

"A revolution of expectations"

What is the meaning of Labour's victory? What will be the effect on the working-class? We asked a representative cross section of socialists to tell us their response to the May Day election*.

"The unions need a common agenda"



Lol Duffy: It's a massive victory. It hasn't brought new voters out, but it does make a difference, because people now see it was possible to get rid of the Tories. People, even those who would normally say we can't expect anything out of Labour, will have more expectations. Labour will attempt to play down expectations and be second team Conservatives. But they won't be able to get away with it because the pressure will be on.

People in local government are already saying that it's time for services to be improved. Frank Prendergast, the leader of Liverpool council, has already called for an extra £14.5m next year.

If we say, "Let's give them the first term," there won't be another chance to change things. Labour will be out and we'll be fighting the Tories again. We've got to get our act together. The first problem will be to motivate people, to get working people active again, wanting to do something and knowing that they can do something to change things.

The anti-union laws will be a problem. For so long, union officials have been able to say that the Tories' anti-union laws have prevented us taking action. In fact they could have fought. Sections of workers *have* fought battles, ignored the anti-union laws, and gone on to win. For the officials, it was just a convenient excuse to do nothing.

We need to get an organised left in the trade unions. There are so many different agendas. We need people to have the same agenda — and that's one of fighting to have decent local services. The left needs to get involved in initiatives like the one Liverpool City UNISON



and the Welfare State Network are launching with the free trade unions conference in July. [See back page for details].

We can't give Labour any grace. They've got such a massive majority now that there's no excuse for *not* acting in the interests of working-class people. They can't say they're worried about being kicked out if they make the wrong decisions. They have the ability to pass laws to do everything we want. The question is whether they have the *will* to do it. We'll have to make them deliver, and there's an urgency in that. Five years isn't a long time. If we don't act immediately, if we start giving the Labour government any grace, then we're going to lose out; we're going to have the same old bullshit excuses while the rich get richer and our lot lose out.

● *Lol Duffy is an officer of Liverpool City UNISON. He was jailed in 1984 along with 36 others for leading the occupation of Cammell Laird Shipyard, Merseyside.*

"A new Red/Green alliance is needed"

John Palmer: The collapse of the Con-

servatives and their probable split into warring factions has created a totally new political environment. The Blair government will represent only the most minimal changes, but much more important will be the liberating factor that the removal of the Conservatives will have on the imaginations and the aspirations of people who do want change. It will create potential for confidence that may allow the left to exercise an influence that it hasn't been able to over the last two decades.

The question that most interests me is how can a new left organise itself and have the politics that allow it to have that influence. My own belief is that this will be done by the creation of a broad, independent alliance of socialists and greens, a very pluralist coalition of anti-capitalist forces who have understood that the old forms of organisation of the old left no longer correspond to any potential for radical change. There are thousands of people — both inside and outside the Labour Party — who want to work together with a politics distinctive from any form of Blairism. The question is, can the British left overcome generations of ingrained sectarianism, which is the product of defeat and marginalisa-

* Talking to Alan MacArthur

tion, to be able to meet that challenge?

We are also seeing the emergence of different political dynamics — notably in Scotland, Wales and in different regions in England. This is another liberating potential. The Scottish left may begin to trail-blaze in its forms of coalition and co-operation so they can offer an alternative to the new Labour establishment.

Class politics will be unleashed by the return of this new Labour government. Battles over redistributive taxation, over public spending, over the welfare state, over low pay will be triggered in a very significant way — but they are not the only battles. If we've learnt anything over the last 20 or 30 years it is that the process of politicisation is a more complex one than merely adding militancy quantitatively in the belief that it somehow becomes a qualitative process of change.

● *John Palmer is the Guardian's correspondent in Brussels, and a supporter of Red Pepper and the Socialist Movement.*

“Blair is building a protective shield around himself”



Vladimir Derer:

Oppositions don't win elections, governments lose them. The size of Labour's majority will tend to make the modernisers attribute it to their changes to the Labour Party. That isn't the case: the swing tended to be the same, more or less, in both targeted and non-targeted seats. The key to Labour's win was the total lack of confidence in the government. Only the media, party spokespeople and business people refer to New Labour. Most people expect at least some Labour, i.e. Old Labour, style policies. But the modernisers are trying to take all the credit for a landslide, and that will have repercussions at Labour Party conference for their proposals to change the structures of the party. They will be more difficult to defeat.

Blair's government will be not much different to the Tories. If we had retained just some of the programme that has been ditched, there could have been major changes, major inroads made into capitalist structures. Labour would still have been elected.

Many party members have deluded themselves that once Labour was elected Labour would do other than maintain the status quo. When that doesn't happen there will be repercussions. The left is in

for a hard time — but it should remain in the Labour Party, at least as long as the trade union link remains. At the moment, I don't think the link is in immediate danger, it is the protective shield the leadership is building around itself. The main target is the conference democracy and the NEC elections. If we lose, we will have no say whatsoever in policy.

● *Vladimir Derer is Honorary Secretary of the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy.*

“The situation is fluid. Things could open up.”

A London Underground RMT member: It was an anti-Tory vote rather than blanket backing for anything Blair wants to do. They've said they won't put taxes up, but some things don't cost any money — like trade union rights. The only reason for Blair not to give positive trade union rights is if he wants shackles on the unions to enable him to carry out a Tory programme.

It was notable that the only time the Labour election campaign faltered was over the issue of privatisation. Clearly they don't have a mandate for further privatisation: they dropped the idea when it proved so unpopular. What will happen to the Private Finance Initiatives, which they want to extend right across the public sector? It's contradictory to say that, on the one hand, they're against privatising the Underground, and, on the other, that they're in favour of PFI. It will create problems for them.

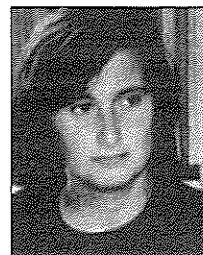
On the Underground the central issue is funding. If Labour abides by Tory spending limits, there will be a huge black hole in the finances. Unless Labour grasps the nettle and says there will be more money, the tube system will just get worse.

It is hard to say whether the mood of people working on the Underground will change. There wasn't any great, feverish anticipation of a Labour government. The vast majority will have voted Labour, obviously, but there were few illusions that everything would be great now. Though the crushing defeat of the Tories will buoy people up, people won't automatically go onto the offensive.

The key issue for a labour movement revival is the fight for trade union rights. It's going to take hard work. The situation is fluid now, things could open up politically. We left shouldn't sit round and carp from the sidelines, but campaign positively and raise ideas about what kind of government we need.

● *Our contributor is a driver on the Hammersmith and City Line.*

“Landslide could mean revival of working-class confidence”



Maria Exall:

As Blair entered Downing Street on the day after the election people were shouting “Tony, Tony, Tony,” and I thought they were shouting “Tory, Tory, Tory.” That sums up the sort of government they're going to be. But it's still a big boost for the labour movement.

For example, the Labour policy on the minimum wage — pathetic as it is — will rekindle the demand for workers' rights. The traditional motivations for voting Labour are still there. The fact that it's been a landslide doesn't necessarily give the Blairites the initiative. It could mean just a general revival of working class confidence.

The obvious stumbling block is the anti-trade union laws, the mark of Thatcherism. Blair will keep these “reforms”, as he calls them, in place.

The left should go on the offensive. We have to realise that we're in the mainstream now and drop the attitude of being on the margins. That's why the case for free trade unions is so important. It's a very basic, simple case that's understood by the majority of working people, but it's been made to seem an absurd demand. We need to win that ground back from the Blairites. The issue around the law will become clearer as action begins to take off.

The fight around the Labour-trade union link is also vital. It's the fight for working-class politics. Blair's ultimate agenda is clear: complete divorce of the party and the unions. He'll get as near to that as he can. What's at stake is defending basic working-class organisations and effective working-class action to change society, i.e. political trade unionism. Every socialist should get involved.

● *Maria Exall is a member of the Keep the Link Steering Committee, and a member of the CWU Executive.*

“People will be looking for more resources for education.”

Ian Murch: Parents, teachers and workers in education and schools will have very high expectations in Labour on funding and undoing the Tory reforms.

It was definitely an anti-Tory vote and people voted tactically in different places to get rid of Tories. I don't think there is any indication that people want

CLEARING THE DECKS

Labour rather than the Liberal Democrats because Labour promised to keep more of the things the Tories have done.

There will be a tremendous feeling among teachers that an era is over and that we can get into a new era. Those of us who can see further into what Labour is thinking and know who's advising Labour on education will be very sceptical. The last thing that parents will want is more meddling around with market forces or blaming teachers for educational failure. People will be looking for more resources and the reorganisation of local provision to make it genuinely comprehensive.

Labour will be sticking to Tory spending plans, but these don't add up. Unless they're going to increase taxes — or cut other aspects of spending — we in education face another year where there is not enough money.

The union leaders will want to give the government a breathing space. That was very evident at the National Union of Teachers' conference this year. Lots of militant motions were passed, speeches made — that we want Labour to do everything from spend a lot more money to abolish OFSTED and league tables — but the General Secretary summed up it up as "conference rhetoric." He then set out an agenda that was to ask for what the Labour Party was promising.

Reality won't give us a breathing space. This year I expect the highest level of redundancies in teaching in my experience. In September the early retirement scheme for teachers will end. Things like these will bring people into conflict with the government.

The left should be pushing forward the demands it was making on the Conservative government. The biggest danger is that people will hold off making those demands and those criticisms. We can't afford to while Labour has no programme for putting more resources into the public sector, putting right the inequalities of provision in the public sector, or restoring employment and trade union rights. We need a revolution of expectations.

● *Ian March is Secretary of Bradford NUT.*

"The unions must oppose Blair's policy for the Party."

Mark Seddon: New Labour has boxed itself in by being so fiscally and socially conservative, committing itself to the Tories' spending plans. It has been elected by a sort of coalition of conservatives, progressives and socialists. It's going to be hard to hold that together for more than 18 months to two years.

We need to pressure Labour to move to the left. That will be hard. Ever since the death of John Smith, Labour's traditional accommodation to organised labour and essential view of social justice have been in abeyance. They are more concerned with business than with organised labour. That will lead to conflict.

There isn't — as much of the left still believes — any kind of homogeneous working class that thinks the same, works in heavy industry and is organised. Things are very different to 20 years ago. Large sections of workers are unorganised; many supported Thatcher. Yet the trade unions have received an incredible bludgeoning, and Labour should be reversing that. But they have only said that, for a year at least, there will be no change other than in the ability to recruit and have workplace ballots.

Among the most political trade unionists there will be a lot of expectations and discontent. People in the fire service and the NHS have had enough. They will take industrial action.

Inside the Labour Party people will be cock-a-hoop for the next six months about winning. But when there are still trolleys in hospital corridors and no more money for schools people will get stropy. How that will be expressed will depend on the outcome of this year's party conference, on whether Blair succeeds in restructuring the party. That will depend on how three big unions — the TGWU, UNISON and GMB — vote. Unless their executives wake up to the implications, Blair's reforms could go through and activist politics in the Party will be dead. Activist politics will remain in the trade unions, but it would be a tremendous blow.

The biggest blocks to progress will be the anti-trade union laws and public opinion about trade unions. The media has moved the established consensus, from the liberal one it was in the 1970s, to the centre right. It will be difficult for unions to make acceptable demands without abuse and attack. The left needs to get back to basics, recruiting to trade unions as collective bedrock defence at work. It has worked in the USA; trade union membership has increased dramatically. And the left needs to have good socialist ideas which are practical in application. We need to get away from both the simplicities of Scargillism and the vacuities of New Labour.

● *Mark Seddon is editor of Tribune.*

"We must build a rank and file movement"

Rod Bacon: I'm very optimistic. Labour getting in stops the most right-wing, rampant Tory government of the 20th century and halts their plans for further attacks including the extension of anti-trade union laws which would have made any fightback impossible.

But Labour will do little in terms of the greater resources for the welfare state that we all want to see, or positive rights for trade unionists. Maybe there will be better rights of recognition or the right to time off for union reps to do union work. The Social Chapter may bring some benefits. But there will be no moves on the fundamentals of picketing and secondary action. That will lead to conflict between trade unionists and the government.

In the civil service, where I work, most people voted Labour as they were worried about their jobs and privatisation. Labour will probably stop privatisation, but keep the Job Seeker's Allowance. The JSA is such an obnoxious benefit people will be forced into fighting it. A campaign of all the trade unions, together with the unemployed and political parties, can beat the JSA. If Labour sticks to the Tories' spending plans it will mean cuts, which will mean job losses for civil servants.

I think militancy will increase fairly rapidly. Trade union leaders who try to suppress that will get a lot of pressure from the rank and file. We need to build on that quickly, use it to build a rank-and-file movement across the unions. We need to link up the various broad lefts, socialist caucuses and so on in individual unions.

The Labour Party is a trickier issue. I'm still a Labour Party member but I feel that many of the party's trade union and working-class roots simply aren't there any more. Many of the activists have withdrawn. Whether they will come back now I don't know. The left should still organise in the Labour Party to keep the link but the battle in the unions will be the most effective in the short run.

The left needs to convince people that socialism can be put back on the agenda, that we can win. The key is optimism. Aspirations curtailed — as we will have now — lead to a fight for change, whereas aspirations crushed — as we had under the Tories — make it hard to do anything at all. The defeat of the Tories is a great start.

● *Rod Bacon is a member of the CPSA Socialist Caucus.*

"More right wing than Ted Heath"

RMT Scotrail driver: This government

will not only be more right-wing than any previous Labour government it will be more right-wing than Ted Heath's government of 1970-74. There is certainly no commitment from Labour to renationalise the railways, short of very serious industrial action!

It could also be a very unstable government. But everything depends on the level of success of any working-class revival. The outcome of any initial industrial battles will be very important in deciding which way Labour goes. And any successful use of the anti-union laws by the management — and the problem is management can now use this without the government backing them up — will be a set-back for the labour movement.

The prospects for working-class revival are better than they have been for a long time. Under the Tories, people in the labour movement, including left-wingers, had at the back of their minds all the time that the government would back up management offensives.

The revival may take some time. There is a real feeling on the ground that we should give Labour a chance, after 18 years of Tory rule. The trade union leaders will use this feeling, and the fear of the return of the Tories against the rank-and-file, particularly if there are industrial struggles. Then they will start saying "don't rock the boat."

What should the left do? The obvious answer is unite! But we all know the problems with this. The left has been tied up with the aim of creating a mass working-class party with democratic structure and radical policies. The possibilities of this may be better under a Blair government, but I'm not convinced much of the left is prepared to work for and create democratic organisations.

Socialists need to continue to work in the Labour Party. There is a contradiction between what the Blairites want to do in government and the aspirations of a lot of rank and file Party activists. That contradiction will unfold and we need to see it through.

"The honeymoon may not last long"

Liam Conway: People will be very happy to have got rid of the Tories. The question is how we turn that into a mood for a fight.

Blair's tax regime means Labour won't even be able to deliver their pretty paltry commitments — to things like



class size. Without more money there are bound to be cuts in education and other services.

In the NUT the left is relatively well placed. It's very influential in many parts of the country and a very large minority — nearly half — of the Executive are on the left including the President of the union. There's a reasonable chance of the left taking control of the union in the next round of elections.

We need to turn the feeling that things are bad in schools into a desire for action. Here in Notts we've got a meeting to defend the welfare state and trade union rights that's backed by the NUT, the Trades Council and other unions. We're building that in every school and union in the county. That sort of thing should be done everywhere. We're also organising a national conference for local branches of the NUT to discuss the post-election situation and how to make NUT leaders implement conference policies. We need to build for action at the first available opportunity on issues like class size, testing and all the other parts of the Tory agenda that Labour have adopted.

The honeymoon period for Blair's government may not be that long. We shouldn't sit back and assume it will take a while for things to turn round. Our role is to be pump primers and get things moving as early as possible.

● **Liam Conway** is Chair of Central Notts NUT

"People have voted for what they hope will happen"

Joe Marino: There will be two basic changes: a return of confidence — among the activists, and amongst ordinary people too — and a build-up of expectations that a Labour government will have to deliver on. The two are inter-linked.

The attitude I've come across in my union has been: "All we need's a Labour government and everything will be rosy in the garden". These expectations are going to fuel a lot of pressure inside and outside the Labour Party.

I think the election was too big a Tory wipe-out to have been just a negative anti-Tory vote. You couldn't explain the size of the Labour majority on that basis alone. People were voting for what they *hope* will happen. What's left of the Tory Party — though obviously they don't exist now in Scotland or Wales or some of the big cities — will fracture. They're certainly out of office for a decade. The so-called right and left of the Tories will split and the right will probably be victorious.

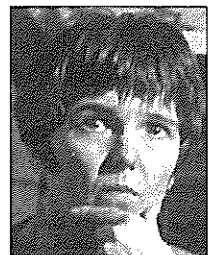
Had Labour lost that would have

been the end of Blair and the Blairites. Right and left would have split fairly quickly. Now the split will develop but it will be a lot slower. Those splits will start to show as Labour start to fail to deliver. If Labour were ever going to change society, now would be the time to do it, with a 180-odd seat majority. But Blair will try to stay on course.

The prospects for a revival of the labour movement are good. What the left's got to do is put forward radical, left-wing policies so that as the crisis develops we can push things forward.

● **Joe Marino** is Secretary of the Bakers' Union.

"We need an alternative vision of democratic socialism"



Hilary Wainwright:

After years of demoralisation politics will open up, not because of Tony Blair but because the mass of people will feel — maybe only for a short time — that politics belongs to them, that they've changed things by their collective vote, that Parliament is in some sense their Parliament.

For many people a renewed self-confidence will be combined with a complete lack of confidence in the government. These people will be the source of pressure and action for moves in a more democratic and egalitarian direction than anything intended by "New" Labour.

The landslide result and the extent of anti-Tory tactical voting indicates a groundswell of pent-up popular feeling against the Tories rather than an enthusiasm for "New" Labour. This flows from both a rejection of what the Tories stood for — letting the market rip and letting public services rot — and angry contempt for how they behaved in terms of sleaze, secrecy and democracy. It's a warning to Blair that if he governs by Tory principles there's going to be disillusionment.

The Blair-Mandelson targeting of Tory voters was also a factor, especially in the bigger swings to Labour in the south. This support is conditional on Labour pursuing moderate policies, and that is the gallery Blair will continue to play to.

However, the size of the anti-Tory majority represents a mandate for a more radical programme, both on constitutional as well as socio-economic issues, than anything that Blair intended. We can

be sure of Blair's intentions — to carry on as he ran the party, in an authoritarian, conservative manner — but it's too early to be sure what the outcome will be because, paradoxically, the landslide means that, in narrow parliamentary terms, Blair is extremely powerful. However, in terms of the make-up of the Parliamentary Labour Party and the political atmosphere in the labour movement outside parliament he faces pressures that won't be easy to control, and these pressures could well affect the balance of power within the Cabinet.

A possible stumbling block to a revival of left-wing politics on a popular scale will be Blair's use of the general euphoria of the election to push through changes in the party to consolidate his power. He also will want to establish tight economic policies and support Kohl's version of European monetary integration. That will limit possibilities for real social change. The issue of democracy in the party and the single currency are going to be important flash-points on the left.

The left has to avoid being cast in a negative and consequently marginal or sidelined role. It needs to act with self-confidence, to rise to the opportunity presented by the landslide defeat of the Tories and press forward practical and positive changes in accord with people's high expectations. These should be related to the minimal commitments Labour has already made but the left should be pushing the commitments forward to become more genuine changes.

The left also needs to mount a defence against the Blair-Mandelson attempts to undermine the party; to focus campaigns around four or five priority issues — presenting an alternative vision of democratic socialism that breaks out of the crass and manipulative dichotomy between "New" and "Old" Labour; and the left must network across the organisations of the left to create a wide and tolerant, pluralistic coalition of the radical and green left. No one organisation on the left at the moment is capable of providing a framework for that coalition, so we've got to be prepared to work co-operatively to create a coalition for solidarity of the kind that has emerged around the dockers.

● *Hilary Wainwright is editor of Red Pepper. For a free sample copy call freephone 0800 581611.*

"A new political space opens up"

Anita Goldsmith: I was eight years old and living in Germany when the Tories

got elected in 1979, so I have never known any other kind of government. I'm really excited about the prospects for our class and the left under a Labour government because I do think we will see an opening up of political space. People have voted for a change, they expect a change and when Blair fails to deliver the goods, they'll start asking why.

But I'm also wary. In the student movement we have seen how a Blair government is likely to batten down the hatches. The Blairites have attempted to smash the left, have dropped free education policies and have tried to say the JSA isn't all bad! They wanted to smother the student movement to make sure stropky students don't go getting any ideas which might kick off discontent and action elsewhere.

"If Labour were ever going to change society, now would be the time to do it, with a 180-odd seat majority. But Blair will try to stay on course."

Watching the election results come in was a strange experience. Whilst I was happy about each Labour gain, the moments were often soured by seeing who had taken some of the seats. It was disheartening to see people like Stephen Twigg, Lorna Fitzsimmons and Jim Murphy elected. These were the people who were responsible for carve-ups and witch-hunts in the student movement. Jim Murphy was the person who said the demand to rebuild the welfare state was "revolutionary rhetoric". It makes your stomach churn.

An important issue for working-class women is that of the minimum wage. Millions of women are employed in low-paid, highly exploitative work. And low-paid women workers need the right to join a trade union.

● *Anita Goldsmith is Women's Officer elect of the National Union of Students.*

"Full employment is the key"

Ken Coates: Large numbers of people still believe that a New Labour government will be significantly different from the Conservatives. It won't be. The famous five pledges, which were printed

on a plastic card (and engraved on the backsides of Labour candidates?), show an authoritarian mind-set. A specific promise to impose "fast-track punishment" on young offenders says nothing about attacking "the causes of crime". Workfare will be presented as an anti-crime strategy, but unless steps are taken to create large numbers of *real* jobs, the old miseries will continue. Workfare would then be perceived as an elaborate new form of oppression: certainly not a liberation.

To cope with this threat Parliament would need to revoke the fifth pledge, which promises a continuation of the old economic policy. This means always attacking inflation, and ignoring rising unemployment where "necessary".

The main way to civilise this government lies through popular action and constant encouragement for MPs who speak out for full employment and humane welfare measures.

The main encouragement for the recovery of working-class self-confidence and strength will come from the struggles which are raging and will continue to erupt all over Europe. There are encouraging signs that workers see the need for European solidarity and consciously reach out to evoke it. In this respect, the recent actions of the workers of Renault in defence of their jobs are exemplary.

The first stumbling block is mass unemployment. The restoration of full employment is the precondition for the recovery of hopeful self-confidence and freedom of choice among our people. It is also the precondition for the recovery of effective trade union powers.

The second obstacle to the advance of working people is backward looking national chauvinism. The reactionary trends in modern Europe can be defeated, if only working people and their allies can unite their forces. But the increase of democratic power will depend on building the strength of trade unions and encroaching greater powers for regional and local associations and democratic authorities. The co-ordination of action on a European level can be helpful in raising the expectations of our people and strengthening their solidarity.

The left should begin careful preparations to mobilise unemployed and excluded people everywhere alongside those who retain their jobs. After serious consultation there should be extensive mass demonstrations and lobbies of parliament to secure the necessary resources for the ending of the blight on so many of our towns and villages.

● *Ken Coates is MEP for Nottinghamshire North and Chesterfield.*