



# How the left established itself

By Sue Hamilton

**A** PREVIOUS article, in *WL40*, described how Labour Students won the leadership of the National Union of Students [NUS] in 1982. Then, they were a left-wing alternative to the previous leadership, around the Communist Party and its allies. After the 1983 election they moved to the right, but a left-wing challenge to them, both in the NUS and in the student Labour Clubs, was developing round Socialist Students in NOLS [SSiN].

NOLS, the National Organisation of Labour Students, had been relatively open and democratic in the early 1980s, but after 1983 it became harder and harder to set up new Labour Clubs, or to secure delegate credentials for the annual Labour Students conference.

Opposition clubs were ruled out on trivial technicalities. Leading critics' membership cards were lost in the national office so that they became ineligible to attend conference, and whole batches of cards disappeared to reduce the number of delegates that clubs could send to conference. Local Labour Party full-time officials, who had to be present for a new Labour

Club to be officially set up, would often cancel at the last minute.

Rules preventing part-time Further Education students from joining the Labour Students organisation meant that every student who was also signing on the dole became ineligible for membership.

The fight came to a head at the Hull Labour Students Conference in 1984. Many, many college Labour Clubs had been ruled out before getting to conference, but not enough: the combined opposition — SSiN and Militant — had at least as many votes as the ruling faction, "Clause Four".

In the first batch of elections, the left slate won some positions. The second batch never took place because the Labour Party official in charge closed down the conference after goading the Militant into behaving badly.

Clause Four alleged that one of their members had been thumped by a Militant supporter. Maybe she did hit him, but it is just as likely that one of his own side did it. More votes had been cast than delegates accredited. Militant declared that they had evidence of how the ballot had been rigged

and demanded a roll-call vote. They bungled it by accusing the Labour Party official in charge personally, without evidence. He took his chance and closed down the conference.

All the elections for a new National Committee were nullified and the old committee, dominated by Clause Four, stayed in office for another 12 months. SSiN candidates Clive Bradley and Bryn Griffiths had been elected as Publicity Officer and Vice Chair but never took office.

Years later, Danny Nicol, a delegate from Oxford University who had gone on to be a leading figure in the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy, revealed that his delegation had indeed rigged the ballot. They had been given more ballot forms than they had delegates, which accounted for the discrepancy between registered delegates and votes cast.

Clause Four made sure that subsequent conferences were firmly under their control, and Labour Students steadily dwindled from a political movement into a machine for putting careerists into NUS positions.

## The South Africa debate

**R**IGHT up until the end of the 1984-5 miners' strike, however, NUS was an open forum. That began to change after a debate on South Africa which frightened the life out of Clause Four.

Students had long supported the movement against apartheid in South Africa, for example in the protests against the South Africa rugby tour in 1970. Every big college had an anti-apartheid society. The Anti-Apartheid Movement had a full-time student organiser.

In the 1980s, struggles led by the new non-racial trade unions highlighted to the world the fact that other anti-apartheid organisations existed besides the African National Congress, which had heavy backing from Eastern Bloc governments, the Communist Parties internationally - and the Labour Students leadership.

Now the issue of direct links between British trade unionists or student unionists and the new non-racial unions and student groups in South Africa came to the fore. The ANC had always insisted that all contact with South Africa should be through them. Any other contact they insisted was a breach of the international boycott of the apartheid state. The new trade unions — developing in the teeth of hostility from the ANC, which recognised only its own exile trade-union front — did not agree. Many of their leaders talked about launching a new workers' party in South Africa. They wanted links with the international working class on their own terms — not mediated through the ANC.

In 1986, Moses Mayekiso, one of the leaders of the new unions, toured Britain with the backing of SSiN and Workers' Liberty, speaking to colleges, union branches, Labour Youth conference and NUS conference. It was impossible for the Labour Students leadership to denounce him as a pro-imperialist.

Labour Students had been saying that direct links would threaten the safety of activists in South Africa. When Moses said that of course caution was necessary, but the best way to make links was to telephone his union's office in South Africa, it was very hard for the ANC's "security" mumbo-jumbo to maintain its old credibility.

At NUS conference, the Labour Students leaders denounced SSiN as counter-revolutionaries, dupes of imperialism and so on. Yet several speakers had long family histories of involvement in the South African struggle; two had had their fathers murdered by the South African state.

The pro-direct links motion was lost by ten votes, thanks to the SWP, whose speak-

ers grasped the microphone to explain that only revolutionaries favoured direct links and reformists opposed them.

## Labour Students and Stalinism

**L**ABOUR Students also denounced SSiN and the rest of the left as "cold warriors" and "pro-American" because SSiN wanted NUS to support the independent student union in Poland set up by Solidarnosc in its revolt against the Stalinist police state in 1980-1. The Polish state-stooge student union, the NZSP, was a regular partner in the NUS's international lash-ups, and it was impossible for some people in Clause Four to grasp that there was a third camp in world politics, and neither Washington nor Moscow carried the banner of the international working class.

One reason they gave for not supporting the Solidarnosc student union was that it did not have a head office with a fax machine! The union had been driven underground, and its members communicated by tiny pamphlets which could be concealed in the inside lining of a jacket without altering the fit. Members wore electrical resistors as badges to identify themselves.

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Labour Students' politics here, as elsewhere, were a mix of the Clause Four politicians' Stalinist ideology and the careerists' notion that student union development was to be measured by facilities and seats on the board of colleges, not by levels of participation and internal democracy!

Clause Four had begun as "Operation Icepick", named after the tool with which a Stalinist agent murdered Trotsky in 1940. Their more political members believed in Stalinism. Their younger careerists enjoyed international jaunts to Eastern Europe.

Each year NUS leaders would go off to the Eastern Bloc to be entertained by "peace movements" or "student movements" which were in fact nothing more than government fronts. When delegations arrived in the UK from the Eastern Bloc, it was party time for Labour Students; they genuinely believed that they were mixing with representatives from a higher form of soci-

ety, and that they were rehearsing for when they themselves would be grown-up politicians conducting matters of state. Now some of them do it with Blair.

Today, after the collapse of the Soviet Union it is hard to imagine the importance of this network, but it was as important as it was corrupt.

## Banning Jewish societies

**B**ESIDES South Africa and Poland, another big international issue — the Israeli/Palestinian conflict — also figured largely in the student politics of the mid-1980s. Here, the alignments were different.

In 1983, Sunderland Poly Student Union banned its Jewish Society because it was explicitly "Zionist" — i.e., it would not disown Israel. The Union referred to the United Nations declaration that Zionism was a form of racism, and argued that banning the Jewish Society was anti-racism.

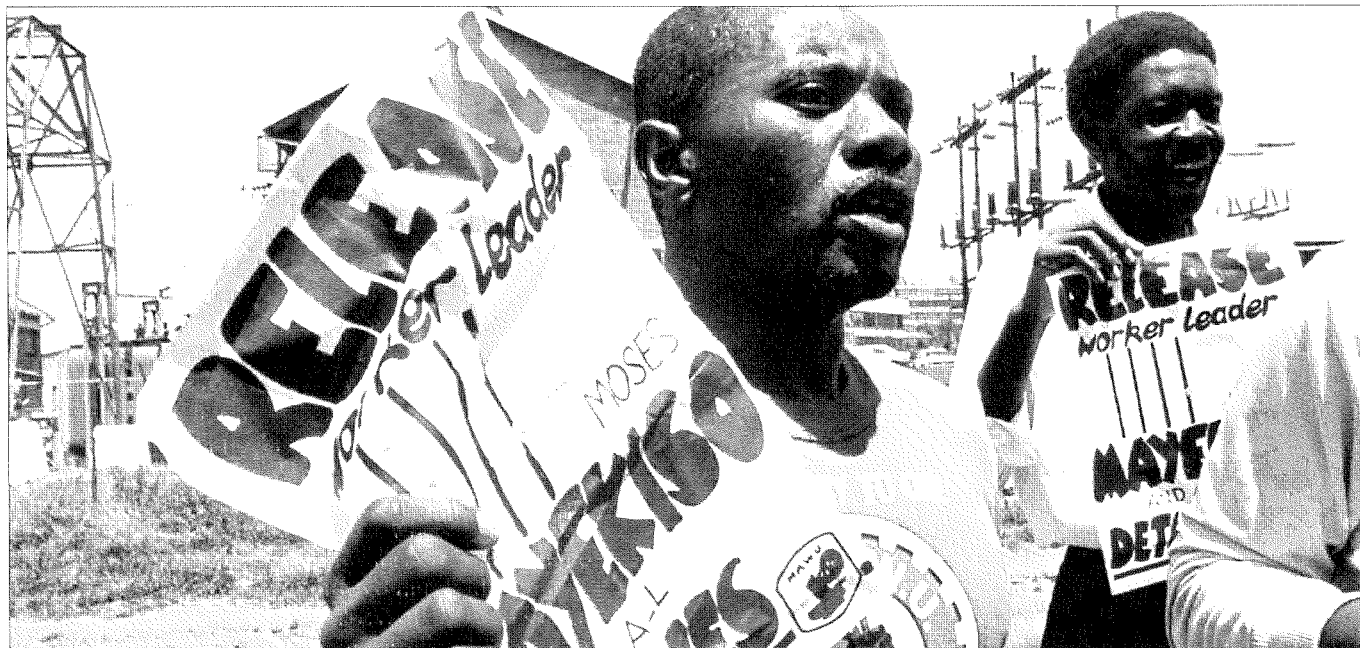
The long debate which followed covered many issues: the Palestinian question, anti-semitism, ways to fight racism, and also norms of democracy in student unions.

SSiN became the main force campaigning against the banning of Jewish Societies and a general culture of "banning the unrighteous". Workers' Liberty, the main group in SSiN, argued further that the right of the Palestinian Arabs to a state of their own — which we vigorously supported — did not and could not undo the right of the Israeli Jews to a state. For the Israeli Jews to want to be independent from neighbouring hostile nations was no more necessarily racist than the self-determination of any other nation.

Some of the Stalinist current in Labour Students were unmistakably anti-semites, but all the NUS leadership were against banning Jewish Societies. Left groups like the SWP and Socialist Action were in favour of the ban.

The argument also brought new players on to the NUS stage — people who had not previously been involved in the mainstream of NUS, who had perhaps been involved in single-issue international or anti-racist campaigns. Some black students saw the campaign to lift the ban on the Jewish Society as support for the policies of the Israeli state: those who opposed the ban were denounced as anti-Palestinian, racist and pro-imperialist!

As the row spread, it became clear that many students who considered themselves socialists, and certainly not anti-Jewish, believed that Zionism was not the majority reflex culture of British Jewry, but rather a conspiratorial ideology which declared the Jews a master race and ipso-facto the Pales-



SSiN organised solidarity with the new non-racial trade unions in South Africa

tinians as inferior beings. Nonetheless, the only Zionists anyone wanted to ban were Jewish ones. There was never a cry for banning Labour MPs like Tony Benn or Eric Heffer who backed Israel. Yet, before being allowed to have a Jewish Society in a college, Jewish students would have to denounce their heritage and their community culture, and side with those who wanted to destroy the state of Israel.

And to many students who saw themselves as militant anti-racists, the NUS leaders' opposition to banning was just one more example of the NUS Executive being too timid to carry through the logic of their position.

So misguided "Trotskyist" anti-racists went to bed with some anti-semites, who were also lashed up with Stalinists hostile to Israel from the viewpoint of the international interests of the Soviet empire. The battle line-up here influenced NUS politics

long after the Sunderland Jewish Society was reinstated and other, copy-cat bans were lifted.

### Holding together a broad movement

IT was a difficult time for SSiN. The project was building a broad left alliance in the student movement, but here SSiN had to oppose a large part of the left. SSiN members who were "anti-Zionists" — who accepted that Zionism = racism — suffered tremendous pressure to break with the majority, whom they considered to be "Zionists".

Through all the head-banging, name-calling and theatrical absurdity, SSiN stuck together by delivering results on the ground and getting the bread and butter issues

right. No matter what one's opinion was on the Middle East, there was more to keep the rank and file movement together than there was to split it.

Throughout this period, SSiN won nearly all the debates on domestic issues at NUS conferences — and there were then two conferences a year, large, lively affairs. On every issue of student unionism — the erosion in student grants, denial of social security benefits to students, housing crises, threats to student union autonomy, cuts in courses and facilities — SSiN had vigorous and practical policies for campaigning.

In a Britain where the Tories were running roughshod over the labour movement, we could score no big victories — and that fact determined a slow but steady drift to the right in general student opinion. Yet for anyone concerned to build a campaigning student union in their college, SSiN were the people with ideas.

Opposition to banning Jewish Societies in fact became something which bound SSiN together. Even those who felt that Zionism did equate with racism knew very well that banning the unrighteous was no way to build effective student unions with mass student involvement.

The SSiN coalition held together by doing all that a good working democracy could do, and that was a lot, to make the organisation habitable for the minority: they were offered space in SSiN publications, their alternative model motions were circulated and they were never denied a platform from which to put forward their opinion. Another of SSiN's strengths was that its slates for elections were not drawn only from the dominant tendency in the coalition.

SSiN's influence grew especially in the

Further Education colleges, where working-class youth study vocational and pre-university courses. The key here was the Area structures of NUS — autonomous, locally-funded, federations of local student unions. Because SSiN activists in the Areas were able to organise good campaigns at a county and city-wide level and to provide direct assistance to the hard-pressed student union organisers in Further Education colleges, we got access to the younger activists in the weakest sector of the national union.

Unable to match SSiN [and Militant's] ability to work in the Further Education sector, the NUS leadership decided to block up the conduit by giving Areas more equitable funding, from central resources, at the prices of the loss of the right to campaign on locally-decided policies.

SSiN combined with Militant to defeat the Labour Students plan, Areas remained autonomous, and the cack-handed, obvious ploy only served to discredit the leadership and widen the support of SSiN as the rank and file organisation which knew what was what in NUS.

### Establishing a voice on the NUS Executive

SSiN had first won places on the National Union of Students executive in 1984, with Karen Talbot and Simon Pottinger. In 1985 Simon won Vice President Welfare against the Union of Jewish Students' candidate Lindsey Brandt, who was supported both by the NUS leadership and by sections of the left.

In 1986 SSiN had to make a watershed decision. Up to then SSiN had never run directly against Labour Students in NUS

elections. Labour Students would (and still does) run only partial slates, leaving slots empty for other groups it wants to horse-trade with, and SSiN had always stood in those slots. Now Labour Students decided to stand their own candidate, Jo Gibbons, against Simon Pottinger in an attempt to stop him winning a second year in office. SSiN ran against Labour Students and won.

In 1987, after yet another Labour Students selection conference which would not have passed scrutiny by independent observers, SSiN ran against their official candidate for President, Maeve Sherlock, though we lost. Then Michele Carlisle stood in a "gap" that Labour Students had left for the Communist Party, and was returned as National Secretary, with Paul McGarry and Emma Colyer also winning non-sabbatical places on the NUS Executive.

In 1988 Michele was re-elected to a non-sabbatical post and was joined by Liz Millward, and by Dave Brennan as the Area Convenors' observer on the Executive.

Since then Left Unity and the Campaign for Free Education have regularly elected a left-wing minority to the NUS Executive. This year, 1997, CFE became the largest single faction on the Executive, with more members than Labour Students, though alliances with right-wing "independents" leave the Blairites' control of the executive still solid.

### Left cover for a right shift

**A**S the reverberations of the Sunderland Poly ban continued after 1983, we also had the University of East Anglia banning the pop group Frankie Goes to Hollywood, Preston Poly trying to ban the television, and an SWPer trying to ban Desmond Decker's song, "The Israelites".

The culture of banning remained deep-rooted in the student movement, and it was fuelled by many themes — from anti-fascism and "no-platform"-ing through to student unions who wanted to free their buildings from the contamination of the outside world's racism and sexism. The whole left culture was unclear about the importance of liberty and free debate. This took the "liberation campaigns" to absurd postures in the years which followed, and banning became an ideological weapon of the right wing against the left.

As the Labour Students leading group, Clause Four — by now renamed Democratic Left — moved right, it shifted from a broadly pro-working-class viewpoint to one which privatised politics. The old slogan of the women's liberation movement, "the personal is political" was reversed into "the political is personal". It became impossible, for example, to treat men and women

equally in political discourse. And how the "feminists" used this new-found moral blackmail!

The norms of democratic debate were superseded by assertion and counter-assertion in an ideology which became known to its critics as "femocracy". The ground rules of femocracy were that members of oppressed groups were always right, unless they were objecting to that assumption, in which case they were the intellectual prisoners of white, heterosexual men. To speak up against the collective assertions of a group of the specially oppressed was to lay oneself open to allegations of racism or sexism or homophobia. For a man to argue with a woman on a broader political issue was thought to be evidence of sexism or even sexual harassment!

We had the Communist Party denouncing SSiN as "the harem" of one of its leading men because SSiN objected to rhetoric of "I experience therefore I am right". The most enlightening incidents were in Manchester.

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### **"Labour Students intend to relaunch themselves as 'independents'. They know that students will clash with the government, and they are not prepared to stand up and defend New Labour policies."**

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The Labour Club candidate for Campaigns Officer in the University student union's annual executive elections, Matt Davies, was in SSiN. He was gay, but he was denounced by the Gay Society and by some Labour Students as a homophobe — because he was standing against a Gay Society candidate! No matter that Matt was in the Gay Society, no matter what his politics or even his sexual orientation, the fact that he stood against the Gay Society made him a certified "homophobe".

An article in *Socialist Organiser* (the journal then published by Workers' Liberty) on "Class Politics not Rainbow Alliances" got Matt's posters ripped down and the author — Clive Bradley, a former member of the Labour Club and activist in the Gay Society at the university — banned from the union building!

Then, just across the road at the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST), there was a social at NUS's national convention for Area Convenors (the elected organisers for the local federations of NUS). A SSiN area convenor

got into a row with two Labour Students convenors about NUS proposals to reduce the autonomy of the Area organisations. The Labour Students people were a man and a woman, and the SSiN convenor was a man. He spoke to the woman in an aggressive and argumentative way — just as he spoke to the man and they in turn to him.

The following day, at UMIST Labour Club, the NUS President denounced the SSiN member for sexual harassment! Later she had to retract and apologise, but only after the matter was taken to the NUS Executive.

Despite SSiN's Michele Carlisle being well-respected as the student organiser for the National Abortion Campaign, SSiN lost the support of many women activists by a hastily written, and rather cross article in *Socialist Organiser* entitled "Feminism not Femocracy". It declared that it was time to put a stop to the trend in NUS whereby all politics was becoming a matter of pandering to and balancing the claims of the self-selected representatives of various oppressed groups. Speaking up against the tide was politically the right thing to do, but perhaps it could have been done more gently, and earlier on.

SSiN was able to survive the outbreak of femocracy in part because a good chunk of our leadership were women. Had the majority of our central organisers been men, then it would have been very hard indeed to survive the critical stand we took on 'liberation ideology'.

Yet we did survive, and established a base which has been built on since then by Left Unity and the Campaign for Free Education.

Since 1987 — which was Labour's third general election defeat in a row — Labour Students' march to the right has accelerated, in line with the "Blair project", as it is now known. Some of the minor figures in the triumph of this New Labour Right have been former NUS or Labour Students activists, and NUS has been well and truly consolidated as a pillar of Blairite good practice. In the past, the arguments in NUS were about how to campaign. Now the argument is about whether NUS should campaign at all.

Now, when the honeymoon period with the new government is over, the Labour Students faction in NUS intend to relaunch themselves as "independents" — so as to be able, for self-protection, to distance themselves from the Blair government. They know that students will clash with the government, and they are not prepared to stand up and defend New Labour policies. A serious left in the National Union of Students can soon, if its organisers know their business, come into its own.