

INTERNAL BULLETIN NO.37.

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LP Perspectives & Report.....Hill

(*This document should be taken together with the relevant amendments from Kinnell to Cunliffe's 'British Perspectives', some of which have been incorporated.

*Almost all the quotes are taken from the Cunliffe and Jones documents on the LP, which are in IB 36 and were originally distributed at the January 22nd NC.

*This document was more or less completed by the time I saw Cunliffe's own amendments to the LP section in his 'British Perspectives'. With some further amendments I agree with almost all he has written. However, this document still stands as a record of the work and as an answer to the sectarian arguments in the organisation, including in IB 36.)

Comrades are asked to make a contribution of 20p if possible towards the cost of duplicating and mailing IBs.

Further resolutions, amendments, discussion articles etc. should be sent to the centre, if possible typed A4 on Roneo stencils.

LP PERSPECTIVES & REPORT.

1. Following a significant rise in individual Labour Party membership in 1980/81 (25%) there has been a decline over the last year of something like 20%. Increased membership fees have played a part, but much more significant has been demoralisation with the apparent strength of Thatcher, a string of working class defeats, and the growing domination of the right wing inside the Labour Party. The period of rank and file victories in the Labour Party and the large unemployment demonstrations has given way to the picture of a Party dominated by a leadership that doesn't agree with its policies, that sees its main enemy as socialists within it, that is paralysed. Affiliated membership has also declined, along with the decline in overall union membership.

There has been little loosening of the organic and open connection between the unions and the Labour Party at any level. The threat to that connection comes from the Tories, and their proposed attack on the political levy. If they manage to impose a system of 'contracting in' (as they did for a whole period following the defeat of the General Strike) it would represent a major weakening of the trade unions' political voice, and therefore a major working class defeat. In that situation, one of the central struggles in the working class would be to rebuild the links.

The Tories certainly understand that the formation of a Labour Party represented an historic gain for the working class. It is therefore not surprising that a major plank in their anti-union legislation is an attack on the political levy.

The virtually unique work we have helped to start in the Mobilising Committee for Defence of Trade Union Rights, the connections we have gained in both the TUs and MP, give us the opportunity to play a central role in organising to defend those links. Within that we would fight for our own policies and perspective - tying the question of the political levy and the block vote to a programme of trade union democracy; arguing that the links should be used by the rank and file as part of the fight for an alternative leadership and a transformed labour movement. In the white collar unions it would allow us to raise the question of Labour Party affiliation in a new way, linking it clearly to the defence of the union.

A major weakness over the last year has been the failure to concretise the demand 'democratise the block vote'. We must urgently change that situation - in conjunction with, and learning from, the demands that are being developed for women in the TUs and the Labour Party Women's Conference.

2. The link between the TUs and the Labour Party is likely to be a major issue in the forthcoming General Election. It will be a propaganda issue because the Tories will only be able to launch an actual assault on the link afterwards - if they win or in coalition with the Alliance. This General Election, almost certainly happening within the next few months, will dominate British politics, and relating to it must therefore be a central part of the League's activity.

Our task is to combine organising for a Labour victory with using the opportunities available in an election to draw new militants around us, to get across our ideas, to organise the Left. We should immediately seek to organise such left forces as we can reach to create an independent voice within the official Labour campaign - on the theme 'Vote Labour; organise for socialist policies; prepare to fight'. The fact that the official Labour manifesto almost certainly, after a period of major struggles for Labour democracy, will be a hedged and gutted version of Labour Party conference policy, opens the possibility of doing this on a bigger scale than the S**V in 1979.

The S**V tactic provides the model, although the exact form will have to be worked out concretely. We should, however, be in a much better position to draw in trade union bodies - using work and contacts in LP workplace branches, Broad Lefts, MCDTUR etc, and even approaching local sections of the TULV if militants have any strength in them (e.g. in the Merseyside area).

After the election, whatever its outcome, a resurgence of the Labour left is very likely. If the Tories or the Tories/Alliance win, there will be recriminations and questioning about why Labour lost; if a Labour government or Labour/Alliance coalition emerges, it will be forced rapidly into conflict with Labour's rank and file and resistance is to be expected. We may see serious attempts to use the power of reselecting MPs to pressurise or destabilise such a Labour or coalition government. We will need to be as well placed as possible to take part in, promote and fight for leadership within this left resurgence, recognising that a working class answer to the crisis of capitalism and the role of the labour leadership will be sharply posed side by side with the possibility of a real element of rank file control through the democratic reforms.

3. The last 16 months have seen real but not decisive defeats for the left in the Labour Party. They have been based on the right wing's capture of the 'commanding heights' of the LP, the NEC - initially in alliance with Foot and sections of the old Tribune left, now with an increasingly clear majority.

Faced with CLPs solidly to the left and relatively confident after the victories of 79-81, the right wing have used their position to launch a witch-hunt aimed at dividing and intimidating this rank and file. They see this, rightly, as a necessary part of re-establishing their control over the Labour Party, and therefore also over its policies. If they are successful they will use their position to reorganise the LP (postal ballots, restructuring the NEC etc.) to strengthen their position. But the fact that the Labour leadership cannot even agree on this immediate programme and that they have laboured over the witch-hunt during the last year indicates the problems they face.

The right wing have little base in the CLPs, which are solidly against the witch-hunt. Most unions have clear Conference policy against a witch-hunt. The Labour rank and file has fought and won on the first test case (Bermondsey), and threatens widescale defiance of any attempted expulsions - at a time when the Labour leadership needs the CLPs to work for their re-election. The invention of the Register, the problems the witch-hunt has run into, flow from this situation.

They have now also run into the election period. While sections of the right wing see this within a clear perspective of restructuring the Labour Party to consolidate their position, and are not prepared to put the fight off, it is nonsense to suggest that the Labour leadership, including the TU bureaucracy, want to lose the election. With the Tories' attack on the unions, and its links with the LP, the stakes in terms of the bureaucracy's influence and position (let alone careers) in capitalist Britain are very high for them too. They want a Labour government, and will accept a coalition. The enforced delay in their witch-hunt puts them in a cleft stick - they have to 'deliver' something, but need to minimise the disruption caused in an election.

The right wing's tactics now appear to be for a limited purge of leading Militant supporters, using the pressure of the forthcoming election to limit resistance, and then wait until after the election for a much wider assault - whether Labour wins or loses. Militant's actions - their sectarian campaign, their unprincipled use of the courts, declaring against CLPs resisting - will help the right wing in this, and we have criticised them accordingly.

Resistance in the CLPs, tied to a real move in the unions, can stop even this tactic. Our ~~co~~-thinkers have played a leading role in organising this, and we must ensure that work in Labour Against the Witch-hunt (LAW) is strengthened and this is made a priority. But this can only be done with a clear assessment of the situation.

The fact that Islington Central CLP, one of the less left wing CLPs in London, can openly declare that it will not expel is an indication of the depth of feeling inside the Labour Party. The fact that over 100 CLPs came to the LAW Conference on October 30th is another. But it is important to remember that many of those CLPs did not have policies to resist expulsions and defy the NEC, and that less than 50% have affiliated to LAW since then. Those CLPs that are immediately involved have got that policy, but the indications are that Militant will tell them not to bother. Large sections of the left have formally come out for resistance, and that needs to be built upon and used. But that has yet to be tested, and the crumbling of a number of them before the Register, and even the reaction of many in local government when faced with a sharp confrontation, indicates that there will be a major fight to organise the resistance.

It is by no means certain that the right wing will be able to strictly control the scope of the witch-hunt before the election, now they have been forced to go for bans and proscriptions, but it is unlikely to go beyond Militant in this immediate period. However, we are still only talking about months before the election is over, and then it is certain we will be an immediate target. Our approach should be the same as the one agreed virtually unanimously at the December 1981 NC - to make it as difficult as possible for the right wing to exclude us from the struggle in the political wing of the labour movement; to avoid giving them any unnecessary hostages; to maintain the strictest security; to minimise any losses.

In this context, the fact that it took the NC two months to agree that the Register was a tactical question is one of the clearest indications of how the political problems in the League could have an immediate and potentially catastrophic effect on our work. To be semi-paralysed over such a question for such a period will ruin us in the witch-hunt.

It is too early after the C*** AGM to reach a definite decision on registration. We need a clear assessment of those that are still prepared to stand out against registration; what the Register now involves after recent developments and how the right wing can still use it. Nevertheless the basic considerations behind the November NC decision should still stand. That it is a tactical question; that our co-thinkers should seek to organise a fight for an effective boycott as long as that is possible (which was done); that it would be wrong in principle and stupid tactically for them to insist on boycotting until the end, or past the time when a boycott was no longer possible; that instead they should use the tactic of registration not to convince the bureaucracy, but to link up with those sections of the rank and file and left who had 'accepted' the Register (as a Conference decision; because we were too weak to boycott) to try and overcome their isolation and therefore strengthen their fight to be in the LP, the political organisation of the trade unions. The approach would be: 'our views on the Register, and the importance of the boycott tactic, have not changed; we are in a clear minority on this; many have now accepted the Register, at least until they can overturn it at Conference, but oppose the witch-hunt; we call on them to openly support us in our fight as revolutionary Marxists to organise in the Labour Party, in the same way as the Fabians and Tribunitites do; we call on them to help us defeat the bureaucracy's attempt to exclude us from the Register and witch-hunt us'.

4. The struggle to democratise the Labour Party was and is of major importance. Taken separately and out of context, the reforms were not particularly radical. What gave them their explosive force was that they represented an attempt by the rank and file - embittered by the experience of the Wilson-Callaghan government - to bring under their direct control a section of the labour bureaucracy. From our perspective of transforming and revolutionising the British labour movement it represented a major step forward, a potential turning point in the history of the movement in a way that even big strikes rarely are.

We reject the syndicalist SWP notion that, because the height of the fight for democratic reforms in the Labour Party took place in a period of decline in direct action struggle, it represented a political step backwards.

From the beginning, S* not only took a leading part in this fight, but also alone clearly spelt out its logic: either the democracy struggle would extend into the unions and would develop into a fight for a militant leadership armed with clear, working class policies; or it would be halted, and then pushed backwards. Far from having a vice like grip on the Labour Party, a badly shaken labour bureaucracy would be forced to launch a wide-ranging purge as part of reasserting its control, if it was left in place. Marxism is not the science of prediction, but we should certainly have made more of the fact that S* alone had both a clear view of what was happening, and had organised on that basis to fight for the most militant outcome.

The trade union bureaucracy was one of the major elements in the recent defeats. Almost devoid of support in the CLPs, the right wing in the LP depended virtually exclusively on the support and voting strength of the right wing trade union bureaucrats, who themselves became better organised after the fiasco of the Wembley Special Conference (where they had more votes than the left but lost). What has given them a clear majority has been cementing the alliance with Basnett, through the TULV, and also the role of the TGWU bureaucracy.

At the beginning, sections of the trade union bureaucracy were forced to support the fight for LP democracy because of the strength of feeling in their own rank and file, and also because of the experience of being kicked away themselves in the last years of the Labour government. At a certain point it was inevitable that they would start to move against it - to distance themselves from, limit and openly oppose the democracy campaign. They were frightened by its implications, and particularly the threat of it spilling over into the unions. Far from the fight for LP democracy being of little concern to union members, the strength of feeling in the unions often made this a difficult job for the bureaucracy. The TGWU - both during the Benn campaign, and also over the Register - is probably the clearest example of this.

Whatever the differences within the bureaucracy, the basic strategy through the TULV has been clear: support the Foot-Healey leadership; go for at least a limited purge; call a halt to the democracy fight; and back this up by controlling the Labour Party's money/resources - both nationally and, to a lesser extent, locally (e.g. offer of 'seconding' local TU bureaucrats). The right wing bureaucrats around the 'St. Ermin's' group (APEX, EEP TU, AUEW etc.) act as a caucus within this - prepared to go for a harder right NEC, flooding local GMCs with their chosen delegates etc.

The strategy has met resistance, and has provoked sharp clashes around the issue of trade union democracy. The clearest examples were the closing of the London Central Branch of the EEP TU, and the enforced resignation of Weighall in the NUR. The influence of the fight for LP democracy in the unions; the struggle for a political alternative to both the Tories and Lib-Lab Labour governments; control over their own leadership - these were the roots of the resistance, and not 'media involvement' spreading the issue.