

## Dayschools: Marxists, the Labour Party and the labour movement

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**CHRONOLOGY'**

1945: Labour gains a large and solid majority of working-class electorate and forms a government (1945-51) which carries through radical reforms (as well as using troops against strikers, secretly developing British nuclear weapons, joining NATO, etc.)

Early 1950s: Big leftist movement in the constituency Labour Parties ("Bevanism"), though solid right-wing control of the big unions enables the leadership to defeat all challenges at Labour Party conferences.

1960-1: Crisis over unilateral nuclear disarmament policy. The right-wing leadership emerges triumphant but shaken. Labour Party Young Socialists (launched in 1959) grows and radicalises (almost all the revolutionaries active at the time are in it).

1963: Former "Bevanite" Harold Wilson succeeds the hard-line right-winger Hugh Gaitskell as Labour Party leader. Labour's profile tilts a bit more leftist.

1964-70: Labour government. At first enjoys wide working-class support, despite only scanty reforms. Later becomes discredited (support for US in Vietnam, attempt to push through anti-union laws, etc.). Meanwhile there is sizeable extra-Labour radicalisation - industrial militancy, students - and many Labour party activists drop out or cease attending Labour meetings.

1970-74: Returned Tory government, at first with proto-Thatcherite hard line. Big industrial battles. Unions shift towards the left in the politics inside the Labour Party. Some revival of local Labour Parties.

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1974: Labour returns to office on back of miners' strike forcing Tories to an early election. At first repeals many Tory measures. From late 1975, amidst economic crisis, Labour government turns sharp right (wage controls, IMF "rescue plan" involving big social cuts). Labour left in disarray following the defeat of the nationalise cause it has attached itself to in the 1975 referendum on British withdrawal from the European Union.

1979: Tories return, with hard-line programme carried through consistently (Thatcher). Rank and file revolt explodes in Labour Party, demanding "never again" a Labour government subservient to capital like the 1974-9 one. Radical measures pushed through to democratise Labour Party. Union leaders, dissatisfied with Labour leadership after the government policies of 1976-9, and still fairly confident of their own power, go along with the left.

1981: A chunk of Labour right wing splits away to form SDP (will later merge with old Liberal Party to form Liberal Democrats).

1982: At a meeting with Labour leadership at Bishops Stortford, the major union leaders agree to fight to push back the left.

1983: In the wake of the Falklands war, Labour loses heavily in the general election. Ex-leftist Neil Kinnock and old Labour right-winger Roy Hattersley elected as new Labour leadership. Many, including on the left, hail this as a "dream ticket". But Kinnock works steadily to reassert leadership control in the Labour Party and dump left policies.

1985: Year-long miners' strike defeated. After this epochal defeat, employers smash union organisation in other previously strong areas (national newspapers, docks) and union leaders proclaim retreat ("new realism").

1992: After a further election defeat, Kinnock is replaced as Labour leader by the old-style right-winger John Smith. Smith pushes through limited measures to reduce union influence in the Labour Party (one member, one vote, rather than decisions by committees of delegates, to select parliamentary candidates).

1994: Smith dies. A labour movement by now heavily demoralised elects right-winger Tony Blair as his successor. Blair moves quickly and symbolically to ditch Labour's Clause Four (notional commitment "to secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry... upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production", previously printed on all Labour Party membership cards).

1997: Blair wins election with a promise to retain the Tories' anti-union laws. He does that and also follows largely Thatcherite policies on other fronts. Blair declares: "I want a situation more like the Democrats and Republicans in the US. People don't even question for a single moment that the Democrats are a pro-business party. They should not be asking that question about New Labour." (*Financial Times*, 16 January 1997). Blairite Stephen Byers floats the idea

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of an open and complete break of Labour from the unions.

Instead, at the 1997 conference Labour adopts new rules called "Partnership in Power". The union say at conference remains (at 50%, rather than nearly 90% before), and unions can still put some motions (only four), but conference heavily downgraded in favour of an impermeable "National Policy Forum".

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1966: FROM "WHAT WE ARE AND WHAT WE MUST BECOME"

"CRISIS OF LEADERSHIP"

The experience of the working class in Russia, Germany and Spain led the Trotskyist movement (as earlier the Communist International) to declare that only the construction of democratic centralist parties, fully grounded on the theory and practice of Marxism/Leninism, could lead the class to power. It denounced those who said there could be an absolute maturity of the working class which could lead to an automatic transition to power. The most magnificent risings in Germany, Spain (and to some extent Britain) had been led to frustration and defeat by their own conservative apparatus. The fight therefore was to overcome the 'crisis of leadership' in the working class - to create parties that would embody the historical interests of the working class.

This is our task: this task will be completed or the working class in the future will go down to defeat in Britain as in Europe. There must be no equivocation here, no easy, false optimism here. The issues must be stated clearly. The outcome of the future battles will only be victory, if the advanced layers can organise themselves into a class-conscious Marxist party.

The Labour Party, Clause IV and all [Clause IV, adopted in 1918 and scrapped in 1995, committed the Labour Party - on paper - to common ownership of the means of production], is an abortion from the point of view of the needs of the working class. History will view the Labour Party as an organism through which a détente was established for a number of decades between the partially roused proletariat and the bourgeoisie in the centre of the British Empire, in the period before the world pressures of capitalism upset the balance. It will record one of two outcomes from this. Either a beating down of the working class, or a reorganisation, a shedding of the old ideological and organisational forms of the movement and the emergence of a class-conscious party modelled organisationally and ideologically (the two condition each other in the future as in the present and cannot be separated) on the parties of the early Communist International.

Our political tendency derives from people who held such views in the Communist Party in the 1920s and in the groups and leagues up to the formation of the

Revolutionary Communist Party after that. The leadership may occasionally still be heard to say something similar. But side by side with this they do (and fail to do) things, and adopt positions which place this view in question.

They talk about the 'socialist' consciousness of the British labour movement; they talk about the future in terms of a 'stages theory' of development, with the mass revolutionary Bolshevik party emerging, if at all, at the end of the long, long tunnel ahead; they completely exaggerate the weakness of the bourgeoisie and its state in such a way that clearly it would not need the organisation of a proletarian 'counter-state', the combat party, to defeat them. (All well and good... if true.) And finally, as we think the last section shows, they have abandoned all talk of seeing ourselves as an independent grouping, striving to function in the living processes as a conscious, active force; they settle down to wait passively in the Labour Party. From this flows their glorification of the Labour Party and the existing labour movement. We must consider these things in detail.

## THE LABOUR PARTY AND SOCIALISM

### ILLUSIONS IN THE LABOUR PARTY

The document issued March 1966 begins by stating that 18 months of Wilson's government has confirmed the analysis made by... "The Marxist Tendency of the role which would be played by the Labour government in a period of difficulties for British capitalism..." Later, on page 8, it adds: "One thing has been demonstrated beyond possibility of refutation. The illusions in certain so-called Marxist circles that this was a left Labour government, in the early intoxication of Labour victory, have been dissolved by the realities of events."

Yes, well, who were those people who fostered illusions in a left Labour government? A document issued early in 1964 by the RSL, and written (we believe) by the then General Secretary (Jimmy Deane) says [The Labour Party in Perspective, p 3]:

"It is clear that there is the possibility of a Labour government being elected in the next election. This government would come to power in conditions of an upswing in the economy which until the early part of 1963 had been more or less stagnant and which, in relation to the other European countries had fallen behind. This is true even though this upswing is threatened by a balance of payment crisis and inflationary tendencies. In this event it is likely that the upswing would be continued through 1964 and possibly to the end of 1965 by a Labour government even with its limited measures for rationalisation and, above all, with its means for policing and disciplining the working class. The TUC has already promised its hand and even (!) the left wing (?) of the TUC has promised to support an 'Incomes Policy' with all that implies.

"In these conditions - of relative full employment - under pressure of the masses the Labour government

would have to give some concessions. It could (reluctantly (!)) allow wage increases for certain sections; it would have to take measures against the monopolies and their price maintenance; it would have to take measures against high profits (! The very idea here is a reformist illusion - SM); it would have to take measures against the uncontrolled increases in prices; it would have to take measures against the enormous increases in rents and the price of houses and land and would have to take measures to prevent the flight of sterling, and so on." I.e. a left Labour government if ever there was one. Clearly these expectations are of substantial redistribution by the Labour government, and not just the occasional empty sop which has been given in one or two of those fields.

So it seems that the "so-called Marxist circles" were wide enough to include the RSL, and those who issued the 1964 document. Or maybe the comrades don't read their own publications? The surprising thing about the 1964 document is that it has a pretty accurate picture of the background; such things as a balance of payments crisis are assumed. "Pressure from the masses" will force a Labour government to act thus. And only a Labour government.

What the writer had in mind is seen clearly when, on the next page, he considers what the prospects are, against the same background, if the government in power is Tory. Not so rosy at all! On page 4, after a Jack London type series of speculations which includes what would happen after a few years of such a Labour government when there would be a decline, and a possibility of big Tory assaults would arise etc. etc. - after all this the eventuality of a Tory victory in the next election is considered.

"In the event of a Tory government scraping to power in the next election it would be short lived. They would have to face precisely the same problems as a Labour government, but with even less ability to overcome them. They would have to take measures against Resale Price Maintenance and perhaps the most formal measures against practices which threaten the interests of the state as a whole (???). However, along with such measures would be the attempt already being proposed to revise the laws relating to the trade unions and their practices (the Tories - not Wilson) and an attempt to obtain the support of the TUC for a so-called wages policy..." Large-scale struggles would develop here. Possibly they would eventually coalesce into a general strike; possibly Labour would return. This being only one variant - of course. If the strike movement failed, the Tories could then continue in power for a period, etc. etc.

Thus we see that the actual perspective of this document, circulated for a time by the RSL was of a left Labour government - the actual perspective as opposed to a large series of possibilities. It would be a government responsive to the workers and reacting with radical difference from the way the Tories would respond in a situation of minor crisis.

Nobody is sneering at the expectations of certain concessions from the Labour Party reformists - or at

the banal newspaper headline type 'prophecy'. But a number of things stand out here. Such things as profit control etc. are not seen as shams to deceive the workers, and this is part of a general picture of serious illusions in the Labour Party. In the same document it is certainly stated that in a very sharp crisis, after giving way to the workers, in the final analysis the Labour Party tops would opt (?) for capitalism. But as with so much besides this has no practical significance. Labour is definitely seen as 'better' than the Tories, more responsive to the workers, and only in the final analysis reactionary - from fear of revolution! Also, of course the silly claim to prophetic accuracy in the 1964 publication should be seen as such.

The leading comrades, as we shall see throughout this document have come to believe their own entryist propaganda. Objective reality is forgotten in favour of the need to begin with the consciousness of the masses. They have forgotten that the Labour Party is basically, in its function, a bourgeois party, and that our function is not to speculate on or exaggerate reforms (still less to peddle fantasies) - but to keep firmly in mind the class issues. Truly we have moved a long way from the original idea of communist entryism - when we were going to support the Labour Party as a rope supports a hanged man; when the only advantage we saw in a reformist, Labour government was the possibility of exposing it before the class.

And experience has still not disillusioned the leadership. The 1966 document shows that the leading comrades see the Labour Party not as a machine, however complicated it may be in its structure and despite its origin, essentially manipulating the masses for the same goals as the Tories, run by bourgeois politicians, only with a slightly different technique of manipulation - but as a party genuinely responsive to the workers.

#### 1966 DOCUMENT, P 2:

"... Finance Capital and the industrialists have made a change in their attitude towards the Labour Government and especially to the Prime Minister. The first bitter hostility (?) has changed to cordiality and support. This has been because of the capitulation (???) to the dictates of Big Business and its servants in the Civil Service."

This would be going rather far even for Militant - in an internal document it is incredible nonsense! The writer obviously thinks the capitalists had the same illusions in Wilson and the Labour Party as had the 'Tribunites' and some of 'our' people. Just one fact: the Economist supported Wilson in 1964! And the Times was more than favourable. The capitalist power centres are under no illusions as to the realities of the Labour Party. Are we being ultra-sharp, hostile, seizing upon accidents of phrasing? No one can deny that this attitude pervades not only the publications of the group, but also the internal material.

1966 DOCUMENT, P 4:

"Wilson thus has a computer in his brain instead of a class sense and belongs to the genus of desiccated calculating machines"

But Wilson does have a class-sense. The class sense of the bourgeoisie! That statement owes more to Bevan than the phrase. But maybe it is not Wilson who lacks a class-sense? A characteristic of a blurred class-sense is the partial or complete loss of the ability to recognise class enemies. (This question of whether Wilson is positively in possession of a bourgeois class-sense and consciousness or his is merely absent connects up with the question of the alleged socialist consciousness of the British labour movement - and with the adulteration, in fact the complete abandonment by Ted Grant and co. of the Leninist conception: "The only choice is - either bourgeois or socialist ideology. There is no middle course (for mankind has not created a 'third' ideology and in a society torn by class antagonisms there can never be a non-class or an above-class ideology)").

1966 DOCUMENT, P 6:

"In addition, the ruling class itself, once Wilson had bowed the knee to Big Capital have deliberately built him up as a great statesman..." etc., etc.

But when was Wilson's 'bowed' knee in question? Again the comrades seem to think that the ruling class have been reading our old documents! They have more reliable sources.

In this document published during the election campaign they talk about the demagogue Wilson appealing to the workers to help carry out a socialist policy: "It is this side that will be brought to the fore in the campaign for the renewal of the mandate".

This myopia is not accidental. It is part of the congenital confusion and illusions of the leadership on the question of the Labour Party. Nowhere in all our documents and publications is there a clear characterisation of the Labour Party. The same meagre 'description' suffices: "the workers' party". This lack of sharpness is also no accident. It is the rationalisation imposed on the leading comrades by their abstentionist application of their 'perspective' of the necessary two stages in the future radicalisation of the class. As their practice of 'entry' has become more and more a passive waiting on the centrist current of the future - to the same degree has the need to paint up the 'socialist consciousness' of the broad movement and even of the Labour Party itself grown.

LENIN ON THE LABOUR PARTY

"The fact that bourgeois labour parties have already

been formed in all the advanced capitalist countries and that unless a determined and relentless struggle is waged all along the line against these parties, or groups, trends etc. it is all the same. There can be no question of a struggle against imperialism or of Marxism, or of a socialist labour movement... (wherever Marxism is popular amongst the workers, this political trend, 'this bourgeois labour party' will invoke and swear by Marxism)" (Imperialism)

It would be possible to compile a booklet of quotations on the Labour Party from Lenin, and some would appear to contradict each other. What we need then is some indication of how to judge the Labour Party, concretely, as it exists now. At the Second Comintern Congress, 1920, Lenin made a speech on the question of affiliation of the British Communists to the Labour Party: "... indeed the concepts 'political organisation of the trade union Movement' or 'political expression of this movement' are wrong ones. Of course the bulk of the members of the Labour Party are workers; however whether a party is really a political party of the workers or not, depends not only on whether it consists of workers, but also upon who leads it, upon the content of its activities, and of its political tactics. Only the latter determines whether we have before us really a political party of the proletariat. From this point of view, the only correct one, the Labour Party is a thoroughly bourgeois party, because although it consists of workers it is led by reactionaries, and the worst spirit reactionaries at that, who act fully in the spirit of the bourgeoisie. It is an organisation of the Bourgeoisie which exists, in order with the help of the British Noskes and Scheidemanns to systematically deceive the workers."

The Labour Party must be seen dialectically - in its connections, in its actual role and significance in the relationship of the classes - not what fig-leaves it adopts, what it says of itself, or what workers think it is.

Nevertheless, of course, Lenin advised approaches for affiliation by the Communist Party (largely on the ground that certain features of the Labour Party were unique at that time - and which are very largely non-existent now). Lenin, in his advocacy of entry, specifically mentioned the fact that the extreme left party, which contributed the main forces to the new Communist Party, the British Socialist Party, had the right to exist with its own programme, organise in favour of that programme, and to explain openly that the Hendersons etc. were bourgeois agents. There have been very many changes since then. Our dehydrated propaganda is not just a bad substitute - in no real sense can it be said to be a substitute - in no real sense can it be said to be a substitute. But he insisted that this should be without illusion. All this is well known, as is Trotsky's advice in the 1930s.

The point we want to make is that all the RSL approaches on entryism stress the alleged fact that the Labour Party is the Workers' Party, and more seriously, completely fail to point out the alien bourgeois nature of the Labour Party. (Here again the leading comrades think they are dealing with a bunch of Third Period ultra-lefts, and not members of the Labour Party, who will have the shallow picture of the

Labour Party as the 'workers' party', constantly bombarded with this view which the bourgeoisie find so useful, by the bourgeois press).

Not only that, but they publicly (and privately) endorse the 'socialist' camouflage of Wilson and Brown. The starting-point for the entryism imposed upon us by circumstances must be a sharp Leninist analysis. This must be the beginning of the education of such forces as we win - particularly those won in the Labour Party. But in practice it is ignored when it is not denied. We are not proposing abandonment of entry - only that it should be seen as a tactic, applied flexibly, an excursion into alien territory - a tactic rather than a way of life. Also reality must be stated clearly; we should sow no illusions in the Labour Party.

On the characterisation of the Labour Party and Lenin's approach quoted above, the leading comrades (Ted Grant and Peter Taaffe) content themselves with pointing out that Lenin later "contradicted" this i.e. their method is one of formal textual comparison which allows them to take their pick of what best fits their own mood of the moment. This, of course is their approach on a whole lot of issues ('Lenin later contradicted What is to be done', etc É), but it is not the Marxist approach. We must see the various positions taken up by Lenin dialectically as they fit together and form a comprehensive (moving) picture. The Labour Party is an organisation of the bourgeoisie - but it is only useful to them because of its connections with the working class. To use the description of it - 'the party of the British workers' etc. - as a means of avoiding a sharp Marxist class analysis of its role, its actual position in the relationship of forces, is not serious. Neither is it serious to say 'well - it is - and then again it isn't.' In its function, whatever the contradictions, it is a bourgeois party. It is true that if we ignore the contradictions we will not be able to gauge future developments - but this approach of the leadership will prevent us preparing to make the best of the future developments in the Labour Party.

The comrades' approach is that Labour Party is the workers' party and essentially the machine is an imposition. It only requires a bit more exertion, pressure, activity on the workers' part for the machine to move, to respond to and reflect their desires, at least to a limited extent. This is both stated and implied: it is our practical approach. The talk of a mass centrist movement is there too of course; as a 'finished formation' it is only one stage removed from the mass Bolshevik Party: our immediate expectation is for a reflection of the ranks' first pressures on the machine.

Because of our whole position we can't avoid presenting these possible reflections as 'good' - whereas our task must be concern for the general class significance of these things, for the fact that movement 'under pressure' by the machine can lead to the defeat of the class. Failure to recognise these people's 'progressive' moves as mousetraps is to make a headlong dive for the cheese! Unless we prepare a force capable of independent activity there isn't much else we can do anyway, except go almost

passively, even into the slaughterhouse.

## THE LABOUR PARTY IS A BOURGEOIS PARTY

The Leninist position is that the Labour Party, judged in its role and function, and despite its origins and special connection with the trade unions, is a capitalist, a bourgeois workers' party. Judged politically it is not a workers' party with deformations, inadequacies (its 'inadequacies' amount to a qualitative difference), but a bourgeois party with the special function of containing the workers - actually it is a special section of the bourgeois state political organisation. The Labour Party is the main instrument of capitalist control of the workers; the organisation formed out of an upsurge of the workers, but an upsurge in which the workers were defeated ideologically and thus in every other field, is now the means of integrating the drives and aspirations of the workers with the capitalist state machine. It is not a passive reflection but an active canaliser of the class - against itself, against the proletariat's own interest. It is against this background that Clause IV must be seen.

The approach and viewpoint is important here, and what we see will be seriously affected by how we begin. The initial statement 'a workers' party' or 'a bourgeois workers' party' will affect everything else. For example the bureaucracy is seen either as a crust formation, with certain deficiencies in relation to the needs of the class, but basically part of the class, which will respond (genuinely as opposed to treacherously) to pressures - OR as a much more serious opponent, a part of the political machine of the main enemy class (irrespective of how it originates); and therefore our expectations from it will be quite different. We will not be quite so 'comfortable' in the Labour Party. The most obvious thing is that we will see their shifts to the left as also a danger and not as a triumph for the pressure of the class, as something which increased our responsibilities, as a party, rather than absolves us of them, lessening our role, questioning the validity of the Fourth International. The unqualified definition of the Labour Party as a worker's party is a snare.

Lenin (1920) anticipated a Labour government as a kind of Kerensky-type regime of crisis, and the situation and class forces then justified that. Now, however, a Labour government slots into a more or less stable state machine and immediately works for the capitalists, bringing to the bourgeoisie as its special gift a dowry of the aspirations and illusions of the working class. Its function at the moment is to alleviate capitalist development problems - rationalisation. In its 'nationalisation' enterprises in general the Labour Party seems to have adopted a special role in relation to the structure of the British economy. This is ever more concentrated, centralised, in need of modernisation. The 'reforming' Labour Party harnesses the workers electorally as a driving-force to overcome the resistance of the average Tory supporter who sees private property as a sacred, immutable principle. The beneficiaries - the big

bourgeoisie, the dominant capitalist groups - are of course a bit more flexible in their thinking and aware of their situation, their own needs.

What this means is that we must be as free in our propaganda and activities as possible - we must get out of the habit of wishful thinking. 'Nationalisation' must be judged and presented from a class point of view. There must be no exaggeration of the ferment under the Labour Party, its vote, or the electoral swing by way of justifying our own 'tactic'. We must justify ourselves by our activity - not by distorting reality. The first thing, as Trotsky said many times is not to be afraid of stating what is. In 1966 the Labour Party did not appeal to the electorate as a socialist party - if anything the very opposite. Ignoring things like that as the comrades do in gauging the petty bourgeois swing to Labour, can help only the bureaucracy. Quietism and tailism are bad enough anyway - on the basis of the self-delusion they become poisonous.

The lesson is that we must stress the necessity for a role for our own movement; the vital need is for self-confidence. How can we build an organisation when in practice we deny our politics an immediate serious vital role?

## SECTARIANISM AND LIQUIDATIONISM

In "Centrism and the Fourth International" Trotsky wrote:

"His shilly-shallying the centrist frequently covers up by reference to the danger of 'sectarianism', by which he understands not abstract propagandist passivity (of the Bordigist type) but an active concern for purity of principles, clarity of position, political consistency, organisational completeness."

Thus Trotsky's definition of sectarianism was: abstract propagandist passivity. The Transitional Programme later:

"They simply dawdle in one place, satisfying themselves with a repetition of the self-same meagre abstractions. Political events are for them an occasion for comment and not for action."

In our application of the entry tactic we unite the worst features of liquidationism, and, paradoxically, also of sectarianism as described above. Our abstract propagandist passivity takes place in the setting of the Labour Party and with ideas watered down to the Labour Party level, retaining only the phrases as dried husks. The disease of sectarianism took us in the throes of liquidation-sickness: it became an over-compensation for our own collapse. The result can be clearly seen. We are so hypnotised our own objectively-imposed weakness that we come very close to fitting the above descriptions.

The concept of waiting for the class to move en masse, while meanwhile we make general propaganda (apart from being very unlikely this side of the revolution's beginning), prevents those partial movements which are necessary to gain strength for

our own group. When other groups or tendencies organise or lead such limited struggles more often than not the RSL condemns it. At a time when Hampstead Constituency Labour Party were running a campaign, led by 'left reformists' etc. against the Immigration White Paper, there was a move among them to expel [Frank] Soskice [Labour Party Home Secretary] from that party. Members of the RSL in Hampstead, who had some influence at the time, campaigned against this move. And our General Secretary considers it a matter to boast of - "There are times when one must hold people back." Note that this restraint was conspicuously absent in Wandsworth [where an SLL member was expelled for "hooliganism" and Militant did not oppose it]. When an SLLer is being expelled, that is the cue for our comrades to move into action ... with the right wing. If the exercise of restraint is not consistent, at least the alignment is.

The move in Hampstead was 'premature' - because the masses were as yet indifferent to it. The all-or-nothing approach again: Trotsky defined the attitude of sectarians etc. who refused to differentiate between the two sides in the Spanish Civil War, as a refusal to fight for limited gains.

We do exactly the same - organisationally.

In the last quarter of the 19th century Marx and Engels (particularly Engels) criticised the British Marxist socialists as having reduced Marxism to a rigid orthodoxy, a dogma - "a credo and not a guide to action." We stand in the same danger, only our credo, because of our gesture towards the broad movement of toning down our ideas and refusing even limited organisational struggles - our 'credo' is already so muted that the Labour Party rot threatens us with extinction.

## CLAUSE IV

The distant ideal of Clause IV is part of the stock-in-trade of the bureaucracy - without this sort of thing they would not be such useful agents of the bourgeoisie in controlling the working class.

This is clear if we remember 1918 and the fact that the Labour Party and trade union tops adopted Clause IV and reorganised the Party to prevent the workers escaping their control. Keeping their positions they were able to organise the workers' defeat in 1926 and prepared the way for the prostration of the class in face of the Great Depression, and for World War Two etc. The apparent victory of Clause IV in 1918 helped preserve the movement in its present Lib/Lab form and thus prepared future defeats. Primarily it is a tool for use by the bureaucracy in controlling the workers in their own group interests and, through them, the interests of the bourgeoisie.

It embodies the desires of the workers and thus it could rebound on the bureaucracy. But likewise the workers' illusions in the existing organisations (and their willingness to carry out Clause IV) could mean heavy losses, even defeat, once the class began to

mobilise seriously.

## THE SOCIALIST CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE MOVEMENT

Ted Grant talks about the socialist consciousness of the British labour movement - not to build on it for propaganda but to excuse indifference to the concrete struggle (February Militant). Let's look at this. At the very best the 'general socialism' of the movement is embryonic naïve collectivism. This is just Sunday socialism, a dream, a far-off event. Also the movement is split up, sectionalised - e.g. the unions. Practical union politics means at most bargaining within the system - reformism. Reformism is bourgeois politics. Ted Grant argues on the 'socialist' resolutions of the various unions: their socialism (to give the most to Ted Grant's argument) amounts to 'municipalisation'. The practical, each-industry-its-own-plan approach of those unions which adopt 'socialist' demands for their own field is sectionalism, bordering on syndicalism.

The Labour Party is one more example of sectionalism and confusion in the movement, and Clause IV (whatever its significance 'in itself') is just a cover, and sows its own illusions of Fabian gradualism. The official Labour Party recognises the class struggle - but only in the manner of Ramsay MacDonald: as something to be deplored and suppressed and not as a battle to be won for the workers' side. What, after all, prevents these socialisation, nationalisation resolutions which are so plentiful in the movement from being effective? They are left in mid-air hanging, frustrated by the bureaucratic filter and the division and illusions of their promoters. There is no drive, no unity - and the resolutions are the work of that active minority in the trade unions who are themselves split up and suffering from all kinds of illusions, from Fabianism to its slightly more energetic cousin Stalinism - from the tortoise to the writhing snake.

The leading comrades say that there is a socialist consciousness (as opposed to an embryonic collectivism) in the British labour movement - and that our task is to generalise it. But what does this mean? That we do a sum of all the resolutions and propose the final abstraction for general acceptance - 1 times 400? That we call a nation-wide 'compositing conference' ('when we have sufficient contact' of course ...)? This is the logic of the propaganda approach they adopt, the actual counterposing of abstract 'nationalisation' propaganda in the Labour Party to the organic class struggle as in the seamen's strike. We are in danger of becoming a Labour Party first cousin to the SPGB!

We agree that the task is to generalise such embryonic consciousness as exists, but this is not, as in Ted Grant's approach, a matter of doing a sum with a collection of resolutions. The condition of effectiveness in generalising these aspirations and combining them as an aim of the concrete, organic class struggle of the workers, and incidentally of integrating, fusing the various fronts of this struggle

in a mutually fruitful strategy - the condition for this is the building of the revolutionary Bolshevik party. Only this can transform the existing confusion, wishful thinking, vacillation of the movement: only this can effect the necessary qualitative change.

In the propaganda field we know the specific objections to Stalinism, Fabianism and vulgar trade unionism - but we are so committed to watered-down sectionalised propaganda criticism of these trends that we fail to knit the whole picture together.

The logic of the gigantism of the means of production in the modern world, is such that collectivism, socialisation, presents itself as the obvious solution in many different forms and accompanied by illusions and complete failure to understand the system as a whole - i.e. how to achieve a harmoniously working socialist reorganisation of the economy. Marxists see this only as a result of the victory in the class struggles of the proletariat and this does not necessarily begin with abstract propaganda about nationalisation. When as in the sea strike Militant ignores the concrete class struggle, in its momentarily most active front, it merely shows how far we have gone, through adaptation, towards Fabian, petty-bourgeois parliamentary socialism.

Instead of exposing the pretensions of the bourgeois agents in the labour movement the comrades paint them up. The Labour Party is completely integrated in the British bourgeois state system - yet they never explain this. They see only the superficially 'working class' nature of the party, and neglect the dialectical approach which would explore the relationships of the classes, the actual role of the leaderships, the de facto role of the different parties. They say the Labour Party is both a bourgeois and a proletarian party, Clause IV both a bourgeois and a proletarian party, Clause IV both a fig-leaf and an aspiration: yet in practice they talk and write only about one aspect, and the most well-publicised one at that, completely suppressing the overall view, that clearly sees these as essentially bourgeois. They can deny it - but clearly there is mis-education, not only of readers of the paper but of our own membership.

## PIPE DREAMS AND REVOLUTIONARY DUTY

The leading comrades gloss up the existing labour movement, exaggerate every hopeful sign and talk about automatic changes and readjustments - in the future, of course, as a rationale of our accommodation now. They forgo a role, and a vital preparation one now in favour of the light-minded dreams and fantasies about tomorrow. We need to keep in mind a point Trotsky made in 1934 about a certain kind of reformist-centrism, capable of "lulling the advanced workers to sleep by inculcating in them the ideas that the revolutionary regeneration of their party is already achieved."

We don't go to quite such a Selbyite length but it is clearly only a matter of degree. In his glorification of

the existing 'socialism' Ted Grant denounce those of us who are less enchanted, as having contempt for the workers. Isn't it rather that we have more respect for the potentialities of the class (embodied and represented in its theory) than for the present broad movement, living with the capitalist system, remaining essentially acquiescent, despite momentary upsurges and occasional protest at the crimes of the system and encrusted with an alien bureaucratic apparatus which slots into the bourgeois state system? Of course it would be absurd to pass 'judgement' on the class like this and not to understand the process, the conditions responsible for the present situation - but the comrades' glorification is absurd.

By glorifying it they help perpetuate it, acting against the polarisation and regroupment which is the first step towards changing it. If we too stand open-mouthed, lighted candle in hand before the Clause IV shrine and its concomitant manana Socialism - how can we educate anyone else?

The question that must be taken up seriously is just how automatic is the condition of the existing labour movement? Lenin thought that consciousness was a decisive element and that when considering the labour movement as it had developed in a given country to see it as outside the control of Marxists was to ignore the fact that actual ideas, ideologies had played a part, had entered the process. In Britain these ideas were and are bourgeois ideas; there is no vacuum.

The ideas of an automatic adjustment in response to changing events by the existing movement, apart from being anti-Marxist, stands in the way of our serious striving to influence events in a Leninist spirit. The views of the leading comrades 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 like those other people who had patience and of course 'a sense of proportion' - the Fabians). Also abandoned is the need to see Clause IV as the product of a certain contradictory relationship between bureaucrats and workers.

There will be no automatic upwards spiral here: the abortive nature of the present movement, far from being elevated 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. We think that the task is still the building of the revolutionary party: this conditions everything else. There is a question mark hanging over the future of the class and the handle of that symbol is the Bolshevik-type party.

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1970: REVOLUTIONARIES AND THE ELECTION. BRIEF EXCERPTS FROM THE "WORKERS' FIGHT SUPPLEMENT: IS AND THE ELECTIONS".

(Our current was at the time organised as a tendency, called the Trotskyist Tendency or Workers' Fight, inside IS, the forerunner of today's SWP. The discussion is about the general election of 1970).

A. For an independent revolutionary presence! by Sean Matgamna and Rachel Lever

"All the conditions which led Marxists to formulate their attitude to the Labour Party in the past, continue more or less. While being a capitalist party in politics and function, it remains 'the workers' party' in composition and origin - that is, the trade union party...

Nevertheless, does automatic electoral support (however critical) for the 'workers' party' still follow as before? Does it apply in this particular coming election?...

Despite the continuance of the old reasons for supporting Labour, as outline above, these are, for this particular election, outweighed by the importance of underlining the treachery of Labour in office. Opposition to the Labour leadership as a whole, and the putting of an independent political alternative, must be the major and primary strategy.

As a secondary strategy to this, support can be given to individual Labour candidates on the basis of their stand in relation to defence of trade union rights and on their record over the entire period of the Labour government... We will have to... put demands on them. One of these demands could usefully be: cut away and split from the right wing! - that is, loyal trade union MPs and the left reformists...

IS must mobilise all its resources in good time and plan ahead for putting up a candidate on a revolutionary platform... The candidate would be treated as if he were a 'presidential' candidate, i.e. the campaign throughout the country will have to focus on his statements and campaign....

With the Tories in power... much of the emphasis will change... After a short time... there will be a swing [by Labour] to the 'left', and the emphasis will be placed on 'defending trade union rights' against the bad Tories. The 'lefts' will come into their own... and will easily swing into the leadership of an important movement of militants...

The local LP wards could even taken on new life... IS members will have to join [the Labour Party] or be cut off from the militants: the task will be to fight for leadership against the left reformists...

But the immediate choices are... do we make a cold, flabby, tail-ending estimation that Labour will probably survive - or, realistically recognising the probability of such a survival and comeback, and even while conscious of our own limitations, attempt to make what gains we can in the present before the comeback, so as to gain greater strength to be able to minimise its harmful effects by intervening in the future?"

B. On the entry tactic, by Phil Semp

"There has been a fall off in ward attendance and a consequent low in Labour Party activity. In the

circumstances, our forces have best been deployed outside the Labour Party for the time being. But that does not mean to say that the relationship between the class and the Labour Party has altered in essence...

In the thirties... Trotsky said that: 'It is urged that the Labour Party already stands exposed by its past deeds in power and its present reactionary platform... For us - yes! But not for the masses... We use such evidence as our propaganda - but it cannot be presented beyond the power of our own press. One cannot shout louder than the strength of his own throat'. This argument applies today...

To be frightened of alienating the few hundred advanced workers we have any influence with is to miss out on the relationship between the advanced workers and the class. The advanced workers are of the class and their moods are very much dependent on those of the rest of the class....

I feel that a large number of the most political will not only vote Labour, but will actively fight to get Labour elected in the given circumstances...

[But] if we have the resources to put up an independent candidate in a safe Labour constituency, then we should certainly do so in order to have a focal point for open revolutionary propaganda and in order to gauge the mood of the masses..."

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OCTOBER 1980: THE LAST LABOUR GOVERNMENT WAS A BOSSES' GOVERNMENT. WE NEED A WORKERS' GOVERNMENT

(Socialist Organiser 28, 25 October 1980)

TONY BENN drew an enormous amount of fire from the press with his speech on behalf of the [Labour Party] National Executive Committee at the opening of the Blackpool Labour Party conference.

To read the hacks, and listen to the baying of the Press Lords, you'd be forgiven for thinking that Benn had delivered a paraphrase of the Communist Manifesto of Marx and Engels, or of its latter-day supplement, the 1938 Programme of Leon Trotsky. You'd be wrong. Dead wrong.

Benn proposed three emergency measures to be enacted immediately the next Labour government takes office.

- The abolition of the House of Lords.

- A wide-ranging Industry Bill, to be put on the statute books 'within a matter of days'. This would give the next Labour government power (by decree) to extend public ownership, control capital movements, and 'provide for' 'industrial democracy'.

- Within a matter of weeks, a Bill would be enacted to return to the House of Commons the powers which it has surrendered to the Common Market in the last

seven years.

All this would be done constitutionally and according to the present rules.

There would be no ringing Roundhead declaration of the democratic right of the House of Commons, as an elected Parliament, simply to dismiss the Lords. 1000 new Lords would be created to get the 'consent' of the House of Lords.

The package amounts to no more than a limited strengthening of the House of Commons. It is limited indeed, because it would leave the monarchy in being, together with its quite substantial reserve powers. (For example, what if the monarch refused to create 1000 peers?).

In any major social conflicts, the formal powers of the monarchy would be a natural rallying point for the reactionaries.

The package also contains nothing about even curbing the power of the civil service or of the armed forces.

How radically does Benn conceive of the Industry Act being used? If a firm is unable to provide jobs when all around us the lives of millions of working class families and whole working class communities are being devastated, it would seem to be a pretty clear indication that private ownership in that industry should not continue. Yet at the Labour conference Tony Benn, successfully opposed a proposal that any firms threatening redundancies should be nationalised under workers' control. The recent NEC rolling manifesto omitted Labour's policy for nationalising 25 big monopolies.

Tony Benn's programme is ridiculously inadequate as a socialist or working class response to the situation we face.

British society is rotting and decaying all around us, and the Tory government is now deliberately acting as a demolition squad.

It is not only that the Tories lack feeling for the British people, though they are sustained in their work by a brutal upper-class callousness towards the workers. More fundamentally, the desperate decline of Britain, fundamentally the decline of British industry's competitiveness and profitability, makes desperate measures necessary - and for the Tories desperate measures are measures that make the workers pay.

The repeated failures of different government strategies, Labour and Tory, prepared the way for demolition-squad Toryism. Just as mortally-ill people sometimes resort to the most outlandish quackery, the main party of British capitalism opts for the murderous quackery of monetarism because they believe that all the other options have closed for them.

Only one thing can fundamentally change the situation for British capitalism in the period ahead - the driving down of the working class share in the wealth we produce to a dramatic degree and at least a serious weakening of the trade unions. For example, it is because they hope that it will help them

in these aims, that the Tories are so ready to tolerate and increase unemployment and the massive destruction of the social fabric that accompanies it.

Labour in office prepared the way for Thatcher. Not just in the obvious sense that Healey and Callaghan introduced their own savage cuts in 1976 and '77, but by its thoroughgoing failure to regenerate industry and British society.

Put into office in the wave of industrial direct action that scuttled Heath, the government behaved as a straight-line capitalist government. It abused the confidence of the workers. Basing itself on the trade union bureaucracy (until 1978) at one side and the state machine on the other, it ruled in defiance of Labour Party conference decisions. It got wage 'restraint' and actually cut real wages for two years running.

But what the ruling class learned from that experience was the insufficiency of even a relatively successful (in their terms) Labour government. They needed to make the sort of attacks Labour could not make without shattering its base. Thus Thatcherism.

Against Thatcherism, the Labour Left now has a sort of consensus in favour of trying another policy for running capitalism - it will have a different driver, a state wheel added here, and a few control screws tightened or added there. But it will remain capitalist.

Import controls, state intervention perhaps to the level reached in wartime Britain, and the collaboration of the working class (read restraint; read incomes policy, perhaps cosmeticised by some regulations on profit distribution) are supposed to ensure the regeneration of British industry and society.

This is nothing but edition 3 of the sort of delusion that dominated the 1964-70 and 1974-9 Labour governments. In so far as they administered capitalism at all successfully, it was by attacking the working class; and they failed miserably to arrest the decline of British industry and society.

The time for patching is long past - and in any case it is in the working class interest not to patch but to transform and bring about fundamental change towards democratic working class socialism - that irreversible change in the balance of wealth and power that the 1974 manifesto tantalisingly talked about and Labour in power forgot all about.

We must replace the fundamental mechanism of capitalism - profit - with a new one: the needs of the working people, fulfilled in a society organised, owned collectively, and run democratically by the working class.

This demands that we plan our lives by planning and organising the economy on which we must build our lives, and this in turn demands the social ownership of the land and major industries.

We need a radical working class alternative to capitalism.

Whether the next Labour government - in 1984, or earlier if we do as we have the industrial strength to do and kick out Thatcher - will be a more or less

radical new instalment of the sort of Labour governments we have had this century, or not, will be determined by two things:

- By whether a real attack is made on the wealth and entrenched power of the ruling class; and,

- by whether or not it rests at least in part on the organisations of the working class instead of on those of the state bureaucracy, the military, and Parliament - that is, whether in response to the direct demands of the working class it can do what we want, or endorse what we do (taking over factories, for example) without being a captive of the state machine.

The working class itself would not only serve and protect its own interests by organising itself outside the rhythms, norms, and constraints of Parliamentary politics, expanding its factory shop stewards' committees, combine committees, Trades Councils, etc., and creating new action committees, to be an industrial power that could as necessary dispense with the Parliamentarians.

The Brighton/Blackpool decisions to control MPs and to give the majority of votes on who shall be prime minister if Labour has a majority in Parliament to the CLPs and trade unions (if we are not cheated) could open the way to a new kind of 'Labour' government - a workers' government, -instead of a government of the trade union party which merely administers capitalism according to capitalism's own laws.

Revolutionary Marxists believe that there must be a socialist revolution - a clean sweep of the capitalists and the establishment of the state power of the working class, leading to the setting-up of a workers' democracy. The big majority of the labour movement don't yet share our views. But we have a common need and determination to oppose and fight the Tory government and to oppose any moves, even by the Labour Party in government, to load the cost of capitalist decay and crisis onto the shoulders of the working class.

If we cannot agree on a root-and-branch transformation (or on precisely how to go about getting it), we can at least agree on a whole range of measures to protect ourselves and to cut down and control the capitalists.

To get the most out of the breakthrough for democracy at Brighton and Blackpool, we must fight to ensure that the next Labour government does act radically in our interests and does base itself on the movement, not on the bosses' state bureaucracy. And at the same time we must prepare and organise ourselves to be able to protect our own interests however it acts.

We must fight to commit the Party to radical socialist policies, and use reselection to make sure MPs are held to those policies.

But if the Labour Party really were to strike at the power and wealth of the bosses, they would strike back, using their army and state forces to repress the movement if necessary - or simply to cow the Labour government.

Whoever wants to break out of the limits defined by the interests of the capitalists must be prepared to disarm the ruling class and destroy its state. Only the working class can do that, organised in squads like those which the flying pickets organise, which can arm themselves when necessary.

Any Parliament-based government that attempted really radical change would put its head on the block, and while the present armed forces exist the axe is in the hands of the bourgeoisie.

Alarmist? An intrusion of insurrectionary politics that are out of place in Britain?

Unfortunately, no. In the last decade the Army has become highly politicised through its work in Northern Ireland. Early this year the pacifist Pat Arrowsmith debated with Field Marshal Carver, chief of the British Army during the struggles that got Heath out in 1974.

"Fairly senior officers", said Carver, "were ill-advised enough to make suggestions that perhaps, if things got terribly bad, the army would have to do something about it..."

So it is either resign yourself to Thatcherism (or a new edition of Healey- Callaghan, or worse) - or fight on all fronts.

The power of the ruling class is not entirely, nor even essentially, in Parliament. That is the terrain to which they now go out from their redoubts in industry, the civil service and the armed forces, to meet and to parley with the labour movement, and to put on a show for the people.

But if the labour movement insists on new rules for the parleying game, they have a reserve language to resort to - force. So have we.

But the bosses' greatest real strength is that they have convinced the majority of the people that force is no part - not even a reserve part - of British politics. That was not the view of the officers in 1974.

The top brass told them then to shut up. But they won't always: some of the coup-talkers in 1974 are themselves now the top brass. In any case we should not rely on their restraint.

Thus we see that Labour's decisions on Party democracy and the new attitude to Parliament open the possibility of a new type of 'Labour' government. But only the possibility.

With the present political positions of the Party and the leaders of its Left, you would get a Labour government which would fundamentally be more of the same with radical trimmings. It would not serve the working class, and in t)resent conditions it would not be able to adequately serve the ruling class. It would not even placate them.

Neither the ruling class nor the working class can afford to muddle along indefinitely - or for much longer.

If Thatcherism fails to regenerate Britain - and it will fail, because of its own vicious absurdities and because the working class must make it fail - that will only increase the desperation of the ruling class.

There is no room left for reformist tinkering.

In the last decade and a half, the working class has defeated successive attempts by Wilson and Heath to solve British capitalism's crisis and decay at our expense. We even drove Heath from office.

The tragedy is that, while strong enough industrially to stop their solutions, we have not been politically able to develop a thoroughgoing working-class socialist solution.

The result is the sort of stalemate that has often in history been the prelude to attempts at ruling-class 'solutions' through military coups or fascism.

One cannot foresee or predict how long the present stalemate will continue. It is certain only that - if all past experience has any bearing on what will happen in Britain. - it cannot continue indefinitely. A solution to the decay and crisis must be found, and it will either be theirs, or ours - that is, working-class reconstruction of society on a socialist basis.

The drive to clinch the decisions on Labour democracy is the centre of the struggle now. Unless the Labour Party is thoroughly democratised, talking about it now as a vehicle for struggle and change is as absurd as calling for the Labour Party to come "to power with socialist policies" was in the '60s and '70s. The Blackpool decisions must be consolidated, extended, and made to work. And no Labour democracy can be secure unless the trade unions are democratised. The rank and file militants in the unions must be organised.

But if we do not simultaneously organise a drive for the minimally necessary socialist policies, then the consequences of democratisation may well be very unlike what the left expects.

As Tony Benn said at Blackpool, a Labour Government will be tested by the banks, the IMF, etc., from the first hours. If it does not go on the offensive in the working class interest, against the capitalists and their system, then it will have to go on the offensive against the left in the labour movement.

Accountability can mean - as it does in European social-democratic parties - tight central control to keep the hands of the leaders free. If there had been accountability in 1975 when Jack Jones and the trade union bureaucracy collaborated with the government to set up the £6 pay limit, then there would have had to be a purge of the left (such as newspapers like the Sunday Express and Observer did try to launch).

With accountability, the leaders would not have the option of placidly ignoring the Party, as after 1975.

The Right and Centre, even backed by the big unions, would have difficulty carrying through such a purge. But the point to focus on now is that it is a serious possibility unless we step up the drive to arm the movement - or at least big sections of its rank and file - with socialist politics.

And not at the "next stage" If the labour movement is to be ready to offer a real socialist alternative at the "next stage", its foundations must be laid and built upon now, and urgently.

That is what the Socialist Organiser groups exist to do, and what we are trying to do.

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1996: "THE LABOUR PARTY IN PERSPECTIVE"

By John O'Mahony. From Workers' Liberty 28, February 1996.

*"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 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 1 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, supporting 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 breakaway 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 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 ç 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 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 stropky 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 "refund 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 proportion 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 legatee 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 Liverpool 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 wiseacres 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'."

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## SEPTEMBER 1997: THE CRISIS OF NEW LABOUR

Tony Benn MP has posed, with remarkable clarity, the issues involved in the current battle over Labour's future. In an article for the Observer entitled "The end of choice at the ballot box", Benn has accurately spelled out the disastrous consequences of a series of related developments, especially the NEC's proposals to change Labour's structure, and its decision to create a Lib-Lab cabinet committee on constitutional reform.

Benn puts it like this:

*"The Prime Minister's decision to set up a Cabinet Consultative Committee under his chairmanship, with a wide remit, and made up of Labour Ministers and Liberal leaders marks another step in the move to create a new political party in Britain*

*"The next major step is due to take place at the Labour conference in October, when a plan called 'Partnership in Power' is to be presented, under which members of the party, the constituencies and affiliated organisations may lose their right to submit*

*motions to conference.*

*"All these plans, combined with the tough new disciplinary code under which any Labour MP who holds an alternative opinion on any issue may be expelled and all new candidates will be drawn from an approved panel, virtually hands over complete control to the leadership.*

*"By the end of this parliament, if not before, it is possible that this project will have been completed and this new party will closely resemble the American Democratic Party, backed by big business and with no meaningful links with the Labour Party or labour movement.*

*"The British establishment has gone along with this from the very beginning and it is not hard to see why. It hopes and believes that such a party would be stronger than the Tories in dismantling the welfare state... and cutting public expenditure and wages in the name of labour flexibility and globalisation."*

This is exactly what is happening!

Benn's great merit is that he has spelt out with a clarity absent from the circumlocution and coding employed by most of the parliamentary Labour left the enormously high stakes involved in the current battles inside the Labour Party. He has elevated the discussion of the New Labour project above the trivia of spin-doctor gamesmanship and the degrading, "King Tony is badly advised" pap. Clearly, sharply and bluntly he has put the New Labour project in the proper context of class, and linked this to the paralysing bureaucratisation that is creeping like black ice over politics:

*"But the price that may have to be paid (for the "Project") is the obliteration of any real policy choice through the ballot box, any real debate in the Commons, and a crisis of representation. We could see the complete disillusion with democracy and the appallingly low turnout there is in America. Clinton was elected with only 20% of the electorate."*

This is exactly the danger. Workers' Liberty has warned of it again and again. Back in 1980, at the high water mark of the Labour left, we argued that the outcome of the battles for Labour democracy would either be a transformed socialist labour movement, or the "Americanisation" of British politics and the destruction of the Labour Party as an entity based primarily on the labour movement. That logic is working itself quickly towards the moment of realisation. The key thing now is to know how socialists should relate to this, possibly terminal, crisis of labourism.

On this question of tactics Benn once again makes an important contribution:

*"Those of us who remain committed to the trade union link and socialist objectives... must continue to campaign quietly and persistently from inside the party and not be tempted to break away. Such principled campaigns are likely to win a great deal of support from the electors who voted Labour on 1 May, since the sheer scale of that victory suggests that it was not only the Conservatives who were*

*rejected but much of the market based philosophy which nearly destroyed our social fabric and which urgently requires real change, not just new management."*

Benn is right to say: No, we should not walk away from the Labour Party if we lose at the Brighton conference. The issue Benn fails to develop, and it is fundamental, is how socialists can continue to raise the issue of working class representation if New Labour is transformed into a "pure bosses' party". The trade unions are the key here.

Even the traditionally right wing AEEU, the engineering union, is talking of the need now to fight to get working class people into parliament. Its criticism of the class composition of the Parliamentary Labour Party — now mostly lawyers, journalists, academics and other jobbing political whores and loose ballast of that sort — is a great step forward.

It shows what effect socialists can hope to have with a serious and bold agitation against the Blairites, and for working class representation by working class MPs willing to fight for our people and for working class policies.

Trade unions can and should use their influence in the Labour Party to de-select existing Blairite MPs and replace them with people loyal to the labour movement and the working class.

That way we can hope to politically re-align the trade union movement on terms a lot more threatening to the Blair project than if we limit ourselves needlessly and artificially to single issue campaigning in a Labour Party increasingly bereft of an active proletarian core.

We are not yet in a position to launch a full scale Labour Representation Committee that could organise the unions to fight to save Labour as a workers' party and, if we lose that fight definitively, put up trade union candidates in elections.

We are in a situation where we can attempt to pull together the key activists in the unions, CLPs and socialist groups who understand the centrality of mass labour movement politics. If we do that, we will be better able to give the Blairites the answer they deserve, win or lose at Brighton.

The conference, Unite for Labour Democracy, on 13 September is therefore of enormous importance for serious working class socialists and labour movement activists.

We say: Unite the left to fight for working class representation!

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SEPTEMBER 1998: SHOULD SOCIALISTS STAND AGAINST LABOUR?

By John Nihill, from Workers' Liberty 49

How do things stand now between the trade unions and New Labour?

The trade unions still have 50% of the vote at Labour Party Conference; they have 20% of the places on Labour's National Executive Committee; 200 MPs, a majority of the Parliamentary Labour Party, are members of the trade union group of MPs. (The trade unions used to have 70% of the votes at conference, and before that 90%.)

But against this seeming strength of the unions in New Labour stands the following: both conference and the NEC have lost their old role, which was often only a nominal role, in making Party policy. Policy is — nominally — now made by a new body, the National Policy Committee, on which the Cabinet has 50% of places, the NEC 50% and the leader the casting vote. In practice, this means that the Cabinet controls the Labour Party. It is a logical and for them necessary extension of the rigid control which the Government exercises over the MPs. Parliament is rigidly subordinate to government and, if the Party was not to make life impossible for the MPs, the Party too had to be subordinate to government. Democracy is indivisible.

The Blairites think they have thus solved the historic dilemma of Labour governments. Running the capitalist system according to its own needs, Labour governments have mostly disappointed the hopes and expectations of their supporters. Repeatedly they have come into conflict with their own party.

To avoid this, New Labour's leaders have gone a considerable way towards abolishing the Labour Party! Blair towers above the Party. He was elected by "One Member, One Vote" — the first Labour leader to be so elected — and he can confront the party structures as an independent power. Local MPs, also selected by OMOV, can do the same and will be backed by the all-powerful Party centre at Millbank Towers.

The proportion of New Labour MPs from any sort of working class or trade union background is now infinitesimal. MPs tend to be lawyers, journalists or lecturers. There has been a big influx of women into Parliament, but not of working class women. Trade union financing continues. But there is much capitalist money too, for the Leader's Office, from the likes of Bernie Ecclestone.

Old Labour trade union relationships exist within a network of new structures. The unions are effectively, though not definitely, imprisoned in these structures. When Augustus Caesar founded the Roman Imperial monarchy, he incorporated many of the forms and names of the subverted Republic — the Emperor was only the "first" of the senators, etc — but it was actually a new system. So it is with New Labour. It is too soon to see it as an irreversible victory for those whose aim it is to destroy the Labour Party and replace it with something like the US Democratic Party. But they are in control; the new structures and relationships embody their project.

After the left's "half a revolution" in 1979 and early '80s the right slowly won back control: what chance is there that the labour movement — the trade unions — can do the same sort of thing with New Labour? What might happen if the trade unions — that is the

trade union leaders — were to try and exert themselves inside the new structures against the New Labour establishment? Is this conceivable?

In fact the unions could still have the possibility of destabilising the not-quite-set new structures. They could try to assert the primacy of working class interests in the Labour Party. However, unless the Blairites who now have the Party by the throat were to unexpectedly collapse, it is highly improbable that the trade unions and constituency Labour Parties could take back the Labour Party. The best they could hope to do would be to split it, hiving off the Blairites.

A movement of Labour resurgence, based on the unions, could still hope to rally a big proportion of the forces now grouped around the Labour Party. There is a precedent, of sorts. In 1931, the labour movement hived off its old leaders — McDonald, Snowden, JH Thomas — who, a minority, formed the National Labour Party and went into coalition with Tories and Liberals. The Labour Party was devastated at the 1931 election, but without that split the Labour Party would have been finished.

Plainly a “1931” development — though a majority of the MPs would probably hive off — would be preferable to a consolidation of Blairism and the end of mass working class politics in Britain for the calculable future. Unless they exert themselves, the trade unions will remain prisoners of the neo-liberals and Christian Democrats who control New Labour.

In this situation the central thing for socialists is to bring class back to centre stage in politics. If, at the end of the day, the labour movement in politics is not striving for the creation of a workers’ government — a government that will do for the working class what Tory governments have done and what Blair’s Government now does for the bourgeoisie — then the labour movement in politics has no independent role to play. It will only be the electoral drudge and pack horse of middle class careerists. The need for a workers’ government has to be explained and propagandised for in the labour movement today.

Rank-and-file trade unionists locally and nationally need to be organised to secure working class representation in Parliament. Where workers are an almost extinct species in the PLP, worker-only shortlists might make sense in certain areas.

In assessing what is new, it is important not to idealise the past of the Labour Party. Lenin at the 2nd World Congress of the Communist International in 1920 rightly defined the Labour Party as a “bourgeois workers’ party”. It has never been anything else. It was a bourgeois workers’ party when, under pressure from the working class, it brought in elements of “the political economy of the working class” (the expression is Karl Marx’s, describing the Ten Hour Bill to limit the working day), the welfare state.

The famous Clause Four of the party constitution, committing the party to an ill-defined socialism, had no effect on what the party in government did. Nevertheless, there were open valves between the trade unions and the Labour Parties, locally and nationally. Through these valves, membership and

influence, as well as finance, flowed.

Under Blair, there has been an enormous tipping of the balance towards the bourgeois pole of the bourgeois workers’ party. The unions remain in the structures and they continue as financiers of the party. But New Labour has blocked up nearly all the old channels of working class political self-expression. Its Labour and trade union connections function only to allow it more plausibly to occupy the space working class politics should occupy. New Labour now functions entirely as a block on working class politics.

In the past socialists said: “Vote Labour and fight”. What did it mean? How did it differ from “Vote Tory and fight”? Many workers in the ‘60s did “vote Tory and fight” — in industry. What was different about Labour was that the fight was also waged within the structures of the labour movement, including the Labour Party. Socialists in the Labour Party fought to take forward the broad working class movement, and in the first place trade union activists, beyond Labourism on the basis of their own experience.

Labour as a right wing and trade union-dominated party was a brake on the working class — but it worked flexibly and by way of a network of labour movement consent. It had structures that might have allowed the bedrock labour movement to shed its old reformist skin. Central to the Blair project is the driving of the working class movement out of politics. With almost all channels blocked to working class involvement and participation, New Labour is not a possible vehicle for working class politics, but a barrier raised against politics for the labour movement. The unions remain affiliated but New Labour is not too far from what the Liberal Party in Britain was until the end of World War One, and the Democratic Party in America is today.

The fundamental strategic concern of socialists in this situation is to argue within the trade unions for the reintroduction of class into British politics wherever it is possible to overcome the stifling.

The final triumph of Blairism would mark an historic defeat for the Labour Party. To accept the definitive victory of Blairism prematurely, while there is still the possibility of turning the trade unions — in the first place the rank and file — towards a struggle for class politics would be desertion. It would, for socialists, be to indulge in the most profound and debilitating sectism. Socialists who do not see their role as that of those who point the way forward for the broad labour movement are sectarians, not Marxists.

Against this background what if any role can the standing of independent Labour and socialist candidates against New Labour in elections have? Is it a matter of principle, as some would argue, not to stand against what is still, just about, definable as the trade union party?

It was never a matter of principle amongst Marxists not to stand against the Labour Party. There were, however, massive practical reasons against it, not least the comparatively open structures of the Labour Party and the genuinely open-valve relationship with the unions. It is the choking off of these open valves

that puts the question of candidates in a new light. So long as most workers continue to see Labour as their party an anti-Labour candidacy makes sense only as an occasion to make propaganda for socialism. Such propaganda in the election puts an additional hurdle in its own path, requiring workers to break with the party they consider their own. For so long as the open structures existed, so long as living trade union based working class politics could exist in and through the Labour Party, then only in very special circumstances could it make sense to stand against Labour. Now that Labour increasingly stands as an absolute block on working class and socialist politics, things are becoming different.

To counterpose a little bit of socialist propaganda to the labour movement in politics — a labour movement and Labour Party within which one could make such propaganda most fruitfully — did not make sense. To continue to forgo socialist propaganda in elections in deference to the monopoly of the anti-socialist and anti-working class Blair party is increasingly to boycott our own politics and our own proper, working class concerns.

The experience of the socialist left in elections over the last decade has not been one to encourage casual electoralism. In Liverpool, we had sections of the old Militant-led Labour Party bureaucracy, people who had recently controlled the council and made jackasses of themselves, standing against the Labour Party. In the Walton by-election they pretended to be the Labour Party, made timid reformist propaganda in the hope of maximising the vote, and, trailing Militant's and Derek Hatton's record in the Liverpool council behind them, like tin cans tied to a cat's tail, they did very badly. The Socialist Labour Party, walking out of the Labour Party on a whim of Arthur Scargill's and grouping together a rag tag and bobtail of sectarians and reformists, and itinerant socialists looking for lodgings, stood against Blair's party in the last election. With few exceptions they too did very badly.

Sections of the left are now beginning to make a fetish of small scale electoralism. Toytown Bolshevism is being supplemented by toytown electioneering. Nothing can be more foolish. Socialists need flexible tactics to relate to the crisis of working class representation.

We need to work where possible within the Blairite Labour Party and against it and outside it. Standing in elections will for the little groups on the left, including the Socialist Workers Party, be only a small part of what must be done in the foreseeable future. If it is counterposed in the period ahead to work to bring the question of class centre stage in politics by a fight for the representation of the trade unions in Parliament, then it will be only the soft electoralist face of the old debilitating left sectarians.

In the unions we should focus on making the unions fight for union policy against the Labour Government. That means fighting the union leaders. That should include both mass action — strikes, demonstrations, etc., and the use of the unions' potential powers within the new LP structures. Particular pressure

should be put on union-sponsored MPs to defend union policies and amend legislation along those lines. Key focusses would be the legal right to strike and engage in union activity without fear of the sack. Fundamentally, we need to build rank and file trade union groups which combine the fight for labour representation in politics with the fight to democratise the trade unions and save them from the largely unaccountable no-fight leaders who have surrendered the political labour movement to Blair.

Standing in elections will logically lead to calls for trade unions disaffiliating from the Labour Party. That sounds radical, but right now it is an acceptance of utter defeat: we should not do that, but campaign to get the unions within the structures of New Labour to fight for class politics. Not to do that is to throw in the towel in the fight against Blairism — with self-mocking radical slogans scrawled on it.

The key question for work in the constituency Labour Parties is the removal of Blairite MPs, i.e., a serious fight for their de-selection and working class candidates instead. Given the central control in the Party, the Blairites will make victory in such a fight practically impossible. But if pursued properly and with the aim of mobilising the local working class base of the Party it would provide a broader basis for an independent electoral challenge to sitting Blairites than could normally be produced simply by organising the already non-Labour left.

In a number of constituencies in the 1997 General Election, there was more than one socialist candidate. The left will have to find ways of uniting its efforts — that is of uniting itself — before it can mount effective socialist propaganda challenges to New Labour in local and Parliamentary elections. A combination of standing united left candidates in selected elections and continued work, as above, in the Labour Party is what we need.

Finally, it is useful to look back at how things were done 100 years ago, when the Liberals dominated the working class politically and small socialist organisations, like Keir Hardie's Independent Labour Party and the Marxist Socialist Democratic Federation, conducted electoral guerrilla war against Liberals and Tories. Socialists would stand to make propaganda — principally in local government elections. Thus they built up support. Parliamentary candidacies were rarer. Socialist groups would sometimes vie for the right to stand in a particular seat, but there would in the election be a rallying behind the socialist candidate. These groups were not free of destructive rivalry, but they lived in a different world from today's inter-warring left. Above all they had — all of them in varying degrees — a common basic idea; working class politics, which they pushed in local, and occasionally Parliamentary, elections. They were building a movement — and in the unions, which mostly backed the Liberals, they competed with the Liberal Party for the allegiance of the trade unionists. Any socialist electoralism now that does not do that — and what it involves is outlined above — will be a more or less noisy irrelevance to what needs to be done.

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## 2001: THE UNIONS, LABOUR AND SOCIALIST POLITICS

(leaflet for the SWP's "Marxism 2001")

Since its election victory on 7 June, New Labour has declared plans to chop up public services further and parcel them out to profiteers. This new slap in the face for the unions has provoked a flux and ferment in union politics such as has not been seen for 100 years.

The unions need to engage with politics. And what has passed for the unions' engagement in politics is now under a searchlight beam which shows it up to be largely a sham.

There are three possible ways out.

The unions could get together to reassert themselves and restore "the political labour movement" as a reality.

The unions could abandon politics. They could become pure "business unions", each union concerned only with its dues income and the wages-and-conditions deals it can negotiate with the bosses in its sector.

Or the unions could turn to narrow-minded, pragmatic, lobby-group politics, trying to trade political support and funds for favours with a variety of MPs, Lib-Dem, New Labour, or even Tory.

All three possibilities are in play. The outcome depends in large measure on what union activists and socialists do now.

On 23 May the Fire Brigades Union conference, against the wishes of the union leadership, resolved to open the possibility of union money being used to back election candidates against New Labour if they are more in line with union policy. The FBU did not, as some have suggested, "break the link with New Labour", or withhold money from the Labour Party; but it did send ripples across the union movement.

On 21 June UNISON conference voted for a review of the union's political funds. That vote, like the FBU one, was carried against the conference platform. The conference also voted, with the union leaders' support, for "strikes when deemed necessary, a national day of action and a national demonstration against privatisation, with a lobby of parliament".

Last weekend, Bill Morris of the TGWU publicly speculated about his union organising joint campaigns over public services with the Liberal Democrats. The TGWU logo might appear on Lib-Dem posters. Trade union candidates?

The GMB coyly failed to deny press reports that it might help field "pro- public services" trade-union (or union-backed) candidates in next May's local authority elections.

On 4 July the GMB announced it would send postcards to Labour MPs with a picture of Dr Richard Taylor, who won a seat in the general election as a "Health Concern" independent. GMB general secretary John Edmonds said that with the postcards the union "is just asking a simple question, 'Will you stand up for public services in the same way Dr Taylor did'. If the answer to that question is, 'no', then obviously it will be very hard for our members to support MPs who are prepared to see our public services effectively privatised out of existence".

Ambiguity, evasiveness, grandstanding — the union leaders' stance has much of all those. The recent upheavals may lead to nothing very decisive for a while yet. Or complexities and untidiness may emerge without fundamental change.

The balance of evidence, though, is that the current ferment in Britain runs much deeper. New Labour has developed a political machine which has no use for the unions — except as cash-cows which make no demands, for so long as they are willing to play that role. The Blair faction has progressively shut down the Labour Party's democratic channels. The working class has been largely disenfranchised. We have been deprived of even that measure of independent working-class political representation which the old, federal, union-dominated, and relatively democratic Labour Party used to provide.

All these are not just last week's headline news. They are solid trends of several years' evolution. The recent union conference votes and the mass working-class abstention on 7 June are two indications that increasing numbers of working-class people see these trends and, in different ways, seek responses.

Standing pat, repeating traditional Labour formulas, and relying on business-as-usual, is not an option. Sooner or later, one way or another, union politics will change. If socialists fail to fight for it to move forwards, then we will, by default, contribute to it moving backwards.

The best possibilities are those built on the recent talk of challenging the Blair faction at Labour conference and, as necessary, through independent trade-union and socialist candidates in elections. Such moves would point to a fight to reclaim the Labour Party from the Blair faction and — since the Blair faction would split rather than face a serious union challenge — to the creation of a new mass workers' party based on the trade unions.

Some people in the Socialist Alliance say that this perspective is futile nostalgia. For example, an article by Mike Marqusee in the latest *International Socialism* journal gives a good and clear account of the recent transformations in the Labour Party. It explains why "engaging in the party's internal debate" was vital. But that was the past. Now that "the admixture has qualitatively changed" in the Labour Party (as Marqusee accurately describes it), he seems to drop the whole idea of trying to rally the unions for independent working-class politics.

"We don't want to reinvent the Labour Party. Even if we wanted to we couldn't — history has moved on".

But why should the strategic priority of fighting to reorient the mass labour movement fall just because the tactical choice for socialists of being active in the Constituency Labour Parties and renouncing independent electoral action has become barren?

No-one can bring back "the Labour Party" just as it was in 1900, nor should socialists particularly want to. But we can, should, and do want to "reinvent" a new "Labour", or mass working-class, party. If it is to be really a mass working class party, it should be based on, or linked to, the existing mass united organisations of the working class — the trade unions. Authentic socialism can advance only through independent working-class politics, not through any substitutes or bypasses.

For mass independent working-class politics to leap up from the grave into which the Blair faction is currently lowering it is, however, not the only possibility in the present situation. Complete withdrawal of the unions from politics is unlikely. However, "shopping around" with the Lib-Dems, Plaid Cymru and Scottish National Party is very possible. This "shopping around" would be a great step backwards. It would reduce the labour movement to a lobby group, doing deals with big-business parties to see who will throw the best sops. In fact it might fragment the labour movement into a variety of lobby groups, each backing particular parties or MPs, more responsive to its sectional concerns. It would destroy the idea of working-class solidarity and common

purpose in politics.

If the left in the unions confines itself to the sort of agitation favoured by Socialist Worker — "Make the break with New Labour!" — then, by default, we will be throwing what weight we have towards that alternative of "shopping around". It is the alternative that "goes with the grain" of the established political balance of forces. Scatter iron filings, and they move towards the strongest magnetic pole. So long as unions judge "pragmatically" and "realistically" — and they will, unless socialists can win the arguments to make them do otherwise — we in the Socialist Alliance, with our 1.62% of the vote in less than one-fifth of the parliamentary constituencies, are a much weaker magnetic pole than the Lib-Dems or nationalists.

Negative agitation against New Labour is not enough. Our positive answer, and the measuring-rod by which we condemn New Labour, must be independent working-class politics. Engels explained: "The working class has interests of its own, political as well as social... The working men find it necessary to organise themselves as an independent Party... The organised Trades would do well to consider... that the time is rapidly approaching when the working class of this country will claim, with a voice not to be mistaken, its full share of representation in Parliament... For [that] organisations will become necessary, not of separate Trades, but of the working class as a body".

The darkest hour before dawn

Review of "The Candidate" by Alex Nunns

Alex Nunns, a journalist on Red Pepper, has based this book on sympathetic interviews with many of the central people in Jeremy Corbyn's 2015 Labour leadership campaign. It's a well-crafted, well-informed view of the Corbyn surge as it looked from the top.

It's hard to remember now just how unexpected Corbyn's 2015 victory was. As Nunns writes, as late as May 2015 "it was easier to imagine the famous monkey hitting random keys on a typewriter and producing the complete works of Shakespeare than hammer out a plausible story that ended with Corbyn at the helm of the Labour Party".

Before the May election John McDonnell had attempted to assemble a "Left Platform" group. It flopped dismally. Activists around Solidarity initiated a "Socialist Campaign for a Labour Victory", and that got a reasonable response, but it was marginal.

Labour lost the election. Ed Miliband resigned. The main candidates to replace him as leader started to compete in promoting themselves as even more right-wing than they had been known to be. John McDonnell wrote: "This is the darkest hour that socialists in Britain have faced" for many decades.

Nunns quotes Michael Calderbank: "Everybody was tearing their hair out, there was despair".

A first lesson from the surprise is how easily we can underestimate the potential of dispersed and thin-spread shifts to the left. Years of small meetings, difficult literature sales, and so on can make us think that everyone out there is uninterested, when it may just be that we're not strong or dynamic enough, and they're not confident enough, to turn their interest in consistent activity.

We had all underestimated the growth of a left-wing body of opinion in the country, diffuse, indeed atomised, but there. Although meetings and strikes had become sparser, demonstrations had often been big.

Student protests in November and December 2010 had drawn over 50,000. Big marches had accompanied the public sector strikes in 2011, and maybe 400,000 joined the TUC demonstration in March 2011. Maybe 250,000 would show up to the People's Assembly anti-cuts protest in June 2015.

All those demonstrations, following the economic shock of 2008 and the "double-dip" in 2012 when GDP fell again, had left a deposit in opinion.

We had also underestimated a slow-burning and unspectacular shift to the left within the Labour Party. Ed Miliband's leadership victory in 2010, seen as a victory for the unions against the dominant forces in the Parliamentary Labour Party, had made some Blairites flee in despair and some tens of thousands of left-minded people join or rejoin the Labour Party, raising its active membership above the worst-since-World-War-Two levels to which it had fallen under Blair and Brown.

The promise of 2010 seemed to have been thwarted. Miliband dithered and veered to the right.

But "the 2008 financial crash [had] changed everything.

Suddenly the Faustian pact [with capital] underpinning New Labour... was exposed as a catastrophic gamble... By 2015 the party had changed. There was no big moment of epiphany, just an unspectacular drift leftwards".

No-one in this new, diffuse Labour left saw immediate openings for shifting the party to the left. In Labour's highly-controlled conferences, there were few manifestations other than more activity on the conference fringes, a radical policy victory on the NHS in 2012, angry but unsuccessful challenges to the platform here and there.

But the leftward drift was sufficient to create wide indignation when Andy Burnham, Yvette Cooper, and Liz Kendall started the 2015 leadership contest all following the media consensus of the time, as cited by Nunns from the deputy editor of the New Statesman: "This is an analysis that's going to appeal to a lot of people in Labour, the idea that Labour lost because it was too left-wing".

So much did Burnham, Cooper, and Kendall live in a media-gear political bubble that they thought that blather about "aspiration" was the way to go.

Tristram Hunt, then shadow education minister, said Labour should appeal to "John Lewis couples and those who aspire to shop in Waitrose". As Nunns remarks, that strategy, "if adopted in [Hunt's] Stoke-on-Trent constituency... could have seen him out of a job. Waitrose refused to open a store in the town because 'residents are not up-market enough'."

A flurry, mostly in cyberspace, demanded a left candidate for leader. No-one at that stage imagined a left candidate could win. Many thought there should at least be a voice of protest in the leadership battle.

John McDonnell refused, and was cool on the whole idea of a left candidate. Ian Lavery refused. He had already opted for Andy Burnham. Jon Trickett refused. The journalist Owen Jones argued that the left should not try to run a candidate, because that would expose it to being "crushed".

But the pressure was sufficient that, eventually, in a meeting of left MPs, McDonnell told Corbyn: "It's your turn", and Corbyn assented. And that enough soft-left MPs, under pressure from their local members, agreed to nominate Corbyn that an addition of maverick and right-wing nominations was enough to get him into the contest.

"When Corbyn offered to stand", writes Nunns, "he was volunteering - in all probability - for no more than a couple of weeks of lobbying and media appearances, a chance to raise the issue of austerity and, when he failed to make the ballot, to demonstrate that the leadership election rules were rigged against the left".

It is fantasy, writes Nunns, to think that Corbyn "was somehow foisted on the party by outsiders". Without the pressure inside the party for a left candidate, Corbyn would not even have stood. And then "Corbyn was ahead among party members within weeks of getting his name on the ballot paper".

There followed a much broader "breath-taking surge of people inspired by Corbyn's candidacy". But that "came

after party members had put him in the leader, after trade unions had lent his challenge an air of plausibility".

15,800 people volunteered for the Corbyn campaign. Starting from zero, it became a bigger operation than any of the establishment candidate campaigns.

In addition to the left shifts in the Labour Party and in wider society, and the self-destructive bubble thinking of Burnham and Cooper, two other circumstances were necessary for the year-of-the-comet concatenation which brought Corbyn's victory.

Labour's right wing had in 2014 changed the rules for Labour leader elections to make them simple one-person-one-vote operations among Labour's members and "registered supporters". The right-wingers did that because, as they peered out at the populace through the opaque windows of the world of parliament, lobbyists, the media, think-tanks, and PR, the only world many of them had known in adult life, it looked to them as if New Labour babble commanded wide support which would help them outflank labour-movement activists. They were utterly wrong.

The union leaders, who had through almost all the history of the Labour Party been the bulwarks of the right wing, were fed up. In 2014 they had been through a bizarre exercise with the Collins Review.

At Labour's special conference on the review, one trade-union leader after another got up to condemn the Collins proposals to reduce the unions' weight within Labour - and then to ask the conference to vote for those same proposals. They had decided to let Ed Miliband have what he wanted, and then to go for damage-limitation behind the scenes.

In 2015, the right-wing pitch of Burnham's and Cooper's campaigns signalled to the union leaders that they were in danger of being excluded from political influence even more thoroughly than under Blair. And Blair had after all been prime minister, with great resources at his disposal. They had accommodated to Blair. But neither Burnham and Cooper was Blair. Neither looked specially like a future prime minister. And the candidates themselves, we must suppose, thought that conciliating the union leaders was unnecessary, or would even create a danger of being stigmatised as "the unions' candidate".

So both the biggest unions, Unite and Unison, and many smaller unions, backed Corbyn. They did not get out many "affiliated supporter" votes for the ballot, but they provided money and resources and credibility for the Corbyn campaign.

The Labour Party staff's "'Operation Icepick' - after the weapon that killed Leon Trotsky in 1940 - ... [in which] soon staff and officials were trawling through the social media posts" to expel hundreds of Labour members and ban thousands of new supporters could not stop Corbyn.

Nor could the media hostility, though even the Daily Mirror declared: "those who look to Labour... must be holding their heads in despair".

Corbyn won, and doubled his supporters' joy by going straight from the leadership result announcement to

speak to a "refugees are welcome" protest. But Nunns reports: "Members of his campaign staff [had] been anxious that he should not go".

That clash signalled some of the problems of the two years since then. And in many similar clashes it seems to have been the backroom staff who prevailed, rather than Corbyn's better instincts.

Nunns interprets Corbyn's victory as the breaking-through of an "anti-austerity movement" long incubated. In a loose sense he's right, and he qualifies his use of the word "movement": "The definition of a 'movement' in this context is, like the phenomenon itself, somewhat fuzzy".

Contrary to what Nunns writes, the local anti-cuts campaigns which had been lively in 2010-1 had shrivelled by 2015. There was no organised movement.

Nunns cites an off-the-record comment from someone in Corbyn's inner circle: "He's not an ideologue; he's not a strategist; he's not an organisation builder".

Corbyn had a creditable record as a voter-against-the-odds in Parliament, and as a supporter of working-class struggles in his area. But, since the early 1980s at least, he has never been an organiser.

John McDonnell had made repeated attempts to create Labour left organisation, through initiatives such as the Labour Representation Committee, launched in 2004. Corbyn was always off on the edge of such efforts. In the Labour Party battles of the years before 2015 - the fight against the Collins Review in 2014, and the campaign over the Labour Party rules review in 2010-1 - Corbyn played no part.

Drifting somewhat towards the soft left from his early loose involvement with Socialist Organiser at the end of the 1970s, Corbyn had become a regular columnist for the Morning Star, although he clearly dissented from the Star's "amputee Stalinist" line on Tibet, for example.

Before May 2015, it must have been, Corbyn had no political perspective than to spend a few more years before retirement (he was 66) casting dissenting votes in Parliament, and then to be an occasional speaker at protests and rallies.

Having been active on the Labour left for over forty years, Corbyn knew all the veteran activists. They all knew him, and respected him for his moral steadfastness on issues where he could see a clear left-right divide. No-one, though, looked to him as a source of fresh ideas, incisive thinking, or bold initiative.

But Corbyn had no organised group around him at the start of the leadership campaign.

"In its struggle for power", as Lenin put it, "the proletariat has no other weapon but organisation". The greatest political significance of Corbyn's victory is that it opened the way for the diffuse "movement" which had propelled him to crystallise into an organised, effective movement, capable of reviving and remaking the broader labour movement as a whole. But it only opened the way. It guaranteed nothing.

Once he was elected, he needed organisation and ideas to deal with the hostility of the great majority of Labour MPs and of the Labour Party staff. Nunns

describes the conference hall where the leadership election result was announced in September 2015: "MPs... sit in stony silence, betraying their emotions with the occasional grimace. Party staff wear sullen, sad faces to match the black attire they are sporting, symbolising the death of the party they have known".

"In no sense was [Corbyn] or his team ready" for the challenges of party leadership writes Nunns. There's a general lesson here, too, for the left. Often the time that Marxist organisations spend on discussing history, grand perspectives, and revolutionary experiences seems off-beam to activists. Why don't we just talk about the immediate practical tasks, and leave all that other stuff aside?

Why not? Because if we do that, when history suddenly jolts forward - as it does sometimes, and it did with the Corbyn surge - then we will be left floundering at exactly the time when our opportunities are greatest.

On a personal level, Corbyn has not done badly. The coup attempt against him in June 2016, in which most of his Shadow Cabinet demonstratively resigned and Labour MPs voted no confidence in him, must have been based on a calculation that, faced with such things, Corbyn would simply retire. He refused, won a second leadership contest handsomely, and then led Labour to a good result in the June 2017 general election.

But even that only keeps the openings open. It does not resolve the questions of organising and political initiative.

Beyond that, the year 2015 delivered two warnings about the need for the Labour left to sharpen its politics if it was going to go beyond protest to transform society. Syriza won Greece's general election with a left-wing but ambiguous program, and within months those ambiguities led it into administering cuts policies no different from previous conservative administrations.

In Brazil, the Workers' Party, which had made real reforms in office since 2002, managed to retain office in the October 2014 election. By early 2015 it was implementing cuts similar to those which its right-wing adversaries had advocated in the October 2014 election; by late 2015 it was on the way to losing office through impeachment, and the Workers' Party organisation had become so hollowed-out that it was incapable of resisting.

The staff of Corbyn's campaign, and then of his "Leader's Office", were mostly scraped together from the left margins of the politico-media-sphere and from networks at the top of bourgeois society, and

Seamus Milne had been working for The Economist and The Guardian since 1981: any involvement he had with rank-and-file labour movement activism dated back to his days as business manager of the ultra-Stalinist newspaper Straight Left in the late 70s and early 80s. Simon Fletcher became chief of staff of the campaign, and then of the Leader's Office (until February 2017), because he had been chief of staff for London local government under Ken Livingstone and then trade-union adviser to Ed Miliband. He too had few links to grass-roots activism.

Worse, both Milne and Fletcher have politics which see the old USSR, or today's China, as viable models of

socialism - politics which see bureaucratic manipulation, not working-class agitation, education, and organisation, as the key to change.

Jon Lansman, an early member of the Corbyn inner circle, had a more serious record. But he "made a bad mistake [in their eyes] on 2 September [2015] in agreeing to be interviewed by BBC Newsnight about mandatory reselection" and saying what he thought: that he had backed it for thirty-odd years. Lansman told Nunns: "I was hung out to dry [by the circle round Corbyn]... persona non grata".

He was "exiled" to run Momentum, an attempt to organise the new Labour-left base, and warned he must do it in a way compliant with the wishes of the Leader's Office; of the more-or-less-Corbynista, or semi-Corbynista, MPs; and of the union leaders.

Nunns quotes Lansman: "Really no-one has been taking the restructuring of the party seriously... The issue of how you actually capture the party and change it is not occupying anyone's mind in the leader's office". As we shall see, that issue ended up not faring well in the minds of those in the Momentum office, either.

The membership of the Labour Party has increased to 570,000. But none of the undemocratic rules instituted by Blair have been changed. The September 2016 Labour Party conference, despite coming just after Corbyn's second leadership victory, brought several victories for the right, unimpeded by any large-scale organisation by the left. The June 2017 Labour manifesto was widely welcomed, but it came entirely from a Blairite-type process - the work of clever advisers in a "Leader's Office" - not from any process of democratic deliberation.

The "Operation Icepick" started in 2015 has been continued, in fits and starts, since then, expelling (without prior notice of charges, hearing, or appeal) hundreds more left-wing members than have ever been expelled before in purges under right-wing leaders, and suspending thousands more.

Labour got two-thirds of the youth vote in June 2017. But few of its new young members have been organised into attending regular meetings. A few active new constituency Young Labour groups have been organised, but only a few. Labour Students remain under capricious right-wing control, and campus Labour Clubs anaemic.

That could be changed, even before much modification of existing Labour Party rules, and in a way which would be hard for the Labour right to exist, by Corbyn and his Leader's Office appealing publicly for a revived Labour youth movement. They have not done that.

Despite Corbyn's keynote appearance in September 2015 at the refugee rights demonstration, the Corbyn Labour Party has called no demonstrations. That is, it has called fewer than Michael Foot did when he was Labour Party leader. Or Hugh Gaitskell.

The political weaknesses arising from this delay in organising was shown in 2016 over the issue of freedom of movement for workers. For five months after the June 2016 Brexit referendum vote, Jeremy Corbyn continued to defend freedom of movement in Europe. But there was no broad organised Labour left to support

him.

Eventually he gave in to pressure from the Labour right, from trade unions, and probably from his own Leader's Office, and declared that Labour would drop freedom of movement and go along with exit from the European single market.

In June 2017 Labour's evasive and ambiguous policy on Brexit escaped electoral censure. Despite everything, voters still identified Labour with "soft" Brexit and a more liberal attitude to migrants than the hard-Brexit Tories. As the Brexit process continues, though - or if Labour should oust the Tories earlier - the evasions and ambiguities will be spotlighted.

The remedy to much of this was to be Momentum, launched in October 2015 by some of those around Corbyn, and with the help of the databases gained from the leadership campaign, to rally the "Corbynista" grassroots.

Momentum has gained twenty-odd thousand members - making it, probably, the biggest Labour left movement ever - and generated some good local groups. It has made an effort to construct a left presence at Labour's 2017 conference, after failing entirely to do so at the 2016 conference.

But it has conducted no campaigns within the Labour Party on any issues other than internal elections. It has publicly declared no policies to fight for. It has pressed for no democratic changes.

In fact, in January 2017, its office shut down Momentum's own incipient internal democracy, abolishing all its elected committees overnight and imposing a constitution which in fact gives all decisive power to the (unelected) office itself. It made that coup in order to forestall the convening of a Momentum conference, and for fear that this conference would adopt policies and resolve to campaign on democratisation measures in the Labour Party.

Back in 2015, Momentum was launched on a promise to become a "mass social movement", an NGO-type outfit with a well-funded office, a large membership connected to the office primarily through electronic messages and web content - rather than what activists like those round Solidarity advocated, a "traditional" Labour left grouping, focused on activity within the labour movement, and with the usual democratic procedures.

Clive Lewis was called in to write the prospectus. Lewis had been a left-wing student activist. In 1996 he ran for the presidency of the National Union of Students from the Campaign for Free Education, a coalition within which Workers' Liberty and Solidarity played a major role.

When elected as an MP in 2015, he told the local press that "the Labour Party now has to move away from the centre ground, taking a bolder and more radical stance... New Labour is dead and buried, and it needs to stay that way. We need something different that can offer an alternative". He was seen as one of the most promising of Corbyn's few allies in Parliament.

Yet Corbyn's victory, and the "management" of left-wing affairs by Corbyn's staff and then Leader's Office, made

Lewis more cautious, rather than bolder.

Interviewed by Solidarity in January 2016, and asked straightforwardly whether he was a socialist who wanted to overthrow capitalism, Lewis strove to be roundabout and vague enough that the bourgeois media couldn't pick on what he said to brand him as too left wing. "I am a democratic socialist. But there are as many definitions of socialism as there are of capitalism... Do I want to see an end to neoliberalism and this version of capitalism? Yes. Do I think that there is a role for capitalism in the future? Well, I happen to be a pragmatist..."

Lewis presented Momentum in these terms: "Momentum will strive to bring together progressives campaigning for social, economic and environmental justice across the country..." It must be designed to answer the questions: "How do you become a mass social movement? How do you begin to capture all those people, all those in Avaaz, 38 Degrees, environment activists, tax avoidance activists..."

Never mind the manipulative overtones of the terminology ("capturing" people). The immediate problem was that most of the people who came to the early Momentum meetings were socialists, and socialists who wanted to organise and debate. Baffled, feeling out of their depth, and increasingly aware that their vague "social movement" model was unviable, Momentum's leaders progressively panicked, imposed more and more restrictions on the membership, and finally staged their January 2017 coup.

Momentum remains a large movement, and one within which work can be done, but at present is hamstrung by the anxiety of its leaders to keep in with the union leaders and the Leader's Office.

Again, there's a lesson: don't be beaten down by the common argument that "traditional" organising - meetings, debates, votes, democratic decisions, regular activity - is just too difficult now, so we must settle for clicktivism instead. We can and should be imaginative about our forms of meetings, but without high-intensity organisation, which means meetings, votes, accountability, and so on, we can never defeat those who now hold the commanding heights, or even the commanding foothills, of society.

Nunns concludes by arguing that the Corbyn surge showed "a movement", arisen "in favour of 'a new kind of politics'", finding expression in and conquering "the principal party of organisation". Such events show that "things can, and they will, change".

He is right that great openings have been created. But society changes in a socialist direction only through organised effort informed by clear politics. And for the diffuse "movement" which has come together round Corbyn to achieve that still requires a large further effort of organisation, democratisation, debate, and self-education.

## Trotsky, 1922

### General Considerations on the United Front

1) The task of the Communist Party is to lead the proletarian revolution. In order to summon the proletariat for the direct conquest of power and to achieve it the Communist Party must base itself on the overwhelming majority of the working class.

So long as it does not hold this majority, the party must fight to win it.

The party can achieve this only by remaining an absolutely independent organization with a clear program and strict internal discipline. That is the reason why the party was bound to break ideologically and organizationally with the reformists and the centrists who do not strive for the proletarian revolution, who possess neither the capacity nor the desire to prepare the masses for revolution, and who by their entire conduct thwart this work.

Any members of the Communist Party who bemoan the split with the centrists in the name of "unity of forces" or "unity of front" thereby demonstrate that they do not understand the ABC of Communism and that they themselves happen to be in the Communist Party only by accident.

2) After assuring itself of the complete independence and ideological homogeneity of its ranks, the Communist Party fights for influence over the majority of the working class. This struggle can be accelerated or retarded depending upon objective circumstances and the expediency of the tactics employed.

But it is perfectly self-evident that the class life of the proletariat is not suspended during this period preparatory to the revolution. Clashes with industrialists, with the bourgeoisie, with the state power, on the initiative of one side or the other, run their due course.

In these clashes – insofar as they involve the vital interests of the entire working class, or its majority, or this or that section – the working masses sense the need of unity in action, of unity in resisting the onslaught of capitalism or unity in taking the offensive against it. Any party which mechanically counterposes itself to this need of the working class for unity in action will unfailingly be condemned in the minds of the workers.

Consequently the question of the united front is not at all, either in point of origin or substance, a question of the reciprocal relations between the Communist parliamentary fraction and that of the Socialists, or between the Central Committee of the two parties, or between l'Humanité and Le Populaire. [2] The problem of the united front – despite the fact that a split is inevitable in this epoch between the various political organizations basing themselves on the working class – grows out of the urgent need to secure for the working class the possibility of a united front in the struggle against capitalism.

For those who do not understand this task, the party is only a propaganda society and not an organization for mass action.

3) In cases where the Communist Party still remains an

organization of a numerically insignificant minority, the question of its conduct on the mass-struggle front does not assume a decisive practical and organizational significance. In such conditions, mass actions remain under the leadership of the old organizations which by reason of their still powerful traditions continue to play the decisive role.

Similarly the problem of the united front does not arise in countries where – as in Bulgaria, for example – the Communist Party is the sole leading organization of the toiling masses.

But wherever the Communist Party already constitutes a big, organized, political force, but not the decisive magnitude: wherever the party embraces organizationally, let us say, one-fourth, one-third, or even a larger proportion of the organized proletarian vanguard, it is confronted with the question of the united front in all its acuteness.

If the party embraces one-third or one-half of the proletarian vanguard, then the remaining half or two-thirds are organized by the reformists or centrists. It is perfectly obvious, however, that even those workers who still support the reformists and the centrists are vitally interested in maintaining the highest material standards of living and the greatest possible freedom for struggle. We must consequently so devise our tactic as to prevent the Communist Party, which will on the morrow embrace the entire three-thirds of the working class, from turning into – and all the more so, from actually being – an organizational obstacle in the way of the current struggle of the proletariat.

Still more, the party must assume the initiative in securing unity in these current struggles. Only in this way will the party draw closer to those two-thirds who do not as yet follow its leadership, who do not as yet trust the party because they do not understand it. Only in this way can the party win them over.

4) If the Communist Party had not broken drastically and irrevocably with the Social Democrats, it would not have become the party of the proletarian revolution. It could not have taken the first serious steps on the road to revolution. It would have for ever remained a parliamentary safety-valve attached to the bourgeois state.

Whoever does not understand this, does not know the first letter of the ABC of Communism.

If the Communist Party did not seek for organizational avenues to the end that at every given moment joint, co-ordinated action between the Communist and the non-Communist (including the Social-Democratic) working masses were made possible, it would have thereby laid bare its own incapacity to win over – on the basis of mass action – the majority of the working class. It would degenerate into a Communist propaganda society but never develop into a party for the conquest of power.

It is not enough to possess the sword, one must give it an edge it is not enough to give the sword an edge, one must know how to wield it.

After separating the Communists from the reformists it is not enough to fuse the Communists together by means of organizational discipline, it is necessary that

this organization should learn how to guide all the collective activities of the proletariat in all spheres of its living struggle.

This is the second letter of the alphabet of Communism.

5) Does the united front extend only to the working masses or does it also include the opportunist leaders?

The very posing of this question is a product of misunderstanding.

If we were able simply to unite the working masses around our own banner or around our practical immediate slogans, and skip over reformist organizations, whether party or trade union, that would of course be the best thing in the world. But then the very question of the united front would not exist in its present form.

The question arises from this, that certain very important sections of the working class belong to reformist organizations or support them. Their present experience is still insufficient to enable them to break with the reformist organizations and join us. It may be precisely after engaging in those mass activities, which are on the order of the day, that a major change will take place in this connection. That is just what we are striving for. But that is not how matters stand at present. Today the organized portion of the working class is broken up into three formations.

One of them, the Communist, strives toward the social revolution and precisely because of this supports concurrently every movement, however partial, of the toilers against the exploiters and against the bourgeois state.

Another grouping, the reformist, strives toward conciliation with the bourgeoisie. But in order not to lose their influence over the workers reformists are compelled, against the innermost desires of their own leaders, to support the partial movements of the exploited against the exploiters.

Finally, there is a third grouping, the centrist, which constantly vacillates between the other two, and which has no independent significance.

The circumstances thus make wholly possible joint action on a whole number of vital issues between the workers united in these three respective organizations and the unorganized masses adhering to them.

The Communists, as has been said, must not oppose such actions but on the contrary must also assume the initiative for them, precisely for the reason that the greater is the mass drawn into the movement, the higher its self-confidence rises, all the more self-confident will that mass movement be and all the more resolutely will it be capable of marching forward, however modest may be the initial slogans of struggle. And this means that the growth of the mass aspects of the movement tends to radicalize it, and creates much more favourable conditions for the slogans, methods of struggle, and, in general, the leading role of the Communist Party.

The reformists dread the revolutionary potential of the mass movement; their beloved arena is the parliamentary tribune, the trade-union bureaux, the arbitration boards, the ministerial antechambers.

On the contrary, we are, apart from all other considerations, interested in dragging the reformists from their asylums and placing them alongside ourselves before the eyes of the struggling masses. With a correct tactic we stand only to gain from this. A Communist who doubts or fears this resembles a swimmer who has approved the theses on the best method of swimming but dares not plunge into the water.

6) Unity of front consequently presupposes our readiness, within certain limits and on specific issues, to correlate in practice our actions with those of reformist organizations, to the extent to which the latter still express today the will of important sections of the embattled proletariat.

But, after all, didn't we split with them? Yes, because we disagree with them on fundamental questions of the working-class movement.

And yet we seek agreement with them? Yes, in all those cases where the masses that follow them are ready to engage in joint struggle together with the masses that follow us and when they, the reformists, are to a lesser or greater degree compelled to become an instrument of this struggle.

But won't they say that after splitting with them we still need them? Yes, their blabbermouths may say this. Here and there somebody in our own ranks may take fright at it. But as regards the broad working masses – even those who do not follow us and who do not as yet understand our goals but who do see two or three labour organizations leading a parallel existence – these masses will draw from our conduct this conclusion, that despite the split we are doing everything in our power to facilitate unity in action for the masses.

7) A policy aimed to secure the united front does not of course contain automatic guarantees that unity in action will actually be attained in all instances. On the contrary, in many cases and perhaps even the majority of cases, organizational agreements will be only half-attained or perhaps not at all. But it is necessary that the struggling masses should always be given the opportunity of convincing themselves that the non-achievement of unity in action was not due to our formalistic irreconcilability but to the lack of real will to struggle on the part of the reformists.

In entering into agreements with other organizations, we naturally obligate ourselves to a certain discipline in action. But this discipline cannot be absolute in character. In the event that the reformists begin putting brakes on the struggle to the obvious detriment of the movement and act counter to the situation and the moods of the masses, we as an independent organization always reserve the right to lead the struggle to the end, and this without our temporary semi-allies.

This, may give rise to a new sharpening of the struggle between us and the reformists. But it will no longer involve a simple repetition of one and the same set of ideas within a shut-in circle but will signify – provided our tactic is correct – the extension of our influence over new, fresh groups of the proletariat.

8) It is possible to see in this policy a rapprochement with the reformists only from the standpoint of a journalist who believes that he rids himself of reformism by ritualistically criticizing it without ever leaving his editorial office but who is fearful of clashing with the reformists before the eyes of the working masses and giving the latter an opportunity to appraise the Communist and the reformist on the equal plane of the mass struggle. Behind this seeming revolutionary fear of "rapprochement" there really lurks a political passivity which seeks to perpetuate an order of things wherein the Communists and reformists each retain their own rigidly demarcated spheres of influence, their own audiences at meetings, their own press, and all this together creates an illusion of serious political struggle.

9) We broke with the reformists and centrists in order to obtain complete freedom in criticizing perfidy, betrayal, indecision and the half-way spirit in the labour movement. For this reason any sort of organizational agreement which restricts our freedom of criticism and agitation is absolutely unacceptable to us. We participate in a united front but do not for a single moment become dissolved in it. We function in the united front as an independent detachment. It is precisely in the course of struggle that broad masses must learn from experience that we fight better than the others, that we see more clearly than the others, that we are more audacious and resolute. In this way, we shall bring closer the hour of the united revolutionary front under the undisputed Communist leadership.

# A government of the working class

By Karl Radek

THE starting point of our activities must be the demand for higher wages, the demand for retention of the eight-hour day and the demand for the development of the Industrial council movement. But these demands do not suffice. Workers who belong to no political party at all can and do demand the daily wage of one thousand marks, whilst five hundred marks will not procure them the necessaries of life. But they see that to increase their wages in paper money provides no issue from their troubles. To begin with, such watchwords may suffice but the longer the struggle lasts, the more essential does it become to proclaim political watchwords, the watchwords of social organisation. When the time is ripe for the voicing of such demands, it is time to move from the defensive to the offensive. We must put forward in these circumstances the demand for control of production and make clear to the workers that this is the only way out of economic chaos.

What are the masses of the workers, not merely the Communists, thinking of when they speak of Workers' Governments? I confine myself to countries in which these ideas have already found an echo: Britain, Germany, and Czechoslovakia. In England, think of the Labour Party. Communism there is not yet a mass power. In the countries where capitalism is decaying, this idea is intimately associated with that of the United Front. Just as the workers say that the meaning of the United Front is that the Communists and Social-Democrats must make common cause in the factory when there is a strike, so for the masses of the workers the idea of a Workers' Government has a similar significance. The workers are thinking of a government of all the working class parties.

What does that mean for the masses practically and politically? The political decision on the question will depend on the fact whether the social-democracy does or does not go with the bourgeoisie. Should it do so, then the Workers' Government can only take the form of the dictatorship of the Communist proletariat. We cannot decide for the social democrats what their policy should be. What we have to decide is this. When we lead the masses in the struggle against the capitalist offensive, are we ready to fight on behalf of such a labour coalition government? Are we or are we not ready to bring about the conditions essential to its realisation?

In my opinion, when we are concerned with the struggle for the United Front, we ought to say bluntly that, if the social-democratic workers will force their leaders to break with the bourgeoisie, then we are ready to participate in a labour government, so long as that government is an instrument of the class struggle. I mean, if it is ready to fight beside us shoulder to shoulder.

What we have in mind is not a parlia-

mentary combination, but a platform for the mobilisation of the masses, an arena for the struggle. The form the question takes is this. Will the social-democrats be excluded from the coalition by the bourgeoisie: will they continue to rot in the coalition; or shall we help the masses to compel them to fight? Perhaps you will ask why the deuce we should bother what they do? If it only concerned the fate of the leaders of the social-democrats, we should certainly be quite happy to leave them to rot. But when the question at issue is the mobilisation of the social-democratic masses, we must formulate a positive programme.

To what extent does such a programme conflict with the dictatorship of the proletariat? To what extent does it conflict with the civil war? It conflicts to the same extent to which an ante-room conflicts with the room to which it leads. As far as we are concerned with the broad front of the proletarian struggle for freedom the watchword of the workers' government is necessary to supply us with a directive; it is a watchword that whets the edge of our political weapons. The

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**"The moment when the workers find themselves simultaneously engaged in the fight for the workers' government and in the fight for control of production, will be the moment when our fundamental offensive will begin."**

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moment when the workers find themselves simultaneously engaged in the fight for the workers' government and in the fight for control of production, will be the moment when our fundamental offensive will begin. The moment when we shall cease to content ourselves with trying to defend what we have, and shall advance to the attack on new positions! Our offensive will begin as soon as the workers are ready to fight for these two watchwords.

Even in the countries where we have the best developed parties, our agitation still exhibits an abstract character, it is not yet instinct with the passion of persons convinced they are fighting for aims realisable in the near future. All their work produces the impression of pure agitation. If we desire that our debates shall not die of anaemia, and that our congresses shall not resemble party conventicles in which nothing but theoretical evolutionary tendencies are discussed, the parties must pursue in practice a very different policy from that they have pursued in the past. There must be a change, not merely in political aim, but also in the

energy of the struggle.

The Communist International is not merely the party for the conquest of power, it is the party for conducting the fight. It is nonsense, therefore, to say: "These are piping times of peace, so the party cannot fight." Such a view would make of the Communist International a parasite upon the proletarian world revolution instead of a combatant on its behalf. The watchword must be not one of disillusionment and of waiting for the revolution, but one of fighting for every inch of ground. All our discussions are devoid of meaning unless we understand that we can only form Communist Parties upon condition that their main activity is not to be in the rooms where resolutions are passed and studied, but on the battlefield where our aims find practical fulfilment, in the United Front of the proletariat, in the fight along the lines that are made actual by contemporary history.

Comrades, I want to say a few words about the peril from the Right. How does the British Communist Party apply its United Front tactics? It says: "We are a section of the working class, namely its Left Wing. Nevertheless, we want to stand together with all the other workers' parties." Whither Naomi goes thither goes Ruth also. And then the election address goes on: "What is the Labour Party? The workers are fine fellows, they want to fight, but the leaders are not quite so fine." And then it says: "In the past as in the present there was treachery on the part of the leaders. Such treachery might happen once. But nevertheless, the Labour Party is against the capitalists." By Jove, if this is a sample of unity tactics, perhaps we better leave them alone. The Executive has shown in its manifesto that the entire policy of the Labour Party is nothing but a continuous betrayal of working class interests. But the Executive also said to the workers: If the Labour Party is victorious and forms a government, it will betray you in the end and will show to the workers that its aim is the perpetuation of capitalism. Then the workers will either desert it or the Labour Party will be compelled to fight owing to the pressure of the workers, and in that case we shall back it. We issued a definite watchword: vote for it, but prepare to struggle against it. If thereupon comrade Webb comes here and warns us against the opportunists, we can only say to him: "Comrade Webb, book your berth as quickly as possible and return to England, in order to fight against opportunism there, and you will have our heartiest support".

*Karl Radek was a revolutionary active in the German, Polish, and Russian revolutionary movements, and an early leader of the Left Opposition. (He later capitulated to Stalinism, then fell victim to Stalin's purges.) This speech is from the Fourth Congress of the Communist International in 1922.*