

Where is Labour going?

Vacuum on the left by Mark Seddon

If comrades want to see what direction the Labour Party is moving in, then I would refer them to the article written by John Biffen, the former Tory minister, in last week's *Tribune*. Biffen claims that the Labour Party has now embraced the entire Thatcherite agenda and will not change any of the things that we opposed over the last 18 years.

A form of free-market economics has been adopted without the leadership seeming to understand how real market economies actually function, their consequences, and their effects on ordinary people. We have the possibility of a Labour Government being elected on a platform not dissimilar to that being presented by the Conservatives, except on issues of constitutional law.

NEC backs far-reaching reforms to remove 'vested interests that personified backroom deals'

Labour curbs union influence on party pol

Mr Blair's announcement of the abolition of the old clause four, set ministers and certain members of a transformed NEC. The document outlining the changes - Labour into power - will be put out for discussion at a national conference. The reforms sharply reduce the influence on party policy of trade unions, which have in the past been able to get away with a lot through their organisational prowess, but also because there has been something of a vacuum on the left. Their own agenda is vacuous in the extreme - you only have to read the Mandelson book to see that - but it is an acceptance of all that we have fought against in the last 18 years. That is the extent of the surrender.

The Labour Party remains our only effective tool for bringing about change. Socialists and trade unionists should stick with it and start fighting their corner again. A culture of deference has been responsible for the leadership believing it can do anything.

There has been a crisis of confidence on the left, and a failure to start thinking. We had the surge in the early 1980s, and there was a lot of new thinking then, but there has not been much since. The basic ideas of equality, redistribution of power and wealth, and workers' control, have to be refashioned to appeal to people today.

The New Right in the Labour Party have been able to get away with a lot through their organisational prowess, but also because there has been something of a vacuum on the left. Their own agenda is vacuous in the extreme - you only have to read the Mandelson book to see that - but it is an acceptance of all that we have fought against in the last 18 years. That is the extent of the surrender.

Repeated defeats - the defeat of the miners' strike in 1984-5, and the smaller defeats after that - have sapped the confidence of the trade unions. That has been the basis of the

"We need a new Labour Representation Committee"

by Geoff Martin London Region Convenor UNISON

THE ditching of the commitments to basic workers' rights in Labour's *Road to the Manifesto* document was the final confirmation that the party's current leadership has no interest at all in standing up for working people. So where does all this leave the founders of the Labour Party, the trade unions?

I believe that the policy recently agreed by the Fire Brigades Union to support only Labour candidates who support the demands of the trade unions and oppose further cuts in public spending sets out the way forward. While it is crucial that we remain centrally affiliated to the party, and play a full part in the policy-making process on those rare occasions that we are given a chance, we should make it clear that there are no blank cheques.

Our members' political fund contributions should be used to fund only those MPs and constituencies who can be relied upon to support our political programme. A greater proportion of our money should be pumped into

campaigns and pressure groups within the party, such as *Tribune*, Alternatives to Maastricht and the Welfare State Network, which support our policies.

The unions pour vast sums into the central party machine with no idea where it goes. For example, the spin doctors who went around rubbishing Rodney Bickerstaffe and Bill Morris during the Clause Four debate could well have had their wages paid by UNISON and T&G members. That is a nonsense and it has got to stop.

We need to toughen up our response. There is now a solid case for reforming the Labour Representation Committee as a pressure group within the party. This was originally formed by trade unionists and socialists who realised that the old Liberal Party could not be relied upon to represent the interests of labour. More than 100 years later, a similar set of conditions have been created by the hijackers behind New Labour.

I am not for a moment suggesting

that we leave the party. Indeed, it is my view that if Arthur Scargill had opted for a Labour Representation Committee or a Campaign for Socialism after last year's conference, rather than walking out, he could have strengthened the left rather than weakening it.

Socialists and trade unionists within the Labour Party need to regroup before it is too late. We need to harden our campaigning around a clear programme for Labour in government which would actually make a difference to the people who represent, those who make a living selling their labour rather than deploying capital.

A reformed Labour Representation Committee makes great sense in the current political climate. To be successful, it would need to involve trade unions at a national level, along with a solid core of Labour MPs. All this might sound a bit old-fashioned and traditionalist, but no one should be put off by that. I hope some discussion about the idea gets going.

accommodation ever since. Their demands now are non-existent. When Peter Hain puts forward a modest, liberal, corporatist proposal for job security, they jump at it. That is the level of their political weakness. They have not stood up and said what they want from a Labour Government.

Most people are buttoned up because after 18 years we just don't want to lose again. That's why a lot of people are quiet. But there are pressures from the grass roots. They will come into play soon. There is going to

be a very tight public sector pay round, and a lot of trade union general secretaries are now looking over their shoulders. They are very concerned with the march of the left in the union branches, and they feel that if they are not careful they could be swept away.

With the "Party into Power" proposals, I think the ultimate intention is to do away with the right of constituency parties and affiliated organisations to have any serious input into policy. The drive is for the end of collective policy-making via trade

unions, and a supine role for Labour Party supporters — that's what they'll become, they'll no longer be members.

The big issue about the "Party into Power" project is the right of party members to put resolutions forward and debate real politics at an annual conference. If that is lost, it may look like a temporary victory for the Labour Party leadership, but you can't suppress great social movements, and people will take to doing other things. Other organisations will fill the gap.

Regrouping the labour movement by Ken Coates MEP

THESE reform proposals from the National Executive Committee are the result of a long rearguard action which has been fought with vigour. They are nothing like as fierce as the proposals canvassed in all the newspapers by the Labour Co-ordinating Committee. This indicates there are serious divisions on the trade unions' role in the Labour Party, you could say about how much the unions would be willing to take. Or maybe there are divisions about what the Parliamentary leaders of New Labour actually want to do. Massive unease within the Party communicates itself all the time to the Parliamentary Labour Party. Personally, I have never known such alienation in the PLP. Of course this does not mean we should now roll over. We need to work out how to defend our democracy now.

This present Labour leadership is very different from previous ones. They have cut the umbilicus, they have formally repudiated the historical objectives of the Labour Party. I don't want to mistake the rhetoric, then or now, for reality, but I would say there are a whole range of quite fundamental differences between this and previous leaderships.

The left can provide a continuity

with what was best in Old Labour — the commitment to egalitarianism. Of course that didn't go far enough, but it was there. This is important when the present distribution of income in Britain is more unequal than it has been for half a century.

The present Labour leadership shows complete indifference to this and has announced tax policy to maintain the inequality. Contrast this with the right-wing Denis Healey telling Party Conference that he was going to squeeze the rich until the pips squeaked.

Where are we in the battle? One thing said on the left is "if we had some form of proportional representation there would be space for a left party". I don't think this is the right way to approach the question at all. It is true that the peculiarities of the Italian electoral system have made possible Rifondazione, they've also made possible a fairly lively green culture and so on. But I don't think it follows that there will be no developments on the left in Britain until we get electoral reform.

A lot of these arguments come from people connected with the old British Communist Party. But they were not getting 200 votes in elections because of the absence of PR. That's how many

people wanted to vote for them. In the 1930s and '40s the Communist Party could pull very sizeable votes indeed. Harry Pollit nearly won the Rhondda with 15,000 votes. In London in 1945 they polled well into five figures. This too was nothing to do with PR. In the end people have not voted for the Communist Party because of its association with autocracy.

The issue is, do people believe that the Labour Party in some broad way represents their aspirations, or don't they. If they don't efforts to replace the Labour Party become credible. If they do then the Labour Party should stay where it is.

A serious regroupment in the labour movement is necessary, around the question of full employment. Without full employment the seed bed of democracy is poisoned. Mass unemployment reduces the lives of millions of people to sheer misery, but it also frightens the life out of everybody else. Workers no longer feel free to stand up for their rights. And it increases the insecurities at home. The rise of petty and serious crime can terrorise people in their neighbourhoods. You then see the rise of xenophobia and racism. All of these things are corrosive of democracy.

This is why the left has got to fight for full employment. It is the acid test of everything.

Those at the top of the political establishment across Europe are of course hostile to this idea but equally a lot of people lower down in the labour bureaucracy and the government bureaucracy, and even the employers' representatives, understand that full employment is possible. They are scared about the social consequences of mass unemployment.

Get in touch with the Keep the Link Campaign

The campaign has just produced a newsletter with 16 pages of facts and arguments about the Labour-union link. Get copies of the newsletter, or details of the campaign from KTL c/o 138 Crampton St, London, SE17 3AE or 0171 708 0511