

INTERNAL BULLETIN NO.39

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The Labour Party: re-draft for British Perspectives

..... Cunliffe with amendments from  
Hill and Kinnell

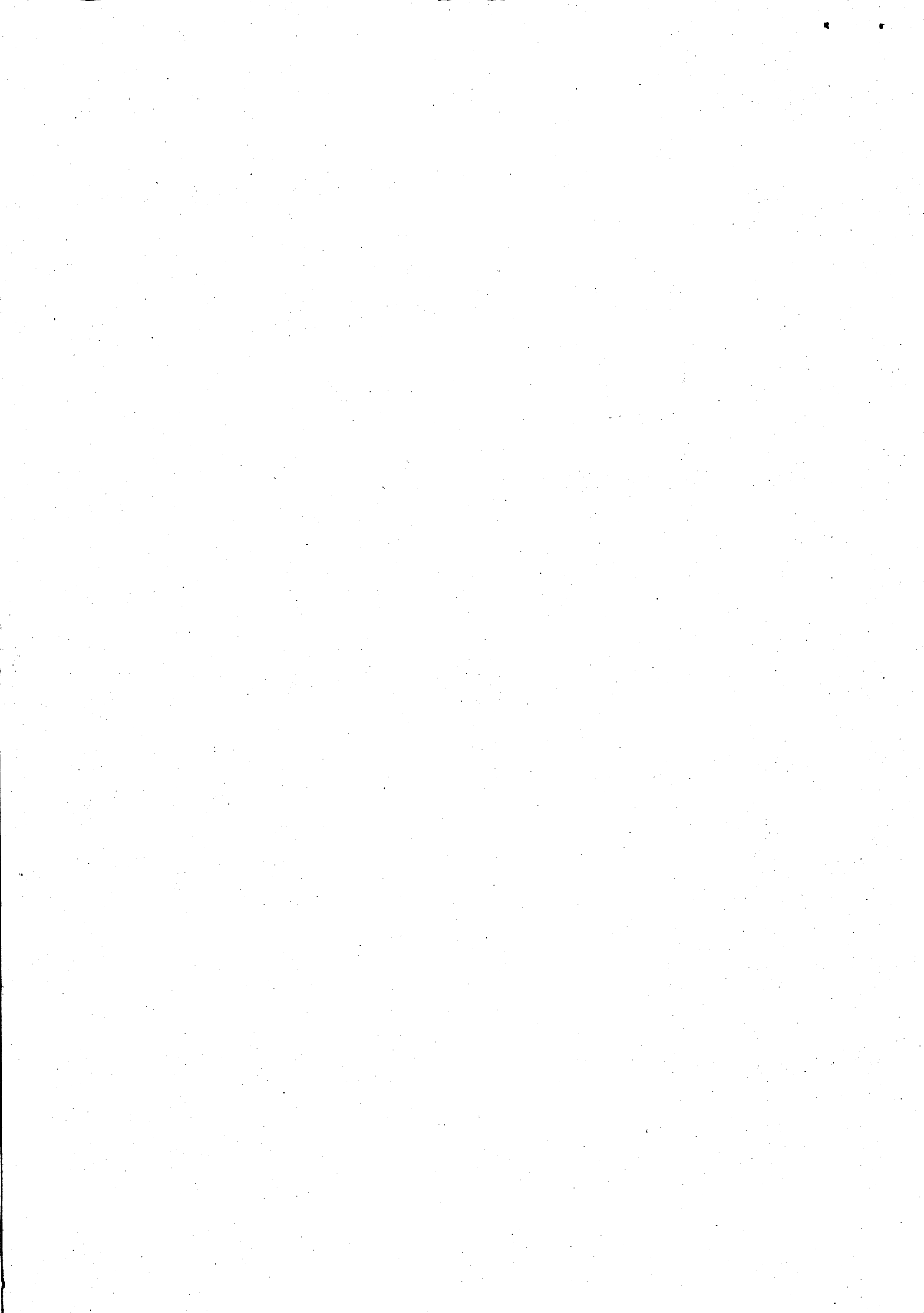
Resolution on youth work ..... Cooper, Fraser, Jagger, Joplin,  
Morganfield, Paul, Strummer

(This resolution relates to the Jagger article in IB 38).

Conference is February 18-19-20

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Replacement section for British Perspectives Draft

Today's situation in the Labour Party is the outcome of a series of interconnecting processes of development in the workers' movement and in British capitalism since the mid 1960s.

In the context of the end of the post-war boom and the substantial decline of British capitalism on the world markets, the established reformist leadership of the British working class - in the Labour Party and in the trade union movement from shop steward level to the full-time bureaucracies - has consistently lagged behind the requirements of the situation, clinging obstinately to the methods and often the policies of the past.

In its role in opposition to Tory governments, the Labour and trade union leadership persists in the politics of protest and parliamentarism, rejecting out of hand the concept of mass working class action to confront, defeat and remove the governments of the class enemy. And the same reluctance to permit or stimulate the independent mobilisation of the rank and file reinforces the bureaucratic opposition to left wing policies which could galvanise the working class and draw it into active political activity in the unions and the LP.

In government, Labour's various tactics and policies for managing and reconstructing capitalism to offer an improved economic climate in which concessions can be made to the working class have time and again run into the barrier of the decline and crisis of the British economy, with its associated pressures from the capitalist class in Britain and internationally (the IMF!) for anti-working class policies.

The reformist politics of the trade union bureaucracy, seeking the "lesser evil" under capitalism, sharing common politics and material links with the Labour leaders, and lacking any serious alternative even where (as occasionally on wage controls) they find themselves tactically opposed to Labour government policies, lead time and again to a bloc between PLP and TUC against the interests and even the ongoing struggles of the working class rank and file.

Thus we saw in the 1960s the Wilson government employ a succession of ineffectual reformist and outright anti-working class policies - including wage controls, strike-breaking and attempted anti-union laws - in their efforts to manage and sustain a decaying British capitalism.

Eventually, under pressure from a powerful and militant shop floor movement which had emerged and consolidated its strength in the boom period - and on which some sections of bureaucrats had built their power base - sections of "left" union bureaucracies of the time (TGWU, AUEW) were forced to a degree to challenge these attacks and mobilise some opposition to them in order to keep control of the movement. Yet even during their shows of protest, these same TUC lefts were seeking ways and means to compromise with their right wing colleagues and with the Labour leadership.

The strength of the shop floor movement and the radicalisation of the trade union rank and file became the main component of the industrial opposition to the Heath government of 1970-74. As Heath plunged into ill-prepared confrontations with the miners and with the trade union movement as a whole, through the Industrial Relations Act and state controls on wages, the pace of opposition was set by the left within the unions. (though we should also recall the defiance of a few Labour councils - most notably Clay Cross - to Heath's "Fair Rents" Act).

An indication of the spill-over of this radicalisation came in the LP conference of 1973 which swung to the left, leaving Wilson to run for and win office on a manifesto far more militant in tone than he would ever have chosen.

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But 1972-4 summed up the basic political problem for the British working class. There were huge direct-action struggles, coming close to a general strike in 1972, blocking and crippling the Tories' attempted solution to the crisis of British capitalism, and finally forcing the Tories into an election which they lost. But insofar as the strike movement was political - i.e. had a conscious alternative at the level of the general running of society - its political expression was 'Kick the Tories Out', i.e., a Labour government.

And that Labour government, despite the left manifesto, was to introduce the social contract, execute cuts more drastic than the present government's, and implement the biggest drop in real wages for decades.

The only conscious political alternative possessed by the great militant strike movement - which implicitly posed fundamental questions of class power - was a bourgeois workers' party, operating in a period when bourgeois society allows little scope for reforms.

1974 and after posed brutally and sharply to the British workers' movement the task of changing its politics, i.e. changing itself. Since then the movement - or at least a section of activists within it - have been attempting that task: crudely, inadequately, in a very limited way so far. This acute crisis of reformism is the basic thread running through all developments since 1974.

In a bid to head off pressure while maintaining the same basic thrust of reconstructing British capitalism, Wilson made a few initial cosmetic changes. Heffer was brought into the government, and Tony Benn

was used as the figurehead for the Industry Bill through which proposals for the wholesale rationalisation of industry with government subsidies through the NEB and systematised class collaboration were to be pushed through Parliament and the trade union movement.

Concessions were made on pay to the still striking miners, to secure a return to work. Under threat of a national engineering strike, the Labour government two months later began the repeal of Heath's Industrial Relations Act.

But Heath's wage controls remained in force - trapping health workers and others who had looked to an increased settlement. The Shrewsbury builders' pickets remained in jail; and the Clay Cross councillors penalised for their stand on rents remained surcharged.

As the economic crisis increasingly tightened its grip, once again the Wilson/Healey leadership resorted first to threats to use "Tory policies" and then to wage controls. In this they were now able to draw on the collaboration of a rightward-moving Jack Jones and the majority of the trade union bureaucracy who were visibly embarrassed and feeling threatened by the militancy of their members. An unholy, wage cutting alliance was formed spanning from the right wing of the PLP through both "right" and "left" of the TUC hierarchy and including the tacit acceptance of the Communist Party, reluctant to jeopardise its position with the union bureaucracies; the line permeated down to many layers of convenors. The result was to put the lid on wages struggles with the exception of a few, isolated fights based at rank and file shop steward level - often opposed with ruthless vigour by the officials (eg BL toolroom, Port Talbot electricians, Heathrow engineers). This wage-control apparatus took on an extended lease of life as Labour lost its Parliamentary majority when a deal was struck with the Liberals. With the full weight of the labour bureaucracy brought to bear on any section seeking a fight, it was not until the firefighters press-ganged their leadership into an all-out strike against Phase 3 of wage controls in 1977-78 that this began to crack.

But with inflation still in double figures and Healey declaring in the Summer of 1978 for another wage cutting 5% limit, the anger and resentment at the record of the Labour government - which had driven up unemployment, cut back health and education, and slashed living standards - spilled over into a movement sufficiently strong to tip the scales at the TUC Congress and find a strong echo in the Labour Party.

Wilson's undisguised contempt for conference decisions in general and the left wing policies of the 1973 manifesto in particular had created conditions in which the question of accountability and of rank and file control over the labour leadership gained a concrete significance for wide sections of the workers' movement. Labour's squalid record in its second term of government had confirmed to many trade unionists that they did not wish to subscribe to yet another reactionary Labour government.

The Reg Prentice affair - in which the majority of the PLP and an important section of the trade union bureaucracy mobilised to defend the position and "rights" of a more or less open Tory against attempts by his local CLP rank and file to remove him - brought the whole issue of reselection as a component part of accountability to the eyes of the labour movement as a whole.

Then the rejection of Healey's Phase 4 by the TUC Congress and - by union block votes - at the Labour Party conference saw the union bureaucrats split on the main lines of economic policy, with sections under heavy pressure from their members to take a firm stand in defiance of the right wing PLP leadership.

As the hammer blows of the strike wave throughout the "Winter of Discontent" demonstrated the gulf between the practice of the Labour leadership and the demands of the trade union rank and file, and destroyed the government's pay policies, the conditions were created for a Tory