

1990

## A Strategy for The 90s

The Workers Party

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## A Strategy for the 90s

The "crisis" within the Workers' Party is not simply the result of the collapse of what has been termed "real existing socialism" or the Robinson-precipitated realignment, although there is little doubt about their significance. The origins of the present difficulties emanate, also and inevitably, from the logic of parliamentarianism. These are the contradictions presented by the demands of real politik juxtaposed to a party whose organisation and political methodology is more firmly rooted in the days when Leninist conceptions of a national liberation movement were talked about: centrism, distrust and suspicion of criticism and "outsiders", anti-intellectualism, a simplistic view of class and the process of politicalisation, and romanticised assumptions about the "party" role in (changing) society with unreal expectations and guidelines on and for membership. To a large extent many of the more glaring problems have been amended, but the much of the underlying philosophy remains.

The challenge posed by these contradictions are critical for the survival of the WP; Irish history is cluttered with the graves of small parties.

### 1. A political strategy

More than the present realignment towards the centre, the absence of a radical democratic (socialist) agenda provides the ideal opportunity for the WP. The party gained enormous public and media credibility for its Dail performance in the early 1980s in part due to Labour's abdication of a radical agenda and to the absence of a civil libertarian tradition in Ireland. The party should build on that experience and its parliamentary reputation to carve out a radical-left position, challenging, campaigning, leading and stimulating debate on a wide range of issues. The PDs <sup>by example</sup> gained credibility on the basis of honesty and integrity in government. The caveat is continued allegations of WP association with ghetto violence in NI.

How long can we continue to offer candidates with little prospect of implementing our policies? The objective of politics is power, therefore there are three options for the WP: 1) marginal party, 2) majority left party, 3) left majority coalition. While many might cherish the dream of over-taking the LP, this is unrealistic (certainly, in the short to medium term). Rather we should continue to pursue and actively seek the construction of a left-majority coalition, forging an alliance with whomever we can - LP, Greens, Independents, etc. - on the basis of a shared agenda.

Discussion currently underway in the LP - particularly among Labour Left - suggests common thinking along these lines and links should be encouraged despite Dail difficulties. Regardless of predator objectives, closer co-operation would be mutually beneficial, particularly if left opposition and political



realignment is our goal. Nevertheless, politically and publicly the WP must clarify its position vis-a-vis the Labour Party; there is little capital to be made explaining differences in terms of personality, coalition or Dail procedure. Indeed, on face value, there is little to differentiate policy positions.

The dilemma of electoralism and parliamentarianism is the contradiction between parliamentary majorities and class minorities. The WP's electoral base is too narrowly focused; the significance of the "working class" has not disappeared, but other strata are also important. The party is often, albeit understandably, in danger of being the political wing of the St Vincent de Paul. Instead, the experience of the Robinson campaign suggests the availability of a constituency for "quality of life" politics, taking the welfare-state as the basis from which any politics has to start. These are times of new cleavages, not based on social class, which must be taken into account; "middle-class" protestations about taxation levels were haughtily ignored by the left and effectively organised by the PDs. The expected down-turn in the economy and the realignment to the centre are not an automatic gain for the WP.

In the short term (1991-92), several key policy areas should be identified where the WP can offer innovative though realistic proposals. The following five (though there are certainly others) present such an opportunity, and are capable of generating significant discussion and marking new political departures in the immediate future:

1. Transport: establishes a strategic approach to urban transport with emphasis on the living city, at the heart of which is the public/class/gender issue of public service vs private cars (document in process).

2. Local Government: the left's call for greater democracy, active participation, and empowerment are meaningless except in a specific context. Reform of local government, however, presents the best opportunity for confronting a popular issue, particularly in relation to government's forthcoming proposals.

3. Education: The government's announcement that it plans to introduce a new education bill presents the ideal opportunity for this area to be reviewed, noting that our potential constituency is broader than traditionally perceived. All parents are keenly concerned about the quality of their children's education, and are actively busing their children all over the city in pursuit of it.

4. Industrial policy: launched already as a discussion document, and in the process of revision, its contents form the basis for many initiatives.

5. Political reform: Public disquiet and cynicism about many of our political institutions, TDs, and the practice of decision-making have been popularised, although there is considerable vagueness about the actual changes that are necessary to make modern government more democratic and effective. One of the main reasons why criticisms do not bite beyond the intelligentsia and media, is that they are advocating democracy which most people feel they already enjoy. Criticism about the PESD negotiations usurping/undermining Dail powers is a case in point. Nevertheless, important issues are raised and it presents an ideal occasion for the WP to actively seek solutions to the general problem of democratisation.



a. policy-making - democratic corporatism: taking the model of the PNR/PESD, consideration might be given to methods of strengthening the role of organised social interests in influencing government by expanding the interests involved, and establishing institutional links with the Dail (cf for example the industrial document). The advantage of corporatist supplements to representative democracy is that they are directed towards goals people approve of, i.e. improving the economy.

b. political ethics/institutional reform: the level of public cynicism about politicians, illusions to corruption, conflict of interest, double-jobbing (inc. dual mandate), inactivity of the Dail and especially the Seanad reinforce popular alienation and will inevitably reflect negatively on the WP who has claimed to members and constituents "we are different." A serious examination of these issues must be faced up to, perhaps leading to the formulation of constitutional amendments or private members legislation in pursuance of a "Code of Ethics."

## 2. Electoral Strategy

In pursuit of a left-majority, our electoral strategy should seek to establish voting pact/transfer arrangements with the Labour Party. In some constituencies, closer arrangements might be reached, where either a WP or LP candidate is clearly ahead. Realistically, in the short term, it should be possible to increase the Left parliamentary presence. (In saying the above, I am fully cognisant of the animosity and competition between the LP and WP in particular constituencies and in the Dail.)

To help ascertain the level of existing and potential support, public perception on the party's activities, its Dail performance, key issues, etc., the WP should commission an opinion poll, centred on key constituencies and nationally. The information should be cross tabulated against the usual categories.

## 3. Organisational Strategy

To many among the public and media, the WP is an awe-inspiring dedicated membership of surreal individuals, who give up their social and family life for "the revolution." Little can dissuade people when our meetings are held in cold rooms, and membership is by invitation after being "educated". If we are serious about enlarging the WP political presence and influence, and moving towards a left-majority, then the WP needs to develop a professional organisation, which is open, dynamic, thinking, and participative.

Much has been written about de-alignment among electorates. Most people put their private concerns first, and provided they are secure and prosperous enough, confine political interest and participation, if at all, to specified interest groups or elections. Party membership is far less relevant or politically crucial to most people, especially if membership is defined as



ritualised tasks, harsh reminders, etc. <sup>In addition,</sup> ~~Nevertheless,~~ traditional socialist concepts of the role of the party need to be re-evaluated.

Fundamental reforms of the party organisation should be undertaken, including, inter alia

a. open membership, and active encouragement for membership among supporters and sympathisers (a party card would cement commitment) with the knock-on effect of revitalising branch and constituency officerboards;

b. abolition of distinction between member and associate, as it must be recognised that the level of commitment by people varies from week to week, month to month, and year to year. Ritual provision of creche facilities isn't an adequate recognition of family responsibilities or commitments;

c. broaden membership participation and representation on the CEC through restrictions limiting full-time party workers to no more than 20% of CEC seats;

d. establish formal alliances and structures to meet regularly with various single-issue groups to discuss issues of mutual interest;

e. over-haul of the party organisation and an assessment of its role in order to develop a professional organisation capable of meeting the demands of the party in and outside the Dail