

# The circus is coming to town

**T**HE CIRCUS is coming to town! In early 1997 the "Lambertist" Workers' Party of France will organise a big "international conference against privatisation and deregulation" in London. The "Lambertists" specialise in such affairs. They also have a long history as an ultra-factional, quasi-religious sect. Their nearest equivalent in the history of the British left is the old WRP of Gerry Healy, with whom they were long connected.

A German Stalinist, Willi Munzenberg, was famous in the 1930s for his talent in organising showy "broad" congresses, committees, appeals and celebrity setpieces even while the Communist Parties were denouncing all other labour groupings as "social-fascist". The Lambertists are the, stodgier and more "workerist", Munzenbergists of today.

Their French organisation claims to have become a broad "Workers' Party", where four diverse tendencies, "socialist", "communist", "anarcho-syndicalist", and "Trotskyist", all have formal status, and which is open to anyone supporting a very modest, indeed anti-Marxist, platform — separation of Church and State; liquidation of the Fifth Republic; a "democracy, the content of which the people itself will define"; "recognition" of the class struggle; and no interference by political parties in trade unions or vice versa. In fact, the Workers' Party has the same office, the same leading functionaries, the same newspaper, and the same politics (without any hint of dissent or debate) as the previous "Trotskyist" group...

Their tabloid *Informations Ouvrières*, reporting on their latest conference (20-23 October, in Paris), claims that it rallied "all the tendencies of the workers' movement". Yet twelve full pages covering the conference report no dissent from an "introductory report" which, in a rich sauce of talk about struggle by "the people" for "democracy" against "the speculators", propounded the cranky long-held Lambertist dogma that the productive forces have ceased to grow in modern capitalism. The Lambertists' "workers' movement" is delimited by their own dogmas.

Such "masquerade and charlatanry" (as Trotsky put it, referring to Munzenberg) is very different from the usual and desirable business of small revolutionary organisations initiating broader campaigns and giving them the best "front"

possible. Here, the show is the campaign. The clothes have no Emperor. The show is the bulk of the "revolutionary" politics, too, because those "revolutionary" politics largely consist of the self-promotion of "the party".

The Lambertists do not collaborate with any other left group in France. Their comment on the presidential election campaign in 1995 by Arlette Laguiller of Lutte Ouvrière, which got 1.6 million votes, was that Laguiller was just the same as Chirac... For the first several weeks of the great strikes of November-December 1995, their paper downplayed the workers' action in favour of a demonstration which they themselves had organised for 9 December in opposition to state funds for church schools. Their

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comments on the strikes were very perfunctory, their distinctive "line" being their pet slogan of "a sovereign Constituent Assembly". The Lambertists' theatrical talent is reserved for their own stage, not used to play a big part on the wider scene of class struggle.

The Lambertists, like the "Healyites", emerged out of the disarray of the Trotskyists in 1948-52, when the labour movement subsided and Stalinists won victories in China and Eastern Europe. They shared the "official" Trotskyist view that the Stalinist victories signified the creation of "deformed workers' states", but (rightly) jibbed at the conclusions, and so seceded.

The then political leaders of what would become the "Lambert group" — Marcel Bleibtreu and others — were disoriented, unsure, and probably depressed too: their group had declined from 1500 members in 1948 to 150 in 1952 (which still made it one of the biggest Trotskyist groups in the world at the time). Pierre Lambert came to the fore because he was a talented improviser with ready answers (work in the right-wing union federation Force Ouvrière, in alliance with some anarcho-syndicalists; and, later, campaigning in support of the Algerian nationalist MNA). Untroubled by theoretical scruples, he would, like the British Lambert, Gerry Healy, manipulate or discard political ideas to fit the practi-

cal schemes.

Lambert elbowed aside the old political leaders, and eventually expelled them in 1955. The political line, previously minimalist and dispirited, shifted into syndicalist ultra-militancy. "The odious comedy of elections will change nothing. Let's prepare the struggle for power!"; "General strike for bread and peace" were the headlines, from a tiny group in the midst of the unmilitant 1950s.

**I**n 1958 a military coup toppled the French government and installed as president Charles de Gaulle, who imposed a new constitution (the "5th Republic") with a weak parliament and strong powers for himself. Something snapped, and the Lambertists shifted sharply to the right. They closed down their weekly paper and replaced it with a small duplicated bulletin which declared: "The working class today is incapable of intervening as such in political struggles". The wild calls for a general strike were replaced by advocacy of an defensive "workers' united front" "to preserve the workers' movement" from immediate and complete suppression. The fetishistic harping-on about a Constituent Assembly (which today is their answer not just in France, but also in Algeria, Israel/Palestine, Ireland, everywhere\*) has its roots in this shift.

In May 1968 they started by denouncing the student movement ("the junketing organised by Cohn-Bendit and Co. at the Sorbonne"), did their best to take people off the streets on the decisive "night of the barricades" (to go and "build the revolutionary party"), and then claimed that the great general strike was all due to their slogans.

In the 1970s and '80s, much of the Labour left shamed itself by continuing to lend "names" to Healy's stunts, long after his group had degenerated into craziness, thuggery (and, eventually, worse than the Lambertists, taking money from Arab dictatorships). The experience should have inoculated socialists against giving any credence to the Lambert circus. Has it?

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\* For example, their now defunct Irish group, the LWR, Catholic chauvinist and workerist, advocated a Constituent Assembly to unite Ireland. But for Catholics and Protestants to accept such a body presupposes unity. A "means" was proposed for achieving unity which presupposed unity! Charlatanism.