

Duncan Hallas on permanent factions

Anindya Bhattacharyya, July 2013

The British [SWP](#) is unusual among Leninist organisations in not allowing “permanent factions” inside the organisation. This rule was brought in by its predecessor organisation, the International Socialists, in the early 1970s and has persisted ever since.

Given the current controversy about permanent factions inside the SWP, I thought it would be worthwhile to go back to [Duncan Hallas](#), one of our tradition’s founders, to dig out the original political rationale that motivated this decision. At the very least it would cut through some of the crude sophistry around this question that has been flying about of late.

What is a faction?

Hallas writes, in his October 1971 document “[IS and the Trotskyist Tendency](#)”:

Any internal struggle involves real costs to an organisation, not least in diversion of effort and attention away from the outside world. So when such struggles become necessary, as they will from time to time, it is important both to minimise the cost and to use the discussion for political educational purposes and not merely for polemical ones.

The context of his remarks was the battle inside the IS over the Trotskyist Tendency, an internal faction that was playing an increasingly destructive role within the organisation. It left later that year and eventually morphed into today’s AWL.

The Trotskyist Tendency described itself as a “the only permanently organised opposition” inside the IS. It was a fullblown organisation within an organisation, complete with “its own members and even probationary members, its own dues, its own internal life, its own discipline, its own internal documents and its own leadership”, as Hallas describes it. He adds:

One of the negative effects of the presence of the Trotskyist Tendency has been to confuse some members about the nature and purpose of platform factions. A faction is a more or less temporary grouping of members formed to fight for (or against) some specific policy proposal or proposals.

The Trotskyist Tendency has never been a faction in the real sense. This is very clearly indicated by the extraordinary fact that it maintained a system of probationary membership.

The only test for membership of a real faction is agreement with its stated platform. Probationary membership is the mark of a separate and exclusive organisation.

He contrasted this set-up with previous factions that had operated inside the IS:

In 1968-69 we and a number of real factions, for example the Democratic Centralists, the Micro-Faction and Platform Four. They were groupings of comrades who wished, at that time, to push the organisation in particular directions and to change its organisational structure accordingly. They held open meetings to discuss and expound their views and to solicit votes.

The factional struggle was quite sharp and in the heat of the conflict a good many uncomradely things were said. Finally conference decisions were made on the disputed questions. The factions more or less rapidly dissolved. No one ordered them to dissolve. They dissolved because new issues were arising and new alignments of comrades on those issues. They dissolved precisely because they were genuine factions.

To summarise: a faction is a formalised expression of opposition to the leadership around specific issues. It is temporary by definition – the faction lasts for as long as the specific argument remains live. Hence a permanent faction is, more or less, a contradiction in terms. Hallas writes:

A permanent faction means, sooner or later, a split. The letter circulated to branches ... by the Trotskyist Tendency speaks of “generalised opposition”. Now a generalised opposition means opposition to all the main policies of the organisation. A faction that develops such opposition, even if it were a genuine faction to start with, is heading towards a split for the obvious reason that it will force its opponents to act as a counter faction in self defence. The organisation then becomes a battleground and every issue becomes a factional issue.

To summarise again: genuine factions are temporary formations that persist for as long as the specific arguments that give rise to them persist. They are characterised by unanimity on the specific question, diversity on all others, and an informal internal structure. “Permanent factions”, in contrast, are not genuine factions at all. They are characterised by generalised opposition over all questions and a highly developed internal structure. They are opportunist in nature, aiming to split the host organisation rather than win an argument within it.

The situation today

How does this analysis apply to the “organised opposition” current within the SWP today? We should first note that this opposition is *not* a faction in any formal sense of the term – even if it wanted to be a faction, rules introduced at the March special conference forbid it from declaring itself as such. It is made up of comrades who have met up informally and collectively committed themselves to staying in the SWP and fighting for the party to return its core principles. Yet we can nevertheless apply Hallas’s three tests to this emergent opposition:

- There are two key arguments that unite the opposition: a strong conviction that sexual harassment and rape allegations against a former leading member of the party have been catastrophically mishandled (to say the least); and a looser conviction that the very fact this mishandling was not promptly corrected signals a grave dysfunction within the party’s internal democracy that must be rectified as a matter of urgency.
- In contrast, the opposition holds a diversity of views on all other major issues: the precise nature of a Leninist party today; the composition of the working class in Britain and its implications for the SWP’s industrial strategy; the party’s relationship to the rest of the left; what, if anything, needs to be updated or revised in its theorisation of oppression etc.
- As for the opposition’s internal structure, it is an informal grouping of comrades equipped with a coordinating group (comprised of volunteers rather than being formally elected) and a [website](#) (set up after a unanimous decision at an opposition meeting in late June).

The opposition clearly fits Hallas’s criteria for a temporary faction as opposed to a permanent one. It has come together around specific issues, has a variety of views on all others, and involves a minimal degree of internal organisation. It is not, however, a faction in any fullblown sense – the comrades involved have not decided to declare a faction and could not do so even if they wanted to.

Majority votes are *not* always binding

One final point. In stark contrast to today’s SWP leadership, Duncan Hallas was never afraid to admit that he had made mistakes, or to specify exactly what those mistakes were and how he had learned from them. He [writes](#):

A word of self-criticism is necessary here, The whole leadership of IS – the whole National Committee – has been at fault in not forcing a debate on the question of centrism at a much earlier date. That minority of NC members, of which I was one, who voted to expel the

Trotskyist Tendency over two years ago, is especially at fault. It would have been better for everyone, including those who have been misled by the Trotskyist Tendency, to have *refused to accept the majority decision as final* and to have persistently fought the latter in the organisation. [emphasis added]

Hallas is unequivocal on this point. When it comes to questions of fundamental principle and issues that are life-or-death ones for the organisation, no serious revolutionary can consider majority votes to be the end of the matter. On the contrary, it is the duty of revolutionaries in these circumstances to set aside the rules and regulations, and to continue their fight for what is right by any means necessary. The stakes are too high for any other course of action to be countenanced.

- For more on the history of factions within the IS/SWP see [Ian Birchall](#) and [Pat Stack](#).