35p

WHO NEEDS THE LABOUR PARTY?

REVOLUTIONARY COMMUNIST PAMPHLETS

Revolutionary Communist Pamphlets

No 3

Revolutionary Communist Tendency

Typeset by Bread 'n Roses (TU)
Printed by Anyway Litho Ltd (TU)
© World copyright Junius Publications Ltd
September 1978

WHO NEEDS THE LABOUR PARTY?

Mike Freeman and Kate Marshall

INTRODUCTION

'Labour: the natural party of government' is the main theme of Callaghan's general election campaign. At the close of the last parliamentary session, the Prime Minister explained his contribution to Great Britain by proclaiming: 'the best service I have rendered to the country is to try to rescue it from the ungovernable position it seemed to be left in by the Conservative Party' (*The Times*, 4 August 1978, p10). In the bourgeois press political commentators agree. Labour deserves the nation's respect for its efforts to solve the crisis. Contrasting the reliability of the Labour Party (LP) with the intemperate views of the Conservatives, the *Financial Times* points out that 'it is Labour which has been in power for most of the last 15 years or so, which appears to know the way the world works and to have the experience to deal with the unexpected. The Tories, by contrast, look like parvenus, putting forward all sorts of dangerously radical ideas' (*Financial Times*, 4 August 1978, p17). Moreover, the Conservative Party cannot claim the support of the unions for the measures with which it proposes to combat the crisis.

The Social Contract is Labour's major achievement. Most recently, despite its formal rejection of the Government's five per cent wage norm, the TUC has been anxious to turn its annual Congress into a rally for the re-election of Labour. *The Sunday Times* expects that, in 1979, workers 'may suffer a decline in real gross pay of some six per cent, given the present outlook for prices' (*The Sunday Times*, 13 August 1978, p56). This underlines the most remarkable – and, for the bourgeoisie, the most gratifying – achievement of the Labour Government. While it has created mass unemployment and cut living standards, it has at the same time contained trade union militancy.

The left wing of the LP has collapsed as Labour has adopted the increasingly reactionary measures necessitated by the crisis. Noting the disintegration of the left, *The Times* comments: 'Socialism, as the left-wing members of the national executive committee understand it, has been in suspense since 1975, apart from the operations of the National Enterprise Board, which support capitalism rather than establish socialism' (*The Times*,

29 May 1978, p9). That the National Enterprise Board supports capitalism is something which has still to dawn on the left. It continues to see the NEB as the socialist spearhead of Labour's programme. But the left has become more realistic on other questions. Norman Atkinson, hammer of the parliamentary left, recently advocated the abandonment of 'orthodox nationalisation', the central feature of the radical programmes adopted by Labour in the early 'seventies. Today the shopping lists for public ownership have given way to what Atkinson calls 'forward-looking systems of co-operative self-management'. Indeed, 'the whole Labour movement', he urges, 'should now carefully re-examine its current thinking in regard to managerial concepts' (*The Times*, 30 May 1978, p2). Whether it moans about the NEB or toys with 'managerial concepts', the Labour left has shown that it completely shares Callaghan's goal of a revitalised British capitalism.

As the election draws nearer the pleas for unity in the Labour movement multiply and grow in urgency. At a *Tribune* rally Tony Benn called on all sections of the LP, from the Manifesto group on the right to the Young Socialists on the left, 'to put their combined strength into Labour's general election battle' (reported in *The Times*, 18 March 1978, p2). After all, why should the left not try to unite the party? It has no significant differences with the leadership: even the five per cent pay limit met with little protest. Eric Heffer has chosen to make a stand on the abolition of blood sports – but even this demand has been sacrificed to electoral expediency.

Although angry at cuts in living standards, workers have not turned their feelings into a conscious challenge against Labour. The crisis seems inevitable. The LP is accepted because it presents itself as the most effective instrument for dealing with Britain's problems. It is accepted as the workers' party because there appears to be no alternative. This pamphlet explains Labour's current success; it shows how Labour is the party which attempts to solve the crisis by integrating militant working class resistance into the capitalist system.

CLASS OR NATION: THE FOUNDATION OF THE LABOUR PARTY

The formation of the Labour Party

The LP grew out of the British trade union movement. The trade unions arose with the expansion of British capitalism in the nineteenth century and were a major gain for the working class. However the political scope of the trade unions was limited from the start to defending labour within the framework of capitalism. The trade unions aimed, not to abolish capitalist exploitation, but to modify it in the interests of labour. As a result of the restricted nature of their activities, the trade unions could provide only minimal defence against attacks waged by the capitalist class as a whole. In order to develop a more coherent strategy to cope with these attacks, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) was formed in 1868 to lobby Parliament and attempt to influence the legislative process.

In the period of expanding capitalism the organisations of the working class were able to obtain considerable concessions from the bourgeoisie. The prosperity of Britain, achieved at the expense of the rest of the world, allowed the bourgeoisie to concede a number of reforms to the working class. This had a major impact on the British labour movement: the experience of

this period strengthened the view that the working class, by exercising pressure on the state, could defend its interests within capitalism. The institutions of the labour movement which emerged from this period were moulded by their adaptation to the prevailing conditions of British capitalism.

The concessions made by the bourgeoisie did not embrace the working class as a whole. This became clear with the economic crisis of the 1880s, which revealed the vulnerability of the semiskilled and unskilled trade unions. As general labourers they could be replaced with ease by scab workers during strikes. Employers could expel active trade unionists and fill their posts without difficulty. In the absence of protective legislation the abuses perpetrated by individual capitalists against these sections of the working class often went unchecked. It was to meet this challenge that general workers set up the New Unions, and it was the New Unions which prompted the formation of the LP. They appreciated the need to establish a party to represent labour in Parliament.

At the 1899 TUC a motion was put forward calling for a break with the employers' parties and the formation of an independent political organisation. It was argued that a body was necessary to promote and coordinate plans for the independent representation of the working class in Parliament. Though occasionally forced to voice the demands of sections of the labour movement, the Liberals could not speak for the working class as a whole. A separate working class party was therefore called for.

Most of the contributors to the debate on the formation of a workers' political organisation were members of the general workers' unions. These unions were also the first to affiliate to the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) which was established by the TUC as a result of this discussion. In addition to the trade unions a number of socialist societies – the Social Democratic Federation, the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and the Fabian Society – affiliated to the LRC. These societies had little influence in the labour movement and saw the establishment of the LRC as an opportunity to strengthen their ties with the working class. This was how the ILP came to play a key role in furthering the development of the newly formed political arm of the trade unions.

In 1900 the LRC had no programme and no paid officials; it did not finance its own candidates for Parliament. But the situation was swiftly transformed. In 1901 a particularly vicious attack on trade union rights provided the LRC with a new impetus to growth. The Taff Vale decision made trade unions liable for damages incurred by an employer during a strike. The LRC sought to reverse this judgment by legislation, and affiliations to it rose from 376,000 in 1901 to 861,000 by 1903. In the same year a fund, raised by compulsory levy, was set up to finance Labour MPs. LRC candidates for election were required to pledge full independence from other parties.

In 1906 the loose political coalition around the LRC adopted the name the Labour Party. The political foundation for this party remained its claim to represent the independent interests of labour. But this claim was based not on a coherent programme but on a general understanding that the role of the LP was to represent the interests of the working class. This approach reflected the extension of trade unionism into the sphere of parliamentary politics. While the trade unions tried to ameliorate capitalist exploitation, the LP was

established to consolidate and extend reforms granted by the bourgeois Parliament.

Labourism or socialism

The establishment of an independent labour party did not signify a political break from the bourgeoisie. Like its counterparts on the Continent, the LP wanted not so much to attack capitalism as to obtain the most substantial reforms that it could grant. The LP rejected Marxism and advanced a strategy that aimed to reform capitalism out of existence. Nevertheless revolutionaries internationally saw the formation of the LP in Britain as a step in the right direction. Lenin commented that the LP, although tied to the bourgeoisie, represented 'the first step on the part of really proletarian organisations of Britain towards a class conscious policy and towards a *socialist* workers' party' (V I Lenin, 'Meeting of the International Socialist Bureau', *Collected Works*, Vol 15, p235).

The formation of the LP represented a limited but important development in the consciousness of the working class. It signified an elementary awareness of the need for the class to unite through its own political organisation. The LP was established in the recognition that the employers' parties could not defend the working class. At the time it seemed possible that the LP would be forced by the logic of the class struggle to adopt a socialist position.

The LP did not claim to be a socialist party. Its heritage included both the pragmatic instincts of British trade unionism and the early socialist traditions of the working class movement. The Fabians brought the rational core of utilitarianism from the nineteenth century industrial bourgeoisie in the form of radical theories of social administration. The ILP carried the heritage of utopian and Christian socialism. Both these traditions were based on radical bourgeois theories, which placed their faith in the state as the agency of socialist transformation. On the right wing, the Fabians thought that the state could be directed by an enlightened elite; on the left the ILP argued that the masses should be mobilised to put political pressure on the state. Keir Hardie summarised the strategy of the ILP in 1907:

> 'The state . . . is what its people make it. Its institutions are necessarily shaped to further and protect the . . . dominant influence . . . . Now that the working class is the dominant power, potentially at least, it logically and inevitably follows that the class will also endeavour to influence the State so as to make it protect their interests. As the political education of the working class progresses, and they begin to realise what are the true functions of the state, their power will be exerted in an increasing degree in the direction of transforming the state from a property preserving to a life preserving institution.' (J K Hardie, *From serfdom to socialism*, George Allen, London, 1907, pp23-4)

The transformation of the state in the interests of the working class was the dominant strand in the thinking of the left wing of the LP. In our analysis of reformism we have outlined the core of this strategy of *state socialism* in the following way:

> 'State socialists understand the state superficially. For them Parliament mediates between different interest groups and the state represents the will of all the people. It is thus possible to use this forum to abolish the inequalities and injustices of capitalist society. State socialists imply that although class conflict, economic crisis, exploitation and poverty are all consequences of capitalism, they can be eliminated while capital remains.' ('The recession: capitalist offensive and the working class', *Revolutionary Communist Papers* No 3, July 1978, p24)

It was this approach of reforming the state that characterised the programme of the ILP.

The perspective of Labourism dominated the party. The LP was seen as the political aspect of trade unionism, for it shared with the trade unions the objective of advancing the interests of the working class within capitalist society. The role of the unions was to bargain on behalf of workers in the workplace; the function of the LP was to influence government legislation in favour of the working class.

The ILP was reluctant to challenge Labourism and commit the LP to a socialist programme. It considered that if the LP were identified with socialism it would lose the support of Liberal and Tory trade unionists. The ILP played down its socialism in its attempts to influence trade unionists and gain seats in the House of Commons. At the Parliamentary Committee meeting of the 1900 TUC, Keir Hardie helped to defeat a proposal that the LRC support the class war and total nationalisation; instead he pursued the narrow goal of independence from the Liberal and Conservative parties. In the words of ILP member Ramsay MacDonald, 'the LP was formed because trade unionism had experienced that a class war led nowhere . . . . the watchword of socialism is not class consciousness but community consciousness' (R MacDonald, *Socialism and society*, ILP, London, 1908, pp137, 144). By its appeals to trade unionists as members of 'the community', the ILP obscured the class antagonism inherent in struggles at the point of production. The ILP's independence was illusory: it sought a non-class solution to the conflict between labour and capital.

Despite the bourgeois outlook of its leadership, the LP itself had a contradictory character. Trade unionists affiliated to the LP were not asked about their political opinions. These workers did not issue statements rejecting the class war – indeed they were forced to wage it by the daily reality of capitalism. The reformist leaders of the LP could not ignore the spontaneous struggles of the working class. In fact some, such as Keir Hardie, led militant struggles in defence of the working class. As industrial unrest intensified the Labour leaders resorted to left-wing rhetoric to maintain control over the working class. One of the few British Marxists of this period understood very well the value of this socialist phrase-mongering to the bourgeoisie. Writing in 1917, William Paul explained how a false conception of socialism had misled workers:

> 'So eager have the state "Socialists" been to bestow the label of "Socialism" upon profit-making institutions that a modern Statesman could say "we are all socialists nowadays". Any demands, such as the reduction of taxes, the extension of tramway car systems, opening of municipal pawnshops and burying-grounds, have been advocated as "socialistic" legislation.' (W Paul, *The state: its origin and function*, Proletarian Publishing, Edinburgh, 1974, pp181-2)

State socialism in Britain was expressed most coherently by the left wing of the LP. It fostered the illusion that the bourgeois state could be the central instrument for defending working class interests. It argued that the LP was willing, or could be encouraged, to use the state to abolish capitalism by

reforms. Thus the state socialists helped to reconcile the working class to capitalism while ensuring that Labour would be a party of the 'national community', based on working class support.

Reform or revolution: Labour's national solution

The political effects of the Russian revolution of February 1917 spread throughout Europe. Internationally the proletariat was growing in strength while the imperialist war had failed firmly to entrench the rule of the bourgeoisie. There was widespread support for the Russian Revolution in the British working class and militant resistance to wartime conditions in industry promised to move in a revolutionary direction.

The problem for the LP was to retain the allegiance of an increasingly class conscious labour movement. It needed to give the working class a programmatic alternative to Bolshevism; one which would serve as a suitable foundation for a national party with ambitions in Parliament. In its search for a programme the Labour leadership was fortunate to be able to draw on Henderson's personal experience of the Russian Revolution. As a wartime minister, Henderson had been entrusted with Britain's negotiations with the Russian Provisional Government, and had come to applaud its use of the state. Referring to the significance of the state as a force for stability in society and to its role as mediator between capital and labour, he told the British Prime Minister: 'employers are beginning to realise [that the] only safeguard against control by workmen is control by [the] state'. (A Henderson, letter to D Lloyd George, 1 July 1917, quoted in J M Winter, *Socialism and the challenge of war*, RKP, 1974, p251). Like the Russian bourgeoisie, Henderson recognised that state control of industry was the only alternative to 'workmen's control'. He concluded that Labour should provide a non-revolutionary alternative to communism by winning the support of the working class for a solution to the political crisis that depended on the use of the state. Labour had to show that 'the Democratic State of to-morrow can be established without an intervening period of violent upheaval and dislocation' (A Henderson, *The aims of Labour*, Toronto, 1918, p73). The institutions of parliamentary democracy could provide a bulwark against revolutionary upheaval:

> 'Revolution, if revolution is indeed to be forced upon democracy, will be a veritable civil war . . . . This is the alternative that unmistakably confronts us if we turn aside from the path of ordered social change by constitutional methods ' (ibid, p59)

On his return to Britain Henderson advocated a parliamentary socialist programme for the LP. Total commitment to British parliamentary democracy was the only alternative to class war and revolution.

The new programme of the LP, *Labour and the new social order*, was drafted by the Fabian, Sidney Webb, in 1918. He and the other leaders of the LP wanted to give it a political identity which could sustain the loyalty of the unions and at the same time widen its appeal to other sections of society. If Labour was to be a truly national party it was necessary to cater for all interests with a comprehensive programme covering both home and foreign policy.

The LP's desire to win working class support (especially since the

extension of the right to vote) was evident in its commitment to sweeping social reforms, which were necessary 'to prove that political methods are effective' (ibid, p72). Although its new constitution permitted (usually middle class) individuals to join the LP for the first time, both they and the affiliated organisations were subordinated to the unions after the reorganisation of the party. With their increased representation on the National Executive Committee (NEC), the unions established bureaucratic hegemony over the Constituency LPs and the cooperative and socialist societies – a hegemony which persists today.

Though it was concerned at the escalation of the class struggle, the LP became less cautious about expressing its socialist objectives. The former worries of the Labour left – that talk of socialism would alienate workers – were rejected, as militants themselves demanded a more far reaching solution to the post-war crisis. The left responded to this mood by making Clause Four the centre-piece of the new constitution.

The statement of the maximum programme of social democracy provided the LP with a political identity that marked it as distinct from other bourgeois parties. Clause Four reads:

> 'To secure for the producers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry, and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible, upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service.'

Clause Four was necessary as a clear alternative to the revolutionary sentiments gripping the working class in Europe. Though it was a response to the post-war militancy of the British working class, the effect of its adoption was to contain this militancy.

The LP's traditional emphasis on communal rather than class politics was the context in which Clause Four was discussed. That is why Clause Four embodies an appeal to intellectuals and middle class elements. As shipwrights' leader W F Purdy, chairman of the June 1918 LP Conference, pointed out:

> 'The broadening of the Constitution to include the worker by hand or brain (a step necessary if Labour is to take its rightful position in national life) will bring into our party all those willing to give of their best in the social service of the community and place our claim to be a National Party in the broadest and widest sense before the country. . . . Our aim is not to serve sectional interests alone, or to set class against class, but rather to secure that all classes, as far as possible, shall come together to make this country a place in which every man, woman and child will have ample opportunities to live and enjoy a happier and better life than has hitherto been possible.' (*Labour Party annual conference report*, June 1918, p25)

Previously Labour had declared its organisational autonomy from other parties. With its vision and ultimate goal codified in the 1918 constitution, the LP distinguished itself politically from the Liberals and Tories and took its place as a national party in the arena of parliamentary politics.

A natural party of government

To British capitalism, the potential value of a bourgeois labour party was apparent from its inception. The LP's claim to be a party of government rests on its ability to subordinate the interests of the working class to the needs of

capital. In the course of the last 50 years it has proved that, in times of crisis, it is ideally placed to call on the working class to defend the national interest. Its responsible approach to industrial struggles and the war effort in the decade 1910-20 has been steadily refined. As the LP's manifesto for the February 1974 general election proclaimed, 'the Labour Party is proud of the contribution we made to the nation's salvation at critical times in our history, and it is in the same mood that we approach the interlocking crises of the 1970s' (*Let us work together – Labour's way out of the crisis*, LP publications, 1974, p1). With four more years' experience of solving 'interlocking crises', the LP is now in a position to make this call to the electorate with even greater confidence.

In the militant strikes of 1911-13, rank and file trade unionists were ready to go beyond their traditional tactics. The polarisation of society tended to undermine the capacity of the bourgeoisie to maintain social control directly. Labour, however, took bourgeois ideas to the centre of the workers' struggle. By intervening in the class struggle the LP sought to suppress the anti-capitalist potential of the spontaneous movement, confining it to the fight for reforms within capitalism. In a period of intense class conflict only a workers' party with mass support could convince the working class that its interests could be defended without challenging capitalism.

In the First World War a Labour MP joined a British government for the first time. As Minister without Portfolio, Arthur Henderson's role was to persuade the unions to refrain from striking, through the 1915 Treasury Agreement; to quell the outcry against the introduction of conscription in 1916; and, more generally, to prevent any disruption of the war economy. Only a representative of the LP could perform this service for the bourgeoisie. As Labour's representative, Henderson was able to curb the militancy of the working class and harness the energies of the labour movement for the war effort.

Support for the LP grew in the inter-war period. At the same time the Labour leadership's ambitions to govern Britain increasingly coincided with the necessity for capital, in the epoch of imperialism, to rely on labour organisations for the maintenance of its rule. The first (minority) Labour Government in 1924, and the complicity of the labour leadership in the defeat of the 1926 General Strike, prefigured the first decisive demonstration of the ability and willingness of the Labour leaders to govern – MacDonald's National Government of 1931. As a Liberal leader advised the monarch: 'in view of the fact that the necessary economies would prove most unpalatable to the working class, it would be to the general interest if they could be imposed by a Labour Government' (quoted in H Nicolson, *King George the fifth, his life and reign*, Constable & Co, 1952, p461). Yet in this period the Labour Party as a whole could not reconcile the conflict between its bourgeois politics and its working class base. MacDonald's attempt to establish Labour as the natural party of government in the conditions of the 'thirties split the party.

The defeats of the international proletariat during the Depression and the Second World War cast their shadows up to today. The liquidation of working class politics in this period has allowed the LP to rise further above its working class base and claim with ever greater credibility its title as a natural party of government. The recession of the last decade has resurrected the fundamental class antagonisms in capitalist society that were suppressed in the post-war boom. In these circumstances the LP has proved to the bourgeoisie that it alone can lead the working class to defeat. To do this it presents its policies as neither bourgeois nor proletarian, but simply as a non-class 'national solution' to the crisis.

Imperialism and social-chauvinism

Formed under the influence of the British Empire, the LP has consistently fomented national chauvinism in the labour movement. Labour's classless strategy begins and ends with the desire to direct the energies of the working class into the service of the nation. In the 'thirties Labour distinguished itself from the employers' parties by its more consistent advocacy of the national interest. The authentic patriotism of Labour was contrasted with the hypocrisy of those capitalists who waved the national flag while investing their capital overseas. Under the heading 'Modern Patriotism', a party pamphlet announced:

> 'Socialism in each country works for peace *in the interests of that country* . . . . The "Nation" we stand for is not the sort of mythological being which has a "balance of trade" or increases its "national wealth" by giving capital-owners a greater return on foreign investments. The "national wealth" for us consists in the tea that is drunk by Mrs. Smith the coalminer's wife. There is nothing "national" in the wealth of Lady de Snooks who draws dividends from Argentine meat and spends them on the Riviera.' (*War and socialism*, LP publications, October 1932, pp11, 12)

Labour criticised the bourgeoisie not because it was capitalist, but because its members put their sectional concerns before the interests of the nation. This radical nationalism played a fatal role in destroying the political independence of the working class.

The reactionary implications of Labour's 'modern patriotism' were most clearly revealed in its chauvinist attitude towards the colonies. From its inception the LP could not depart from the Liberal or Conservative approach to the Empire. Its adherence to the national interest meant support for British imperialism. For all its sympathy with black people and foreign workers, Labour was not prepared to throw away the benefits of Britain's imperial conquests.

In 1924 the reformist Second International congratulated the LP on its first experience of government. This was 'one of the most remarkable stages in the history of the British Labour Movement – the first British Labour Government' and it proved that 'British Labour is both ready and capable to take over the conduct of the affairs of the British Empire' (*Second Congress of the Labour and Socialist International*, 22-27 August 1925, p154). The ruling party in any imperialist nation had the job of running the Empire. In the inter-war period the activities of the British state extended worldwide and Labour did not baulk at its global responsibilities; it merely faced them with the enthusiasm appropriate to a party on probation.

Today the British Empire may have shrunk, but the LP still carries out the dictates of imperialism with determination. The Labour Government's brutal oppression of the Irish people illustrates Labour's 'national' credentials.

Labour maintains a bipartisan policy on Ireland with the Tories; and in its liberal use of military repression it shows that it is second to none.

On occasion the LP has talked about national independence for Ireland. The need to defend British imperialism has, however, prevented it from doing anything more than express fine ideals. Support for national self-determination – hedged with qualifications – was given at the 1918 LP Conference. Two years later, when British mercenaries were terrorising the Irish population in the Tan War, the refusal of the LP to give genuine support to the Irish people was made explicit. From the safety of the conference Sidney Webb put forward a motion in favour of self-determination, but said that it was necessary to find out from the Irish people what 'form' of self-determination they required. J H Thomas, general secretary of the railwaymen's union, explained exactly what the LP meant by self-determination – it did *not* mean the right to 'the establishment of an Irish Republic' (*Labour Party annual conference report*, 1920, p167). In 1920, the LP's Special Conference on Ireland supported the creation of an open Constituent Assembly to work out a new form of government for Ireland. The Irish could form a separate government so long as its constitution would 'not become a military or naval menace to Great Britain'. This qualification was necessary, the LP explained in shamefaced terms, 'to meet public superstition and prejudice' (*Report of the Labour Commission to Ireland*, appendix V, p118).

The LP's recognition of the right of nations to self-determination was simply a more subtle form of colonial policy. The right to self-government was all very well so long as the granting of this principle did not conflict with the interests of Britain. The colonial people had to prove that their intelligence was sufficient; their proposals for national self-government had to be responsible before Labour would grant this right. In 1925, at a conference of Labour representatives from the British Empire, Labour's expert on colonial affairs, Colonel J C Wedgewood, MP, dismissed India's passionate pleas for self-determination with 'it is all very well to say self-determination; we want to know what sort of self-determination you want' (*Report of the First British Commonwealth Labour Conference*, 27 July – 1 August 1925, p18). The LP was insistent that 'the natives' prove they were fit to rule themselves. In the meantime Britain would take care of the colonies – although, under Labour, British rule would be more compassionate than in the past. *In practice the LP attempted to reconcile the interests of the colonial peoples with the interests of British imperialism.*

The LP patronisingly promised to judge each colony on its merits. Weighing up the pros and cons in 1933, it said:

> 'There are territories, for example, in the West Indies where the people are probably already capable of managing their own affairs. There is no reason why they should not be given a large measure of self-government. On the other hand, the African territories, are in this respect, entirely different. Their people are in a condition which would make it impossible for them to take over the government of their country on modern lines. In such cases, what is required is education and preparation with the definite object of training the population in self-government.' (*The colonies*, LP policy report No 6, August 1933, pp5-6)

The LP's attitude to the African colonies was thoughtful, benevolent – and

the same as the bourgeoisie's. But there were reasons for an interest in the colonies that went beyond a concern for spreading British education abroad. The cheap food and raw materials imported from the colonies were a benefit the LP could not ignore. And while the policies of the international capitalists were objectionable, there were British exports to consider too:

> 'We do not wish to see overseas territories exploited for the benefit of capitalist concessionaires. We desire to see a rising standard of life amongst native races and, therefore, improving markets for British goods.' (*'On the dole' – or off!*, LP publications, 1926, p15)

More money in the pockets of the 'native races' would enable them to buy British. 'Concern' for the colonial peoples was always coupled with a ruthless defence of the British economy.

Today, the LP continues to upbraid imperialism for being unpatriotic. It wants an imperialism which looks after British workers. The Labour left criticises capitalists for exporting jobs abroad and heads the chorus calling for import controls. *Tribune* MP Maureen Colquhoun, who has vehemently argued that she is 'not a racist', says:

> 'everybody here sympathises with the problems of underdeveloped countries, it is basic to our Socialist thinking, but, comrades, do we really have to put up with sweat shop conditions in the underdeveloped countries which undermine the working conditions fought for by trade unions in our country for generations?' (*Labour Party annual conference report*, 1972, p284)

This kind of 'Socialist thinking' is what Lenin called social-chauvinism: socialism in words, chauvinism in deeds.

STATE SOCIALISM: THE LABOUR PARTY AND THE SLUMP

The National Government – Labour's response to the crisis

In the protracted Depression of the inter-war years, Labour's strategy of safeguarding the interests of the working class within capitalism was put to the test. When capital could not provide regular employment and adequate living standards, the tendency of working class struggle to go beyond Labourism provided a constant challenge to the Labour leaders. In these conditions the state socialist strategy of the Labour left had important consequences. It appeared to the labour movement as a plausible alternative – an alternative to capitalism and to revolution. All sections of the party were agreed that a progressive government could use the power of the state to overcome the worst excesses of the crisis. Disagreement within the party centred on the measures needed to achieve this common objective.

On the left of the party, the ILP considered that the dimensions of the crisis necessitated nothing less than the full measure of socialist reforms embodied in Labour's constitution. The Labour leadership, on the other hand, responded pragmatically to the need to maintain the stability of bourgeois society. While heralded as socialist measures, the leaders' proposals for state intervention were not designed to overthrow capitalist social relations but to restore conditions for capitalist profitability. In this spirit Labour's 1928 programme *Labour and the nation* centred on proposals for state intervention in social and economic affairs.

For the state socialists this programme did not go far enough. However, despite the left's insistence on radical measures, it did not see the crisis as confirming the need for revolution. For the left the crisis was an evil to be overcome *before* socialism could be introduced. In restricting their goal to the achievement of capitalist stability, the state socialists could not oppose the pragmatic policies of the Labour leadership.

When the second Labour Government was elected in 1929 it was confronted with the full impact of the slump. Unemployment was at the record level of 2.5 million. Under the leadership of MacDonald and Snowden, the Cabinet was forced to implement the measures necessary to restore financial stability. These steps culminated in the announcement in July 1931 of cuts of £97 million in public spending – two thirds of which were to come from a 20 per cent cut in unemployment benefit. In addition, national insurance contributions were to be raised and a more stringent means test introduced. Once the Labour Government accepted responsibility for resolving the crisis it was forced to carry out the anti-working class measures required by capital.

Many of MacDonald's colleagues – and particularly those in the trade unions – could not face this, the inevitable outcome of the bourgeois politics of the LP. MacDonald wrote to them: 'Nothing gives me greater regret than to disagree with old industrial friends but I really personally find it absolutely impossible to overlook dread realities, as I am afraid you are doing' (*TUC annual conference report*, 1931, p75). In the intense crisis of 1931 the LP could no longer reconcile the Government's systematic attacks on the living standards of the labour movement with the aspirations of the party's supporters. The majority of the LP rejected MacDonald and his policies because it was not prepared to break its ties with the working class. The LP recoiled from the full consequences of its programme.

Together with Snowden and Thomas, MacDonald broke with the LP to take up office in the National Government, a coalition with Liberals and Tories which proceeded to implement the savage cuts in state expenditure without compunction. Labour's programme led to MacDonald's betrayal of the working class. In forming the coalition government MacDonald pursued the LP's lack of political independence to its organisational conclusion. The earlier state socialist predilections of MacDonald and Snowden, both ex-members of the ILP and founder members of the LP, gave way before the harsh reality of capitalist crisis.

The left – no alternative to MacDonald's betrayal

MacDonald's betrayal outraged the labour movement. The policies which led to the formation of the National Government were an explicit attack on working class living standards; they received a hostile response from the trade unions. However the working class lacked the class conscious leadership necessary to repulse the bourgeois offensive launched by the National Government. The British labour movement had not recovered from the defeat of the General Strike in 1926. Then, confronted directly by the bourgeois state, trade unionism had proved unable to defend the working class. Now working class anger with MacDonald was combined with the

growth of militant protests against unemployment. This spontaneous movement strengthened the Labour left against the party leadership.

The scope of working class opposition to MacDonald was limited by the programme of state socialism. Labour's responsibility to provide a national solution to the crisis was not at issue. It was the terms of MacDonald's solution, its explicitly anti-working class character, which antagonised his former supporters in the unions and the LP. MacDonald's betrayal of the interests of the working class was explained in terms of his personal weaknesses: for the right of the party the problem was his affinity for the company of aristocrats; for the left it was his incorrigible gradualism and his fatal timidity.

MacDonald's solution to the crisis was subjected to detailed criticism in a manifesto issued jointly by the TUC and the national executive and parliamentary wing of the LP. It complained that whereas *equality* of sacrifice had been promised, only the working class had suffered; 'no comparable sacrifice has so far been demanded from the wealthier sections of the community' (*Labour's call to the nation*, August 1931, p3). The need for sacrifice from all sections of society, including sacrifice from a working class in which poverty and malnutrition were rampant, was accepted by the LP and the TUC; only the terms of MacDonald's austerity measures were questioned. A plan involving increased taxation and the sale of British investments abroad was advanced to solve the crisis in a more egalitarian fashion. MacDonald's betrayal was countered with the utopian desire to solve the capitalist crisis – within capitalism, but without the defeat of the working class. As the manifesto put it, 'the forces of Labour are vitally concerned with the national interest but we emphatically reject the view that this can only be solved by the impoverishment of the workers' (ibid). More realistically, MacDonald appreciated that 'the impoverishment of the workers' was the only means of restoring capitalist profitability. His premise of the need for sacrifice in the national interest accepted, the LP's utopian schemes were no match for the practical measures of the National Government.

The ILP led the left's campaign against MacDonald's betrayal. Although it shared the political assumptions which led to the betrayal of 1931, the intensity of the class struggle and the militant hostility of the labour movement towards MacDonald strengthened its subjective radicalism and reinforced divisions within the LP. In response to these conditions the ILP disaffiliated from the LP in 1932.

The ILP could not provide a class alternative for the militant sections of the working class. Its radical version of the LP's programme was an insufficient basis for its existence as an independent organisation. As a result the ILP quickly disintegrated as a political force. Its place inside the LP was taken by the Socialist League (SL).

The counter-crisis strategy of state socialism

Under the constant pressure of a militant labour movement, the state socialists were a strong influence on the policy of the LP in the 'twenties and 'thirties. First the ILP and later the SL developed the Labour left's answer to the crisis. Whilst the right-wing leaders emphasised moderation and practical

reforms, the left advocated decisive action and stressed the socialist goals of the LP programme.

The counter-crisis strategy of the left was formulated in the language of Marxism. However the theoreticians of the left sought explanations for the crisis not in Marx's *Capital*, but in the tracts of bourgeois political economy. Their vulgar form of Marxism treated inequalities in the sphere of distribution, which were exacerbated by the Depression, as though they were independent of the capitalist mode of production. They could only understand production as a natural, rather than a historically determined process. Fred Henderson expounded this point in 1932:

> 'The problem of abundant production has been solved; but quite obviously the problem of distribution has not been solved with it . . . . Our productive powers depend upon natural laws; but our distributive arrangements are our own artifices entirely.' (F Henderson, *The socialist goal*, LP publications, 1932, p8)

In this way the exploitative character of the capitalist production process – production for profit – was obscured. As SL leader Stafford Cripps saw it, 'the problem can only be solved by a new technique of distribution – distribution for use and not for profit' (S Cripps, *The ultimate aims of the Labour Party*, LP publications, 1933, p7). The state socialists did not understand that redistribution is a political, not a technical problem. As long as capitalist relations exist the criterion of profitability prevails both in production and distribution.

The agency for accomplishing the redistribution of national wealth – in Cripps's phrase the 'ultimate aim' of the LP – was the bourgeois state. The left believed that if the working class could gain control of the machinery of government through Parliament it could introduce its full programme to solve the crisis. With mass support, a progressive regime could overrule the forces of reaction in the interests of society as a whole.

For the left socialism was the grand finale of the fight for state control. What was at stake was not planning, for every political party accepted the need for some state intervention. The question was – in whose interests was state planning to be carried out? For the left, socialism was synonymous with an egalitarian distribution of wealth. Its emphasis on socialist forms of distribution was a response to the poverty and inequality that prevailed in British society. This socialism, to be introduced without altering the exploitative process of production, was a pious hope for the working class during the Depression. In place of the two real alternatives – capitalist rationality or the dictatorship of the proletariat – the left substituted its illusions.

The right-wing leaders of the LP were not given to wild experiments. Bevin easily rebutted Cripps's metaphysics at the 1933 LP Conference with sound commonsense: 'our work is eminently practical . . . and we know as leaders the absolute folly of putting up programmes that are not likely to be realised' (*Labour Party annual conference report*, 1933, p161). For Bevin, state intervention had to be justified by economic criteria. Nationalisation was 'not likely to be realised' unless it could be shown that it would help streamline the capitalist economy. For the left state control had virtues in itself; for the right it was only one counter-crisis option among many.

The continuation of capitalism was accepted by the Labour leadership – the role of the LP was to introduce such reforms as would make it more efficient. This hard headed approach was aptly conveyed by the titles of two seminal works by Labour leaders in the 'thirties – Morrison's *Socialisation and transport* (1933) and Dalton's *Practical socialism for Britain* (1935). The Labour leaders were, like the left, ready with a plan to save the nation; but, unlike it, their manifestos did not need long introductions on the nature of socialism, for they were directly related to the immediate requirements of capitalism. *Labour's immediate programme* for 1937 argued:

> '[Labour] is determined to use the resources of our country so as to create a real prosperity in which we all shall share. Science has placed in our hands the means of attaining this end but only if finance and trade, industry and agriculture conform to a national plan under the guidance of the state.' ('Labour's immediate programme', *Labour Party annual conference report*, 1937, appendix X, p277)

The Labour leaders responded instinctively to the needs of capital. An expansion of state intervention was increasingly recognised by the bourgeoisie as the means of guaranteeing the conditions for capital accumulation. This programme, which embodied the strategy of the practical socialists, could integrate all the hallowed principles of the left wing – nationalisation, planning and redistribution.

The left could have its cherished socialist aims. In terms of everyday reality the state socialists had nothing distinct to offer. More and more the logic of capitalism forced them to adapt to the practical socialism of the right. The Labour leadership could easily submerge political differences about the future.

However the dry programmes of practical socialism could not mobilise militant workers in the way that the state socialists' resounding calls for a more equitable distribution of wealth could. The influence of state socialism on the labour movement meant that the measures of state intervention implemented by the practical socialists were interpreted as progressive by sections of the working class. Consequently nationalisation and state direction of essential services could be seen as oases of socialism in a capitalist desert. According to Cripps, capitalist industries were already connected by socialist roads. Britain, he stated, had 'a purely socialist system of road provision, regardless of any question of private or state profit' (S Cripps, op cit, p4).

For the left, nationalisation was a way of building socialism bit by bit. The left assumed that the adoption of policies of state intervention by other political parties was an indication of their reluctant conversion to socialism. In reality the commitment of the left to state planning helped to win the working class to large scale state intervention in economic and social life during and after the Second World War. As a result many workers interpreted the extension of state activity during the war as a demonstration of the potential for state socialist planning.

The LP emerged from the slump with valuable lessons for its later role in British political life. The experience of the crisis had revealed that Labour's policies of nationalisation, government planning and administration were *necessary* to overcome the anarchy of capitalism. A 1938 LP recruiting leaflet entitled *Stop that slump* declared:

' "Experts" and "leaders" wrangle: but on one thing they are agreed: that a slump will come, sooner or later. Labour says: PLANNING CAN STOP SLUMPS. Let Labour plan for prosperity: BRITAIN'S WEALTH FOR BRITAIN'S PEOPLE.' (*Stop that slump*. LP leaflet No 67, 1938)

In the event planning was not sufficient to restore capitalist profitability. Planning turned out to be the controls made necessary by a war economy. More than a million workers had to be killed and thousands of factories had to be destroyed before state intervention could have its desired effects. In the aftermath of the war the LP turned its practical socialism, with the support of the labour movement, to the tasks of national capitalist reconstruction.

THE POST-WAR BOOM: LABOUR ON THE SIDELINES

The new revisionists

The legislative programme of the 1945-51 Labour Government represented the realisation of the policies of state socialism. The Second World War had established the conditions in which this programme could be implemented. The world economy was reorganised under the dominance of US capital and capital values were destroyed on a world scale. Above all the international working class had suffered a massive defeat, resulting in an increase in the rate of exploitation and a substantial reduction in living standards.

The Labour Government's programme, which was presented as a socialist package, was in reality nothing more than a set of state measures designed to help re-establish profitable accumulation. At the end of five years of Labour legislation the potential for its strategy of state intervention was exhausted: a number of essential but unprofitable industries had been nationalised and a comprehensive health and social security system set up. From the point of view of the bourgeoisie, Labour had done its job, for it had obtained the support of the working class for the austerity measures that were entailed in the reconstruction process. Once profitable production had been re-established, the counter-crisis measures of the left had nothing further to offer. Capital could turn again to the traditional bourgeois party to maintain its domination.

During the period of reconstruction the LP had demonstrated that it could govern. The left of the LP had made no major criticisms of the Labour Government. The only way it had defined itself politically was through calling on the Government to act with a greater sense of urgency. The left and right were (and remain) united in their assessment that the Attlee Government had inaugurated a revolution in British society. The victory of 1945 and the achievements of the Government mark the zenith of British Labourism and are held up for acclaim with particular fervour by the left. The Government which introduced wage restraint in 1948, conducted a savage imperialist war in Malaya, sent troops to break numerous strikes and imprisoned scores of trade union militants – the Government which confirmed the viability of Labour's solution to the problems of the nation – this is still fondly remembered.

In the post-war boom, Labour, the party of crisis, had a minimal role to play. The massive increase in productivity and output resulted in a growth of the mass of commodities available to the working class. Rising productivity

enabled trade unions to negotiate regular wage increases for their members. In this period of relative prosperity trade unionism could flourish and collective bargaining became a successful tactic, especially in the more advanced sections of the economy. The gains won by trade union methods meant that for a large section of the labour movement there seemed no immediate need for a political strategy; state socialism in particular was irrelevant. Socialism was not a striking necessity while these conditions of capitalist stability lasted. In the labour movement a right-wing shift ensued and reactionary bureaucrats ruled the trade unions.

The Cold War dominated international politics, keeping Russia constantly in the public eye as an example of the austere and repressive outcome of the first socialist revolution. The political institutions of social democracy in Britain – as in the rest of Europe – went into gradual decline. Labour lost three general elections and the support of 1.7 million voters between 1951 and 1959. The number of Labour MPs declined by one third between 1945 and 1959 and in the late 'fifties Labour Party membership began to fall. *The Daily Herald*, 'Labour's own national daily', made heavy losses: in 1964 it disappeared altogether. The crushing defeat of 1959 called into question Labour's future. Ray Gunter, addressing the 1960 LP Conference, spoke of 'a sense of deep anxiety that this, the greatest democratic Socialist Party in the world, is in danger, if not of disintegrating, at least of withering away' (*Labour Party annual conference report*, 1960, p133).

The right wing ruled the LP during the boom; the left was condemned to isolation, fragmentation and insignificance. In the protracted period of capitalist expansion following the Second World War the contradiction between the working class and the interests of capital appeared to have been overcome. In these conditions the tendency of the party to distance itself from its working class base and to establish an all-class national appeal was consolidated.

In the 'fifties a school of new revisionists intent on eliminating the LP's identity as a class party gained considerable support. Crosland, Strachey and Jay were the leaders of this trend, which was consolidated in the election of Gaitskell to the party leadership in 1955. The acceptance of the document *Industry and society* by the 1957 Conference marked the hegemony of the revisionists in policy-making.

The starting point of the revisionist analysis was that society in the early 'fifties was fundamentally different from society before the war. The implementation of the programme of state socialism by the post-war Labour Government was held to have transformed capitalism; a new form of society, characterised by the 'mixed economy', had been born. According to Crosland, British society was no longer capitalist. Britain was not socialist just yet – but capitalism had certainly been transcended. The LP, which had always rejected the necessity for class struggle, had hitherto been forced to take account of it in practice. But now that capitalism had vanished with the help of a Labour Government, the class struggle could be declared truly obsolete. In 1952, Socialist Union, the informal grouping of the revisionists, unequivocally rejected it:

'The class struggle is no more a fixed pattern of action for the achievement of socialism than socialism itself is a fixed set of institutions . . . .To pit class against class in

the end leads to a naked struggle for power and advantage, destroying the very values which socialists wish most to uphold.' (Socialist Union, *Socialism: a new statement of principles* [1952], Socialist Commentary Publications, 1958, p43)

Unfortunately for Socialist Union the class struggle would not go away. Crosland complained that 'class feeling, and general social *malaise*, still persist in England to a deplorable extent' (C A R Crosland, 'The transition from capitalism', *New Fabian Essays*, Turnstile Press, London, 1952, p62). Labour stated quite openly that its role was to uproot class consciousness and replace it with a sense of national identity: 'the purpose of socialism is quite simply to eradicate this sense of class, and to create in its place a sense of common interest and equal status' (ibid, p62). The revisionists dismissed the policies of the late 'forties as outdated. The time had come to call a halt to nationalisation, expansion of the social services, state controls and attempts to redistribute wealth. Instead the fight for a new world based on efficiency and compassion had to begin.

The new revisionists attempted to redefine the social and political problems of capitalist society in technical terms. They turned their backs on the question of the ownership of the means of production and argued instead the need for public accountability and control. The growth of the mixed economy was making the old capitalist boss all but extinct. His place was being taken by the manager, who, with the interests of the consumer and shareholder at heart, would promote greater productivity, efficiency and fairness in the distribution of wealth.

The drive to increase productivity was approached in the same technical way as nationalisation. Although the social relations of production still confined the productive potential of society within the narrow constraints of profitability, this obstacle to social development was concealed during the boom. As capitalism expanded the revisionists characterised the problem as one of correctly applying science and technology to the process of production. This was a theme which the Labour leaders expounded with increasing vigour throughout the boom; it reached a crescendo in Wilson's 'white heat of the technological revolution' – the electoral platform which took Labour into government in 1964.

In the field of social policy the attempt to resolve the difficulties facing an LP in retreat took a similar form. Poverty was no longer seen as a political problem – to be solved only by the socialist transformation of society. It could now be overcome by appropriately designed pension and superannuation schemes and by programmes of welfare benefits. Decent housing and health care likewise required an administrative approach.

In this period of capitalist stability there was little place for the Labour left. State socialism could not provide a coherent alternative to the revisionist strategy and the left declined in strength and influence. In the 'thirties there had been a vigorous left current inside and outside the LP. In contrast, the initiatives of the 'fifties came from the right. After Gaitskell's accession it was the leadership itself which proposed radical changes to the programme and constitution of the party.

The left could not challenge the revisionists. It too was preoccupied with the intricacies of management. It was 'now less concerned about who owns a factory, and more about who manages it and how' (*Keeping Left*, New

Statesman Publications, 1950, p28). The fact that the domination of capital was mediated through managerial agents was seen as evidence of the growing irrelevance of the capitalist class. The left also agreed with the revisionists' assessment that the class struggle was obsolete. As *Keeping Left* expressed the spirit of class collaboration, 'it is to the teamwork of these two forces in industry – a politically conscious Trades Union Movement and a minority of enlightened managers – that Britain's industrial success in the first five years of the full-employment era are chiefly due' (ibid, p5).

The left had no arguments against Gaitskell's *Industry and society*. It could only reassert its traditions of state socialist principle. Speaking against the revisionists' new document, Maurice Edelman, MP, conceded that 'this analysis is brilliant'; he only protested that he was 'an old-fashioned nationaliser' (*Labour Party annual conference report*, 1957, p131). This nostalgic sentiment was echoed by other delegates, notably by one from Govan, who issued the pathetic plea 'let us all be Rip Van Winkles, old-fashioned Socialists, old-fashioned nationalisers' (ibid, p137). Since it did not reject the premises of the right wing, the left was ill equipped to oppose its conclusions. Practical politics took a firm hold on the party and the conference gave a massive vote of support for the programme of the revisionists.

The disintegration of the Labour left illustrated the irrelevance of state socialism in conditions of boom. Unable to sustain an independent strategy, the Labour left indulged its missionary zeal. During this period the left concentrated on issues of conscience and foreign affairs which could be pursued without serious consequences. German rearmament, unilateral disarmament, the massacres of Hola and Sharpeville – these were the great causes of the Labour left in the post-war boom. But these issues were taken up not as manifestations of imperialism but as fodder for the moral crusades of philanthropists. The left's interest in brutality did not extend to the oppression of the Irish people. As always with state socialist concern for the oppressed, the further from Britain the better.

The trade union connection

The debates following Labour's heavy defeat at the polls in 1959 show the full impact of the boom on the LP. The initiative again came from the right. Scarcely had the votes been counted when Jay declared that 'we are in danger of fighting under the label of a class which no longer exists' (D Jay, 'Should there be no more "nationalisation"?', *Forward*, 16 October 1959, p12). He proposed changing the name of the party – to 'Labour and Radical' or 'Labour and Reform' – and loosening the links with the unions. The leadership accepted that the party's ties with the working class were an electoral liability. They pointed to the changing conditions brought about by the post-war boom: the declining proportion of manual workers, the growing number of white collar workers, the weakening of working class identity and the strengthening of 'consumerism'. As Gaitskell perceived them, the factors responsible for Labour's electoral defeat were 'the changing character of labour, full employment, new housing, the new way of living based on the telly, the frig., the car and the glossy magazines' (*Labour Party annual*

conference report, 1959, p133). Countering the Tory view that Labour was a class party, he argued:

'If you look at the parties in the House of Commons today you will see that ours is a far better cross section of the community than the Tories who are still overwhelmingly drawn from a single social class. Yet, somehow, we let the Tories get away with the monstrous falsehood that *we* are a Class Party and they are *not*. We must surely now attend to this.' (ibid, p109)

Now was the time for Labour to demonstrate decisively the 'monstrous falsehood' of its label as a class party.

The Labour leadership was closely concerned with the plight of other European social-democratic parties. Some, as in Italy and France, had declined into political insignificance; others, as in Scandinavia, Germany and Austria, had survived by abandoning their commitment to the ultimate aim of socialism in favour of more pragmatic objectives. This was the course Gaitskell advanced to the delegates at the party conference. He argued that it was time to stop 'waving the banners of a bygone age'; in practice the LP had come to accept 'in some form a mixed economy' (ibid, pp112, 113). Clause Four, the historic commitment of the 1918 Conference to the common ownership of the means of production, was proposed for sacrifice.

The debate on Clause Four raged for the next year. The leadership wanted a new declaration of aims to be incorporated into the constitution so that Clause Four could be brought up to date. This move provoked a sharp response from the trade union movement. But opposition to amending Clause Four did not so much reflect disgust with the abandonment of socialist principles – for these had no consequence in any case – as opposition to Labour's real intent: the erosion of the LP's formal ties with the trade unions. While the Labour left campaigned for Clause Four with passionate moral commitment, the real force behind the revolt came from the trade unions themselves.

In the face of this trade union opposition the NEC hastily resolved not to proceed with any amendment or addition to the constitution. Insofar as the LP could have any pretensions to be a party of government this was based on working class support for its bourgeois programme. In the end the LP as a whole was forced to recognise the importance of links with the labour movement. Without the support of the unions the LP could not claim the capacity to rule the country.

The struggle over Clause Four is claimed by the left as a victory; it retained its socialist totem. In reality this debate only emphasised the irrelevance that Clause Four had for the LP. The meeting of the NEC which rejected the amending of Clause Four also approved a statement of 'Labour's aims' which was later adopted by the conference. It was claimed that this statement 'reaffirms, amplifies and clarifies Party Objects in the light of post-war developments' (*Labour Party annual conference report*, 1960, p12). It 'amplified' Clause Four by qualifying the commitment to nationalisation almost out of existence. The content of Clause Four was reinterpreted by the leadership in accordance with its central political strategy – the development of rational techniques of intervention in the capitalist economy. Though the retention of Clause Four maintained the formal links between the unions and the LP – between the aspirations of the working class towards socialism and

Labour's bourgeois national programme – in practice the politics of state socialism had been defeated.

The impact of the boom on Labour's programme

By the early 'sixties there were signs that the post-war boom might not last forever. The British economy expanded more slowly than those of its major competitors and the outdated character of much of British industry became increasingly apparent. These were the first signs of the fundamental problems of the 'seventies: the need to restructure industry and restore competitiveness.

Wilson presented the programme Labour had evolved during the boom as the solution to the problems facing the nation. The Tories were cast as old-fashioned and incapable of the radical thought and action necessary to restore Britain's greatness. The party of the old school tie and the old boys' network was unable to lead the technological revolution which Labour proposed for British industry. The accession of the fourteenth Earl of Home to the Tory leadership after the Profumo scandal completed the identification of the Conservatives as a party of defunct grouse-shooters. Wilson pursued this theme in the 1964 election campaign:

'For the commanding heights of British industry to be controlled today by men whose only claim is their aristocratic connections or the power of inherited wealth or speculative finance is as irrelevant to the twentieth century as would be the continued purchase of commissions in the armed forces by lordly amateurs. At the very time that even the M.C.C. has abolished the distinction between amateurs and professionals, in science and industry we are content to remain a nation of Gentlemen in a world of Players.' (*Labour Party annual conference report*, 1963, p140)

The theme of science and technology was placed at the centre of Labour's programme. The document *Labour and the scientific revolution* was adopted in 1963 and formed the basis of the 1964 manifesto. Capitalist social relations were taken for granted. The remaining social problems could be solved through technological change. Labour's tasks were of a purely technical character; all that was now necessary was to administer the mixed economy in such a way as to maximise productivity, efficiency and social justice. The 1964 manifesto represented the culmination of Labour's 'practical socialism'. Every major social question was transformed into a technical one. Even the word 'socialism' did not appear in the manifesto. Its approach is summarised in the concluding paragraphs:

'The Labour Party is offering Britain a new way of life that will stir our hearts, re-kindle an authentic patriotic faith in our future, and enable our country to re-establish itself as a stable force in the world today for progress, peace and justice.

It is within the personal power of every man and woman with a vote to guarantee that the British again become THE GO-AHEAD PEOPLE WITH A SENSE OF NATIONAL PURPOSE, THRIVING IN AN EXPANDING COMMUNITY WHERE SOCIAL JUSTICE IS SEEN TO PREVAIL.' (*Let's go with Labour for the new Britain*, 1964, p24)

Socialism in the LP is a product of the radicalism of the working class. During the post-war boom the rhetorical militancy of the Labour left reached a low ebb. The degree to which class antagonism was suppressed is indicated by the left's acceptance of the 1964 manifesto as its own. Despite Labour's

enthusiasm for the latest in technology, for the bourgeoisie the LP served an old-fashioned purpose. The 1964 Wilson Government did what Labour knew best.

LABOUR IN THE RECESSION: BASTION OF THE BOURGEOISIE

The resurgence of militancy

Despite its loyalty to British capitalism and its willingness to attack the living standards of the working class, the LP still retains the allegiance of the labour movement. During the Wilson administration of 1964-70, the Government attacked workers' living standards in an attempt to restore the competitive position of British capital. The loyalty of the unions to Labour ensured acceptance of wage restraint. However, the attempts of the Government to restrict trade union militancy and to impose a prolonged statutory incomes policy foundered. In this period, before the onset of the recession, the Government's threats could not contain the revolt of the rank and file. It overthrew Labour's White Paper *In place of strife* in 1968. But the forced withdrawal of *In place of strife* made it seem that the Labour Government had become more responsive to working class pressure. Paradoxically, Labour's status as a party which could take account of working class needs was enhanced; the LP was strengthened by this defeat of the Government. In particular, the state socialist strategy of pressing the state to act in the interests of the working class appeared to be vindicated by this event. The subsequent experience of the labour movement with the directly anti-working class Heath regime further strengthened the allegiance of trade unionists to the LP. When industrial militancy and the miners' strike forced the Tories out of office it did indeed seem that mass pressure could force the bourgeois state to concede to working class demands.

The resurgence of large scale working class militancy produced a radical shift in the unions and stimulated the re-emergence of the left in the LP. As class divisions assumed a new importance, so too did the Labour left. Jack Jones and Hugh Scanlon became leaders of the two most powerful unions in the country on platforms of militant opposition to both incomes policy and anti-trade union legislation. A new spirit of militancy extended to the white collar and public sector unions. These unions expanded rapidly and participated in the wave of strikes that marked the early 'seventies. The hegemony of right-wing trade union leaders in the TUC and the LP came to an end: the bloc votes of the large unions were now ranged with the left against the leadership of the party.

The swing to the left in the trade unions changed the composition of Labour's NEC. In 1966 it was a loyal supporter of the Government; in 1975 Chancellor Healey was ousted by *Tribune* MP Heffer to consolidate the left majority. The *Tribune* group forged a new alliance with the trade union MPs in a series of parliamentary revolts against anti-trade union legislation. Of the 50 new MPs elected in 1974, 28, many in response to the demands of their local supporters, immediately joined the *Tribune* group. Under the pressure of the crisis, the left, ineffectual and irrelevant since the war, emerged as the voice of the labour movement in the LP and as a plausible alternative to the established leadership.

There was now nobody in the LP to argue that the working class was a category made obsolete by post-war economic and social developments. The term 'working class', which disappeared from Labour's vocabulary in the 'fifties and 'sixties, was on every delegate's lips in the radical conferences of the early 'seventies.

The Social Contract and the working class

Since its election in 1974 the LP has once more proved that it is the party for the crisis. The LP makes the capitalist solution to the crisis more palatable to the labour movement. It says the crisis is a misfortune which afflicts us all; all classes therefore have a common interest in solving it. In the absence of an independent working class alternative the trade unions have made the Government's objectives their own. Wanting to reduce inflation and regenerate British industry, they have accepted the Government's argument that a complete strategy must include wage restraint. In return they ask only that government policy should not neglect the interests of the trade unions and that the bosses should make some sacrifices too. These futile requests cloud the real consequences of the reformist programme: if workers accept reponsibility for the crisis they cannot resist the measures required to restore profitability.

Commitment to the Social Contract has led the labour movement to moderate its wage demands in order to help win the 'battle against inflation'; it has led to the acceptance of cuts in social services because 'we are living beyond our means' and in the end it has led to the toleration of closures and redundancies because the criterion of profitability is accepted. In political terms the recognition of the need to solve the crisis has let the Labour Government off the hook. It has been able to say to the labour movement that it has no choice in the matter – these unpleasant measures are necessary for future prosperity. The acquiescence to these measures in exchange for token legislative reforms and vague promises of better times ahead constitutes the core of the Social Contract.

When the recession accelerated rapidly in the mid 'seventies the traditional tactics of the labour movement could no longer defend workers' living standards. Orthodox trade union methods could not cope with mass unemployment and record inflation. In these circumstances the labour movement accepted the Government's argument that 'wage rises cause inflation', and agreed to modify the trade union struggle in the hope that a Labour administration would guarantee living standards. George Regan expressed the feelings of many militants as he led the strikers at SU Carburettors back to work in Spring 1976. He explained:

> 'We are responsible people and we did not want to cause further hardship for thousands of British Leyland workers. We feel that we have a genuine grievance but we now accept that we will not get the money because of the Government's pay code.' (*The Sunday Times*, 4 April 1976, p1)

In the past four years numerous trade unionists have been forced to the same conclusion. The *Financial Times* recently congratulated the Labour Government for its success in giving the trade unions an education:

> 'The unions have learned to understand the link between wages and inflation, and

between inflation and unemployment. The facts of life have won.' (*Financial Times*, 1 June 1978, p27)

Once the labour movement allowed the 'facts of life' rather than its independent interests to determine the course of its struggle, it fell prey to the bourgeois offensive. In these conditions the moderate trade union leaders could assume their traditional domination over the movement. The strength of bourgeois ideas in the labour movement had a divisive effect; it appeared to many trade unionists that militancy would only exacerbate the crisis rather than advance workers' interests.

This explains why a united and coordinated fightback against the bourgeois offensive has yet to emerge. Struggles have tended to be small in scale and localised in character. There have been protests against the shutdown of industrial plants, the closure of hospitals and the erosion of differentials. But acceptance of the premises on which these measures are justified prevents a unified labour movement defence of each particular section that comes under attack. Groups of workers have faced the state without the organised support of the labour movement; thus isolated they have been easily defeated.

The labour movement has failed to repel the attacks of the ruling class because it is not prepared to challenge a Labour Government directly. Workers believe that a challenge to the Government could only mean asking Thatcher to take control. Clearly that is no alternative. The Labour left attempts to express the dissatisfaction of militants with the Government. Like the working class it too is dissatisfied – but it too sees no alternative.

The crisis and the Labour left

Unlike the LP leadership, the left appeals to class interests and instincts. It criticises the leadership's conservatism and argues for 'bold socialist policies'. Success at passing resounding conference resolutions has strengthened the view that a socialist alternative exists within the LP. The 'left alternative strategy' of the state socialists in the LP has played an important role in winning the adherence of trade union militants to the Labour Government.

The Labour left's strategy, like that of the Government, accepts the existence of capitalism. Unlike the Government, the left argues that the crisis can be resolved without reducing workers' living standards. This illusory perspective is based on a superficial understanding of the crisis. For the left the crisis is not the consequence of the contradictions inherent in capitalist production but stems from malevolent manipulations in the spheres of distribution or politics. The crisis is due to mistaken policies like joining the EEC or accepting the advice of the IMF. Alternatively the crisis is attributed to the motives of the capitalists – it is a result of 'bad management', 'investment strikes' or unpatriotic speculators. Once the crisis is seen in these subjective terms then things can easily be put right. With a little impetus from the bourgeois state a new managerial cadre could be created. The left advances solutions to the crisis which accept capitalist relations at the same time as it tries to curb the abuses and excesses of capital. It claims that the present measures of the Government are 'bad economics'. Instead of wage cuts, what is needed is more money in the pockets of working people in order

to stimulate investment and create jobs. The left shares the aim of the Government – to restore the profitability of British industry – but suggests that there is a working class way of going about it.

In response to the upsurge in working class militancy of the early 'seventies some aspects of the 'left alternative strategy' were incorporated into the manifesto for the February 1974 election. This included the pledge to effect a drastic redistribution of wealth and income, and plans for a major expansion of public ownership and welfare benefits. The same manifesto also promised to introduce a social contract. The left now invokes this manifesto as the socialist testament of the LP; it demands that the Government honours the commitments in it. *But the experience of the last four years shows that the sort of state intervention pursued by the left can only serve capital and not the working class.* The political importance of the left alternative strategy is that it can present capital's counter-crisis measures as if they were socialist policies. The Labour Government could not have successfully carried out its anti-working class strategy without the help of the Labour left. Promised in the 1974 manifesto and enthusiastically promoted as a progressive experiment by the *Tribune* group, the NEB and planning agreements have been incorporated into the counter-crisis strategy of the bourgeois state. The NEB has salvaged and restructured bankrupt British industries (Rolls Royce, Leyland, Alfred Herbert) at the cost of thousands of jobs. All the left can do is encourage the Government to give the NEB 'more teeth' – with which it can only attack the working class and reduce living standards further.

The fact that the Labour Government has concluded only one 'genuine' planning agreement – with Chrysler – in the whole of its term of office is a source of major distress to the left. When the farcical aspect of state attempts to plan capitalist production is exposed by the sale of Chrysler, the left can only protest 'this is not what we had in mind'. During the capitalist crisis, planning – with or without the NEB – can only take place at the expense of the working class.

Throughout the 'seventies the left has consistently argued for import controls. The impact of the world recession in the less competitive branches of the British economy, such as textiles, footwear and steel, has precipitated a nationalistic response from sections of the labour movement – a response which has met with sympathy from a number of British capitalists. As a measure to protect British industry at the expense of foreign workers, import controls found little support among the Labour leadership in 1974. But, four years later, with the escalation of inter-imperialist rivalries and the growth of protectionism worldwide, the LP-TUC Liaison Committee has announced that the Government intends to proceed with 'a far bolder approach to limit the degree of import penetration' and to be 'ready to use selective and temporary import controls if these prove to be necessary' (*Into the 'eighties: an agreement*, July 1978, p6). The policies of the Labour left thus acquire relevance as capital comes to demand them; the Labour left has provided a socialist veneer for the imperialist policies of trade war.

The state socialist programme also contains demands which could never be implemented in a capitalist crisis. Through its calls for redistribution of wealth, increasing working class consumption and bans on the export of capital, the left proposes to shift society's resources in favour of 'the

majority'. These utopian demands suggest that a progressive transformation of society can take place within capitalism – an illusion fundamental to the 'left alternative strategy'. The left's adherence to the regeneration of British industry undermines its commitment to the redistribution of wealth. Because the left wants a more efficient capitalism it cannot challenge the pragmatic response of Callaghan and Healey to the needs of capital. In the crisis British industry demands an offensive on working class living standards and the redistribution of wealth favoured by the state socialists collapses. As one delegate to the Labour Party Conference expressed his feelings of shock when confronted with the consequences of the state socialist strategy: 'the last thing we expected when we asked then for a redistribution of wealth and incomes was that that redistribution would take place in favour of the rich and not in favour of the workers' (*Labour Party annual conference report*, 1974, p282).

Since 1974, many militant workers have realised that redistribution of wealth has taken place in favour of capital; but the considerable influence of state socialism on trade union militants has prevented them from drawing the lessons of this experience. Though the anti-working class nature of the Government's strategy has become more obvious as the crisis has unfolded, the left prepared the ground for the capitalist class before the full impact of the recession. In doing so it managed to give a progressive aura to aspects of the Government's policies, so that some reactionary measures (the NEB, 'industrial democracy', planning agreements) were welcomed and others (incomes policy) at least tolerated. Now the left finds that it must put its utopian demands in cold storage and look instead for a means to soften the blows of the counter-crisis strategy.

The Labour Party and the class struggle

The gradual unfolding of the world recession has dominated the last decade of British politics. For Labour the crisis has presented the opportunity to step forward once again to save the nation. It is qualified for this task by its expertise in managing the economy and, most importantly, by its ability to win the support of the working class. Early in the 'sixties the Labour right rediscovered the advantage of the link with the unions which it had disparaged in 1959. After the failure of Tory incomes policy, the journal of the Labour right noted that the party's 'close alliance with the unions' was 'an asset *which it alone enjoys*, and not a liability' (*Socialist Commentary*, May 1962, p5). The fact that the organised working class supported the bourgeois programme of Labour in preference to the bourgeois programme of the Tories was indeed an asset for the LP. As *Socialist Commentary* continued, the LP 'must be able to show . . . that the unions will cooperate wholeheartedly only if Labour is in office' (ibid). With the approach of the general election this remains a major theme in Labour's appeal to the country.

The LP is a party for the crisis. It has been able to contain and suppress class contradictions by actively canvassing support for its measures from all sections of society. The trade unions have been most persistently courted over the past four years by a government whose existence depends on their

support. As a result of its successful erosion of class independence the LP faces the coming elections with the labour movement – left and right – united behind it. Hence differences over policy pose no threat to the dominant position of the LP leadership.

The Government is supremely confident. The five per cent pay norm, which will bring further substantial reductions in real wages, is held up as the precursor of a permanent incomes policy. This blatant attack on the working class was fully endorsed by Parliament; while seven adventurous left-wing MPs managed to abstain, the rest of the *Tribune* group voted for the Government's wage restraint, salving its conscience with the statement that 'this must not be taken as support for any control of wages, and we are opposed to the five per cent limit proposed in the White Paper' (*The Times*, 26 July 1978, p4). Even socialist rhetoric is abandoned as the logic of the Government's strategy has the last word.

The left can offer no alternative because its own policies are not fundamentally opposed to those of the Government. Heffer admits as much:

> 'Of course we are all critical of the public expenditure cuts which have taken place as well as the incomes policies which . . . . have put far too much emphasis on the inflationary pressures created by wage increases and almost ignored the damaging effects of price and profit rises. Yet there is little doubt that the Government has protected the working population from the most serious effects of the capitalist world crisis far more than any Tory Government would have done.' ('Only socialist policies can bring a Labour victory', *Tribune*, 21 July 1978)

Despite its record, the left still depicts the Government as the 'protector' of working people, and as the only alternative to the Tories. This view is also prevalent in the trade unions. As Moss Evans, leader of the transport and general workers' union, noted when he pledged £500,000 towards the LP's election expenses: 'we shall get no sympathy at all from a Tory government, and despite the fact that we disagree with the current White Paper, our union will do everything in its power to get Labour re-elected ' (*The Times*, 28 July 1978, p21). Today this air of resignation permeates the whole labour movement. Why is it that the mass of the working class still looks to the LP to protect it in the crisis?

Criticism of the policy of the Labour leadership has been made without the left wing ever questioning its support for the Government. The extremism of the Government's attack has been criticised by the state socialists, but they have not challenged the basis of Labour's programme. They have called for Labour to implement its manifesto but have not tried to expose its reactionary content. This means that in practice the posturing of the Labour left can offer nothing to the working class. On every central question the left has gone along with the Government. It accepts the Social Contract although it wants more 'special cases'. It supports racist immigration controls yet asks the Government to administer them in a 'humane' way. It accepts the right of British imperialism to dominate Ireland but wants this oppression to be exercised democratically.

Once it is understood that no independent working class alternative has developed in response to the crisis, it is no longer surprising that the Labour movement has chosen to support the LP. Indeed, under the pressure of the crisis the left has disintegrated and the leadership of the LP has consolidated

its hold over the labour movement. Had there emerged a section within the labour movement prepared to challenge the LP from the standpoint of the working class, the Government would have been put to the test. But because the Government's anti-working class policies have not been understood as betrayals by the movement the Government has been able to retain its credibility.

Revolutionaries must drive home the lessons of Labour's record. This requires a political challenge to the premises of Labourism and in particular to the programme of the state socialists. Only direct opposition to the LP can ensure that the experience of the last four years becomes a conscious lesson for the working class.

REFORMISM AND THE VANGUARD: THE LABOUR PARTY AND THE STRUGGLE FOR REVOLUTIONARY COMMUNISM

Reformism and the radical left

The direction of revolutionary strategy in relation to the LP emerges from the previous analysis. The LP, a historic product of the struggles of the British proletariat, has become the main instrument for winning the working class to the strategy of the bourgeoisie. The dominance of the LP over the working class has been consolidated by the experiences of the 'thirties, the Second World War and the post-war boom. Throughout this period there was no serious challenge to the strategy of state socialism. In the absence of a Marxist alternative, reformism has not been undermined – it has been strengthened by the material conditions of the post-war period. That is why the onset of the crisis has once again stimulated working class support for Labour.

The LP has developed from a tentative experiment in labour politics in the first decade of this century into the natural party of government. It performs this role because, unlike the Conservative Party, it has not only a bourgeois programme but also a massive working class constituency. The Labour left has played a critical role in mobilising working class support for this bourgeois party. While initially it was the product of a movement for class independence, the LP has turned out to be a most effective instrument for destroying the independent movement of the working class.

The resilience of the LP can only be understood in the context of the past defeats suffered by the working class and the degradation of proletarian ideology in the labour movement. As the earlier discussion of the post-war boom indicates, by the mid 'fifties working class independence had been so far eroded that a large section of the LP could countenance abandoning its special relationship with the labour movement. Since that period the LP's vocabulary has become more working class – but the content of its programme remains the same.

The existence of a state socialist wing in the LP has enabled Labour to give an organisational expression to reformism and has reinforced this ideology in the labour movement. However, the problem of reformism goes beyond the confines of the LP. Radical versions of Labour's programme have considerable support amongst trade union militants. As a result the working class militancy of the late 'sixties and early 'seventies was politically dominated by Labourism. In the same way trade union militants today may reject the terms

of the Social Contract while accepting its ideological premises. Given the absence of a class alternative to state socialism, even the most militant struggles do not challenge reformism politically.

The strength of reformism cannot be measured by looking at LP membership lists or by counting the votes of Labour candidates. The whole of the official labour movement has evolved on the basis of its reformist tradition – a tradition which has been confirmed on numerous occasions by the absence of any serious challenge to Labour. The radical left critics of Labour have never understood reformism, always seeing it in narrow organisational terms. Whenever it appeared that the LP was losing members or votes the radical left declared that reformism had become irrelevant. In periods of trade union militancy the radical left announced that reformism had been dispensed with. The left never grasps that, far from being an alternative to Labour, militant activity can actually sustain illusions in reformism. The political domination by the state socialists of the famous work-in at Upper Clyde Shipbuilders in 1971 is one example. The radical left fails to understand that, without a revolutionary alternative, the working class will not spontaneously reject the reformist programme.

Not so long ago the radical left predicted the imminent demise of the LP. The working class militancy of the 'sixties and early 'seventies was seen as proof that reformism was at an end. Tony Cliff, leader of what is now the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), spoke of 1969 as a period in which the labour movement was characterised by the 'withering away of loyalties to traditional organisations' (*International Socialism* No 36, April/May 1969, p20). As late as 1973, the International Marxist Group (IMG) explained that the class struggle would sweep the LP aside. It talked of 'the spectacular rise of the shop stewards movement and the no less spectacular decline of the control of the Parliamentary Labour Party over the working class as a whole' ('The situation in Britain and the tasks of the IMG', *International*, Vol 2, No 2, Summer 1973, p9). This superficial view of reformism was rapidly overturned by reality. The ability of the Labour Government to contain trade union militancy has forced the radical left to change its previous assessment.

Today, the radical left takes a very 'serious' attitude towards the LP – so serious that, when not working inside it, the radical left adapts to it. Sections of the radical left call for a vote for Labour on the spurious grounds that it is an 'independent organisation of the working class'. This concept of organisational independence obscures the inability of the LP to pursue a working class policy. As our analysis shows, the independence of the LP is entirely fictitious. The LP has repeatedly served as the means of tying the working class to the bourgeois state.

Lack of political independence leads to the abandonment of organisational autonomy in times of crisis. Labour's participation in national governments during the First and Second Imperialist World Wars shows the true nature of this independence. It is for the same reason that on vital questions facing British imperialism Labour has never taken a distinct position. Today, the LP's lack of independence is reflected in its bipartisan policy on Ireland, immigration and Zimbabwe.

The radical left uses the social composition of Labour's support as the criterion for assessing the LP's independence. This shallow view provides the

IMG's motivation for voting for Labour. For the IMG, the LP is a workers' party 'which is organisationally independent from the bosses' (*Socialist Challenge*, 13 July 1978, p7). Lenin's assessment of the early LP provides a striking contrast with these superficial observations:

'Of course, most of the Labour Party's members are working-men. However, whether or not a party is really a political party of workers does not depend solely upon a membership of workers but also upon the men that lead it, and the content of its actions and its political tactics. Only this latter determines whether we really have before us a political party of the proletariat. Regarded from this, the only correct, point of view, the Labour Party is a thoroughly bourgeois party .... It is an organisation of the bourgeoisie, which exists to systematically dupe the workers.' (V I Lenin, 'Speech on affiliation to the British Labour Party', *Collected Works*, Vol 31, pp257-8)

The LP is a bourgeois party with a considerable working class constituency. The IMG's prattle about 'organisational independence' only reflects its illusions in Labourism.

The tactics of the radical left relate to the *form* and not the *content* of the LP's reformism. As a result the radical left relates to the *formal contradiction* between Labour left and right as though it were a fundamental one. Given their essential programmatic unity, the formal differences between left and right are *always* resolved by the right's more consistent bourgeois programme. The effect of the radical left's support for the left against the right is to give credence to the left's illusory independence. This tactic – summed up in the slogan 'Make the lefts fight' put forward by the Workers Socialist League (WSL) – purports to expose the inability of the left to fight. Whatever its intentions it simply reinforces the myth that the left can play a progressive role. The Socialist Campaign for a Labour Victory (SCLV), a recently formed radical left propaganda bloc, boosts the progressive role of the lefts:

'In addition there would seem to be an increased public recognition of the significance of the differences between the left and right of the Labour Party – if only on the level of distinguishing between the Party and its activists and Conference on the one hand, and the government on the other. If the Left were visible and fighting, this would be a major boost . . .

'We believe that it is the left wing of the party which can provide the greatest reserves of energy and enthusiasm.' (SCLV, appeal statement, July 1978)

The 'significance of the differences between the left and right' mainly exists in the imagination of the radical left. Insofar as the left appears to be a distinct force, revolutionaries should expose the essential similarities between the two wings of the party – not try to encourage the left's 'energy and enthusiasm'.

Another tactic of the radical left is the call 'Break the Lib-Lab coalition'. According to the WSL, 'every aspect' of its 'propaganda and practical work . . . since March 1977 has centred on the political necessity for a break in the Lib-Lab coalition' (*Trotskyism Today*, July 1978, p9). The Spartacist League takes this absurd position a step further: 'one important tactic for revolutionaries . . . is to put forward a policy of conditional non-support to Labour in upcoming elections unless and until they repudiate coalitionism' (*Workers Vanguard*, 8 April 1977, p11). By concentrating on the Lib-Lab pact sections of the radical left oppose only a particular form assumed by Labourism. The only implication that the working class can draw from this is

that the reactionary policies of the Government originate in its alliance with the Liberals and not in the programme of the LP.

The question of critical support

For the RCT electoral tactics are subordinate to the day to day perspective of fighting reformism. Revolutionary tactics in the next general election must flow from the struggle for class independence. Almost every radical left organisation calls for critical support for Labour in the coming elections. Although critical support is presented in many different formulas, every radical left group claims that this approach will lead to the 'exposure' of the Labour leadership, citing Lenin and Trotsky as its guides. But the Third International's discussion of the tactics to be pursued by the early Communist Party (CP) towards Labour shows how wrong the radical left is to use the authority of Lenin and Trotsky in its defence.

In the period preceding 1920 there were major revolutionary upheavals in Europe. The victory of the Russian Revolution was followed by intense class conflict in a number of countries. From these developments a section of the left drew the conclusion that reformism was no longer a problem and that communists should not participate in Parliament. British communists argued not only against participating in Parliament, but also against affiliating to the Labour Party. Lenin's polemic against this ultra-left position – *Left-wing communism – an infantile disorder* – was written as a contribution to this debate.

Lenin argued that the LP – established scarcely 20 years previously – was the first organised expression of the political aspirations of the British working class. The working class had never experienced a Labour Government and hence the LP's programme had not been put to the test. Lenin was not in doubt as to the opportunist and reactionary nature of the LP's programme and leadership. But he understood that the party enjoyed the support of the working class because it appeared to be a party which could defend its interests.

Lenin's tactics followed from his assessment of the relationship between the LP and the working class. Despite the movement of the working class in an anti-capitalist direction, the LP was able to retain its domination of the labour movement. In these conditions the LP provided the medium through which revolutionaries could reach a mass audience. Internationally there was a section within the working class with a highly developed class consciousness which was prepared to challenge the rule of capital. Although in Britain this section was small, Lenin argued that its leading cadres should organise themselves in a communist party and attempt to work within the LP and trade unions. Through the tactic of critical support they would be able to expose the bourgeois politics of the LP to its mass base. It was from this perspective that communists were encouraged to give electoral assistance to Labour in order to 'hasten the transfer of political power from the direct representatives of the bourgeoisie to the "labour lieutenants of the capitalist class" so that the masses may be more quickly weaned away from their last illusions on this score' (Lenin, ibid, *Collected Works*, Vol 31, p199). In the presence of a revolutionary vanguard within the labour movement the

experience of betrayal by Labour could be used by the CP to demonstrate Labour's reformist character and to show the need for workers to organise independently.

The condition on which affiliation and electoral support were proposed was the complete organisational independence of the CP – the freedom to carry out its own activities and propaganda. The independence of the vanguard party was essential to provide the clearest exposure of the opportunist Labour leadership before the masses. The objective was to break the workers from the LP and win them to the CP – not to influence the politics or personnel of the Labour leadership, but to build an independent working class party.

Those who today propose these tactics understand neither Lenin nor present day reality. Revolutionary tactics are not timeless formulas. The 'critical support' tactic of 1920 was designed to win the mass of the working class to the revolutionary vanguard. It was based on the assumption that a vanguard had already been won to communism. Lenin wrote: 'the chief thing, has already been achieved: the vanguard of the working class has been won over, has ranged itself on the side of Soviet government and against parliamentarianism, on the side of the dictatorship of the proletariat and against bourgeois democracy' (Lenin, ibid, p92). Once this victory was won, communists could turn to the task of winning the mass of the working class to the vanguard. Lenin noted: 'the immediate objective of the class-conscious vanguard of the international working class movement . . . . is to be able to *lead* the broad masses' (Lenin, ibid, p93). Furthermore Lenin warned that the tactic of critical support should not be applied indiscriminately: 'as long as it was . . . a question of winning the proletariat's vanguard over to the side of communism, priority went and still goes to propaganda work' (ibid, pp93-4).

Today there is no vanguard in the British working class: a vanguard, in Lenin's words, 'on the side of the dictatorship of the proletariat'. Marxism, as working class politics, exists only in the form of a propaganda group. Today the task of revolutionaries is to train a vanguard. The tactic of critical support, designed to win the mass of the working class to a vanguard, bears no relationship to this task. In the absence of a vanguard critical support turns out to be uncritical support for Labour. This is because at present the political basis for exposing the Labour leadership does not exist.

During the past four years the Labour Government has been able to suppress the contradiction between its pro-capitalist policies and the interests of the working class. The LP has achieved this by reconciling the labour movement to its strategy. In the absence of a revolutionary vanguard this real contradiction cannot take on a clear political form. In these circumstances a policy of critical support can only criticise the Government's most obviously anti-working class policies at the same time as it confirms the general validity of its solution to the crisis.

More importantly, in the absence of an independent class alternative the Labour leadership has tamed the left and silenced most of its critics in the labour movement. Trade unionists, forced by the crisis to accept Labour's solution to it, do not see this government as a government of betrayal. In these conditions there is no political basis for exposing the Labour leadership.

At best critical support can draw attention to extreme examples of class collaboration or to the reactionary nature of a Labour politician. Thus the recent removal of Prentice by constituency activists in Newham North East could not represent a threat to reformism: it only confirmed the existence of an (illusory) alternative inside the LP.

Any support for the LP, no matter how 'critical', undermines the development of a class conscious current in the labour movement that could challenge the reformist leadership of the working class. Asking advanced workers to support Labour critically is to ask them to do what they are already doing. What they require is an independent programme that can challenge the LP. This programme can only be developed in total opposition, both political and organisational, to this party.

The bankruptcy of the radical left is revealed in its cheap formula demands. In the run-up to the election the radical left makes no attempt to debate and discuss the problem of reformism. Instead it issues statements on tactical questions, detailing the demands it will put on Labour and the qualifications it places on its support. In reality the radical left, from the SWP to the IMG, calls for a vote for Labour because, like the labour movement, it sees no alternative. The lack of independence of the radical left from trade unionist politics leads it to fall in line at the polls. The SWP does not even make a pretence of offering a coherent justification of its position. This is the decisive lead the SWP offers to its membership:

> 'We can't pretend that a call to vote Labour again can be made without choking back our disgust. But at least the devil we know has one advantage for the left. With Callaghan and Healey in office it is clear to anyone capable of rational thought that the Labour Party *is* conservative, that a real socialist party has to be built outside it and against it.' (*Socialist Worker*, 5 August 1978, p2)

While the SWP chokes all the way to the poll booths the IMG faces 'the grim reality'. It argues 'socialists inside and outside the Party have to face the grim reality that there is no alternative but to call for the return of a Labour Government' (*Socialist Challenge*, 13 July 1978, p7). In arguing that there is no alternative to Labour, the radical left simply states its inability to fight for an alternative leadership in the working class. We conclude by outlining the revolutionary alternative to Labour – one which is also an alternative to the empty slogans and abstract formulas of the radical left.

The election and the RCT

In our analysis we have argued that the LP has become the most effective institution for containing the struggles of the working class. The LP has obtained widespread support not because the labour movement is sentimentally attached to its traditional institutions but because the working class shares the ideological premises of its leadership. As long as state socialism dominates the thinking of militant workers the contradiction between the rank and file's attempts to defend its interests and the pro-capitalist policies of the Labour leadership will not express itself in direct class hostility. Their commitment to a reformist strategy means that trade unionists can only oppose a particular Labour bureaucrat or a specific aspect of the LP's programme. This is why the hostility of the workers' movement

to broken election promises or to betrayals does not lead to the rejection of reformism.

The defence of working class interests demands a relentless struggle against all aspects of the state socialist programme. The radical appeal of state socialism, presented in the form of the 'left alternative strategy' today, acts as a barrier to the development of an independent working class vanguard. In these conditions, revolutionaries must show the irreconcilability of the strategy of the Labour left with the defence of working class interests. This challenge to reformism can only be carried out in relation to the living experience of struggle. In the crisis today every step that the working class takes to protect its living standards comes up against the bourgeois state and the Labour Government. The crisis forces the bourgeoisie to use the state more and more to intervene in the everyday activities of the working class. In the form of incomes policy, the police at Grunwicks or the army in the firemen's strike, the bourgeois state has launched a series of attacks on the working class – a series that has not ended yet.

The fear that there is no alternative to Labour has paralysed the trade union movement. Revolutionaries must develop a leadership which understands that the successful outcome of a particular struggle depends on its determination to challenge the state and the Labour Government. This requires a decisive propaganda campaign against the Labour Party. A critique of reformism must be extended to its practical conclusions. There can be no clarity if criticism of Labour's policy is hedged with ifs and buts. In recommending the working class *not* to vote for the LP, the Revolutionary Communist Tendency is simply drawing out the consequences of the Marxist critique of reformism. To do otherwise would be to undermine the struggle against state socialism and fail to provide the political basis for drawing workers to communism. The task of revolutionaries today is not to win the masses but to create a working class vanguard. This requires that revolutionaries counterpose an independent political and organisational alternative to Labour.

The radical left's policy of choosing Labour as the lesser evil is an adaptation to the prevailing views of the labour movement. *It is a standpoint that is entirely reactionary, for it suggests that working class interests can be defended on a basis other than class independence.* With the deepening of the crisis and the intensification of the bourgeois assault on the working class, the politics of the lesser evil can only compound the political disarray of the labour movement.

Today the only possibility of revolutionary activity in the mass organisations of the labour movement is around the struggle against the politics of the LP. The trade unions provide a limited instrument for the defence of working class living standards. For communists working in unions it is necessary to point out that all the past gains of the working class are threatened by the trade unions' commitment to support for Labour. Revolutionaries must demonstrate that the elementary class solidarity achieved by the trade union movement is undermined by the divisive attacks of the Labour Government. From this perspective the struggle against the reformist leadership of the trade unions is inseparable from a clear and direct challenge to the politics of the LP.

We call for an abstention at the general election not because we want to

push electoral tactics to the fore but because it is the only position consistent with a revolutionary struggle against reformism. For revolutionaries the election campaign provides a useful forum for discussing the recent political experience of the working class. Our strategy must be to transform militant struggles into a class conscious experience for those workers who are beginning to question the strategy of reformism.

The RCT will intervene in the elections around issues which highlight the interests of the working class as a whole and which further the development of class independence. The creation of a vanguard is best served by raising questions which require a class response. We shall take up the demands for an immediate withdrawal of troops from Ireland and for an end to all immigration controls. The struggles in support of the Irish liberation movement and against racism directly focus on the nature of the imperialist state and the reactionary role of the Labour Government. Propaganda on these issues can challenge the confines of trade unionist politics and provide workers with a broad class outlook.

By making the questions of Ireland and racism living issues during the election campaign, communists can contribute to the development of class independence in Britain. This serves the immediate practical need of building the political foundations from which a fightback against future social contracts can be launched.

If you would like further information about the activities and propaganda of the Revolutionary Communist Tendency or would like to comment on the politics of this pamphlet please write to BM RCT, LONDON WC1V 6XX. This pamphlet, *Who needs the Labour Party?*, is one of a series. *Under a National Flag* Revolutionary Communist Pamphlets No 2 on racism has just been reprinted. Forthcoming issues will be on Ireland and the British labour movement, and on unemployment and the crisis.

Single issue:	Subscription (four issues post free):
UK 35p (plus 13p postage)	UK £2.00
Overseas 50p (plus 20p postage)	Overseas £3.00

Make cheques, postal orders and international money orders (non sterling cheques not accepted) payable to RCT Association and send to: BM RCT, LONDON WC1V 6XX.