

Debate on the unions and the Labour Party

Workers' Liberty 3/23. July 2009

Note

Some comrades have, as is their right, reprinted the 2004 document (almost all written in July 2003), "The Trade Union Movement, New Labour, and Working-Class Representation".

To get any idea of the relevance of that polemic to today, I think comrades should also read the July 2009 document which argued that the 2003-4 approach was becoming outdated and might within a couple of years become more outdated. That document, written by Sean Matgamna and myself, sparked much opposition at the time. I think in hindsight that we understated, rather than overstated, our arguments for reassessment which elicited so much vehement dispute at the time.

In an afterword, I'll give some brief background to the debate, comment briefly on the introduction to the reprint of the 2004 document.

Martin Thomas, November 2025

Introduction, July 2009

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

The background material includes:

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

[* *The opponents never in fact wrote that response*]

1. How the new facts change the prospects

"When the facts change, I change my mind. What do

you do, sir?"

John Maynard Keynes

"You say that in all this time you have not departed by an iota from the platform of 1925, which I had called an excellent document in many respects. But a platform is not created so as to 'not depart from it,' but rather to apply and develop it. The platform of 1925 was a good document for the year 1925. In the five years that have elapsed, great events have taken place".

Leon Trotsky (remonstrating, in 1930, with Italian communist-oppositionists).

"The test of the seriousness, the maturity, the honesty and the ultimate viability of any revolutionary organisation is its attitude to its own mistakes. Marxists make mistakes - inevitably. Those who are serious face their mistakes, analyse them in the light of further experience, analyse why they made the mistakes they did, and thereby avoid making a merely empirical alteration without fundamentally learning from the experience. Those who are not serious, or who are first of all concerned with 'face', prestige, and factional self-defence seek above all to evade an honest accounting: they subordinate fundamental questions of method and approach to what are essentially secondary and, in the final analysis, unimportant considerations".

Introduction to "IS and Ireland" (AWL pamphlet, 1969)

How the new facts change the prospects

1. The world capitalist crisis is the worst for 70 years. Its efforts are likely to be big and prolonged.
2. Barring an improbable political miracle, New Labour is heading for a crushing defeat in the next General Election.
3. A Tory government will attempt to slash public spending. It will attack the working class in a way patterned on the Thatcher government at the start of the 1980s, and perhaps more so.
4. The Tories have already radically separated themselves from the statist turn of Labour economic policy over the last year. They have come forward as the party of "fiscal responsibility as the foundation of our economic policy", i.e. of drastic cuts.
5. The union-Labour link has (bar the FBU and the RMT) survived the period of New Labour government. (PCS was never affiliated to the Labour Party). The period when the neo-Thatcherite New Labour government might have provoked a decisive breaking-up of the old Labour-union link is coming to an end with the union-Labour link seriously modified, but intact.

6. The looming era of Tory cuts opposed by the unions and a re-faced Labour Party under new leaders (and here it makes no difference that it may be hypocritical or self-contradictory opposition) - that is the gigantic fact, the shaping and reshaping fact, that we must now take into our calculations.

7. The unions that have hived off from the Labour Party have done so towards political disengagement (FBU) or towards only episodic (and sometimes regressive: No2EU) political ventures (RMT).

8. The ostensibly revolutionary left remains weak, electorally and in every other respect, especially in its politics. The old-Labourite political constituency, though disillusioned with Blair and Brown, has mostly responded passively. Although most of its adherents are scattered outside the Labour Party, its known leaders and relatively concentrated bodies of people are inside.

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

10. Within the general category of "bourgeois workers' party", the Labour Party has moved drastically towards the bourgeois pole. It remains in general terms a bourgeois workers' party.

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

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

a) Gordon Brown will be discredited, and to some degree the whole neo-Thatcherite course of most "New Labour" economic policy will be discredited.

b) The Labour Party will probably elect a new leadership which will seek to put a fresh face on it.

c) The new leadership will want to rebuild some active membership to enable it to operate as an opposition party.

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

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

f) The union leaders, who have been openly very critical of Blair-Brown policies for several years (though, in a period of relative prosperity, preferring to haggle with the Government rather than do anything vigorous about those criticisms) are likely to be drawn in to that process of recriminations and of seeking renewal.

13. All those factors point to the possibility of some

revival of the affiliated-unions/Labour complex as an active force in working-class political life. Unfolding events make it seem a serious probability. In any case, we cannot, on the facts, deny that it is a serious possibility that we must reckon with.

14. There is a strong history of apparently long-dead or near-dead "bourgeois workers' parties" reviving under a variety of new pressures. Such formations cannot be politically bypassed just by the growth of political disengagement and disillusion. The durability of working-class based parties - Social Democracies and even Communist Parties - long after they should be dead and buried because of their deeds, is a gigantic fact of 20th century history (and in terms of its consequences, a very tragic one).

15. The forms of a revival are impossible to predict. It may be limited and unspectacular, as for example the Labour Party revival in 1970-4 was, and yet important enough to require some reorientation from us.

16. The practical conclusions for us now are:

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

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

What the dispute is not about:

1. AWL attempting to do entry work in the existing or soon-likely Labour Party. Nobody proposes that or thinks it makes sense. The most that is on the agenda in this field is sending a scout here and there into the Labour Party.

2. AWL committing to the view that the Labour Party will certainly revive after the coming general election. Nobody says that - only that a revival is possible, or probable, and that that has to be important in our calculations now.

3. AWL committing to the view that if the Labour Party does revive, it will return to its old pre-Blair-Brown-coup self; or that getting a "new old Labour Party" could be an adequate goal for Marxists.

4. AWL committing to the view that there will be an "explosion" in the Labour Party after the coming general election. SM's article in Solidarity 3/151 talked of "seriously increased prospects for an explosion within the New Labour structures". It meant a row, a blow-up, in the union/ Labour Party relationship. Let us hope that the revival is explosive. But we do not know. We cannot know. And nothing essential in the debate now rests on the idea that a revival is bound to be "explosive".

5. AWL not standing or supporting suitable anti-Labour socialist candidates in the general election, including our own candidate, Jill Mountford in Camberwell and Peckham.

6. AWL abandoning its public presence and organisational independence. Nobody proposes anything like that. In some circumstances Marxists might tone down or abandon their public face as a revolutionary organisation; but only in conditions where they have to do that in order to intervene effectively in a big left wing in the Labour Party like the Bennite movement of the early 1980s.

7. AWL renouncing standing or supporting anti-Labour socialist candidates after the general election. If, some way down the road, we find ourselves a small force in a greatly revived Labour left, there may be practical considerations against standing or supporting candidates. That is unknown territory now. There is nothing new in these considerations. Even when denouncing the Socialist Party (then called Militant) for standing in the Walton by-election in 1991, we felt obliged to say that in principle we did not rule out candidates against Labour. We will judge as things develop.

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

9. AWL dropping its call for a Workers' Representation Movement based on Trades Councils and similar broad representative local working-class organisations.

10. AWL dropping its propaganda for a workers' government - a government that will be for the working class what the Tories and New Labour have been for the bosses.

11. AWL denying, discounting, or forgetting the structural changes in the Labour Party since 1997. Those have cemented over or blocked the democratic channels which previously existed in the party and which in the past (1974-9, for example) allowed the Labour Party to pit itself against the Labour government.

12. AWL denying, discounting, or forgetting the widespread disillusionment and disgust with New Labour in the working class.

13. AWL painting up the New Labour of today by "reading back" from the possibility of a revival of the Labour Party as a real party in 2010 and after. Nobody is doing that or proposing to do that.

14. AWL saying "soft" things about the Labour Party leaders. We never did that, even when we were centrally involved in organising the Labour left!

What the dispute is about:

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

- * The slump

- * Real policy differentiation between Labour and Tories

for the first time in 15 years or more

- * Looming general election defeat for the Labour Party

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

- * The likelihood of a Labour Party with a new leadership and a new face allying with the unions against "Tory cuts".

2. Recognising that the union-Labour link has survived the 12 years of neo-Thatcherite New Labour government. It has been seriously modified in its operation, but the unions remain linked to Labour, and only two relatively small unions have split away.

3. Recognising that the conditions of stark conflict between New Labour and the unions that led to the expulsion of the RMT from the Labour Party and the disaffiliation of the FBU, and which might over time, had they continued, led to other disaffiliations, are over for now.

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

5. Recognising that it is a better development, by far, for our long-term concerns and "projects", for the main unions, faced with a Tory government and with the task of drawing a balance-sheet on the New Labour government, to respond politically within a collective framework - the Labour Party structure, preferably opened up further by union discontent and pressure - than would be a development in which the unions fragment, peeling off from the Labour Party one by one.

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

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

8. Refusing to attribute political virtue to trade union bureaucrats such as Bob Crow of the RMT just because they are "disaffiliated". Refusal to fantasise that a political "pole" constructed around such trade union bureaucrats can do the political job which can be done only by AWL. Even at the best, a "pole" consisting of the RMT leadership and some of the extant left groups cannot be the decisive prize for us. It would at best recreate a fragment of the old pre-Blair Labour Party and the old Stalinist Communist Party (from before its break-up in 1988-91).

10. Refusing to substitute a fantasy "project" of a "pole" of the disaffiliated unions, defined only or mainly by disaffiliation (that is, propaganda for such a "pole": for us it could not now be anything more than that) for focus on building the real "pole" of adequate political

opposition to the New Labour Party and the trade union leaders - that is, on AWL, and a rank and file trade-union movement in all the unions, not only those disaffiliated from the Labour Party.

3. Why argue now for a union fight in the Labour structures?

Over the last dozen years AWL has argued for activists to fight in the unions for those unions to raise the banner of revolt against New Labour, rally those who could be rallied to recreate the old, relatively open, Labour structures that Blair and Brown cemented over - and hive off the New Labour element.

In fact over those dozen years things have moved on a more or less straight track towards ever-greater sealing-off of the New Labour machine from the unions and from any species of working-class activism.

Now, new factors indicate a serious possibility that in the next few years things may move in a different direction.

The Labour Party has become an organisation in which the openings for combatting the New Labour government are very much closed off short of a concerted revolt by the leaders of the big unions.

With Labour in opposition - joint opposition with the unions - to fierce Tory cuts, however, the choices will be posed differently.

To workers disgusted with New Labour's record, Labour will nevertheless appear as the big union-linked opposition to the Tories.

An influx of activists motivated by fighting the Tories may then stimulate loosening-up of the cemented-over structures, and opening-up of space for recrimination about New Labour's record.

If the historic possibility remains open of rallying forces in the Labour structures, and reclaiming sections of those structures from the New Labour hijackers, then that is by far the better, most economical, quicker way to move mass working-class political development forward, compared to the path of building working-class political representation anew from the scattered bits and pieces which will be left by a piecemeal peeling-off of the unions from Labour.

If such moves by the unions can be made to happen in and through a fightback (in alliance with a new-faced Labour Party) against the Tory government, it will enormously shorten the perspective for the re-emergence of a union-based party fighting, even minimally, for the working class and with it.

Of course it does not therefore follow that this will be the outcome in the next few years! Of course we should beware of wishful thinking.

But in terms of the evolution of present realities, an orientation in that direction is a lot more firmly grounded than the fantasy that the kitsch left and Bob Crow will

form even a roughly adequate "pole" around which working-class politics can be reconstructed in segregation from and in competition with the "big" labour movement.

Therefore, we should for that next period stay with an orientation of pushing for the unions to fight in the Labour structures, rather than rush to declare in advance that defeat is signed and sealed, that all possibilities for a fight are shut off for the assayable future.

To campaign for disaffiliation now would be a complete abandonment of, a complete (and not at all "flexible!") turn away from, any advocacy of the unions "sorting out" Labour. To do that in a developing situation in which a union/Labour revival is, to put it at its weakest, not ruled out, can make no political sense whatsoever.

It is always good in politics not to tie our tactics too closely to our predictions. Predictions cannot but be imperfect, and may - even if they were the best predictions possible at the time they were made - turn out to be seriously wrong.

All the advantages of such "flexibility" here belong to the position which recognises the serious possibility of a Labour revival, as against the "disaffiliation now" dogmatists.

Does refusing to concede defeat in advance as regards the big unions mean shutting off other paths for real progress? No, it does not!

Our position does not rule out AWL election candidates, AWL campaigning for a new Socialist Alliance, or AWL participation in a Socialist Alliance if we can get it set up. In 2001-3 we opposed disaffiliation, and responded to the rise of the new "awkward squad" generation of union leaders by agitation for them to fight in the Labour structures, while also participating in the Socialist Alliance that existed then.

If a sizeable left-of-Labour party should, after all, somehow emerge in the next couple of years, then we would participate, as the British Trotskyists in the mid-1930s worked in the Independent Labour Party while thinking (rightly) that the ILP's split from the Labour Party in 1932 had been wrong.

If pessimism proves well-founded, and there is little or no revival in the labour movement in the next few years, then opposition to disaffiliation will not disable us, any more than it has done in the last 12 years of labour movement retreat.

The disaffiliationist line, by contrast, "locks the tiller", making impossible the essential work of manoeuvring and tacking in relation to developments. It commits us, come what may, to go on steering in a straight line. It rigidly rules out a whole dimension of politics - battle within the Labour structures - and locks us into a single scenario: building up a "pool" of disaffiliated unions and propagandising for them to form a party. If there is even a mild Labour revival, the disaffiliationist line will set us seriously askew.

Disaffiliation

We need to face the fact that disaffiliation by any union in the near future is almost certain to mean a move towards political disengagement or a political policy of "shopping around" for supportive politicians of different parties. It is almost certain to mean that even if the disaffiliation motion is initially, on paper, linked to the desire for a new working-class political party to the left of Labour.

If the serious left in the union cannot push the union leadership into any political fight inside the Labour structures, then disaffiliation cannot miraculously so strengthen that left as to make it able to push the union leadership into the far more demanding tasks of building an even halfway-adequate new party from scratch and stopping the union leaders engaging in diversionary and reactionary political idiocies such as "No2EU".

Tipping the union leadership into disaffiliation by way of a membership or delegate vote which can unite all the elements of political disengagement, frustration, etc. around the negative proposition of disaffiliation, can be read as a shift "to the left" only if one makes a stupid fetish of disaffiliation.

In fact, in 2007, after the SSP split, we advocated (unsuccessfully) that RMT reaffiliate to the Labour Party. That same year, the FBU's left-wing leadership successfully proposed that FBU open a discussion with a view to reaffiliating, though since then the FBU Executive has conceded that for now FBU members are in no mood to do that.

And what about the attack on the union-Labour link that may happen in the coming period if a Tory government outlaws union payments to political parties? We can't judge how likely that is, but it has been discussed and is a possibility. It would have the same meaning as the Osborne Judgement of 1909 (forbidding unions to use their funds for political purposes) which, together with the Taff Vale Judgement of 1901 fuelled the drive to create a union-based Labour Party.

What would advocates of a campaign for union disaffiliation say then? Anyone with our general politics who would say in that eventuality, "Oh, good! We didn't want the link to continue, either!", would be a hopeless political dim-wit.

Or do we campaign for disaffiliation, and then, if the Tories try to legislate to force disaffiliation, switch sides and campaign against disaffiliation?

None of this means that a revival of the affiliated-unions/Labour complex will necessarily take a left-wing character, even by "old Labour" standards of what is left-wing. A big Tory election victory, heavy Tory attacks, and mass unemployment are not necessarily good conditions for mainstream politics shifting to the left, or left-minded people becoming more confident and ambitious.

Even when the mass labour movement is conservative in tone and mood, it is still the only one we have got! And it is the only one the working class - workers faced with fighting the Tories, against whom will stand an

opposition bloc of the main unions and the Labour Party - has. All our hopes of socialism rest on the working class. We have a duty to seek leverage in the existing mass labour movement, as it is, however uncongenial, and to adapt tactically to that concern; a duty both to stand firm on our political principles and to be flexible in our tactics.

A left-wing tone to the revival will of course create better conditions for our task of building AWL and AWL influence. That possibility is likely to depend on rank and file working-class combativity against the Tories.

But union leaders' agitation, even hypocritical agitation, can foster rank-and-file combativity; and that in turn may push the union leaders to more serious moves.

It was internal labour-movement revolt that stopped the Labour government in 1969-70 putting anti-union legislation on the statute books. By contrast, it was working-class activity on the streets and in workplaces that disabled the law which the Tories put on the statute book in September 1971.

The long agitation at trade-union leadership level, first against Labour's proposed laws and then against the Tory law, was an irreplaceable part of the conditions that generated the rank and file revolt and the big strike wave triggered by the jailing of five dockers under the new law for illegal picketing in July 1972. It was then the TUC's decision, under pressure of that strike wave, to call a one-day general strike, that broke the will of the Heath Tory government.

In the event of big working-class battles, all currents of the left (broadly defined) are likely to be augmented; but, starting from where we are now, there is no possibility in the next few years that such an augmentation would simply bypass the Labour Party, or pull the big affiliated unions away from the Labour Party without any prior process of conflict within the Labour structures.

For that to happen, the Labour-union link would have to be shattered, and the Labour Party break up and begin to disappear. That has not happened. In the new situation emerging, it is extremely unlikely that it will happen.

We advocate the perspective of a fight by the unions within the Labour structures, up to a split if necessary. After the general election the Labour leaders will probably first seek to re-knit relations with the unions. A 1931-style rupture of unions and Labour activists from New Labour recedes somewhat into the future in the new situation shaping up.

There is a strong network of personal ties, contacts, and consultations between the unions and the Labour Party. A New Labour hack like Charlie Whelan (an AEEU official from 1981 to 1992, then an aide to Gordon Brown, now back with Unite) is an example of the interchange of personnel here. With Labour in government, these ties have served to make the unions subservient to the government; with Labour in opposition, some of them will, maybe and to some extent, serve an opposite purpose.

The idea that a union remaining affiliated to the Labour Party "traps" it politically is radically false. It is one thread in a skein of attitudes that fetishise either the union-Labour link or its opposite.

Union leaders go for lobbying and haggling with governments, rather than mobilising, because of their politics, not because of Labour affiliation. Never-affiliated unions do that as much as affiliated ones.

Being affiliated does not stop a union fighting the Labour leadership politically; in fact it can make such a fight easier and more effective.

Events point to new possibilities for that fight - not for an immediate showdown, but for the revival of some life and movement - within the next few years.

4. Instead, build an alternative "pole" by way of disaffiliations?

After the defeat at the Bournemouth Labour Party conference of September 2007, which banned political motions to future conferences from unions and local Labour Parties, AWL began to propose a fallback option in addition to our basic line of pushing for the unions to fight within the Labour structures.

We argued that politically dissenting unions (some affiliated, some disaffiliated) should regroup, creating in the political field something like (in the industrial field) the Congress of Industrial Organisations which organised the mass unionisation in the USA in the mid-1930s.

We proposed this at the conferences in 2007 and 2008 of the Labour Representation Committee, to which those dissenting unions are affiliated. We said that the LRC should broaden out into a Workers' Representation Movement linking up with local Trades Councils, etc. which might run local independent working-class candidates.

We did not propose that the politically dissenting unions launch a new party. In general, we do not give a blank cheque to union leaderships which are more militant than the others, but remain politically a long way from adequate working-class politics, to launch a party on our behalf.

Neither the "dissenting" unions (RMT, FBU, CWU, etc.) nor Trades Councils have moved in the direction we advocated, in the recent period of stark conflict between the New Labour government and the unions. The No2EU campaign, and any likely follow-up general election effort around the RMT leadership, do not correspond to what we think the working class needs and what we therefore advocated.

To extrapolate from that "CIO" idea into the idea that our effort should now be to assemble a "pole" - a party or quasi-party - of disaffiliated unions would be politically foolish.

Our original "CIO" idea made a grim fallback-position sense in the conditions of relative boom; Labour

possibly continuing in power to 2014 or beyond; the union leaders playing donkey-to-rider with New Labour; etc.

The "pole" extrapolation means something radically different in the changed conditions now and, foreseeably, for the next few years. It would, under the Tory government that is likely soon, pit us not against a New Labour government and its union-leader backers, but against the mainstream organised labour movement.

It would pit us against the main body of the unions when they are, most likely, the main force of opposition to that Tory government. (It is bound to be timid, inadequate, possibly treacherous opposition - but opposition nonetheless, and the opposition that will be visible and audible to the working class at large and to others seeking a plausible counter to the Tories).

Moreover, advocacy of the "pole" could never, for AWL in its present size and influence in the labour movement, be other than propaganda for it. That line of propaganda, in the new circumstances, would turn us into a project-mongering sect needlessly counterposed to the activity of the broader labour movement.

There is no possibility in the calculable future that electoral efforts, either by the small socialist groups that exist now, or by a couple of unions or a single union (and, at that, one with gammy and even, on the EU, reactionary politics), can burgeon to a scale that can bypass or short-circuit a revival of the affiliated-unions/Labour complex.

It defies logic and historic precedent to hope that a couple of sectional unions, as unions, will initiate a substantial party-type "project", in the next few years.

As Trotsky put it: "Trade unions do not offer, and in line with their task, composition, and manner of recruiting membership, cannot offer a finished revolutionary programme; in consequence, they cannot replace the party".

The main forces outside the Labour Party and to its left are the kitsch-left socialists of whom we are so critical. Long ago a Roman republican gave us this bit of concise wisdom: "Can there be greater foolishness than the respect you pay to people collectively when you despise them individually?"

Even united, "the left" will, politically speaking, remain what it is - unless we transform it.

The idea that this left and such trade-unionists as Bob Crow of the RMT (a CPB sympathiser) will, "united", form a viable, even roughly adequate, left-wing "pole" is a-political delusion, an attempt to escape the limitations imposed on AWL by our size and condition into an imaginary world in which "the left" will magically have been transformed into something which does not exist. To escape in fantasy, and in fantasy only.

Fantasy politics is passive politics - changing things in your head when the "the point, however, is to change them" in reality.

Opposition to questioning disaffiliation comes from a

number of radically different conceptions and approaches.

Some advocate no Labour vote even as a fallback, arguing that the Labour Party can be treated as completely dead. Some differ from the present writers essentially only in saying that a possible Labour revival will be some years in the future rather than sooner. (Though meanwhile we go on advocating new disaffiliations? Yes, that's what they seem to want to say.)

Some disaffiliationists say little about the new "pole", but largely confine themselves to the view that the structural changes in the Labour Party rule out any revival there.

Those who invoke the new "pole" as an immediate project for the sake of which disaffiliation is necessary use various words - "project", "coalition", "formation", "alignment", etc. But, to make any sense at all, what's involved must be a formation which runs candidates in elections; has a political life between elections; and has some internal democracy (local groups, committees, conferences).

In short, a party, though maybe a loose, inchoate one. A large and more or less adequate new workers' party or quasi-party! A tall order? Indeed! And taller still when, for what they say to add up, it must all happen within the next year or so!

Or is it that the "new pole" is not an immediate practical proposition but rather a long-term aim which we propagandise for?

That indicates a perspective that we seek to chip away bit by bit, disaffiliating unions one by one, building up a "pool" of disaffiliated unions. In that "pool", we make propaganda for a long-term perspective of the disaffiliated unions constructing a new party.

It makes the position more, not less, nonsensical.

If a RMT-CWU party had really been immediately possible around the time of the CWU conference, then there could have been a reasonable discussion about whether we should promote or seek to work in it, and how.

To say that there are no such immediate possibilities, but we should write disaffiliation into our programme as the mandatory next stage towards the fairly distant future "pole", is an even purer form of nonsense than the idea that an RMT-centred party is immediately possible and can be "our answer" to the Labour Party.

We should refuse to make a fetish of disaffiliation, to see it as a necessary precondition for working-class political revival. To do that would make us a stupid mirror image of our former comrades who fetishised affiliation, seeing the preservation of the old union-Labour bloc as the precondition for revival of mass working-class politics.

It is impossible to calculate in advance, with certainty, that there will be no fightback by the big unions. And it is wrong in principle for us to give up on it now, and orient to the prospect of further defeats for the labour

movement.

Our approach should be (in Romain Rolland's phrase which Gramsci would quote): "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will".

The equilibrium with the unions have with the New Labour government under conditions of relative prosperity cannot be maintained. For some years past, and now, the union leaders have indulged in the fantasy politics of backing Brown against Blair. An election defeat will give them a jolt of political reality.

If the labour movement does not fight back against the coming Tory cuts, it will not stand still. It will be pushed further back.

The assessment made by some who disagree with the ideas expressed in this article that the Labour Party may well revive in five, six, seven years' time, but absolutely not in the next couple of years, cannot be rooted in any observable trends and factors around us.

It is arbitrary and artificial: an attempt to combine our analysis with a timeframe eclectically chosen to bridge the gap between our analysis and the views of those who say flatly that no Labour revival is possible.

If the bureaucratic cementing-over of Labour structures rigidly rules out all significant Labour revival in the next few years, then what will have changed in five, six, seven years' time?

If the "big" labour movement sits out the fierce Tory cuts submissively, then the obstacles to revival created by labour-movement demoralisation and bureaucratic sealing-up in the Labour Party must surely become worse, not better.

A delay in Labour revival is possible. The New Zealand Labour Party, as we understand it, did not hit bottom and start to revive immediately when it lost office after trashing the NZ welfare state, Thatcher-style, in 1984-90. The revival came from 1993-4, after three years of very right-wing government by the National Party.

But there seem to be special explanations there. There was a large left split from NZ Labour in 1989, forming "New Labour" (so-named!) and then the Alliance. In the early 1990s the Alliance had a bigger membership than the NZ Labour Party. NZ Labour's revival started with another split-off from it (to the right this time), a change in Labour leadership, and the fading of the Alliance.

There is nothing like the NZ Alliance in Britain. If Labour is going to revive any time soon at all, that should become visible within a year or two of the next general election.

5. Does disgust with New Labour rule out revival?

Our procedure is based on the idea that Marxists develop and redevelop their expectations of what will or can happen within the frame of the big shaping objective events. When the economic, social, and

political framework shifts, then we must reassess everything, including, here, the prospects for change in the union-Labour relationship.

We try to map out the economic, social, and political framework of our "prediction". We combine reasonable extrapolation of present trends and postulated changes in them as a result of the big "framing" factors. We know that there are strict limits to our ability to predict, and we make "predictions" with the proper tentativeness. We spell out possible variations, and then adjust empirically to the way things shape up.

It cannot make sense to insist that "subjectively" driven hatred of New Labour is now so strong that it will not change or be affected in any important way by the changes in the "objective" economic, social, and political framework. (Or, rather, not for "several years"). To do that would be to tie ourselves to a rigid prediction based on presumed knowledge of the future psychological reactions of millions of people.

In fact, we can't know the psychology. Arguments about what is likely to happen in the future are anyway notoriously difficult. There is often passionate assertion of hopes, desires, longings, on one side; distastes, hostilities, phobias on the other. To base predictions on presumed knowledge of future psychology is to give great scope to arbitrariness.

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

We say that the big objective framework is changing, and is likely to change further, and therefore... Others, while not denying the big changes, respond, with fierce dogmatism: no, there is no "therefore"! Not any! Not the slightest possibility that the big events will impact on union-Labour relations. None at all (at least for several years...)

The existing trend of union-Labour relations will continue as if nothing has altered. So will the collapse of the Labour Party, even when it is in opposition to a Tory government which is even more right-wing and anti-working-class than the New Labour government was, and is driving through severe cuts.

Of course, in any such situation, the previous trajectory of events looms large, immediately, concretely, like an iceberg raised out of the sea in front of us. The implications of the big changes in the objective framework are as yet only small subterranean shifts, or perhaps as yet only potentialities, and potentialities that may be offset by countervailing tendencies.

But one of two things here. Either the enormous shifts in the "objective" framework have not happened, or are not happening, or are not likely to happen. Or they are happening, or likely to happen - but cannot (at least for several years) have any important political consequences for union-Labour relations.

The first option - the assertion that nothing is changing in the slump - would be absurd, and of course no-one in AWL asserts that. But the second option is scarcely less

absurd. In union-Labour relations, too, things have to change. Change how, how much, and at what tempo, that is harder to say; but they cannot but change.

It is our responsibility to try to understand the direction of the changes and their implications for what we do and try to do.

Predictions should be made tentatively, and with recognition that many things are possible that may wreck any neat picture that can be drawn now.

A stance of "my mind is made up, and I'm not going to change it, slump or no bloody slump" is irresponsible in this debate because it makes rational discussion of a changed situation difficult. It counterposes the overbearing iceberg of present and recent reality to proper consideration of shifts and changes in currents and temperature which have, most likely, started to melt the iceberg is wrong. It cannot but make rational discussion of the changed situation difficult.

(Global warming? It's a myth. I don't believe a word of it! Look at the size of that iceberg; think of all that's gone to make it what it is...)

Until the debate of the last two months, the slump and the likely Labour defeat at the next general election had not been properly factored in to all our calculations. We are still working through those implications for AWL in every aspect of our work. What we have done - somewhat belatedly - is attempt to factor them in to the union-Labour question..

Do we overstate the political difference between Labour and the Tories?

Is it not true that Labour - given the opportunity - would make cuts similar to the Tories? Indeed! But the sort of badinage one might exchange with a Blair-Brownite - Labour would do it too - will not offset the effect on the labour movement of a major Tory cuts offensive.

Those who think it would should read the exchange between Trotsky and C L R James on workers learning from "facts"! - www.workersliberty.org/node/4158.

The anti-working-class record of New Labour is important, and AWL should continue to point it out in our commentaries and agitation. However, in terms of understanding the implications of the new situation, that is about as relevant as the German Stalinists' dismissal of the Trotskyists' call for a united front between all parties based on the working class to fight the rising Nazis with the cry that the Social Democrats were the murderers of Rosa Luxemburg.

Yes, the New Labour government's record cannot but in the short term detract from the credibility of the Labour Party in opposition opposing the "Tory cuts" (that will be the labour movement catch-cry).

But will things not shift with new Labour leaders? With Labour and the unions opposing the Tories? The slump and the "Tory offensive" will be the gigantic facts of the situation after the General Election.

Propaganda about New Labour's record in government will be part of our educational work, of course, but we

cannot stand on the sidelines of any Labour-linked opposition to real Tory government cuts, saying, with resigned defeatism and hopelessness: "Aw, Labour in government would be just as bad. Nothing to choose!"

6. The 2010 General Election and the Lessons of Labour Movement History

Apart from a small few people AWL is agreed that in a general election we will say: "Vote Labour as fallback where there is no acceptable socialist candidate". Why? The Democrats in the USA are the choice of most unions. Despite that, we do not advocate a Democratic vote, and we do advocate a Labour vote.

Why? Because in a limited sense New Labour, even as it is, and not forgetting or discounting any of the shifts of the last 15 years, remains the trade unions' party.

The present situation in the Labour Party - with all the old channels blocked up - is without precedent. None of us should forget that. Yet, changing what needs to be changed, the experience after 1970 sheds valuable light on what we are discussing.

In 1970 the Labour Party was vastly discredited. In the late 1960s there was a mass exodus of active Labour Party members.

In the working-class movement then, Labour was the party that in 1969 had made an attempt (against which there had been big trade-union-organised demonstrations) to legislate to limit trade union rights, not the party that in the 1940s had created the modern welfare state. The Tory governments between 1951 and 1964 had accepted the welfare state, and indeed had augmented it. Their achievements had included a vast programme of council house-building. The 1970-4 Tory government did not cut, or propose to cut, welfare provision as Thatcher later would.

The term "Butskellism" (from Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell and Tory politician R A Butler) had been current since 1954 to sum up Labour-Tory bipartisanship on such issues, and indeed on almost all issues - just as the dominant politics in Britain for 20 years now might be called "Blatcherism".

The old Labour left had largely collapsed - some, like Michael Foot, into supporters or semi-supporters of the Wilson government. An attempt in 1968 by left Labour MPs and trade union leaders to create a rank and file Labour left - the "Socialist Charter" movement - was a miserable failure.

But in 1970 political space opened up between the victorious Tories and the now-in-opposition Labour Party. The Tories had shifted to a small variant of what would later be Thatcher's industrial policy. They aimed to stop government expenditure on shoring up industries in trouble ("lame ducks"). And they picked up on the Labour government's attempt to shackle the unions, and made it law. Direct action defiance would

eventually neuter and defeat the law.

Effortlessly, the Labour Party in opposition, under the unchanged leadership of ex-prime-minister Harold Wilson, moved "left". Ex-minister Tony Benn had never been especially left-wing, even in the loosest sense of the category "left-wing". He had supported the Labour government's attempt to legally shackle the trade unions. Now he, too, moved left - but as a "left face" of the Shadow Front Bench, not as an opponent of it.

The CLPs began to fill up again with members. The Labour Party moved left, limitedly and without convulsions or confrontations. The misdeeds of the 1964-70 government were not forgotten, just set aside as less important than the immediate battle against the Tories.

Many things are different now, notably the structural changes in the Labour Party. To expect exact duplication of any past pattern after the New Labour government is gone would be too mechanical. No less mechanical would be to say that because exact duplication cannot occur with the Labour Party in its present state, therefore nothing at all like what happened after 1970 is conceivable after 2010.

In 1970 there was a tremendous left-wing ferment outside the Labour Party, a range of groups and campaigns which had fought the Labour government, which now offered a more militant opposition to the Tories, and which continued to grow in 1970-4. And yet Labour revived. Nothing like that extra-Labour left exists now.

The short-term possibility of a sizeable anti-New-Labour current in the labour movement going on to organise something politically substantial that is better than New (not to speak of old) Labour is, we think, nil. Such things as the failure of Arthur Scargill's attempt to refurbish an Old Labour party in the form of the Socialist Labour Party weigh on the minds of militants; so will the recent antics of the SWP's "Respect", and the RMT's involvement in the "No2EU" fiasco.

All of these factors cannot but work to make a re-treading of old political ground more rather than less likely - namely, a rallying to union-Labour (or union and Labour-rump) opposition to the post-2010 Tory government.

The experience of 1974-9 also speaks towards that course of events being likely - not certain, but likely.

The Labour Party, which was back in power because trade-union militancy had defeated and derailed the Tory government of 1970-4, had demobilised working-class militancy with the help of the trade union leaders (the leftists Scanlon and Jones in the lead). The left, led by Benn, had dug itself into a political hole by focusing its big efforts on getting Britain out of the EEC (now the European Union).

Instead of collapsing, as in the late 1960s, the rank and file Labour left generated a strong opposition within the Labour Party to the Labour government. (The memory of that was the main reason why the Kinnockite soft-left and the Blair-Brown gang later moved, as soon as they

could, to stifle the Labour Party. The ex-left Labour Party leader Kinnock is reputed to have said: "We'll get our 'betrayals' done before we get into government").

With the Tories back in power, a tremendous ferment broke out in the Labour Party, from 1979 to about 1982, around discussing what had "gone wrong" with the 1974-9 government and efforts to democratise the Labour Party so that the party would control a future Labour government. The slogan "never again!" - never again a Labour government like the Wilson-Callaghan government of 1974-9 - summed up its attitude to Labour's record in government.

It would be foolish to expect now and after the next General Election that any of this will be repeated exactly. It would also be foolish and politically debilitating not to understand that the past points plainly to some sort of Labour revival in opposition and to shifts in union-Labour relations.

Memory

It would be criminally foolish for AWL to act now as if such possibilities are things of the past. We are fond of saying, after Trotsky, that the revolutionary party is the memory of the class. It has to be the true memory of the class.

It has to have the courage to look at uncongenial things which its memory indicates that we should expect to recur. We should begin to distinguish between natural feelings about the Blair-Brown coup and political judgements which tell us that repulsive things like the revival of a refurbished union-Labour party are nonetheless a better option than a bit-by-bit peeling-away of the unions.

To assume there will be no union-Labour revival, we have to assume that there will be no life, no vitality, in the labour movement faced with slump and a Tory government offensive. That is, we have to be entirely defeatist.

We have to assume in advance that the overwhelmingly dominant pattern following a Labour general election defeat will be demoralisation, with existing Labour Party members giving up in despair and allowing their memberships to lapse.

Of course, it is possible that the revival will be so minimal and feeble as to change nothing essential. It is not ruled out that the union leaders will do nothing of consequence to restore anything like the functioning mass trade-union party that Blair and Brown stifled. In that case, remnants of the old Labour Party imprisoned in New Labour will slink their miserable way towards the political grave.

It is not the business of revolutionary socialists to accept in advance that things will be so. Still less is it our business to orient in advance to that (real) possibility of defeat, and to play the wretched role that the SWP played in the 1980s struggles of the labour movement with the premature defeatism enounced in their "downturn" thesis, SWP policy since 1979. Their main activity was to insist that nothing could be done but to build a left-wing "pole". It was that even in the first

half of the year-long miners' strike: Tony Cliff insisted that: "The miners' strike is an extreme example of what we in the Socialist Workers Party have called the 'downturn' in the movement" (SW, 14 April 1984). Yes; and ice is fire, and ultra-left sectarianism is serious working-class politics!

The left-wing "pole" for them meant "build the SWP". Even so, it was, at least, rather more real than the propaganda for others to build the "pole" that comrades talk of!

It would be foolish to lose sight of the difficulties imposed by the structural changes in the Labour Party; but only a little less foolish to lose sight of the fact that all sorts of improvisations are possible.

We cannot fetishise our own previous analyses and thereafter refuse to see that reality may be changing. Otherwise we fall into the posture of a small and silly, dog-worshipping-his-"product", version of political ancestor worship.

We were right to assess the structural changes in the Labour-union link as of very great importance. That assessment does not need to be changed. But the question posed now is whether they absolutely rule out any Labour Party revival in membership and activity until the structural changes are first reversed.

Here a sense of direction, of the flow of things, is central. So is some sense and some knowledge of the real history of the labour movement.

The old Labour-union arrangements are not the only way possible to arrange such things. We should learn from the past but not be slaves to it. If, as the saying goes, he who does not learn from the past is likely to repeat it, it is also true that he who thinks the future will be an exact repetition of the past will be slow in grasping what is new in the present and the near future.

Since 2007 Unite has had a policy of encouraging branches to take up all possible union positions in local Labour Parties. There are reports that GMB and other unions have recently taken up a similar policy. In conditions of big clashes between a new Tory government and the labour movement, it is not at all ruled out that such policies will have effect, and lead to some serious growth in local Labour Parties.

The system Blair and Brown destroyed had itself been the successor to earlier forms of labour movement organisation in which the Trades Councils were far more central than they have been for many decades. Until 1918 there was no individual membership of the Labour Party. Local organisation was through the Trades Councils or through the affiliated socialist societies, most importantly the ILP, which was started seven years before the Labour Party got going in 1900, and 25 years before it had individual members.

In a reply in 2004 to comrades who, essentially, wanted us to have an orientation of waiting indefinitely for the Labour Party to "return to normal", JB and SM wrote that "because on the broad plain of history defeats can be reversed, it does not at all follow that what used to be is restored in both form and content... [It is wrong] to

go from the truth that the working class will again win victories to the implication that the forms of the old Labour Party will thereby certainly be restored — or to imply that if one does not believe they will then one does not believe that the working class, which 'has had hundreds of years experience in reversing defeats', can revive".

They cited the example of "the first great political workers mass movement, Chartism. It fell apart in the years after 1848... For decades after 1848 you will find Marx and, especially, Engels, looking to the Chartists, a movement organised to win working-class electoral-political equality, as the model on which the political workers' movement would revive.

"And? The Tories, under Disraeli (who in the 1840s had been sympathetic to the Chartists and spoken in defence of them in Parliament), carried through the first big instalment of working-class representation, in 1867. The Labour Party was created more than half a century after the collapse of mass Chartism.

"One can see many threads of detailed continuity, as well as the fundamental continuity that both Chartism and the Labour Party were forms of working-class political mobilisation. But the 'reversal' of the defeat of Chartism did not take the form of a restoration of the forms of Chartism, or of the chaotically loose relationships of the various political currents within Chartism.

"One of the layers of the working class that had made Chartism what it was, the handloom weavers, had disappeared completely as a result of technological change by the time the 'reversal' began..."

This argument against people who let themselves believe that the old forms would automatically reappear cuts both ways. There are other possibilities. The labour movement and the working class are very ingenious in elaborating organisational forms, and that means that the loss of the old structures is not necessarily decisive in certain conditions.

No-one says more than that. At this stage it would be wrong to say more than that.

We say no more than: don't be blinded by our previous assessments of the Labour Party in decline into thinking that if the workers and the labour movement fight the attacks they are likely to face, then transforming or adapting old structures, or partial revival of previous forms, or elaborating new ones, is impossible.

The working class has done remarkable things in this field - for example, turning the police-organised "Zubatov" pseudo-unions set up in Russia in 1901-3 into tools that in part the workers, and even the Marxists, could use. More than once the class content of a Stalinist police-state "union" has been changed so that to some extent (limited by bureaucratism, etc.), it becomes something like a real working-class organisation.

The fundamental thing is the great shaping and re-shaping factors - slump, Tory/Labour differentiation and the end of "Blatcherism", Labour pushed into opposition

to Tory cuts together with the unions, etc. They create a situation out of which all sorts of innovations and improvisations may come.

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy".

If anyone wants to quibble that a union-Labour political entity without the "old Labour" forms being fully restored will not be the Labour Party, but something new, then we won't quarrel with them over that. Define it as you like. Unless the mass working-class movement is to accept defeat without a fight in face of the coming Tory cuts, some such union-Labour entity will have to be revived or improvised.

8. Trotsky: "It is impossible to leap over the problem. It must be solved"

Historical references can never settle a question; but we can learn from history, for example from how Trotsky responded in previous circumstances when it was argued that social democratic parties had become so dead that the sheer weight of political disengagement and unresponsive leadership ruled out revival.

The first excerpt is a polemic written in 1922 against French communists who rejected united-front tactics towards the French Socialist Party in the early 1920s. The French Communist Party then had 130,000 members as against only 30,000 for the Socialist Party. (Those are the figures given by Trotsky in his article: other sources give the SP 40-odd thousand. Bear in mind AWL has about 0.1% the membership of the Labour Party even in its present shrivelled state!)

Trotsky's prediction that "passive and partially disillusioned, partially disoriented workers" might flow to the SP at the next turn was confirmed. The CP was down to 50,000 members in 1928, even before Stalinist "Third Period" policies reduced it further; the SP was up to 119,000 by 1929, and was electorally way ahead of the CP.

"The Dissidents [the French Socialist Party] may under certain conditions prove to be a much more important counter-revolutionary factor within the working class than might appear, if one were to judge solely from the weakness of their organization and the insignificant circulation and ideological content of their paper, *Le Populaire*...

The initial flood-tide of vague, uncritical, revolutionary moods has been unavoidably superseded by an ebb. Only the most resolute, audacious and youthful section of the world working class has remained under the banner of Communism.

This does not mean naturally that those broad circles of the proletariat who have been disillusioned in their hopes for immediate revolution, for swift radical transformations, etc., have wholly returned to the old pre-war positions. No, their dissatisfaction is deeper

than ever before, their hatred of the exploiters is fiercer. But at the same time they are politically disoriented, they do not see the paths of struggle, and therefore remain passively expectant - giving rise to the possibility of sharp swings to this or that side, depending on how the situation unfolds.

This big reservoir of the passive and the disoriented can, under a certain combination of circumstances, be widely utilised by the Dissidents against us.

In order to support the Communist Party, faith in the revolutionary cause, will to action and loyalty are needed. In order to support the Dissidents, disorientation and passivity are necessary and sufficient. It is perfectly natural for the revolutionary and dynamic section of the working class to effuse from its ranks a much larger proportion of members for the Communist Party than the passive and disoriented section is able to supply to the party of the Dissidents.

The same thing applies to the press. The elements of indifferentism read little. The insignificant circulation and content of *Le Populaire* mirrors the mood of a certain section of the working class. The fact that complete ascendancy of the professional intellectuals over the workers prevails in the party of the Dissidents runs nowise counter to our diagnosis and prognosis. Because the passive and partially disillusioned, partially disoriented worker-masses are an ideal culture medium, especially in France, for political cliques composed of attorneys and journalists, reformist witch-doctors and parliamentary charlatans.

If we regard the party organisation as an operating army, and the unorganised mass of workers as the reserves, and if we grant that our operating army is three to four times stronger than the active army of Dissidents, then, under a certain combination of circumstances, the reserves may prove to be divided between ourselves and the social-reformists in a proportion much less favourable to us". ("On the United Front", 2 March 1922).

The second excerpt is from 1930:

"The assertion made by the official leadership [of the Communist Party] that the Social Democracy allegedly no longer exists politically in Italy is nothing but a consoling theory of bureaucratic optimists who wish to see ready-made solutions where there are still great tasks ahead. Fascism has not liquidated the Social Democracy but has, on the contrary, preserved it.

In the eyes of the masses, the Social Democrats do not bear the responsibility for the regime, whose victims they are in part. This wins them new sympathy and strengthens the old. And a moment will come when the Social Democracy will coin political currency from the blood of Matteotti [an SP parliamentary deputy murdered by the fascists] just as ancient Rome did from the blood of Christ. It is therefore not excluded that in the initial period of the revolutionary crisis, the leadership may be concentrated chiefly in the hands of the Social Democracy. If large numbers of the masses are immediately drawn into the movement and if the Communist Party conducts a correct policy, it may well

be that in a short period of time the Social Democracy will be reduced to zero. But that would be a task to accomplish, not yet an accomplishment. It is impossible to leap over this problem; it must be solved.

Let me recall at this point that Zinoviev, and later the Manuiskys and Kuusinen [Stalinist officials], announced on two or three occasions that the German Social Democracy also essentially no longer existed. In 1925 the Comintern, in its declaration to the French party written by the light hand of Lozovsky, likewise decreed that the French Socialist Party had definitely left the scene. The Left Opposition always spoke up energetically against this flighty judgement. Only outright fools or traitors would want to instill the idea in the proletarian vanguard of Italy that the Italian Social Democracy can no longer play the role that the German Social Democracy did in the revolution of 1918". ("Problems of the Italian Revolution, 14 May 1930).

Workers' representation after Bournemouth

These are the main sections of the resolution on "Workers' Representation after Bournemouth" passed at the AWL conference in May 2008

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

It will reduce Labour to a US-style political party, with real political input from the organised working class limited to a junior lobbying role for trade union leaders. This crisis of working class representation demands urgent action. Thus we campaign for a recomposition in the socialist and labour movement.

We campaign for the creation by socialists and trade-union organisations of a broad Workers' Representation Committee... It will encourage local affiliates and committees to adopt a flexible approach, utilising whatever means available, to secure working-class political representation. Getting such organisations (Trades Councils, ad hoc committees) to initiate independent working-class candidacies in elections is a central part of the fight for working-class political representation.

2. To make broadcast appeals to the general public to "build a new mass workers' party" is arid, empty, and downgrades the necessary programmatic, educational, and local-sinew-building work necessary for any real workers' party to emerge. We dedicate ourselves to a multi-dimensional, multi-faceted fight to build a broad movement, as organised and cohesive as possible, for independent working-class representation. Work to build such a movement can create the basis for the future regroupments which can actually create a new mass workers' party.

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

- A rearguard fight in the Labour-affiliated unions over the coming months, up to their 2008 conferences, for them to repudiate the Brown plan and table proposals in the Labour Party to restore their political rights;
- A fight to win commitments from different sectors of the left to the cause of unity for working-class representation, and practical steps to piece together unity where possible;
- A fight in the unions affiliated to the Labour Representation Committee to commit them to the cause of unity for working-class representation, and, where possible, to practical initiatives like the proposal widely supported (though eventually, this time, rejected) in the RMT for that union to initiate a broadly-backed independent working-class slate for the May 2008 London mayor/ GLA elections;
- A fight to create the underpinnings of such a movement in each city and district by building the Trades Council and committing it to the politics of independent working-class political representation;
- In all this, a constant battle to promote fully independent working-class politics.

4. The original Labour Representation Committee of 1900, the first form of the Labour Party, had union affiliations totalling only 353,070 members, less than 20% of the total trade union membership at the time of 1,908,000. Only bit by bit did the affiliated membership rise to 1.45 million in 1909. If the socialists, and the more politically-assertive unions, had waited until they had a majority, or near-majority, of the union movement, then the Labour Party would not have been founded at all in 1900.

Likewise today: to wait for all the big unions to move would be to paralyse ourselves. We should fight for the socialists and the more politically-assertive unions to give a lead — and do so fully aware that, with recent industrial defeats, in the calculable future growth for a new working-class political venture is likely to be slower, not faster, than after 1900.

5. Our fight over the next year in the Labour-affiliated unions cannot be limited to a fight to restore the status quo. It should be a fight to restore the full right of the unions (not just the “big four”) to table motions at Labour Party conference, to abolish the Policy Forum, to make the union representatives on the Labour Executive fight for union policy, and to apply maximum union pressure to the New Labour leadership to respect the conference decisions on privatisation, anti-union laws, rail renationalisation, council housing, the health service, and so on, passed under working-class pressure.

6. All the Labour-affiliated unions, even the most leftist, let the Bournemouth rule-change go through without opposition. Energy in fighting for a reversal of that position must be coupled with sober assessment of the realities which it illustrates. We can possibly win a commitment to reversal of the rule change at CWU conference next year. In the biggest unions — Unite, Unison, GMB — the political structures have become so impermeable that overturning the leadership line will be

very difficult. In Unite, indeed, it will require forcing a special conference, since on the current schedule Unite is not due to have a policy conference until after the Bournemouth rule change is “finalised” in autumn 2009.

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

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

9. The mere fact that even if Bournemouth is consolidated, the biggest unions will — in the calculable future, short of a political earthquake — remain attached to it, will not define Labour as a “workers’ party”, even in the “bourgeois workers’ party” sense...

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

Although the outcome will be indicated fairly plainly after the 2008 union conferences, and indeed is well flagged up even now, the next general election will most likely take place before we can say absolutely definitively that Bournemouth is consolidated.

Even if Bournemouth is consolidated, that does not necessarily rule out activity in CLPs here and there (in the same way as in the late 19th century Marxists were active in East End Radical clubs linked to the Liberal Party), though the Bournemouth vote (82% of CLPs voting to ban themselves from putting political motions in future) provides solid confirmation that there is very little life in the great majority of CLPs.

Activity to win working-class socialist candidates through local Labour Parties; “default” votes for Labour where no socialist candidate is standing; and activity here and there in CLPs — all these, then, are not ruled out in the period ahead. But the lack of life in the CLPs indicates that these will be secondary elements in the fight to build a movement for working-class representation.

11. Where a union leadership has made it clear that it is committed to the Bournemouth rule change, and attempts to reverse the policy have failed, then Labour affiliation is as “de-politicising” for the union as any alternative: it means that the union’s political activity is defined by being yoked to the New Labour machine without the union even

seeking to have an open, public political voice in the matter. In that situation, it would be sectarian to oppose disaffiliation motions, and wrong not to initiate them ourselves. We seek to add positive direction to such motions by linking them to our positive proposals — fight for a workers’ representation movement, affiliation to LRC, etc. — but we cannot contend that workers have no right to unyoke their unions from the New

Labour machine unless and until those workers have a clear Marxist perspective.

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

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

Political initiative is likely to come through Trades Councils — relatively close to the rank and file — before it conquers the inertia of the big national trade union bureaucracies.

This idea is not based on illusions about the condition of Trades Councils today. Rather the contrary: it is that we know that the local sinews of cross-union organisation are weak, and that any national move will lack real grip unless it goes together with strengthening of those sinews.

On the same principle, the work of building Trades Councils will be empty if it is confined to adding delegacies and passing paper resolutions. To have real life, a Trades Council must support union organising drives and strikes, and run anti-privatisation, NHS, union-rights, anti-racist etc. campaigns — maybe through sub-committees — with the Trades Council itself as the ongoing core. It will link the fight for working-class representation in the electoral arena with working-class politics in non-electoral campaigns and organisation in the workplaces.

But we also know that the fight to build a new movement for workers' representation may be long and uneven. The Trades Councils are a relatively open, responsive avenue for even patchy and episodic stirrings of working-class political self-assertion. An orientation to rebuilding Trades Councils puts us in the best position to make the most of such stirrings.

13. In all of this, increasing the political profile of the AWL as an open Marxist organisation remains a priority. We are not simply brokers for working-class regroupments; nor are we self-effacing enthusiasts of building Trades Councils without too much worry about the politics.

In all the work outlined in this resolution, we argue for fully independent working-class revolutionary politics — for authentic "Third Camp" Marxism. We do not have some cut-rate programme with which to fob off "the masses" while we reserve our full ideas for a select few. We do not make our Marxist programme an ultimatum. We fight for independent working-class political self-assertion here and now, with the working class and the unions as they really are, and support every positive step in that direction; but at the same time, we constantly fight for that self-assertion to be on the

clearest possible political basis.

When the Labour Party was relatively open and lively, and we had wide scope for using it to promote our politics to a relatively wide working-class audience even at election time, it made tactical sense to let ourselves be bound by Labour Party discipline not to stand against the party.

We no longer have such good grounds to accept the discipline of the Labour Party. Running AWL members as socialist candidates in elections is for us an opportunity for agitation and propaganda; for taking our socialist message out to a much wider working-class audience than normally is possible for us; for training our activists; and for winning new contacts...

Resources make it impracticable for us to run such candidates more than on an occasional "demonstration" basis, but we should let as few elections as possible pass by without at least that "demonstration" that socialist alternatives exist.

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

Why have Marxists ever bothered with the Labour Party?

This discussion article on Marxists and the Labour Party was written by Sean Matgamna in September 1976, at the end of a big political battle in the International-Communist League, forerunner of the AWL, in which attitudes to the Labour Party figured as one of the issues.

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

"H", "E", and "L", in the document, are Dave Hughes, Dave Stocking, and Stuart King, leaders of a group in the I-CL which had, just before the article was written, announced a split from the I-CL to form the Workers' Power group.

1. The British working class and the trade unions Communist revolution demands the prior liberation of the working class from bourgeois ideology. In Britain, where the privileged conditions of the Empire allowed a great degree of freedom of working-class activity to be tolerable to the bourgeoisie, the role of the labour bureaucracy has been crucial.

The education system and the media, of course, reinforce the ties of bourgeois ideology over the working class; most important, however, in a situation where the working class has created an organisationally independent political force and has periodically engaged in major struggles with the bourgeoisie is the role of the trade unions in sustaining the false consciousness created by the basic social relations of bourgeois society and restricting the struggles of the working class from breaking through that consciousness.

The trade unions "socialise" the class to acceptance of bargaining within the system, and therefore taking responsibility for it in time of crises.

The last two and a half years [of Labour government]

have shown that Trotsky was not at all exaggerating when he wrote that: "In England, more than anywhere else, the state rests upon the back of the working class which constitutes the overwhelming majority of the population of the country. The mechanism is such that the bureaucracy is based directly on the workers, and the state indirectly, through the intermediary of the trade union bureaucracy".

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

2. The Labour Party

The trade union bureaucracy created the Labour Party under pressure of blows from the ruling class (Taff Vale, Osborne Judgement), itself responding to intensifying international pressure.

The great revolutionary upsurges of the British working class (early 19th century, Chartism) had already been defeated before they could have had the chance to link themselves with scientific communist theory (Marxism). After the defeat of Chartism and the rise of the Empire, a definite labour aristocracy consolidated itself in the workers' movement in the late 19th century.

The mass party of the British working class therefore was created, not as a party influenced by Marxism (like the French, German, or Italian social democracies), but as a conservative party of social reform. At its founding conference the trade unionists insisted that the Party constitution should not include even the formal statement of a socialist aim. The sectarian attitude of British Marxists to the Labour Party hindered any challenge to that conservatism.

Until 1918 the Party had a relatively loose federal structure. It had no individual membership (except through the affiliated societies: ILP etc.). In many areas the Trades Councils carried out the functions of a Constituency Labour Party.

After the First World War the Party leadership responded to the ferment in the working class through tightening the Party structure (with the individual membership constitution, and the rejection of CP affiliation, finally made definite in 1925 though the CP's principal predecessor, the BSP, had been affiliated). Sectarianism on the part of the newly-formed CP (only after great pressure from the Communist International leadership did it apply for affiliation to the Labour Party, and then not in such terms as to elicit a favourable response from reformist workers) blocked the possible development of revolutionary influence in the Labour Party. Communists, however, retained important influence in many local Labour Parties, and in the course of the 1920s the Communist-led National Left Wing Movement of expelled CLPs involved up to a quarter of all Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs). In the "Third Period" [of ultra-left Stalinist policy, 1928-34], however, the CP liquidated the NLWM. With the depression in the workers' movement after 1926-7, the experience of Labour Governments, and the rapid growth of the integration of trade union bureaucracy and bourgeois state (Mondism, etc.), the Labour Party

became stabilised as a bourgeois political machine. As a result of the criminal Stalinist misleadership of the CP the Labour Party had retained its massive political hegemony over the British working class. Left-wing movements continued inside it. The ILP was a pole of attraction until in the 1930s it broke from the Labour Party - and subsequently, failing to break from centrism, withered away.

The Socialist League, later in the 30s, was probably the most "left" reformist opposition yet in the Labour Party. The Labour League of Youth, founded in 1926, was taken over by the Stalinists but wrecked by them and Transport House [then Labour Party HQ] in 1939.

The Second World War and 1945-51 saw the further consolidation of the Labour Party as a machine for running capitalism and of the integration of the trade unions and the state. The trade union block vote was the reliable bulwark of the right against the constituency left movements round the Bevanites.

But the experience of "In Place of Strife" [the Labour Government's attempt at anti-union laws, in 1969] shows not only that the "political wing" can take on an autonomy, but more importantly that autonomy's limits and constraints, and the elasticity and durability of the trade union/ Labour Party connection.

True, the straight bourgeois party, the Conservatives, was equally unable to control the unions. The crucial difference is that the unions were effectively able to restrain and control the Labour Party from the inside, with the aid of very limited direct action: just as there is active collusion and even promotion of Labour Government policies today by the trade unions.

The basis of Labour reformism throughout the Labour Party's history has not been any direct control by petty-bourgeois elements, but the direct control of the bedrock organisations of the working class, themselves dominated by the bourgeois ideology of working within the system.

Stalin-Bukharin in the mid-1920s attempted to construct a theory of a sharp differentiation between the right-wing politicians of the Labour Party and the trade unions - "the policy of the Anglo-Russian Committee... was based completely on the fiction of (trade union) autonomy: the party of MacDonald and Thomas [Labour leaders] is one thing, taught Stalin but the trade unions of Thomas and Purcell quite another" (Trotsky).

The problem is not that the Labour Party is a two-class party, good proletarians vs. bad petty-bourgeois and Tory agents. The problems is of a reformist mass working-class movement, which remains reformist even during mass direct action upsurges as from '71 to '74. Where, as then, those upsurges do not take on a massive enough scope to go beyond the system to the point of creating dual power or workers' power, the mass militancy naturally ebbs back into the channels and norms of parliamentary reformism. Even if in 1972 we had reached the level of Soviets and dual power, the major force within those Soviets would in political terms have been the Labour Party. Though the Labour Party lacks the organisational monolithism that made German Social Democracy such a powerful force for reaction within the German Soviets in 1918-19, it would have been our major opponent.

Therefore any attempt to counterpose the unions to the Labour Party, as being the fighting organs of the class, is sheer ignorance, not only on the obvious level that it has rarely been the case that the union machines have fought, that there is a bureaucracy, that there has been a decline in trade union branch life probably proportionately more important than the much-discussed decline in the CLPs, but because the union machinery is the solid basis of the Labour Party, a force for the right against both socialist politics and militant direct action throughout almost the entire history of the Labour Party.

It was more than right-wing demagoguery which claimed that the "Bevanite" disputes [between the Labour leadership in 1951-5, and left-wing CLP activists led by Aneurin Bevan] were between the workers' movement "proper" and airy-fairy "dreamers" of disparate backgrounds.

3. The "open valve"

The unions and the Labour Party and Trades Councils etc. form a complex, interacting network. When we talk of an "open valve" between the unions and the Labour Party there is nothing mystical about it.

In all advanced capitalist countries there is a symbiotic interaction between the trade unions and the mass parties based on the working class. The Labour Party is organised on a constituency basis consisting of wards and affiliated trade union branches; the possibility exists of a free flow between the unions and in so far as the Labour Party, and in so far as the existing working-class movement in Britain is politically active, even in a minimally independent sense (i.e. the organisational sense) it is through such channels that the activity takes place.

It is for example possible and desirable for most ICLers who belong to a union to get nominated as delegates to their local Constituency Labour Parties.

Discussion about the quantity of such activity is useful and necessary for rational deployment of our resources. But to deny that it is so, or to ignore the organic link between the Labour Party and the unions, is to make any rational allocation of forces for work in the labour movement in its all-round totality impossible.

4. Are the trade unions the "central fighting organs"?

By focusing on "the unions" as "the fighting organs of the class" we implicitly take on a syndicalist coloration, and indeed it is a right-wing accommodationist "syndicalism" which sees the unions as a homogeneous bloc and ignores both the control of the bureaucracy and the central responsibility which the unions as a whole, and their modus operandi, bargaining within the system, translated into Parliamentary politics, have for much of what we find obnoxious in the Labour Party. Syndicalism usually has left-wing connotations, as in relation to the pre World War 1 revolutionary syndicalism which Trotsky described as "a remarkable rough draft of communism". But there has also been right-wing syndicalism, like for example the Jouhaux group which dominated the French CGT after World War 1.

In so far as the focus on "the unions" is meant as a focus on the centrality of working class direct action, it is a mystified and extremely confused expression of

that focus, and one which stops us from seeing and intervening in the labour movement as a whole, and thus militates against us preparing to do in developing our own organisation to help working-class direct action, above all to help transform it into conscious communist politics.

In so far as the workers in the last decades have "looked to the unions as their fighting organs", it has largely been to shop floor organisation. The authority regained by the unions in the last few years was paralleled by a re-growth (astonishingly rapid given the 1964-70 record) of Labour Party membership after 1970-71.

It is necessary to relate to both, to understand the complex of inter-relationships. We all vastly underestimated the importance of the opposition of first the trade union organisations as a whole against In Place of Strife and then of the unions and the Labour Party as a whole against the Industrial Relations Act [Tory anti-union law, 1971] in evoking the explosive atmosphere that triggered spontaneously when the five dockers were jailed [for picketing, in July 1972]: yet the contrast between the response to the Five and to the Shrewsbury pickets [building-worker pickets arrested in 1973, under different laws] illustrates nothing if not that. The power of the official movement, acting according to the reformist logic of taking responsibility for the system in creating the present working-class acquiescence to wage cuts etc. in face of capitalist crisis is only another illustration of the same phenomenon. The working class has not been beaten except by the combination of the limits of its own reformist outlook, the limits of direct action (1969-74) which is not revolutionary either by the consciousness of its participants or objectively by the massive scope it takes on, and the tremendous power of the apparatus of the labour movement.

For a number of generations the working class has "gone to school with Labourism" (the phrase is Trotsky's, writing almost half a century ago about one then very pessimistic but possible variant of developments the variant that we now have to live with and overcome). That has been possible precisely because of the role of the trade unions in the 1920 and '30s (Bevinism) [after Ernest Bevin, general secretary of the biggest union, TGWU], and in the right-wing domination that was so all-pervasive thereafter until the 1960s - and because of the inadequacy of the revolutionaries.

The developments of the late 1960s and early 1970s were no more than a kink within the pattern. The present relationship of the unions to the Labour Party and of both to the Callaghan government and to the bourgeois state illustrates it graphically. Those who insist on the major focus on "the unions and the industrial milieu", who counterpose "industrial milieu" and "Labour Party milieu" as totally separate, who see the Labour Party as qualitatively different:

a) obscure and mystify our real central focus working, class direct action;

b) by an ignorant syndicalist fetish will unwittingly deprive the organisation of the possibility of relating flexibly to the working-class movement - creating a quasi-syndicalist sect;

a) impose on the organisation a way of looking at the complex reformist labour movement, political and industrial, that is so selective that it phases out of the picture whole areas of the interconnections and criss-cross interactions of the political and industrial segments of one organic movement - precisely those areas where a clear understanding is vital for the organisation.

An equivalent of the one-dimensional picture H/E/L draw would be to take a map of extremely difficult terrain, with inadequate roads, produce a simplified version, mainly of the roads, with much of the essential detail removed, get someone to memorise the simplified version, and then set them to travel over that territory blindfold. Blindfold? Yes, because otherwise your senses would allow you to see when you were in forest territory and likely to crash into a tree, walk into a ravine, or drop over a cliff.

In the labour movement direct sense impressions can allow a certain amount of empirically adequate reaction to seen events. (For example, H and E's limited degree of recognition that the Labour Party may be important "in some areas" before the fusion; or, more strikingly, the attitude of one leading comrade of the Workers' League [1975 splinter led by Jim Higgins from the SWP, then IS] who, in conversation with Reynolds and Smith, said that he agreed with Hindess's analysis of the Labour Party that it had lost all class roots but agreed with the Workers' League working in the Labour Party in certain areas, and was himself seriously thinking of joining his local CLP!)

Often, however, your immediate impressions and experiences will lead you to see the opposite of the actual relationships. The general revolutionary-left reaction to the industrial militancy of 1969-74 is an example; so is the case of the SLL, briefly WF, member, who concluded from 1972's events that a revolutionary party was not necessary since the working class was spontaneously doing a great job. (He was even wrong on the spontaneity, not seeing its connection with the official campaign! Workers' Fight [forerunner of AWL] did not begin to see it until early 1973).

We need full and adequate maps of the terrain and the interconnections, to take account not only of the gut reaction against the Labour Party - which is good for political neophytes, but criminal for supposedly mature revolutionaries - or of the 1969-74 direct action, but also of the whole analysis our movement has made over many decades of the British labour movement as a whole.

5. A mass left current in the Labour Party?

But what does the open valve mean concretely here and now? Evans in particular insistently asks and re-asks the question: is there a mass influx into the Labour Party, do we expect one, etc.

There has, beyond dispute, been a serious re-growth of individual Labour Party membership since 1970, which continues active - and there is considerable ferment, though it is limited and perplexed because it too often, even at its most "left", shares many of the ideas about accepting responsibility etc.

Nevertheless the Tribunites [left Labour MPs of the time] could, if they had the will for its organise a serious

and substantial movement against Government policy, one that could actually lead to growth and draw a serious influx into the Labour Party. An illustration of this is the massive response by factory convenors to Benn's proposals on nationalisation.

The period now resembles the period from about 1947 to the resignation of [Aneurin] Bevan, [John] Freeman, and [Harold] Wilson [from the Labour government, over prescription charges] in 1951 - ferment, disgruntlement, no focus, no leadership - with the additional restraining factor of the fear of the government falling.

Whatever the effect on the morale of the Tribunites of the attitude of the union leaders and of people such as [Michael] Foot, significantly they retain an oppositionist stance. Whatever the future personal fate of Foot or of Benn, it is a gross mistake to write off even this sort of element.

Shortly before he resigned, to re-emerge as the leader of the scattered left-wing forces and to trigger the internal crisis that lasted from 1951 to 1955 and even later, Aneurin Bevan was responsible as a minister for bringing militant London dockers to trial under wartime regulations against strikes. (They were acquitted - the dockers struck under the slogan, "While they are in the dock, we remain out of the docks").

Organised opposition and some influx, though hardly a mass influx, is possible. We do not expect a mass influx. We cannot make any infallible prediction on the likelihood of the Tribunites leading a serious fightback; baldly, we do not think they will. In any case, to clarify the issue, we would be willing to argue with our opponents on the basis of such an assumption. For comrade Evans' insistent question is fundamentally misconceived.

While objective conditions, trends and movements in the class and in the class struggle, etc., are the parameters of our work and our strategy in this case, an orientation to a reformist working class - we categorically reject the view that the tactics of a group the size of the ICL can have any direct automatic or mechanical relationship to such trends.

Because of its size, the ICL has an immense autonomy in tactical manoeuvres to put on muscle, put down roots in the class, relate to layers of militants, etc. It will only do this if it is tactically flexible. Only in the final analysis are its tactical and organisational manoeuvres related to and restricted by the big trends in the class struggle, etc.

One illustration of this is the American Trotskyist breakthrough to leading industrial mass actions, in 1934: the Minneapolis coal yards were by no means the centre of US industry. They were simply where the Trotskyists were able to find an opening.

In the dispute in the ICL now our side is simultaneously arguing for an orientation to the mass trend in the workers' movement - reformism - towards the great epochal task posed to communists in Britain, of overcoming reformism; and for a flexible approach to small-group building, which is our immediate, next-stop, priority. It happens that the two coincide.

However, if we as we are now were faced with an IS-like group of 2000 to 5000 in conditions such as 1968 when about a dozen Workers' Fight [WF] members

entered an IS [as the SWP was called then] of about 1000, then there would be a very strong argument for "fusing" with - entering - that organisation. Some of us might advocate it.

Inside such an organisation we would simultaneously argue for a correct appreciation of the Labour Party and the task of eliminating reformism. For an organisation of a few thousands the appropriate tactic would probably be serious partial fraction work in the Labour Party now. But not self-evidently. IS [as the SWP was called then] is not a proscribed organisation for the Labour Party. Depending on circumstances we might advocate total entry.

6. Tactics and strategy

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

Here E's obsessive questioning about how we see the "trends" etc. in the Labour Party developing is most instructive. For us it is not the determinant given that there is a serious, though limited, ferment in the Labour Party, that it relates to forces now politically active, vast, and with deep roots in the working class, compared to our present size, and that no other comparable and contradictory opportunity for intervention to build the ICL in the labour movement exists.

In the 1930s the Trotskyists talked of entry in a number of different circumstances, usually to do with growth, ferment, crisis (or, as in the USA, freakish re-growth) of centrist or social-democratic forces.

Self-evidently if there is no political life one does not enter. At the same time one would keep in mind that even a shrivelled social-democratic sect can have a political weight and resonance out of all proportion to its size precisely because of reformism of a trade union sort in the working class, and the synchronisation of Social Democratic ideas with both bourgeois indoctrination of the working class on the nature of the state, etc., and a vague, undeveloped socialism or yearning for change. "On the eve of the 1924 legislative elections, the bureau of the ECCI in a special appeal to the French CP pronounced the SP of France 'non-existent'. I protested in vain in a letter to the bureau against this evaluation, explaining that a reformist parliamentary party may retain very wide influence with a weak organisation and even a limited press" (Trotsky, Writings 1930, p.42).

It was only - to my knowledge - after the development of vulgar evolutionism in the post-Trotsky "Fourth International" that the question Evans obsessively poses about evaluations of mass trends in existing parties became central.

Trotsky also analysed mass trends, general tendencies, etc. for example on entry into the French SP (though in relation to Belgium the case for entry rested much more on the general centrality of the Labour Party in the workers' movement and on perceived openings for "the lever of a small group"). However, for Trotsky tactics were a matter of revolutionaries seeking a real, active relationship to the working class where opportunities presented themselves, not of revolutionaries chasing after the waves and currents of History.

Thus even in the French case, where the sharpness of

the immediate social/political crisis made gross trends of much more immediate relevance to revolutionaries, Trotskyists argument did not rest on a view of the SP developments as the centre of politics in France: he recognised the "miserable" social composition of the party and the fact that most advanced militants were outside it.

In postwar Trotskyist entrism, on the contrary, the concept of a necessary objective trend towards a mass left current in the Stalinist or social-democratic party became central, with the would-be revolutionary protagonist being ancillary to that trend.

Masses and mass trends are relative. If there were genuine mass influx into the Labour Party, we could not gear into it directly anyway. We would relate directly to individuals and handfuls of people. In fact the question Evans poses as central to any Labour Party tactic: will there be a mass influx? only became central to

Trotskyists after they ceased to regard entry in a short-term perspective of political self-promotion and growth, and developed the tactic of deep entry; that is, started to see their central role as one of spotting the right evolving trend in which to immerse themselves.

E has picked it up uncritically - it is after all the predominant idea after a quarter of a century of vulgar pseudo-Trotskyism. Without realising it, he has the vulgar-evolutionist "Pabloite" conception. Or a caricature of it: the early 1950s "FI" forces after all worked out their ideas seriously, attempted coherence and rigour. Evans parrots these ideas, not realising that an official group position which he formally accepts on the Fourth International has as its centre a critique of the whole vulgar-evolutionist conception

Politically and psychologically E represents here a passive, academic, consumerist tendency, forever ready to discuss trends, influxes and outflows, etc.

Nowhere is there a driving will to find a road to growth, to the real labour movement, for the ICL. The tendency is not unlike that of the Naville trend in French

Trotskyism which Trotsky criticised bitterly: "But if.. and then.. and if? To foresee everything and provide for everything in advance is impossible. It is necessary to understand the situation clearly, to determine the tasks and to proceed with their fulfilment".

The WF tendency developed from a nucleus of four to a national tendency because it started in 1966 with a limited critique of vulgar evolutionary Trotskyism, and thereafter aggressively pursued, with the writings of Trotsky and Cannon as guide, a policy of organisation-building linked to a focus on the mainstream of the labour movement.

As it happens we think that entry should be the norm in Britain, and superficially that may seem to parallel deep entry. No. It is not with us, as with the Militant [forerunner of Socialist Party and Socialist Appeal today], a matter of riding to "power" with Labour, but that the openness of the existing mass party of the working class in this country is, almost uniquely, such that revolutionaries can exist in it more or less openly, making no concessions except for a few trivial organizational precautions. and because it is the mass party of the working class, that is where revolutionaries ought to be.

Evans and the others operate with a strange romantic view of the past of the Labour Party. They demand of us that we give them some guarantee, or at least commit ourselves to the hope, of a mass upsurge in the Labour Party wards. They seem to believe there was once a thriving Labour Party life bearing some relationship to the nominal individual membership.

As far as we know there has never been that! Probably in the period from 1945 to 1954-5 there was more involvement - certainly there have been some shifts in working class participation levels and so on. But nothing qualitative - unless you want to argue that the upsurge since 1970 is such.

Certainly there is more life in the Labour Party now than since the unilateralist/Clause 4 controversies of 15 years ago, and with younger and fresher forces often involved, more likely to engage in a campaign comparable to the post-1951 Bevanite campaign against the Party leadership than just to fade away as did so many between 1964 and 1970.

It is in the nature of social democratic organisations that their active membership usually is tiny as a ratio of their support. It is not in relation to the vastly inflated nominal membership of the Labour Party, individual or affiliated, that we should judge the present Labour Party and Young Socialists, but in relation to the ICL, its size, its tasks, and the opportunities in the social-democratic arena for us.

7. An illustration: and some objections

As illustration of why, we will take Tower Hamlets CLP (probably a bit better than the average Labour Party).

About 70 delegates attend the monthly General Committee meetings, more than half trade-union delegates, not ward activists.

Where is there a more typical minimally politically active body of workers for us to reach, moreover workers "representing" organisations numbering tens of thousands? Trades Councils? Sometimes. We should be there too. It is much more accessible to most of our members to be in wards and CLPs.

Aren't they backward and reformist? Sometimes. Some are militants, reformist militants.

Aren't we lending credibility? We have little to give. On the contrary, we gain a hearing, integration, contacts, including industrial contacts.

Isn't it corrupting to encourage working-class militants to become involved in such a milieu, to draw any of the few worker contacts we have into active Labour Party work away from the pure proletarian situation of the factory? If such a person is close politically, it can (a) be a training in how to fight reformism in the factory and (b) be a drawing of her/him into active collaboration with us in a way that is meaningful in combating the general reformism s/he will meet - and finally, into the ICL.

If the person in question is not politically active at all, or is not politically active outside trade union activity, but is a reformist in electoral terms, in outlook etc., then drawing her/him into active struggle on specific issues can be the beginning of politically transforming her/him. Reformism demands passivity. Sincere reformist workers drawn into activity in the reformist mass party, in association with revolutionaries, can be transformed into revolutionaries.

Our approach - building our organisation on the basis of our politics, actively seeking to find a route to transmit those politics - allows that flexibility. The petty bourgeois workerist tendency, lacking a rounded view of the whole labour movement, and having a superstitious fear of the Labourite face of reformism (though not of the trade-unionist face of the same reformism), are helpless in dealing with such problems.

They confuse technique - factory bulletins, paper sales and geography - the shop floor, more usually standing at the factory gate - with politics. No: they substitute technique for politics. Or again, No. They substitute a fantasy about a magic technique (and a few magic slogans) for either a real technique or real politics. But don't we lose credibility, prestige, face, by the limited camouflage we adopt in doing this entry? Have we much to lose?

A group our size will recruit on propaganda for its full programme. It will engage in actions, attempting to use transitional slogans in struggle, and as part of that struggle to draw some people further along the line of linked demands, beyond the immediately relevant slogan or slogans to our full politics. Very occasionally - usually not under circumstances it can control or plan for (cf. the Minneapolis example again) - it will engage in an exemplary action that will focus a lot of attention on the grouping responsible (suitable self-identification, publicity, etc. is obviously not something we forswear). In so far as one can make sense of their conception, and especially the way they counterpose their fantasy plans for exemplary industrial work as a means of gaining credibility for the ICL, H/E/L operate with a mental image of a valiant ICL doing "propaganda by the deed", as opposed to our more traditional conception of propaganda by explanation.

Even apart from the fact that a propaganda group gets its ideas across through all-round explanation, and that in the very most favourable circumstances only a limited amount can be got through to people by exemplary action, this is self-evident nonsense. By definition we are weak in ability to perform because... barring freak situations we are weak.

The propaganda of the deed approach counterposed to a more rational conception is another fantasy - the 7-stone weakling from the body-building advertisements kicks sand in the face of the giant 17-stone bully to "prove" he is stronger and tougher. Since things in reality are not quite like that, immediately subsequent events are very likely to provide an "example" of the opposite...

S. Entry work and the united front - and workerism
We lose almost nothing - we can gain enormously.

Entrism is a variant of the United Front; the tactic developed by the Communist International after 1921 to win over the social democratic workers, who were a big minority or a majority in most European countries. Essentially it meant communist organisational and ideological independence, coupled with unity in action with reformist workers, dictated by real class interest; the reformist workers would learn in action. For Britain the Communist International advocated affiliation of the CP to the Labour Party.

Lenin outlined the reasons for this approach in Britain:

the CP could, apparently, make open propaganda, calling the Labour Party leaders traitors, without automatic expulsion - "the British Communists must demand and get complete freedom to expose the Hendersons and the Snowdons". So can we today, without the formal affiliation.

The Trotskyists of the 1930s, having decided the Communist International was dead for the revolution, sought for ways of building their own organisation. Entryism was frequently used. It is the united-front tactic adapted to conditions of terrible weakness of the revolutionaries.

ICL cannot with much success approach even IS for unity in action. We can just about make such proposals to the IMG. IS, IMG, ICL together could not realistically propose united-front unity in action to the Labour Party. Entry means by-passing the formalities.

Most of the objections to taking opportunities such as participating in meetings of 70-odd delegates (like Tower Hamlets CLP monthly meetings) in conditions of very great political freedom of propaganda, are strangely coupled with a quite peculiar idealisation of workers in the factory place.

The factory is the heroic battle front, especially to the petty bourgeois who have never been in one, or never for more than a few months. The General Committee, or ward, is the grubby place where the political consciousness that is the dominant one among our class - including in the factories - is starkly revealed. From this flows the psychological need to deny the organic link between the two, to blinker oneself to the fact that even in the heroic phase of a strike action the basic political concepts and framework of ideas usually remains that so starkly and uglily bared at the General Committee or ward.

Idealisation and romanticisation of "the worker" in the factory on the one hand and, to speak frankly, something akin to snobbishness in relation to the real political consciousness of the real workers on the other - that is the mark of petty bourgeois workerism. It is a killer disease for an organisation like the ICL, because those 70 Tower Hamlets GC members just happen to represent the only working class we have in the area apart from the few Communist Party sectarian Stalinoid social-democrats and the "revolutionaries".

They are not meaningfully separable from workers in factories (!), and they are often more accessible to us - though certainly when they move into strike action may well be a time when they and other workers presently more backward are most accessible to our ideas, and show the "true essence" of the proletariat bestirring itself in a way that bears some relation to its historic role as we conceive of it.

The "revolutionaries" who indulge in a combination of "workerist" romanticism, usually from a distance, or peering in fascination at the mysterious world beyond the factory gate where one is trying to sell papers, and squeamish or snobbish reluctance to probe into the realities of the reformist consciousness that dominates our class, are sick. They also belong to a distinct class category - petty bourgeois workerism.

9. Labour Party work versus industrial work

But, all that apart, it is agreed that working class direct

action is central and that it takes place mainly in the factories. In terms of scarce resources. Isn't there a conflict between Labour Party and industrial work? What is industrial work? (a) Work within a factory; (b) from the outside, around it; (c) trade union work.

At the Trades Council level the line is already scarcely worth drawing, in contradistinction from the General Committee level. Labour Party work is attendance at meetings, doing a tiny amount of work for the Party. As the ICL, in both trade union and Labour Party work, our primary business is fighting the battle of ideas, building a revolutionary nucleus.

Pushing forward this or that partial struggle, building this or that rank and file grouping, left caucus, or Young Socialists branch, is important, and has weight in making our basic tasks easier or more difficult - but for Leninists what is central is the task of revolutionary propaganda and building a revolutionary organisation. We do not counterpose that task, as the Healyites do, to the building of partial movements and struggles - but still less do we dissolve it into or subordinate it to that building. Such a subordination is implied by H/E/L's prioritisation of a search for "where the sanctions and forces can be mobilised" over a search for openings for ICL propaganda and active intervention.

A clash of resources at a given time and place is possible - yes. A serious ICL member or branch - first and foremost ICL, and not Labour Partyist or trade unionist - will intelligently choose.

There is no general clash, either logically or empirically. Logically, there would only be a clash if all members had enough serious industrial-militant contacts to talk to, help, "service", etc. so that no time was left for anything else.

That is not the case, and scarcely ever likely to be the case. If it were however, the case, then what would we say to those militants? We would try to educate them to ICL politics and recruit them - yes. What line would we propose they take with the reformist mass of workers, on a routine day to day basis? "The ICL is the only answer"?

How would they relate to the fact that compared to the Labour Party (or CP or IS) the credibility of the ICL wouldn't be very great even if we were much much bigger? They would have to relate to the Labour Party and passive Labour Party supporters by making demands on the Labour Party. Even if they lived in the situation most ideally corresponding to the thinking of H/E/L our comrades would have to relate to the Labour Party.

But why only from outside? Again, logically, only if there was an ever-expanding circle of "pure" industrial militants to occupy them fully. Here, even logically, the theory becomes absurd. It is not logical or conceivable, given the reality of the labour movement, that this expanding circle would not overlap with elements of the Labour Party, militants already within it.

Even IS wound up hauling in workers some of whom remained members of the Labour Party and all of whom had to vote Labour. (Oliver describes how in Coventry IS, around election time, the worker members would disappear... off canvassing for the Labour Party!) IS also had to relate to Labourite workers. And the cry

"build IS" has not noticeably answered the problem. The ICL is anyway committed to the use of transitional demands, and does not see itself growing into a mass party in a molecular growth - or wouldn't H/E/L agree? Do they have a new analysis of IS to offer us? Do they want to abandon what they used to call "transitional politics" and, following the encouraging examples of the WRP and IS, adopt the cure-all slogan for us of "build the ICL"?

Looked at logically and followed through to its conclusions, the idea of a basic or serious conflict between Labour Party and industrial work (work in the economic and political reformist working-class organisations) leads us straight to IS sectarian politics. Actually it only leads us back to them.

For H/E/L operate with a mishmash political consciousness still bristling with IS prejudices, of which their fear of the Labour Party is one, and their failure to go beyond beginning to understand the method of transitional demands is another.

Both theoretically and empirically the counterposition, "Labour Party work versus industrial work", the cornerstone of the H/E/L argument is untenable.

10. SWP (IS) and the Labour Party

It is a fact that it is impossible to understand IS's evolution without understanding its relationship to the Labour Party.

The Cliff tendency was part of the syndicalist and sectarian majority of the (maximum 500 strong) RCP in the '40s [Revolutionary Communist Party, the united Trotskyist group of the time], which fought against an active tactic of the Labour Party entry.

It collapsed together with the survivors of that majority into the Labour Party in 1950 (together with the current Militant [the forerunner, then deeply immersed in a Labour Party "perspective", of the Socialist Party and Socialist Appeal today].

By 1960 Cliff is writing in Edition One of his booklet on Luxemburg, justifying Luxemburg remaining in the German Social Democracy and the post-1916 Independent Social Democracy. until 1919, in terms of rationale and self justification for a completely passive Labour Party existence.

(Cliff on Luxemburg, like Cliff on Lenin, tells us more about Cliff than anyone else - or at least about Cliff's position at the point of his writing, or revising: see the shameless unacknowledged changes, on crucial points changes of 180 degrees, in the 1966 edition of the Luxemburg pamphlet). John Palmer reportedly put it most sharply if crudely. "Only when the revolutionary workers are in the streets fighting will it be appropriate to leave the Labour Party".

Then came the 1964 Labour Government and the growth of opposition to it, with IS to the beginnings of the wave of industrial militancy, adapting gropingly and empirically. By 1967 Cliff is ready to publish two articles in Socialist Worker (then Labour Worker) showing what had been available in excellent book form from Ralph Miliband since 1961, that Keir Hardie had never been a "good socialist" etc. They drifted out of the Labour Party, like they had drifted in.

By early 1969 Jim Higgins could write that the evolution of the Labour Party was irrelevant to IS, as if reformism

was being evaporated by the heat of industrial militancy Workers' Fight had in 1966 published the first Trotskyist analysis we know of since the 1930s establishing the elementary fact, anathema then to the other groupings, that the Labour Party was a capitalist party, though one based on the working class. In early 1969 WF replied to Higgins by saying that, on the contrary, the Labour Party was central to the whole future of IS.

The same people were a few months later to begin to fight (we now think mistakenly, though we do not repudiate the critical approach that led us to those conclusions) against a blanket endorsement by IS of all Labour Party candidates and argue instead for attempting to throw IS's weight into widening the split between the trade unions and loyal trade union and pro-trade-union MPs, and the Wilsonites, over In Place of Strife, voting for the former and not the latter. It was in our estimation of the weight IS could dispose of and of the dynamic of Labour Party/union relations that we were wrong, not the general approach.

The same individuals (Landis, Price, Cleary) now advocate a serious involvement in the Labour Party, without any withdrawal from meaningful industrial work. Wild zig-zagging? Only apparently. The central appreciation of the centrality of reformism has remained constant, so has the crucial question for communists of having a clear scientific view of the Labour Party and flexible and adaptable tactics. On that we have a constant record for 10 years.

The Labour Party is a bourgeois party

(1966 Criticism of Militant/Socialist Party's then position.)

Sean Matgamna

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

The authors were all then members of the RSL, the group later to become known as the Militant and today continued by the Socialist Party and Socialist Appeal. They wrote the document as a critique of the RSL's politics, which were then centred around a "perspective" for the evolution of the Labour Party into (eventually) a mass socialist movement led by "the Marxists". Not only the RSL, but also all the would-be Trotskyists in the 1950s and '60s, had come to talk of the Labour Party as "the workers' party" and to use such slogans as "Labour to power with socialist policies". Though the authors agreed with the RSL that Marxists should be working in the Labour Party, they were also the first people for many years in British Trotskyist discussion to unearth and uphold Lenin's definition of the Labour Party as a bourgeois party, a bourgeois workers' party. Of course, nothing can be copied straight over from 43 years ago to today. We are including this text to give readers background on the basic approach with which the AWL tendency approaches the Labour Party question.

"The fact that bourgeois labour parties have already been formed in all the advanced capitalist countries and that unless a determined and relentless struggle is waged all along the line against these parties, or groups, trends etc. it is all the same. There can be no question of a struggle against imperialism or of Marxism, or of a socialist labour movement... (wherever Marxism is popular amongst the workers, this political trend, 'this bourgeois labour party' will invoke and swear by" Marxism) Vladimir Lenin: Imperialism)

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

"... Indeed the concepts 'political organisation of the trade union Movement' or 'political expression of this movement' are wrong ones. Of course the bulk of the members of the Labour Party are workers; however whether a party is really a political party of the workers or not, depends not only on whether it consists of workers, but also upon who leads it, upon the content of its activities, and of its political tactics. Only the latter determines whether we have before us really a political party of the proletariat

"From this point of view, the only correct one, the Labour Party is a thoroughly bourgeois party, because although it consists of workers it is led by reactionaries, and the worst spirit reactionaries at that, who act fully in the spirit of the bourgeoisie. It is an organisation of the bourgeoisie which exists, in order with the help of the British Noskes and Scheidemanns to systematically deceive the workers."

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

Nevertheless, of course, Lenin advised approaches for affiliation by the Communist Party (largely on the ground that certain features of the Labour Party were unique at that time - and which are very largely non-existent now).

Lenin, in his advocacy of entry, specifically mentioned the fact that the extreme left party, which contributed the main forces to the new Communist Party, the British Socialist Party, had the right to exist with its own programme, organise in favour of that programme, and to explain openly that the Hendersons etc. were bourgeois agents. There have been very many changes since then...

He insisted that this should be without illusion. All this is well known, as is Trotsky's advice in the 1930s.

The point we want to make is that all the RSL approaches on entryism stress the alleged fact that the Labour Party is the Workers' Party, and more seriously, completely fail to point out the alien bourgeois nature of the Labour Party. (Here again the leading comrades think they are dealing with a bunch of Third Period ultra-lefts, and not members of the Labour Party, who will have the shallow picture of the Labour Party as the

"workers' party", constantly bombarded with this view which the bourgeoisie find so useful, by the bourgeois press).

Not only that, but they publicly (and privately) endorse the "socialist" camouflage of Wilson and Brown. The starting-point for the entryism imposed upon us by circumstances must be a sharp Leninist analysis. This must be the beginning of the education of such forces as we win - particularly those won in the Labour Party. But in practice it is ignored when it is not denied. We are not proposing abandonment of entry - only that it should be seen as a tactic, applied flexibly, an excursion into alien territory - a tactic rather than a way of life. Also reality must be stated clearly; we should sow no illusions in the Labour Party.

On the characterisation of the Labour Party and Lenin's approach quoted above, the RSL's leading comrades content themselves with pointing out that Lenin later "contradicted" this, i.e. their method is one of formal textual comparison which allows them to take their pick of what best fits their own mood of the moment. This, of course is their approach on a whole lot of issues ("Lenin later contradicted What Is To Be Done, etc...."), but it is not the Marxist approach.

We must see the various positions taken up by Lenin dialectically as they fit together and form a comprehensive (moving) picture. The Labour Party is an organisation of the bourgeoisie - but it is only useful to them because of its connections with the working class. To use the description of it - "the party of the British workers" etc. - as a means of avoiding a sharp Marxist class analysis of its role, its actual position in the relationship of forces, is not serious.

Neither is it serious to say "well - it is - and then again it isn't." In its function, whatever the contradictions, it is a bourgeois party. It is true that if we ignore the contradictions we will not be able to gauge future developments - but this approach of the leadership will prevent us preparing to make the best of the future developments in the Labour Party.

The comrades' approach is that Labour Party is the workers' party and essentially the machine is an imposition. It only requires a bit more exertion, pressure, activity on the workers' part for the machine to move, to respond to and reflect their desires, at least to a limited extent. This is both stated and implied: it is our practical approach... Our immediate expectation is for a reflection of the ranks' first pressures on the machine. Because of our whole position we can't avoid presenting these possible reflections as "good" - whereas our task must be concern for the general class significance of these things, for the fact that movement "under pressure" by the machine can lead to the defeat of the class. Failure to recognise these people's "progressive" moves as mousetraps is to make a headlong dive for the cheese! Unless we prepare a force capable of independent activity there isn't much else we can do anyway, except go almost passively, even into the slaughterhouse.

The Leninist position is that the Labour Party, judged in its role and function, and despite its origins and special connection with the trade unions, is a capitalist, a bourgeois workers' party. Judged politically it is not a

workers' party with deformations, inadequacies (its "inadequacies" amount to a qualitative difference), but a bourgeois party with the special function of containing the workers - actually it is a special section of the bourgeois state political organisation.

The Labour Party is the main instrument of capitalist control of the workers; the organisation formed out of an upsurge of the workers, but an upsurge in which the workers were defeated ideologically and thus in every other field, is now the means of integrating the drives and aspirations of the workers with the capitalist state machine. It is not a passive reflection but an active canaliser of the class - against itself, against the proletariat's own interest. It is against this background that Clause Four [the "socialist" clause in the Labour Party's constitution then] must be seen.

The approach and viewpoint is important here, and what we see will be seriously affected by how we begin. The initial statement "a workers' party" or "a bourgeois workers' party" will affect everything else. For example the bureaucracy is seen either as a crust formation, with certain deficiencies in relation to the needs of the class, but basically part of the class, which will respond (genuinely as opposed to treacherously) to pressures - or as a much more serious opponent, a part of the political machine of the main enemy class (irrespective of how it originates); and therefore our expectations from it will be quite different. We will not be quite so "comfortable" in the Labour Party.

The most obvious thing is that we will see their shifts to the left as also a danger and not as a triumph for the pressure of the class, as something which increased our responsibilities, as a party, rather than absolves us of them, lessening our role... The unqualified definition of the Labour Party as a workers' party is a snare. Lenin (1920) anticipated a Labour government as a kind of Kerensky-type regime of crisis, and the situation and class forces then justified that. Now, however, a Labour government slots into a more or less stable state machine and immediately works for the capitalists, bringing to the bourgeoisie as its special gift a dowry of the aspirations and illusions of the working class. Its function at the moment is to alleviate capitalist development problems - rationalisation. In its "nationalisation" enterprises in general the Labour Party seems to have adopted a special role in relation to the structure of the British economy. This is ever more concentrated, centralised, in need of modernisation. The "reforming" Labour Party harnesses the workers electorally as a driving-force to overcome the resistance of the average Tory supporter who sees private property as a sacred, immutable principle. The beneficiaries - the big bourgeoisie, the dominant capitalist groups - are of course a bit more flexible in their thinking and aware of their situation, their own needs.

What this means is that we must be as free in our propaganda and activities as possible - we must get out of the habit of wishful thinking. "Nationalisation" must be judged and presented from a class point of view. There must be no exaggeration of the ferment under the Labour Party, its vote, or the electoral swing by way of justifying our own "tactic". We must justify ourselves by our activity - not by distorting reality.

The first thing, as Trotsky said many times, is not to be afraid of stating what is. In 1966 the Labour Party did not appeal to the electorate as a socialist party - if anything the very opposite. Ignoring things like that, as the comrades do in gauging the petty bourgeois swing to Labour, can help only the bureaucracy. Quietism and tailism are bad enough anyway - on the basis of the self-delusion they become poisonous.

The lesson is that we must stress the necessity for a role for our own movement; the vital need is for self-confidence. How can we build an organisation when in practice we deny our politics an immediate serious vital role?

How economic crises shape politics

Leon Trotsky

The reciprocal relation between boom and crisis in economy and the development of revolution is of great interest to us not only from the point of theory but above all practically

Many of you will recall that Marx and Engels wrote in 1851 - when the boom was at its peak - that it was necessary at that time to recognize that the Revolution of 1848 had terminated, or, at any rate, had been interrupted until the next crisis.

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

It would, however, be very one-sided and utterly false to interpret these judgments in the sense that a crisis invariably engenders revolutionary action while a boom, on the contrary, pacifies the working class.

The Revolution of 1848 was not born out of the crisis. The latter merely provided the last impetus. Essentially the revolution grew out of the contradictions between the needs of capitalist development and the fetters of the semi-feudal social and state system. The irresolute and half-way Revolution of 1848 did, however, sweep away the remnants of the regime of guilds and serfdom and thereby extended the framework of capitalist development. Under these conditions and these conditions alone, the boom of 1851 marked the beginning of an entire epoch of capitalist prosperity which lasted till 1873.

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

This storm-and-stress era, during which prosperity and the favorable conjuncture were very strong, while the crisis was merely superficial and short-lived - it was precisely this period that ended with revolution. At issue here is not whether an improvement in the conjuncture is possible, but whether the fluctuations of the

conjuncture are proceeding along an ascending or descending curve. This is the most important aspect of the whole question.

Can we expect the same effects to follow the economic upswing of 1919-20? Under no circumstances. The extension of the framework of capitalist development was not even involved here. Does this mean that a new commercial-industrial upswing is excluded in the future, and even in the more or less near future? Not at all!

I have already said that so long as capitalism remains alive it continues to inhale and exhale. But in the epoch which we have entered – the epoch of retribution for the drain and destruction of wartime, the epoch of leveling out in reverse – upswings can be only of a superficial and primarily speculative character, while the crises become more and more prolonged and deeper-going.

Historical development has not led to the victorious proletarian dictatorship in Central and Western Europe. But it is the most brazen and at the same time the most stupid lie to attempt to conclude from this, as do the reformists, that the economic equilibrium of the capitalist world has been surreptitiously restored...

On the basis of this economic depression the bourgeoisie will be compelled to exert stronger and stronger pressure upon the working class. This is already to be seen in the cutting of wages which has started in the full-blooded capitalist countries: in America and in England, and then throughout all of Europe. This leads to great struggles over wages. Our task is to extend these struggles, by basing ourselves on a clear understanding of the economic situation. This is quite obvious.

It might be asked whether the great struggles over wages, a classic example of which is the miners' strike in England, will lead automatically to the world revolution, to the final civil war and the struggle for the conquest of political power. However, it is not Marxist to pose the question in such a way. We have no automatic guarantees of development.

But when the crisis is replaced by a transitory favorable conjuncture, what will this signify for our development? Many comrades say that if an improvement takes place in this epoch it would be fatal for our revolution. No, under no circumstances. In general, there is no automatic dependence of the proletarian revolutionary movement upon a crisis. There is only a dialectical interaction. It is essential to understand this.

Let us look at the relations in Russia. The 1905 revolution was defeated. The workers bore great sacrifices. In 1906 and 1907 the last revolutionary flare-ups occurred and by the autumn of 1907 a great world crisis broke out. The signal for it was given by Wall Street's Black Friday. Throughout 1907 and 1908 and 1909 the most terrible crisis reigned in Russia too. It killed the movement completely, because the workers had suffered so greatly during the struggle that this depression could act only to dishearten them. There were many disputes among us over what would lead to the revolution: a crisis or a favorable conjuncture?

At that time many of us defended the viewpoint that the Russian revolutionary movement could be regenerated only by a favorable economic conjuncture. And that is what took place.

In 1910, 1911 and 1912, there was an improvement in our economic situation and a favorable conjuncture which acted to reassemble the demoralized and devitalized workers who had lost their courage. They realized again how important they were in production; and they passed over to an offensive, first in the economic field and later in the political field as well. On the eve of the war the working class had become so consolidated, thanks to this period of prosperity, that it was able to pass to a direct assault.

And should we today, in the period of the greatest exhaustion of the working class resulting from the crisis and the continual struggle, fail to gain victory, which is possible, then a change in the conjuncture and a rise in living standards would not have a harmful effect upon the revolution, but would be on the contrary highly propitious.

Such a change could prove harmful only in the event that the favorable conjuncture marked the beginning of a long epoch of prosperity. But a long period of prosperity would signify that an expansion of the market had been attained, which is absolutely excluded. For after all, capitalist economy already embraces the terrestrial globe. Europe's impoverishment and America's sumptuous renaissance on the huge war market corroborate the conclusion that this prosperity cannot be restored through the capitalist development of China, Siberia, South America and other countries, where American capitalism is of course seeking and creating outlet markets but on a scale in no way commensurate to Europe. It follows that we are on the eve of a period of depression; and this is incontestable.

With such a perspective, a mitigation of the crisis would not signify a mortal blow to the revolution but would only enable the working class to gain a breathing spell during which it could undertake to reorganize its ranks in order subsequently to pass over to attack on a firmer basis. This is one of the possibilities.

The content of the other possibility is this: that the crisis may turn from acute into chronic, become intensified and endure for many years. All this is not excluded. The possibility remains open in such a situation that the working class would gather its last forces and, having learned from experience, conquer state power in the most important capitalist countries. The only thing excluded is the automatic restoration of capitalist equilibrium on a new foundation and a capitalist upswing in the next few years. This is absolutely impossible under the conditions of modern economic stagnation.

Here we approach the question of social equilibrium. After all, it is frequently said... that capitalism is being automatically restored on a new foundation. Faith in automatic evolution is the most important and the most characteristic trait of opportunism.

If we grant – and let us grant it for the moment – that

the working class fails to rise in revolutionary struggle, but allows the bourgeoisie the opportunity to rule the world's destiny for a long number of years, say; two or three decades, then assuredly some sort of new equilibrium will be established. Europe will be thrown violently into reverse gear. Millions of European workers will die from unemployment and malnutrition. The United States will be compelled to reorient itself on the world market, reconvert its industry, and suffer curtailment for a considerable period.

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

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

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

Afterword 2025

Martin Thomas

The Labour Party and the background to the 2003-10 debate

In early 1976 Labour's left MPs voted for the Wilson Labour government's social cuts, under pressure of Wilson declaring he would consider this a vote of confidence.

The Parliamentary Labour left then collapsed. Some of those who later became the prominent leaders of the 1979-and-after Labour left - Tony Benn, Michael Foot - remained loyal members of the Wilson Cabinet which had issued the ultimatum to backbenchers.

There was no organised "CLP left", other than the small Campaign for Labour Party Democracy.

That was the background to the 1976 text in this collection, which is at least as instructive for us as the 2003-4 document.

The Labour leadership ran roughshod over the 1978 TUC and Labour Party rejections of its enforced wage curbs.

After the 1979 general election defeat, and as Thatcher's Tories started on their agenda, the most left-wing Labour council in the country, Ted Knight's Lambeth, responded by decreeing mid-year social cuts. But Knight had misjudged. Local Labour Party revolt forced him to back down. Revolt became widespread in the PLP and the CLPs.

The union leaders, who were sore about 1978-9 and

also felt themselves strong (union density was at its all-time peak), went along partially with the CLP revolt. Big rule changes were pushed through.

The Labour Party became much more open and lively than ever before, and also more left-wing (though it was a warped leftism, with for example withdrawal from the EU as one of its main mottos). A Parliamentary Labour left was revived, with the Campaign Group of MPs founded in 1982.

By 1982, however, the trade union leaders had decided it was time to call a halt. From then, for the next 12 years, the left (and pseudo-left) policies were wound back bit by bit, and the regime was tightened bit by bit.

In 1994 Tony Blair won Labour leader after the sudden death of John Smith. He decided the bit-by-bit attrition could now be replaced by a sudden coup.

His "Third Way" would:

- scrap the old Clause Four (Gaitskell had wanted to do that in 1959, but retreated)
- accept the Thatcher curbs on the unions and strikes; continue the Thatcher drive for privatisation and contracting-out (towards the end of the Blair-Brown regime, they proposed to get the bulk of council housing transferred to housing associations, and rents in the residue raised to private-rent levels; they were unable to push that through)
- break the link with the unions, or at least, by largely shutting down Labour democracy, neutralise them, so as to avoid risk of future troubles like post-1979.

His models were:

- the Hawke-Keating Australian Labor governments of 1983-96, which transformed the Australian economy on neoliberal marketist lines. It sapped union strength by running down the "award" system and switching to "enterprise bargaining agreements". Hawke was leader of the Australian Council of Trade Unions 1969-80 and was able to do his work with union acquiescence.
- the Bill Clinton "New Democrats", who had the US presidency from 1993. They radically curbed the US unions' traditional clout within Democrat structures, turning instead more to (relatively) liberal millionaires, who had of course already long been a big power in the Democrats' leading circles. They proclaimed "the end of welfare" and a shift to mass incarceration (Crime Bill, 1994).

The two leading advocates of a clean break with the unions, Stephen Byers and Peter Mandelson, fell victim to scandals in the early years of the Blair regime, and the project of a clean break with the unions faded. But in 1997 Blair had pushed through a radical restructure.

Labour Party conference debates were scaled down to a few, on union proposals. The CLPs had no access. A National Policy Forum was set up with the power to formulate policy and push its whole package through conference on a single take-it-or-leave-it vote.

The unions had shifted right in the last years of Tory rule, to a line of "new realism" and "social partnership".

Thinking that right-wing politics were necessary to defeat the Tories electorally, and even a Blair government which they could hope to nudge on piecemeal issues was better than Tory rule, they backed Blair.

Labour Party membership had risen 1994-7, but collapsed very fast after 1997, and CLP life even more so.

Labour conferences became so meek that Blair could positively welcome the chance of a conference vote against his policies so that he could proudly boast on TV that he would pay no attention, in order to assert his authority.

However, in those years one union after another elected new left (not very left, but left) leaders, the so-called "awkward squad". In 2003 the unions voted through restoration of the right of CLPs to take motions to Labour conference. The CLPs were so beaten down that the majority of them voted to continue denying themselves the right to motions, and they made little use of that right in the next few years, but the right was regained.

In 2002-3, also, many Labour MPs rebelled against Blair over the Iraq war. After then backbench revolts became chronic. The unions were more passive. All the union reps on the Labour NEC, including the RMT's, went along with Blair throughout. The RMT eventually attempted to make good by making a show of an emergency motion to Labour conference which they knew in advance would not be accepted as an emergency by the Conference Arrangements Committee, which then as now remained union-dominated.

But, bit by bit, the tight "Blairite" structures were working loose. In mid-2004 the unions used the National Policy Forum to impose a few (modest) demands on Blair.

I was in Australia at the time, and remember writing to the comrades in the office telling them that they were overestimating the shift. The demands were indeed modest. But it was a shift.

Then in 2007 we seemed to be wrenched back to full neutralise-the-party mode. Blair passed the leadership to Brown. Brown made a show of getting nominations for leader by 88.2% of Labour MPs, and also (unnecessarily) by the big majority of unions and CLPs. The union leaders, and the CLPs too, saw Brown as somehow more labour-movement-based, less Clintonite, than Blair. Brown took advantage of that to get all the unions (and the big majority of CLPs) to agree to scrapping motions to Labour conference altogether, replacing them with desultory debates on a few chosen "issues".

We thought (I thought) at the time that this meant a decisive new step in the Labour leaders extinguishing political life within the labour movement. Only a few in AWL dissented, notably Stephen Wood and Chris Marks. They were right, though, and I was wrong. Most of us were wrong.

We worked out a policy based on that wrong

assessment, which is included in this collection ("After Bournemouth"). The policy was wrong in another way, too. It advocated working to revive Trades Councils and make them local political Workers' Representation Committees. Although Trades Councils were much livelier and broadly-representative than they are now, there was not a single Trades Council strong enough for the policy to gain grip. We should have been able to see that at the time.

Why Trades Councils? Because by then we could see that "form a left electoral party" alternatives to Labour were dying or becoming what we had called in 1998 "toy-town" exercises. (We did at the time investigate the Greens too, and took it no further only because we found little life there). I'll cover that below.

Meanwhile the great 2008-9 economic crash unfolded. Brown insisted for many months he would make no social cuts to narrow the vast gap which automatically followed between increased benefits spending and decreased tax revenues. When he made cuts they were far too modest for the Tories, who proclaimed the "austerity" plan they would push through relentlessly from 2010 to 2019.

The union leaders evidently decided they had been foolish to confine themselves to hopes of results from words in Brown's ear or at the National Policy Forum. Unison (of all people) took the initiative to get motions restored by a vote at the 2009 conference.

Labour lost the 2010 general election, of course, but in the local elections that year Labour made gains, starting to reverse a huge decline in that area which had been continuous since 1997.

After the 2010 election:

- there was an influx into CLPs, modest (tens of thousands, not hundreds of thousands) but real
- Ed Miliband was elected leader as the "candidate of the unions", against his brother who was the preferred candidate of the PLP.
- Labour conferences became very much more lively (though still heavily manipulated, as they had always been except perhaps in the early 1980s). For example, in 2012 we were able to get a pretty good resolution on the NHS through compositing and win it on the floor of conference. The leadership took no notice, of course, but the conference delegates did.

Ed Miliband told conference, to loud applause, "I'm not Tony Blair". There were promises of renewing Labour democracy. They came to almost nothing, though a useful and under-used victory was gained on allowing clause-by-clause "references-back" by Conference of National Policy Reform reports.

The Collins Review of 2014 promised to cut unions' weight in Labour considerably. We campaigned against, indeed, led the campaign against it. It was passed with the consent of the unions after a backroom deal told them they would largely keep their institutional weight in Labour, as they have done.

There was considerable anti-cuts activism for a period

in 2010-1 (and student activism, against a fees increase and the abolition of EMA). Miliband-Labour surely did not lead that revolt, but it did figure (as Labour had done in 1992-7, for example) as the alternative government likely to make smaller cuts and to be more responsive to union pressure.

In 2012, as anti-cuts revolt faded, Miliband made a turn to saying that most of the Tory cuts would have to be accepted. Labour's opinion-poll lead over the Tories, sizeable at that point, started declining, and Miliband paved the way for Labour to lose the 2015 election.

In the leadership election then, Yvette Cooper and Andy Burnham decided to "tack right", presenting themselves in the most right-wing light possible to woo the votes of a Labour membership they judged to be regretting even Ed Miliband's mild 2010-2 essays in soft-leftism. They misjudged. Jeremy Corbyn won with the support of the unions, and won another leadership election (in 2016) with their support after a PLP vote of no confidence in him.

After Corbyn's excellent result in the 2017 general election, his team won hegemony in the Labour Party, with the right-wingers mostly deciding to sit out until Corbyn crashed and they could reassert themselves. Many chances to democratise the Party structure were missed (it's a long story), but changes were made.

If you were at, say, the 2003 or 2007 conferences, as I was, you could see that the conferences between 2015 and 2019 were a different political world.

Many elements remained from the New Labour era, but the unions (mainly Unite, but also the unions generally) had more sway over Labour parliamentary policies than they had ever had before except perhaps in the early 1980s. CLPs motions got lively debates.

The renewed life in the Labour Party was not as strong as in the early 1980s, and not the same as it was in the 1960s even, but it was life, much more than anything in the New Labour era.

Indeed, the major lids on democracy were (and are) not so much formal changes left over from 1997, as:

- the centralised membership system (introduced in the 1980s or 90s sometime, I don't know when). Before that, expelling members required getting their CLPs to exclude them, and threatening CLPs or CLP officers with disciplinary measures if they didn't. Now HQ can exclude people with a few emails. (Under Starmer, there is more of an appeals process than under Corbyn, but many excluded members fail to use it, thus making exclusions easier)

- an innovation of the Corbynite general secretary (2018-20) Jennie Formby: suspensions for an indefinite period, with no clear charges, and with a warning that any agitation about the suspension is an expellable offence. There is less of that now than there was under Formby, but still some

- the rules which allow the (still union-dominated) Conference Arrangements Committee to rule CLP motions out of order on vague and slippery grounds.

Those were used hugely in the Miliband years, and again in 2025.

- the "sociological" change which has created a virtual party-within-a-party in Labour of MPs' aides, union political functionaries, think-tankers, and NGO people.

Although we should have no romantic illusions about the dim CLPs of the later 1950s and the 1960s (the huge Labour membership figures of those years were mostly people signed up for cheap beer in Labour Clubs), it is also undeniable that there has been a cumulative process since the 1970s of "shaking loose" the connections between the Labour structures and both the unions and the wider working class.

But to say there is nothing "significantly different" from 1998, or "there is no more life than under high Blairism", is not true.

After the (modest) post-2010-election influx into Labour, it seemed to me, at least, that our 2009 arguments against unions disaffiliating, and for renewed attention to Labour, had been shown to be true. In fact we had understated the case rather than overstated it.

Rightly, I think, we did not spend energy on trying to get the "alternative pole" or "unions should disaffiliate" advocates of 2009 to concede they had been wrong. We focused on practical reorientation, and were cautious and measured in doing so, as readers can see from the 2010 conference text reproduced in "The Trade Union Movement..." At least one National Committee member insisted he was "still a disaffiliationist" (and repeated that message fifteen years later at our 2025 conference), but we shrugged and moved on.

Left candidates against Labour

In May 1945, Labour was still in its wartime coalition with the Tories, which involved Labour backing Tory incumbents, and Tories backing Labour incumbents, in all by-elections. The CLPs had even less life than in high Blairism.

The Orthodox Trotskyist Revolutionary Communist Party, then some hundreds strong and highly active, stood in a by-election in Neath, against a Tory-backed Labour candidate. The RCP slogans were "Break the coalition, Labour to power". (The RCP secretary and Neath candidate, Jock Haston, apparently was on friendly terms throughout with the Labour candidate, and later sought his help to secure a trade-union tutoring job).

The RCP effort got a respectable vote, 4.6%, and built an RCP branch in the area (including, at least briefly, the famous philosopher Rush Rees, Ludwig Wittgenstein's most eminent disciple).

Within weeks Labour did break the coalition and come to office.

There were still "left" candidates against Labour, in the sense of candidates of the Communist Party, who had two MPs until 1950 and a fair number of councillors for

a long time after. Although until Labour re-licensed a national Labour youth movement in 1959-60 life in the Labour Party remained pretty poor, with the partial exception of the "Bevanite" stirring in the early 1950s, no Trotskyist argued for supporting those CP candidates.

The next Trotskyist candidate was in the Swindon by-election of October 1969, under the Wilson Labour government which was then very unpopular with left-minded people. Hundreds of thousands of left-minded Labour members had dropped out or become inactive since 1966, when the slogan of the Liberals had been "which twin [i.e. Labour or Tory] is the Tory?" The Healyites (SLL) were then on a "we're about to form the new mass revolutionary party" binge (with, it should be said, a lot more real base to the nonsense than today's RCP has). They stood and got 1.1%. Although the SLL, naturally, claimed a triumph, we must suppose they didn't even recruit members from the effort, because they then stood no-one in the 1970 general election.

In the slump of Labour life which followed the 1976 cuts vote, the SWP and the IMG (forerunner of ACR, but then an energetic and sizeable group) seized the occasion to run in by-elections. Their results were poor. There was talk for a while of the SWP and IMG allying to run a "socialist unity" slate in the then-coming general election (and talk among us about whether we should try to get in on such a venture). In the end, the SWP did nothing in the 1979 election, and the IMG ran a very unsuccessful "Socialist Unity" effort with Big Flame and a few others.

What is now the Socialist Party had been, under the name Militant, immersed in the Labour Party. From 1991 they decided to quit, and to run candidates (under various labels). They got some good votes - for example, 19.3% for Tommy Sheridan in Glasgow Pollok in the 1992 Westminster election - but their active membership declined drastically before levelling out around, maybe, 2001.

Arthur Scargill launched the Socialist Labour Party in 1996. Quite a lot of the outside-Labour left rallied to it (not us), and it was reasonably active (not just electorally) and lively for a couple of years. It ran 64 candidates in the 1997 general election, some getting reasonable votes.

We chose not to support the SP or SLP candidates in the 1997 general election, although between them they made one of the largest left-of-Labour showings in a general election ever, and some of them got relatively good votes. In a word, these were still "propaganda candidates", and for poor propaganda.

Sean Matgamna wrote an article in 1998 suggesting we should consider seeking united-revolutionary left candidatures. After considerable debate among ourselves, and a lot of complicated to-and-fro among left groups, we did, in the London Socialist Alliance (2000) and the Socialist Alliance (2001 general election).

Both those efforts got an unprecedented cooperation of left groups (SWP, us, SP, etc.) and drew a sizeable

number of young not-yet-affiliated people into their campaigning. The Socialist Alliance had a considerable internal life in which we could make our voice heard, so that its manifesto of 2001, for example, visibly showed our imprint. We lost the vote in the Socialist Alliance over attitudes to joining the euro, but only after debate in which we won the majority of the "unaffiliateds" to our view.

The London Socialist Alliance did relatively well; the Socialist Alliance poorly, except in a few places, notably two constituencies where we had the SA candidate, Islington South and Nottingham East.

Inside the SA we argued, and with some though patchy effect, for running only in safe Labour seats, for an understanding that we were by no means yet at the end of the story with Labour, and against union disaffiliation from Labour.

Meanwhile ex-SP people in Scotland had formed the Scottish Socialist Party, which for a few years was an open, relatively democratic, lively operation, with very promising election scores. It drew in us and many other leftists, way beyond the ex-SP base.

Soon all that began to collapse. The SWP torpedoed the Socialist Alliance in 2003 and turned to Respect, an alliance with George Galloway launched in 2004. We made several attempts or calls to revive the Socialist Alliance over the next few years, but all to no effect.

The SSP split and effectively collapsed in 2006-7. Galloway threw out the SWP in 2007. Although the SP had revived a bit in activity since 2001, its council-election scores declined (it would have no councillors elected in 2010). The SP turned to a No2EU alliance with the RMT leadership, which was then mutated into TUSC.

Faced with this, I proposed (and no-one dissented) that we should resort to running one "model" AWL candidate in the 2010 election, as the least-bad way of "raising the flag". We ran an energetic campaign (in Peckham), but did poorly (75 votes, 0.2%, only about a third of what the crank "Workers' Revolutionary Party" candidate got).

In hindsight, I think the basis for useful anti-Labour left election efforts had collapsed earlier, probably at the point that the SSP collapsed.

Assessing in hindsight, we should also note that we reaped very little in terms of recruits or even longstanding contacts from a very large effort put into the electioneering we did in those years.

I don't know exactly why - the French revolutionary left seems able to recruit usefully out of election campaigns even when they make poor scores, and Socialist Alternative in Australia say that their united-far-left effort Victorian Socialists (originally quite broad, now just a front for S Alt) has been useful in recruiting, mostly from students whom they first meet on campus and then take with them into door-to-door election activities.

But it is a fact. I do not believe that it was a consequence of some easily-fixed error in how we did

our electioneering. A lot of it was done pretty energetically and well, and with good efforts to follow up with door-to-door paper sales and attention to contacts made in the electioneering. None of the other groups involved in the Socialist Alliance recruited much from it, either.

That does not mean that we abjure anti-Labour left candidacies for ever. It does tell us that they're harder to make effective than we thought. It does mean that we should be wary of the idea such candidacies are going to be an easy route to recruits and growth.

Some lessons

- We should certainly not limit ourselves to "Labour-legal" activity, and we don't. We have an open revolutionary paper, we do street activity, etc. But the Labour Party is more resilient than we might think. The "high-Blairite" period, or 1966-70, or a good few other periods, were not the "death" of the Labour Party as they seemed to be, precluding any revival. It is unlikely that the current decline is that death either.
- It is harder than you'd think to make anti-Labour left electioneering really fruitful.

A few points on the 2025 introduction to "The Trade Union Movement..."

There is not space or time for a full critique. But a few points:

- It is not true that Blair dropped his plans to sever the trade union link because he found that that he could "get his way" with the unions without doing that, i.e. the unions proved less stropky than he thought.

The unions did not become more acquiescent in the 2000s after being stropky in 1994-7. The opposite. In 1994-7 the union leaders were mostly demoralised right-wingers willing to give Blair whatever he wanted in return for a promise of a word in his ear occasionally (more than they could get from the Tories). In the 2000s they became stropkier, very inadequately so, but stropkier (the "awkward squad").

The break-the-link failed partly because Blair lost much of the big-bourgeois support and finance he had in 1994-7, and partly because Blair concluded that the unions would now not passively accept it.

It was also, of course, because the Blair government enjoyed favourable world capitalist conditions. It could afford to give union-friendly concessions (minimum wage, tax credits, increased spending even with PFI and such on schools and health), and the unions were passive enough to accept that as the best they could expect.

- The introduction mixes up the Collins Review, done in 2014 as part of a pushback by Ed Miliband against the Unite union's efforts to gain clout within Labour, with the Hain Review commissioned by Miliband in its earlier years.

- We opposed the Collins Review. In fact, we led the campaign against it. It was passed, and it was bad. But the introduction does not mention our biggest argument against it.

That argument was that it threatened drastically to reduce the union vote in the party. It passed after a backroom deal to neutralise that element and keep the union vote essentially the same as it was.

- The introduction eludes the fact that the Corbyn challenge in 2015 was driven by forces within the Labour Party, the forces that were invisible to Cooper and Burnham. Without those forces, Corbyn would not even have agreed to stand, and the unions would not have backed him. Many new people did sign up as "supporters" to vote for Corbyn, but he would have won even without that vote.

- The introduction fails to note an error in our 2015 conference document which it quotes. It seemed in 2015 that much of the influx into the Labour Party was young people. Some of it was, but most of it wasn't. Most of it was "returners", people who had been politically active in the 1980s but dropped away or become active only in unions or single-issue campaigns. Young Labour was weaker at the end of the Corbyn era, under Corbynite leadership, than it had been under soft-left and right-wing leadership before then. Campus Labour clubs revived only minimally, probably less than under Miliband. The national Labour Students organisation remained under right-wing control.

- It is not true that "the Blairite bureaucracy remained its stranglehold on the Party machine" under Corbyn. To its credit, the Corbyn team forced out Iain McNicol, the general secretary, in early 2018, and replaced him by a Corbynite, Jennie Formby.

- It is not even quite true that McNicol was a Blairite as distinct from being a Labour right-winger in general (and a very nasty one). He had been elected in 2011 as the unions' candidate for general secretary, against Chris Lennie, a long-time Blair-apparatchik.

- It is not true that the "wave of expulsions" came "from 2016 onwards". The "wave of expulsions" and exclusion started in 2015, as the old Labour bureaucracy sought to minimise the numbers who might be entitled to vote for Corbyn. Then they tried again, for the 2016 leadership contest. No-one knows how many they excluded, but certainly many thousands.

- The exclusions continued at a lower tempo after 2016, but (from early 2018 at latest) not by "the Blairite bureaucracy". They were then exclusions by the Corbynite bureaucracy, closely linked with the Unite bureaucracy. (In fact, the people currently running YP).

- The writers of the introduction make the occasional gesture to saying that this or that may have changed over 22 years, but only to conclude that any changes are "minor" and so can be ignored. Nothing, they tell us, is "significantly different" from what it was in 1998. The "Blairite coup" is still "firmly in place". Indeed, we are told it remained firmly in place even in the Corbyn

years: "the Blairite bureaucracy retained its stranglehold on the party machine". Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.

To prove this "nothing changed" line, Duncan a couple of years ago told us that "one thousand" people from the Tony Blair Institute had secretly been moved in to run Labour Party HQ. It was completely untrue, as I think Duncan now admits.

- No question that the Starmer government is very bad and right-wing. But - I won't go into it here, and have written about it elsewhere - but it is not even true that it is specifically "Blairite", in the 1994-2003 "Third Way", "copy Clinton" sense, as distinct from more generically Labour right-wing (as in 1967-70, 1976-9, etc.). Moreover: between 1994 and 2008-9 Blair stood in counterposition to Tories who had tacitly admitted that Thatcher had "overdone" it, and really advocated nothing very different from him. The Liberals' old slogan from 1966, "which twin is the Tory", and the old jeers about "Butskellism", rang true. Now even this wretched Labour leadership stands in counterposition to Reform and to a Tory party tacking fast right, both of them advocating huge cuts, mass deportations, etc.

- It is entirely untrue that those of us who oppose the introduction's "it's the 1998 show again" line have moved to "a similar position".

We had in fact investigated Collective (the second of the three attempts since 2020 to form a "Corbynite" regroupment, after Transform but before YP). We investigated Corbyn's operation in Islington North. We investigated the Corbynite "Community Independent" councillors in Islington South (one of them in my own ward: I know him fairly well). We reported a dearth of life. Whatever great virtue those operations had in the introduction-writers' eyes from being anti-Labour electorally, for us that did not wipe away the vice of low political life.

When the SWP made a success of its We Demand Change conference (as it did) and suggested WDC might stand left-unity candidates as part of a range of activity extending beyond elections, we said we should intervene and test the possibilities. We thought (and we were right) that those possibilities were slim, but we said we should investigate. The same holds with Your

Party. We intervene where we can. But what conditions our intervention is the quality of political life in such ventures, not whether or not they have the saving virtue of running in elections or (in the case of YP) having sitting MPs and councillors. Whether those MPs and councillors are a virtue or not depends on their positive politics, and the quality of political life around them, not on the single fact of them being anti-Labour.

Duncan and John have variously argued that we should support a TUSC candidate, that we should support Jamie Driscoll (with the entirely untrue argument that Unite and GMB were backing him), that we should look to running AWL-only candidates again, and generically that we should turn our main gaze to more or less anything leftish (except, unaccountably, the Greens), as long as it has the saving virtue of running in elections against Labour. Oh yes, we should criticise their "dominant politics" and "lack" of "democratic structure", but those were only peccadillos compared to the shining virtue of standing against Labour.

This depended on the claim that the situation now is essentially unchanged from 2003-4, and on a much more "electoralist-at-any-cost", less political, attitude to electioneering than we had even in the years.

Our argument was not that we should not investigate real ventures where they existed, but (a) that the ventures touted lacked substance (b) that the thin "virtue" of standing against Labour is not sufficient to outweigh the vice of lack of political life (c) that sitting at home scanning the internet for speculative hopes of salvation from anti-Labour-left candidates diverts us from doing the limited but real things our friends can still do in Labour Parties (and we can do on the streets, in demonstrations, door-to-door, etc., with AWL stalls and sales).

If we want to throw ourselves into something just because it runs in elections against Labour and is generically left-wing, then better throw ourselves into the Greens. In fact, I'd say we should do some investigating in the Greens. Only, on historical evidence, I'd say we would be foolish to consider that as more than a subsidiary effort.

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