



# On Slogans and Tactics

Thu, 30/06/2005 - 22:00

## A Reply to Bill's critique of our tactics

In his latest criticism of the perspectives of the organisation, *Why the Opposition is not a Problem*, Bill J argues that events since the last conference of Workers Power in February prove that the perspectives and tasks adopted by the conference are flawed.

He criticises the conference decision for 'elevating certain 'key slogans' or whales above the class struggle.' He points out, in case anyone should misunderstand him, that he is not necessarily opposed to us using any of those slogans - in the right circumstances. It is making them 'key' slogans that is the problem ' or so it would appear at first sight.

Now of course there has been no attempt to elevate anything 'above' the class struggle. The majority of delegates to the conference supported raising the key slogans ' a new workers' party, a rank and file movement in the trade unions, social forums/democratic coordinations of struggles, a new youth international and a new International - because we believe they arise as pressing necessities of the class struggle.

For example, there is a burning need for a new party: and hundreds of thousands of union members are sick of seeing the bureaucrats paying their fees over to the very government that is attacking them. There are unions outside the Labour Party; there is a pressing need for working class representation.

This need arises not just in this or that union or during this or that election campaign, but generally in Britain today as a result of the charge to the right of the Labour Party, the effects of its neoliberal policy, and the alienation from the Labour Party of a significant part of the vanguard of the working class.

The need for a rank and file movement in the unions is similarly pressing. It is revealed in every strike, every dispute, every threatened struggle and every sell-out.

The absence of democratic coordination of struggles from below, across the campaigns and the initiatives and the different sectors of those in struggle, is also very clear. We saw it at the G8. We see it in the antiwar and antiracist movements. Above all we see it in the continued absence of coordination between the fightback in Europe and struggles in insular Britain.

These slogans are not elevated above the class struggle ' they are an expression of a real need of the struggle. They address the crisis of working class leadership.

## Why key slogans?

At this stage in the argument, it is often objected that there is nothing wrong with the slogans in and of themselves, but that they shouldn't be singled out as 'key'.

Some comrades have presented our use of these slogans as if we were trying to replace the rest of our programme or downplay the importance of transitional demands and a revolutionary programme.

Others ' like Bill - seem to think we should raise them when appropriate, but that making them 'key' slogans somehow stops us applying them creatively or even stops us raising them at all at important moments.

I want to show that these fears are groundless.

It is entirely usual in the revolutionary tradition for communists to advance a revolutionary programme of demands and also to agitate around a set of slogans addressing a specific situation in the class struggle.

There are many examples of this. In the 1880s through to 1898, the key slogan of Marxists in Russia was the formation of a workers' party. Did this mean they advanced no other programme, or deprioritised it? It did not. It was simply a rallying cry for a great strategic goal, essential if the proletariat were to prepare a struggle for revolution and socialism.

In 1934-35 in France, the key slogans of the Trotskyists included an antifascist militia, the united front, committees of action, a fourth International. Did advancing such agitational slogans detract from their fuller action programme, or from the fight against the degeneration of the USSR? In no way.

In our own history as Workers Power we have ourselves emphasised certain slogans at important moments in the struggle. In the miners' strike in 1984-85 we emphasised the call for a General Strike, picket defence squads, councils of action, a rank and file movement in the NUM and a working class women's movement. This didn't stop us from advancing the rest of our programme through agitation and propaganda, including job sharing with no loss of pay, sliding scale of wages and hours, international solidarity, measures to discipline the scabs in the union etc. It was a matter of emphasis based on the needs of the class struggle.

Today, can anyone seriously claim that by emphasising certain key slogans - slogans designed for a less intense class struggle situation than those described above - we have somehow deprioritised, abandoned or obscured the rest of our programme? It simply isn't true. Demands against racism, against the war on terror and the occupation of Iraq, against deportations, against the pensions robbery, outsourcing, redundancies - our programme remains and we agitate and propagandise for it. But we are also able to raise the slogans above as the key things that are missing - the steps we need to take to start to overcome the crisis of working class leadership which is holding the movement back.

### **For a new workers' party - sometimes?**

Bill says: "The tendency argued that the NWP should not be used as a cure-all substitute for the revolutionary party, but focused on particular areas of work where it could gain a resonance and have an impact. The only (relative) success we have had with that slogan this year has been where we used it in that way, around the RMT conference, but even there as Pat points out himself, this is not a conference for a New Workers Party, but to discuss political representation in the unions."

Now, of course, some in the tendency were in reality against us using the slogan full stop, arguing that the vanguard hadn't broken from Labour. Others like Bill support the slogan - but not as a "key" slogan. Bill's passage quoted above gives us a very clear exposition of this view.

The first point to answer is: has the group used the slogan for a new workers' party as "a cure-all substitute for the revolutionary party"? I would say never. The call for a new workers' party is of course a united front call, raising as it does a demand on the existing trade union, left reformist and centrist leaders to break with Blair and/or their populist projects and come together in a conference to found a new political party. But when have we ever failed to point out that to represent the interests of the working class, such a party would need to adopt a revolutionary policy? It is precisely this insistence of ours - not an ultimatum but a declaration of our revolutionary intent - that draws such criticism from opportunists like the Socialist Party and the ISG.

The fight for a new workers' party is a form of our fight for a revolutionary party - not a substitute for it in any way. Nor have any of the programmes we have advanced in elections avoided raising this very point: the need for a new political working class party to aim for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism.

What about Bill's point that we should raise the slogan "focused on particular areas of work where it could gain a resonance and have an impact." We could hardly disagree with this. We have been doing just that. The work in the RMT does not contradict raising the call agitationally elsewhere, including in areas where there is as yet no organised initiative to break from Labour. Why would it?

The danger in Bill's point is the implication that where we as yet find little or no 'resonance' for the call, we should deprioritise it or not raise it. This would be tailist. The need for this new party does not disappear where the consciousness of one part of the working class lags behind that of others. There is a need for a new workers' party not just in this or that part of the British working class movement but in every industry, every area, and every part of the working class.

If we have had relative success in getting the RMT to commit to a conference discussing political representation of the working class - where we will certainly fight for this to be secured by forming a new workers' party (how else?) - then this is a success not just of a militant in the RMT but of a Workers Power member in the RMT, a member of an organisation which aims to be known for this policy, for this slogan. The two things complement one another.

Of course, sometimes we would not raise the call for a new workers' party. If the Labour Left revived and militants looked to struggles within Labour as expressing their goals like in the 80s, we might find ourselves back in a situation in which intervention in Labour and the formation of a revolutionary tendency in the party would once again commend itself as a tactic for the creation of a revolutionary party. Or if we had a sizeable revolutionary cadre party we might focus on united front tactics to break a part of the reformist party away, directly to the revolutionaries.

Those circumstances do not exist in Britain today - the correct call is the formation of a new workers' party. To raise this demand only when and where we think it will get a resonance would be to tail the consciousness of the vanguard rather than to give a lead. That would be an opportunist error and - as I have said before - a break with the best traditions of the group, with the tradition of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, who started from what was necessary for the advance of the struggle, not from what they thought the existing ideas of the masses were ready to accept at any given moment.

The rank and file movement: does a general slogan prevent specific uses of a slogan?

Bill tells us, again: 'The tendency argued that the key to the use of the R & F movement slogan was its application in the class struggle, alongside patient propaganda for it.'

Again, we can reply that raising the rank and file movement as one of our key slogans doesn't obstruct 'its application in the class struggle' but is an expression of it. Given that we fully expected to see a series of disputes in which the trade union bureaucracy sell out and hold back the workers, why only agitate for it when there is a strike or an individual struggle? Why not raise it generally as a need of the working class in Britain today?

But here Bill thinks he has found a new argument. In the Gate Gourmet dispute the slogan was 'dropped by the leadership'!

Now this is an overstatement to say the least. The leaflet that London comrades and Jez put out together didn't emphasise it enough, and many comrades agree with this criticism, notwithstanding the other excellent qualities of the leaflet. But to say the PC or the fulltimers 'dropped' the demand is wholly disingenuous. We carried it in the paper; we argued it with the strikers; we raised it with the strikers' representative at the panel debate on the unions at our recent London day school.

But, perhaps not thinking things through enough before developing his argument, Bill then claims not only that the leadership dropped the demand - but that they dropped it because it is a key slogan! Because the conference wanted us to raise it as general need of the struggle, therefore we apparently decided not to raise it as a specific need of the struggle. We made it a key slogan; and the key apparently locked the door it was supposed to open.

Comrades will have noticed that this is a strikingly incoherent and illogical argument. Why on earth should our use of the general slogan for a rank and file movement have caused us to give it insufficient emphasis in a leaflet?

A moment's thought reveals that the general use of something does not exclude but includes its specific use. Did the general call for a new workers' party stop us raising it specifically in the RMT? If not, why not? Or maybe 'the

leadership? just haven't got round to dropping it yet? Should our comrade in Bristol RMT maintain the fight for his union to raise the call by? opposing it being a key slogan of WP?

Bill's attempt to counterpose the general use of key agitational slogans to their focused use in specific situations is illogical, a failed argument. There is no need for comrades to change our key slogans in this respect. The rank and file movement will remain a specific call of WP in each dispute in the period ahead, against the pensions sell out, in Unison, the PCS, the NUT and the RMT ? and it will remain a general call for the workers in every union and across the unions, because it addresses a general need of the class struggle in Britain today.

For good measure, Bill adds another argument here. The reason the leadership 'dropped' the rank and file movement slogan 'could be considered an aberration, but it was not, it flowed from the schematic passive propagandist way the leadership pose 'key slogans'.

This is novel. No one has accused the conference decision of this before. And no wonder: the key slogans were specifically conceived as being for agitation, which means a smaller number of ideas for a larger number of people (whereas propaganda is a larger number of ideas for a smaller number of people). Opponents of the slogans objected to us giving them a specific emphasis in our agitation. Now, we are told, the problem is that the leadership is using them in a passive way, in a propagandist way. Quite what Bill means by this is not made clear. We can only hope that Bill will now be making common cause with many supporters of the conference decision and arguing for a more active agitational use of the rank and file movement slogan ? both in specific trade union struggles and generally as a critical step forward in the struggle against the trade union bureaucracy.

## **Social Forums**

Bill says: 'The slogan of a social forum in every city and a UK social forum at Gleneagles was dropped by the leadership even before Gleneagles, it was only featured in only one quarter page article at Gleneagles itself, since then it has disappeared entirely. If you look at the branch perspectives reports this autumn, branches are not fighting for a social forums in their areas.'

It is simply untrue that the fulltimers, PC or NC dropped this slogan before the G8. We raised it there; we argued for it at the counter-conference and in the meetings on the youth, the debate with the CWI and in countless discussions with activists; it was included in the G8 paper.

Should we continue to raise the slogan now? In my view given the time that has passed since the ESF and the fact that the term 'social forum' is not widely known in Britain, we could reformulate it, change the words, but the content of the slogan will still need to be expressed. That is that democratic coordinations of struggle from below are needed; it is the absence of these that left the big G8 demo largely under the control of the charities and religious leaders, that left the centrists able to get away with the counter-conference taking no decisions, and that leave the diverse campaigns and initiatives today disconnected and prey to the tender mercies of the opportunist centrist leaders and their manoeuvres.

This is not the first time I've made this point. In a discussion with Jason on the egroup prior to the G8 I wrote: 'You say 'What we need more is a counter-summit or series of counter-summits and organising bases to take forward the struggle. What we could get out of it possibly is a revitalised anti-cap movement- maybe a rerun of the People's Assemblies idea- and try to make them into real action orientated bodies'.

As was explained often during our debates earlier this year, that is exactly what we mean by a UK social forum and why the majority of delegates to our conference voted for it. Personally I think it's a good slogan that can win a real hearing in Edinburgh next month, along with our other demands. But maybe you'd prefer to use a different phrase or term to sum it up. If that's our only difference then that seems pretty minor to me.

Do comrades feel that the slogan 'An all-Britain Popular Assembly' would be a better way of framing our demand, the content of which is for a democratic coordination of the struggles against global poverty, war and neoliberalism/privatisation? If so perhaps the NC would consider it. We used it before, in the context of the antiwar

movement in 2003. We would of course still propose the closest ties of such an Assembly/Social Forum with coordinations in Europe, including of course those in the ESF, which include the major French and Italian unions, the German left etc.?

In the run up to the Athens ESF we might find that the words 'social forums' sum up what we mean effectively. I suspect that a better form of words needs to be found. But I remain convinced that democratic coordination is essential, and that we should be fighting to tie it in with the ESF as a very important forum in which the need for a European-wide response to the neoliberal attacks can be debated by key forces.

Now I suspect that Bill would not agree with this either. After all, he says later in his document that the social forums 'do not exist in the UK and only to a limited extent, if anywhere elsewhere?'. This, of course, is completely untrue, a sign of almost wilful ignorance. There will be a very large social forum in Athens in July. All expectations are that there will be at least 50,000 there; represented will be key organisations and initiatives of the European working class, including the Italian metalworkers union FIOM, the CGIL union federation and the COBAS syndicalists; from France key forces from the 'Non?' campaign, including CGT and G10 Solidaire unions plus the PCF, left social democrats, Attac and the LCR; from Germany the PDS/Linkspartei; Belgian and Dutch and Austrian militants plus, of course, militant workers and youth from Greece and Turkey.

We want the campaigns in the UK to be coordinated; we want them to be under democratic control of the activists; we want them to meet with, talk and listen to and discuss with their European counterparts. We want them to coordinate and attend the ESF and help forge a European fightback against the Lisbon Agenda and the neoliberal offensive. That is why 'whether we use the phrase social forums or not in Britain' we need a slogan that addresses this key need of the class struggle in Britain and Europe as a whole. Amend it by all means 'to drop it would be a serious mistake.

### **Youth International and Fifth International**

Bill says: 'Because the leadership pose the youth international almost entirely in terms of winning forces through the social forums (which do not exist in the UK and only to a limited extent, if anywhere elsewhere) this means in effect building a youth international through intervening into the ESF and WSF events and organising meetings. Consequently it has made little progress. We are not talking to any international contacts (as far as I know), the few contacts we did have i.e. the Basques, we have lost.'

This is also wrong. Neither the L5I nor the Revolution international Council pose the youth international exclusively in this way. We are intervening in the coming national conference of left wing youth organisations in Germany to fight for our perspective; we are building a REVO group in Indonesia; we have made contacts who want to form a REVO group in Switzerland. We sought contacts not only at the ESF and its preparatory assemblies but also 'as Bill knows very well' at the international mobilisation against the G8 in Scotland this year.

But we will also continue to intervene in the ESF around this fight. Why? Because we had success at the London ESF with the call for a youth assembly. Because we have met militants from many other countries at the ESF and the WSF 'including having discussions at the WSF with a young split from the PTS. We will follow up an invitation from a CGIL militant at the ESF who has asked Luke to come and speak at a big youth meeting in Italy next year.

And it's not all about discussions with groups either. Everyone knows that the overwhelming majority of the people at the ESFs and WSFs 'not on the platforms, but the activists on the ground' are young. We will make and follow up individual contacts there as part of our fight to build REVO and the League and as part of our fight for a youth international and a New World Party of Social Revolution.

### **Perspective and tasks of the league**

Bill says:  
'The leadership operate to a perspective that world capitalism is stagnant and that the world is in a pre-revolutionary period. And yet in spite of this very upbeat assessment of revolutionary opportunities they have registered no serious

progress in building the league this year, or last year, or the year before that. At a certain point they have to be accountable for their actions. If the objective situation is so strongly in our favour, why have they failed to build the league? Either they are a very bad leadership, or their perspective is wrong.?

The first point here is to note how Bill ? as he does so often in these debates ? slips into misrepresentation. He knows full well that the League does not believe that the world economy is stagnant.

It is true that the Sixth Congress perspectives talked about globalisation entering a period of stagnation. But subsequent discussion at the IEC clarified this formulation. It made clear that what we are talking about is not a situation of constant stagnation (an impossibility given the continued cyclical movement of capitalism in all periods) but a period that displays a tendency to stagnation.

Of course Bill can keep quoting the formulation back at us as if it means we all believe the world economy is stagnant, but that won't alter the fact that we don't think that.

Our most recent set of perspectives (January 2005) make this absolutely explicit:

?The world economy is in the upswing of the business cycle - an upswing that could still last another two years or more. This upswing is uneven and unsynchronised? especially as between continental Europe and the United States. The sustained fall in the value of the dollar against the Euro acts to depress EU exports and depress the cyclical recovery there. The US has certainly experienced a feverish upswing: the EU a low and slow recovery.?

What our long term perspectives do say is that since the 1970s we have witnessed a strong tendency to stagnation in the imperialist heartlands, which in turn leads to an offensive by big capital for the extension of working hours and reduction of real wages, the export of capital to cheap labour economies in China and India, seizure of resources through new colonial adventures like Iraq and the neoliberal offensive of the EU.

We do believe? with some pretty convincing evidence ? that these developments have led to growing instability, especially in continental Europe in Latin America and in parts of Asia and Africa. Whilst Britain is not in the forefront of these developments (like the USA it has experienced a fairly vigorous cyclical boom) it has witnessed a recovery of industrial struggle - from however low a base - and it has also witnessed a historically strong antiwar movement. Michael said all of this in his debate with Bill at the W(B) summer school ? Bill chooses to ignore it.

More to the point for the current discussion, however, is Bill's claim that we have made no serious progress in building this year, or last year, or the year before that. Again Bill should check his facts ? or just trust the evidence of his own eyes. Maybe he does not know that we now have a REVO group in Germany with some 30 members ? something we certainly didn't have a few years ago? Or that the Austrian section is engaged in a powerful recovery, that its contingent on the October school student strike and march was 250 strong in a demo of 2000, that 35 REVO delegates from 13 schools attended REVO's Vienna meeting after the strike? Fair enough. But he certainly knows about the powerful renewal of our forces currently underway in the growth of REVO in Leeds, Liverpool, Leicester and indeed over recent months in Manchester.

We do not believe that capitalism is about to suffer a catastrophe or that Britain is about to erupt; we simply believe that in Europe class struggle is mounting, that the conditions for building are good, that the growth of the Chinese and Indian economies are unlikely to offset the fact that we are probably about to go into recession in Britain and America and that the current conditions of struggle are not likely to grow calmer but more intense.

In fact, it is Bill who is being schematic ? blindingly so. He says: ?We have not advanced because in fact world capitalism is not stagnant and we are not in a pre-revolutionary period.?

Just as it is possible to build in a period that is not pre-revolutionary, so it is possible to mess up in a period of sharp class struggle through subjective errors (the French Trotskyists managed it in 1937-38 and the Spanish in 1931-36). To say we haven't advanced (itself a very one-sided assessment as I have said) because of the growth of capitalism and the nature of the period is dangerous objectivism.

It is also an offence to common sense. We are simply not in a period in Europe of reduced, low levels of class struggle. There is a lot going on in Britain too. There are plenty of opportunities. Bill may complain about being called pessimistic, but his schema looks dangerously like a self-fulfilling prophecy that can only result in underachievement. Of course, Bill will point to good work undertaken in his branch and elsewhere to prove his optimistic and group-building credentials. But the fact remains that objectivist schemas that lower comrades' horizons will damage the group if they are allowed to take hold.

### **Hold course**

Bill has failed to show that our slogans are false; he has failed to show that they arise from anywhere other than the needs of the class struggle, providing that this is understood not in purely national and local terms or as simply what workers are already struggling for. Provided that is that one does not have a tailist conception about how to relate to the class struggle.

He has failed to show that they contradict our broader transitional programme; he has failed to show that they harm our work. In the case of two of them, he has failed even to show what his reasoned objection can be to their use.

He has deepened his errors by claiming that, in the case of one key slogan, its general use contradicts its specific use. He has misunderstood our international youth work and has failed to understand that the World and European Social Forums provide a rallying point for forces of resistance, including working class forces that urgently need to be rallied to the fight for a new international. And he has failed to understand that under the current perspective, current tasks documents and current leadership, the League is winning new layers of young people in greater numbers than before to a fighting revolutionary programme.

Instead he proposes an incoherent approach to slogans and programme, muddling and mixing up general demands and specific agitation, and would have us decide whether to emphasise a demand not on the basis of its objective necessity in the struggle, but on the tailist grounds of whether it already has a resonance in this or that sphere of the class struggle. He would elevate his analysis of the world economy into a schema that predicts another 10 years of shallow recessions and sharp upswings, and translates this into what can only be described as a catch-all excuse for the group failing to advance.

And this is the 'alternative' he wants to persuade the British Section's members to adopt. Should either Workers Power (or the League) entrust its supporters with a leadership majority on this basis? No we should not. I am convinced we will continue to disprove these ideas in political debate, and in practice, through continued growth in the sharpening struggles ahead.

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