

The debate on the workers' government

Against defeatism!

LOOKING at the contributions last month on the question of calling for a workers' government as part of the agitation around the coming General Election, I found that in general, I can see the relevance and usefulness of such a slogan, but some aspects of the debate were worrying.

The arguments against the slogan appear to fall into two main categories:

Firstly, that it is "too advanced" for the current situation. This implies that we cannot ask people to think about what government is for, because it will confuse them about why we call for a Labour vote. It betrays a lack of confidence in the working class being able to follow through the logic of our position.

It also suggests that we can only call for a government accountable to the working class when we are in a strong position inside the Labour Party. But it is precisely our weakness in the LP which makes it necessary to spell out the difference between the Blairites ("Vote Labour"), the soft left / ultra left ("Vote Labour and ..." or "Vote Labour but ..."), the extra-Labour left ("Don't vote Labour") and ourselves. It crystallises our position far more definitively.

Secondly, that it implies we've already lost on the nature of the Labour Party. On the contrary, the slogan actually enables us to link together the task of electing a Labour government with the task of seeking to transform the Labour movement in a concrete way. If we compare "Vote Labour and fight for ..." slogans, they do not play this role, as they fail to make clear how the fight should be organised, or on what terms. The SWP are quite comfortable saying "vote Labour & fight" and to them it means "fight outside the Labour Party".

Where revolutionaries have any input into the Labour campaign in their area, they have a particular reason for needing a slogan which poses the General Election in a specific way. We are not just saying, vote Labour. We are saying, "This Labour campaign is different. The candidate proposes to make herself accountable to the Labour movement." The campaign is a positive one, about the needs of working class people. We need to be able to say to people, this campaign is a model for how the Labour Party ought to function — join it and help make that possible. We say that our candidate would be a "workers' MP" — logically, we are therefore agitating for the principle of a "workers' government" on a local scale.

The suggestion has been made that workers' government ideas are useful as part of our general propaganda, but not as a slogan. On the contrary, "For a government accountable to working people" or similar, is a useful way to pose the issues about the nature of the state and the nature of the Labour Party without presenting it as an ultra-left discussion. It flows naturally out of the work we have been doing around the welfare campaign, and in those areas of the country where supporters of the AWL have been able to have a significant input into the Labour Party campaigns, we have fought to present the coming general election in

these terms.

If comrades believe the work we have done in the Labour Party recently is correct, then the logical progression is to use the election to address the issue of how we organise to get what we have set out as the aims of the campaign — that means addressing the issue of what government is for. Here the workers' government slogan is going to be very useful.

There are, however, some problems with the way the workers' government idea has been presented in *Workers' Liberty*, and in some discussions. These need to be clarified. It has been suggested that a workers' government in the current situation is a defensive proposition; that we are calling for a Labour government without Blair. Some comrades have taken that to mean that we want a return to Labour governments a la Wilson or Callaghan. But that is not on offer. The reality is that the very act of purging the Blairite tendency from the Labour Party would transform it: to succeed, the rank-and-file would need to be mobilised and militant, the unions active and political participants. The removing of Blair would take the Labour Party forward, not backwards, and it is on this basis that we should work.

It has been suggested that we call in words for a Labour government without Blair, or for a Labour government without Tory policies. But these slogans are both fantastical and ultra-left. They have no grip on reality and offer no scope for discussion with the working class electorate, who will either smile and shrug their shoulders, or laugh at us. We can expect many working class voters to need no lectures about Blair, but they do need a constructive approach to their ideas. They are, after all, going to be voting Labour in many cases despite Blair, but they recognise that he is a reality, and can only be removed with a struggle. The struggle will happen around the link, which is the practical test of the slogans for a workers', not bosses', government.

Likewise, it is true that using slogans around a workers' government makes possible (far more easily than if we say straightforwardly, "Vote Labour") a shift to a new position if we lose the fight inside the Labour Party. From this has been deduced a certain defeatism among those who argue for a workers' government. Whether it is true or not that those who initiated the debate believe the battle is unwinnable, we in Leicester do not. We do not see the workers' government slogans as defeatist. Just as the slogan makes possible a shift to a new position with a defeat in the movement, so it makes possible a shift to a more offensive position should we win the struggle inside the Labour Party. Those comrades who say, "I believe we can win, therefore I am against the use of the workers' government slogan" should instead say, "I am against the defeatism, not the slogan". The idea of the workers' government is a flexible one — transitional in the sense that it applies to a point of transition inside the Labour movement, when the issue of the nature of the movement itself is open to debate: what is the Labour Party for?

Some comrades have suggested that the purpose in voting Labour is to "break the logjam in British politics." This is true, but potentially misleading. Where is the logjam? It can be interpreted that the logjam is in Parliament, and hence we vote Labour to "kick out the Tories." But that is not the case. We don't say, "Vote tactically", after all. The logjam is in the working class, and the point of wanting a Labour government is the

effect an election victory will have among the politically conscious elements of the class. So kicking out the Tories is not enough — mobilising the workers for political victory is all.

I am worried that several contributions appear to misjudge the severity of the situation inside the Labour Party, and that this is not consistent across the debate. That is, not all those who underestimate the significance of Blair are opposed to the slogan, and not all those who are resigned to defeat support it. There appears to be confusion around the slogans because, I think, there is confusion about our relationship to the Labour Party at the moment. This is a fluid phase — things could go very rapidly against us, or against Blair. We cannot rely on old formulas or wait to see what happens. We have to use the general election in order to intervene not only into the working class but also into the workings of the Labour movement, and challenge the politically active workers to think, "What is the Labour government to be for? To serve the bosses or the workers?"

This is not accepting defeat within the Labour Party, it is the only rational basis on which to oppose the Blairites.

Richard Grasse

Socialist re-Action

THE AGM of the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy, 8 March, was a good place to witness the destructive influence of Socialist Action on both the Labour left and the wider struggle to fend off the Blair leadership's offensive against the union link and collective, participatory democracy in the party. Socialist Action is an obscure sect on the left of the Labour Party which specialises in sycophancy towards certain strategically chosen bigwigs and (more usually) smallwigs, combined with petty factional hostility towards rival socialist organisations active in the labour movement. Its members were on top form in the CLPD's AGM.

Mark Seddon, Editor of *Tribune*, introduced the discussion on strategy to defeat the latest offensive from the Labour leadership against the rank and file. He urged comrades to think through all the issues involved and question some of the Labour left's old certainties as we face an attempt by the Blairites to silence the working class in politics. In particular, Seddon raised the idea of refounding a Labour Representation Committee. This would be a co-ordinated and logical extension of the decision by a number of trade union bodies to redirect some of their political funding away from central Labour Party coffers and towards Labour MPs and labour movement campaigns which reflect their own policies, to deepen and renew labour representation in the face of Blair's attempt to destroy it.

Socialist Action's topsy-turvy analysis of the battle to defend the Labour-union link was epitomised by the extremely silly Carol Turner who said that any decision by trade unions to divert political funding away from central Labour Party funds would be a weakening of the link between Labour and the unions. This is to take a passive approach towards the link in which determination by the unions to stay with Labour means that they allow themselves to be pushed around as much as the Labour leadership wishes. Let us be clear about this. Trade unions should pay enough money

into central Labour Party funds to ensure their rights as affiliated organisations, but why voluntarily pay more money than necessary to a Blair leadership determined to see the trade unions shackled in industry and silenced in politics? Presumably Carol Turner believes she was wrong in the past to support trade unions making donations to the Committee to Stop War in the Gulf, Labour CND, the Anti-Racist Alliance and the Campaign to Defend the Welfare State.

Turner also explained Socialist Action's view that the CLPD should be hostile to the Keep the Link campaign because KTL was providing left cover for trade union bureaucrats, didn't oppose the NEC's proposals and anyway the Labour-union link was not under threat.

These allegations are either slanderous, stupid or both. Firstly, KTL has always opposed any attempt to reduce union influence in decision making so, of course, they oppose the NEC's proposals. Secondly, despite what Socialist Action may say, both the Blairites and the bosses' press clearly understand the NEC proposals as an attack on the link. The *Financial Times* reported the proposals under the heading "Labour cuts union influence over policy", while in private Blairites boasted that they have worked out the "clever" way of effectively breaking the trade union link.

Interestingly, it is only "left faking" trade union bureaucrats who share Socialist Action's analysis: so who's covering from whom?

Now Socialist Action know all about providing left cover for trade union bureaucrats and, for that matter, fake left MPs, as anyone who has come across their "campaigning" in defence of the welfare state can testify. In the case of the Keep the Link campaign this charge is made regardless of the facts which are that both the Keep the Link campaign and the Keep the Party Labour campaign (whose support includes Socialist Action and CLPD) are campaigning against *all* the attacks on the rights of the affiliated organisations, the CLPs, annual conference, women in the party, and in defence of democracy generally, and that substantial unity and co-operation exists between the two campaigns on the ground.

What Socialist Action don't understand is that if Blair is to be defeated on this issue then it is necessary to reach out to sections of the labour movement rank and file beyond the traditional hard left and win the political argument about what the Labour Party is for. If at the union conferences we get up and repeat Carol Turner's assertion that "the union link is not under threat" not only would we be spreading rubbish, we would be actively helping the right-wing union leaders who don't want their unions to oppose Blair.

The current edition of the Keep the Link newsletter contains statements and articles by various trade union leaders who may or may not end up opposing the constitutional changes. I think there are good reasons for including them. Alliances need to be made between the existing hard left and activists who have voted for and look to trade union leaders who have pledged to defend the link between Labour and the unions. Central to the campaign must be to convince these activists that fighting to defend the link in the here and now means opposing the raft of constitutional changes due to be put by the NEC to Party Conference this autumn. The Keep the Link newsletter does this very effectively.

Acknowledgement that the existing hard left is not strong enough by itself to defeat the attacks on democracy was reflected at the CLPD AGM when most of those present, including Socialist Action, argued that it was important to push resolutions calling for any decision to be deferred until the 1998 conference. Now there are good reasons for trying to win a delay as well as building as much opposition as possible, not least the fact

that the timetable for consultation on the NEC proposals is extremely tight and includes the general election period when all local meetings are cancelled. But we need a strategy beyond one of delay, wait and hope. It will take more than the passing of another year (assuming deferment can be won, which is not going to be easy) to build up enough opposition to Blair to see off the attacks on the link and party democracy. It will require the kind of approach adopted by Keep the Link in reaching out to a much wider layer of activists. Moreover, it is vital that this work is done now and not put on the back-burner for after this autumn's conference when it may all be too late.

So what is Socialist Action's problem? Basically, they believe they are entitled to a monopoly on the leadership of the labour left and the resistance to the Blair offensive. They see Keep the Link as a competitor rather than an ally because they had nothing to do with setting it up and have no chance of taking it over. Serious socialists will not allow this sort of small-minded attitude to prevent an effective alliance of Keep the Link and Keep the Party Labour.

Bill Davies

1917: a bureaucratic revolution

IF a bureaucratic class can exist in Russia as a ruling class, can one exist without being the ruling class (or, more particularly, what is their relation to the means of production)?

Imperial Russia had a Tsar who made all decisions and had ultimate power. Decisions were carried out by bureaucrats who were not part of the aristocracy or the church. These people were paid functionaries. The system was known as bureaucratic-feudalism. Bureaucrats administered the means of production so had much control of it. They routinely diverted portions of the means of production for their own ends in various forms.

How is this different from a worker stealing from her boss or getting freebies? When bureaucrats divert capital (or property capable of reproducing itself) there is a qualitative difference upon which a class is formed, gradually accumulating influence.

Why did a bureaucratic class arise? Due to Russia's vastness and spareness of resources, administrative ability was at a premium, so that during crisis they would be safeguarded. It was a desirable profession.

Technical skill was less important than the ability to provide materials, etc. The aristocracy would encourage this to be separate from the church to avoid the church becoming too powerful.

It is this system of bureaucratic privilege which has been perpetuated by the Russian revolution. It is my contention that the bureaucratic class were revolutionary and class conscious and that the Russian revolution was a bureaucratic revolution. Only the extraordinary efforts of the Bolshevik Party allowed the working class to have so much influence.

Jim Noble

State capitalism in the USSR?

BARRY Finger (WZ37) and Roger Clarke (WZ36) dispute my claim (WZ34) that the USSR and the other Stalinist states were state-capitalist. Central to the argument, both on their side and on mine, is the question whether the USSR was based

on wage-labour.

Wage-labour presupposes an owner or owners of the means of production with amassed wealth, counterposed to the workers, from which they pay wages; that is, it presupposes capital. The relation between wage-labour and capital shapes the basic classes, the struggles between them, and the development of the productive forces. It is the central defining relation of capitalism. The relations between capitals — whether there is free competition, whether prices move freely, whether profits are equalised, whether crises occur in such-and-such a form — are less central.

Instead of being handed rations or possessing their own means of production, the workers in the Stalinist states worked for wages and bought their subsistence in shops. They were wage-workers. Yes, extreme state control modified wage labour. As Bukharin wrote, "State-capitalist structure of society makes the workers formally bonded to the imperialist state"; or, as the Algerian Marxist Benhouria put it, "State capitalism, for the worker, is wage-labour plus control and surveillance". The question is whether the modifications made Stalinism an exceptional, "deformed" capitalism, or whether they made the elements of wage-labour secondary and formal, and created an altogether different mode of production, with different social classes and a different development of the productive forces.

Wage-labour exists fairly widely in pre-capitalist systems, but they depend centrally on other forms of exploitation, slavery, tribute-paying, and so on, thus are not capitalist. Wage-labour will continue to exist in a workers' state, but it will be systematically eroded in favour of "free and associated labour", and so a workers' state is in transition from capitalism to socialism. The Stalinist societies showed no similar logic of development away from wage-labour.

In the early '30s Stalin talked about replacing wages by state rations. He did not succeed. "In the autumn of 1930 the attitude temporarily came to prevail that... labour as well as the means of production must be directly planned by the state... Legislation, discussion and economic practice... all reflected a rapid movement towards the training and allocation of Soviet citizens in accordance with the needs of the central plan..."

"These far-reaching measures failed to establish a coherent system for direct planning and allocation of labour in any way comparable to the system of planning and allocating industrial production... In practice, outside the growing forced-labour sector, workers normally remained free to change their jobs and were not subject to compulsory direction... a labour market, though an imperfect one, continued to exist" [1]. From the 1950s to the 1980s, that labour market moved closer to capitalist norms.

Workers in the USSR and other Eastern Bloc countries moved from job to job, seeking the best bargain. In some countries and periods they did so freely, elsewhere and at other times in defiance of unenforceable laws, but always they moved. Employers bid for the best workers with bonuses and perks, and squeezed productivity out of their workers with piece-rates [2].

When the workers mobilised, wage rises were among their first demands. Often the mobilisation was sparked by price rises, sometimes by uncontrolled inflation. Class struggles — both the workers' struggle for better wages, and the bosses' struggle to increase production by piece-rates and bonuses — show that the wage-relation was real. The workers in the Stalinist states showed in mobilisations like those of Hungary 1956 and Poland 1980-1 that they shared the essential characteristics and potential of the wage-working class under capitalism.

A system in transition from capitalism to a

hypothetical "bureaucratic collectivism" might, I suppose, still have wage-labour, gradually eroding it in favour of state-slavery. However, in the Stalinist systems the "state-slavery" elements were generally strongest in the first years. Those systems had no internal logic which took them further and further away from wage-labour; rather, the contrary. As the totalitarian, or semi-totalitarian, wrench-grip on the societies of Eastern Europe has been released, since 1989, the spontaneous economic trends of the substructure have been revealed: not collectivist but capitalist.

Yes, the State regulated the Stalinist economies. How — according to what class interests and norms — did it regulate them? The despotic regime gave huge scope to whims and blunders, but there were underlying regularities.

As well as the legal state-regulated markets in labour power and consumer goods, black and "grey" free markets in those commodities and in producer goods, and the surrounding world market, encircled and limited the State plans. Those State plans introduced no new economic logic, taking the systems increasing outside the ambit of capitalism, but, on the contrary, sought shortcuts within the logic of capitalism.

The Stalinist regimes fixed prices mostly according to planners' estimates of what prices should be in a market. Wages were set at social subsistence level, as under capitalism; bourgeois norms of distribution prevailed. Profits were grabbed and controlled by a small minority, who enjoyed vast privileges over the majority. The organisation of production, the choice of technology, the lack of consideration given to the environment and to other social costs and benefits which cannot be reckoned on the market, all conformed to capitalist standards.

The State regulation systematically twisted the economy away from free-market patterns in three major ways: towards cheap basic consumer goods and, often, fairly full employment, to secure totalitarian control; towards greater investment in heavy industry; and towards autarky (trying to construct a national economy independent of the rest of the world).

Those torsions were nationalist, not anti-capitalist. In the mid 20th century, all across the underdeveloped capitalist countries, petty bourgeois formations rebelled against the parasitism, corruption and dependence of the old oligarchies or colonial administrations. They wanted national development. They made bourgeois revolutions or semi-revolutions against the bourgeois oligarchies and their allies, feudalistic landowners and colonial rulers. Depending how tightly-knit and ideologically coherent their organisation was, they pushed the old oligarchies aside, reduced them to second rank, or crushed them.

The petty bourgeois revolutionaries or reformers did not want bourgeois democracy and free enterprise, which would allow the old oligarchs and imperialists still to hold considerable sway. In all cases they created powerful interventionist states; where they were vigorous, fervent, mass-mobilising revolutionaries (revolutionary Stalinists) they created totalitarian regimes, austere dedicated to national industrial development, protected by military discipline against disruption by individual profiteers or by the working class.

In such cases the liberated peasants were re-enslaved, this time to the profit of the State rather than private landowners. Not merely the larger part, but the whole of surplus value was ruthlessly concentrated in the hands of the State and channelled into crash industrialisation. The Stalinist states had many special features, but their state sectors developed large-scale national capitalism, not anti-capitalism.

Barry is right to point out that Engels' sketch of state-capitalism is an extrapolation from advanced

capitalism, not a model for industrially-backward states. In *Capital* Marx indicated that state power and force played a large role in the early stages of capitalism, too. "The organisation of capitalist production, once fully developed, breaks down all resistance... The dull compulsion of economic relations completes the subjection of the labourer to the capitalist. Direct force, outside economic conditions, is of course still used, but only exceptionally... It is otherwise during the historic genesis of capitalist production. The bourgeoisie, at its rise, wants and uses the power of the state..." (*Capital* volume 1, p.737). In 20th century conditions, unanticipated by Marx, the role of direct force in capitalist industrialisation reached a scale and took forms unanticipated by Marx.

That framework can help us to see Stalinism in perspective — it was not an abortive attempt to supersede capitalism — and facilitate analysis of its specificities (like, for example, the French writer Jacques Sapir's meticulous "state-capitalist" account of "Economic Fluctuations in the USSR, 1941-1985").

The "bureaucratic-collectivist" label appeals because it seems to highlight the specificity of Stalinism: "Call a whale a mammal? Nonsense! A whale is nothing like a sheep!" In fact Barry's assumption that capitalism is defined by "spontaneous self-regulation" leads him to characterise state and other bureaucracies in the West as "bureaucratic-collectivist" too. Every system is then a bit capitalist, a bit bureaucratic-collectivist. The bureaucratic-collectivist bit is large even in, say, Tory Britain, where 40% of national income passes through the state budget, and there are many more countries than those of Stalinism where it is overwhelmingly dominant. And so, in fact, the "bureaucratic-collectivist" label blurs the specificity and our historical overview.

1. R W Davies in David Lane (ed), *Labour and Employment in the USSR*, p.31-32.

2. "Differing wages for similar jobs across branches even within single towns persist" (Silvana Malle, *ibid*, p.132). "55 per cent of workers are still [1983] on the piece-work system" (p.133). Cf Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, chapter 4.4.

Martin Thomas

Keep drugs illegal!

ANDY Robinson's "Drugs: serious solutions, not vigilante repression", (*WL38*), is a mix-up of soggy liberal social-psychology — arguing that calling someone a smack-head makes them one — and a strange belief that legalising drugs would reduce drug-related crime.

Legalising all drugs — as Andy prefers — would not break the link between drugs and street crime. Instead, it would make easier the life of the drug barons.

No doubt, once legalised, the drug industry would be governed by a less harsh regime than the current regulation by a bouncer-enforced 'under-state'. But I don't care to legitimate this dirty money nor to promote the men who run the drugs world into the body-politic of British society.

Andy is also wrong to think that drug related street crime would vanish. It is probably true that dealers would no longer hang around street corners making a threatening nuisance of themselves to people living nearby and that would be positive. But young people would still have to thief to get the money to buy the drugs, whether over the counter or on the streets. Legalisation would make no difference to his sort of drug related crime — and it is precisely this problem which engenders misery and undermines communal identity and solidarity.

However, Andy is right to call for programmes

of alternative activities for young people. The expectation is that through these activities people will explore new ideas, opportunities and form the relationships which will help them to make sense of themselves and their social position.

Regardless of these arguments, there is another very good reason why drugs should not be legalised. They are very bad for you. If tobacco and alcohol were not legal, I doubt socialists would campaign for the right of multinationals to peddle these killer drugs.

Andy is right to think that decriminalisation of cannabis for personal use (and maybe 'E' too, but that drug is too young for me to know much about) is an appropriate demand — but it's a very long way from that liberal demand to the position of the old hard-right libertarian Tories (which Andy endorses) who think that getting the state out of a potentially healthy, money-making market is more important than protecting people from this kind of exploitation.

Finally, Andy may well be right to say I am naïve about the IRA's anti-drugs campaign. It might indeed be a mask for ensuring their control of the streets. But I do prefer to see working class action to clear up their streets and protect their young, to seeing the same people campaigning for legalising, legitimising and easing the passage of killer drugs into the hands of bored, alienated and abused youth.

Sue Hamilton

What drugs do to you

I AM acquainted with the view expressed by Andy Robinson (*WL38*) that 'hard' drugs should be made legal. The underlying notion that an appeal to reasonable behaviour is sufficient to prevent dependence and that people have a right to do with their bodies as they will seems irrefutable. However, very few of us are free of emotional content. We might have one drink too many or curse a close family member in a weak moment, and then feel sorry for our behaviour! At a time when the availability of automatic guns is questioned; and regulations governing car safety are regularly tightened, it seems to court disaster to make powerful drugs available to all. Variants of cocaine and heroin are used medically to prevent serious pain; and within the medical profession are governed by strict regulations.

Psychotropic drugs also can have hidden dangers. The garish stories emanating from the USA in the '60s regarding the behaviour of people under the influence of LSD, e.g. attempting to fly from the upper stories of buildings, or staring at the sun until eye damage occurred, may have been fabricated. My experience tells me that psychomimetic drugs can induce irrational — if momentarily uplifting — feelings and activity. However, I agree social conditions can induce drug-taking e.g. personal isolation, the traumatic end of a relationship, or simply the process of growing up.

When I was living in Liverpool in the '70s there was an outbreak of 'joy-riding'. My initial response was amazement at the daring of these kids, that is until a woman and daughter were run down by a speeding youngster. Many people can take drugs and 'get off' them, but some people need a tectonic shift in their lives to return to 'normality'.

Those that insist on their right to experiment with 'harder drugs' must expect to risk addiction with its attendant problems such as severe mood swings, sleep disturbance, physical ill-health, psychiatric disorders and an association with the criminal fraternity.

John Bryn Jones

US Labor Party

LAST year big steps were taken towards the creation of a mass trade union based Labor Party in the USA (see *Workers' Liberty* July 1996). But what sort of Labor Party? How can the cause of a US Labor Party best be advanced? Discussion of this question is intense amongst US socialists. Here we print the first two contributions in what we hope will be an extended discussion on the question of the US Labor Party.

I. We should stand in elections

THE founding of a Labor Party in the United States is a big opportunity for the labor movement. This is the first time that working people have moved toward having our own independent voice in politics since 1948 — rather than trailing after the Democrats, hoping for crumbs.

So it's a shame that some union members are so critical of this new-born Labor Party, just because it doesn't correspond to the full-fledged and ideal labor party we'd like it to be. When they focus on the many problems the Labor Party faces, they tend not to see the forest for the trees. Let's try to look at it with a little historical perspective! Today a labor party is practically in the mainstream of labor debate — which is way ahead of where we were five years ago.

One of the hot debates at the convention last June was whether the party should run candidates, and that debate is still raging. I'd like to weigh in on the yes side — though we were quite right not to try it this year.

Labor Party founder Tony Mazzocchi says we should stay away from elections because the only result is either defeat followed by demoralisation, or victory followed by sell-out followed by demoralisation. Therefore we should model ourselves after the civil rights movement, doing grass roots agitation that forces politicians to change the laws whether they want to or not.

But I would argue that it's unlikely that the Labor Party can start from where we are

now and grow in a straight line till we have "hundreds of thousands of members," as one resolution put it. We need to take part in elections because:

1. Running candidates says something that no other type of grass roots work does. It says, "Working people should take power." When the Labor Party (in the future) runs candidates for Congress and President on our far-reaching platform, it is saying, in effect, "We don't buy corporate competitiveness as the organising principle of society; working people should take the wealth from the fat cats." We get to talk about the big picture.

Merely trying to influence existing politicians and candidates doesn't say that. It says, "We're just another pressure group on the professional politicians, who will always be in charge."

2. Candidates get publicity; running them says you're putting your money where your mouth is.

3. Many people will get involved in electoral politics who won't in other kinds of grass roots activities. Like it or not, when you say "party" to just about anybody, they say, "Who are you running?" If all we're doing is non-electoral work, why should people join us, to do work that they can do just as well wearing another hat?

Jobs with Justice, for instance, is an already-existing national organisation with chapters in many cities, a labor-community coalition that takes on various kinds of campaigns. Why would anyone join the Labor Party to do non-electoral work, rather than Jobs with Justice, which has a track record?

Of course, in the best of all possible labor parties, the more top-down activity of an election campaign would interact with action in the streets. And we'd have to look out for the constant tendency to have illusions in individual candidates, and also in what it is possible for a few souls in office to do.

We do need to "go beyond the electoral process," as our resolution put it, but we also need to get into elections if we're to make a name for the Labor Party and attract "hundreds of thousands" of members.

Labor Party leaders ought to be doing some serious research and sounding out. They should investigate where the endorsing unions, both local and international, might have the combined capacity to run credible local campaigns. This could be for school board, city council, county executive, maybe even Congressperson. The 1998 Labor Party convention could adopt such campaigns and prepare to go all out to win them.

Given that many chapters are not yet very strong, this would be a sounder approach than throwing open the doors to any chapter anywhere that wanted to jump into the electoral arena.

In addition, of course, local Labor Parties are already free to launch or work on ballot initiatives. The Patient Protection Act on the November ballot in California, introduced by the California Nurses Association, is one example. In many cities and states "living wage" campaigns are already under way, to get the city council or state legislature to set a minimum wage in the \$6.50-8 range for certain workers, or to get a living wage initiative on the ballot. These fit in perfectly with our party platform.

Some members have said that the current Labor Party leaders are opposed to running candidates because they don't really

want a new party at all; their true plan is to act only as a pressure group, prodding the Democrats in Congress. They don't want to put up Labor Party candidates because that would annoy their Democratic friends.

I believe this appraisal is dead wrong. Party leaders' reason for not running candidates is tied to a recruitment strategy.

For the time being, at least, this strategy is to make it easy for international and local union presidents to endorse (and commit funds). Joining the Labor Party should be a minimal, non-scary kind of commitment. And that means you have to reassure them that they can keep on doing their thing with local and national Democrats.

For many, many Labor Party members who are local union officials, raising money for and asking favours of Democratic politicians is part of their way of life, part of the way they see themselves and their unions as having influence. They are not inclined to risk changing it, especially when the Labor Party is so new and weak. This is particularly true for public sector unions and in cities and states where a union is large enough to have some influence in internal party workings, such as the UAW in Michigan.

The Political Director of the American Federation of Government Employees, for example, says he sees no contradiction in AFGE's president's being on the Democratic National Committee and also endorsing the Labor Party. "The point where I'll see a contradiction," he says, "is if they decide to run candidates."

The party's new recruitment brochure lists "Is the Labor Party running candidates? No." as point #2 in its self-description.

So, under this approach, the Labor Party is to be a holding tank of progressive political sentiment. The strategy is to recruit unions into a larger and larger holding tank, based on the notion that you can be in the Labor Party and still do your regular COPE work, until there's critical mass enough that you *can* start acting like a party — that is, run candidates.

Party leaders may well be looking toward AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Rich Trumka's becoming president of the federation in not too many years, with the aim of recruiting as many locals, intermediate bodies, and internationals as they can to pressure Trumka, once he takes office, to lead a labor party.

Stripped to its basics, the argument is that you don't run candidates until the holding tank has grown full enough. And the only way to fill the tank is to keep a low profile.

Now, it's hard to argue with the notion that you don't take bold action until you're strong enough. The question is, how does the party get strong enough?

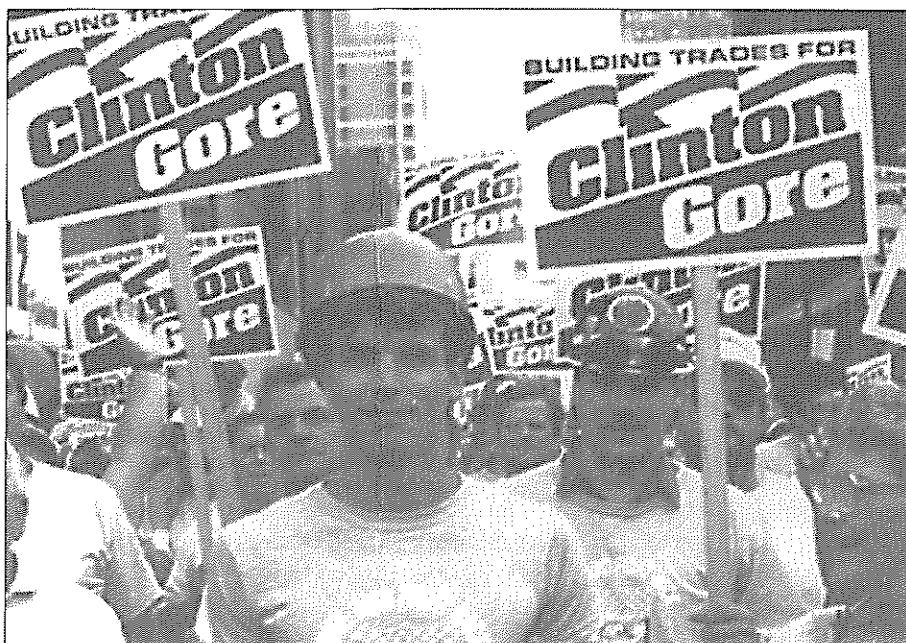
Under the holding tank strategy, the rank and file of the endorsing unions are likely to be pretty passive. They're not supposed to do anything much; you hope they'll know that their local or international union has endorsed; the best will be individual members as well. Then all of a sudden someone opens the floodgates of the holding tank and they're supposed to rush out and work their tails off for the Labor Party?

Union members over the last decade have been markedly resistant to union leaders' recommendations about how to vote. Without a lot of groundwork — and action — they won't be automatic converts

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to the Labor Party either.

There are other problems with the holding tank strategy:

1. If we're not running candidates, what will we be doing that will make union leaders or members want to join?

2. The holding tank is not a conception that can hold well. Already, Labor Party Advocates leaders were pushed by restive members who weren't satisfied with the early conception of LPA as a mailing list/club. They were prodded into allowing the formation of chapters and then into encouraging the formation of chapters.

Mazzocchi noted, "It's difficult to recruit people, as many of our activists have pointed out, when there's really nothing for them to do," and LPA called a founding convention of a Labor Party even though its conception was still pretty similar to LPA. But members' expectations were raised. Now that we're a party, the pressure is on to act like one.

Labor Party leaders may be able to maintain the holding tank strategy for a while (but it should be noted that both the United Electrical Workers and the Longshoremen have said they want to run candidates in the relatively near future). In any case, there will be more pressure and more fractiousness than ever within the party. Many, many Labor Party members, including members of the endorsing unions, will want the party to shit or get off the pot at some intermediate stage, before others have decided the holding tank is full enough.

So the debate will go on. There are acres of terrain to contest in the party's self-definition and in what it does on the ground. Those who want to write off the new party because it isn't the electoral equivalent of the CIO are wrong. If we didn't take part in organisations just because they're beset with conflicting impulses, we wouldn't be involved in our unions either.

One final point: many of us have been active in the labor movement for decades, pushing and prodding it to reform, to become more militant, to shape up. We shouldn't forget that this Labor Party has the potential to help change the labor movement too.

Jane Slaughter

II. Break with the Democrats!

LAST summer, when Bill Clinton played to the tune of conservatives and signed the bi-partisan welfare reform bill, he inexorably antagonised two of the Democratic Party's key pillars, unions and blacks. This bill will condemn society's most defenceless — women, children, the elderly and documented immigrant workers — to poverty and homelessness by cutting them off welfare after two years. It will build a vast reserve army of the unemployed, desperate to work at starvation wages, cross a picket line to take a striking union member's job or beg in the streets. Clinton's signing of the welfare reform bill was a calculated measure: "Poor people don't vote and working people have no choice but to vote Democrat." Workers, who usually vote for "friends of labor" Democrats, are becoming increasingly fed up with the bi-partisan anti-labor legislation like NAFTA, the Team Act, deregulatory schemes and the draconian Crime Bill.

Democratic Party arrogance that takes working people for granted was the impetus behind the founding of the Labor Party in June. 1,400 delegates mostly from unions reportedly embracing 1,000,000 workers travelled to Cleveland to build a labor party that will ostensibly change America's political landscape. In every industrialised country, except here, there's a party that claims to speak for the working class. In the U.S. there have been labor parties, but not always independent and, like San Francisco's anti-Chinese immigrant Labor Party of 1901, not always progressive. With the trade union movement down to a mere 12% of the workforce labor must rethink its political strategy. So far only nine international and national unions have endorsed the Labor Party. Most

union tops remain Democrat-loyal. John Sweeney, new AFL-CIO chief, who was in Cleveland during the Labor Party convention, was conspicuously absent. Only a militant rank and file upsurge will break the labor aristocracy's slavish attachment to the Democrats.

Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union (OCAW) official Tony Mazzocchi and President Bob Wages started organising the Labor Party ten years ago. The Labor Party's reformist program challenges corporate America with demands like full employment, a 32-hour workweek, labor's unfettered right to organise, universal health care, and a \$10 an hour minimum wage. However, the leadership's abstentionist position — that it's premature to run Labor Party candidates in the upcoming elections — prevailed at the convention... not without a bitter fight. When Chairman Wages initially refused to recognise a motion from the ILWU permitting party organisations to run candidates at the state and local levels it nearly provoked a walkout by the longshoremen. Thus, left unanswered was the convention's slogan: "If not here, where? If not us, who? If not now, when?"

A debate over abortion ensued when the nurses tried to amend the proposed program's limited call for "reproductive services" (which places it to the right of the Democratic Party) with an amendment guaranteeing the right to "a safe and legal abortion". It too was defeated.

Indeed, the leadership tried to avoid controversy at all cost. Yet, the creation of a workers' party is itself controversial. Any labor party worth its salt wouldn't be afraid to raise the call for nationalisation of basic industry in the face of massive job losses due to the global onslaught of privatisation; or to demand an end to the U.S. imperialist blockade of Cuba; or the release of framed black freedom fighters Geronimo Pratt and Mumia Abu-Jamal languishing in jail.

Explosive contradictions exist for the Labor Party. If it is to be truly independent its union affiliates can not support or participate in the Democratic Party. Yet, American Federation of Government Employees' president John Sturdivant sits on both the Labor Party Interim National Council and the Democratic National Committee. And if this Labor Party is for real why didn't its head Bob Wages vote against the early endorsement of Clinton at the March AFL-CIO Convention?

More significantly, a real labor party isn't just an electoral machine. It is actively engaged in the class struggle, leading workers on strike and organising against racist repression. Convention delegates voted unanimously for a massive "March on Detroit" to defend the embattled newspaper workers on strike for a year. If this Labor Party is for real, then it will rally the labor movement behind these strikers. The future of both may hang in the balance.

Jack Heyman

Jack Heyman, an ILWU Convention delegate, attended the founding convention of the Labor Party in Cleveland in June.