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WORKERS EDUCATIONAL ASSOCIATION (Northern Ireland District)
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DISTRICT SECRETARY: PAUL NOLAN

Mr. Smith,
DENI,
Rathgael House,
Balloo Road,
BANGOR,
Co. Down.

28th October, 1987

Dear Mr. Smith,

I am writing to inform you of the WEA's response to the concerns raised by the Department of Education and by the N. Ireland Office official, Mr. Nigel Hamilton, at our meeting in Rathgael House on September 15th, when the subject under discussion was the Conway Mill. As the WEA representatives at that meeting Miss Lavery and I presented a summary of the main points to our District Council, making every effort to present your case as accurately and dispassionately as possible.

As you might expect the discussion which followed was a difficult one. Given that the Department of Education is our major sponsor, the District Council was concerned to pay careful attention to any anxiety expressed about our educational programme, and the meeting pressed to hear further details of the allegations relating to the Conway Mill. This placed Miss Lavery and myself at something of a disadvantage. We referred to the Hansard extract to which you had drawn our attention, but could not answer questions on its specific application to the matter in hand. The inference that those involved in the Conway Education Centre are in some way, whether consciously or unconsciously, providing support for a paramilitary organisation was an obvious one to extract, but one strongly contested by the Conway Mill WEA Branch representative, Dr. Myrtle Hill. Such an accusation, she felt, would brand members as either the agents or dupes of an illegal organisation, and as such was not only insulting but dangerous for the individuals concerned. Dr. Hill appealed to the meeting to consider the educational work of the centre, and the open nature of its financial and management structures.

The District Council then had to weigh up the arguments for and against our continued involvement with the Conway Mill. The meeting took as its starting point the assumption that the WEA must not allow itself to be used as a cover for illegal or paramilitary activities, and then looked for evidence that such an abuse occurred in the case of the Conway Mill. In the absence of any facts it was difficult to progress the line of argument that had been presented at Rathgael House, and the meeting had difficulty in dealing with an allegation, or the report of an allegation, that was unsubstantiated. This is not to say that the meeting did not consider the allegation seriously, but that having heard the argument those present were uncertain what weight could be attached to it.

The arguments in favour of supporting the activities of the Conway Mill Branch had, by contrast, the firm ground of principle to support them. One fundamental principle of the Association is its right, as an independent organisation, to guide its affairs free from external political pressure. Various speakers who contributed to the discussion pointed out that the WEA's independence must be seen as the central issue, and that the WEA must have confidence in its own judgement. The record of the WEA's involvement with working class communities on both sides of the sectarian divide, and the high respect it commands were cited on as testimony to the WEA's ability to involve itself in areas where illegal or paramilitary groups are active without ever falling into the trap of being used as a cover. The strong feeling emerged in the meeting that if the WEA were seen to be acting according to the whims of the government in power at any particular time its reputation as an independent body would disappear, and with it its ability to operate as a force for tolerance and enlightenment.

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In addition to the various arguments put forward which had as their central theme the importance of the WEA's independence, other viewpoints were put forward on the role of the Conway Education Centre in West Belfast. It was pointed out that not only had the promised fourth College not arrived, but that other venues which had operated as adult education centres were closing their doors. The Conway Mill, with all its limitations as a venue, was one of the few places where adult education could be made available. Details of its educational programme were then introduced as evidence of the Centre's attempt to provide proper non-sectarian community-based education, and testimony given of its ability to attract audiences from both traditions. These efforts are backed not only by the WEA but also by reputable bodies like the Joseph Rowntree Trust and the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust which, in spite of the allegations made, have chosen to back their own judgement and maintain their commitment to the Conway Mill.

Miss Lavery and I then cautioned the meeting that the Department had made it clear that a decision by the WEA to maintain involvement with the Mill would have adverse financial consequences for the district. The District Council expressed its regret that such a threat had been made but felt it should not allow this consideration to affect its decision. Accordingly it was decided not to accede to the request by the Department of Education to withdraw from the Mill and to await formal notification of the penalties which that decision might entail. It was also decided that, given the serious issues raised by this affair, the WEA National Office should be informed, as should our National President, Professor Bernard Jennings.

I trust that this full account of our discussion will assist you in understanding the thought and feeling behind the WEA's response, and the particular difficulties that faced us following the request made by you at our meeting in Rathgael House. If I can assist you further by additional information or by clarification of the views expressed in this letter do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,



PAUL NOLAN
District Secretary