

The Labour Party in perspective

By John O'Mahony

"The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working-class parties. They have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole. They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement... The Communists are, practically, the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others; on the other hand, theoretically, they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement."

Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*

"To say that ideologists (conscious leaders) cannot divert from its path the movement created by the interaction of the environment and the (material) elements is to ignore the elementary truth that consciousness participates in this interaction and creation. Catholic labour unions are also the inevitable result of the interaction of the environment and the material elements. The difference, however, is that it was the consciousness of priests... and not that of socialists that participated in this interaction."

Lenin

"It is not enough to be a revolutionary and an advocate of socialism in general. It is necessary to know at every moment how to find the particular link in the chain which must be grasped with all one's strength in order to keep the whole chain in place and prepare to move on resolutely to the next link."

Lenin

THE Labour Party is now led by open enemies of socialism. That is nothing new. But the present Labour leaders are open enemies of trade-union involvement in running the party too, that is, of the very character of the Labour Party as it has been for nearly a century. This *is* new. The unions, bureaucratically controlled, have always been the bulwark of the right wing in the Labour Party.

If Tony Blair has his way, Labour-union links will eventually be severed. The Labour Party will become something like the Liberal Party was before the First World War, and Labour will have been pushed back into the womb of Liberalism, from whence it emerged in the first two decades of this century.

Labour's separation from Liberalism was at first no more than organisational. Where before 1900, for three decades, the unions



Leader of post-war Labour: Clement Attlee

got a handful of "Lib-Lab" MPs into Parliament under the Liberal banner, after 1900 the trade unions backed their own open candidates. Even then, the Lib-Lab MPs from the tightly-knit mining communities did not join the Labour Party until 1910.

Winning 30 seats in the 1906 election, the trade-union MPs formed the Labour Party. It was at first a party without individual members, a conglomeration of trade unions and affiliated societies like the Independent Labour Party, the Fabians, and, from 1916, the British Socialist Party, formerly the Social-Democratic Federation, the main precursor of the Communist Party of Great Britain (1920).

Despite the socialist societies involved, this party was still politically Liberal, and it was not fully independent even electorally. In every election before 1918, Labour operated an election pact with the Liberals.

Labour became a modern party only in 1918, when it created constituency parties with individual members, adopted a general socialist (though not Marxist) objective, the famous Clause Four ("to secure for the workers by hand and brain the full fruits of their labour"), and abandoned its electoral pact with the Liberals.

The "New Labour" Party of 1918 was both a maturation of the labour movement towards revolutionary socialist politics, and a powerful block to its further development on that road. "Each progress in organic evolution is at the same time a regress, by fixing a one-sided development and barring the possibility of development in a number of other directions" (Engels). What happened both before and after 1918 depended not only on the "natural" and "organic" evolution of the British labour movement, but also, as we will see, on the battle of ideas within it, Fabianism against Marxism, revolutionary socialism against reformism, militancy against moderation, democracy against elitism, and on what the revolutionary socialists did or failed to do.

Here I make not a detailed summary of Labour Party history, but an attempt to analyse how and why the British labour movement evolved the way it did, and how, for good and bad, Marxists have interacted with the processes that shaped the political labour movement the Blairites are now trying to destroy. I am concerned with drawing conclusions for Marxist work now.

What were the forces that went into the making of the new Labour Party of 1918? What had changed?

The trade unions had evolved politically. In the 1880s the unions had been Liberal in politics. Reflecting the dominant ideas of late Victorian bourgeois society, they were unable to conceive of ameliorative state action, and looked to "self-help" and their own benefit systems where later generations would look to the welfare state. The new unions of the dockers and other "unskilled" workers, after 1888-9, did not have high dues and good "welfare" benefits like the old craft unions, and naturally they began to look at "socialism" and the reforming state for welfare. By 1918 state action was widely accepted in bourgeois society and (in part as a consequence of that) demanded by the trade unions.

From the 1890s, "constructive" Liberalism and Tory self-serving paternalism had progressively embraced the idea that the state had to take direct responsibility for social engineering and social welfare in the ultimate interests of the ruling class. In Germany, the pressure of the powerful Marxian socialist movement had induced Bismarck to bring in social insurance as a means of undermining the socialists and guaranteeing healthy, educated workers and soldiers.

The discovery of the extent of malnourishment among British soldiers in the Boer War (1899-1902), where at first they did very badly, alarmed the ruling class. The example of their German imperialist rivals helped convince both Tories and Liberals of the need for state action.

After 1906 the Liberals laid down the first foundations of a welfare state. Old age pensions — which gave large numbers of old workers an alternative to the workhouse prisons for the indigent — had been discussed for decades. In 1908 Lloyd George brought in old age pensions, then in 1911 National Insurance.

On a certain level, this bourgeois approach, which in part reflected working-class (including international working-class) pressure, was in principle indistinguishable from reform socialism, the difference at most being one of degree and extent. Constructive Liberalism, the calculated paternalism of imperialist Toryism, and Fabian reform socialism were all of a family by the First World War. This helped transform the labour movement — and also to confuse it about what socialism was and was not.

The other great shaping force was organised socialist propaganda, sustained over

decades. Socialism revived, after decades of eclipse, in the early 1880s, when both the (Marxist) Social Democratic Federation and the Fabian Society were founded. These bodies, and after 1893 Keir Hardie's Independent Labour Party, plugged away with criticisms of capitalism and socialist propaganda for a different society. Against the others, the Marxists explained the class difference between socialism and bourgeois welfare-ism.

By 1918, a powerful if undefined socialist collectivism held sway over much of the labour movement. The National Council of Labour Colleges, an independent working-class educational body, had been set up as the "Plebs League" in 1909 by students at Ruskin College, the trade-union education centre in Oxford. Demanding Marxist education, they seceded and organised a big network of socialist lectures in basic non-denominational Marxism. This was a great force for working-class enlightenment.

And then came the Russian Revolution. The first revolution in February 1917 had a tremendous impact in Britain. In July 1917 the Leeds Convention, at which large numbers of workers were represented, issued an appeal for soviets in Britain. Future Labour prime minister and future renegade Ramsay MacDonald backed the call! When in October 1917 the Bolsheviks demonstrated what soviets could mean, Russia remained tremendously popular.

In 1920 the trade union leader Ernest Bevin and others organised a powerful network of "Councils of Action" across Britain to mobilise the working class to stop the British government helping the Poles in the Russian-Polish war. In London dockers struck work to prevent the loading of a munitions ship, the "Jolly George", for Poland.

Labour had had ministers in the wartime government, Henderson and Barnes. During the war the trade unions had greatly increased in numbers. By the beginning of 1918 the Labour Party leaders, encouraged by the mid-war split in the Liberal Party, spurred by working-class militancy, and frightened of being outflanked from the left, reorganised the party.

This was, explicitly, a reformist, non-Marxist party. The Marxists, whose organisation was the oldest socialist group, had been defeated by Fabians, Christian Socialists, pacifists, and "constructive Liberal" refugees from the breakdown of their party. Why?

We must go back again, briefly, to the beginning. The historic reputation of the early British Marxists has been given to them by their Fabian and ILP enemies and by their Marxist successors, who had revolted against their inadequacies. They have, I think, received more abuse than they deserve.

For the one-third of a century before World War I they educated workers in basic Marxism, such as the mechanics of the exploitation of wage-labour (the labour theory of value) and the need for a working-class socialism. They fought for a hard, distinct, durable class outlook. They helped organise the burgeoning labour movement, and trained generations of leaders of the labour movement — of trade unions and of the

Labour Party, too. Those today who find it discouraging to have to explain to young people not only what socialism is, but also basic trade unionism, should note that Eleanor Marx had to teach the gasworkers' organiser and future MP Will Thorne how to read and write.

Even Clement Attlee, and the future Labour right-winger Herbert Morrison, passed through the SDF/BSP.

Yet as Frederick Engels, who was in general too hostile to them, rightly said: they tended to see Marxism as a salvationist dogma, a shibboleth, to be brandished aloft before the labour movement, which was asked to accept it as cure-all, whole and at once. They did not use it as a guide to Marxist action that would help the workers' movement develop. They disregarded the guidelines of the *Communist Manifesto*: "The Communists have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole".

It disparaged trade-union action, seeing the making of propaganda about its real inadequacy as the specifically Marxist task. In the great upsurge of semi-syndicalist militancy in the years before the World War, the SDF, as an organisation, tended to stand aside, sup-

"The SDF disparaged trade-union action, seeing the making of propaganda about its real inadequacy as the specifically Marxist task."

porting the workers but disparaging the action, instead of throwing itself into what was a tremendous revolt of raw working-class militancy. In other words, where the job of Marxists is to fight the class struggle on the three fronts of industry, politics, and ideas, and of the Marxist organisation to link and integrate those fronts into one coherent strategy, the SDF overemphasised the "propagandist" side of things. As a consequence, the beneficial effects of SDF propaganda and of the influence they gained for basic Marxist notions was diffuse and not organised in a revolutionary movement. The Marxists were unable to shape the growing labour movement into a coherent socialist force. Tasks neglected by the SDF/BSP for "purist" sectarian reasons became the province of the reformists. The Fabians and the Christian Socialists gained a dominant influence.

The decisive weakness of the SDF was probably its attitude to trade unionism and trade-union militancy — disdainful support combined with the fostering of trade union officials who gave their own increasingly bureaucratic caste meaning to the SDF/BSP's "Marxist"-sectarian incomprehension of raw militancy.

The SDF's approach to the Labour Party was also a prize example of sectarianism.

When in 1900, the trade unions, still essentially Liberal in politics, responded to a court ruling which removed their immunity from employers' claims to make good losses inflicted during a strike by setting up the Labour Representation Committee, the SDF promoted it. At the second LRC conference in 1901, the SDF moved a motion committing the Liberal or Tory trade unionists to recognition of the class struggle; when the motion was voted down, they just walked out, leaving the political movement of the trade unions and of the organised working class to the ILP, the Fabians, and the Christian Socialists!

Instead of working to develop the Labour Representation Committee towards their ideas, they denounced from outside what was in fact the movement of the organised working class into politics. It was the beginning of a tradition.

After 1906 sections of the SDF, including H M Hyndman, wanted to affiliate to the Labour Party, but it would be a decade before the majority agreed to do so. That was 1916, in the middle of the World War, as the BSP split — both sides would be in the Labour Party. Even after the shake-up of ideas following the war and the Russian Revolution, and the transformation of the BSP into the CP (1920), the sectarian approach continued, though often repudiated in words.

After considerable discussion and at Lenin's urging, the Second Congress of the Communist International (1920) came out for CP affiliation to the Labour Party.

"The Second Congress of the Third International should express itself in favour of Communist groups, or groups and organisations sympathising with Communism in England, affiliating to the Labour Party... For as long as this party permits the organisations affiliated to it to enjoy their present freedom of criticism and freedom of propaganda, agitational and organisational activity for the dictatorship of the proletariat and the Soviet form of government, as long as that party preserves its character as a federation of all the trade union organisations of the working class, the Communists should without fail take all measures and agree to certain compromises in order to have the opportunity of influencing the broadest masses of the workers, of exposing the opportunist leaders from a platform that is higher and more visible to the masses and of accelerating the transition of political power from the direct representatives of the bourgeoisie to the 'labour lieutenants of the capitalist class' [the Labour Party] in order that the masses may be more quickly weaned from their last illusions on this score..."

Of course, the CP view of the Labour Party was true. In 1922 the CP anatomised the Labour Party thus:

"A Labour Party which was ruled and organised primarily by officials of independent and often warring unions inevitably became entirely divorced from the socialist or revolutionary idea. Its leaders, in their overwhelming majority, were financially and otherwise no longer members of the working class, but of the middle class. They were often Liberals, and might be conservatives,

in all else but defence of their own unions, finances and privileges. (This was particularly noticeable, again, in the Parliamentary group).

"Thus, even before the war, the Labour Party had become quite distinctly a class organisation of the proletariat which was dominated by that section of the middle class whose profession it was to organise trade unions".

Nevertheless, this was the actually existing labour movement in politics — the highest level the mass of workers had so far achieved, and along the right road.

In fact Labour was as yet no closed-off, tightly-controlled party. The ultra-left communist Sylvia Pankhurst was a delegate to its 1918 conference. The major component of the new CP, the BSP, was affiliated to it. The CP could simply have informed the Labour Party that the BSP had changed its name. Concerned to raise a clear, visible banner of communism and to take their proper place within the ranks of the new Communist International, the CP leaders emphasised their separateness and sought affiliation as if going through a ritual. Leaders of the party like J T Murphy — who came from the small De Leonite Socialist Labour Party, a break-away from the SDF in 1903 which, though it had merits of its own, exaggerated and systematised the sectarian faults of the parent body — made speeches that were not designed with diplomacy in mind. "We take them by the hand today the better to take them by the throat tomorrow", said Murphy. They were refused affiliation.

Yet there was, in 1922-24, even a London Communist Labour MP, Saklatvala. He was no ordinary MP. The best description, telling us much about the Labour Party then, is that of the communist and Trotskyist veteran Harry Wicks:

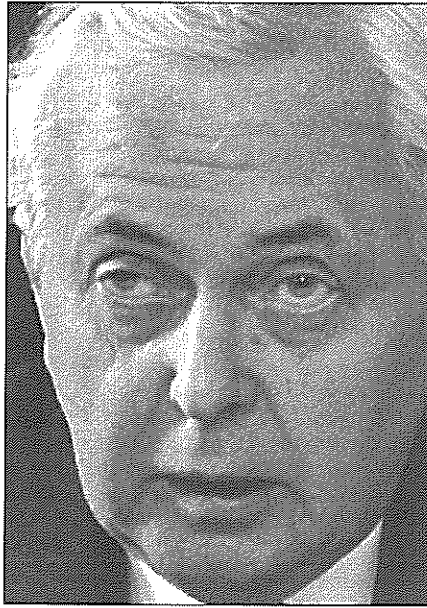
"In the twenties, to the consternation of the Liberal-minded Labour leadership of Henderson and MacDonald, Battersea North elected as their member of parliament the Indian Saklatvala. Not only was he an Indian but a Communist, and he was sponsored by the united Battersea labour movement.

"The link that Saklatvala established with his worker constituents was not that of the proverbial surgery: 'Can I help you?', 'Have you any problems?' At that time the entire working class had a problem, that of survival against the employers' lock-outs, widespread unemployment and the downward slide of the sliding scale of wages agreements.

"Saklatvala spoke at factory gate meetings and introduced the monthly report-back from Westminster. There were great meetings. Long before the doors of the town hall opened, queues formed just like they used to at Stamford Bridge.

"The platform was always crowded. Sak, as he was affectionately known, was flanked by the entire executive of the Trades and Labour Council and numerous representatives of Indian and colonial organisations. He was short in stature, broad-shouldered, with flashing eyes, and was a magnificent orator.

"Those monthly report-back meetings on



Wilson

the doings in Parliament stirred hundreds into activity. The Battersea labour movement pulsed with life and was united. Marxist classes held by the old Plebs League flourished. Trade union branches were crowded".

Despite refusals, the question of Communist Party affiliation remained open for years. Until the Liverpool conference of 1925, Communists could be trade union delegates to Labour constituency committees and to Labour Party conference. After 1925, three dozen Constituency Labour Parties let themselves be disaffiliated rather than expel Communists, and formed an organisation of the disaffiliated Labour Parties, the National Left Wing Movement, which also embraced left-wing groups in other constituencies.

In the unions, the CP, working from the low point of trade-union defeat and depression in 1922, built the rank-and-file "Minority Movement" into a force claiming as its affiliates trade union bodies enclosing a quarter of the organised trade unionists, then numbering about four million.

In retrospect the experience in Britain fits into this summary of the historical experience: wherever mass reformist organisations of the working class existed at the time of the formation of the Communist International, if the CI failed to win over the majority or a big minority of the old organisations then the CI failed to become the main force in the working-class movement.

That is a true general summary, but it obscures the processes that shaped the events in Britain. Up to the middle 1920s it was still possible for communists to have superseded the reformists as the dominant force in the British labour movement. The small CP, pursuing an orientation to the mass labour movement, trade unions and Labour Party alike, was, despite, sometimes, a sectarian style and manner, essentially not sectarian. It put forward perspectives for the labour movement and the objective needs of the working class, and fought for them throughout the labour movement, engaging in united-front work with the

reformists.

It had great and growing influence in the trade unions, organising the rank and file, building on rank and file militancy where the SDF had not known what to do with it. It had influence and supporters in the Labour Party. Above all, the class struggle was moving to the biggest confrontation in British history: the battle between reformist and revolutionary perspectives was far from settled.

Even after the nine months of minority Labour government in 1924, the Labour Party had not yet hardened definitively into the reformist mould. It was the subsequent policies of the Marxists, as much as the desires of the reformist leaders, that gave to the political labour movement the shape it was to have for the rest of the twentieth century, just as the SDF's deficiencies had let reformist leaders call the tune in the development before 1918.

It was the rise of Stalinism that destroyed the CP's prospects. From far away Stalin shaped the history of the British labour movement.

In Russia a new bureaucratic ruling class moved towards displacing the working class from power by first producing its own world outlook. The Bolsheviks had made a revolution in backward Russia believing that socialism was impossible there: the October revolution was but a first step of the world revolution. Civil war and wars of intervention followed. The revolution survived, maimed and isolated. As the bureaucrats infesting the state that the workers had erected in self-defence moved to take to themselves material privileges and to seize power for themselves, their leader Stalin proclaimed that backward Russia could build "socialism in one country", despite the domination of the world by capitalism.

The CPs outside Russia might as well act as political border guards for the Soviet Union.

This was not said clearly, but the logic unfolded very quickly. In Britain it meant that since the CP was small, Stalin looked for more powerful local support for Russia. While being anything but revolutionary at home, many trade-union leaders were friendly to the Russian Revolution. The Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee linked Russian trade unionists with British trade union bureaucrats, some of whom had been in the BSP. It gave them prestige with the left and made control of the rank and file easier.

That is how it was when in May 1926 the TUC called a general strike to defend the miners. Britain was now in a revolutionary situation. For nine days the strike developed and grew in strength and confidence. On the ninth day workers were still coming out. And then the TUC called it off, leaving the miners to fight on alone for six months to ultimate defeat.

It was a classic betrayal of the workers' interests by trade union bureaucrats. Here was a tremendous opportunity for the CP at least to settle accounts with the reformists and compromisers, if not yet with the bourgeoisie. In fact the CP was hamstrung as a revolutionary organisation, fighting the

incumbent leaders, by the involvement of some of those leaders in the Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee.

The CP raised the slogan "All Power to the TUC General Council" — the TUC General Council that was selling out the strikers! Despite its sincere intentions, it helped the traitors. Even though the CP grew in the aftermath of defeat, the attrition of working-class morale and combativity was tremendous. This was the working class that would be hit soon by the great slump and pushed down further.

Worse was to come. In 1928, reflecting Stalin's final cataclysmic seizure of power in the USSR and the beginning of forced industrialisation and collectivisation, the Communist International proclaimed that the world had entered the "Third Period". The first period after the World War had seen working-class upsurge and defeat; the second, capitalist consolidation. The Third Period was the period of revolution everywhere.

Everything that happened could be and was construed according to that scenario. A religious pogrom in Palestine could be transmuted into an anti-imperialist struggle; fascists in Germany seen as misguided fighters against the Versailles Treaty; nationalist leaders togged out as incipient communists — everything in fact which a later generation would come to know as post-Trotsky "Trotskyism" was pioneered here.

The dogma explained delays in the world revolution in terms of the Social Democrats, and concluded that they were the main enemy, the "Social Fascists", to be smashed at all costs. It made sense to ally with Hitler's Nazis in Germany against the Social Democrats, "the murderers of Liebknecht and Luxemburg", and suicidally, the German Communist Party did that.

In Britain the Third Period made the CP regard the left-wing movement of disaffiliated Labour Parties as a roadblock to CP growth rather than a bridge to the Labour Party, and the trade-union Minority Movement as a buttress of the bureaucrats rather than the agency for their eventual removal. The National Left-Wing Movement in the Labour Party was liquidated, the Minority Movement turned into an attempt to create new trade unions. It was a great self-liquidation by the Communist Party. A couple of tiny "red" trade unions, among miners in East Fife and clothing workers in East London and Leeds, were the only result.

This marked the end of any large-scale challenge to the dominance of Labourism. When the CP pulled out of its bureaucratic ultra-left craze in the mid-1930s, it was only a tool of Russian foreign policy, a source of totalitarian pollution in the labour movement and politically a force pulling Labour to the right — into a "popular front" with Liberals and "progressive" Tories. The Trotskyist groups which tried to maintain the politics and perspectives of original communism were tiny and of no account in mass working-class politics.

Thus a history which might have gone differently actually saw the consolidation of a reformist labour movement. The trade

union bureaucracy was strengthened by the defeat of the General Strike and then by the dampening of spirits in the great depression. Trade union leaders became more and more enmeshed in collaboration with the state.

In the late 1920s and '30s collectivist ideas were dominant in the unions. But it was a reformist socialism, at best, without any conception of struggling for working-class power." In practice, for the Labour Party leaders, "socialism" was a political artefact, camouflage, not a guide to action. Then as now, their operational ideas were strictly in line with the bourgeois consensus.

In October 1929 Labour formed its second minority government under Ramsay MacDonald, and it proved feeble and helpless in face of the catastrophic world slump. Even a left-winger with some serious credentials, George Lansbury, concerned himself with potty pre-World-War-1 vintage schemes of organised emigration to Australia as a solution to unemployment. When Labour minister Oswald Mosley advocated Keynesian solutions — that the state should organise the capitalist economy, boosting consumption and thus production and employment — he was isolated in the government... and went off to found the British Union of Fascists.

Faced with the crisis, the Labour prime minister, MacDonald, the Chancellor, Philip Snowden, and the former railworkers' leader Jimmy Thomas, opted in July 1931 to cut the miserably inadequate dole of the unemployed workers in the interests of a balanced budget. They split from Labour and coalesced with Tories and Liberals to form the National Government, with MacDonald continuing as Prime Minister.

The number of Labour MPs fell from 288 in 1929 to 52 after the 1931 election, fewer than the 63 elected in 1918. But now there was no competition from the left, except from the vacillating Independent Labour Party, which split from Labour in 1932 with about 15,000 members.

Labour swung left, electing Lansbury, the Michael Foot of the 1930s, as leader for a while. But in fact no real balance-sheet of what had led to the collapse of the Labour government was drawn. Those who had

shared responsibility for the government up to the final split blamed everything on MacDonald's villainy, not on the politics and approach they shared with him. Soon the trade-union bureaucracy, in the person of Ernest Bevin, boss of the TGWU, reasserted a brutal control. Clement Attlee replaced Lansbury as leader in 1935.

Labour recovered some of its electoral fortunes in the 1935 election, which the Tory-controlled National Government again won. It formed a coalition government, with Attlee as deputy prime minister under Churchill, in 1940, and remained in it until Hitler was defeated. Old-style Toryism had been heavily discredited even among the intelligentsia in the 1930s, and ended in the catastrophe of war. 1945 was the reckoning. Labour won by a landslide.

What was the Labour Party of 1945? It was, as before, an extension of trade-union bargaining into Parliament. It was wretchedly non-militant, judged by the needs of the working class. But it was a party of genuine reformists. They wanted change in the interests of the working class, an end to things like the means test for unemployment relief.

It was a movement led and staffed on the trade-union level and even, though less so, on the parliamentary level, by men and a few women of genuine conviction, tempered in the struggles that had shaped the labour movement.

The honest communists of that period — the Trotskyists and, to some extent, the ILP — rightly denounced them for their inadequacies and there is no reason to gainsay any of that. But their inadequacies were those of a reformist labour movement.

If they could be justly denounced in the last analysis as Liberals, they were on the whole sincere liberals who believed in human equality and wanted to extend it.

They saw the labour movement of which they were organically part or to which they had attached themselves as the essential force for progress. In their own way they were loyal to that movement.

The scope of the Labour victory and what followed should not be misconstrued. It was immense. Vast masses of workers wanted a socialist revolution in 1945 and voted Labour to get it. They had seen what the state could



Campaign for Labour Party Democracy lobby



Most of the Tribune MPs of the early '80s ended up helping Kinnock steer the party rightwards

do in the organisation of society during the war: they wanted the same scope of action in peacetime, for peacetime objectives — for life rather than death. They were determined not to return to the 1930s. They had no use for the Tories, even though Tory leader Churchill was popular as the war leader who spat hate and defiance at Hitler.

Lenin once summed up the three cardinal conditions for a revolution thus: the rulers cannot rule in the old way; the ruled are not willing to go on being ruled in the old way; and there is an available, mobilised alternative to the old order. In 1945 the ruling class could not go on in the old way because the working class (and others) were not prepared to tolerate it. Even the Army was massively anti-Establishment and pro-Labour.

And there was an alternative — Labour. A Labour Party armed with a programme of nationalisation which had been imposed on the leaders at the 1944 conference (one of them, Herbert Morrison, told a left-wing delegate: you have just lost us the election!).

Certainly, Labour after 1945 merely continued the tradition of capitalist state amelioration that stretched back to World War 1 and earlier. Certainly, blueprints for a welfare state were drawn up at the behest of the wartime coalition by Lord Beveridge, a Liberal. Even so, political victory for the labour movement in 1945 was decisive for realisation of the welfare state. It happened the way it did only because Labour was available to carry through a revolution.

It was, of course, a limited revolution. All Labour's revolution did was establish a welfare state and a certain level of economic activity by the capitalist state. The commanding heights of the economy were left in the hands of the capitalist class, as was state power, which the Labour leaders considered a neutral force.

Thus was the apogee of the reformist labour movement. It imposed the welfare state and a "left" consensus on the Tories for 40 years. In the boom years the Tories maintained the Labour-established status quo, working with the unions. They vied with Labour in this regard. For example, in 1951 they promised if elected to build 300,000 houses within a year — and did.

Even after the Tories took back control of government in 1951, the impact of the 1945 revolution continued, amidst the long post-war capitalist boom. Trade unions had great

weight, with Tories no less than Labour.

Reformism had shot its bolt with the creation of the welfare state. The socialist goal of the suppression of capitalism and true social democracy free from wage slavery was never their goal. All the reformist-led movement could do was mark time, work at narrow trade union concerns, and see its structures rot inwardly. After 1945 the reformist leaders had succeeded far more than they had dreamed they might, and had nowhere to go but down.

In retrospect you can see the ravages of decay within the imposing outward forms of the labour movement from the 1950s to the 1970s. Political impotence and prosperity had killed off Chartism in the 1850s. A century later, "power" without control amidst prosperity sapped the strength of the labour movement. Over time the union bureaucracy became more and more middle-class and university-educated, at the top the MPs less working-class. Now they lacked not only ideological independence from the middle class, but even the basic sociological identification with the working class which had given life to the old reformism.

The official structures of the labour movement decayed — while the rank-and-file working-class movement was, uncomfortably for the Labour and trade union leaders as well as for the ruling class, and Labour governments in the 1960s and '70s, very much alive.

For 25 years, up to the mid and late 1970s, a great simmering — essentially unofficial — strike movement, rising and falling, was a stable feature of life in Britain. The working class reacted to prosperity and full employment with steady assertiveness, pushing up wages, expanding areas of working-class control within the wage-slave economy. Because Labour, the political wing of the labour movement, was at a loss to say what it stood for — except the administration of capitalism, in fact more ineptly than its natural party of government, the Tories — the working class was thrown back on assertive trade unionism.

They reacted to the tepid and conservative official labour movement by sloughing it off like dead, drying skin, burrowing down to grassroots militancy: the political dimension of the labour movement began to atrophy and this would have great consequences for the working class, because the reliance on

rank and file militancy was only possible in a full-employment economy. Militancy alone, small-scale wage "reformism", was no answer to the basic problems of the working class at the level of the general administration of society.

Yet it was a tremendous thing in itself, this stropy bloody-mindedness and determination not to give an inch. It was the basic substance of all working-class socialist perspectives. But without politics it could not develop.

Thus the working class marked time through the years of boom, building unstable islands of prosperity, control and dignity within capitalism. Through those decades, the militant working-class rank and file, in defiance of Labour and trade-union leaders, time and again prevented the ruling class from running its own system as they thought they needed to run it. It was impasse. Even Labour governments, faced with the rank and file, could not impose the ruling class's preferences.

The Wilson government [1964-70] was defeated when it tried to bring in anti-union legislation in 1969. All that government could do was grapple with the problem of Britain's expiring dog-end of empire and an ailing economy. It brought in a "National Plan" which was an abject failure. Its major reforms were all (valuable) liberal adjustments: abortion rights, gay rights. The working class was disappointed but, relying on industrial muscle, faced the Tory government returned in 1970 with confidence.

The Tories came back to power determined to sort out the labour movement, to put the working class in its place, to restore the untrammelled right to rule as it liked to the ruling class after 25 years; to boost profit. Labour's attempt to legally shackle the trade unions had failed because Labour was entwined with the unions, whose leaders then did not think they could police the rank and file as Labour's abortive 1969 legislation would have required them to. The Tories put laws on the statute books — but they could not make them stick. In July 1972 a quarter of a million workers struck and forced the Tories to release five dockers jailed for picketing. The anti-union laws were immobilised.

In the 1970s, as in the '40s, the ruling class could not go on ruling in the old way; masses of workers did not want to go on being ruled in the old way. But there was revolutionary force ready to take over. Nor was there any equivalent of what the Labour Party had been in 1945.

Reformism had been bankrupted by its own seemingly durable successes of the '40s. It had no place to go. The increasing purposelessness of the reformists, together with the decay of the reformist officialdom, at Labour Party and trade union level, and the ineptitude of the Marxist left, left rank-and-file militancy headless — divorced from any politics that expressed its own drive even on a minimal political level. That is what shaped the 1974-9 Labour government.

In 1974 industrial militancy derailed the Tory government, which called an election to get a mandate against the unions and lost

it. Largely ignoring the Labour Party, the masses of industrial militants had taken on the Tories and beaten them. *But when it came to government, they could turn only to Wilson.*

The contradictions of the reformist labour movement as it had evolved since 1945 were exposed self-destructively in the aftermath of Labour's February 1974 election victory.

The Wilson-Callaghan government of 1974-9, for part of its life a minority government, inherited a major social crisis of working-class bedrock revolt.

At first it bowed to the tremendous militancy. Tony Benn, an important Labour minister, received large numbers of requests from shop stewards' committees to nationalise their industries. They wanted socialism, and thought "nationalisation" was the way to it.

The trade union leaders were an essential prop of the shaky Labour government, and of the state. At no other time in the century was Trotsky's diagnosis of the role of the trade union bureaucracy as a pillar of the British state more visibly true than then:

"From the example of England one sees very clearly how absurd it is to counterpose, as if it were a question of two different principles, the trade union organisation and the state organisation. In England more than anywhere else the state rests upon the back of the working class which constitutes the overwhelming majority of the population of the country. The mechanism is such that the bureaucracy is based directly on the workers, and the state indirectly, through the intermediary of the trade union bureaucracy..."

"The Labour Party... in England, the classic country of trade unions, is only a political transposition of the same trade union bureaucracy. The same leaders guide the trade unions, betray the general strike, lead the electoral campaign and later on sit in the ministries.

"The Labour Party and the trade unions — these are not two principles, they are only a technical division of labour. Together they are the fundamental support of the domination of the English bourgeoisie. The latter cannot be overthrown without overthrowing the Labourite bureaucracy. And that cannot be attained by counterposing the trade union as such to the state as such, but only by the active opposition of the Communist Party to the Labourite bureaucracy in all fields of social life: in the trade unions, in strikes, in the electoral campaign, in parliament, and in power."

In 1974-5, an opinion poll reported a majority believing that TGWU leader Jack Jones was more powerful than prime minister Harold Wilson. Sections of the army talked seriously of organising a military coup, as the then chief of staff would later publicly admit.

The government and the trade union leaders turned their energies to dampening down militancy, trying to run the capitalist system as best they could. And, because the rank and file militancy was politically headless, they succeeded in their negative task. They could do nothing positive. It started to unwind

the film of reformist progress even on the level of welfare, initiating cutbacks in 1976. It prepared the way for the Thatcherite counter-revolution.

Symbolically, the so-called winter of discontent of 1978-9 heralded the end of Labour government and sent it out of office with the noises of disgruntled trade union militancy ringing in its ears.

The failure of the Tory "get tough" policy initiated by Edward Heath in 1970, ending in Tory defeat in 1974, revolutionised the Tory party. The Thatcherites who came to power in June 1979 embodied the embitterment of the ruling class and its thirst for revenge and counter-revolution against the achievements of 1945.

Aided by slump and mass unemployment, which they deliberately encouraged, they wreaked havoc on the disoriented labour movement, inflicting the worst anti-union laws in western Europe on what had been one of the most militant working classes in Europe. Trade union leaders were driven out of the corridors of power and scapegoated for the past.

The final turn on the road that led to Blairism was made here. Thatcher had not defeated the working class; no-one had. If the working class had mobilised in all-out resistance to anti-union laws, to the cuts and to the naked class rule unleashed by Thatcher, then the Thatcherites could have been beaten. Even if they had beaten us in a fight, we would be in a better shape to prepare a new round. That was not done, not attempted, before, belatedly, the miners made a stand in 1984-5.

Out of office, Labour went through a tremendous crisis in which the contradictions of decades exploded in confusion and bitterness. A mass revolt of the rank and file for democracy — that is, for the next Labour government to be accountable to the movement — was incongruously aided by leaders of far-from-democratic unions. The focus was on the structures of the movement, rather than the politics. The big events, like Tony Benn's candidacy for deputy Labour leader, were symbolic contests rather than contests for real power. Here was the point at which a real new turn might have been made: if the local government left had fought; if most Marxists had not held aloof from the struggle in the Labour Party. Tony Benn talked about the need to "refound the Labour Representation Committee". It was not to be. There was no sufficiently big effort to organise a fight for rank-and-file control and militant policies in the trade unions parallel to the battle in the Labour Party. Where the trade union militancy of the 1970s had finally run aground for lack of a political dimension, the political revolt of 1979-81 failed for lack of a trade union dimension and of political clarity.

The Labour and trade union leaders did not fight back against the Tories; the "left" leader, the George Lansbury of his age, Michael Foot, launched a crusade against "extremists" and "anti-democrats" — in the labour movement! By the late 1980s the Tories rode around like victorious horsemen on a battlefield, targetting anything

wearing labour movement colours that still twitched.

That is where Blairism came from, the victory of Thatcherism. If Labour after 1945 imposed a "left" welfare-state consensus on the Tories, which they did not break for three decades, the Tories have now imposed a "marketist" consensus on the Labour Party. Hungry for political office on any terms, backed by a rank and file wanting the Tories out on any terms, the Labour leaders have moved inexorably to reflect Tory politics.

They accept the Tory media's approval or disapproval as the highest court of judgement on what they say or do. In a country where most of the things that make trade unionism effective — solidarity strikes, for example — are illegal, the "party of the trade unions" does not now propose to scrap the anti-union laws.

They accept the Tory argument that "society" cannot afford to give the poor state-of-the-art health care free at the point of consumption. They will not, unless they are forced to, restore the Health Service.

Now, the Labour leaders have *always* more or less accepted the going wisdom of the bourgeoisie. They did not become Keynesians until the bourgeoisie did in world war two; and they did not sit long at Keynes's feet after the bourgeoisie moved on. What is new is the extreme distance the Blairites have travelled from the key notions of reform and old-style liberal democracy. In their ideas these people have little in common with even such an old-style labour movement right-winger as Roy Hattersley.

These middle-class "Labour" politicians are eager to emancipate themselves from the trade unions. They want Labour to be a modern "mass" party of late-bourgeois passive pseudo-democracy, in which the politicians relate to a passive membership through the bourgeois-owned mass media, probably with state funding of political parties. Blair and Brown have already set up a large personal staff, largely funded by donations from big business, separate and independent from the official Labour Party machine.

The trade union leaders, increasingly university-educated middle-class men and women, with no real background in working-class struggle, or any sort of struggle of the sort that shaped even the old reformists, have bowed under pressure of Tory blows to the de-politicisation processes. The working-class movement is being pushed out of the direct access to politics it won when it established the Labour Party. Large dimensions even of the bourgeois democracy of the past are thus being cut away.

Of course, it does not follow that the union leaders will go on letting them push the unions out of politics. When the Tories have been kicked out and Prime Minister Blair is in no.10 Downing Street, the demands and expectations of the labour movement, at all levels, will escalate.

Among the sectarian left, it has become an "established fact" that the 150,000 new members who have joined the Labour Party over the last two years are all middle-class and right-wing; yet the facts are that a big pro-

portion joined on the cheap rate as members of affiliated trade unions, and a recent opinion survey showed that most wanted unions to be more active in the Labour Party and wanted a figure set for a legal minimum wage before the General Election.

Even so, the trade unions may well let the Blairites push ahead to a complete rupturing of Labour-union links or be unable to stop them. This would create a situation at the end of the 20th century not unlike that which the labour movement faced at its beginning. In that way, Blair is the legate of Margaret Thatcher, who set out to destroy socialism in the labour movement.

If this happens, it will be a historic defeat for the British working class.

Now Marxists of all people did not expect steady progress, ever upwards, under capitalism. There is no stable victory for the proletariat, no long-term historic resting place, until it has crushed the bourgeoisie.

Nor did we expect the steady improvement of the Labour Party, its evolution towards a better and better approximation to working-class socialist adequacy. The first political statement by the first forerunner of *Workers' Liberty* summed up the perspective like this:

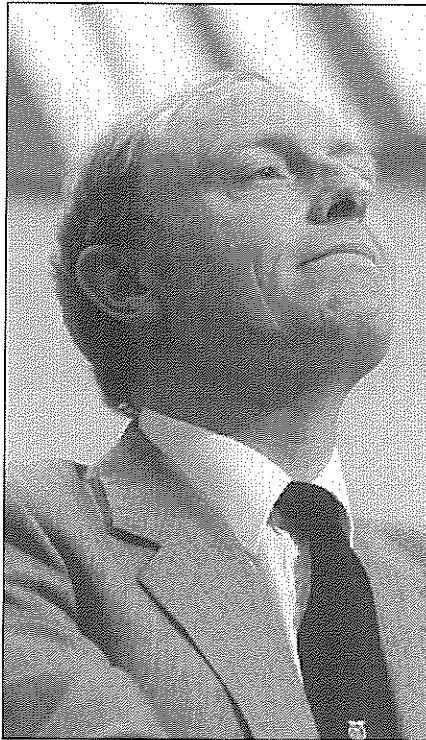
"The idea of an automatic adjustment by the existing movement in response to changing events stands in the way of our serious striving to influence events in a Leninist spirit. The views of the leading comrades [of Militant] on such things as Clause IV show that they see the movement as slowly maturing and Clause IV as an organically evolved first fruit of this process. The dialectical view is abandoned, the need to see the future sharp breaks, leaps, etc. (and the need to prepare for these, rather than wait passively).

"There will be no automatic upwards spiral here: because of the abortive nature of the present movement, events far from elevating it automatically to a higher stage could plunge the class downwards and backwards in a sharp crisis. More — it must be said that in view of all the past this is inevitable."

And what of the Marxists during the decline and possibly the fall of old reformism? The communist "old believers", the followers of Trotsky, were a marginal force, for decades, sometimes working in, sometimes outside the Labour Party.

In the late 1960s and '70s, "Trotskyists" became quite numerous. But they proved utterly inadequate. Instead of relating to the real working class and the only labour movement we have, many Marxists lost themselves in fantasies about third world Stalinist socialism, or anarchist sloganising about "revolution now." Where one Marxist organisation, the Revolutionary Socialist League (Militant) gained real influence, it subordinated the interests of the class struggle to its supposed private interests as an organisation; doing a cop-out while the miners were fighting the decisive battle of the Thatcher years.

If it had used the needs and logic of the class struggle as a compass, Militant would have deliberately looked for a link up with the miners and if necessary let the logic of the struggle lead to a break between the Liv-



erpool Labour Party and the Labour leadership. Instead, they ducked out of the struggle and, picked off by the Tories once the miners were defeated, soon scuttled off in a private adventure out of the political labour movement.

The SWP first followed the drift of rank and file militant work away from active political reformism into reliance on industrial militancy, evolving an ideologically impure but functional syndicalist "politics" and perspective around it. When the strike and election of 1974 proved the continuing importance of the Labour Party, when workers needed a governmental alternative, they went on a brief mad period of ultra-militant "steering left" which wrecked their trade union base, then flipped back to take refuge in caricature sectarianism. The solution to the problems of the working class was to "build a revolutionary party", completely separate from it — a party with the implicit perspective of rebuilding the labour movement from the ground up. They became utterly defeatist for the foreseeable future, until "the party" has been sufficiently "built." They continue the British "Marxist" tradition.

Yet the case for real Marxist politics could scarcely be better made than in the history I have analysed and outlined above.

Things have gone as they have because the early Marxists did not build an organisation able simultaneously to make socialist propaganda, educate Marxist cadres, link up with bedrock working class militancy, and use a combination of reformist, transitional and revolutionary demands to gain the leadership of the British labour movement. They did not know in practice how to link up and knit together the three main fronts of the class struggle — trade unionism, politics and ideas — into a coherent strategy.

We can not go back and relive that history to produce a better result. We can learn from it and bring those lessons to bear on the

class struggle and the struggle inside the labour movement. We can build an organisation that knows both how to relate to the existing mass movement and how to act as an independent Marxist force in all the facets of the class struggle. Through all this history, the failures and weaknesses of the Marxists have played, again and again, a deadly *anti-Marxist* role.

The Blairites have not yet destroyed the Labour Party. To accept it as given that they will is premature, unnecessary. They must still be fought every inch of the way in the Labour Party and in the trade unions as the "Keep the Link" campaign fought John Smith in 1993 and the Clause Four campaign fought Blair in 1994-5.

We will best fight them by rousing the bedrock of the labour movement in defence of things long taken for granted by working class people like the welfare state.

Speculation about what may happen in the Labour Party is useful only if it leads us to a clear idea of our own socialist identity and the tasks socialists face now. Whatever happens with the Labour Party these tasks essentially remain the same, though circumstances and therefore details vary.

If the Blairites destroy the political mass labour movement, then we will agitate in the trade unions for a political party of the unions, this time with better politics. The immediate task is to build our own socialist movement now. That way we will be better able to handle whatever comes. Antonio Gramsci put it well, long ago, writing in an Italian fascist prison:

"The most important observation to be made about every concrete analysis of forces is this: that such analyses cannot and must not be ends in themselves (unless one is writing a chapter of past history) and they only acquire significance if they serve to justify practical activity, an initiative of will. They show what are the points of least resistance, where the force of will can be applied most fruitfully; they suggest immediate tactical operations; they indicate how a campaign of political action can best be presented, what language will be best understood by the multitudes, etc. The decisive element in every situation is the force, permanently organised and pre-ordered over a long period, which can be advanced when one judges that the situation is favourable (and it is favourable only to the extent to which such a force exists and is full of fighting ardour); therefore the essential task is that of paying systematic and patient attention to forming and developing this force, rendering it even more homogeneous, compact, conscious of itself." From *The Modern Prince*.

Confronting a worse catastrophe than any we face, the possible victory of fascism in France, Trotsky put the same idea more directly in 1934.

"Under the least favourable hypothesis, the building of a revolutionary party would mean to speed the hour of revenge. The wisecracks who duck away from this urgent task by claiming that 'conditions are not ripe' only show that they themselves are not ripe for these conditions'." ■