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Why There is no Alternative to Reconstitution : a Discussion Document

The Workers Party

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**WHY THERE IS
NO ALTERNATIVE
TO RECONSTITUTION**

***THE
WORKERS
PARTY***



A Discussion Document

Introduction

The proposal to reconstitute the Workers' Party will have caused surprise and even alarm amongst some members. We have been asked why such a drastic step is necessary. Surely our problems are not insurmountable and a compromise can be found between opposing views?

If opposing views were all that were at issue certainly a compromise, a working relationship could be found.

The problems, however, are deep and fundamental. They relate to organisation, politics and ideology. Reconstitution is intended to establish the rights of the general membership and to guarantee that democratic decisions, once made, are implemented.

A vote for reconstitution and the steps necessary to implement it effectively is a vote of confidence in our capacity to deal with change in a mature way.

A vote against the motion is to put at risk all the progress we have made to date.

We believe that the vast majority will opt to support reconstitution once the issues are laid out clearly and unambiguously.

For that reason we ask you to read and consider the following statement before deciding how your vote will be cast. Whatever way you vote, you will be deciding on the future of the Party and its politics.

Proinsias De Rossa
Workers' Party President

Seamus Lynch
Workers' Party Vice President

WHY THERE IS NO ALTERNATIVE TO RECONSTITUTION

The decision to have a special Ard Fheis to reconstitute the Party has been represented by some critics as a panic measure by a parliamentary cabal who would be better off in the Labour Party or even the Progressive Democrats. The proposal is alleged to create the conditions for a witch-hunt against 'real' or 'revolutionary' socialists in the Party. It will also, it is claimed, serve to insulate a 26-county social democratic Party from the problems of the North. Careerism, we are told, will sacrifice the Northern members for its own narrow purposes.

These statements are not true and simply serve to obscure the real issues at stake and to hide from the general membership the true sources of conflict. These have their origin, in part, in the collapse of the Eastern European bloc and the disintegration of the USSR. The Right throughout the world has greeted these developments as a vindication of economic liberalism and liberal democracy and as final evidence of the intellectually bankrupt nature of Marxism. This has all added to a long-standing set of conflicts and tensions in the most important Communist Parties in the West.

For, as most informed commentators know, the whole Soviet model of 'socialism' and the associated ideology of Marxism-Leninism had been under challenge from within some of those same Communist Parties since the development of 'Euro Communism' in the 1970s.

One of the reasons why the Workers' Party has had its recent troubles is the repressive attitude taken by some leading members to any criticism of the Soviet bloc. For some, during the 1980s, it was sufficient to label a proposition or argument 'Euro-Communist' to have it dismissed out of hand. During the discussion of the new Party programme the same arid labeling approach was used to dismiss any serious attempt to face up to the bankruptcy of the Stalinist tradition as some sort of mealy-mouthed reformism. There were disturbing echoes of the bankrupt wailing of the CPI. The failure of the statist economies of the East is in no way a proof of the failure of Marxism or Socialism but only of a particular authoritarian and voluntarist view that socialism could be constructed 'from above' by a vanguard armed with the theory of 'scientific socialism'.

One of the effects of the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917 and the formation of the Third International was to narrow down the choice of direction to that of a 'revolutionary' Communist approach or a 'democratic' social democratic one. In crude terms the Communist tradition was only capable of taking power in economically backward countries or on the backs of the Red Army. In the developed capitalist countries it has been social

democracy that has been the overwhelming force. Its accomplishments are not to be sneered at particularly in its more vital forms like Sweden. However, in its reaction against Soviet style Communism, Social Democracy has tended to lose whatever Socialist resolve it had. It has frequently degenerated into mere electoralism and lost in the process any claim to be a part of a wider strategy of social transformation.

It is a travesty of the intention of those of us who have been arguing for applying an unsentimental and critical focus to the current state of the Party to claim that we have a social democratic agenda.

It is even more obnoxious to be labeled as a disciples of Harris whose veneer of social democracy has been shown to be even more superficial than his communist veneer.

The choices we have are not confined to a superficial radicalism expressed in the outmoded terms of Marxism-Leninism or the dull managerial approach of Spring and Kinnock. There is, in our view, a space for a Democratic Socialist alternative to both Stalinism and Social Democracy. But we cannot make the challenge to social democracy effectively as long as there are doubts about our own commitment to democracy.

The tendency to make sneering references to 'bourgeois democracy' and abstract attacks on 'parliamentarianism' (which is also linked to notions of the 'revolutionary vanguard' and 'democratic centralism') can only serve to reinforce ordinary people's doubts about our commitment to basic democratic values. We cannot ignore the damage that association of any radical form of socialism with the Soviet Union has done to the cause of social transformation. The English socialist R H Tawney summed up the choice very clearly:

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They (socialists) must face the fact that, if the public, and particularly the working class public, is confronted with the choice between capitalist democracy, with all its nauseous insincerities, and undemocratic socialism, it will choose the former every time.

Both Stalinism and Social Democracy represent visions of socialism or social reform which treat the working class and the mass of the population as passive, as essentially an object to be acted upon by the elite of Marxist-Leninists or enlightened administrators. Both have given to socialism a statist and bureaucratic cast which is, in part, responsible for the success of the neo-liberal upsurge of the last decade.

In the case of the Workers' Party both a certain kind of Soviet Marxist ideology and the associated ideology of the vanguard Party and democratic centralism may have served a positive transitional function as the republican movement struggled to transform itself and shed backward nationalism and militarism.

But times change and vanguardism did not challenge one key aspect of the republican tradition - its elitist and conspiratorial approach to politics. In Northern Ireland this has been overlaid by a history of bitter conflict with the Provos and other terrorist organisations. It is now being argued that those of us who have raised the need for a clear and fundamental break with any last vestiges of the conspiratorial mentality are 'forsaking' the members in the North. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The Party has long argued that there was no military solution to the conflict in Northern Ireland, that what Northern Ireland needs are new structures of democratic accountability, an entrenched Bill of Rights and structural reforms in the economic and social sphere. We have won respect for standing out against knee-jerk anti-RUC sentiment.

We had won ground in the 1980s because it appeared to increasing numbers of people that we had shown the ability to change, to rethink our positions, to jettison the ideological baggage of our past. Unfortunately that hard-won capital has been squandered in ways that we may ignore but which the public won't. Attitudes that most of us believed had been put behind us but are still a reality. This reality is restricting the growth of the Workers' Party in the Republic as well as in Northern Ireland and threatens to destroy us.

We cannot ignore this problem and we should not be tempted to compromise or fudge on it. The stakes

are nothing less than the survival of the Party as a serious political force in Irish life. All over Europe the Left is struggling to emerge from the debris of collapsed social democratic and Stalinist projects at a time when many of the economic, social and cultural bases of traditional working class struggle and political involvement are disintegrating. This has meant that many traditional ideas and slogans on the Left have been falling on stony ground for some time.

The Workers' Party critics of the proposal for reconstitution have utterly failed to keep abreast of the debates which have been taking place on the European Left for over two decades, despite the fact that both *Workers' Life* and *Making Sense* have made a serious attempt to bring them to our notice.

The problem here is a concept of Marxism as a complete system with all the answers. The fact is that, while Marxism has continued to demonstrate a great strength in analysing the contradictions and inequalities of capitalism, it has been much less successful in either producing a convincing model of a socialist economy or of an alternative to liberal democracy that does not appear to be democratically regressive.

It was these problems that the new Party programme was beginning to address. But even to challenge the 'system' was sufficient to produce shrill cries of betrayal and revisionism. What was on display at last year's Ard Fheis was a Marxism more in keeping with religious faith. The programme was seen as containing a number of blasphemies which had to be dealt with by the invocation of such holy relics as 'class struggle' and 'revolution'. If you are not happy with the ritual you are excommunicated to the land of middle-class liberalism and the PDs.

In fact, all the evidence from Ireland and other Capitalist countries is that, while class remains a determining factor of the lives of the vast majority of people, class antagonism and identification with class is much less powerful as a source of immediate political and cultural identity. It is not enough simply to preach at people and that is essentially what we do when we talk in

abstract terms about class struggle and revolution. Our concepts and practices must reflect their lived experience. That means an activist Party that is involved in a multiplicity of different struggles. It also means bringing to those separate struggles a broader and longer term vision. This cannot be constructed from old socialist manuals but only through a process of democratic interaction with popular struggles and campaigns. Our experience has shown us that

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the vanguard culture and democratic centralism produces an elitist and authoritarian attitude to both ordinary members of the Party and even more to the mass of the population outside. This leads to suspicion of, rather than enthusiasm for, the spontaneous emergence of movements and groups aimed at radical change.

At the core of any credible socialist vision at the end of the twentieth century must be modesty and democracy. Modesty because of the barbarities and dead-ends of much of what has passed for socialism in this century. Just as Marx would have achieved little if he had not stood on the shoulders of intellectual giants like Hegel and Adam Smith, we should make it clear that we will take enlightenment from whatever source. Tired clichés about 'bourgeois ideology' and 'middle class liberalism' should be seen

for what they are, the protective mechanism of closed minds.

But what's of central importance is that we have to face up to the fact that our crisis is too deep to be resolved simply by ideological debate or political education. The last couple of years has not seen a debate but more a dialogue with the deaf. The great step forward which the victories in the 1989 election represented has

been undermined by some people who can see in the Parliamentary Party nothing more than a threat. Thus despite the fact acknowledged by a Press which is not usually bending over to say positive things about the Workers' Party, that they have brought a new radicalism into the Dail, the TDs are now portrayed as the source of the crisis in the Party.

The truth is precisely the opposite; the emergence of a new source of influence in the Party has provoked a backlash from a group who feel that, for historical reasons, they 'own' the organisation.

Democratic centralism and the belittling of the Parliamentary Party have a clear aim; to maintain the power of a particular section of the Party over the rest of it. It is as crude and brutal as that. The aim of reconstitution is not to replace one power centre with another and to enshrine the parliamentarians in power. It is to open up the Party to the active participation and control by its membership. There is no future for another parliamentary Labour Party in Irish politics. There is space for an active democratic socialist Party with a strong presence in the Dail. Unless the Party is reconstituted the avalanche of dirt with which we have been smeared recently will bury that space.

The name of the Workers' Party has been irretrievably linked to unlawful activities in the North. We cannot continue to pretend otherwise. As constituted at present the Party can go nowhere in Northern Ireland. This is a tragedy for the vast majority of our members in the North. It is now being suggested that those in favour of reconstitution see the Northern members as an embarrassment to be got rid of as quickly as possible. The fact is that the positive progress which the Party was making in the North was the product, in large part, of the struggles and sacrifices of the Northern membership. They are not being sold out by us. Their achievements are being undermined by those who will not see the need to change and to finally and completely break with the past. It was its revisionist

position on Northern Ireland which has done much to establish the Party's distinctiveness in the Republic.

Its special knowledge of the North was a major stimulus to the development of policies on secularism and pluralism in the Republic. It would be a miserable admission of failure for a reconstituted Party not to continue to play an active and challenging role in the politics of Northern Ireland.

Reconstitution is aimed at establishing a more adequate relation between our democratic socialist philosophy and values, set out in the Party programme, and the structures, behaviour, atmosphere and inner life of the Party. At present it is quite possible for someone to be attracted by what they know the Party says it stands for and then be shocked and sickened by what they read or see on television which seem to show a different and seamy side to the present Workers' Party.

We are deluding ourselves if we think that denunciations of the 'capitalist media', whatever effect they have internally, will do more than confirm an image of a defensive sect with something to hide. The Workers' Party has made a major contribution to producing an Irish Left with a serious and critical edge to its politics. It has achieved more in the intellectual and strategic renovation of Irish socialism in the last twenty years than the rest of the Left

in the whole period since the execution of Connolly. It would be a tragedy if it was to become no more than an interesting chapter of Irish political history - another Clann na Poblachta, a 'surge' Party with no long-term influence. If the road of reconstitution is rejected then we all risk spending the next few years writing the Party's obituary.

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