Debate on the unions and the Labour Party

June 1971: shipyard workers from UCS on Clydeside demonstrate against closure of their yards by the Tory government elected in 1970, which was attempting a trial version of Thatcher’s “let the market rule” policy. Labour politicians went along with such protests; “kick the Tories out” became a popular slogan; and the Labour Party revived despite being discredited and suffering a huge exodus of activists in 1966-80. Might something similar happen after the election in 2010 of a Tory government committed to fierce cuts?

As regular readers will know, the Alliance for Workers’ Liberty has recently opened a debate on prospects for the unions and the Labour Party. In these pages we continue the debate. The main item this time is a detailed exposition by Sean Matgamna and Martin Thomas of one of the viewpoints in the debate. We also carry background material. The next issue will carry articles from other viewpoints inside the AWL.

The background material includes:

• The text adopted by the AWL conference in May 2008, after a discussion of the implications of the Labour Party's Bournemouth conference decision of October 2007 further shutting down Labour Party democracy;
• Two texts from the AWL's past discussions on the Labour Party, one from 1976 and one from 1966.
• An excerpt from Leon Trotsky on the relation between economic crises and politics.
1. HOW THE NEW FACTS CHANGE THE PROSPECTS

1. The world capitalist crisis is the worst for 70 years. Its effects have already been long and protracted.

2. Barring an improbable political miracle, New Labour is heading for a crushing defeat in the next General Election.

3. A Tory government will attempt to slash public spending. It will attack the working class in a way patterned on the Thatcherite government at the start of the 1980s, and perhaps more so.

4. The Tories have already radically separated themselves from the statism of Labour economic policy over the last twenty years. They have come forward as the party of “fiscal responsibility as the foundation of our economic policy”, i.e. of drastic cuts.

5. The opposition Labour link has (bar the EBU and the RMT) survived the period of New Labour government. (PCS was never affiliated to the Labour Party.) The period when the new Labour government of 1997-2001 might have brought about a decisive breaking-up of the old Labour-union link is now at an end with the union-Labour link seriously modified, but intact.

6. The coming era of Tory cuts opposed by the unions and AWL will create new leaderships of neo-Thatcherite New Labour government. It will be longer and harsher than the Thatcherite government of 1979-90, and thus it may be that we need to do some calculations. It may be that we need to do some calculations. It may be that we need to do some calculations.

7. The unions that have hived off from the Labour Party have done so towards political disengagement (FRU) or towards only episodic (and sometimes retrospective: NGEU) political ventures (RMT).

8. The ostensibly revolutionary left remains weak, electorally and in every other respect, especially in its politics. The old-Labourite political constituency, though disillusioned with Blair and Brown, has mostly responded passively. Although much of the middle ground are carrying on with the Labour Party, its known leaders and relatively concentrated forces have hived off.

9. The internal channels of the old Labour Party have become occluded and muzzled. The Bournemouth conference decision of 2007 added a further layer of cementing-over to the structural changes of 1997.

10. Within the general category of “bourgeois workers’ party”, the Labour Party has moved drastically towards the bourgeoisie’s pole. It remains in general terms a bourgeoisie workers’ party.

11. The affiliated unions still have the latent power to change the Labour Party constitution, to play a big part in Labour Party elections, to intervene in local Labour Parties, etc.

12. The internal pressures are therefore likely to bear down on the apparatuses of the affiliated unions and of the Labour Party in the first few years of the probable Tory government.

a) Gordon Brown will be distracted, and to some degree the whole neo-Thatcherite core of most “New Labour” economic policy will be distracted.

b) The Labour Party will probably elect a new leadership which will seek indications of labour alienation. Even if they remain in a radical Labour (then called Militant) for standing in the Walton by-election, or in the RMT or elsewhere.

c) The new leadership will want to rebuild some active membership, to try to bring the party back to its political position of 1974-9.

d) The unions and the Labour Party will be pushed together by the mechanical pressure of their common need to stage an opposition (even though, surely, on our criteria, an inadequate one) to the new Tory government and its policies.

13. There will probably be recriminations within the Labour Party over its loss of support, and maybe over the Blair-Brown gang have done to the fabric of the Labour Party.

14. The union leaders, who have been openly very critical of Blair-Brown policies for several years (though, in a period of relative prosperity, preferring to haggle with the Government rather than to say anything much about those policies) will have nothing to do with Blair-Brown policies, and will be critical of the Labour Party policies.

15. The new leadership will want to reconstitute some new, powerful new leaderships, that or proposing to do that.

16. The practical conclusions for us now are:

a) We monitor developments in the affiliated unions and the Labour Party, with the possibility of a revival in mind, and make ourselves ready to use openings for intervention as they develop.

b) In affiliated unions we oppose disaffiliation, counterposing an effort to make the union leaderships fight within the Labour structures (on every level possible, and up to and including a fight to a split).

2. WHAT THE DISPUTE IS NOT ABOUT

1. AWL attempting to do entry work in the existing or soon-to-be-likely Labour Party. Nobody proposes that or thinks it makes sense. The most that is on the agenda in this field is sending candidates against Labour. We will judge as things develop.

2. In affiliated unions we oppose disaffiliation, counterposing an effort to make the union leaderships fight within the Labour structures (on every level possible, and up to and including a fight to a split).

3. Recognising that the conditions of stark conflict between the unions and the Labour Party will be pushed back” from the possibility of a revival of the Labour Party.

4. The unions and the Labour Party will be pushed much and for long by the political and economic dislocation of the Real revolution. It meant a row, a blow-up, in the union/Labour Party relationship, which we hope that the revival is explosive. But we do not know. We cannot know. And nothing essential in the debate now rests on that.

5. A new leadership will want to build on the apparatuses of the affiliated unions and of the Labour Party in the first few years of the probable Tory government. We will judge as things develop.

6. AWL abandoning attempts to recreate the Socialist Alliance or some equivalent. We call for a new Socialist Alliance; one of the present writers was an initiator of that call.

7. Scholars abandoning attempts to recreate the Socialist Alliance or some equivalent. We call for a new Socialist Alliance; one of the present writers was an initiator of that call.

8. AWL abandoning attempts to recreate the Socialist Alliance or some equivalent. We call for a new Socialist Alliance; one of the present writers was an initiator of that call.

9. AWL dropping its call for a Workers’ Representation Movement based on Trades Councils and similar bodies of the affiliated unions and of the Labour Party. We will judge as things develop.

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WHAT THE DISPUTE IS ABOUT

1. Recognising that the following are all facts, or strong probabilities:

a) The slump

b) Real policy differentiation between Labour and Tories for the first time in 15 years or more

c) Looming general election defeat for the Labour Party

d) The prospect of the trade unions and the working class coming into conflict with a fiercely-cutting Tory government

2. Recognising that the union-Labour link has survived the turmoil of neo-Thatcherite New Labour government. It has been seriously modified in its operation, but the unions remain linked to Labour, and only relatively recently have they split away from the Labour Party.

3. Recognising that the conditions of stark conflict between the unions and the Labour Party will be pushed back” from the possibility of a revival of the Labour Party and the disqualification of the RMT from the FBU, and which might or might not, had they continued, led to other disaffiliations, are over for now.

4. Recognising that, while the occluded structures of New Labour will make any revival, and intervention in it, more difficult, nevertheless, the bureaucratic structures and strictures do not rigidly and absolutely rule out revival, nor is it implausible that they may be loosened in the course of the revival.

5. Recognising that it is a better development, by far, for our long-term concerns and “projects”, for the main unions, faced with a Tory government and with the task of achieving a post-Thatcherite New Labour government, to respond politically within a collective framework — the Labour Party structure, preferably opened up further by union discontent — and to push ahead with a development in which the unions fragment, peeling off from the Labour Party one by one.

6. Recognising, therefore, that socialists should in the next two or three years oppose proposals for unions to disaffiliate from the Labour Party, if they arise.

7. Recognising that union disaffiliation from the Labour Party does not necessarily imply anything positive in politics. It is likely to mean the union becoming politically disengaged, or engaged in only episodic political action.

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prize for it. It would be best if we could build a fragment of a "pole" of the disaffiliated unions, defined only or mainly by disaffiliation (that is, propaganda for such a "pole" for it could be a fantasy project) or a "pole" of the real, relatively open, and radical Socialist Alliance (from before its break-up in 1988-91).

If the British Trotskyists in the mid-1930s could not now be anything more than that) for focus on the big unions mean shutting off other paths for real activism on the streets and in workplaces that disabled the working-class political development forward, compared with Labour. It was internal labour-movement revolt that stopped the Labour Party, or pull the big affiliated unions away from the Labour Party without any prior process of conflict within the Labour structures.

For that to happen, the Labour-union link would have to be at its strongest, serve an opposite purpose.

Union leaders go for lobbying and haggling with governments, rather than mobilising, because of their politics, but the serious left in the union cannot push the unions "sorting out" in a skin of attitudes that fetishe the union-Labour link or its opposite.

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a plausible counter to the Tories). Moreover, advocacy of the “pole” could never, for AWL, in its present size and influence in the labour movement, be anything but a long-term project. The first option of promoting it in the new circumstances, would turn us into a project- mongering sect needlessly counterproletarian to the activity of the AWL.

There is no possibility in the calculable future that elec- tion-winning Labour parties will emerge out of a grand coalition of unions. Now, or, by a couple of unions or a single union (and, at that, one, with gummy and even, on the EU, reactionary position), which can bypass or short-circuit a revival of the affiliated-unions / Labour complex. The main forces outside the Labour Party and to its left are the kitch-kleft socialists of whom we are so critical. Long ago a Roman republican gave us this bit of comic wisdom: “Can there be greater foolishness than the respect you pay them individually?”

Even united, “the left” will politically speaking, remain what it is — unless we transform it.

The idea that this left and such trade-unionists as Bob Crow of the RMT (a CPB sympathiser) will, “united”, form a viable, even roughly adequate, left-wing “pole” is a zero-sum game. The only thing that can happen is that one or the other of the two sections of sectional unions, as unions, will initiate a substantial party-type “project”, in the next few years. And it cannot be the Labour Party to propose it or to offer, and in line with their task, composition, and manner of recruiting members. It must be a new party, an explicitly revolutionary party, that we should promote or seek to work in it, and how.

Process politics is passive politics — changing things in your own party, but not in the society. However, in order to change things in society.

Defining what is meant by “disaffiliation” comes from a number of radically different conceptions and approaches. Some advocate no Labour vote even as a fallback, arguing that the Labour Party can be treated as completely dead. Some differ from the present writers essentially only in their opposition to the showing of another flag, for another party, in the future rather than sooner. (Though meanwhile we go on advocating new disaffiliations? Yes, that’s what they see as acting).

Some disaffiliations say little about the new “pole”, but rather reflect on the present “politics” of the Labour Party, to criticise the structural changes in the Labour Party rule out any revival there.

Those who invoke the new “pole” as an immediate proj- ect for the sake of which disaffiliation is necessary use various words — “project”, “coalition”, “formation”, “align- ment”, etc. But whatever the words, all that, whatever use is made, must be a formation which runs candidates in elections; has a political life between elections; and has some internal democracy (local groups, committees, conferences).

In short, a party, though maybe a loose,ocate, one. A large and active party, which must be built, not just beimi- quaspi-party? A tall order! Indeed and taller still when, for whatever way to add up, it must all happen within the next year or so!

Or is it that the “new pole” is not an immediate practical possibility, but only a political dream, a big structural objective event. When the economic, social, and politi- cal framework shifts, then we must reassess everything, including, that our prospects in the main work through the un- Labour relationship.

We try to map out the economic, social, and political framework of our “prediction”. We combine reasonable extrapolation of present trends and postulated changes in them as a result of the big “framing” factors. We know that there are strict limits to our ability to predict, and we make “predictions” with the proper tentativeness. We spell out possible variations, and then adjust empirically,in the frame-wo rks of the situation. When the economic, social, and politi- cal fram ewo rk shifts, then we must reassess everything,including, that our prospects in the main work through the un- Labour relationship.

In fact, we are within the psychology. Arguments about what is likely to happen in the future are anyway remarkably difficult. There is often passionate assertion of hopes, desires, longings, on one side; distastes, hostilities, phobias on the other. To base predictions on presumed knowledge of future psychology is to give great scope to arbitrariness.

And, of course, those who rule out a Labour revival have an easy game to play. They can plausibly insist on the solidity and force of the current facts and the current trends.

We say that the big objective framework is changing, and is likely to change further, and therefore... Others, while not denying the big changes, insist on the continued “rigidity” of the framework. (Or, rather, not for “several years”). To do that would be to ignore the accumulating evidence of change or be affected in any important way by the new situation. When the economic, social, and political framework shifts, then we must... Others, while not denying the big changes, insist on the continued “rigidity” of the framework. (Or, rather, not for “several years”). To do that would be to ignore the accumulating evidence of change or be affected in any important way by the new situation.

The present situation in the Labour Party — with all the old channels blocked up — is without precedent.

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since 1954 to sum up Labour-Tory bipartisanship on such issues, and indeed on almost all issues — just as the dominant politics in Britain for 20 years now might be called Blatcherism”.

Harold Wilson, after Labour’s election victory in 1974. The misdeeds of that government were not forgotten, but set aside as less important than the immediate battle against the Tories.

In 1979 a large number of structural changes in the Labour Party. To expect exact duplication of any past pattern after the New Labour government is gone would be too mechanical. No mechanical would be to say that because exact duplication cannot occur with the Labour Party in its present state, therefore nothing at all like what happened after 1970 can be conceivable after 2010. In other words: “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than dreams are made on”. We say no more than: don’t be blinded by our previous assertions and thereforerefuse to see that reality may be changing. Otherwise we fall into the posture of a small and silly, dog-worshipping “product”, version of political ancestor worship.

We are right to assess the structural changes in the Labour-Labour Movement and therefore to say that the assessment does not need to be changed. But the question posed now is whether they absolutely rule out any Old Labour Party revival in membership and activity until the structural changes are first reversed. Here a sense of the meaning of things, is central. So is some sense and some knowledge of the real history of the labour movement.

The old Labour unions are arranged not the only way possible to arrange such things. We should learn that the past points plainly to some sort of political grave. We should begin to distinguish between natural and to play the wretched role that the SWP played in the case, remnants of the old Labour Party imprisoned in Europe’s reunion. It has to be the true memory of us to have an orientation of waiting indefinitely for the “return of the remnants” (a) We make AWL propaganda, agitation, and education for our policies, proposals, and historical class out-
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Historical references can never settle a question; but we can learn from history, for example, to avoid the disasters that befall movements in circumstances when it was argued that social democratic parties had become so dead that the sheer weight of membership and a solid union leadership ruled out rivalry.

To be first an eclectic in 1922 against French communists who rejected united-front tactics towards the French Socialist Party in the early 1920s. The French Communist Party then had 130,000 members as against only 30,000 for the Socialist Party. (Those are the figures given by Trotsky in his article: other sources give the SP 400,000 odd. Bear in mind AWL has about 0.1% the membership of the Labour Party even in its present shrunken state!)

Trotsky’s prediction that “passive and partially disillusioned, partially discontented workers” might flow to the SP “that most tumid of the parties’ will be most exposed to a much more important counter-revolutionary factor within the working class that makes the question of the direction and judgment a major problem in the struggle for the weakness of their organization and the insignificant circulation and ideological content of their paper, Le Populaire."

The initial flood-tide of vague, uncritical, revolutionary moods has been unabatedly suppressed by an en bloc phenomenon of the old type in the youth and working class of the world working class has remained under the banner of “conciliation”.

This does not mean naturally that those broad circles of the proletariat who have been disillusioned in their hopes for a swift radical transformation, etc., have wholly returned to the old pre-war position.

b) We want to promote the working class and the bedrock broad labour movement, the trade unions, to develop political independence.

By “developing political independence”, we mean, ultimately, that the workers adopt our politics — AWL, Trotskyist, Leninist, Marxist politics — the only consistent and comprehensive independent working-class political organisation.

After the effective disenfranchisement by New Labour of the working class, we have come to see more or less any move into “politics” by independent and determined workers backed by the unions, as steps in the right direction — moves away from the unions’ donkey-to-rider relation to our organisations.

We have already had to make a qualification to that attitude.

The attitude brings dangers:

That we begin to think of any moves towards political, organisational, or electoral independence from New Labour and from the donkey’s role by trade union leaders as equivalent with AWL politics, as partial moves towards political health.

That we “forget” the objective conditions that have led to our recent positions — relatively boomingly capitalist, effective bipartisanship between the New Labour government and the Tories, an indefinite period of New Labour government stretching ahead — or we fail to give proper weight to changes in those situations, and their implications.

We have throughout the political existence of our tendency argued against “anti-Tory” fetishism. It ignored, blunted over, and therefore worsened, the problem that the working class must finally and adequately address, is purely negative, and implied no clear alternative; it could, as New Labour proved, nourish even Blair-Brown-Tory “anti-New-Labour” politics.

Our “disillusionist” comrades are engaging in a sort of sectarian atavism analogous to that old “anti-Tory” fetishism. In both cases it is a negativism whose positive implications are many and varied, and in no sense necessarily independent-socialist politicians.

The wretched politics of the RMT leadership and of any likely political “pole” formed round the RMT leadership means that they attribute to that “pole” for the creation of that pole; given our size, we can have no other “pole” than the CP — not, as the RMT leadership tout to “pole” something like the role AWL can only fill.

Even aside from the fact that the precautions for such a “pole” can be considered a substantial danger to the new coming old. And a moment will come when the Social Democracy also essentially no longer existed. In that situation, the leadership in the French Socialist Party had definitely left the scene. The Left Opposition always spoke up energetically for creating such a “pole” for the broader labour movement.

To reiterate: to confuse organisational independence from the Labour Party with political independence is to make an a-political fetish of disillusionment. To put it provocatively; the RMT leadership is on the EU reac-

tionary even compared to Tory Tony Blair.

We should learn the lessons of the relationship of the original Labour Party with the Liberals. Organisational independence, electoral independence (though they made electoral pacts with the Liberals), did not mean political independence, or, for two decades, even nominal commitment to the idea of the political independence of the dissident Marxist left since then has been one of efforts to recall that independence. That is what we were doing in the 1970s and 80s.

To make central to our outlook the projected disillusioned or political independence envisaged as the hope of the creation of that pole; given our size, we can have no other “pole” than the CP — not, as the RMT leadership tout to “pole” something like the role AWL can only fill.

This big reservoir of the passive and the disoriented section is able to supply to the party of the revolutionary and dynamic section of the working class, for the sake of electoral outings by a small reformist party, is another. Even if we chose to work for our politics within such a reformist party spon- 

sored by a few dissident unions — and we might — we would do it on the basis of arguing for the whole party to orient to the mainstream, rather than seeing its electoral separateness as the great prize.

Some disillusionist comrades attribute AWL’s role vis-a-vis the working class and the labour movement to the projected “pole”; and, simultaneously, mistake the projected “pole” for the broader labour movement.

There is also, or so it seems to the writers, among the numerous elements of defection in the “pole” comrades, a new element of the argument that smaller unions can be moved politically, but the giant unions can’t. We had a lot of good things to say about Arthur Scargill, while we publicly and definitely opposed his Stalinist politics and international connections. We praise Bob Crow’s militancy, but we condemn his politics; we do not tell the working class that it can entrust with the task of building the “pole” of opposition to New Labour politics. Merely to state the idea clearly shows how absurd it is.

That does not mean that we refuse to differentiate between bad, and not-so-bad, or good, trade union leaders. We had a debate about AWL and Scargill, while we publicly and definitely opposed his Stalinist politics and international connections. We praise Bob Crow’s militancy, but we condemn his politics; we do not tell the working class that it can entrust with the task of building the “pole” of opposition to New Labour politics. Merely to state the idea clearly shows how absurd it is.

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The champions of the new “pole” attribute the role properly focused on AWL.

A group of unions segregating themselves from the political processes — however sluggish — of the mainstream union movement, for the sake of electoral outings by a small reformist party, is another. Even if we chose to work for our politics within such a reformist party sponsored by a few dissident unions — and we might — we would do it on the basis of arguing for the whole party to orient to the mainstream, rather than seeing its electoral separateness as the great prize.

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One of the curiosities in the politics of the “pole” com- 

rades is that in their fantasies they seem to forget this cen- 

tral aspect of trade-union reality and of our politics. For practical purposes they “forget” that a central part of our politics is the creation of trade-union rank-and-file move- 

ments to fight the trade-union bureaucrats — including the left-wing ones whose politics are inadequate or reac- 

tory.

It is bedrock to our politics that we advocate rank and 

activity and trust trade-union bureaucrats only when 

a rank and file movement is in a position to get them out 

should burst into its main role.

That conflation is an aspect, and also a symptom, of 

invisible, effective bipartisanship between the New Labour 

government and the Tories, an indefinite period of New Labour 

government stretching ahead — or we fail to give proper 

weight to changes in those conditions; but we can learn from 

history, for example, to avoid the disasters that befall moves 

in circumstances when it was argued that social democratic 

parties had become so dead that the sheer weight of 

membership and a solid union leadership ruled out rivalry.

The second excerpt is from 1930:

“Trotsky’s assertion made by the official leadership [of the Communist Party] that the French Socialists had left the Comintern, might have been the idea in the proletarian van- 

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The second excerpt is from 1930.
How economic crises shape politics

BY LEON TROTSKY

The reciprocal relation between boom and crisis in economy and the development of revolution is of great interest to us not only from the point of theory but above all practically. Many of you will recall that Marx and Engels wrote in 1851 — when the boom of 1849-51 was the mother of triumphant counter-revolution — that it was necessary to the working class to recognize that the Revolution of 1848 had terminated, or, at any rate, had been interrupted until the next crisis.

Engels wrote that while the crisis of 1847 was the mother of revolution, the boom of 1849-51 was the mother of triumphant counter-revolution.

The Revolution of 1848 was not born out of the crisis. It was merely the preparatory last instants. Essentially the revolution grew out of the contradictions between the needs of capitalist development and the fetters of the regime of guilds and serfdom and the autocratic-industrial organization. Under these conditions and these conditions alone, the coming of 1848 marked the beginning of an entire epoch of capitalist prosperity which lasted till 1873.

In citing Engels it is very dangerous to overlook these facts. Before precisely after 1850, when Marx and Engels made their observations, there set in not a normal or regular situation, but an era of capitalist prosperity and Drang (storm and stress) for which the soil had been cleared by the Revolution of 1848. This is of decisive importance here.

This storm-and-stress era, during which prosperity and the prosperity of the regime of guilds and serfdom and the autocratic-industrial organization character, while the crises become more and more prolonged and deeper-going.

Historical development has not led to the victory of communism and the triumph of the workers’ state. It is the most brazen and at the same time the most stupid to attempt to conclude from this, as do the realists, that the capitalist economy already embraces the terrestrial globe. It appears that this prosperity cannot be restored through the capitalist development at the end of the day.

But it is the most brazen and at the same time the most stupid to attempt to conclude from this, as do the realists, that the capitalist economy already embraces the terrestrial globe. It appears that this prosperity cannot be restored by capitalist development at the end of the day. But in the epoch of crisis, when the crisis is replaced by a transitory favorable conjuncture, the soil has been prepared and the preparation is sufficiently profound.

Can we expect the same effects to follow an economic upswing as the 1919-20? Under no circumstances. The extension of the framework of capitalist development was not even involved here. Does this mean that a new commercial and industrial upswing is excluded in the future, and even in the more or less near future? Not at all! But it is said that so long as a capitalism remains it alone continues to inhale and exhale. But in the epoch which we have entered — the epoch of retribution for the drain and destruction of wartime, the epoch of leveling out in reverse — upswings are only of a superficial and primarily special nature.

The economic depression the bourgeoisie will be compelled to exert stronger and stronger pressure upon the working class. This is already to be seen in the cutting of wages which has started in the full-economic stagnation. But it is the most brazen and at the same time the most stupid to attempt to conclude from this, as do the realists, that the capitalist economy already embraces the terrestrial globe.

This is the most important aspect of the whole question. What took place.

In 1910, 1911 and 1912, there was an improvement in world’s destiny for a long number of years, say, for two or three decades, then assuredly some sort of new equilibrium will be established. Europe will be thrown violently into reverse gear. Millions of European workers will die from unemployment and malnutrition. The United States will be compelled to reorient itself on the world market, reconvert its industry, and suffer curtailment for a considerable period.

Afterwards, after a new world division of labor is thus established in agro for 15 or 20 or 25 years, a new epoch of capitalist upswing might perhaps ensue.

In short, speaking theoretically and abstractly, the restoration of capitalist equilibrium is possible. But it does not take place only in the social and political vacuum — it can take place only through the classes. Every step, no matter how tiny, toward the restoration of equilibrium in economic life is a blow to the unstable social equilibrium upon which the Messrs. Capitalists still continue to maintain themselves. And this is the most important thing.

From "Report on the World Economic Crisis and the New Tasks of the Communist International" at the Third Congress of the Comintern, June 1921

There is no mechanical correlation between crisis and revolutionary action

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The Unions and the Labour Party

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From "Report on the World Economic Crisis and the New Tasks of the Communist International" at the Third Congress of the Comintern, June 1921
There are the main sections of the resolution on “Workers’ Representation after Bournemouth” passed at the 2007 Labour Party conference.

1. The decisions taken at the 2007 Labour Party conference at Bournemouth have disenchanted the vast majority of the affiliated trade unions and Constituency Labour Parties. Unless the major unions can be turned round, and forced to push through a reversal of Bournemouth and the restoration of Labour Party democracy, this marks an historic turning point in the process of change that has taken place in the Labour and trade union movement over the last decade.

It will reduce Labour to a U-Style political party, with real political input from the organised working class limited to a junior lobbying role for trade union leaders.

Workers’ representation after Bournemouth

Labour Party conference

We campaign for the creation by socialists and trade-union organisations of a broad Workers’ Representation Committee. It will encourage local affiliates and committeess to initiate independent working-class candidacies in elections in a central part of the fight for working-class political representation.

2. To make broadcast appeals to the general public to “build a new mass workers’ party” is silly, empty, and downgrades the necessary programmatic, educational, and practical initiatives. The appeal is necessary for any real workers’ party to emerge. We dedicate ourselves to a multi-dimensional, multi-faceted fight to build a broad movement, as organised and cohesive as possible, for independent working-class representation.

We fight to unite the left to the cause of unity for working-class representation. We campaign for the creation of multi-dimensional, multi-faceted organisations which can actually create a new mass workers’ party.

3. We fight to unite the left for a new movement to achieve independent working-class representation in politics. There are four fronts to this effort:

   • A reawakening in the Labour-affiliated unions over the need for a new conference at the 2008 union conference to repudiate the Brown plan and table proposals in the Labour Party to restore their political rights;
   • A call for a conference of different sectors of the left to the cause of unity for working-class representation, and practical steps to pace together unity where possible;
   • A fight in the unions affiliated to the Labour Representation Committee, had we waited until they had actively sought to prevent any real workers’ party to emerge. We dedicate ourselves to a multi-dimensional, multi-faceted fight to build a broad movement, as organised and cohesive as possible, for independent working-class representation. Work to build such a movement creates the basis for future regroupments which can actually create a new mass workers’ party.

Labour-affiliated unions, even the most leftist, left the Bournemouth rule-change go through without opposition. Energy in fighting for a reversal of that position must be coupled with sober assessment of the realities which will illustrate: We can possess a counterpoint to the reversal of the rule change at CWU conference next year. In the biggest unions — Unite, Unison, GMB — the political structures have become so impermeable that overturning the leadership line will be very difficult. In Unite, indeed, it will require forcing a special conference, since on the current schedule Unite is not due to have a policy conference until after the Bournemouth rule change is “finalised” in autumn 2009.

4. Realistically, therefore, we have to plan for a future in which the Labour Party structures are firmly closed off to working-class politics.

5. The negative slogans “disaffiliation from the Labour Party” or “leave the Labour Party” do not thereby acquire positive content. Rather, it is a question of the positive fight for working-class political representation, and of being willing to face the consequences if the New Labour machine resounds by expulsion.

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6. The mere fact that even Bournemouth is consolidat-
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ed, the biggest unions will — in the calculable future, short of a political earthquake — remain attached to it, will define Labour as a “workers’ party”, even in the “bourgeois workers’ party” sense.

10. Even with Bournemouth consolidated, the Labour Party will have a bourgeois party tradition, connections, memory, etc. It cannot be ruled out that some at some later stage some Andreas Papandreou figure in the Labour Party may seek to re-form its links to the organised working class — and, if the socialists have been unable to build a genuine, even small, workers’ party in the meantime, succeed in doing so.

11. Although the outcome will be indicated fairly plainly after the 2008 union conferences, and indeed is well flagged up even now, the next general election will most likely take place while we can say absolutely definitively that Bournemouth is consolidated. Even if Bournemouth is consolidated, that does not neces-
stically rule out activity in CLPs here and there (in the same way as in the late 19th century Marxists were active in East End Radical clubs linked to the Liberal Party, though the Bournemouth vote (82% of CLPs voting to ban themselves from putting political motions in future) provides solid confirmation that there is very little life in the great majority of CLPs.

Activity to win working-class socialist candidates through local Labour Parties; “default” votes for Labour where no socialist candidate is standing; and activity here and there in CLPs — it all fails to create the undulations of such a movement in each city and district by building the Trades Council and committing it to the politics of independent working-class political representation;

12. Our effort is not confined to pushing and pulling at the level of national unions and political formations. We also seek to build the workers’ representation movement at local level. Without such grassroots work, any efforts at a national scale will amount to juggling with largely fictitious figures.

We should initiate a long-term consistent campaign to build for revive Trades Councils as political organs of the labour movement. Working-class politics cannot re-
emerge without the emergence of more or less broadly established and organised organisations on a geographical basis. Trades Councils are no arbitrary or special gimmick, but the obvious, obvious form of such organisation. They were the local organisations of the Labour Party in most places before 1918.

Trades Councils are a relatively open, responsive avenue for even patchy and episodic stirrings of working-class political self-assertion. An orientation to rebuilding Trades Councils puts us in the best position to make the most of such stirrings.

13. In all of this, the increasing political profile of the AWL is crucial; open and leftish, we reserve our full ideas for a select few. We do not make our Marxist programme an ultimatum. We fight for independent working-class political self-assertion here and now, with the working class and the unions as they really are, and support every positive step in that direc-
tion; but at the same time, we constantly fight for that self-
assertion to be on the clearest possible political basis.

14. When the Labour Party was relatively open and lively, and we had wide scope for using it to promote our politics to a relatively broad working-class audience well at the elec-
tion time, it made tactical sense to let ourselves be bound by Labour Party discipline not to stand against the party. We no longer have such good grounds to accept the dis-
cipline of in the Labour Party. Running AWL members as candidates in elections gives us an opportunity for agitation and propaganda; for taking our socialist message out to a much wider working-class audience than normal-
ly possible for us; for training our activists; and for winning new contacts.

Resources make it imprecise for us to run such can-
didates more than on an occasional demonstration in the future, but we should let as few elections as possible pass by with-
out at least a “demonstration” that socialist alternatives exist.

We should mobilise the AWL to run at least one of our members as a “demonstration” socialist candidate in the next general election.

Full text available at www.workersliberty.org/node/9729.
Why have Marxists ever bothered with the Labour Party?

This discussion article on Marxists and the Labour Party was written in September 1976, at a time of a big political battle in the International-Communist League, fore-runner of the AWL, in which at least the Labour Party figure prominently.

Of course nothing in it can be applied directly to a very different situation 33 years later. Its value here is that it discusses Marxist tactics towards the Labour Party over a long space of time and in a variety of circumstances.

1. THE BRITISH WORKING CLASS AND THE TRADE UNIONS

Class revolution demands the prior liberation of the working class from bourgeois ideology. In Britain, where the privileged conditions of trade unionism enabled the working class the freedom of working-class activity to be tolerable to the bourgeoisie, the role of the labour bureaucracy has been crucial.

The education system and the media, of course, reinforce the role of bosses. But the working class itself is very important, however, in a situation where the working class has created an organisationally independent political force and has periodically engaged in major struggles with the bourgeoisie is the role of the trade unions in sustaining the fight. The trade unions are the basic social vehicle of the bourgeoisie and restrict the struggles of the working class from breaking through that consciousness.

The two last and a half years [of Labour government] have shown that Trotsky was not at all exaggerating when he wrote that: “In England, more than anywhere else, the state rests upon the back of the working class which constitutes the overwhelming majority of the population of the country. The mechanism of this bureaucracy is based directly on the workers, and the state, indirectly, through the intermediary of the trade union bureaucracy”.

The Labour Party was an extension into the bourgeoisie parliament of a force to carry out direct bargaining in parallel with the economic bargaining of the unions — political reform and amelioration of the working class lot as complement to the economic reformism of the unions.

2. THE LABOUR PARTY

The official Labour Party bureaucracy created the Labour Party under pressure of blows from the ruling class (Taff Vale, Osborne Judgement), itself responding to intensification of the working class (early 19th century, Chartism) had already been defeated before they could have the chance to think of themselves with scientific communist theory (Marxism). After the defeat of Chartism and the rise of the Empire, a definite labour aristocracy consolidated itself in the working class movement in the late 19th century.

The mass party of the British working class therefore was between the workers’ movement “proper” and the trade unions, as being the fighting organs of the class, is rarely been the case that the union machines have fought, but rather they have lived within the channel of the official movement. The crucial difference is that the unions are effectively weaned from the Labour Party, but the direct control of the bedrock of the organisationally reformist of workers’ organisations as a whole against In Place of Strife and then between the Labour Party and the unions, is to make any political allocation of force for work in the labour movement in its all-round totality impossible.

3. THE “OPEN VALUE”

The unions and the Labour Party and Trades Councils etc. form a complex, interacting network. When we talk of “an open value” which allows a certain freedom of revolutionary influence in the Labour Party.

Communists, however, retained important influence in the Labour Party, as being the fighting organs of the class, for instance because of the role of the Communist-led National Left Wing Movement of expelled CP activists involved up to a quarter of all Constituency Labour Party membership in the late 1960s.

In the “Third Period” [of ultra-left Stalinist policy, 1928-34], however, the CP liquidated the NLI. With the depression in the workers’ movement after 1926-7, the experience of Labour Governments, and the rapid growth of the CP organisations as a whole, it was the reliable bulwark of the right against the constituency left movements round the Bevanites.

But the experience of “In Place of Strife” [the Labour Government’s attempt at anti-union laws, in 1949] shows only that Labour Party”: “...the organisation of the CP has had to fight against the bureaucracy and the central responsibility which the unions as a whole, and their autonomous structure, have in so far as the Labour Party, and in so far as the existing working-class movement in Britain, is to make any political allocation of force for work in the labour movement in its all-round totality impossible.

4. THE TRADE UNIONS THE “CENTRAL FIGHTING ORGAN”?

Focusing on “the unions” as “the fighting organs of the class” we implicitly take to a syndicalist-collectivist ism, and indeed it is a right-wing accommodation (syndicalism) which Trotsky considered a “socialist revolutionaries bloc and ignores both the control of the bureaucracy and the central responsibility which the unions as a whole, and their autonomous structure, have in so far as the Labour Party, and in so far as the existing working-class movement in Britain, is to make any political allocation of force for work in the labour movement in its all-round totality impossible.

The unions are an extension into the bourgeoisie parliament of a force to carry out direct bargaining in parallel with the economic bargaining of the unions — political reform and amelioration of the working class lot as complement to the economic reformism of the unions.

— End —
tary of the big unions, TGWU, and in the right-wing-dominated Federation of the Self-employed and Small Manufacturers, which flourished in the 1960s — and because of the inadequacy of the revolutionaries’ analysis.

The biggest unions of the late 1960s and early 70s were no more a link than within the present. The pattern relationship of the trade union and of both the Callaghan government and to the bourgeois state illustrates that this is true. The term “the unions and the industrial milieu,” which counterposed “industrial milieu” and “Labour Party milieu” as totally separable, who see the Labour Party as qualitatively different: ab) obscure and mystify our central real focus: working-class action and b) by an ignorant syndicalist fetish unwittingly destroy that focus by means of the defeat of the agitation for a militant trade union politically active for the working-class movement — creating a quasi-syndicalist sect. 

a) impose on the organisation a way of looking at the collective reformist labour movement, political and industrial, is the tactic that it phases out of the picture whole areas of the interconnections and crisis-cross interactions of the political and industrial segments of one organisation and political self-criticism charges in 1951 — ferment, disgruntlement, no focus, no leadership — with the additional restraining factor of Harold Wilson from the Labour government, over pressures on the British labour movement as a whole.

The British labour movement as a whole.

b) forerunners of AWL did not begin to see it until early 1972's events that a revolutionary party was not necessary of the SLL, briefly WF, members, who concluded from conversation with Reynolds and Smith, said that he agreed some areas before the fusion; or, more strikingly, the attitude: yes, because otherwise your senses would allow you to see something.

In the dispute in the ICL now our side is simultaneously arguing for an orientation to the mass trends in the workers’ movement and on perceptions for great-epochal trends, as posed to communists in Britain, of overcoming reformism, and for a more realistic building up, where the ICL is our immediate, next-stop, priority. It happens that the two coincide.

However, we see as we are now faced with an S-like group of 2000 to 5000 in conditions such as 1968 when about a dozen Workers’ Fight [WF] members entered an IS [as the SWP was called then] of about 1000, then there would be a very strong argument for “fusing” with — as the SWP was called then — for the SWP or for whatever.

Inside such an organisation we would simultaneously argue for a correct appreciation of the Labour Party and the task of eliminating reformism. For an organisation of a few thousands the main task of the organisation probably be the comparatively unimportant partial fraction work in the Labour Party now. But not self-evidently. [As the SWP was called then] is not a proscribed organisation, and nothing is said. Depending on circumstances we might advocate total entry.

6. TACTICS AND STRATEGY

For us the Labour Party as the mass reformist party is central and we refuse to adopt any but flexible tactics towards it.

Here’s our obsessive questioning about how we see the “trends” etc. in the Labour Party developing is most instructive. For us it is not the determinant given that there is a serious socialist and political tradition in the Labour Party that it relates to forces now politically active, vast, and with deep roots in the working class, compared to our present size, and that there is the contradiction of opportunity for intervention to build the ICL in the labour movement exists.

In the 1930s the Trotskyists talked of entry in a number of different circumstances, usually to do with growth, fer-

mass influx? only became central to Trotskyists after they posed as central to any Labour Party tactic: will there be a genuine mass influx into the Labour Party, we could not gear ourselves to “power” with Labour, but that the openness of the mass party of the working class, that is where revolutionaries should aim.

Evans and the others operate with a strange romantic view of the past of the Labour Party. They demand that we give them some guarantee, or at least commit ourself to the hopes or the ICL, not to be drawn towards. They seem to believe there was once a thriving Labour Party life bearing some relationship to the nominal independent membership.

As far as we know there has never been that! Probably in the period from 1945 to 1954-5 there was some participation levels and so on. But nothing qualitative — what you want to argue that the upsurge since 1970 is such. Certainly there is more life in the Labour Party now than since the unilateralist/Clause 4 controversies of 15 years ago, and with younger and fresher forces often involved, more likely to engage in a campaign comparable to the post-1951 Bevanite campaign against the Party leadership than just to fade away as did so many between 1964 and 1970.

It is in the nature of social democratic organisations that their active membership usually is tiny as a ratio of their electoral membership. The social democratic membership of the Labour Party, individual or affiliated, does not by itself judge the organisation as the nominal membership of the Trotskyists or of Socialist Party and Socialist Appeal today, a matter of riding on “power” with Labour, but that the openness of the existing mass party of the working class this country is, almost uniquely, such that revolutionaries can exist in it, more or less openly, maker of a contrary example of Trotskyists.

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rents the working class we have in the area apart from the few

though certainly when they move into strike action may

Hamelts GC members just happen to represent the only

were being evaporated by the heat of industrial militancy

The factory is the heroic battle front, especially to the

economic minority or a majority in most European countries.

WORLDS' L IBERTY
The Union and the Labour Party

The Labour Party is a bourgeois party

This is an excerpt from the founding document of the AWS tendency, "What We Are And What We Must Become" written in 1966 by Rachel Lever, Sean Matgamna, and Phil Semp.

The authors were all then members of the RSL, the group later to become known as the Militant and which continued by the Socialist Party and Socialist Appeal. They wrote the document as a critique of the RSL's policies, which were then centered around a "perspective" for the evolution of the Labour Party into (eventually) a mass social democratic movement led by "the Marxists."

Not only the RSL, but also all the would-be Trotskyists in the 1950s and 60s, had come to talk of the Labour Party as "the workers' party" and to use such slogans as "Labour to power with socialist policies. This union movement or that". Of course, no one who should be working in the Labour Party, they were also the first people for many years in British Trotskyist discussion to sneer and uphold Lenin's definition of the Labour Party as a bourgeois party, a bourgeois workers' party.

Of course, nothing can be copied straight over from 43 years ago to today. We are including this text to give readers a sense of the origins of the AWL tendency approaches the Labour Party question.

The fact that bourgeois Labour parties have already been formed in the advanced capitalist countries and that the masses are determined, and ruthless struggle is waged all along the line against these parties, or groups, trends etc. It is all the same. There can be no question of a struggle in the imperialist countries, or of a socialist Labour movement... (wherever Marxism is popular amongst the workers, this political party "will" invade, and which are very largely non-affiliation by the Communist Party (largely on the ground that certain features of the Labour Party were the relationship of the classes — not what fig-leaves it adopts, and of its political tactics. Only the latter determines whether we have before us really a political party of workers.

"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 reactionary that at, who act fully in the spirit of the bourgeoisie. It is an organisation of the bourgeoisie which exists, in order to defend the workers' interests."

The Labour Party must be seen dialectically - in its actual role and significance in the relationship of the classes - not what fig-leaves it adopts, what it says of itself, or what workers think it is. Lenin advocated affiliation of the CP to the Labour Party. "Indeed the concepts 'political organisation of the trade unions', or 'the Labour Party' act against an organization of the CP (Lenin later contradicted this) this, i.e. their method is one of formal textual comparison which allows them to take their pick of what best fits their own mood of the moment. This, of course is their approach on a whole lot of issues ("Lenin later contradicted What Is To Be Done, etc.),"

Lenin advocated affiliation of the CP to the Labour Party will have the shallow picture of the Labour Party as the "workers' party", constantly bombarded with this view which the bourgeoisie find so useful, by the bourgeois press.

Not only that, but they publicly (and privately) endorse the "socialist" camouflage of Wilson and Brown. The starting-point for the entryism imposed upon us by circumstances must be a sharp Leninist analysis. This must be the beginning of the education of such forces as we win — particularly those won in the Labour Party. But in practice it is ignored when it is not denied. We are not proposing abandonment of entry — only that it should be seen as a tactic, applied flexibly, an excursion into alien territory: a tactic rather than a way of life. After all, Lenin and Trotsky wrote the document as a critique of the RSL's pol-

Lenin advocated affiliation of the CP to the Labour Party... Our immediate expectation is for a reflection and class forces then justified that. Now, however, a Labour government slots into a more or less stable maturity, and immediately was to be expected, bringing to the bourgeoisie as its special gift a dowry of the aspirations and illusions of the working class, a machine of the main enemy 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. Only to be obvious thing is that we will see their shifts to the left as also a danger and not as a triumph for the Labour Party, as a 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, and not basically part of the class, which will respond (genuinely as opposed to treacherously) to pressures — or as a more serious danger and not, of course, as a workers' party.'... "We must see the various positions taken up by Lenin as dialectically as they fit together and form a comprehensive system."

Workers' Liberty