Debate

future battles between the next Labour government and the working class. Workers' Liberty mobilised all the forces it could muster in the Labour Party and the affiliated unions for the tasks.

But to go from that position to suggesting that the battle in the Labour Party is all over because of the loss of Clause Four is to abandon dialectics for constitutioal fetishism. The Labour Party is not In distinguishable from the Lib-Dems or the US Democrats. The union link is still basically intact. Labour is not yet a "pure" bourgeois party.

The alternative to a narrow focus on the rule book is to look at the Labour Party as it has developed historically, taking in all aspects of its contradictory reality.

This is how this magazine summed up that reality during the battle for Clause Four.

"Labour is the political wing of the multi-millioned trade union movement. Despite all its many limitations it represents the first faltering steps of the working-class movement on the road to political independence.

Though all Labour governments have — fundamentally — served the interest of capital, the party remains rooted in the bedrock organisations of the working class. It provides the only actually existing governmental alternative available to the working-class movement here and now.

If our politics are centred on the working class and the fight for its self-liberation then they, necessarily, relate to the working class, and to its organisations as they actually exist. Therefore serious socialists have to relate to the Labour Party. If Blair is successful in winning the abolition of Clause Four none of this will change.

The fact that the Labour Party, in its role, had written into its constitution a formal commitment to common ownership, which is one prerequisite of socialism, did not make the Labour Party socialist. On the contrary, the party's overall contradictory nature is defined on the one side by its actions in government and by policies and on the other side by its social base.

It is thus a 'bourgeois workers' party' [the definition is Lenin's].

Labour's reformism has always been a reflection of trade unionism. Labourism is merely the extension of the trade unionist principle of bargaining within the existing capitalist system into the bourgeoisie's own parliament. Whereas unions bargain with individual employers or across particular industries, Labourism has represented 'trade unionist' bargaining at the level of society and the overall running of society.

The abolition of Clause Four in itself will do nothing to change this basic nature.

Much of Blair's 'New Labour' Labourism is still, in part, a form of trade unionism in politics — the par-icularly degenerate, decayed and uninspiring variant of the Christian-democratic social-market philosophy of the professional civil service opportunists who run some of Britain's bigger unions.

Nothing that has happened since Blair's special conference victory changes this assessment. In fact, the key events at this year's conference were the product of a classical Labourist backroom deal. Blair promised the union leaders that there would be no new attacks on the union link and in return he received support on the minimum wage and selective education. The end result was the most stitch-up Labour conference since Harold Wilson's early days as leader.

It is strange for Scargill to claim that campaigning for socialism is no longer possible inside the Labour Party because of changes in the rule book.

Of course, we should not confine ourselves to what can be done now inside the Labour Party, but the fact of the matter is that it is still possible to win significant support for socialist ideas inside the Party and to organise around them. The Socialist Campaign Group of MPs secured a full third of all the votes cast in the recent NEC elections, to quote just one significant fact.

The difficulties facing those of us who fight for socialism come from the witch-hunters and the huge powers they have given to themselves to hound and persecute socialists. All those powers predate the New Clause Four. They are rather similar to those used by previous generations of witch-hunters back in the "Good old days" of the old Clause Four, particularly in the 1930s.

In reality the last thing the Blairites are likely to try right now is to expel someone for speaking up for the old Clause Four. Their priorities lie elsewhere. They are preparing to carry through a series of major attacks on what remains of the welfare state, attacks that will be so viciously anti-working class that they are certain to stir up opposition within the Labour Party. It is the job of Marxists to remain within the Labour Party where the major fault lines in British politics will develop.

As we were saying...

Lenin on the Labour Party

It would be possible to compile a booklet of quotations on the Labour Party from Lenin, and some would appear to contradict each other. What we need then is some indication of how to judge the Labour Party, concretely, as it exists now. At the Second Comintern Congress, 1920, Lenin made a speech on the question of affiliation of the British Communist to the Labour Party.

"...indeed the concepts 'political organisation of the trade union movement' or 'political expression of this movement' are wrong ones. Of course the bulk of the members of the Labour Party are workers; however, whether a party is really a political party of the workers or not, depends not only on whether it consists of workers, but also upon who leads it, upon the content of its activities, and of its political tactics. Only the latter determines whether we have before us really a political party of the proletariat. From this point of view, the only correct one, the Labour Party is a thoroughly bourgeois party, because although it consists of workers it is led by reactionaries, and the worst spirit reactionaries at that, who act fully in the spirit of the bourgeoisie. It is an organisation of the bourgeoisie which exists, in order with the help of the British bosses and Scheidemanns, to systematically undermine the trade union movement.

The Labour Party must be seen dialectically — in its connections, in its actual role and significance in the relationship of the classes — not by what fig-leaves it adopts, what it says of itself, or what workers think it is.

To use the description of it — 'the party of the British working class' — as a means of avoiding a sharp Marxist class analysis of its role, its actual position in the relationship of forces, is not serious. Neither is it serious to say 'well, it is, and then again it isn't.' In its function, whatever the contradictions, it is a bourgeois party. It is true that if we ignore the contradictions we will not be able to gauge future developments.

The Leninist position is that the Labour Party, judged in its role and function, and despite its origins and special connection with the trade unions, is a capitalist, a bourgeois workers' party.

"Judged politically it is not a workers' party with deformations, inadequacies (its 'inadequacies' amount to a qualitative difference), but a bourgeois party with the special function of containing the workers — actually it is a special instrument of the bourgeois-state political organisations. The Labour Party is the main instrument of capitalist control of the workers; the organisation formed out of an upsurge of the workers, but an upsurge in which the workers were defeated ideologically and thus in every other field, is now the means of integrating the drives and aspirations of the workers with the capitalist state machinery. It is not a peaceful or liberal party, but an active canaliser of the class — against itself, against the proletariat's own interest. It is against this background that Clause Four must be seen.

The approach and viewpoint is important here, and what we see will be seriously affected by how we begin. The initial statement; 'a workers' party' or 'a bourgeois workers' party', will affect everything else. For example, the bureaucracy is seen either as a crust formation, with certain deficiencies in relation to the needs of the class, but basically part of the class, which will respond (generously as opposed to treacherously) to pressures — Off as a much more serious opponent, a part of the political machine of the dominant class (irrespective of how it originates); and therefore our expectations from it will be quite different. We will not be quite so 'comfortable' in the Labour Party. The most obvious thing is that we will see their shifts to the left as also a danger and not as a triumph for the pressure of the class, as something which increased our responsibilities, as a party, rather than excuses us of them, lessening our role, questioning the validity of the Fourth International. The unqualified definition of the Labour Party as a workers' party is a snare.

From What We Are and What We Must Become, July 1920
Asylum seekers latest Tory scapegoats

By Stan Crooke

DESPERATE to revive their fading hopes of winning the next General Election, the Tories have reverted to playing the race card. The targets selected for the Tories' latest plunge into the sewers of racism and Union Jack jingoism are asylum seekers and refugees.

Speaking at this year's Tory Party conference, Social Security Secretary of State Peter Lilley was greeted with rapturous applause when he announced plans to slash the right of asylum seekers to claim welfare benefits.

All asylum seekers, irrespective of whether they apply on arrival or in-country, will lose the right to claim benefits during the appeals procedure after rejection at the first stage of the asylum application process. These measures will come into effect on 8 January 1996 and will apply — retrospectively — to anyone applying for asylum after 12 October this year. As a result, 10,000 asylum seekers and their dependants will lose their entitlement to social security on 8 January.

Under the new measures announced by Lilley, asylum seekers will be able to claim welfare benefits only if the Home Secretary formally declares that their country of origin is undergoing a "significant upheaval" which could give rise to a well-founded fear of persecution.

But there will certainly be few, if any, occasions when Michael Howard will declare that a country is undergoing a "significant upheaval." Such a declaration would trigger a spate of asylum applications by the nationals of that country — and the whole point of Lilley's proposals is to slash the number of people who apply for asylum and claim welfare benefits.

Moreover, in the dirty world of capitalist diplomatic horse-trading, Michael Howard, or any other Tory minister, would be reluctant to declare that countries in which British capitalism had vested economic or political interests were undergoing a "significant upheaval" and were persecuting their citizens.

The amount of money which Lilley claims will be "saved" by driving asylum seekers into homelessness and complete destitution will be just £4,200 million — less than 0.2% of the annual social security budget.

Less than a fortnight after Lilley warmed the hearts of the Tory faithful by promising to rid the country of "bogus" asylum seekers, Home Secretary Michael Howard took up the theme of "bash the scrounging foreigner" after the main planks of a new Asylum and Immigration Bill were leaked in the media.

Due to be announced when Parliament reassembles on 15 November (after publication of this issue of Workers' Liberty), the Bill will:

- Give the Home Secretary the power to draw up a "white list" of supposedly safe countries; asylum applications lodged by nationals of those countries will be deemed to be "manifestly unfounded."
- Abolish the right of an asylum seeker to an oral appeal in the event of their asylum application being deemed to be without foundation.
- Scrap the right of an asylum seeker to an in-country appeal if they have passed through a "safe country" on their way to the United Kingdom; instead, they will be deported to the "safe country" and may then lodge an appeal from there.
- Introduce a system of fines for employers who employ illegal immigrants, thus transforming employers into a second eleven for the Immigration and Nationality Department.

According to press reports, countries on the new "white list" would include Algeria, Nigeria and Sri Lanka — all of which are characterised by intense social conflict and a widespread and persistent abuse of human rights. Hardly by coincidence, they are also the countries of origin of many asylum seekers in Britain.

Lilley and Howard both used the same arguments to "justify" their attacks on the rights of asylum seekers and refugees. Pandering to the racist stereotype of the sponging foreigner, they claimed that most asylum seekers were merely economic migrants masquerading as victims of persecution.

As evidence in support of their claims they pointed to the ongoing increase in the number of people applying for asylum in Britain, and also to the high rate of rejection of asylum applications. On both counts their evidence does not stand up to scrutiny.

The increase in the number of asylum applications has been relatively modest — an increase of just 10,000 since 1992. The 40,000 or so asylum applications now lodged annually in Britain are insignificant compared with many other European countries (750,000 people applied for asylum in Germany in 1992 and 1993) and Third World countries (Zaire has a refugee population of 1.5 million).

The current high rate of rejection of asylum applications is not a reflection of their lack of merit but rather the product of government policy. Prior to the implementation of the Asylum and Immigration (Appeals) Act of 1993 only 16% of asylum seekers were not given leave to remain in this country. Now the rejection rate has jumped to 75%.

The anti-asylum legislation of 1993 made it more difficult to claim asylum by shifting...