

Fight for a workers' government (1980)

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With sharp class battles in prospect, the time has come for revolutionaries to raise the slogan of a Workers' Government.

We must put forward the necessary measures to assert working-class control over society. But we cannot just spell out a blueprint-programme and call for that blueprint to be carried through by the existing structures of the labour movement, as they are, adapted to quite different politics - or by some future revolutionary labour movement, to emerge somehow and somewhere separately from today's labour movement.

Along with revolutionary social measures, we must fight for a restructuring of the labour movement to make it capable of enforcing those measures for serious rank and file control over the political leadership of the labour movement.

The strands are tied together by the struggle for a Workers' Government, i.e. for the Labour Party and the labour movement to break with the bourgeoisie, to restructure and reorient itself, and to form a government which takes serious measures against capitalist power.

The decay of Britain

A catastrophe threatens the working people of Britain.

Rising inflation; steadily growing unemployment; a process of de-industrialisation which threatens to destroy the job possibilities of the workers in whole areas of Britain and to reduce them to pauperism; Government cuts, savage and vindictive, motivated by economic quackery and middle class spite, and so extensive that they amount to a drive to take back much that the working class has gained since 1945. The prospects ahead are that things will get worse, not better.

It is unlikely that world capitalism will pick up sufficiently to lift Britain out of the doldrums. The world capitalist system is in a state of crisis and decay reminiscent of the depression that lasted for the decade before World War 2. Most commentators believe a new world slump is imminent.

All the policies of the Thatcher government add up to a drive to cut working-class living standards to such an extent that the rate of profit will rise and they hope British capitalism can begin to heal itself. In a vain drive to recapture the vigorous youth of a now decrepit, moribund and reactionary capitalism, millions of working class women, children and men must suffer poverty and malnutrition, be diseased or grow up sickly because medical care is too expensive, must waste their days and their lives in unemployment, must forgo the possibility of education. Women must be driven back into the home and into servicing roles.

The Tory government is attempting to carry through the reorganisation of Britain in the interests of the capitalist class and at the expense of the working class. And in truth there is not even a glimmer of hope for the future of British capitalism as a going concern except by cutting the standards of the working class drastically. By our assertiveness over the last 15 years, the working class has made it difficult to the point of impossibility for the capitalist class to run capitalism according to its own needs, the needs of profitability. We have hamstrung the capitalists and their loyal politicians without finishing them off and replacing them.

The ruling class can settle for nothing less than a decisive defeat, perhaps a fundamental and crushing defeat, of the working class.

The Liberal-Labour method (under Wilson and Callaghan) of controlling the working class, which achieved a relative success for most of the life of the last Labour government, has

not even succeeded in arresting the decline of Britain, let alone begun to repair its situation. More drastic measures are needed and are being attempted.

The pressure on the ruling class is tremendous to do something to arrest the precipitate decline. Repeated failures have led to the capture of the Tory party by its present leadership and now add desperation to their efforts.

The prospect ahead is one of bitter class struggle. To imagine that in the next period the class struggle will not escalate is to imagine that the working class will bow down before the life-destroying Tory offensive and accept defeat peacefully. Nothing in the post-war history of the working class suggests that is even a possibility.

Already before the defeat of Callaghan's government in the May 1979 election the working class had started to fight back. Already the great struggle of the previously passive and even backward steelworkers, who last had a national strike in 1926, has shown the tremendous reserves of strength the working class possesses and will use. Less than a year after Thatcher's electoral victory the call for a general strike has been taken up by layers of the working class who understand the power of direct action and who recall how we stopped Wilson's attack on trade union rights and what the weapons were which allowed us to drive out Heath's government.

Millions of workers including many who, did not vote Labour in 1979 already understand that the most important task the working class faces now is to kick out the mad-dog Tory government of Thatcher and install a Labour Government. Decisive class confrontations are absolutely unavoidable in the period ahead.

The crisis of British capitalist society can be summed up in the following formula: The ruling class for 15 years has been strong enough to hold on (partly by grace of its lieutenants in the Labour Party), but not strong enough to rule effectively from the point of view of capitalism.

The working class, using its industrial strength, has been strong enough to veto and to stop successive ruling class attempts (using both Labour and Tory governments) to hamstring and beat down the trade-union movement, but it has not been politically able to impose a working-class solution to the crisis of British society, that is, to carry through a working class reorganisation of British society.

Its own political organisation, to which it turned after it crippled the Heath government in 1973-4, proved under the leadership of liberals and reformists to be no more than a fall-back government for the ruling class. The stalemate and the crisis continue. The new Tory attack on trade union rights is the third in a decade...

The social-political impasse is an extremely dangerous situation for the working class. If it continues it will place in question the continuance of parliamentary democracy in Britain at least as it exists at present. The combination of working class political weakness and enormous (and for the ruling class, crippling) industrial and social strength is the classic source of ruling-class drives to destroy the organised labour movement, using fascist bands or the regular military and police forces or a combination of both.

Serious people should not rely on "Britain's democratic traditions" to fend off such dangers. Chile, where an army coup in 1973 led to the destruction of the labour movement and the massacre of its militants, also had an exceptional history of stable bourgeois democracy (longer than many European countries). The agents of the ruling class did what they needed to do to defend it.

A major danger for the labour movement is to assume that things can go on indefinitely as they are. They simply cannot. No country and no social system can continue to decline, to rot and fester indefinitely, year after year and decade following decade without at some point reaching the stage where the ruling class and their agents attempt drastic action. It is impossible to know and predict how long the stalemate can last. But it is certain it cannot last indefinitely.

Here the recent exchange at a debate in Cambridge between Pat Arrowsmith and former chief-of-staff Field Marshal Carver should put the labour movement on its guard.

Carver confirmed that army officers had discussed a coup in February 1974. "Fairly senior officers were ill-advised enough to make suggestions that perhaps, if things got terribly bad, the army would have to do something about it".

Carver said that top army commanders had put down the coup talk. But the higher ranks of the army cannot always be relied upon to stop the disciples of General Kitson, now chief of the Army training establishment. President Salvador Allende of Chile relied on the armed forces leaders to control the middle-rank officers - right to the day when they murdered him and unleashed a holocaust against the Chilean labour movement. The working class must rely only on itself.

First of all its must face the fact that British capitalist society and therefore the labour movement is in an impossible position, and if there is not to be a working-class, necessarily a socialist, solution to the crisis of British society soon, then there is a real danger of an ultra-reactionary 'solution' in which the most powerful labour movement in the world is crippled or completely destroyed.

It is probably that the 1980s will see either the conquest of power by the British working class or the destruction of the British labour movement by the forces of capitalist reaction. Only the political rearming of the labour movement with the programme, ideas and methods of class-struggle revolutionary socialism, together with its organisational renovation, can guarantee the better of these two alternatives.

We need Socialist Answers now

If the working-class movement rouses itself and fights back, then it will defeat Thatcher's onslaught. Workers' Action has argued for full-scale industrial mobilisation to achieve just that - a General Strike. But unless the General Strike is the beginning of a socialist revolution, then it will be no more than a necessary defensive response to the present Government's plans for reorganising Britain.

As well as an industrial fight back now we need a positive working class alternative to the Tories, to move forward, to break the social-political impasse, and to begin to solve the crisis of British society which threatens the livelihood of large sections of the working class. Nothing less than working-class control of society is adequate that is, working class power. We must set an immediate socialist solution, and the struggle for it, as the immediate goal of the labour movement.

There is no other alternative which the working class can accept or tolerate. There is no other way of meeting the decline of the society in which the British working class must live, but to break out of the capitalist system, to dismantle its fundamental mechanism (profit as the regulator of the economy), and to replace it with our own mechanism - working-class need - and thus to destroy the power of the ruling class and take the control of our lives out of their hands. We must begin to reorganise production and gear it to our needs - to break the yoke which the power of the vested interests of capitalists, landlords, and bankers imposes on the working class.

- Living standards must be protected against inflation. Automatic wage increases each month in line with price rises, as a minimum. A national minimum wage of at least £70.

- Work-sharing without loss of pay, organised on the broadest scale under workers' control, to end unemployment. Cut hours, not jobs!

- To enforce them measures, the labour movement must establish its monitoring and control over the economy. Trade

unionists' and housewives' committees should work out a working-class cost of living index. Business secrecy must be abolished. Workers' control must be established over production, to ensure decent jobs for and proper conditions of work.

- The cuts in social services must be restored and reversed. Education, welfare and health services must be put under control of the workers, the users, and the communities. We need an expanded and integrated public transport service, at low fares, and free for local services. A major programme of house-building and renovation is urgently necessary.

- To gain the resources for this programme, capitalist waste, luxury and profiteering must be eliminated. The productive resources of society must be mobilised according to a rational, democratically-decided plan, ending the huge waste of unemployment. The banks and financial institutions, and the major industries, should be nationalised, without any compensation for the big exploiters.

- To protect the socialist transformation from the ravages of international competition and sabotage, a state monopoly of foreign trade must be established. But this demand cannot be confused with the nationalist demand for import controls on a capitalist basis. Nor can we see socialist transformation as confined to Britain. Together with a programme for the labour movement to transform Britain must go a programme to link up with the working class throughout Europe (west and east) and light for the Socialist United States of Europe. That fight will mean the destruction of the bosses' Common Market. But the call for withdrawal from the Common Market on a capitalist basis, or the attempt to blame a remote enemy (the Brussels bureaucrats) for British capitalism's crisis, is as misleading as the demand for import controls.

- For the working class of different countries to unite to fight for socialism first requires that the working classes of oppressor countries should fight for the liberation of oppressed nations. Support for the struggle for Irish unity and independence and immediate and unconditional withdrawal of British troops therefore urgent tasks. Moreover, no nation which oppresses another can ever itself be free. The Dragnet Prevention of Terrorism Act, through which Britain's repression in Ireland spills over into Britain, must be repealed.

- Support for the struggle of the black working people in Zimbabwe and South Africa is also among the central tasks of the British labour movement. South African goods and services should be blacked.

- The labour movement also needs to rally the most oppressed sections of the working class in Britain itself. Women must have full equality in the right to work, in pay and opportunity, in law, and in the labour movement. Positive discrimination is also needed to transform formal equality into real equality. Free contraception and abortion on demand and free 24-hour nurseries [state-financed and community-controlled] are vital for women to play their full part in the struggle and in society.

- All immigration controls must be ended, together with the whole system of state racism based on them. The labour movement must deny fascists the right to organise.

- Not only in their constant harassment of black communities, but also in their increasingly-frequent assaults on picket lines, the police have shown that they defend only capitalist and racist law and order. The Special Patrol Group, the political police in the Special Branch, and the police detachments trained in anti-picket or paramilitary techniques, must be disbanded. This is only attainable by disbanding the whole police force, for any capitalist police could quickly be trained in special anti-working class techniques. Crime prevention, crowd and traffic control, etc. can be handled by the organised working-class communities.

- The Army - a professional army, whose officers openly talk about 'counter-insurgency' being central to its role - must be disbanded. As far as there will be a need for defence, the working-class movement can itself organise defence from its own ranks. The flying pickets of recent years show the power of the working class to enforce its 'law and order'. The extension of that sort of organisation into a workers' militia is

necessary to counter the reactionary threat from the army and enforce its disbandment.

- Revolutionaries fight for a state based on workers' councils. But we would give full support against capitalist reaction to any Parliamentary government taking decisive measures in the workers' interests (while believing and arguing that the committees of struggle necessary to enforce and defend those measures would necessarily have to develop into workers' councils providing a higher sort of democracy than Parliament). We must however demand immediately the abolition of the House of Lords and the Monarchy. Without that abolition any sweeping measures against privilege and entrenched interest are idle dreams. The abolition of official secrecy, the replacement of top civil servants by elected and accountable functionaries, and the election of judges, are likewise necessary.

A Workers' Government

This programme, its parts and its entirety, is necessary and essential immediately. But who, which organisations, what government will carry out such a programme? The trade unions as trade unions cannot. Nor can these measures be achieved factory by factory. They can be implemented in the whole of society or not at all. Only a central government can carry the programme through. Only if the strike struggle and other battles can be made to culminate in a working-class government can the measures be carried out.

To put this programme forward as an option now is to day-dream unless we can point to the forces that could - and can be organised to, more or less quickly - form a government. Do such forces exist in the British working class movement now? We think they do.

The dilemma of the revolutionary left is that it is not itself anywhere near the possibility of aspiring to form the government: neither any part of it, nor all of it together. And so far the Labour Party in office has never been other than a capitalist government based on the reformist organisations of the working class.

In 1922 the Communist International discussed how revolutionary groups which were a minority in the labour movement should approach such a situation of capitalist crisis and an unready mass labour movement as we in Britain have today. The revolutionaries would put forward an action programme based on what was objectively necessary and would be seen to be necessary by many as yet non-revolutionary workers. The central idea was to pose the task of working-class self-defence and the reorganisation of society to a movement which, despite its leaders and even its widespread reformist prejudices, had every direct interest and motive for fighting for those demands. The 'keystone' of that programme, the precondition for even a possibility of the realisation of its demands, was a workers' government - that is, a government based on the organisations of the working class and seriously fighting to at least win some of the measures the working class needed. 'Workers' government' was an algebraic formula, with the concrete details having a number of possible forms.

The Theses of the Communist International on the Workers' Government explained it thus:

"... As a topical political watchword the workers' government is the most important only in those countries where the bourgeois society is particularly very unstable and where the balance of power between the workers' parties and the bourgeoisie makes the decision on the question of government a practical necessity... The reformist parties in these countries endeavour to 'save' the situation by propagating and bringing about coalition between the bourgeoisie and the social-democrats...

"To such an open or disguised bourgeois/ social-democratic coalition, the revolutionaries oppose a United Front of the workers, a coalition of all the workers' parties on the economic and political field for the struggle against the bourgeois power and for the final overthrow of the latter. Through the united struggle of all the workers against the

bourgeoisie, the entire State machinery is to get into the hands of the workers' government, thus consolidating the positions of power of the working class.

"The most elementary tasks of a workers' government must consist in arming the proletariat, in disarming the bourgeois counter-revolutionary organisations, in introducing control of production, in putting the chief burden of taxation on the shoulders of the rich, and in breaking down the resistance of the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie.

"Such a workers' government is only possible if it arises out of the struggle of the masses and if it is based upon the support of active workers' organisations involving the lowest strata of the oppressed working masses... It is self-evident that the formation of a real workers' government and the continued existence of such a government whose policy is revolutionary, must lead to a bitter struggle and eventually to civil war with the bourgeoisie...

"... The revolutionary party [must maintain its own character and complete independence in its agitational work... Every bourgeois government is at the same time a capitalist government, but not every workers' government is a really proletarian, i.e. a revolutionary instrument of the proletarian power...

"The revolutionaries are willing to make common cause also with those workers who have not yet recognised the necessity for proletarian dictatorship, with Social-Democrats and non-party workers. Thus, the revolutionaries are prepared, under certain conditions and with certain guarantees, even to support a mere ostensible workers' government (naturally only insofar as it represents the interests of the workers).

"At the same time, the revolutionaries say to the workers quite openly that it is impossible to achieve or maintain a real workers' government without a revolutionary struggle against the bourgeoisie. One can only describe as a true workers' government one which is resolute in taking up a serious struggle at least for the fulfilment of the most important day-to-day demands of the workers against the bourgeoisie. Revolutionaries can only take part in such a workers' government...

"[These] are not proletarian dictatorships, nor are they inevitable transition forms of government towards proletarian dictatorship. but where they are formed may serve as starting points for the struggle for dictatorship. Only the workers' government, consisting of revolutionaries, can be the true embodiment of the dictatorship of the proletariat".

The major problem with raising the call for a workers' government in Britain is that the Labour Party has been the massively predominant force in the working class movement and the Labour Party, dominated by agents of the ruling class, has produced nothing but bourgeois governments. To spread the idea in 1973-4 that the Labour Party could be a workers' government would have been to spread confusion.

A workers' government and a Labour government

A workers' government would differ from the Labour governments we have experienced so far by:

- Really fighting for the demands in the programme above, or at least some of the most essential.

- Even if resting on a Parliamentary majority (which is the most probable variant, at the beginning), basing itself on the working class, and relying on its mobilisations in the struggle against bourgeois resistance.

- By breaking to a serious degree with the organs of the bourgeois state power, its bureaucracy, police and army.

- By being to some degree directly answerable to and controllable by the working class, because dependent on it against the bourgeois state - not, as with the Wilson/ Callaghan government, dependent on the bourgeois state against the labour movement and against Labour Party conference decisions.

It was therefore not possible to call for a Workers' Government in a situation where there was no revolutionary organisation of sufficient size and weight, where the bourgeois state remained stable and the class struggle

remained essentially confined within the channels of bourgeois society, and where the Labour Party dominated working-class politics and was itself in the bureaucratic grip of the right wing, capable of surviving while ignoring the labour movement's demands.

1972-4: The Left's dilemma

We will get a clearer idea of the problem and of what Workers' Action thinks is sufficiently altered to allow the raising of the Workers' Government slogan now by examining how the dilemma was faced by forces on the revolutionary left (and by Militant, which is an amalgamation of left-reformist and right-centrist tendencies, bound together by the Labour Party).

The SWP focused (and still focuses) on industrial action, and made timeless socialist propaganda. It is a combination of syndicalism and abstract socialism. Industrial action was and is its only answer to the impasse the class faces.

Implicitly its position is that until the SWP is a mass party any talk of a fundamental social change, of socialism to be fought for immediately, is ruled out. In essence their project is one of replacing reformism and the Labour Party by rebuilding the political labour movement from the ground up, that is, building the SWP, which through involvement in militant industrial action and socialist propaganda can gradually become the dominant organisation in the working-class movement.

Their perspective is actually a perspective at best for decades ahead. The problem is that we haven't got decades. We face a catastrophic crisis and decline of British society now, and the need for answers now, even if the left isn't ready. The SWP's view implies pessimism about the working class being able to do anything except at best hold its own through industrial muscle.

Others - prominently Militant, but not only them - called and call on the Labour Party to carry through socialism, with slogans like "Labour to power with socialist policies", "nationalise the 200 monopolies", and "Labour, take the power".

Essentially all such summary slogans were fantasies, separate from a programme for restructuring the labour movement or even (before the Labour Party's Brighton conference decision) from a plausible perspective for the success of such a programme.

The correct Marxist approach of making specific demands on those organisations and leaders who claim to represent the working class or are elected through its organisations, as a means of mobilising forces to struggle for those demands and against those opposing them or refusing to fight for them, is generalised foolishly into a very abstract summary slogan. Militant itself counterposed such fantasies to the industrial class struggle.

Workers' Fight like Workers' Action focused on the industrial struggle, and also focused on work in the Labour Party, but realistically, recognising the limitations placed by the relatively stable right wing domination. Fantasies about Labour instituting socialism were avoided; so was the view that in 1974 the Labour government could be a real working-class government. Specific demands were placed on the Labour government, and of course a Labour vote was called for

This approach was also limited, recognising the reality of the Labour Party in 1974, and did not put forward an immediate perspective of struggle for socialism, despite an attempt to relate to the existing political labour movement as well as to the trade unions and the industrial struggle.

The assessment of what was possible in the circumstances was at any rate more or less accurate (though perhaps tending too much to accept the state of the political labour movement as given, despite raising the call to renovate and democratise the labour movement, including the Labour Party too). In so far as any immediate socialist solution was looked for, it was as a possible outcome from a general strike that would lead at least to dual power and thus perhaps circumvent Parliament-based reformism.

The IMG looked to industrial action, more or less ignored the Labour Party, and instead called for a government of the working class, based on the trade unions (in various forms). This could only be a mystified and foolishly self-consoling way of calling for a Labour Government. A later variant (see their 1976 British Perspectives) called for a workers' government based outside Parliament, which was seen as probably originating in a general strike creating organs of dual power - i.e. soviets or their rudiments.

This was a sectarian and 'next year in Jerusalem' variant of the workers' government which essentially had nothing to say to the immediate situation. It was especially foolish in that the Parliamentary traditions of the British labour movement are very powerful, would be a big factor for the ruling class - even in a general strike - and in any case have to be related to.

None of these approaches is satisfactory. In the case of Workers' Fight (though we would now make some criticism of the approach of this tendency, too) the unsatisfactory situation arose essentially from the hard reality that the ruling class (and the non-combatant left) dominated the political labour movement.

After the Brighton decisions

For this situation to change, it was necessary either for the Labour Party to lose its predominant position in working-class politics, or for the political wing of the labour movement itself to begin (it is as yet no more) to change - and to begin to change sufficiently for it to be now not fantastic to set as a goal its transformation (at least partially, and on condition that further changes we pressed through) into a real instrument of the working class.

The decisions of the Brighton conference, if they are pushed through and consolidated to make the Parliamentary Labour Party accountable and therefore more or less controlled by the labour and trade union movement, open up a new perspective. The posing of a full transitional programme to the British labour movement, that is, the posing of immediate socialist tasks for the struggles now opening up, ceases to be fantasy and nonsense on condition that the forces can be organised to push through the changes in the Labour Party and labour movement - i.e. on condition that the struggle against Thatcher's government is linked to the struggle for a democratic and accountable political wing of the labour movement.

It is not required that the Labour Party becomes a revolutionary party - or that one should think it can or will become that.

Only, that the political organisation of the trade unions be tied to the working class interest, by depriving the Parliamentary tops in office of the possibility of an alliance on a stable basis between themselves and the bourgeois state, and that the political wing become immersed in the class struggle. That will not, of course, stop the leaders weaselling and betraying. But given these conditions, and given the activity of organised revolutionary militants, raising revolutionary political perspectives, the ferment and mobilisation of the working class against the Tory government will do the rest.

For many decades Marxists looked to the experience of the working class with reformism in office to lead to a break with reformist politics. This has not yet happened on a mass scale. Probably it will require a serious struggle for reforms by the mass labour movement in the present crisis conditions to make it happen. In advance of a mass break from reformist politics, the experience of the Wilson/ Callaghan government ignoring their own movement and resting on the bourgeois state against it has led to a move to restructure the Labour Party - to democratise it and, by rendering it accountable to its members, to destroy the possibility of a repeat of the experience of the last Labour Government.

The development is a powerful testimony to the tenacity of the hold the Labour Party has in the working-class movement, because it is relatively supple and flexible, or can be made to be so.

The Brighton decisions are - or rather can be made to be - the beginning of a process of renovating and reconstructing the labour movement in all its wings and sections, from shop stewards' committees through to the Parliamentary Labour Party.

Brighton demonstrates that transforming the political wing of the labour movement is a possibility, and thus that it is possible to raise the transitional demand for a workers' government in Britain, where in the initial stages such a government would inevitably have the Labour Party as its main or only component.

Could the proposals to democratise the Labour Party - in many cases to bring it into line with other social democratic parties - be absorbed by the Labour bureaucracy? Yes, undoubtedly, over a period of time. Now, however, the struggle for democracy has deprived the bourgeoisie of a stable fallback party of bourgeois government just as the class struggle begins to escalate. A blasé, dead, static, predestined assessment of the struggle in the Labour Party writes out all the opportunities for revolutionary intervention.

Even should the Brighton decisions be reversed or deflected at the next conference, as is possible, the experience points to a decisive area of continuing struggle for all socialists and trade union militants who really want to settle accounts with the Tories and with capitalism.

Tasks of Revolutionaries

What then are the tasks of revolutionaries?

1. To put forward in the labour movement a full programme for the beginning of the socialist transformation of society, as our immediate answer to the crisis of British capitalist society and the consequent Tory attacks on the labour movement and on working-class living standards.

2. To crown that programme with the call for the creation of a workers' government which will at least fight for the immediate interests of the working class, breaking with the bourgeoisie where necessary and to the extent necessary. We try to root the daily work of the labour movement in a perspective of socialist and working-class power. We explain that without the workers' government slogan, all socialists can do is have a syndicalist focus or a more or less abstract socialist focus (or both).

We agitate and make propaganda for the specific measures and demands in the action programme, fighting to commit the organisations of the labour movement to struggle for them. Thus we prepare politically to give weight and meaning to the Action Programme.

In Britain there is already in existence a vast network of factory committees which could expand their activities and functions to the point of being dominant over the organs of the bourgeois state, and, even before creating soviets, could be the basis of a decisive struggle. We make demands on these working-class organisations (while making propaganda for soviets): the working class must, in the course of the struggle, learn confidence in its own democracy and in the potential of its own existing factory organisations to expand into a framework of democratic working class self-rule in the whole of society.

We avoid like the plague delusory generalisations like 'Labour to power with socialist policies'. We say instead: These and those measures and demands alone will serve our class interests. A government will be a workers' government, even in a minimal sense, only if it really fights for these demands, going as far as necessary in a break with the bourgeoisie. We explain that in the light of all experience such a government would have to support or perhaps (less probably) initiate working-class action to disarm the state forces or major sections of them, and to begin to build a counter to them. Only a government thus freed from the pressures and the threats of the armed forces of the ruling class could carry through a serious working-class programme of reconstruction of society,

We put forward these proposals neither in the spirit of manipulating the labour movement, nor merely to expose the

leaders by making impossible demands - but as measures immediately and self-evidently necessary for the working class. They can be fought for and realised on condition that the capitalist framework and institutions are not treated as sacrosanct. We offer our honest collaboration for the fight.

In addition, of course, we explain in our propaganda that only with the complete expropriation and disarming of the bourgeoisie and its agents, and the consolidation of the rule of the working class in a stable system of democratic workers' councils based on the armed and self-controlling working class - only then will it be a stable and complete workers' government. But short of that a beginning is actually possible and can be made by the organisations and militants of the labour movement who do not yet accept our politics.

Many people in the labour movement now are likely to interpret our call for a workers' government as just a call for a Labour government. That is beyond our control. We do our best to limit misunderstandings, but we can only shout as loud as our voice. To refrain from raising necessary slogans for fear of misunderstanding is to boycott ourselves. To the degree that we win support for our programme and for the working of renovating the labour movement, we become a force to help ensure that there will never again be a Labour Government like the ones of the past.

To the degree that the planks in our programme are taken up and demanded by the labour movement, militants are picking up weapons against reformism, even if they also have illusions in it at the beginning. The struggle for a workers' government can be taken up by all those who want to fight for working-class interests and to really defeat the Tories.

3. We point to the need to renovate, reorganise, and reconstruct the existing labour movement as an essential prerequisite for a workers' government, a government essentially different from the bourgeois Labour governments of the past. This work becomes extremely urgent in the light of the objective social tasks confronting the labour movement.

We must point out to all sections of the labour and revolutionary socialist movement the link that exists and must be developed between the direct class struggle and the struggle against the bourgeois agents in the labour movement. That link is the prerequisite to be able to give the direct action struggles a political focus that can lead to a real victory over the Tories and over capitalism. To prosecute the class struggle in the period ahead on the level of even beginning to offer an overall socialist solution, it is a precondition that the class struggle be prosecuted within the labour movement itself, against the agents and unreformable collaborators of the ruling class and of the Tory government.

We must demand here and now that the Labour Party and trade unions break off collaboration with the Tory government and its agents.

Bring Industrial Militants into the Labour Party

4. We must turn the Labour Party outwards to the class struggle - and begin to get away from Labour Party work in the spirit of Militant, which has given Labour Party activity a bad name.

At the same time we must turn industrial militants towards the Labour Party and towards the political perspective of a workers' government. For the revolutionary left this is the essential point to insist on.

The experience of 1973-4 is fundamentally that because the best industrial militants were not also involved in the Labour Party, they had no political instrument to fight even for reforms. The Wilson/Callaghan leadership was all the better able to demobilise the working class.

The passive consumerists of the SWP lay great stress on the moribund state of many Labour Party branches, and the fall in individual membership in the last two decades. To this we counterpose the need to build and develop those organisations by recruiting industrial militants and making the Labour Party organisation reflect the trade union struggles.

The point is not whether the Labour Party membership has withered or not. It has remained the party of the working class movement. To industrial militants we say: orientate to the movement. If you want a workers' government, join us in the fight to change the labour movement to make that possible.

To those who have been working to democratise the labour movement we say that a perspective of a slow and peaceful democratisation of the labour movement - as society rots! - is impossible.

The fight for democracy in the labour movement can only be won if it is linked to the fight for class-struggle politics which gives purpose and urgency to it. The labour movement will be renovated urgently, under the felt pressure of a dramatic crisis, or not at all.

5. To the sectarian left we explain the close organic links of the Labour Party and the trade unions the fact that there is an open-valve connection allowing the rank and file militants to flood the political wing should they wish to.

We advocate that they should do this on the political perspective of fighting to make the political labour movement into an instrument of class struggle. We explain that only if large layers of the militants can be got to abandon the politics of self-exclusion will anything other than defensive struggle be possible.

We explain the need for a full programme of democratisation of the whole labour movement, trade unions and Labour Party alike, and demonstrate that these we inseparably linked. Without democratisation of the unions nothing stable can be achieved within the Labour Party dominated by those unions. We insist that it is foolish to counterpose the Labour Party and the trade unions as the neo-syndicalists of the SWP do.

Fight for Trade Union Democracy

6. We pose the tasks of claiming for working class politics the movement the working class has built and sustained. As part of that, we pose the struggle to democratise the trade unions, to break the power of the bureaucracy, which means building a rank and file movement in the trade unions.

- All officials should be elected and subject to constant recall.
- All full time officials should be paid the average wage in their industry.
- Union policy-making bodies should be comprised of elected lay-officers only.
- Election addresses to be circulated unaltered for candidates for all elected positions in the unions.
- Any educational qualifications for union office should be abolished.
- No member to be disqualified from holding office on political grounds (other than fascist activity).
- Full minutes and voting records of policy-making bodies should be circulated.
- No political censorship of union journals.
- National delegate conferences should be held annually.
- Standing Orders committees should be made up of elected lay members.
- No branch block voting.
- Appeals Committees should be comprised of elected lay members only.
- No secret negotiations.
- Every stage of negotiation should be subject to rank and file ratification at mass meetings.
- Mass meetings should never be presented with package deals unless each part of the deal has been voted on separately by the meeting beforehand.
- Voting in the unions to be at workplace meetings, and not by postal ballots.
- All strikes in support of trade union principle, work conditions or wages to be made official.
- Dispute benefit to be raised by levy of the entire membership when necessary.
- Support for the right of trade unionists to enforce closed shops,

- Opposition to the check-off system.
- Opposition to employer-policed 'agency shops'.
- Support of the right for trade unionists to discipline fellow workers who flout democratic decisions.
- Access to job waiting lists by shop stewards' committees. Waiting lists to be on the basis, first applied first employed.
- Opposition to any 'managerial policing' by shop stewards. No participation in management committees intended to keep shop stewards off the shop floor for long periods.
- Shop stewards to hold regular report-back meetings.
- Insistence on allocated time for such meetings, especially where there is shift working.
- Union branch meetings to be at the workplace and in work time if possible. If not, crèche facilities to be provided to make sure women workers can attend.
- Full equality for women in the trade unions. Positive discrimination to ensure real equality. Support for the right to form women's caucuses.
- No discrimination against black or immigrant workers in the unions. Positive discrimination to ensure real equality. Support for the right to form black caucuses.
- Campaigns to recruit immigrant workers to trade unions (using leaflets in the immigrants' own languages).
- Automatic endorsement of industrial action by black and immigrant workers whether they are in the majority or not.
- A purge of open racists from all positions in the labour movement.
- Full trade-union rights for young workers, including the right to strike. Formation of youth committees.
- Establishment of effective Joint Shop Stewards' Committees, on a plant, combine, and international basis.
- Develop links between unions. Expand trades councils to include representation from the unemployed, tenants and students, and, most important, direct representation from factory committees and other shop floor organisations.
- Unionisation of the unemployed with full rights within the unions.
- Rights of members to criticise union policy.
- Right of members to meet unofficially and visit other branches.
- Right of members to communicate with the press.
- Right of members to write, circularise and/or sell political literature.
- Right of appeal direct to Appeals Court.

General Strike and the Workers' Government slogan

The workers' government slogan would probably be an irreplaceable slogan in a general strike for the strike movement to realise even part of its potential. While it would be schematic and premature to call for a general strike to achieve a workers' government now, the parallel propaganda for both general strike and workers' government prepares the ground for a future linking of the two slogans. The workers' government slogan allows socialists to relate to the existing movement, and would do so all the more in a situation of much more advanced and developed mobilisation and struggle.

In no sense do we understand the workers' government demand as an alternative to working-class militancy and direct action. On the contrary, it is an instrument of such action.

Organise the Revolutionary Left

8. We limit ourselves neither to hope nor speculation, but pose as a central task the work of winning broad working-class forces in the Labour Party and the trade unions to revolutionary Marxist politics. We must bind and organise those militants into a solid force in the Labour Party and trade unions, to fight for these politics and perspectives against both the open bourgeois agents and the bureaucrats of the labour movement - and also against the inevitable vacillations and betrayals of some who now travel a stretch of the road in common with us. We know and say that the struggle can

never be confined to what the Labour and trade union bureaucracy will be willing to accept.

9. Socialists can bend under the pressure or the weight and inertia of the labour movement either in the direction of accommodating to it and accepting its apparent limits, or by a 'rejection' of that movement and a retreat to sectarianism.

The major forces of the revolutionary left, until then part of the Labour Party, made that sectarian retreat in disgust with the Wilson government of the late 1960s. The disgust was justified, the retreat was not. We fight both forms of capitulation and instead offer the perspective of struggle for workers' government on the basis of a labour movement transformed in the struggle for it.

Hatred of the Labour Party because of its record and its leaders is the natural first untutored response of young people setting out to fight for socialism. But the attitude to the struggle within the political labour movement of the leaders of the Socialist Workers' Party (for example), is nothing other than crude pseudo-revolutionary sectarianism. We must fight to eradicate such crippling sectarianism, which has been a dominant tradition of British Marxism from the Social Democratic Federation through the early Communist Party and the Revolutionary Communist Party to the SWP.

In the Transitional Programme Trotsky wrote: "Sectarian attempts to build or preserve small 'revolutionary' unions, as a second edition of the party, signify in actuality the renouncing of the struggle for leadership of the working class. It is necessary to establish this firm rule: self-isolation of the capitulationist variety from mass trade unions, which is tantamount to a betrayal of the revolution, is incompatible with membership of the Fourth International".

All proportions guarded, and keeping in mind the differences between trade unions and the Labour Party, which is the trade unions in politics, the attitude at the SWP and its various shadows and splinters to the struggle in the Labour Party is exactly of the capitulationist variety. (We don't dispute the justice of their denunciations of Labour's record). The complete collapse of the SWP at election time into uncritical lesser-evilmism illustrates it dramatically. (Paul Foot: 'I am a strong Labour supporter for three weeks').

There is nothing revolutionary about abandoning the political wing of the organised labour movement to bourgeois agents, naive or shamming semi-leftists, and the passive sectarians around Militant. It is a largely voluntary self-exclusion, and voluntary surrender of the political labour movement to the reformists, that is, to the people who will lead it to destruction.

To shun the fight within the political wing of the labour movement and to pretend (except during elections) that an airtight barrier exists between the reformist unions and the reformist Labour Party, is less than serious working-class politics. It confines the largest revolutionary organisation to nothing other than limited trade union politics and abstract socialist propaganda as its answer to the crisis the working class faces.

If the political labour movement were the tightly policed preserve of the right wing, then there might be no alternative to the SWP's tactics. In the actual situation there is now substantial freedom for Marxist work within the political wing of the labour movement.

For all its braggadocio, the perspectives of the SWP are immensely pessimistic. If it is actually necessary to rebuild the labour movement from the ground up (as distinct from renovating and reorienting it), if the movement is, as Paul Foot said at the recent debate with Benn, rotting, then it is a perspective of decades, and inevitably we face defeat in the coming struggles. Even if a case could be made for such an expectation on the basis of calculation, to coldly and without a struggle accept it in advance would be the most criminal defeatism.

To rule out the chances of renovating the labour movement is to rule out in advance a struggle by the small forces of Trotskyism to orientate the workers' movement even at the last minute for a struggle. Defeatism and capitulatory moods are a crime even when dressed up and disguised as self-

righteous denunciation of social democracy where it needs to be denounced.

Trotsky and the Labour Party in Britain

10. To the pedantically-minded who ask "do you think the revolutionaries can take over the whole Labour Party?", we say that it is the wrong question. Do they themselves think that the whole of the trade unions can be won for revolutionary politics without divisions and splits?

We say we will prosecute the fight and organise the left as vigorously as possible and then we will see. We say to the left of the labour movement: "Fight for a programme that answers the needs of the class now. If you fight we can win. And we must fight to win whatever the organisational consequences, or whatever rearrangements will be entailed".

When the SWP and others denounce the idea that the Labour Party can be made an instrument of socialist change, we explain that they are actually doubting that the working class can be in the period ahead. Can the trade unions be such an instrument? Can the class itself? If so, does that not mean action through the Labour Party, with the necessary reorganisations and replacements?

In the near future, if the working class and unions can be instruments of socialist change, that means that something must be done about the Labour Party, which at present is a dominant force for bourgeois politics in the working class movement. The SWP policy of ignoring it is not revolutionary politics. We need not just ABC propaganda that Labour has been bad in office, but also to know what to do about it.

We must bring the experience of the Marxist movement on the question to bear. Can we reform or take over the Labour Party? Trotsky showed how this was the wrong question in the 1920's, when he put forward the following general or algebraic perspective:

"At the present moment, the Communist Party is extremely small. In the last elections it had altogether 53,000 votes a figure which, when compared with the five and a half million votes of the Labour Party, might seem distressing if we did not understand the logic of the political evolution of England.

"To imagine that the Communists in the course of subsequent decades will increase step by step, acquiring at each new parliamentary election a few tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of votes more, would be a radical misunderstanding of the development of the future.

"Of course during a certain comparatively prolonged period, communism will develop rather slowly, but then there will ensue an ineluctable crisis: the Communists will occupy the position in the Labour Party which is now held by the Independents. [The Independent Labour Party, a loose left-reformist party formed in 1893 which became one of the constituent parts of the Labour Party at its founding, had the leading role in the Labour Party in the 1920s].

"What is needed in order to bring this about? The general answer is quite clear. The Independent Labour Party owes its unprecedented boom to the fact that it enabled the working class to create a third party, i.e. its own party. The last elections show with what enthusiasm the English workers regard the instrument created by them. But a party is not an end in itself, the workers expect from it action and results..." (Where is Britain going?, 1925).

In the same book Trotsky also discussed the pessimistic perspective for Britain, that which actually came to pass - that the working class would "go to school" for decades Labourism.

Now we have reached the end of an entire cycle of working-class history, culminating with the self-evident bankruptcy of reformism but with the Labour Party still in almost monopolistic control of mainstream working-class politics.

The remarkable thing is that the Labour remains a relatively flexible and open political expression of the politics of generalised trade unionism. In the last seven years a wide range of repressive bureaucratic rules and usages have been scrapped and to an as yet limited extent the Labour Party has been shaken up by the struggles of the last 14 or 15 years. The

possibilities for propaganda within the Labour Party, and in the general class struggle without having to forfeit membership and activity in the Labour Party, are now not qualitatively less than when Lenin advised the Communist Party in 1920 to affiliate to the Labour Party on condition that they were still able to make revolutionary propaganda and struggle against the leaders.

Revolutionaries have yet to win the right to affiliate to the Labour Party. We do have the right of individual membership and in practice the right of political factions. The experiment of the Socialist Campaign for a Labour Victory in the 1979 election demonstrated what the situation is and how it should be developed. Four CLPs adopted a whole platform of class-struggle politics - including open criticism of the Labour leadership and government, and an open statement of the need to prepare to fight it. A parallel election campaign was organised within the Labour Party campaign.

The experience is best compared to that in the early 20s when a number of Communists stood for Parliament with their own politics but under the Labour umbrella (although the Labour Party conference had rejected CP affiliation).

We cannot know how long this situation will last. A strong right turn in the next Labour Party conference and after might seriously change it. And we cannot now follow Trotsky literally and speak of an affiliated revolutionary party assuming the leading role within the existing structures of a loosely-organised trade-union party. But it is an essential part of fighting the class struggle in society that we try to gain the victory for class-struggle politics in the political wing of the movement. Workers' Action must bring the experience of Marxists in the 20s to the labour movement, and make widely known the experience of the SCLV.

And in the USA...

We should also make widely known the political position developed by Trotsky and his comrades in the late 30s in favour of calling on the US trade unions to form a Labour Party. The political method they used has an essential lesson to teach British revolutionaries.

The tremendous working-class movement for industrial unions which created the CIO utilised revolutionary tactics like the sit-in strike. Nevertheless the new unions were immediately bureaucratised and engaged in class collaboration. Some of the leaders of the movement, like the Mineworkers' president John L Lewis, were died in the wool bureaucrats.

The Trotskyists advocated that this movement should create a broad trade-union party on the general structural model of the British Labour Party. Knowing the strength of the bureaucrats, they still proposed that the trade unions engage in politics. Politically it was an algebraic formula: if the trade unions as they were turned to politics, the possibility of a counter-revolutionary reformist party being consolidated was a real one. The Trotskyists orientated towards fighting against that, and towards fighting for their own politics within a Labour Party. They built and recruited to their own small party: part of the work of doing that was a responsible, objective, non-sectarian perspective for the labour movement and locating the work of the Trotskyist movement within that.

This correct and necessary approach to the work of politically developing the labour movement in America says a lot about the sectarian politics of those who voluntarily exclude themselves from the discussions and struggles in the existing political party of the trade unions in Britain - a movement that has already gone through a massive exposure of the bankruptcy of reformism.

The tasks of Marxists

11. We fight for an end to the bans and proscriptions and for the right of organisations like the Communist Party and the SWP to affiliate to the political wing of the labour movement. We call on revolutionaries to come and help us with the fight to lift the bans and proscriptions.

12. We pose as a central task of the period ahead the creation of unity of the forces of revolutionary Marxism around this perspective of a serious and realistic orientation to the political and trade-union wings of the labour movement, and to the work of organising the forces of Marxism within the only mass labour movement which exists in this country.

In the last 14 years there has been an eruption of sectarianism and neo-syndicalism rooted in the disorientation and collapse of the old Trotskyist movement (the Socialist Labour League) in 1962-4; the bitter experience of Labour in office (1964-70 and 74-79); and, above all, the sheer inexperience and impressionism of the thousands of young people who became revolutionaries in the late 60s and early 70s. For them, gut feeling of hostility to the politics of Wilson and Callaghan was the beginning of a political wisdom - we must help them go beyond the mere beginning.

The result of the revolutionaries' failure has been to leave the political wing of the movement to the right wing and to tendencies like Militant who took to a non-class-struggle, abstract, socialist preaching as a refuge from the problem of fighting the right wing and the bureaucracy.

Nevertheless there is now quite a large number of people who have some revolutionary ideas and even a revolutionary culture of sorts who have broken from reformism. They could be an enormous leaven for the struggle in the Labour Party. The work of reorienting some, at least, of those forces is a necessary part of the work of transforming the labour movement.

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