

New Labour is becoming No Labour

IN the looming General Election. Tony Blair may yet manage to repeat what Neil Kinnock did in 1992 and conjure Labour defeat out of seeming victory. Nonetheless, the Blairites continue their drive to destroy the Labour Party as a working-class party. There, at least, they are making progress.

What are they doing? They are carrying through, within the labour movement, a major part of the Thatcher programme to destroy working-class politics and socialism. Blair makes no secret about it. He says plainly what he is up to. He is working towards "a situation more like the Democrats and the 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).

Blair is not just talking. He is acting. At Labour's National Executive Committee, meeting on 29 January, the New Right took the movement a big step further along the road to its own extinction as a labour party, by moving dramatically to "curb union influence on party policy" (as the Financial Times put it). The National Executive Committee decided that the annual conference should be cut down so that it cannot be "a 'shadow' or 'watchdog' of Labour in power". It should be reduced to two days of debate, with Constituency Labour Parties and trade unions no longer able to submit motions directly. The NEC itself should be downgraded to have little role in policy-making, with the constituency and trade-union element of it outweighed by Cabinet, MPs' and councillors' representatives.

The NEC put these proposals out for "consultation", reconsideration in June or July, and decision at the October party conference.

II

WHAT is new in this situation? Everything. All the old relations within the labour movement are now in flux. The main channels connecting Old Labour to the trade unions and the working class are being severed or bypassed. Those intent on turning Labour into a straightforward bourgeois party already have the commanding heights of the party. Those who might be expected to object powerfully, the trade union leaders, are letting them have their way. And, short of a massive rank-and-file revolt in the trade unions and the Labour Party, it is on the trade union leaders that the outcome immediately depends.

Not this or that policy is at stake, but the character of the Labour Party itself, and whether or not the labour movement will continue in politics. That is at stake even if, as now seems

likely, the Blair faction decides not to cut Labour's trade-union link completely, but to rearrange it so that they keep the advantages of trade-union support and finance while leaving no real chance for the unions and Labour's working-class base to assert themselves; while, in fact, turning the old Labour-union relationships into their opposite, into a trap rather than an empowerment for the labour movement.

The old labour movement and the left are caught in a pincer movement between the Blairites and the Tories, paralysed by the idea that because they want to get the Tories out they must not rock Blair's boat. Anti-Toryism is not enough, nothing like enough, but in the labour movement today anti-Toryism is everything. The paradox is that anti-Toryism is now one of the great props of Blair's drive to continue and consolidate the Tory programme of the last 18 years, with the New Labour party as his instrument. A Labour Government, once seen as a means, is now the self-sufficient end to which all other ends and goals are sacrificed. In the cause of beating the Tories and putting in a Labour Government, the reason why the trade unions entered politics and created the Labour Party is forgotten; those intent on destroying the Labour Party and making a

real Labour Government impossible are being allowed to have their way because "the Tories" must be defeated!

In the election we will say: Vote Labour and fight. But New Labour is increasingly No Labour, though the process is not complete. For decades, "vote Labour and fight" meant, vote for a government based on the trade unions, and fight, through strikes and demonstrations

where necessary, but also through labour movement channels. Those channels of accountability were what gave the Labour Party its unique character and what made it different from, say, the Democratic Party in the USA. The Blair faction is destroying them. By voting Labour the working class may break the 18-year logjam in British politics and move forward, but lodged within that victory will be looming defeat: the end of the 97-year-old ties of the Labour Party to the trade unions. In 1997, "vote Labour and fight" contains its own built-in negation. That is the tragic condition to which mass labour politics in Britain has come.

The crisis is not something for the future; it is upon us now. Time is short, because all indications suggest that the Blairites will act fast after the election, especially if they win. This is no routine battle in a more-or-less stable Labour Party, like so many in the past. If the broader labour movement does not quickly understand how urgent the issues are and begin to

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act; unless the labour movement and the left rediscover and reassert the basic ideas on which mass working-class politics in Britain was built; unless we urgently remember where we have come from and where generations of labour-movement activists have been trying to go — then the New Labourites will clinch their victory.

III

IT is because the old labour-movement basics have been almost buried by defeats and demoralisation that the New Right have had such a smooth passage. The battle of ideas is part of the class war, and a decisive part. Where the New Labourites, backed by the bourgeoisie and by layers of the trade union bureaucracy, have a clear, bold project, whose class purposes and outlines are clear to their hard-core supporters, we have no widely understood perspective or rallying cry for the labour movement.

Trotsky once observed that reformists “systematically implant in the minds of the workers the notion that the sacredness of democracy is best guaranteed when the bourgeoisie is armed to the teeth and the workers are unarmed”. Right now, in the battle of ideas and perspectives, the Blair faction and the bourgeoisie they represent are ideologically armed to the teeth, and the labour movement disarmed. The first job of socialists is to rearm the labour movement ideologically.

Too often we forget our broader perspectives, immerse ourselves in trade-union and Labour Party routine, and float to political destruction with the easy stream of shallow and treacherous anti-Toryism. We neglect the first and irreplaceable job of socialists — to propagate a vision not only of the socialist goal but also of the sort of labour movement needed to achieve that goal. Though the discussion continues, to many of us round Workers’ Liberty, that vision is summed up by the call for a workers’ government, and, immediately, for maintaining or rebuilding a mass workers’ party to attain it.

Why did the labour movement ever go into politics? To win a working-class government that would serve our interests as the Tories and Liberals served bourgeois interests. For Workers’ Liberty, a workers’ government worthy of the name would be a government that would create socialism by expropriating the bourgeoisie, destroying their state power, and abolishing wage-slavery. For the reform-socialists who controlled the labour movement, it became a government that could win reforms. Common to both, however, was the idea of the working class acting independently in politics to secure its interests, however minimally defined.

For us, the call for a workers’ government is another way of calling for the socialist transformation of society, but expressed as perspectives for a broad labour movement in which there will be many different notions of a workers’ government and how “far” it should go. It allows us to form a united front even with those who would understand a workers’ government as, say, 1945 Labour.

All the many issues of trade-union and political life, all the demands and protests of concern to workers and other oppressed people, fit in with the idea of a workers’ government — without in any way being damped down to waiting for such a government, now any more than in the past when workers struck, demonstrated and fought rent strikes while calling for and wishing for a government that would serve the working class as the Liberals and Tories served the bosses.

We ourselves are not prohibited by anything in the politics of Marxism from calling for a workers’ government that would, “even minimally”, “do for our class what the Tories for theirs” — that is, from expressing one of the wishes most common in the labour movement. Making that call, as we should, will not

confine us to its limitations; nor are those who would understand a workers’ government as “1945 Labour” predestined, once engaged in struggle and mobilisation to realise it, to stop at that level of ambition.

Today, when socialists talk of “keeping the link” between Labour and the unions, we suffer if we do not explain why we want that in terms of the old and irreplaceable ideas and goals. Too often we appear to trade unionists and New Labour Party members intent on kicking the Tories out as obstreperous and obstructive conservatives who senselessly oppose the “modernisation” of Labour. If kicking the Tories out and putting Labour in, on any terms, is a self-sufficient goal, then what the Millbank Tendency are doing, and the entire drift of the Labour Party under Kinnock and Smith, leading to Blair, makes a bleakly realistic — though no working-class or socialist — sense.

While continuing the day-to-day fight at every level of the Labour Party and trade unions, socialists need insistently and repeatedly to spell out the historical and political context of current politics. Why do we want to keep the link? Because we want to maintain and develop a working-class party! Why? Because we want a government that will serve our side as the Tories serve the bourgeoisie!

Class is the decisive test. To restore the idea of class politics to the centre of the labour movement’s concerns, we have to shake that movement out of its hypnosis with official politics, and win it back to an understanding that we need a workers’ party and a workers’ government, because working-class politics is more than the see-saw of the Westminster party game.

The objective of a workers’ government — and, immediately, of maintaining or rebuilding a working-class party to attain it — that is what gives focus, goal and sense to mass working-class politics. The strength of the feeling now that on any terms we must kick the Tories out, which the Blair faction exploit so shamelessly, is a grim and tragic proof of how central the question of government must be to working-class politics. If the labour movement does not have a socialist notion of the question, then it will have a bourgeois (right now, Blairite) one. That is the lesson of Labour’s 15-year drift to the right in pursuit of government, which has now turned into a soulless and possibly suicidal scramble for office.

It needs to be spelled out and repeated: only the reinstatement of the objective of a workers’ government, defined and measured by our class interests, at the centre of mass working-class politics, gives sense, logic and coherence to our immediate concern, the fight to preserve the working-class character of the Labour Party. Only the knowledge that Blair

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THE WORKING CLASS WILL RISE AGAIN!

“The emancipation of the working class is also the emancipation of all human beings without distinction of race or sex.” Karl Marx

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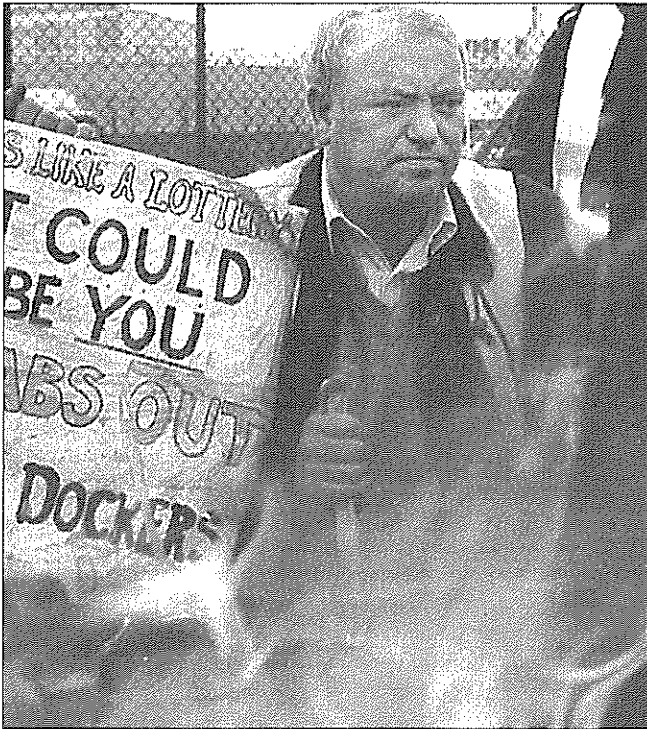
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will not lead a government even minimally committed to the working class, and the conviction that the labour movement can and must create such a workers' government, can generate the mass political energy that will either defeat Blair's New Labour project or begin to recreate a mass working-class party.

IV

TWO great moods on the left and in the labour movement play into the hands of the Blairites. The first is business-as-usual Labour loyalism — refusal to face up to what is new in the situation. Those who do not recognise how much things have already changed must become the political prisoners and dumb tools of the Blairites.

No socialists should accept defeat in advance of the hard fact, or give up on the chance to rally the left and make it into a force prepared to go on in any eventuality, including defeat. We will fight every inch of the way, and to the last possible moment, recognising that if the Blair faction succeeds, then the working class will have suffered a political defeat of historic proportions. But not to know and say plainly that Labour victory in the election will on all indications be the signal for a strong final offensive against the labour movement in politics — that can only help the Blairites and make their final success more likely.

The mirror-image of head-in-the-sand Labour loyalism is the sectarian "rejection" of mass working-class politics now very widespread on the left. Some of the sectarian groups are, not entirely secretly, pleased with what Millbank is doing. Nothing could be more foolish. The Blairites are pushing the working class back many decades; those socialist sectarians who experience this as a forward motion for socialism only reveal their disorientation and their utter lack of historical sense. A few recruits for the Socialist Workers' Party, the Socialist Labour Party, or the relaunched Militant, in exchange for the extinction of mass working-class politics, is a bad bargain, except in the Alice-in-Wonderland account books of the sectarians. Acceptance that the left should be happy as a small propaganda group — or "revolutionary party" — that is only a variant of defeatism.

How should socialists relate to the mass labour movement,

basically, the trade unions? Marxists argue for their ideas and organise disciplined, purposeful intervention on all the fronts of the class struggle. But, from Marx and Engels through to Trotsky, Marxists have insisted that we must help mass working-class politics develop; that we must begin on the level of the existing movement and educate it in action and propaganda towards class struggle and socialist politics. This is the concrete political meaning of the idea that the working class is central to Marxist politics. The socialist or Marxist group that does not propose and fight for such political perspectives for the broad labour movement is a sect, even if it has thousands of members.

The development of a mass workers' party is the precondition for effective mass socialist politics. That was the guiding idea for Frederick Engels in his attitude to the "first draft" of the Labour Party, Keir Hardie's Independent Labour Party of the 1890s, and for Leon Trotsky in the late 1930s when he advocated that the powerful US trade unions should create a Labour Party structurally modelled on the British Labour Party.

Why did we ever advocate a Labour vote? Not because Labour might be a lesser evil than the Tories, though it was, nor because we might hope for a little bit of what Marx called "the political economy of the working class", though we could, but because the Labour Party was the organised working class in politics. Only on the basis of the experience of Labour in government could the mass labour movement go forward — helped by socialist propaganda and by the organising activity of Marxist revolutionaries in the class struggle — beyond the limited stage of political evolution represented by the Labour Party as it was. That was our central concern. The problem now is that the New Labour project fosters not the forward development of the labour movement, but its regression into the womb of Liberalism, from which the Labour Party emerged at the beginning of this century.

V

TO defend the working-class character of the Labour Party, and the idea of a working-class party able to win a working-class government, we must build the campaign to "Keep the Link", and campaign for working-class demands like union rights and restoration of the Welfare State.

We should explore the possibilities of creating a broad committee for working-class politics — that is, a new Labour Representation Committee, like the one which set up the Labour Party in 1900. Its immediate task would be to try to stop Blair destroying the Labour Party as a working-class party.

There is great anger in the depths of the working-class movement. Many workers do expect something better than what Blair says he will give. The situation after a Labour Government is elected may be more explosive than we can predict now. The Blair government may, for example by banning public service strikes when they come to office, as some of them say they will, stir up the movement against themselves.

The New Labourites say, even before it is formed, that their government will serve the bosses and not the workers — say, in fact, that a Blair government will be a Tory government of scarcely lighter blue hue than this one. The trade unions must be roused to fight for working-class interests against a Blair government. In the beginning is the class struggle! That is the great sure source of labour and socialist renewal.

As Leon Trotsky put it, every great action begins with the statement of what is. "To face reality squarely; not to seek the line of least resistance; to call things by their right name; to speak the truth to the masses, no matter how bitter it may be... these are the rules of the Fourth International"....

Sean Matgamna

The world without Stalinism

THE organisation that publishes this magazine celebrated 30 years of existence with a weekend school on February 8-9, at which we reviewed the events of those years. Viewed from today, some of that period — and especially the mid-1970s — looks like a vanished world, its political coordinates more distant from us than those of a hundred years ago.

At first sight, for socialists, the shift has been much for the worse. Yet, if we dig deep enough, in many ways the world today promises better for socialists than that of, say, 1975.

The obvious setbacks are real enough. In 1975, three decades of what socialists then called “the colonial revolution”, the struggles for national independence of the colonies and semi-colonies of Britain, France, the US, the Netherlands, etc., were reaching their final victories, with the expulsion of the Americans from Vietnam and the liberation of Angola and Mozambique from Portuguese rule. Those struggles showed that the wretched of the earth, with organisation, solidarity, determination and courage, could throw off the greatest military powers.

Ho Chi Minh, the Stalinist leader of Vietnam’s national struggle, famously told an Italian journalist that the way for sympathisers in the West to help the Vietnamese was to “make the revolution in your own country”. A great wave of working-class struggles, after the huge French general strike of May-June 1968, showed us how. In Britain, five dockers jailed under Tory anti-union laws were freed by a spontaneous mass strike movement in July 1972, and a miners’ strike in 1973-4 so crippled the Tory government that it called an early general election and lost it. Trade union membership rose (it would reach its peak, in Britain, in 1979). Rank-and-file and shop stewards’ organisation was powerful in many industries.

That governments could and should intervene in the market to secure full employment and a universal minimum of welfare was no radical heresy, but staid conventional wisdom. We could use that conventional wisdom as a springboard to demand that the drive for private profit be not merely counterbalanced, but replaced by production for need.

The area of self-proclaimed “socialist” states expanded to cover more than one-third of the world. By the mid-1970s, not many, even in the official Communist Parties, saw the USSR and

its clones as ideal models for a new society; indeed, one of our causes for hope was that those Communist Parties were fraying at the edges, less sure of themselves, and losing ground to the revolutionary left. In Portugal’s protracted revolutionary crisis, from April 1974 to November 1975, a Communist Party which until the 1960s had entirely dominated the underground resistance to the pre-1974 fascist regime was outflanked in many unions, factories, and workers’ and neighbourhood commissions by the revolutionary left.

Almost all of us, however, even those sharpest in their criticism of Stalinist tyranny, saw the Stalinist states as showing some elements of a better future in their state-owned and regulated economies, “deformed” though they might be by the bureaucracy. Almost all were confident that the next stage in the Stalinist states, whether through peaceful reform or workers’ revolution, would be the direct conversion of those state-owned economies to democratic, and therefore socialist, administration. Poland in 1980-1, where, in a few weeks of struggle, workers formed a trade union movement ten million strong and sketched a programme for a “self-managing society”, showed us how.

Poland also showed up the fatal element of illusion in the left of the 1970s. When Poland’s rulers declared martial law to suppress the workers’ movement in December 1981, our demonstrations of protest were only a few thousand strong, a small fraction of the tens of thousands who had come on to the streets against Chile’s military coup of 1973. Not many people on the left openly and confidently supported martial law, but the great majority were equivocal, torn between their attachment to the “deformed workers’ state” of Poland and their loyalty to the living Polish workers.

Portugal in 1974-5 went through maybe the most protracted revolutionary crisis of the post-1945 world, with the least unfavourable balance of forces between the revolutionary left and the traditional Stalinist and social-democratic parties. Yet most of the revolutionary groups were Maoist: to the official Stalinism of the Communist Party they counterposed only different Stalinisms, more militant but no less a blind alley for revolutionary-minded workers. There were anti-Stalinist groups, but at the peak of the crisis, in August-September 1975, they sank themselves into a “Revolutionary United Front” with the Communist Party and left-wing army officers who said they wanted a government of workers’ councils but insisted that the first step towards that was to create a “popular army”... commanded by them.

No widespread mood of hope is ever likely to be without exaggeration and illusion, and there was a great deal more than illusion in the optimism of the 1960s and ’70s. Yet the element of illusion was, in the end, large enough to disable the revolutionary left and dash our hopes. Ultra-left “vanguardism”, taking the guerrilla struggles of the Third World as a model for how a determined minority could make a revolution without the detours of patient work in the labour movement; wishful thinking about the revolutionary Stalinist regimes of Vietnam or China, which led to demoralised dismay when thousands of boat people fled Vietnam as the Stalinists consolidated their rule, and China turned towards the capitalist world market; and the taint of Stalinism in the revolutionaries’ idea of what a revolutionary party should be, which led to the various groups becoming walled-off, dogmatic sects — these were enough to ensure that no revolutionary

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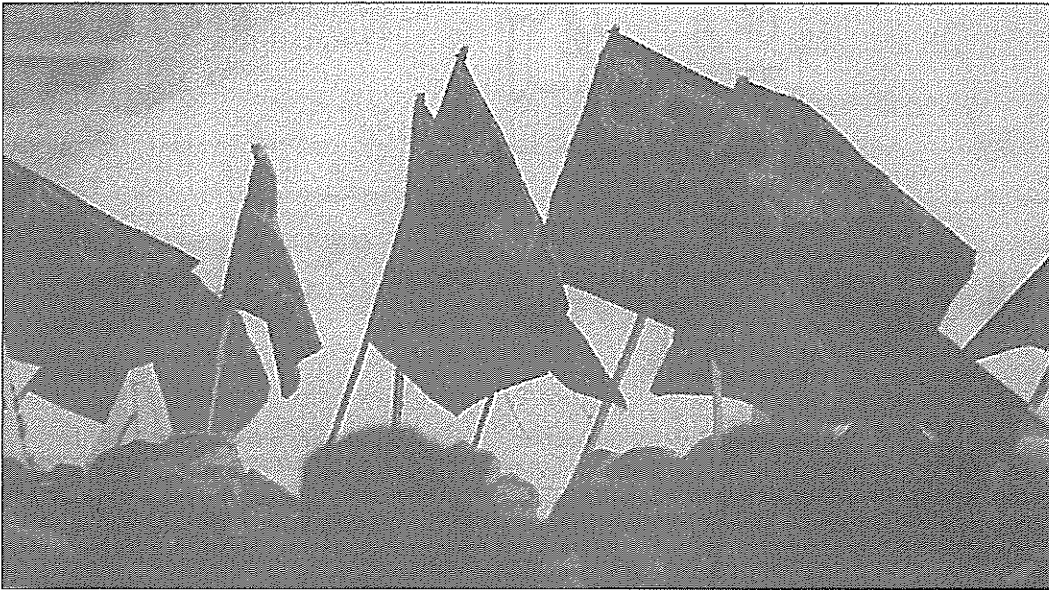
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COMMENTARY



CGT in France, subscribed to a rival international grouping. Nevertheless, they suggest that, taking the world as a whole, trade unionism is expanding. In 1976 the ICFTU had 53 million trade unionists affiliated, through 119 organisations in 88 countries; in 1986, 80 million, through 144 organisations in 99 countries; in 1996, 124 million, through 195 organisations in 137 countries.

No-one can remain a socialist without being disgusted by the bour-

geois individualism of the 1990s, the mean-spirited (and very conformist) culture which says: "Yes, the world is rotten, but I'd rather look after my family, my career, my job, my social life, than work to change it without immediate visible result". Yet in this shit there may be manure for a better future. The working class, as Trotsky once put it, suffers not from too much but from too little individualism. Once struggle warms up the individualism, it may be a powerful force against the revival of old social-democratic and Stalinist influences. It does at least cut against the huddled "miserabilism" — "us poor workers" — of the old parties. In the *Grundrisse*, Karl Marx wrote of "the great civilising influence of capital". "Each capitalist... searches for means to spur [workers] on to consumption... to inspire them with new needs... [Capital produces] a stage of society in comparison to which all earlier ones appear as mere local developments of humanity... Capital drives beyond national barriers and prejudices as much as beyond nature worship, as well as traditional, confined, complacent, encrusted satisfactions of present needs, and reproductions of old ways of life. It is destructive towards all of this, and constantly revolutionises it...

group got near to leading the great workers' struggles of the 1970s to victory. Because we failed to achieve victory, we got defeat. Because we got defeat, we got capitalism reorganising itself at the expense of the working class. During and after the recession of 1979-83, the capitalist governments restructured their world on the basis of free-flowing international finance capital. For national governments to secure jobs and welfare was declared impossible — "you can't buck the market" — and in fact became impossible, within the limits of mainstream politics. Workers were defeated and intimidated by mass unemployment. Trade unions have retreated, and in many countries more so than in Britain. The old Communist and social-democratic parties have withered, not by losing support to the revolutionary left, but by collapsing or moving to the right. The shipyards, docks, mines and car factories which were the bastions of left-wing militancy in the 1970s have been shut down or cut back.

That set the scene for the overthrow of Stalinism in Eastern Europe and the ex-USSR, in 1989-91, to be a revolution of a curious conservative type, with the slogans: "No more experiments! No more utopias! No more grand political projects! Leave it to the market and the experts!" And that, in turn, increased the pressure against the left in the West.

The pressure is real. For the day-to-day work of socialists, the warm optimism of the 1970s, despite all its illusions, was much more favourable than is the cold pessimism of today.

Yet none of the setbacks really cut deep into the basic alignment of our perspectives. Despite increased unemployment in many countries, the working class has continued to grow. The capitalists will never find a way to produce ships and cars, or transport goods, or transmit information, without workers.

The biggest shipyard in the world is now in South Korea. There are more white-collar workers in the advanced countries, but they are still workers. New trade union movements have developed in countries like South Korea, Brazil and South Africa. In ex-Stalinist Eastern Europe, the old Stalinist labour fronts have been replaced by genuine (even if still weak) trade unions. Even in still-Stalinist China, where a working class hundreds of millions strong has developed over the last half-century, strikes have become common.

The membership figures of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions give an incomplete picture of the trends world-wide, because until the 1990s not only the Stalinist state "unions", but also many genuine trade union groups, like the

geous individualism of the 1990s, the mean-spirited (and very conformist) culture which says: "Yes, the world is rotten, but I'd rather look after my family, my career, my job, my social life, than work to change it without immediate visible result". Yet in this shit there may be manure for a better future. The working class, as Trotsky once put it, suffers not from too much but from too little individualism. Once struggle warms up the individualism, it may be a powerful force against the revival of old social-democratic and Stalinist influences. It does at least cut against the huddled "miserabilism" — "us poor workers" — of the old parties. In the *Grundrisse*, Karl Marx wrote of "the great civilising influence of capital". "Each capitalist... searches for means to spur [workers] on to consumption... to inspire them with new needs... [Capital produces] a stage of society in comparison to which all earlier ones appear as mere local developments of humanity... Capital drives beyond national barriers and prejudices as much as beyond nature worship, as well as traditional, confined, complacent, encrusted satisfactions of present needs, and reproductions of old ways of life. It is destructive towards all of this, and constantly revolutionises it...

"The universality towards which it irresistibly strives encounters barriers in its own nature, which will, at a certain stage of its development, allow it to be recognised as being itself the greatest barrier to this tendency."

Beyond that, nothing is guaranteed. Working-class struggle is inevitable; whether it is channelled politically, as Lenin once put it, by priests or by Marxists, depends on the work of the active minorities who prepare in advance. The drab and unattractive grind of socialist activity today yields slower results than our more exuberant ventures of the late 1960s or the 1970s. Yet, in the long view, both phases are equally important. Every move forward in working-class organisation always has to be combined with an effort to undo the mental and organisational hobbles imprinted by the ruling classes in the previous phases of the movement.

We have great opportunities. The revolutionary left today, despite all its weaknesses and splits, stands, on the whole, in a much better relation of forces to the Stalinists and reformists who once monopolised the workers' movement. This period of setbacks is not like the one in the late 1940s and the 1950s, when the revolutionary left declined much more than the Stalinists and reformists. The Maoists have vanished. If the political atmosphere is colder without Stalinist, or semi-Stalinist, or quarter-Stalinist illusions, it is also clearer and healthier.