

For a Strong Party, for a Healthy Debate

by Lynn Beaton

In the national phone hook-up on Tuesday, 22nd July three issues were raised about the Militant organisation. Since the content of this discussion will be reported to all branches, it is important that I clarify the issues raised. The only way for us to deal with issues which might drive wedges between us is to confront them openly. Open discussion can only strengthen us, whereas confusion and misunderstandings can only weaken us.

The issues concerned

- a) criticism of the media coverage received by Stephen Jolly, National Secretary of Militant, in the aftermath of the Dandenong anti-Hanson rally.
- b) a statement that Militant owed the New Labour Party \$300.
- c) c)the 'agenda' of Militant members in the New Labour Party.

I will deal with the question of the money first because it is more straight forward.

AT NO TIME HAS MILITANT OWED THE NEW LABOUR PARTY MONEY. Forgive the capital letters, comrades, but since this has been stated, it must be denied loudly. There is no truth behind it, only a small misunderstanding, which has unfortunately caused some obvious concern among some delegates on the hook-up. The misunderstanding occurred over the financing of the Broadsheet which was produced in Melbourne after the Newcastle Conference in November last year.

Militant resources were used to produce the broadsheet and in particular two Militant members Bill Deller and myself donated a considerable amount of time and money from our own personal resources to the production of the Broadsheet. I'm sure you will understand that the claim that Militant owes money has left a rather bitter taste.

The situation

1. The Newcastle conference decided that a Broadsheet to promote the New Labour Party would be produced in Melbourne and the costs would be covered by the New Labour Party national funds.
2. A guesstimate figure of \$300 was mentioned to cover costs.
3. In fact the printing cost alone for 10,000 copies of the four page Broadsheet was \$580.
4. The New Labour Party paid \$300 and Bill Deller agreed to borrow the remaining \$280 from Militant, in the form of credit from the printer with whom Militant has an account. This \$280 was to be paid back to Militant from the Melbourne Branch of the NLP to cover the costs of the Broadsheets which it would distribute in Victoria.

NB I assume the misunderstanding occurred at this point. Bill was under the impression the debt was owed by the Melbourne Branch of the NLP and Patrick that the debt was owed by Militant. I suspect that Bill used the 'we' meaning MB NLP, but Patrick interpreted Militant. I must further stress that it makes no sense at all, that Militant could owe the NLP money for producing a broadsheet for the NLP.

5. The printer refused to release the Broadsheets until the complete amount was paid.
6. The NLP national funds were used to pay the remaining \$280 for the Broadsheet and the Melbourne Branch of the NLP was to pay this back to cover the costs of broadsheets distributed in Victoria.

The National Conference (Melbourne)

1. It was agreed that the second National Conference would be held in Melbourne and money taken at the door, and from any other fund-raising activities organised would belong to the Melbourne Branch of the NLP.
2. \$385 was taken on the door at conference.
3. The Melbourne Branch asked for \$100 to cover conference costs and suggested that the remaining \$285 be kept by the national treasurer to cover the \$280 owed by the NLP Melbourne Branch for copies of the Broadsheet which was distributed in Victoria.

The National Telephone Hook-Up

1. The Treasurer of the NLP, Patrick Brownlee, asked the delegates on the hook-up to approve the holding of the \$285 from the door of Conference to cover the debt of \$300 which Militant owed the NLP.
2. Delegates refused to allow this, stating (not surprisingly) that the money raised on the door at the conference was NLP money and that if Militant owed money it should pay it back from Militant funds. Also one delegate objected to \$285 being paid and insisted that the complete debt of \$300 should be paid.
3. However the debt was only \$280 and it was an NLP Melbourne Branch debt and therefore to pay it from the taking of the door at Conference was perfectly in order.

NB To our knowledge no other branch has paid for copies of the Broadsheet.

The Costs of the Broadsheet

| <u>Item</u> | <u>Cost</u> | <u>Paid by</u> |
|--------------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Production Print-run | \$580 | (see above) |
| photographs | \$60.00 | B. Deller |
| Bromides | \$100 | B. Deller |
| Lay-out - 4 x \$50/page | \$200 | L. Beaton |
| Printing, etc. | \$45 | Militant |
| Distribution Air freight | \$80.00 | B Deller |
| <u>Express post</u> | <u>\$79.00</u> | <u>B Deller</u> |

PLUS - Militant paid for the printing of an extra 500 copies of the Broadsheet which were inserted into the Militant newspaper and distributed by Militant.

Neither Bill Deller, Militant or myself have any intention, or have ever had any intention of asking for a refund for the time and money we contributed to the production of the Broadsheet. It was done as part of our commitment to building the New Labour Party. In fact we would never have mentioned these personal contributions except to help comrades understand the injustice we feel at the suggestion that Militant owes the NLP any money.

Media Coverage of Anti-Hanson Demonstrations

During the national telephone hook-up two opposite positions were put by different delegates with regards to the role of Stephen Jolly in the media over the last few weeks. The first was that the New Labour Party suffered as a result of such media coverage being given to an NLP member. The second was that he should have spoken as a spokesperson for the New Labour Party and not as a spokesperson for Militant. The criticisms are contradictory and raise a number of issues requiring clarity on the relationship of NLP members and the media.

In all the media coverage Stephen Jolly was acting in his capacity as the National Secretary of Militant. Many NLP members have occasion to speak to the media in roles other than their membership of the NLP. Trade unionists, community activists, academics etc. all have cause to speak to the media at different times and it is not appropriate, when they are representing their

unions, community campaigns or academic research that they attribute their comments to the NLP.

In Victoria there were statements made to the media about the demonstrations by the NLP. That these were not so widely broadcast as those made by Militant is the whim of the media over which we have no control. Secondly Stephen Jolly is a rank and file member of the New Labour Party and as such, is not in a position to act as its spokesperson.

The situation with the media attention received by Militant is as follows. Militant was not involved in the organisation of the Dandenong anti-Hanson rally where a man was bashed. Militant supported the rally and as part of its support hired a bus to take people from central Melbourne to the outer Melbourne suburb and produced a leaflet advertising that fact and urging support for the demonstration. As a result of that leaflet, the media, then Pauline Hanson and then John Howard all accused Militant on national media of causing the violence and called Militant political terrorists. Militant was obliged to respond. Stephen Jolly, as National Secretary gave media interviews condemning the violence and denying Militant's association with it. Once that had happened, he was sought relentlessly by the media for comment on two upcoming demonstrations in Werribee and Geelong respectively. It was the view of Militant that we should try to turn this attention to our advantage and he therefore took the opportunity to promote some policies of the organisation.

Throughout this period (which was very hectic) we discussed how the NLP could gain some publicity from this media attention. At all times we were concerned that it was the NLP and not Militant which would benefit most from mass media - since Militant does not see itself as a mass party, and the NLP is intending to become one. However, anyone who knows how the media works will understand that once they have an individual in their sights, they become severely blinkered. The NLP in Geelong made a statement about its involvement in the Geelong rally, but it was only taken up by the Geelong papers.

I hope it doesn't need saying, but just in case, let me assure everyone that Militant had nothing to do with the violence at Dandenong, we have no idea who was involved and believe it was none of the organised left groups who attended. In fact we suspect it was either very angry local youth or agent provocateurs. Further we consider violence in the circumstances to be counter-productive to the aim and intention of the demonstration which is to encourage as many people as possible to show opposition to the views of Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party.

Militant's "Agenda" in the NLP

Questions were raised in the national hook-up about what role Militant was playing in the NLP, and what its objectives in the NLP were. I am delighted that these questions were raised, because it provides an opportunity to make it clear to all NLP members, exactly how Militant views its participation in the NLP.

In a general sense, the first point in regard to this is that we are committed to openness at all times, both in the way we work and in our expectations of the way others work. Therefore if members have questions or criticisms about the role of Militant, or the way Militant works, we urge them to bring these questions out into the open so the ensuing discussion can strengthen the organisation.

Militant is a small political organisation committed to international socialism as the only long term solution to the problems of international capitalism. It is our view that in all countries around the world the immediate task for socialists is to build mass worker's parties which are able to participate in national parliaments. We therefore welcomed the formation of the New Labour Party and sent two delegates to the Newcastle Conference to participate and to establish whether there was general agreement of objectives and policies. The reports of our two delegates were very positive and, since the time of the Newcastle conference we have worked openly toward building the New Labour Party.

Alongside a number of other interested people in Victoria we have worked to build the Victorian Branch of the NLP. Several Militant members have joined the NLP and openly promoted its building. For example Chris Gaffney and myself appear on separate weekly programmes on Radio 3CR. On both programs we regularly promote the NLP along with other non-Militant members. The regular promotion on 3CR has helped enormously in the drawing together the breadth of the Victorian membership. Every issue of the monthly newspaper Militant, since the Newcastle conference has carried articles about the New Labour Party which have encouraged readers to join and attend its functions.

I know that dual membership of Militant and the NLP causes concern for some NLP members and I hope this article can rest some of those concerns or at least contribute to an open debate about them.

Political movement is extremely complex and dynamic. People have different levels of political consciousness and at different times in history that consciousness changes among large numbers of people. In this historic period the working class needs a mass party which will represent it in the capitalist world in which we exist, Militant is not such a party.

There will (I hope) come a time we will be faced with the challenge of overthrowing the capitalist system altogether and replacing it with a socialist one, but that time is not now. When that time comes we will argue within the NLP for a socialist program, and I assume there will be others which will oppose us, but that time is a long way off. For now the task for all of us is to build a party which can play a 'real' part in the politics of Australia. We argue in this period for a program which will firstly defend the working class against the attacks on it from the ruling class through the Liberal Party and the ALP, secondly strive to re-win the gains which have been lost in the past ten or fifteen years and thirdly to introduce a program of reforms which will improve the quality of life for all.

At some time in the future, the fight for socialism will be the most appropriate fight, but in this period of political back-lash and growth of the right, it is vital that left forces build and work together to counter their common enemy. Because, in the longer term we are fighting for socialism, should we be excluded from, or exclude ourselves from the political struggle of today - or should we join in with others with whom we have agreement about the need to build a mass workers party.

Our only interest is in working towards a political outcome of improvement and justice for the working class and opponents of bigotry, greed, exploitation and corruption in this country and internationally. It is our aim to help the working class and all oppressed groups find appropriate political expression. We have no interest in building either Militant or the NLP for their own sakes - but in each case only to help facilitate the changes necessary to achieve the outcomes described above.

The organisation Militant has existed in Australia since 1987, and has existed internationally since 1968. It would be ludicrous to expect us to dissolve an organisation with a long history at this point in time when the reality is, that the NLP is very new and still, despite our efforts to build it and the efforts of others, untested. We are working for the success of the NLP but it is still too early to guarantee that success.

We believe that the potential for success of the NLP is strengthened by the harmonious co-existence of many political tendencies within it. Harmony requires difference and the richest harmonies include some discord, but always leads to resolution. The existence of many political formations and tendencies is the most healthy political situation for without them, political life in Australia would be dead. Agreement with these groups is not the main question, in fact it is in clarifying disagreements that development takes place.

Other's in the NLP it seems, are concerned that Militant is intent on dominating the NLP, on stacking meetings and stacking committees. Nothing could be further from the truth. For that is a contradiction with our aim. It is because we believe that a mass party must be broad that we are in the NLP and if we were to try to take control of the committees of the NLP we would be

trying to introduce socialism by stealth, which we have no intention of doing. Secondly if we were the dominant tendency in the NLP it would indicate that it was, in fact, time to build a socialist party. We welcome the breadth of opinion, for we are convinced that it is only through having such breadth that a mass party can be built. At the Melbourne conference for example we welcomed particularly the contribution of the delegate from Tasmania on the women's question. We disagree strongly with her views, but that the NLP is broad enough to accommodate such variance of opinion is its strength.

Finally, I cannot stress enough the importance of open debate and open discussion in the NLP. I understand that this is difficult. The left for at least fifty years has become more and more fragmented and there has been more and more distrust and suspicion about different tendencies. This is a hard legacy to overcome but it is incumbent on all of us that we do so. Unless we overcome any inability to discuss openly, we will only be sustaining the fragmentation. Already the development of the right is a great danger and unless the left can learn to work together and build a mass party they may well take over the political agenda. We need all the resources we can get. And unless we are able to utilise those resources who have so far come towards the NLP we are lost.

Lynn Beaton 30th July