

Reorientate the League for the Tasks of the Moment' - a Criticism

1. The aim of this document is to spell out our main criticisms of the document 'Reorientate the League for the Tasks of the Moment' (RTL). We plan to produce an alternative draft of sections of the document and a background document arguing for this draft. This criticism is the first step.

2. Our main disagreement with the document is over the national question. We do not think that the document can take us forward because it contains a basically incorrect position on the relation between national and class struggle. This criticism will concentrate on this theme. But there are important points of agreement which we will mention here. There is a need to build a higher level of political unity in the League, in theory and in practice. The central question that we have to deal with is British imperialism and our work should have an anti-imperialist orientation. The most serious error of the League's work in the past has been its chauvinism. We must support the oppressed when they rise up and recognise the importance of their revolutionary movements and ideology. We must reject the old dogmatic approach to theory and take up real study of British imperialism and the resistance to it both in this country and in the world.

3. Our criticisms are based on the line that has been developed for some time in the League, in most detail in 'Roots of Resistance' (IJ No 1.) and in 'Racism, National Oppression and Free National Development' ('October' Vol.1.2.). This position was also argued at the 2nd Congress and a set of amendments adopted on 'National Rights'. However the Congress reflected the confusion on these questions and amendments were made to the 'National Rights' amendments on key questions and other amendments were adopted which contained a different line (see article in 'October' Vol.1.1.). Since the Congress the struggle over line has continued in a confused and scattered way. One line held that the class question is more important than the national question and key questions have been whether national minorities exist or not; and the question of building a 'broad movement' combining anti-racist and anti-fascist work to unite the working class. This line clearly subordinates the struggle of black people to the struggle of the working class in general. ||

4. There are different interpretations of how RTL stands in relation to this two line struggle. Some say that it does not take a stand on the two lines but leaves the question open for further debate and struggle. Others think that the two previous lines both separate the national and class struggle off (from opposite viewpoints) and the line of RTL puts a correct position on the relation between national and class struggle. We think that there is a line contained in the document which is a new position being put forward in the League. It is new in the sense that it puts black and Irish workers in the vanguard and relates the revolutionary nature of their struggles to their origins in the Third World, Ireland etc. However essentially it also subordinates the national to the class struggle within this country, and in that sense is a new form of a previous line. This is also a 'left' reductionist line, close to the position of the RCG. The amendment passed at the CC aimed to give greater emphasis to the national struggle but tends to blur the issues because it is imprecise and can be interpreted to suit either position.

5. The analysis that runs through the RTL is that the main contradiction within this country is between the British imperialist bourgeoisie and the working class, that within the working class, it is the black and Irish workers who are playing a vanguard role and who will unite the whole of the class in a united struggle against capital. The black and Irish workers play this role because of their 'double oppression'. This theme runs through the

first seven paragraphs of the document although the phrase 'the working class and the oppressed' is used in an ambiguous way. Does this mean non-working class oppressed people? There is no mention of national contradictions within this country. This position comes out most clearly on p.3. of the document: "In Britain, the black and Irish workers are the most subjectively rebellious and revolutionary because of the situation of double and super-exploitation which they face Thus, in a sense, we can say that the struggles of black and Irish workers in Britain form a part of the main revolutionary force in the world today, internalised to the imperialist heartlands. At the same time, they are part of the working class (in Britain) ! Their conditions of life and relationship to the means of production make this so....."

6. This position reduces national oppression to a question of double oppression. It limits national oppression to the question of the origin of black and Irish workers and does not take up national oppression within this country. Thus it stresses only black workers instead of national minority communities, and does not take into its analysis the many different forms of racist oppression in order to fit black people into a preconceived class position. This is opposed to the 'Free National Development' (FND) position which analysed the oppression of black people in this country and their resistance to it; linked racism in this country with the oppression of peoples and nations by imperialism and showed the continuity between the two; it showed that the struggle against national oppression here has mainly taken the form of a separate struggle not primarily based on the class position of black workers but on the unity of national minority communities. It is of course true that the majority of black people are workers. But it is not true that "their conditions of life" define them as simply part of the working class. Many of the "conditions of life" affect national minority people as a community, on a multi-class basis, and do not affect majority working class people: this is what racist oppression means. The struggles of black people have centred on many of these questions: cultural questions such as schools for religious or language teaching or for example the right to wear turbans; immigration and nationality laws; and police harassment. The most extreme example is probably racist violence which is a threat to any black person, whether an employed or unemployed worker, a doctor or a barrister, or a petty bourgeois shopkeeper. The nature of racist oppression has also determined the form of the fightback and the forces that can be mobilised for these struggles. Leaders in struggles in the defence of the black community talk about 'defending our people' and 'our people are faced with racism from the state and from the white working class'. They do not identify with 'our class', do not see themselves as essentially a member of the working class and see their position more often as a 'colony' within the imperialist heartland.

7. RTL is confused on this question and in some parts acknowledges the multi-class nature of the national struggle by using 'people' instead of workers. But the main emphasis is on black workers and their leading role in the struggle of the working class as a whole. For example, on p.5., it is argued: "Where black and Irish workers lead today the rest of the working class will have to follow. This is why we argue that they are a bridge" However on p.2. it argues: "Like the Irish people, black people in Britain have fought heroically and protractedly but with little support from the rest of the working class." This passage implies that Irish and black people are simply part of the working class, and therefore that their struggles are an advanced or leading force in the struggle of the working class as a whole. This is a different position from that put forward by the FND line which has argued from a concrete analysis of the actual struggles that have taken place against racist oppression over the last thirty years. The characteristics of these struggles have been that they have been based within the black

communities, at different times building different alliances mainly between different national communities, that they have been struggles against racist oppression and for freedom for black people which inevitably have an anti-imperialist orientation. The class question constantly comes up within these struggles but not as put forward by RTL. These are questions of class alliances and class leadership which are essentially questions to be sorted out by national minority people themselves.

8. An amendment added to the document seems to take up some of these questions. For example on p.3. "The national minority peoples' struggles cannot be reduced simply to class struggle.... for they are forms of struggle in their own right which have a role autonomous from that of the majority working class but which can also introduce a more dynamic revolutionary trend into it." At best this amendment taken as a whole is vague and can be interpreted any way. Having said that national struggles cannot be reduced simply to class struggle, it qualifies this by saying they are a form of class struggle in the last analysis. This does not explain anything. It is also unclear what "a more dynamic revolutionary trend" means and earlier on this is referred to as "an element arising from their national demands". These phrases tend to blur different lines without adding clarity.

9. Essentially then, RTL puts forward a position that black and Irish people are a doubly oppressed section of the working class. In developing a position on national oppression the FND line has distinguished between national oppression and racist oppression, defining the latter as the highest and most vicious form of national oppression and has concentrated on the position of black national minorities. This is consistent with also taking up analysis of other nationally oppressed people for example, Irish, Welsh and Scottish. RTL does not make this distinction but assumes that black and Irish people are in the same position in relation to British imperialism and does not touch on the question of Wales and Scotland. It assumes that lessons drawn from the struggle of Irish people here can be applied directly to that of black people which we would argue is not necessarily the case. In reducing the question of national oppression to double oppression it does not argue why working class women are not then part of the vanguard. The FND position argues that there is a common basis of oppression shared by different national minorities i.e. national oppression, while allowing for analysis of the particularities of the different minorities. The RTL position however by lumping together black and Irish workers and ignoring Wales and Scotland, glosses over real differences and oversimplifies a complex situation.

10. The demand for Free National Development was amended at the 2nd Congress to one for democratic rights. RTL argues that defending and extending democratic rights is the key task in the class struggle in Britain today. But in the list of restrictions of democratic rights, it confuses different questions and again sees the struggle of national minorities as, in essence, part of the struggle of the working class as a whole. The main confusion is putting together different kinds of demands. We argue that the struggle for their national rights by national minority people is qualitatively different from some of the other questions listed here. National oppression cannot be reformed away under capitalism - hence the revolutionary nature of this struggle. Even when the struggle is aimed against legal aspects of national oppression, it is not a struggle that can be won within the imperialist state. For example, the immigration laws: we do not fight for non-racist immigration controls even though we fight for reforms such as for the right to stay of individuals threatened with deportation. More important, fighting for national

rights is not a fight simply against legal measures: there is no law that says that a higher proportion of black people should be unemployed or that black people should be subject to racist violence. To confuse this kind of question with bourgeois democratic rights e.g. restrictions on legal rights such as the Tebbit Bill is to confuse two different kinds of questions. Again it fails to analyse concretely the nature of the struggle of national minorities, fails to see that they face different forms of oppression and hence raise different demands from that of the working class as a whole. The document also says: "By working on the question of democratic rights we unite in practice with those sections who are not under the ideological hegemony of the labour aristocracy." We have seen in practice that this is not true without a correct analysis of what 'rights' we are talking about. For example in the Bradford 12 campaign at one stage the aspect of democratic rights implied in the use of the conspiracy laws was emphasised in order to win unity with sections of the white working class by drawing comparisons with the use of the conspiracy laws against the Shrewsbury pickets. This was quite opportunist because it covered up the real issue which was the right of self defence of national minorities. Similarly the issue of trade union recognition was pushed to get support for the Grunwick strikers in a way that opportunistically covered up the question of racist super-exploitation of black workers. We will deal with other criticisms of the 'democratic rights strategy' later on, but these points bring out that far from providing a strategy that takes us forward in relation to national minority struggle, this strategy only serves to confuse the issues further.

11. RTL present us with a general analysis that picks up the parts of the whole and tries to fit them into a general framework rather than basing itself on concrete analysis. The result is to reduce the position of black and Irish people to part of the working class as a whole and in so doing to omit any analysis of the 'highest and most vicious form of national oppression, racist oppression.' It also therefore misses out the resistance which has developed over the last thirty years apart from its culmination in the uprisings of last summer which are not put in the context of a long and protracted struggle. RTL mechanistically translates the fundamental economic contradiction of labour and capital into the main political contradiction for British imperialism and does not in fact tackle the reality of class relations and political struggles in a decaying imperialist society and thus undermines the sharpness and revolutionary nature of the national contradictions within the British state.

12. The question of the political economy of British imperialism is a complex one which we have to tackle as a priority in the future. But the picture in RTL is oversimplified. For example in the opening paragraphs, the crisis of imperialism is not put in the context of the rising struggles of the peoples and nations of the Third World against imperialism. We do not think that at this stage we can produce a document dealing with the international situation generally i.e. covering the questions of war and peace, the peace movement etc. But we cannot deal with British imperialism as a crisis of capitalism in one country isolated from the international context. It reduces the situation to an economist explanation that the capitalist class is trying to force down wages which even on the economic level is simplistic. For example, what about the restructuring of industry? finance capital? And it seems to present a conspiracy theory of history in which the opposition to imperialism abroad and internally is not related to the strategy of the ruling class which is seen as united in one bloc. We do not claim to

be in a position to come up with an all-round analysis of the crisis of British imperialism but we would criticise the RTL for oversimplifying and distorting the issues by attempting to do so.

13. The same goes for the position of RTL in presenting the strategy on democratic rights as a strategy to take us forward. We have argued above why this is no answer in the case of black national minorities and in fact confuses different questions. Another example is the PTA. In RTL the restrictions on political rights are seen as essentially part of the economic struggle to keep wages down. But the PTA was directed not mainly at the economic fightback in this country but mainly to prevent support for the struggle in Ireland and only secondarily at active trade unionists here. We should not oppose the PTA primarily on the grounds that it is a threat to the whole of the working class (which it is in the long term) but because it is aimed at the suppression of solidarity particularly from the Irish community with the liberation struggle in Ireland.

14. When it comes to the economic struggles of the working class, we do not accept the implication that it is the restriction on bourgeois democratic legal rights that is the main obstacle to these struggles going forward. It is clearly essential to take up these questions in the course of any struggle but it is not mainly legal rights that are the obstacle. The recent example of the health workers dispute illustrates this well: there were many examples of secondary picketing, technically illegal, in the course of the strike and of many other recent struggles at the place of work. Other factors than this led to the defeat of these struggles.

15. A more general point about the strategy on democratic rights put forward in RTL is that it implies a strategy close to that of the old position put forward who say that we should have a strategy of building a broad movement which unites the working class in the fight against fascism. If we see fascism (state fascism) developing mainly through gradual restrictions on democratic rights then the two positions, apparently quite different, are very close. We would argue that principled unity can only be built through recognition of the need to defend and fight for the national rights of national minority people not by arguing that in themselves these are questions for the whole of the working class.

16. The strategy on democratic rights is linked in the RTL with an analysis that we can best challenge the hold of the labour aristocracy over the working class through challenging "the British state on the sacred grounds of its laws....." and the "total unshakeable belief of the labour aristocracy in the right of the ruling class to rule and their utter devotion to perpetuating that rule....." Again we think this is an oversimplified picture based on the 19th century model of a labour aristocracy which is a bought off layer of the working class. British imperialism has developed since then and part of that development has been the incorporation of top level trade union leadership into the state so that they are probably more accurately described as part of the bourgeoisie than as part of a layer within the working class. One result of this has been that through the Labour Party and the role of Labour governments top trade union leaders do in certain situations challenge the laws imposed by a Tory government. David Basnett recently threatened an "insurrectionary trade union movement" and there are many examples of Labour Party leaders challenging laws passed by a Tory government. This is obviously not to challenge the right of British imperialism's right to rule but these examples show up the oversimplified picture presented by RTL and the strategy that follows from it of challenging the laws of the British state.

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The development of imperialism over the last 80 years or so has affected the internal relations within the metropolitan countries as well as their external relations, and the concept of a bought off layer of the working class is not adequate to explain these relationships. This is another question which needs more theoretical work to solve. Lenin in fact went beyond this concept of a bought off layer. He referred to the ability of the capitalists "to create something like and alliance between the workers of the given nation and their capitalists against the other countries (p.13 Imperialism and the Split in Socialism). We think this concept is a better starting point to describe the reality of twentieth century Britain and the complex relations within the country. At the top end imperialism has actually incorporated the top trade union leadership into the bourgeoisie. In between there are middle sections of vacillating petty bourgeois strata. The majority working class is also affected ideologically and materially (although not necessarily bought off in the sense of have lost forever their revolutionary potential) and this is reflected in its position facing two ways: on the one hand engaged in a constant struggle on the economic and sometimes political level with capital, at present limited in a social-democratic framework generally, and on the other hand, allying itself with the ruling class in its oppression of the oppressed nations of the Third World and the national minorities within this country. Imperialism has had the effect of blunting the contradiction between the bourgeoisie and the majority working class and the depth of racism within the working class is just one manifestation of this reality. It is only when we understand this concretely that we can begin to break the hold of opportunism on the working class and build a principled unity between the nationally oppressed and the majority working class.

18. RTL sees the road to this unity as for the working class as a whole to unite under the leadership of black and Irish workers who are seen as the vanguard of the class and, at the same time, as the bridge between the revolutionary struggles in the Third World and Ireland struggles within this country. RTL implies that as the crisis develops the whole of the working class will follow the lead of black and Irish workers in a way that was heralded by the uprisings of 1981 when sections of the majority working class followed the lead of black youth.

19. Although we agree with many of the individual points raised, for example the importance of the uprisings of 1981 and that of the links with revolutionary movements in the Third World and Ireland, we think that the overall strategy glosses over the real situation, avoids analysing the complexities and particularities of the situation in order to come up with a general strategy.

20. Most importantly, as we have argued above, the struggle of black people against their oppression and for national rights is a separate struggle of an advanced nature aimed at the British state. This struggle has been carried out without the support of and often in the face of direct opposition from members of the majority working class. RTL glosses over this important contradiction and engages in wishful thinking when it says that the majority working class will spontaneously follow the lead of black and Irish workers. If we understand that imperialism has to a great extent, enlisted the support of the majority working class in its oppression of nations and peoples, and built an alliance with it, we can also then understand that to the extent that the majority working class either actively supports racist oppression or does not actively fight it, the fight against this oppression will take the form of a struggle between nationalities. This fact cannot be wished

away: but it must be understood in order to build a principled and firm basis on which to break the alliance with imperialism. There are many examples to back up this point: major struggles led by national minority people have won hardly any support from the majority working class over the last period - the Nationality Bill demonstration, Black People's Day of Action and the Bradford 12. Many industrial disputes have been fought in the face of opposition from white workers who have in the short term benefited from discrimination against black workers. It is also true that black and white workers have often united in economic struggles which affect both but this unity does not begin to tackle the question of racist oppression. For example, black and white workers can unite round a pay rise but this does not imply any understanding on the part of white workers of national oppression - racist violence, immigration controls, cultural oppression etc. As long as we have a situation in which the majority working class is either hostile or neutral towards the struggle of national minority peoples, it is wishful thinking simply to gloss over this contradiction.

21. There is another aspect of this too. The content - the direction, demands and strategy - of the struggle of national minority people has been round the struggle for national rights, for freedom for black people. Although there is much to learn from this struggle because of its anti-imperialist nature, this struggle cannot of itself lead the struggle of the majority working class. The struggle of the latter must be defined by its character as a struggle to free the working class from its exploitation by capital. The two struggles face the same enemy - British imperialism - but cannot be merged into one current. Unity between the two has to be built round principled demands which guarantee that the majority working class supports the struggle of black people. This is a different analysis from one which simply puts black and Irish people in the vanguard. At this stage the concept of the strategic alliance is not defined in any detail, but it puts the relationship of the two struggles correctly and the need to build this alliance on the principled basis of support by the majority working class for Free National Development for national minorities in this country and support for international struggles against imperialism.

22. The concept of the 'bridge' which replaces the strategic alliance in RTL does not provide any answers. Mao uses the concept of the October revolution being the bridge between the struggles of the working class in the advanced capitalist countries and the struggles of oppressed peoples and nations. Here it has a concrete and specific meaning. In RTL the concept of the bridge is used to link the national struggles of the Third World, through the national minority people here, to that of the working class without spelling out how this will happen, glossing over the question of the continuation of the oppression of national minorities in this country and over the contradiction between national minorities and the majority working class. The points put forward in an amendment are too vague to spell out a strategy: "point of juncture" and "more dynamic revolutionary trend."

23. Finally, the document correctly points to the importance of the events of summer 1981 - the fact that the massive rebellion shook the British state and heralded a stage in the growth of new revolutionary forces in this country that are prepared to fight an uncompromising struggle against imperialism. It also points to two important aspects: the unity with white workers and the unity with Irish people. However, it does not analyse these events in a deep way. The uprisings are taken as a point of reference, a model, and in so doing, they are seen in isolation, separated from the years of oppression and

and the years of struggle and resistance which culminated in the uprisings. The black youth alone seem to be put forward as the vanguard and thus isolated from the rest of the national minority peoples. The unity with white workers is seen as an indication that the white working class will follow the black and Irish workers who are seen to be in the vanguard of the working class. But what were the uprisings all about? In a desire that the working class will follow this lead, the situation is simplified yet again and the uprisings are seen in the context of the struggle of the whole of the working class against the British imperialist bourgeoisie. The 'October' article suggests that the uprisings demonstrate four elements: black consciousness, defence of national minority areas, anti-imperialism and rejection of the tradition and methods of the bought off sections of the labour movement. The uprisings were predominantly black rebellion. In this context, the significance of white participation is that white people can be mobilised to support the national demands of national minority people and this holds great potential for the future. The document does not proceed from analysis of the concrete situation and appears to ignore what little knowledge we have of the nature, form and organisation of the black struggle. Overall, the RTL document takes us a step back in that it underestimates the importance and revolutionary nature of the national struggles that exist in this country and the world, and reverts to a line which subordinates the struggles of national minority people to that of the working class as a whole.