

Martin Thomas reviews 'The Retreat from Class: A New "True" Socialism' by Ellen Meiksins Wood. Verso, £6.95.

The working class is not in fashion on the left. It has been replaced as the touchstone of radicalism by the 'new social movements'.

Last week I sat in a local Labour Party meeting as one of a rather small opposition to a budget for the local left-Labour council which included 7 per cent rent rises, £6 million of unspecified 'savings', and a declaration that there would be nothing, or almost nothing, to offer in response to demands from the council workers' unions. At the top table was a comrade whom I had last crossed political swords with some 17 years ago, when he was an anarchist, someone who considered Trotskyism not revolutionary enough.

His political trajectory is not exceptional. In West Germany the Maoists and anarcho-Maoists of the '60s and early '70s now form the backbone of the Green Party. Danny Cohn-Bendit, a student leader in France in 1968 who then promised a 'left-wing alternative' to 'obsolete communism' is one of them.

In Australia the Communist Party, once a left breakaway from Kremlin orthodoxy, has practically dissolved itself into a patchwork of ecological, anti-nuclear and feminist campaigning. The once-Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party wants a new left party which will be for democracy but not explicitly for socialism or nationalisations.

Ellen Meiksins Wood deals with those of the leftists 'retreating from class' who go in for "theoretical elaboration and complexity, not to mention pretension and obscurity". They are also the most right wing, at least of those who have remained broadly around the left and the labour movement (in France, as she notes, many ex-Maoists have simply gone over to the right).

She examines the ideas of



St Mary's hospital occupation

Going out of fashion?

Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Paul Hirst, Barry Hindess, Gareth Stedman Jones, Gavin Kitching, and Samuel Bowles — all situated politically on Labour's right wing but with the peculiarity that they claim to be Marxists of a sort.

Ellen Meiksins Wood challenges these new reformists' dismissal of the working class directly:

"It is one of the many paradoxes of (their) position that, while (they) vehemently reject revolutionary violence as a viable option in advanced capitalist democracies, they tend, at least implicitly, to recognise as genuine challenges to capitalism on the part of the working class only those which take this form.

"Equally paradoxical is the fact that the very people who decry what they take to be demands for instant socialism, and who envisage the transition (to socialism) in the most

gradualist terms, also seem to dismiss as inconsequential any working-class challenge to capitalism that does not issue in the immediate establishment of socialism. At the same time, social movements that are far from attacking the foundations of capitalism, either in their aims or in their consequences, are hailed as the stuff of which socialism will be made...

"No one can seriously maintain that any other social movement has ever challenged the power of capital as has the working class...(And) for all its limitations and institutional conservatism, the labour movement has more consistently than any other social collectivity stood on the side of the various causes which the left regards as valuable and progressive...

"If working class movements still have much to learn about the full dimensions of human emancipation, and if they have yet to create

forms of organisation adequate to their task, there has been no historically identifiable social force that has even come close to their record of emancipatory struggles, either in the breadth of their visions, the comprehensiveness of the liberation they have sought, or in their degree of success".

This downgrading of the working class has both a right-wing version (which Ellen Meiksins Wood demolishes well) and a left-wing version (Socialist Action in Britain, for example). In the left-wing version, the centrality of the working class is still proclaimed in words, but the sectional struggles of the oppressed are romanticised and elevated far above direct class struggle. The riots in Britain's cities, for example, and the constitutional reform movements within the Labour Party of the women's sections and black sections, are incongruously coupled together and depicted as much more revolutionary than any strike.

Both in the right-wing version and in the left-wing version, the retreat from class is justified by a polemic against 'economism'.

The argument, so Ellen Meiksins Wood shows, starts by constructing a caricature of Marxism. In this caricature the 'economic base' grinds along like some automatic machine. It assembles classes and dictates their class interests; and those class interests are directly reflected in political parties and political struggles. Every social conflict is a battle between the assembled workers and the assembled capitalists on the issue of socialism versus capitalism.

The theorists reject this caricature — and class politics with it. Parties, ideologies, etc. do not reflect class interests — in fact the whole notion of class interests is empty metaphysics. Politics is politics — it is not concentrated economics. There is no necessary correspondence between socialism and the working class. Socialist politics is about constructing alliances of different movements and forces around socialist ideas,

Turn to inside back page

ment. Bolshevism is distant from both, yet it subsumes both and transforms them into a qualitatively higher unity.

You would never think from Cliff's picture that the central political slogan of the Bolsheviks throughout this period was the demand for a fully governing, freely elected parliament, a slogan that remained central until after the October Revolution.

Socialists in the Lenin and Trotsky tradition would quarrel not, of course, with Cliff's positive emphasis on direct action, but with his one-sidedness. And with his a-historical history: for example, he makes much of the class composition of the Bolshevik Duma fraction, who were metal and textile workers, and then neglects to mention that the leader of the Bolshevik deputies, "the metalworker Malinovsky", was a police spy (shot by the Bolsheviks in 1918).

He belabours Eric Heffer for his views on parliament, accusing him of downgrading direct action, especially during the great struggles of the early 1970s, when the general strike was on the order of the day. He attacks Heffer for not advocating a general strike.

Well, though IS (the predecessor of the SWP) did advocate the general strike on and off after 1970, the record shows that in July 1972, when a quarter of a million workers struck spontaneously against the jailing of five dockers under the Tory Industrial Relations Act, and the TUC declared a one-day general strike, forcing the government to release the five, IS *didn't* dare call for a general strike at the point when it mattered.

The depths of nonsense are reached when Cliff endorses (from the left) the ultra-right-wing claim that working-class industrial defeat can be electorally good for Labour, citing the steady growth of the Labour vote after 1926, which culminated in Labour being the biggest party in the House of Commons after the October 1929 general election.

The fact, of course, is that there is often a zig-zag pattern. Blocked in industry, the class turns to politics. Blocked in politics by a Tory government, as in the '50s, or frustrated by a right-wing Labour government, as in the '60s, the class turns, if employment and other conditions are favourable, to industrial struggle.

To say that one of these things is 'bad', to condemn the turn to politics because it isn't the 'pure' industrial class struggle, and implicitly to identify it as necessarily right wing — as Cliff does — is both stupid and defeatist.

Defeatist, because it is a central fact of working-class life that we experience industrial defeats, and that there is a limit to what can be achieved by industrial gains unless the workers 'go political'. Short of generalised industrial action — a general strike — leading

to revolution, no amount of pure industrial militancy can generate a socialist solution. The great merit of Bolshevism was that it linked up the industrial militancy of the Russian working class with revolutionary politics.

That being so, to 'insist' on the movement remaining on one, industrial, plane, and snobbishly to reject and disdain the other, political, plane — which is what Cliff does in the guise of rejecting Parliament — is to rule out real development of the real working class in the world as it is.

> You might say that Cliff's formula is 'boom-time Trotskyism'. When the workers are on the up and up then we have a role — when they are down we have no political role, except to help to rebuild on the small, local issues and to make general socialist propaganda, and the right and soft left come into their own.

But even this is incoherent. For the workers were very much on the up and up in 1973-4. We took on the Tory government, challenged its authority, and panicked Heath into a general election which he lost. It was then that the right and soft left came into their own.

For they had the political wing of the movement; and the workers needed politics. The workers, however militant, had no governmental alternative to the Labour Party — and thus the great and successful industrial push against the Tory government resulted in a Labour government... which soon demobilised the industrial militancy.

That experience brings out the real essence of the matter for socialists as it is posed in principle and in British reality: the political struggle and the industrial have to be integrated and for socialists to be able to integrate them they have to do more than build an organisation — though that is irreplaceable — they have to win the ideological battle, against both the straightforward versions of ruling-class ideas and the more subtle versions we get within the labour movement which tie the workers to the bourgeoisie.

One of the central ideas of the latter sort is of course the notion that you can get socialism through parliament. But one of the sources of this false idea is that you can get some things through parliamentary politics. We cannot defeat the idea of socialism through parliament by counterposing to it not different politics *in parliament and everywhere else* but 'pure' industrial struggle. The SWP's a-political, or pretend-political, syndicalism and talk of 'building the revolutionary party now', is no substitute for engaging wholeheartedly in such 'parliamentary politics' as the fight to return a Labour government now.

True to its trimming, hawking and eclectic politics, the SWP will

opportunisticly say 'vote Labour' on election day — otherwise it would risk isolation. But that is only the election-time version of its routine abandonment of politics to the right. Indeed, at election time it is more glaring. In 1979 Paul Foot put it like this: 'For the next three weeks I am a very strong Labour supporter'.

The working class needs a revolutionary party. But such a party will not be a small propagandist apparatus, a small machine counterposed to the existing labour movement. A party is a party if it can minimally perform a certain range of activities, including conducting itself in all the affairs of the working class — which means all the political affairs of society, for these concern the working class, and if the working class does not have socialist answers it will — to repeat yet again and finally — accept the answers of the Bourgeoisie and the reformists.

The early Christians lived in daily expectation that the Second Coming of Christ was imminent. It would be the end of the world, and the Kingdom of God would come into being instead.

Then as the decades passed they began to lose faith in the imminence of the Second Coming — and of course they never thought that they could do anything except pray to bring it about. So they turned instead to the belief that 'for now' the Church was the visible Kingdom of God on earth.

So too with the socialists who substitute for the Marxist work of political struggle within the labour movement the building-up of their own organisation. 'The party' becomes their Kingdom of socialism on earth.

Worse than the Christians, they regress from the Marxist belief in struggle on all fronts to a helpless waiting for the 'millennium', which for them is the revival of the industrial militancy of the '70s. (In this way they parallel earlier Marxists who waited paralysed for decades for the Great Slump to come back to radicalise the working class).

Hope for a millennium is comforting. It is especially comforting in periods of disappointment, setbacks and defeat, like that we are going through. But it is in its essence a turning away from the root of socialism — the working class in the whole range of phases and concerns of its struggles.

Going out of fashion?

From back page

and that is that.

Unfortunately, the caricature

of Marxism is not just a caricature of Marx's ideas. It actually exists as an addled version of present-day Marxism, in Militant and (on its off-days) in Socialist Worker. So apparently justified polemics against Militant can give backing to versions of "socialism" divorced from class politics — from the Kinnockites on the right to Socialist Action on the left.

In its most right-wing version, 'anti-economism' leads to ordinary vote-catching electoralism, laced with a snobbish preference for the supposedly idealistic educated classes over workers, who are condemned as seeing no further than immediate material interests. As Ellen Meiksins Wood points out, "To a large extent, it is just another repetition of banal and hoary right-wing social-democratic nostrums.

"The idea that capitalist democracy need only be 'extended' to produce socialism, or that socialism presents a higher ideal of life capable of appealing to all right-minded people irrespective of class, would, for example, be perfectly at home with, say, Ramsay MacDonald, or even, for that matter, John Stuart Mill.

The new reformists are now disillusioned with what they see as revolutionary socialism in China, Cambodia and Vietnam. They opt instead for reformed capitalism. The elitist bias remains. The new sectarians were usually not whole-hearted Maoists, but they too saw the Chinese, Vietnamese and Cambodian Stalinists as leaders of the world socialist revolution. Unlike the new reformists, they have remained revolutionaries — by transferring their faith from Vietnam to Nicaragua, and retreating into moralism.

The bridge for the new reformists between Maoism and their present politics was, so Ellen Meiksins Wood argues, Eurocommunism. She identifies the Greek/French writer Nicos Poulantzas as "the forerunner" of the present retreat from class, and analyses his theories with refreshing briskness. This particular emperor is shown not only to have no clothes, but also to have knobby knees and a sagging paunch.

The prominent 'new reformist' Ernesto Laclau had another channel in his path from being "a defender of what he took to be Marxist orthodoxy and theoretical rigour". He started off with an argument about 'national-popular' ideological themes not necessarily being tied to any one class which was "informed by his attitudes towards the political situation of his native Argentina and by his sympathy for the 'popular interpellations' of the Peronist tradition". From this attitude to Argentine nationalism, the road was straight to a reduction of socialist politics in the metropolitan countries to a manipulation of the 'national-popular' ideologies here.