not a group outside the working class trying to talk to it.

14. The need for more co-ordinated campaigns of meetings around a single topic supported by posters and advertising (Manchester)

P. Bennett (Manchester) and B. Johnson (Eccles) moved:

"This ADM recommends that at least one series of co-ordinated propaganda meetings on a single topic be held in 1991".

Carried 15-0.

15. In view of Britain having the highest density of video recorders in the world, that the Party examine the possibility of producing socialist videos (Glasgow)

C. McEwan (Glasgow) opened.

R. Cook (Birmingham): a lot of high quality video material was now available and people were able to judge what was good and what was not. Anything we were likely to be able to produce would be considered amateurish, so we shouldn't rush into doing our own videos.

S. Coleman (Central London): a few years ago a resolution calling for a socialist video had been passed, but nothing had resulted. We could perhaps be more modest and use clips from TV and other videos as visual aids to our meetings.

D. Donnelly (Glasgow): videos even if not of high technical quality could still be used for Party education.

C. May (NW London): Comrade Buchanan had videoed scores of meetings, but what had happened to them? Were they to be made available at least to members?

Sunday afternoon

6. What is the most that we can hope for the Socialist Standard to do and how can we make sure that it does it? (Central London)

S. Coleman (Central London): the Standard was the most important vehicle for putting over socialist ideas that the Party had; indeed it could be said that producing it was the Party's raison d'etre. Yet we were not agreed on its role. Was it aimed at first-time readers or was it a theoretical journal? His branch thought it should be the former, but at present it was a mere collection on essays. It should be consciously aimed at the first time reader even if this might lose us some of our regular subscribers.

R. Cook (Birmingham): the best length for an article was 200-250 words, to be contributed by members specialising in a subject. At present the Standard was more like a literary journal where the editorial committee decided whether to accept or reject articles submitted by members on their own initiative.

P. Deutz (E London): how long does a first-time reader remain a first-time reader? If the Standard was aimed exclusively at these what would there be for those who wanted to know more to read?

J. Dunn (Yorkshire): the Standard couldn't just be aimed at first-time readers. It had to provide more than simple introductory stuff.

S. Pinner (Islington): there could perhaps be a separate theoretical journal.

P. Bennett (Manchester): could the "World Socialist" be revived for this purpose?

A. Buick (SSPC) admitted that the Standard was in a rut, with circulation stagnating at around 2000 copies a month. Some changes were being planned from January 1991 such as a new design and shorter articles (down from 1500 on average to 1000).

17. Is a weekly or fortnightly Socialist Standard feasible and if not, how could it become feasible? (Central London)

Central London waived their right to open.

P. Hope (General Secretary): the fact was that we just did not have the manpower to print a weekly.

E. Goodman (EC Member): nor would we be able to sell it on a weekly basis, especially as most branches met fortnightly.

S. Coleman (Central London), winding up, said the branch had submitted this item at the request of some members of the WSP of Ireland who had wanted the matter discussed. They now had the answer to their question.

18. The scope of the pamphlet to replace the present Questions of the Day. What subjects should be covered and who should be aimed at? (Glasgow).

R. Donnelly (Glasgow): the EC had said they wanted a new title, but should the revised pamphlet be for propaganda or for educational purposes?

P. Lawrence (SW London) said his branch was in favour of the present format. R. Cook (Birmingham) and P. Deutz (E London) agreed.

A. Buick (W London): there were two views in his branch. One favoured a book format, the other favoured converting it into a question-and-answer form.

Fraternal greetings were read from the BDS in Vienna. S. Coleman (Central London) and C. Pinel (Manchester) moved that the letter be published in the Socialist Standard. This was Agreed.

S. Ross (NW London) and D. Henderson (Islington) moved that the Report of the EC and Party Officers to 1990 ADM be adopted. Agreed.

12. Are the working class more or less class conscious than they were in 1904? (Central London)

S. Coleman (Central London): in 1904 more people had talked about classes and the working class, the contrast between riches and poverty was greater than now, and the Party was able to identify with a wider working class movement. On the other hand, there was now a wider global consciousness that had not existed in 1904.

J. Dunn (Yorkshire): in 1904 the urban working class was virtually confined to western Europe and the eastern seaboard of North America. Now it was world-wide and there was a world political culture. This was a cause for optimism as it meant that the world working class was now united objectively, if not yet consciously.

F. Simkins (SW London) challenged this assumption. The contrast between workers in Western Europe and North America and those in the shanty towns of South America, Asia and Africa was enormous and their problems were not the same.

19. Past statements made in the name of the Party supporting the capitalist organisation, Solidarity, which is now the government of Poland, and other statements supporting similar organisations in other countries, and the need to repudiate them (Camden)

B. Howlett (Camden) read a prepared statement from the branch. In 1981 and 1982 the Socialist Standard had described Solidarity as a "working class organisation" and as a "trade union", yet it was obvious even at the time that Solidarity was a capitalist political organisation. How could it have been a trade union of wage workers when it contained peasant farmers in its ranks? Some members were in favour of the Party supporting steps towards democracy in countries like Poland. This was wrong. Clause 8 of our Declaration of Principles meant we had to be hostile to such movements for democracy and to call on workers to form instead a socialist political party based on our principles.

S. Coleman (Central London): the item referred not only to Poland and Solidarity but to "other statements supporting similar organisations in other countries". The opener had not produced any evidence on this.

P. Lawrence (SW London): we couldn't just accept what Camden Branch said the Party had said, as they had a proven record of lying and twisting on such matters. Branches needed time to check up the alleged sources that had been quoted.

P. Lawrence (SW London) and D. Henderson (Islington) moved "next

business". This was lost 9-12.

B. Cook (Birmingham): the Party had never said that Solidarity was a socialist organisation but only that it was a trade union. What we had supported was democracy at work amongst the workers, workers democratically organising in a trade union. Certainly they had other, mistaken ideas of religion and nationalism, but what had been important was their democratic self-organisation. This was what we had supported and should always support. There was nothing to repudiate.

E. Deutz (E London): We must not confuse what we might feel as individual workers and what we should say as a Party. As an individual she had been pleased to see workers in Poland in the early 1980s stand up to their oppressors, but the Party should not say it supported non-socialist movements, which was what movements for democracy were. We were opposed to campaigns for constitutional reforms just as much as we were to campaigning for any other reforms.

J. Dunn (Yorkshire): the reforms in Eastern Europe were not solely the result of pressure from the working class but were also needed objectively to clear away bureaucratic impediments to further capitalist development. If we say that countries must pass through a democratic stage before socialism, were we not taking up the same position as the Mensheviks who we had repudiated in the past?

P. Bennett (Manchester): there was a distinction between supporting the efforts of workers and supporting the organisations they formed. The 1981 leaflet Camden were criticising in fact expressed support for certain actions of "the workers in Solidarity" and did not say that we supported Solidarity as an organisation.

E. Simokins (SW London): Comrade Deutz's position that we can sympathise in private with workers' efforts at obtaining democracy but could not say this in public as an organisation was untenable. Socialism was impossible without political democracy first existing, so we had to favour democracy and its establishment.

C. Elworthy (Birmingham): it wasn't a valid argument in favour of supporting democracy to say that we preferred to live in a democracy rather than a dictatorship. This logic could commit us also to supporting the NHS, for instance. However, we couldn't say that we didn't support workers struggling for democracy, but we had to add that they should go on and set up a revolutionary socialist party.

C. Pinel (Manchester): Solidarity had changed from being a trade union into being a political party, but to criticise the Solidarity of 1980-81 on the grounds that it later became a political organisation would be like criticising the Tolpuddle Martyrs because the TUC was now linked to the Labour Party.

C. Slapper (non-delegate) made the same point: organisations can change and, when they did, this didn't mean we had to repudiate everything they had done previously. In any event, the support we had given to Solidarity had been very heavily qualified, the full sentence in the 1981 leaflet reading: "By their principled and democratic actions, the workers in Solidarity have won the admiration and support of socialists, even though we strongly oppose their nationalist and religious illusions and even though we recognise the limitations of trade union action".

C. Skelton (non-delegate): in none of her articles and talks on Poland had she ever used the word "support" in relation to Solidarity. This was because she had never regarded it as a genuine trade union. Certainly it had been started by workers over industrial issues, but was very soon hi-jacked by "intellectuals" with political axes to grind. As to movements for democracy, the Party position had been well-stated in our "Questions of the Day" pamphlet: in countries where political democracy did not exist the workers, "besides trying to organise into a socialist party ought also to struggle to get the freedom to organise into trade unions and win elementary political rights. As in the advanced capitalist countries, however, this should still involve opposition to all other parties in order that the socialist issue shall be kept free from confusion".

S. Coleman (Central London): the question of the attitude that socialists should take towards movements for political democracy under capitalism was a difficult one, and there had always been differing views in the Party on it. However this was not Camden's concern. They

had declared at the previous ADM that they thought the Party had been taken over by a "parasitical minority" opposed to the Party's principles. This item was merely part of their continuing campaign to try to prove this absurd claim. They had a contempt for the rest of the Party and were not fit to sit at ADM.

H. Young (NW London): it was obvious that Solidarity had been organised by the Catholic Church; it had mainly been a peasant organisation concerned with land distribution and not a workers' organisation. We had made a mistake about Solidarity and should say so. National democracy was not a step towards socialism but a step towards nationalism.

C. McEwan (Glasgow) said he had always had doubts about Solidarity because of its links with Roman Catholicism and Polish nationalism. Perhaps we had been mistaken in some of our earlier judgements of it.

C. May (NW London): Comrade Pinel had said Solidarity had once been a trade union, but it had always been composed of intellectuals, shopkeepers, farmers and students as well as workers, so how could it be said it had been a trade union in the sense the SPGB had always used the term?

F. Lawrence (SW London): Solidarity did begin as a workers' movement in the shipyards of Gdansk. Today it had split into a political wing and into a trade union wing which we would still support in the same way that we supported trade unions in Britain as working class organisations. Camden's item spoke of the Party having supported "the capitalist organisation, Solidarity" and "similar organisations in other countries", but they had produced no evidence. What they had done was smear-mongering in the best McCarthyite tradition.

S. Pinner (Islington): democracy was based on information, but Camden had circulated nothing in writing to back up their serious allegations. This meant delegates were in no position to make a proper judgement on them.

S. Pinner (Islington) and D. Henderson (Islington) moved:

"We recommend that item 19 is discussed in the Branches after the relevant material is circulated to them in order to enable democratic discussion since lack of information curtails full discussion". Carried 11-7.

J. D'Arcy (Camden), winding up, said that the argument was about whether or not Solidarity had been a trade union. Although it had registered as a union and had put forward some trade union demands, it had gone far outside this by demanding reforms of the economic and political system. Contrary to what Comrade Cook had claimed, there was no such thing as a spontaneous working class movement for democracy; working class struggles for bourgeois democracy could only be carried out by a political party which had inevitably to be a capitalist party. In giving its support to Solidarity, the Party had supported a political movement which had started as a protest against the state capitalist government of Poland and had ended up as the government there. We had made a bad error and should repudiate it.

At 5.40pm H. Vallar (chair) closed the meeting. Items 20 ("The political implications of the demise of the European Communist Parties") and 21 ("Was Marx right about the increasing misery of the working class") were not reached.

Report of the Standing Orders Committee

	branches represented	branches not represented	delegates sitting
Saturday, 13 October,	11.30	15	4
	2.15	16	3
Sunday, 14 October,	10.45	15	4
	2.30	15	4

(*) All days: Lancaster, Newcastle and Swansea. Bristol present Saturday afternoon, otherwise absent.

Collections

Saturday morning	£194.81
Sunday morning	49.06
Sunday afternoon	67.27
	£311.14

Floor Resolutions Carried at 1990 Autumn Delegate Meeting

- 16 OCT 1990*
1. "This ADM recommends that at least one series of coordinated propaganda meetings on a single topic be held in 1991". (Cd 15-0).
 2. "That an all-London Election Coordinating Committee be set up by the EC as soon as possible in order to prepare for the contesting of at least one London seat in the 1991 or 1992 General Election". (Cd 16-3)
 3. "This Delegate Meeting reaffirms the Conference Floor Resolution that the Party printing press should only be used for printing socialist literature". (Cd 12-8).
 4. "That the fraternal message from the BDS be published in the Socialist Standard". (Agreed).
 5. "We recommend that item 19 is discussed in branches after the relevant material is circulated to them in order to enable democratic discussion, since lack of information curtails full discussion". (Cd 11-7).