

Labour youth organise



By Douglas Vespa

IN 1993 there were only 18 branches of Labour's youth movement still in existence. The national youth organisation had effectively been closed down in 1987. Three times as many Labour Party members were over the age of 66 as were under 25.

These facts, together with Labour's declining electoral support from young people, led Labour's 1993 Conference to decide to allow Young Labour groups to be formed. The intention was to create a tame body to provide Labour with a youthful image and footsoldiers for electioneering. Young Labour's objectives (as set out in its rules) place organising "social activities" above any form of politics or campaigning.

Young Labour groups have *no* rights of representation within the Party, no links with local CLPs. They have no right to control their own publications, raise funding through membership subscriptions, or receive grants from the Labour Party. They are responsible to unelected regional officials, not to local Party democracy.

Young Labour's "first birthday party", held at the 1994 Labour Annual Conference, attracted, in the main, activists from Labour's right-wing student organisation, the National Organisation of Labour Students (NOLS). Inevitably, Labour's youth magazine, *Regeneration*, is an insipidly right-wing affair.

None of this immediately spells advances for the left, but Labour has launched tame youth organisations four times in the past

— and they have never remained what the Labour leaders designed them to be.

In 1924 the growth of the Communist Party's Young Communist League prompted Labour to allow local youth sections for the first time, and the formation in 1926 of a national Labour League of Youth (LLY). Originally it had no National Committee, regional committees or any form of self-government. Its work was to be "mainly recreational and educational." But a left wing grew up in the 30s, Stalinist dominated. The LLY was disbanded in 1939.

The League of Youth was revived after the Second World War. Its newspaper *Young Socialist* carried adverts for the RAF and campaigned against the right to vote at 18. Several League of Youth members were expelled for campaigning against conscription. Yet the left grew.

In 1955, once again, the Labour leadership disbanded Labour's youth organisation.

Third time was no luckier. Launched in 1960, the year after Labour's third successive election defeat, the Young Socialists was initially to have no elected national committee and no right to discuss general political issues at its conference.

Hardly an open invitation to the left — but despite all this, left-wing resolutions were passed on issues like NATO and unilateral nuclear disarmament (then an issue of dispute in the Labour Party of crisis proportions). The left in the newly formed Young Socialists fought the 1960 attempt by Party leader Hugh Gaitskell to ditch Clause Four.

A layer of Labour's youth drew conclusions from these disputes. Supporters of the Marxist paper *Keep Left* were able to get one of their number onto the National Committee in 1961, two more the following year (as part of a unilateralist majority), and the next year to win a majority. In the midst of a witch-hunt, their newspaper banned (1962), and despite the obstacles placed in their way by the right-wing careerists and the bureaucrats, *Keep Left* supporters won the leadership of what had been set up to be a tame right wing controlled youth organisation. They did it by persuading activists recruited from such places as university CND societies to take YS branches out to working-class youth. They agitated on council estates over issues like youth facilities. They organised socials. They made their meetings accessible to youth not yet political.

The Labour leadership fought back with expulsions and disbandments, but *Keep Left* — by then drunk on their own success — ducked out of the fight and opted instead for an independent sectarian existence outside the Labour Party.

The strength of the right within the fourth Labour youth organisation, the Labour Party Young Socialists (LPYS), had been boosted by the departure of *Keep Left*. But again the LPYS youth gained political rights. The LPYS declined in the latter half of the 60s. The Militant tendency took control — with the tacit agreement of the

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The Great Wen goes septic

Colin Foster reviews

London: a social history

by Roy Porter. Hamish

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Review

"INNER LONDON has become the nation's capital for poverty, family breakdown, school truancy, delinquency, crime, alcoholism, vandalism and violence... This amounts to more than a temporary social dislocation... a new urban order is emerging..."

"In place of the employed, self-sufficient and respectable working classes who abounded from the time of the guilds to the 1960s... a new outcast London is coming into being... misery and waste, strife and demoralisation... decrepit infrastructure..."

Thatcherism — so Roy Porter shows — has revived many of the evils of Victorian or Georgian London. But it has also done worse.

In all of its previous history since the Middle Ages, London has been Britain's main manufacturing and trade centre — a place of relatively high employment (even in the 1930s), skills and wages. Its growth had been shaped and sustained by vast investment projects — in the Victorian era, the railways, the docks, the sewer system and the Embankment built above it, the Underground and so on.

Now London has suffered a greater decline of manufacturing even than Liverpool. The docks are finished. The only big investment projects are speculative office-building, and a bit for the tourist trade.

From being the centre of a burgeoning British capitalism, London has become a spot on the margins of a floundering world private-profit economy. And the Tories have left it to the mercies of the market.

Their only real hope of dynamism is the still-pivotal role of the City of London in world foreign exchange and other financial markets. Yet Porter's account shows, for London, the same logic which Robert Fitch has recently (*New Left Review* no. 207) discerned in New York:

"Can anyone imagine a poorer choice of industrial mix than Wall Street or speculative office building? For resident income? For stability? For the creation of wealth?"

And, in London as in New York, planners, sometimes well-meaning, have only made the havoc of the market worse — "destroyed economic diversity without being able to fill the new space..."

London's grip on a share of the proceeds of world capitalism is probably even shakier than New York's: a relatively small shift in the way international finance works could quickly take most of the business of the City of London to Frankfurt or elsewhere, and leave London a basket-case. ☐

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LP leaders. Militant would not rock the boat.

From the late 60s Vietnam War demonstrations to the anti-Cruise missile demos fifteen years later, every political issue that interested youth was ignored or dismissed with contempt by the Militant-led LPYS. Sterile, abstract propaganda was its staple. When it was closed down in 1987 the LPYS was an isolated and uninspiring organisation.

All this indicates that, whatever the intentions of Blair and the careerist youth around him, Young Labour is not certain to be the tame and lifeless organisation they would like. Experience already indicates that left-wing Young Labour branches can attract young working class people.

Experience also indicates that where YL branches and other Party members fight seriously to win rights and status for Young Labour within the local Party those things can be achieved — at least on a local level. YL branches are starting to establish their right to formulate policy and campaign on it. In some areas they are being granted delegate rights within Party structures. The felt need of many of those who run CLPs today to recruit and involve youth in the Party can generate support for YL activists seeking democracy.

YL branches can provide campaigning opportunities to reconnect Labour to that generation of working-class youth cut off

from it by mass unemployment and by lack of union rights.

Youth who get involved in YL quickly learn socialist lessons. Socialists can discuss *political answers* with working-class youth and organise them to fight for the regeneration and transformation of the movement.

The bureaucratic shackles on Young Labour undoubtedly hinder that work, but they cannot fully prevent it, any more than they prevented it in the past. Youth attracted to left-wing politics — no matter how vaguely to begin with — make uneasy bedfellows with the bureaucrats and careerists who run organisations like the Labour Party. That is the root explanation of the history I have outlined.

The comparative absence of right-wing shackles in the LPYS period [1965-87] is the exception, not the norm.

One of the two crucial lessons for today from the 60s is this: good relations with local Parties are vital for defending YL branches from the arbitrary powers of Regional Offices. The other is that to *build* YL branches means getting out of cosy discussion circles and into the places where working-class youth are.

Young Labour's future remains uncertain, but the Blairites are unlikely to have things easy for long. ☐

Note: Douglas Vespa is a pseudonym. The author is active in Young Labour.

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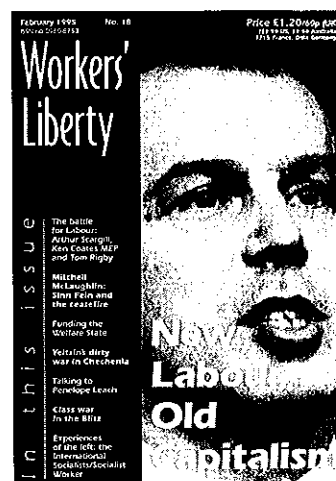
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