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Introduction to 2025 edition

John Bloxam, Duncan Morrison, Zack Muddle, November 2025

This pamphlet, written by Sean Matgamna and John Bloxam, was originally published in April 2004. It started life in 2003 as an internal document in the Alliance for Workers' Liberty (AWL). Many of the articles and debates had previously been openly published in the pages of *Solidarity*. It mainly dealt with one of the basic issues facing working-class militants, as described in the original 2004 introduction:

"The biggest event in working-class politics for many decades is the Blairite hijacking of the Labour Party, which the unions founded over a hundred year ago, from the treacherous 'bourgeois workers' party' it had been into something qualitatively different.

In the public pronouncements of its leaders, New Labour is an explicitly anti-working-class party. It treats the labour movement and the working class with open contempt and undisguised bourgeois hostility.

If New Labour did and does still belong to the general category in which Lenin placed it, a 'bourgeois workers' party', it has been shifted drastically towards the bourgeois pole of that contradictory combination.

If Marxists in the 1920s could accurately call the Labour Party 'a sort of general federation of the working class' as well as a 'bourgeois workers' party', it has lost that character. The special features which persuaded Lenin to argue in 1920 that British communists should seek to affiliate to the Labour Party — the open, federal structure; the channels which allowed trade-union rank-and-file sentiment to flow into the party relatively easily, at a series of levels — have all been abolished."

We considered it important enough to publish as a pamphlet then, and to republish it 21 years later when out of print, and now faced with another "New Labour" government led by Starmer.

The original context was important, and so also were developments in later years. The Blairite hijacking of the Labour Party in the 1990s; the decision to stand socialist and workers' candidates where practicable outside Labour; the Socialist Alliance from 2001, grouping the majority of the revolutionary left in an electoral project in which the AWL vigorously participated, then collapsed into the ignominy of Galloway's Respect Party by the SWP in 2004. Because they were still able to get their way in New Labour, the Blairites' plan to sever the trade union link with the Labour Party was dropped, with them maintaining instead the formal, public links and cash from the unions but within the new gutted structures.

Minor changes were made, at different times, to the basic picture described; some life continued in the Labour Party, even if in isolated pockets but not sufficient to change the overall picture. "That real Labour Party democracy, limited and inadequate though it was, has gone. The limited concession made by New Labour in 2003, that in future Constituency Labour Parties can put four motions on each conference agenda, does not change that."

One of the pamphlet's basic arguments was summed up:

"But what would the Tories in power do now that Blair isn't

doing? The protracted Tory crisis is rooted in the fact that the Blairites are the best Tories, and are in Government.

We are only left with the fact of continued trade union affiliation to the Labour Party to justify defending union-affiliation! That affiliation is now in practice without any of the characteristics which led us in the past to support and defend it.

The unions' links with New Labour now play an almost entirely negative role, precisely in relation to working-class representation, which New Labour has more or less completely destroyed. We are in a situation of transition and flux.

Certainly we want to use the trade unions' affiliations in order to take the fight into the Labour Party. For that reason we oppose disaffiliation. We want the unions to break with Blair through a positive political mobilisation of their members, flexing their political muscles by trying to use the unions' positions in labour structures for working-class ends. But keeping the affiliations in place is not all-defining;

The unions continue to have links with Labour, and so do working-class voters (though the 2001 General Election showed that those ties have seriously eroded and continue to erode). That is the reason why we still advocate a Labour vote as against Tories and Lib Dems...

We are for a trade-union fight in the Labour Party ... We think AWL members should vote against motions advocating that unions disaffiliate.

The issue is whether such an approach rules out anti-Labour candidates or asking trade unions for money and support for such candidates. Nobody says the unions should give up. We say they should indeed fight in the Labour Party. The difference is that we want to say others things too.

The decisive question is whether it is possible to combine the two things: can we, on one side, advocate that the trade unions and their leaderships should challenge Blairite control of the Labour party for the purpose of restoring working-class representation; and on the other, stand or support labour-representation or socialist candidacies, and urge local and national trade unions to give support, and finance, to such candidacies?

We believe it is possible to combine an active and independent policy in the electoral arena with advocating a fight by the affiliated trade unions, as unions, within the Labour structures..."

Important to note here that the "revolutionaries' minority initiatives and activities", standing or supporting labour-representation or socialist candidacies, was not regarded as some kind of passive trampoline to get around the problem of Blairite domination of the Labour Party structures or the various failings of outside Labour "independent" electoral challenges, but "one important tool for fighting the political fight in the trade unions now — agitation and propaganda to convince workers that trade-unionists should act, even

in a limited, local way, to win back union representation by supporting labour-representation or socialist candidates...". The policy of combining the two approaches was described as walking on two legs, and practicable — "it is possible to combine an active and independent policy in the electoral arena with advocating a fight by the affiliated trade unions, as unions, within the Labour structures." The historical precedent here was "the very important fight which candidacies — especially local government candidacies — played in creating the Labour Party 100 years ago... the old Socialist Societies which founded the Labour Party appealed as socialists for support to trade unionists, but those of them who took the working-class movement seriously motivated the advocacy of a trade union-based Labour Party on the need to secure working-class representation in Parliament... The basic political argument is that revolutionaries' minority initiatives and activities cannot in general be subordinated to the tempo of (or calculations of the direction of) the broad development of the broad movement..."

There is no argument that the analysis, arguments and proposals in the 2004 pamphlet are timeless, or somehow cast in stone. The pamphlet itself commented: "Any reassessment of the case we made 5 years ago could only be grounded on the implications of the election of the new trade union leaders, and the newly rebellious Labour MPs. This, of course, is a very important question. If we don't keep living events under review, and submit our earlier calculation to repeated review in the light of new developments, then we will cease to be a living tendency."

In 2007, Gordon Brown initiated the banning of Constituency Labour Party (CLP) and trade-union motions to Labour Party (LP) conference, then with the support of the trade union leadership (after originally talking about opposition). There was discussion about John McDonnell standing in the Labour leadership election that year. Two years later, and following the 2008 global financial crash, the same trade union leaderships secured a promise to reverse the LP conference resolution ban, and also a review of the whole LP structure. At the same time there was a relatively small but significant increase in LP membership.

In the following three years there was considerable debate in the AWL about the ramifications of these changes, and the previous policy as described in the pamphlet. It was sparked by a 2009 discussion article in *Solidarity* by the pamphlet's main author, Sean Matgamna, arguing that the capitalist crisis, the prospect of Labour soon suffering a huge election defeat in 2010 and being forced into opposition to a fiercely-cutting Tory government, meant that we could not rule out some revival in Labour, and in such a situation to support trade union disaffiliation moves from the Party would be premature.¹ He talked about "seriously increased prospects for an explosion within the New Labour structures" within a relatively short period up to and following a large General Election defeat.

"In the last few years AWL has argued that the longer the ultra-bureaucratic New Labour structures survived unchallenged by the unions, the less likely would be any Labour renewal by way of internal revolt to break those blockages to rank-and-file involvement in the Labour Party on which New Labour rests — its abolition of the democratic channels of the old Labour Party, its dispensing with Annual Conference in all but name, its transforming of the National Executive Committee, its choking-off and isola-

tion of local Labour Parties.

It seems to me that the developments outlined at the beginning of this article demand that we revise our assessment, or at least open our minds to a serious possibility that things may move in a different direction from the more-or-less straight tracks they have followed for 15 years.

With that situation, the prospects for a revival within the Labour Party cannot but be better than they have been for the last 15 years. How much better? With what outcome? I can't judge.

The tragedy of the situation in the last 15 years has been that any political action by the unions has depended on the union leaders. The layer of union leaders before the current one supported the Blair-Brown coup within the Labour Party which created New Labour; without their support the coup could not have happened. Their successors, the current generation of union leaders, have made "oppositional" noises sometimes. But they have done nothing. The "working-class" aspect of the Labour Party has withered almost to nothing.

It is not ruled out that the union leaders will do nothing to restore 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...

We have polemicised ... against those who argued for an indefinite policy of waiting passively for the union leaders to "do something", of opposition to any political initiative by the more dissident unions, on the grounds that eventually, in a year or a decade or two, "something" might turn up, and the unions could then act in lock-step to recreate a real Labour Party. That policy of "waiting" for an indefinite time would have ruled out anything other than a slow "biodegrading" of revolutionary socialists into mere trade-unionists and labour movement routinists.

What is new now is that it is not a matter of indefinite waiting. There is a definable, and short, time with which, as a result of the slump and New Labour's likely crushing defeat, things will move in something like the way we want them to. Or they won't.

One practical conclusion: it makes no sense to continue along the straight lines we have mapped for the last 15 years or so, which would suggest, for example, supporting the (promised) disaffiliation motions at the CWU conference in June ...

We should oppose disaffiliation. To those who support disaffiliation, for reasons with which we have very great sympathy, we should say that now the only sensible policy is wait and see. Not to wait indefinitely; to wait until we see how things shape up with the big unions and the Labour "base" after the general election. If there is then no revolt within the Labour structures, or only a feeble one quickly suppressed, then the question of disaffiliation will be back on the agenda.

Were we wrong in the past? I don't think so; but prospects have, maybe, changed, as a result of the slump, the radical discrediting of New Labour, and the opening up again of a clear political gap between the Tories and Labour. The question is: if they have changed, maybe, are we flexible and "tactical" enough to register that and respond?

¹ "Debate: Labour and the unions. Why we should not back CWU disaffiliation", 14 May 2009, *Solidarity* 151: see bit.ly/debate-1-u

So far, only maybe. But if the possibility exists of reclaiming the Labour structures, or sections of them, from the New Labour hijackers, then that is by far the better, most economical, quicker development, compared to the path of building working-class political representation anew from zero. We should, for now, orient to that “maybe”.

Labour was defeated in 2010, but not the “crushing defeat” that was raised as a possibility — the “not inconceivable ... meltdown” scenario of only 100 seats or so. They were replaced by the Lib Dem-Tory coalition government. Labour lost, but it came second after the Tories and retained 258 seats.

The immediate conclusion to this discussion was contained in the AWL “Perspectives” resolution (passed in October 2010, and reproduced in full with this reprint as a new appendix 8). The following quotes from it are particularly relevant:

“4) The Labour Movement and the Crisis

... Through the 20th century the Labour Party was the party of the labour movement, the bourgeois workers’ party. Since 1994-7 it has had many of its old structures and its modes of relating to the trade unions and the working class destroyed or changed radically in terms of their previous function.

Annual conference as a living congress of the labour movement in politics no longer exists. Most constituency Labour Parties are depleted in membership, political life, and ability to intervene in the national Labour Party.

In the late 1970s the Labour Party counterposed itself to the Wilson-Callaghan government as critic and medium of protest and organised resistance, but the Labour Party in the New Labour epoch was gutted by the New Labour leaders. This was done deliberately with the intention of freeing a future Labour government from the pressure of the labour movement and of the militant Party rank-and-file — to destroy potential agency of working-class resistance to such a government...

As our press has many times pointed out, this disenfranchised the working class to an enormous extent. It greatly devalued the power of the working-class vote to affect affairs of state — even if only as loud criticism and organised opposition to government — and therefore devalued its democratic value. Without its own party, even in the very limited sense in which old Labour was its own party, the working-class vote was nullified... the working class enters the crisis in poor condition. It also, however, enters it without a recent history of crushing defeats: the miners’ defeat of 1985 is old history to anyone under the age of 40.

There are great difficulties in the way of an effective working-class fightback against the coalition government, but not such as to guarantee in advance that there will be no militant resistance.

As revolutionaries, we register the difficulties; we do not deceive ourselves by painting up small fightbacks as much bigger than they really are; we keep in mind that when resistance comes, it may well be in places, at times, and on issues that we did not exactly expect; but we advocate and orient to the best possibilities of resistance. We do not accept defeat in advance. If we did so, we would make ourselves a factor working against effective resistance, not for it.

5) The Election and After

Coming on top of the widespread and deep disillusionment with the Iraq war, and with Prime Minister Brown’s limitations as a Blair-style PR-adept politician, the economic crisis put the lid on the coffin of the New Labour government.

In mid-2009 opinion polls pointed to a crushing general election defeat, perhaps even electoral meltdown, for New Labour, and a big Tory majority in the post-general election parliament.

In fact that did not happen. Labour lost, but the Tories did not win the election. The Labour vote held up better than looked likely...

6) Outside-Labour left electoralism

The other fact established by the general election was the failure of the attempts, since 2000, to use electioneering during the years of New Labour rule to build on working-class resentment at that rule and against New Labour’s suppression of effective working-class political representation and to regroup a substantial body of left and working-class activists.

Maybe things could have been different if the small beginning — very small and shaky though we said it was, at the time — made by the Socialist Alliance in 2001 had been built on positively, rather than trashed by the SP and SWP. In fact anti-Labour left electoral efforts were already in decline by 2004, and passed through periods of farce (Respect, the SSP split, No2EU), before arriving at a desultory and politically very thin effort, mainly by the SP but with token participation by the SWP and a few others, at the 2010 general election.

In principle we are for socialist candidates challenging Labour. We are for continuing the fight for working class political representation in the main ways proposed since 1997 and the Blairite coup in the Labour Party, including anti-Labour electoral challenges. The practicalities depend on the circumstances and the quality of the socialist, or would-be socialist, candidates.

For the next period there is no prospect of an anti-Labour electoral project being an axis around which a big and healthy left-wing force can be regrouped.

However in the course of positively advocating and arguing for “left unity” we could have a good impact on activists around the left and there may be limited opportunities. We do not have the resources to run an electoral effort big enough to make a generalised impact as the AWL alone but that should not rule out singular limited local electoral initiatives under our own banner where this makes sense....

Anti-Labour electoralism cannot be a priority for us in the coming period, but there may be limited opportunities. There may be cases where we will back solidly-based socialist or labour movement candidates, or stand our own candidates, in order to challenge slavishly cutting Labour councillors. The difficulties that would cause for our Labour Party fraction work should not be decisive against such activity we would assess such candidacies on a case by case basis.

7) The Labour Movement in Politics After the Election

a) The central fact that the AWL must register — the AWL, which has become progressively disgusted and alienated at New Labour in government and the leaders' stifling and strangling of the old Labour Party — is that the union link has survived the long period of New Labour government. The political history of the British labour movement, of the interaction of its trade union and political parts, and the interaction of both with the working class, now begins a new chapter.

The undemocratic structures imposed on the Labour Party in 1997 are still there, but to fetishise those structural changes as the sole defining factor would be as wrong as dismissing them as inconsequential.

The New Labour political machine is intact. Its first-sight reality is no longer as the "party of business" ostentatiously marginalising the trade unions, but a Labour Party substantially defined, in popular awareness, by its opposition, in common with the trade unions, to "extreme" Tory cuts. For the next period, the working class, the unions, and the Labour Party are pushed together, and in a situation where there is no other political force even loosely connected to the working class which stands as a credible political alternative to the Tories.

b) One union has disaffiliated from the Labour Party (FBU) and one has been expelled (RMT). These unions are of course very important, and especially important for us as areas of higher-than-average militancy. But, as the election showed, they are a politically marginalised element of the trade union movement, and with not even the most roughly adequate political basis to create a viable alternative to the Labour Party.

To focus our political agitation on the creation of "our own" small militant political labour movement, grouped around the RMT leadership, and defined essentially by the quality of not being affiliated to the Labour Party, would be sectarian project-mongering of the sort which Trotsky defined in the Transitional Programme of 1938 as functioning above all to take pockets of militants out of the broader labour movement.

It would mean the AWL giving up on the prospect of socialists influencing and transforming the bigger unions, that is the main trade unions, the major part of the labour movement.

It would mean the AWL renouncing an across-the-board fight in the labour movement for our class-struggle politics in favour of pleas directed at and conditional on the RMT leadership.

c) Thus, the Labour-union links, though seriously changed, have survived. The history of the interaction begins again and in radically changed conditions to those of the last 20 years.

When the prospects seemed to be of New Labour continuing to rule for a long time in conditions of prosperity and of chronic Tory disarray with the unions continuing for an indefinite period to play dumb horse to the New Labour rider, we floated the overarching conceptualisation of some sort of CIO-like regrouping of the militant unions, Trades Councils and perhaps other elements, as an organising

centre. It was seen an open-ended formula, not exclusively limited to battle within the Labour Party, but it was never presented as "our alternative to the Labour Party", or linked with a call for more militant unions to disaffiliate...

We refused to accept the invitation of some comrades to play the role of trade union sheepdogs for the Blairites by opposing on principle any action that might lead to unions being expelled from the Labour Party. Until our 2008 conference, our own basic line was that affiliated unions should begin a fight to transform the Labour Party, and if that fight led to expulsion, well and good. We advised a fight, not a policy of pick up your marbles and withdraw.

Events have now re-invigorated that policy. With Labour in opposition and opposing the Tory cuts, the political alignment of Labour and the unions is restored. There is no visible or foreseeable trigger that will separate off the affiliated unions from New Labour. If disgruntled militants advocate disaffiliation, our job will be to explain to them that a union willing to fight can achieve much more by agitating within the main bloc of politically-active unions than by hiving off, and we point to the experience of the FBU to confirm that.

d) If the sharp polarisation that existed in the General Election with Labour and the unions aligned against the Tories continues, and it probably will, there are likely to be serious moves in the disaffiliated or expelled unions to re-affiliate to the Labour Party. It is probably too early in the post-election evolution of the Labour Party for us to take the initiative and advocate that, as we did in the RMT in 2007, but we should take no dogmatic positions against it.

Concretely, in current or near-future conditions, RMT or FBU reaffiliation to the Labour Party would add lively pressure there in favour of reconstructing Labour Party democracy, in favour of a firmer stand against cuts, and so on.

It could also make for more fruitful political life in RMT and FBU, promoted by the "feedback" from Labour Party battles into those unions.

We should not trip ourselves up by moving too fast on this. But if serious moves for reaffiliation develop within either union we should not oppose them, even if, for example, they come from people not on our political wavelength such as soft-left Labourites.

In all cases, we assert our own politics and our own views on how affiliation should be used, by amendments, by speeches, or by leaflets and articles.

8) The Limits on Labour Revival

In the last year there have been some moves by the unions to restore Labour Party conference, and since the general election some tens of thousands of people have joined the Labour Party. A further inflow of new life may come if the Labour party, allied to the unions, is the centre of opposition, even if only verbal opposition to the "Tory cuts".

These small stirrings, though small, indicate that we should seriously explore the life of local CLPs and Young Labour groups, and again make a practical reality of our never-formally-abandoned policy of doing limited but organised "fraction work" in the Labour Party and in the Labour-related structures of the affiliated unions.

However, the pressure for a radical restructuring and revival of the Labour Party as a living organisation that a massive defeat might have produced does not now exist.

That Labour in opposition would “oppose Tory cuts” and chime in with the unions was entirely predictable. But the General Election and its outcome will shape events in the labour movement very differently from what might have followed a crushing defeat for New Labour, and a convincing Tory victory.

In such a situation there would be no prospect of an early return of Labour to government in a routine election, not for a long time. Now however we face a situation where Labour can reasonably hope to win the next election.... A corollary of the common front of Labour and the unions against the Tory-Liberal cuts will be to focus trade unions and the Labour Party rank-and-file on winning the return of a Labour government in the next general election, soon. That will create great pressure not to “rock the boat”... Within the Labour Party and in the trade unions, the leading layers of New Labour politicians, especially the younger ones, are not utterly discredited, as they might have been by a crushing Labour defeat and outright Tory victory.

The feebleness of the Labour Party organisation in the country and the lack of other than a token youth movement probably made the difference between Labour defeat and victory in the May 2010 election. Those who run the Labour Party must know it. Both the Milibands look to something like the “Obama model” — an ad-hoc organised network of loose supporters beyond the party — as their guide for restoring the Party’s fortunes. That is not at all necessarily counterposed to restoring or renovating the Party structures, and some of it would certainly feed into the Party structures.

A modest revival of Labour Party life is likely, but it starts from a very low level, and the urgent pressure for shake-up and restoration which crushing defeat would have brought is not there.

There is no mandate for the elaborate and costly evasive action which full-scale AWL reinvolvement in local Labour Parties would require. What is indicated now is serious exploration and a restart of Labour Party fraction work. The exact scale and proportions should be decided and reviewed in line with events and evidence.

9) The workers’ government

The considerations above about the limits of life in the Labour Party structures are important in deciding how much involvement in the Labour Party and its structures the AWL should have now. They cannot decide the general political attitude we should take to the Labour-union bloc... The key conclusion from the experience around the election, what it delineates and tells us about the political state of the labour movement and the working class in politics, and the facts of the new government, is that for now and for the next foreseeable period the Labour-union bloc is still central in working-class politics, and cannot be “by-passed”.

Agitation to “make Labour fight” — including “make Labour councils fight” — has to be a central political theme. It has to be a central theme irrespective of calculations we can make that official Labour’s “fight” against the Tories

will be feeble. It is one of the day-to-day expressions of the general agitation, which we should continue, for a workers’ government....

In the unions (mainly) and through our Labour Party fraction work, we fight for the reconstruction of Labour Party democracy, including the full rights and function of Labour Party conference, and the mandatory reselection of MPs and other representatives. We agitate for the unions to use their positions in the Labour structures to reconstruct Labour Party democracy and to push the policies decided by their members for social provision, for union rights, against cuts, etc.

We defend the unions’ right to participate collectively in politics, and thus fight against any moves by the Lib Dem-Tory government to legislate against collective union funding of political parties.

With all that borne in mind, there is much to be learned from this pamphlet for the current period, and the subsequent comments made after Labour’s defeat in 2010 in the AWL “Perspectives” resolution. We would urge comrades to read the details in both. “Perspectives” was the most comprehensive assessment since 2004 of the developing situation, a decade and a half since the Blairite coup.

After Labour’s defeat, Brown resigned as Party leader and was replaced by the soft-left Ed Miliband, who was elected under the old electoral college scheme, where the different party sectors (Labour MPs and Euro-MPs; individual Party members; affiliated organisations — trade unions and socialist societies) each made up a third of the total vote. Ed Miliband won, defeating his more clearly defined Blairite brother David, and other Blairite candidates as Andy Burnham and Ed Balls. Diane Abbott was eliminated on the first round. Ed Miliband commissioned the reviews into LP structures promised to the trade union leaders in 2009; it appeared as the Collins Review in 2014. This left the structural reforms, introduced in the Blair counter-revolution of 1997, almost completely untouched; got rid of the old electoral college scheme for electing the Party leader and replaced it with the undemocratic OMOV system, and allowed a new group of members (affiliated supporters) to vote who did not have the same rights as full members. Members of affiliated organisations could vote in leadership elections as long as they registered with the party as affiliated supporters, declaring their support for Labour values, supplied personal contact details, were on the electoral roll and paid a £3 fee. The left, including the AWL, opposed that report, but it was implemented. After Labour’s defeat in the 2015 General Election, and the Tories won a majority, Ed Miliband resigned.

Jeremy Corbyn was elected Labour leader in September 2015 under the new electoral system.

Corbyn’s victory was completely unexpected by the right wing in the Party, but also many on the left. It was an unintended consequence of the new electoral system and the widescale and angry rejection of the coalition government’s austerity politics and the lack of an alternative by Labour under Ed Miliband. For five years, Miliband and Labour hadn’t in reality opposed Lib Dem-Tory swingeing cuts. They repeatedly endorsed austerity in broad brushstrokes but offering a kinder face: promising “sensible” cuts rather than “slash-and-burn”. Turning a blind eye to anti-cuts campaigns, local Labour councils had been implementing that central government “slash-and-burn”.

Large numbers of young people took advantage of the affil-

iated supporters scheme to vote for the Corbynite alternative; also trade unionists. The anti-austerity pressure that had built up played a role in getting Corbyn on the ballot paper, as well as getting trade unions to come out in recommending support. Many of the affiliated supporters also became full Party members, and overall Party membership more than doubled to 400,000 after the General Election. The AWL discussed the situation at its 2015 Conference, as described in the following extract²:

"After decades of capitalist triumphalism and the decay of the left, the movement which carried Jeremy Corbyn to victory brings great openings and opportunities for socialists, potentially very great. But we have not yet emerged from the old period; that is the task to be accomplished.

We need to:

- *Organise the newcomers into active CLPs, Young Labour groups, local left caucuses, etc.*
- *Fight for democracy and for an active political life at every level of the party and labour movement.*
- *At the same time, patiently explain class-struggle and socialist political ideas, shifting the debate, making new socialists and winning new support.*

The progress of socialist education and organisation will also be vitally important for the fate and development of the broader movement. Either the "Corbyn surge" will be consolidated by building an active and democratic mass Labour Party and reviving working-class politics, or it will end with a backlash driven by the Labour right. Either we will to some significant extent win the battle of ideas in this movement, or it will go down, one way or another. We can do that only if we convince many more people of class-struggle socialist politics and rally significant numbers of them — and of those previously vaguely and passively sympathetic — into active fighters for the politics of working-class self-emancipation.

During the Blair years, the Labour Party remained in general terms what we have called a "bourgeois workers' party", due largely to its institutional link with the unions. Within that formula, there was a very significant shift towards the bourgeois "pole", as the Blairites reshaped the party structure, the party's self-conscious working-class membership and supporter base attenuated, and the unions allowed themselves to be pushed to the margins. Now, with the Corbyn surge, there is a positive shift. Party membership, fast approaching 400,000 in mid-October, has more than doubled since the general election; on the face of it the influx is made up mostly of left-wing white collar workers and young people. There is a renewed movement for labour movement political representation, although many of those involved do not yet see it that way. The Blairite drive to push the unions out of Labour Party politics has been halted — in fact in some respects the unions have in the last four months played a more pro-active role in the party than ever before in its history...

We face many difficulties. The unions have not been transformed. The Blairite party structure and party machine remain in place, for now. Much of the left-wing politics promoted by the Corbyn campaign has been woolly and populist, with little reference to socialism or even the la-

bour movement. The whole left visibly bears the signs of the period we are perhaps coming out of. We must challenge any notion that, with Corbyn elected, the job is done. In fact the bigger and more difficult job starts now...

The first task is the fight to revive, democratise and enliven the whole Labour Party and labour movement, in every area and at every level. Without that we cannot meaningfully fight for left-wing policies. Make party conference sovereign, abolish the policy forums; end bans on the socialist left's participation in the party; open up the youth and student structures; and create democratic structures for oppressed groups. What policies? We support, against the Tories and the Labour right, even the relatively weak and piecemeal reforms being proposed by Corbyn and his close allies; but we argue to deepen and develop Labour's program along the lines of the class-struggle "Emergency Plans" developed by French Trotskyists or our "Workers' Plan for the crisis" — reform demands which boldly answer the most pressing needs of the working class and workers' struggles regardless of the needs and demands of capitalism. The "political economy of the working class", as Marx put it — allocation of resources planned for need, against the logic of the market and profit. Tax the rich to stop and reverse cuts, rebuild public services; attack inequality; scrap nuclear weapons and cut military spending; renationalise privatised industries and services; nationalise the banks; repeal the anti-union laws. We argue for the left to advocate the aim of a government based on and accountable to the labour movement, a workers' government which serves the working class as the Tories serve the bosses. In the movement for such a government we will seek to constitute a consistently revolutionary wing. We call for Labour councillors to refuse to implement cuts. But the dominant soft-left outlook in the Corbyn surge accepts it as obvious that councillors must make cuts. We won't win that argument with councillors (or many of them, anyway), before we win it with the rank and file. This discussion can stimulate the re-building of active local anti-cuts campaigns.

We defend the right of members to easily select/deselect MPs and councillors as a basic precondition of democracy, of accountability of representatives and of the labour movement's ability to exert pressure on and control over a future Labour government. We call for Labour MPs to take only a worker's wage, and reasonable expenses, and to donate the rest to the party. We seek to rebuild and extend union involvement in the party, in particular by promoting union delegates to local Labour Party structures.

If the Trade Union Bill passes, hollowing out Labour Party funding and the union link, we will continue to fight for its repeal; and we will fight for the overthrow of the Collins Review arrangements and the restoration or creation of a much more extensive and democratic union-party link. We must fend off the drive that will come for agreement between the union leaders and the party leaders, or some of them, to halt and reverse progress to the left — of the kind that signalled and prepared retreat in the early 1980s. It is good that most unions supported Corbyn for leader, but it does not mean they have been transformed; that task remains, including by fighting for the unions to promote working-class policies in the Labour Party and by fighting to democratise them. Union democracy is key — without

2 From "After Corbyn: making socialist politics a decisive force", published *Solidarity* 382, 28 October 2015, extracted in turn from a resolution that was passed the following month by Workers' Liberty conference — see bit.ly/a-corbyn

it, no wider transformation of the movement is possible. Whatever the tactical specifics, we advocate all unaffiliated unions affiliate to the Labour Party, starting most obviously and urgently with the RMT.”

In fact, and for the detailed reasons spelt out in the pamphlet “*Corbynism, What Went Wrong?*”, we lost. Corbyn’s left-wing 2017 election manifesto showed what was possible and that left-wing politics could win, but the Blairite bureaucracy retained its stranglehold on the Party machine, and launched a wave of expulsions against the left from 2016 onwards. The Corbynite leadership made no serious attempts to undo the Blairite structural changes. In fact the main significant reform to Party Conference was when the right wing wrote into the rule book that Labour councillors were barred from opposing council cuts. The prediction in 2015 that “Either the ‘Corbyn surge’ will be consolidated by building an active and democratic mass Labour Party and reviving working-class politics, or it will end with a backlash driven by the Labour right” was confirmed with Keir Starmer’s election in 2020 following Labour’s 2019 election defeat.

Was the basic picture that is described in detail in the 2004 pamphlet of the Blairite coup and its results the later subject of a counter-revolutionary “restoration” after 2009-10? That is one of the basic questions that we would ask readers to consider in reading or re-reading the 2004 pamphlet reprinted here, together with this new introduction and additional appendices at the end.

Consider too: How should we assess the situation after Starmer won the leadership in 2020? The Leader’s “office” and Cabinet are firmly Blairite and in control of the Party. The 2024 General Election saw many leftist candidates bureaucratically replaced with imposed right wingers. Since then several other MPs have been suspended for opposing cuts. In structure and policies, is it significantly different to the Blairite “New Labour” Party after 1998? Is the Blairite coup, and all that involved, not still firmly in place? Whatever minor changes, is Starmer’s New Labour not cut from the same cloth?

The Starmer government, in power since July 2024, has functioned as a Tory government, promised reforms to the anti-trade union legislation notwithstanding. They have used their position to deliver attacks on working class people that the pre-election Tories themselves didn’t feel able to do — cuts to pensioners’ winter fuel payments; savage cuts announced to the welfare budgets for the disabled, despite modifications pushed on them by some union and rank-and-file Party revolts. They’ve attacked strikes and side-lined unions in the Party; used the whip of suspensions to get parliamentary rebels in line. Labour has repeatedly backtracked on the environment. Pre-election promises to repeal at least more recent anti-union laws seem to have been kicked into the long grass. Starmer’s response to Israel’s destruction, starvation, and flattening of Gaza has *at best* been woefully inadequate. And all of this has been combined with adding to severe restrictions on rights to protest.

As the far-right is ascendant internationally and Reform is topping the polls in the UK, Labour’s leadership seeks not to undercut them with left-wing policies and an alternative vision, but with an aping of their policies. From attacking trans people to wrapping themselves in the union jack and attacking migrants, Labour’s response is reactionary and counter-productive. By communicating that migrants, trans people,

or even benefit recipients are a real problem — they’re emphatically not — they strengthen the case for people to back the real deal: voting Reform or even joining anti-migrant protests.

The situation has revived calls for “parties” or electoral candidacies to the left of Labour. Some, such as Jamie Driscoll’s “Majority”, or the Sultana-Corbyn initiative with a holding-name of “Your Party”, centre around elected representatives who were suspended from Labour by Starmer. We have significant criticisms of the dominant politics and democratic structures — or lack thereof — of all of these to date.

There is an ongoing discussion among Workers’ Liberty activists and supporters about whether and how we should relate to, intervene in, initiate and understand possible as well as actual challenges to a Starmer-led Labour Party from the left. The authors of this new introduction and instigators of this pamphlet’s reprint have been arguing since before the 2024 General Election that we should take more seriously, and consider initiating or intervening in prospective or possible working-class and socialist electoral challenges to a Starmer government. We don’t all agree on some of the specifics³ but are united in that and in recognising that the current discussion has much to learn from this reprinted pamphlet. Many arguing against us previously have de facto moved towards a similar position. In April 2025 Workers’ Liberty rightly voted to “investigat[e] the possibility of electoral challenges”, and we intervene in the Sultana-Corbyn electoral initiative (see appendices 10-12). This welcome practical shift has not yet been adequately accounted for theoretically.

The Labour left and the unions have so far put up only belated and limited resistance to Starmer’s shifting of the party to the right. We seek to build on the openings there that exist, with stirrings of discontent likely to increase. All in Workers’ Liberty agree that we should continue the fight within Labour, and within the Labour-affiliated unions too. The key questions are about what else we do *as well* in our fight to transform the labour movement as a whole.

The evolution and degeneration of much of the left and far left since the first edition of the pamphlet is another important change: accelerated by much of it supporting Brexit, by the flourishing of Stalinism in the Labour left under Corbyn’s leadership, by widespread apologism for Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, and by an expansion of revanchist and reactionary politics on the ostensible left since Hamas’ massacre of 7th October 2023 and Israel’s subsequent war of annihilation.

We, Workers’ Liberty, recognise the necessity of seeking to transform the existing left, of pursuing left unity and a united front approach.⁴ But the extent of reactionary rot infecting the purported left must be contended with when intervening in, and evaluating the possibilities of intervening in, actual and potential left electoral initiatives.

The politics of this pamphlet are not “holy-scripture”. Comrades may decide, for example, that it was wrong in 2004 and therefore wrong now. However, we hope they will first read or re-read in detail what it says and subsequent articles/documents over the period since then and now available with this reprint.

The rest of the pamphlet, and the first seven appendices, are reproduced essentially as they were in the 2004 edition (with minor clarifications and contemporary context). Appendices 8 and 9 reproduce Workers’ Liberty’s assessment and conclusions in 2010 and 2011. The final three appendices provide important context as we go to press in 2025.

³ Or indeed with every detail on this page

⁴ See for example “The rise of the far right and reassembling the left”, passed by Workers’ Liberty conference 2025 — bit.ly/r-left

Introduction to 2004 edition

John Bloxam and Sean Matgamna, April 2004

The biggest event in working-class politics for many decades is the Blairite hijacking of the Labour Party, in the mid 1990s. The Blairites have transformed the Labour Party, which the trade unions founded over a hundred years ago, from the treacherous “bourgeois workers’ party” it had been into something qualitatively different.

In the public pronouncements of its leaders, New Labour is an explicitly anti-working-class party. It treats the labour movement and the working class with open contempt and undisguised bourgeois hostility.

If New Labour did and does still belong to the general category in which Lenin placed it, a “bourgeois workers’ party”, it has been shifted drastically towards the bourgeois pole of that contradictory combination.

If Marxists in the 1920s could accurately call the Labour Party “a sort of general federation of the working class” as well as a “bourgeois workers’ party”, it has lost that character. The special features which persuaded Lenin to argue in 1920 that British communists should seek to affiliate to the Labour Party — the open, federal structure; the channels which allowed trade-union rank-and-file sentiment to flow into the party relatively easily, at a series of levels — have all been abolished.

The keynote was struck on the eve of the 1997 election, when Blair promised the Tory *Daily Mail* that “Britain will remain with the most restrictive trade union laws anywhere in the western world” (26 March 1997). He has kept his word.

Even the Liberal government of 1906, which changed the law to give back to the trade unions the right to strike, was more responsive to the working class than this “Labour” government.

Raised as a Bonaparte figure with enormous political power above the other institutions of the party — National Executive, conference, Parliamentary Labour Party — by the pseudo-democracy of one member, one postal vote, the Leader bestrides the Labour Party like a colossus. To find anything like the personality cult created around Blair for the last decade, you would need to go to the Stalinist states.

The Leader’s “office” — lieutenants, “advisers”, spin-liars, and other assorted bourgeois riff-raff, financed by big capitalist donations and state funds — is not only the real centre of the party, its mind and heart. For practical political purposes it is the party. No-one else makes policy. When the Leader is also prime minister, he has immense power.

The structures and relationships within the Labour Party have been radically transformed. The old names and categories — Conference, National Executive, etc. — have remained in use, but they denote things that are radically different from those that bore the same names through decades of Labour Party history.

Essentially, the annual conference and the National Executive no longer even notionally control Party policy. The conference still has rights on paper, but the leadership has been able to assert publicly and repeatedly that it has none, without any kickbacks. It has become the norm for New Labour that regional conferences no longer discuss big political issues; and the national conference and the Executive scarcely do.

With these new structures, the Labour Party in the country cannot counterpose itself to the Government by way of reso-

lutions on policy from the Constituency Labour Parties going for debate at conference.

In fact the branches and the CLPs are shrunken and withered husks, but even were they teeming with political life, the structures of today’s Labour Party would block off the party members from affecting party policy. If mass CLPs existed now, their members could assert themselves politically only by creating, in parallel to the Blair Labour Party structures, structures akin to the “National Left Wing Movement” of local parties disaffiliated for refusing to obey the decision of the 1925 Labour Party conference to exclude members of the Communist Party who were elected as trade-union delegates to Labour Party bodies. Had the left been in a better state in the mid 1990s, then something like the NLWM might have emerged then.

Under the old structures, any issue that animated any broad circle of working-class activists was sure to reach the conference agenda. Union delegations were more or less bound to vote in line with their unions’ policies on the issue. Under the new structure, the issue of the Tory anti-union laws can go undebated from year to year with neither rows nor ructions between the trade unions and the New Labour leaders. Today the union-Labour link is qualitatively more shut off from rank-and-file influence than it has ever been before.

Of course the Labour leadership could always defy conference decisions. But when it did so, it usually faced loud protest, sometimes very troublesome protest. The Labour Party was a living movement.

That real Labour Party democracy, limited and inadequate though it was, has gone. The limited concession made by New Labour in 2003, that in future Constituency Labour Parties can put four motions on each conference agenda, does not change that.

Central control over the vetting of candidates at parliamentary and local government level now operates to stifle and strangle everything that used to be alive in the old Labour Party. The possibility of rank and file self-assertion and control through the selection and deselection of MPs, and even of local councillors, has been more or less destroyed.

By now, the central Labour Party machine rarely feels the need to intervene in candidate selections. That, however, does not testify to a loosening up, but to a decline in local Labour Party life; those who run the New Labour machine know that few unruly candidates have any chance of selection.

The channels and forums in which and through which the political life of the Constituency Labour Parties expressed itself have been cemented up. The old ramshackle, sluggish, but living Labour Party has in effect been strangled. There is some life left in the local Labour Parties, here and there, but it is confined to isolated pockets.

According to the latest figures, for the end of 2002, the constituency membership of the party on paper had declined to 249,000. From a survey of constituency secretaries, the *Guardian* (12 April 2004) concluded that further losses of membership due to the Iraq war have probably taken the figure down below 220,000. That is the lowest figure since individual membership figures were first compiled, with the possible exception of 1942, when the absence of Party members in the armed forces, and the atrophy of political life due

to Labour's agreement not to fight the Tories in by-elections during the war, brought membership down to 219,000. In the early 1950s Labour's paper constituency membership was over a million.

The active membership has declined even more catastrophically than the paper membership. According to the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy (CLPD), which still thinks the CLPs should be the main focus of socialist work, the active membership now mainly comprises elderly people who dislike Blairism but have insufficient energy to make any new start, and young middle-class careerists. Trade union delegates to CLPs are, so the CLPD says, "as rare as hens' teeth".

Many constituency General Committees have been wound up. The Labour youth movement exists essentially on paper. Very few student Labour Clubs exist. The vast number of abstentions in the 2001 General Election shows that the reflex class-conscious Labour vote has been eroded drastically. Many long-loyal working-class Labour voters abstained, or voted for the Lib-Dems because, compared to the Blair party, they are now, in many of their policies, the "left-wing" party, and the party least subservient to big business. Working-class people who still voted Labour did so mostly out of inertia or "lesser-evil" anti-Tory sentiment.

In short, the relationship between the Labour Party and the political life of the working class, the trade union movement, and the left has been changed dramatically and qualitatively.

The recent expulsion of the RMT from the Labour Party for backing the Scottish Socialist Party in certain areas is probably only the beginning of a process of political unravelling and eventual realignment.

In addition to changing the Labour Party, the Blair gang have operated with equally uncerecermonious disregard for the institutions of bourgeois democracy, which they claim to revere. Under this New Labour government, the bureaucratisation of Parliament, long in train, has accelerated seriously. Where in theory Parliament controls the Government, the reality for the first five years of Blairite rule was that the Government rigidly controlled Parliament.

Statistically, the batch of Labour MPs elected in 1997 shows up as having produced as many Parliamentary rebellions in its first two sessions as the Labour MPs under the 1945 or 1966 governments, and more than under the 1964 government. Since the Iraq war, large numbers of New Labour MPs are so often in opposition to the government that it is not too much to say that the outlines of two Parliamentary Labour Parties can be discerned within the New Labour parliamentary group.

But many of the rebels would be disarmed if Gordon Brown, Tony Blair's New Labour political alter ego, were to succeed Blair. We have yet to see whether any sizeable section of the "opposition New Labour Party" in Parliament will play a part in the recreation of a union-based working-class party.

The statistics of Parliamentary rebellions must be read against the background of Blair Government policies which are in flat contradiction to the sentiments of the labour movement, and in a way that even the worst Labour governments in the past were not. Most of the time, the majority of Labour MPs turn themselves into robots connected to a single mind in the Whips' office and behave like speak-your-weight machines programmed with soundbites to justify ostentatiously anti-working-class and anti-Old-Labour policies.

The MPs who revolted against Blair on the "illegality" of the Iraq war would have supported the war had the USA and the UK succeeded in bullying or bribing enough UN votes to

make it "legal". They have never revolted against Blair's maintenance, over nearly seven years in government, of the Tory laws that outlaw trade-union solidarity action and, indeed, most effective trade unionism. There are a few decent MPs loyal to the labour movement and the working class, but the Parliamentary Labour Party as a whole is an entity devoid of labour movement and working-class loyalty.

The result of the Blairites' 1997 election victory over the Tories has been, paradoxically, to disenfranchise the working class and the labour movement and to deprive it of responsive parliamentary representation on any level. Politically, these developments have thrown the working class back to the beginning of the 20th century, when the Labour Party first emerged.

How did this catastrophe for working-class politics come about? Over the long years of Thatcher-Major government, the Labour career politicians and trade-union bureaucrats moved towards the idea of "getting the Tories out" at any price, even if it meant adopting Tory policies. So did many rank-and-file people in the labour movement, who failed at times to notice or understand what it would mean. They would not listen when we told them that their own demoralisation and depoliticised "anti-Toryism" was pushing them into an acquiescence with what the Kinnock-Smith-Blair leaderships were doing to the political labour movement which could not but prove fatal for all they wanted to achieve by "kicking out the Tories".

In British politics the Thatcherites pushed everything to the right, establishing an anti-socialist consensus comparable to the consensus in favour of the Welfare State which the powerful Labour Government of 1945-51 had in its time and for a generation imposed on the Tories and Liberals.

Opinion surveys continued to show that grassroots working-class people wanted welfare-state provision and were against privatisation. But, after many years of Thatcherite rule, such feelings were combined with low and decreasing confidence.

The Labour Party and trade union leaders gradually came to believe that, if they aspired to govern, they could not oppose the consensus of the media, academia, and big business; and then, positively to embrace that consensus. The Blairites embraced it wholeheartedly and from deep conviction. The trade union leaders, cowed and demoralised by the Thatcherites, came to accept it too, reluctantly, and to back the radical changes in the Labour Party which we now call Blairism (though in fact some of them had preceded Blair's election as leader in 1994).

The union leaders who had the weight and the power to stop the Kinnockite drift and the Blairite coup instead threw their weight behind the transformation of the Labour Party into a bourgeois machine heavily insulated from working-class influence.

The Blairites, some of them ex-Stalinists or other one-time leftists, knew that what they would do in office could rouse the Labour Party and the labour movement against a Blair government, as the Labour Party in the late 1970s had counterposed itself to the Callaghan government. They decided on a pre-emptive strike. They would close down the channels and structures of the old Labour Party.

At the height of the left-wing Labour upsurge in the early 1980s, some of the Labour leaders, such as Shirley Williams, Roy Jenkins, and David Owen, who would split to form the Social Democratic Party (which later fused with the Liberal Party), had discussed such drastic changes in the Labour Party. In the early 1980s the present authors pointed out where

all this would lead.

We quoted Bertolt Brecht:

"After the rising of the 17th of June the Secretary of the Writers' Union had leaflets handed out in the Stalinallee in which it can be read that the people had forfeited the confidence of the Government... Would it not be simpler if the Government dissolved the people and elected a new one?"

We commented:

"their [the Labour Right's] goal is to restore, on a new basis, the situation where the MPs are beyond the effective control of the labour movement... to dissolve the Labour Party as it has so far existed and... to have the media elect a new one for them". (Mobilise for Labour Democracy, January 1981).

The founders of the SDP had been too weak to do it. It fell to Kinnock and Blair to carry out the programme of the SDP within the Labour Party.

Before they could do it, the working class had first to be defeated by the Thatcherites in such clashes as the greater miners' strike of 1984-5, and then ground down.

After 1997, socialists who had no time for the pretence that the Blair Labour Party is only an especially unpleasant variant of the old Labour Party had to decide what to do.

The situation was and is complicated by the fact that the transformation of the Labour Party had not, and has not, been wholly and definitively accomplished. Things are not yet cut and dried. The big unions retain a great potential weight even in Labour's changed structures, should they choose to use it.

They still have that power because trade-union money remains an important part of the Labour Party's financial support (combined now with money from bourgeois well-wishers). The docility and subservience of the union leaders after 1997 made it unnecessary for the Blairites to push through the clean break with the unions which some of them had suggested. They rightly calculated that they could continue to get money from the unions — no longer, as it used to be, the overwhelming bulk of Labour Party funding, but still substantial — without political cost.

The result is that though the Blair "project" has produced an anti-working-class and anti-Labour government, the trade unions are still potentially a great power within the New Labour structures. This is the major contradiction in Blair's "New Labour Party".

The unions remain a power within New Labour's structures. But the big question is whether the new generation of leaders who now head the unions will take advantage of that contradiction to strike at Blairism.

We must be clear about this — any attempt at concerted use of that trade-union power now is mostly likely to provoke an organisational rupture with the Blairites, to split New Labour.

We — the AWL — advocate that the unions should use everything they have and can muster to challenge and fight the Blairites. If it proves necessary, and it will, the trade unions should split with the Blairites and found a new union-based political party.

In the meanwhile, what should socialists do? We urge the unions to wage a fight to a break with the Blairites. Yet we cannot confine ourselves to only that. We cannot play the role of passive advisers or advocates for what the whole lumbering body of the trade union movement should do in years to come.

We are an autonomous political force. We are people engaged in organising those who want to be the representatives of the labour movement of the future in the labour movement of the present. We must win and educate those who will fight for and secure that socialist future of the labour movement. What therefore should we do now? What should we recommend to young people entering radical politics, or working-class activists disgusted by Blairism?

Should we continue automatically to back the "Labour" (Blairite) candidates in elections? Or, on the contrary, should we begin to use elections, where appropriate, to take the message of independent working-class representation directly to the rank and file of the trade unions and to the working class. Should we use elections to spread the idea that the unions should work towards a new union-based workers' party?

Should we do now what our political predecessors, the socialists who founded the Labour Party, did back in the days when the trade unions backed the Liberal Party and got some union-financed MPs, the so-called "Lib-Labs", elected on the Liberal ticket — that is, stand independent socialist candidates in elections?

In 1998 AWL decided to do just that. We helped found what became the Socialist Alliance of 2001, which the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) has just decided effectively to wind up by sinking it into "Respect", whose main activity is to attempt to elect George Galloway, the ex-tankie Stalinist and friend of the fascistic Ba'athist dictatorship in Iraq, to the European Parliament.

We turned towards electoral challenges to the Blair Labour Party without pretending that a revival of the New Labour party, or segments of it, into something resembling the old Labour Party, was absolutely inconceivable, five, ten, fifteen or twenty years ahead.

Our core argument was not that the Labour Party was completely, thoroughly, and irreversibly dead, but that the rhythms and tempo of socialists' activity, and how socialists would present themselves to the broader working class and to youth, could not be tied down to any slow and flickering pulse of working-class activity still discernible in the Labour Party, or to caution and self-effacement to "keep in" with Labour on the basis of speculative hopes of a future revival.

We rejected the schematic approach of the Socialist Party (SP, formerly Militant). For decades they were committed to the bizarre notion that the Labour Party was inexorably ripening into a mass socialist party. In the mid-1990s they swung, just as mechanically, one-sidedly, and un-dialectically, to the view that nothing at all was left of the old Labour Party, and that they themselves, in competition with the new Labour Party, would become the mass Marxist party.

This typically wooden, uncomprehending, and politically unbalanced schematism has made them unable to intervene rationally in the real political arguments developing in the Labour-affiliated trade unions. As they have gradually been forced into recognising that the SP is not going to develop linearly into a mass workers' party, or win trade-union affiliations, they have been pushed into basing themselves on incoherent anti-political sentiment in the unions (as with their current campaign for a vote in Union against maintaining the union's political funds) or on flaccid ecumenism towards any even nominally leftist anti-Labour electoral enterprise (the Galloway/ SWP coalition, the Campaign Against Tube Privatisation, etc.)

In principle, if the unions, or a sizeable bloc of unions, launched a determined fight for their own policies, they could strike a tremendous blow at Blairism, a blow compara-

ble to what the unions did to Ramsay MacDonald, the traitor Labour prime minister who went over to the Tories in 1931.

The question is, will they? And if they will, when?

That trade-union activism and assertiveness, and working-class political militancy, will revive, we take as guaranteed by the basic class contradictions of capitalist production. When and how that will happen we can not know.

In terms of time, it could happen relatively quickly. But in terms of the things that have to be done in the labour movement, short of a very dramatic working-class upsurge, it is a long way off.

In any case, it is far from certain that revival will happen in a tidy or even manner. It is downright improbable that it will take the form of a smooth and steady winding-back of the Labour Party from its present Blairite shape to what it was in previous decades; and it would be foolish and self-viscerating for socialists to base their activity now on the belief that it will take that form.

Can socialists confine themselves to tactics based on and limited by hopes for a concerted trade-union offensive within the Labour structures? The only rational answer, based on the facts of the situation of the British working class and the socialist groups, is: no, they can not.

In the last few years the trade unions have elected a new generation of leaders who, as trade unionists and in terms of their politics, are a great improvement on their predecessors, the traitors who made Blairism possible in the 1990s. These new leaders are — and this is the most important thing — genuine trade unionists, concerned to better their members' lot, where their Blairite predecessors had come to see trade unions as primarily concerned with dispensing miscellaneous services to individual members and negotiating "partnership" with employers.

They could do a great deal now in the Labour Party. We urge the rank and file of the unions to insist that they should. We support and help promote the tentative moves now afoot to create a new "Labour Representation Committee" like the one set up by some trade unions and the socialist organisations in 1900, out of which the Labour Party grew.

But meantime, what do we do "until" the union leaders move seriously? We repeat: should socialists wait passively? No, we should not! No socialist working-class movement can be built on the basis of a policy of passive speculating and "waiting on events". The socialist struggle for influence on the working class must be conducted now, however unfavourable the circumstances. In conditions infinitely bleaker than our situation today, Trotsky truly wrote: "Under the least favourable hypothesis, the building of a revolutionary party would mean to speed the hour of revenge. The wiseacres who duck away from his urgent task by claiming that 'conditions are not ripe' only show that they themselves are not ripe for these conditions".

The larger revolts by Labour MPs since the Iraq war are a second new factor, paralleling the rise of the new trade union leaders. That some of these MPs fervently want to get rid of Blair is plain beyond dispute. Whether they would proceed to reverse Blairism is a very different question. Many of them would happily support Blair's other self, Gordon Brown. Most of them have never objected to Blair keeping the Tory anti-union laws on the statute book. Most of them did not support the firefighters' strikes of 2002-3. Most of them are as complicit in the Blairite hijacking of the Labour Party as the old trade union leaders were.

Socialists should pay attention to the MPs' revolts, and any movement they stir up in the CLPs. But meanwhile it contin-

ues to make sense to stand socialist candidates where that is practically possible.

Hard factual evidence is provided by the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP). For all its large shortcomings, the SSP has consolidated a sizeable working-class socialist electorate in Scotland. In the 2003 elections to the Scottish Parliament, the SSP's lists got 7.7% of the vote across Scotland, and six members elected. They had 15% of the vote in Glasgow.

Conditions for socialist candidates in bourgeois-democratic elections are somewhat better in Scotland than in England and Wales. But the differences are not qualitative. And the Labour Party in Scotland is not worse than in England and Wales — in fact, in part because of the pressure of the SSP, it is a bit more responsive to working-class sentiment than Labour at Westminster.

Additional hard evidence is provided by the railworkers' union RMT. Its members had one of the highest rates of paying the political levy to the Labour Party of any union. It took its Labour Party links more seriously than other unions. It withdrew support from Labour MPs who flouted its policies — most notably Blair's deputy John Prescott — and created a new RMT parliamentary group of Labour MPs loyal to union policies. It conducted a fight to get a proper debate on the Iraq war at the 2003 Labour conference.

Now its Scottish region has voted to support the SSP, and the Labour Party has disaffiliated the RMT. Socialists could, and did, argue that the Scottish RMT should have balloted its members on supporting the SSP. We can, and do, argue against the RMT's ex-Stalinist-turned-syndicalist leadership, around Bob Crow, converting the RMT's political activity into that of a funding agency for diverse middle-class leftist electoral enterprises. But we argue from the left — against their expulsion and for the RMT to work with other combative unions, and with socialists, to build a new Labour Representation Committee — and not from the right. Any socialists who would argue that in face of their expulsion from the Labour Party, the RMT leadership should instruct RMT activists to grit their teeth and continue to sponsor Blairites, instead of seeking a working-class alternative to Blairism, will have lost the political plot.

We do not urge that the RMT should wait for all the other unions to be ready to come with it. We remember that when the Labour Representation Committee, forerunner of the Labour Party, was launched in 1900, it had the backing of organisations representing only 350,000 of the two million trade unionists then in Britain. Most trade unionists supported the Liberal Party. If the socialists and activists had waited until the majority was ready to move, the trade unions would have remained tied to the Liberal Party. The Labour Party, whose hijacking by the Blairites socialists are now having to come to terms with, would never have been born!

It is salutary to recall that the miners, who had a block of MPs elected under the Liberal banner, did not break with the Liberals and join the Labour Party until 1909.

In the following pamphlet these issues and their implications are discussed. All but the introduction and a few small inserts or alterations were written in July 2003. It is a contribution to a discussion on these questions which has been going on for some time in our newspaper *Solidarity* and inside the AWL. It deals in some detail with an article, *The Case for Revolutionary Realism*, published in *Solidarity* 3/30, which was in its turn a reply to an article of ours in *Solidarity* 3/29 — the articles are printed here as appendices 1 and 2 — but also covers more general background debates and issues.

I: Leon Trotsky: Class, Union, and Party

The trade unions are not only the bedrock of the labour movement.

With the Blairite hijacking of the Labour Party, which had been founded at the beginning of the 20th century by the trade unions and socialist organisations to fight for working class interests, the trade unions are pretty much all that's left of the labour movement.

Even though the number of trade unionists has fallen from its peak strength in the pre-Thatcher years, 25 years ago, it is still a very powerful movement. There are twice as many trade unionists in Britain now as there were in France in 1968, when the working class seized the factories in a general strike. The work that *Solidarity* and Workers' Liberty does in the trade unions is the most important practical work we do.

Politically, we argue that the trade unions must assert themselves against Blair and Blairism within the Labour Party, where they are still a great latent power. We call on them to attempt to take back the Labour Party from the hijackers, and, as this proves impossible, to break with Blair's party and found a new trade union based mass working class party which takes as its aim the creation of a workers' government — a government which will serve working-class interests as the Tories and Blairites have served the capitalist class. But how does it all fit together?

The best way into this subject is the following attempt at a systematic presentation of Leon Trotsky's views on trade unions and politics, the unions in relation to the "working class as a whole", and the unions and the revolutionary party.

These questions are especially complex in Britain where Marxists such as *Solidarity* and Workers' Liberty work to build a revolutionary Marxist party, and *also* advocate the recreation of a mass working-class party, in one way or another, by the trade unions.

The French labour movement, with representatives of which Trotsky discussed these questions, had a number of peculiarities. Before the First World War, the trade union federation, the CGT, grew up separate from the (Marxist) Socialist Party. The CGT was a select revolutionary layer of the working class, politically conscious but rejecting Parliamentary politics.

They believed that socialist revolution would be made by way of the trade unions eventually seizing control of industry and the whole country.

It was one of a number of revolutionary syndicalist movements that grew up before the First World War in recoil from the one-sided Parliamentarianism which dominated the workers' movement at that time.

Trotsky later described the left wing of the pre-1914 syndicalist movement in France as "a remarkable first draft of communism, which lacked the essential political dimension".

In 1914 the CGT, like the French Socialist Party, supported their "own" government in the war. Only a small minority, led by Pierre Monatte, opposed the war from the beginning.

After the war the majority of both the SP and CGT gravitated towards the Russian Revolution and the Communist International (CI). But the revolutionary syndicalists retained many of their old ideas.

Trotsky knew the syndicalist leaders Monatte, Alfred Rosmer, and others, well and had a very high regard for them. For two years before his deportation from France at the end of 1916 he had worked with them in Paris, part of a still small

anti-war minority.

In the early 1920s, as the CI became bureaucratised and Stalinised, Monatte and his friends reverted to their old limited syndicalist, trade-unionist outlook.

The issues Trotsky discussed with them in 1923 and later go to the heart of the relationship of class, trade unions and party in Marxist theory.

a. DO THE UNIONS REPRESENT THE WORKING CLASS AS A WHOLE?

In March 1923 Trotsky discussed with Robert Louzon, a supporter of Pierre Monatte, "the fundamental question of the relations between party and trade union". He summed up Louzon's views and the views of the syndicalist leaders in the French Communist Party (PCF), as follows:

"Comrade Louzon defends the complete and unqualified independence of the trade unions. Against what? Obviously against certain attacks. Whose? Against attacks ascribed to the party. Trade union autonomy, an indisputable necessity, is endowed with a certain absolute and almost mystical significance."

Trotsky continues:

"The trade unions, says Louzon, represent the 'working class as a whole.' The party, however, is only a party. The working class as a whole cannot be subordinated to the party. There is not even room for equality between them. 'The working class has its aim in itself.' The party, however, can only either serve the working class or be subordinated to it. Thus the party cannot 'annex' the working class..."

Trotsky points out that it is simply not true that the unions represent the working class as a whole. Look at the proportion of workers organised in trade unions. Nowhere are the unions even a majority of the working class, and in France they are especially weak.

Louzon, says Trotsky:

"Is obviously, consciously and determinedly, shutting his eyes to what is actually going on in France. One might think that the article had been written from the star Sirius. How else is it possible to understand the assertion that the trade unions represent the 'working class as a whole'? Of what country is Louzon talking? If he means France, the trade unions there, so far as we are informed, do not, unfortunately, include even half of the working class."

And the union federations in France were either reformist (the Confederation Generale du Travail, CGT, led by the wartime patriot, Leon Jouhaux), or revolutionary, the Confederation Generale du Travail Unitaire (CGTU), under the leadership of the PCF. Trotsky:

"Neither of the two trade union confederations embraces more than 300,000 workers. Neither singly nor together are they entitled to identify themselves with the whole of the French proletariat of which they form only a modest part. Moreover, each trade union organisation pursues a different policy... [and] in the [CGTU] Louzon represents but one tendency."

b. DOES THE WORKING CLASS BEAR ITS OWN "AIM" IN ITSELF?

Louzon had asserted "that the working class, which he obviously regards as synonymous with the trade union organisation, bears its own aim in itself."

Trotsky regards this idea as mystification and nonsense. It is meaningless to speak of "the working class as a whole" if one is discussing social movements and politics and how the working class becomes, in Karl Marx's words, "a class for itself".

Trotsky asks what is for him the key question: "With whose help, and how, does the French working class express this aim" [which Louzon asserts that it has in itself]? "With the help of Jouhaux's organisation? [The CGT] Certainly not. With the help of the [PCF-led] CGTU? ... Unfortunately it is not yet the whole working class".

For Trotsky it is meaningless to cite the mere existence of trade unions, as Louzon does, without reference to the politics of their leaders. He recalls for Louzon and the reader the fact that it was not so long ago that the CGTU was led by a secretly organised group of anti Communist anarcho-syndicalists. For Trotsky the CGTU is, but also is not quite, the same organisation under the different leaderships: one cannot talk of the working class or the trade unions having their "aim" "in themselves" when in fact the different successive leaderships, the anti-communist syndicalists and then the PCF, pursue different aims, and lead the Federation broadly with these aims in mind. Trotsky asks:

"In which of these two periods has the CGTU best represented the interests of the working class?"

How does one assess this? "Who is to judge?"

It cannot but be a matter of political judgement — and then the question is: whose political judgement?

"If we now attempt, with the aid of the international experience of our party, to answer this question, then, in Louzon's opinion, we commit a mortal sin, for we then demand that the party judge what policy is most beneficial to the working class. That is, we place the party above the working class."

If such a thing is defined as a "usurpation" of the function of the working class or of the union as the embodiment of the working class, to work out its own 'aim', what alternative approach is there? The working class as a whole?

Trotsky:

"But if we were to turn to the working class as a whole, we would unfortunately find it divided, impotent, and mute. The different parts of the class organised into different confederations, even different trade unions in the same confederation, and even different groups in the same trade union, would all give us different replies."

Most workers, not being in trade unions, would play no part in such discussions of policy:

"The overwhelming majority of the proletariat, standing outside both trade union confederations, would, at the present time, give us no reply."

"The proletariat has its aim within itself. If we strip this sentence of its mystical trappings, its obvious meaning is that the historical tasks of the proletariat are determined by its social position as a class and by its role in production,

in society, and in the state. This is beyond dispute. But this truth does not help us answer the question with which we are concerned, namely: How is the proletariat to arrive at subjective insight into the historical task posed by its objective position?"

Were the proletariat as a whole capable of grasping its historical task immediately, it would need neither party nor trade union. Revolution would be born simultaneously with the proletariat. But in actuality the process by which the proletariat gains an insight into its historic mission is very long and painful, and full of internal contradictions.

It is only in the course of long struggles, severe trials, many vacillations, and extensive experience, that insight as to the right ways and methods dawns upon the minds of the best elements of [emphasis added] the working class, the vanguard of the masses. This applies equally to party and trade union."

c. MINORITIES

Trotsky:

"Where and by whom are these tactics consciously, carefully, and critically prepared? Who suggests them to the working class? Certainly they do not fall from heaven. And the working class as a whole, as a 'thing in itself,' does not teach us these tactics either. It seems to us that Comrade Louzon has not faced this question."

Trotsky notes that in working class history, the trade union too, like the revolutionary party, begins as a small group of active workers. It grows as it learns from experience. Like the revolutionary organisation, whose members are selected not as with the union, by the fact of working for an employer and seeking collective self-protection, but by way of political programme, the union is normally a minority.

So:

"While the revolutionary organisations are struggling to gain influence in the working class, the bourgeois ideologists counterpose the 'working class as a whole' not only against the party of the working class but against its trade unions, which these ideologists accuse of wanting to 'annex' the working class. [The then leading bourgeois newspaper] Le Temps writes this whenever there is a strike.

In other words, the bourgeois ideologists counterpose the working class as object to the working class as conscious subject.

For it is only through its class conscious minority that the working class gradually becomes a factor in history."

Trotsky rebukes Louzon, who has accused the party of which he is a member, the PCF, of wanting to "annex" the working class: "It is wrong for Louzon to employ the terminology customarily used by our opponents in their fight against the revolution — it is a question of winning the confidence of the proletariat. And it is only possible to do this with correct tactics, tested by experience."

Trotsky nails down his central point:

"For it is only through its class-conscious minority that the working class becomes a factor in history..."

The criticism levelled by Comrade Louzon against the 'unwarranted claims' of the party applies equally well to the 'unwarranted claims' of the trade unions... Above all in

France”.

This is why pre-1914 French syndicalist theory “arrived, during its classic period (1905-07), at the theory of the ‘active minority,’ and not at the theory of the ‘collective proletariat.’ For what else is an active minority, held together by the unity of their ideas, if not a party?”

This was unavoidable and inevitable, and a necessary precondition of the working class being able to effectively fight the class struggle. For emphasis and clarity, Trotsky puts it very sharply:

“Would not a trade union mass organisation, not containing a class-conscious active minority, be a purely formal and meaningless organisation?”

d. AGAINST A HYBRID OF UNION AND PARTY

The Communists want the unity of the trade union movement, of the reformist CGT and the Communist CGTU, Trotsky insists. Why?

“The main consideration of the Communist International has been the historical task of the working class as a whole, and the enormous independent significance of the trade union organisation for solving the tasks of the proletariat.

In this respect the Communist International has from its very inception defended the real and living independence of the trade unions, in the spirit of Marxism.

The Communists are not afraid of the word ‘party’, for their party has nothing in common, and will have nothing in common, with the other parties. Their party is not one of the political parties of the bourgeois system; it is the active, class-conscious minority of the proletariat, its revolutionary vanguard.”

Trotsky knows the working class had paid a price for the character which pre-war trade unionism had taken. French syndicalism, by being a party, “but without openly becoming a party ... prevented the trade unions from becoming, if not an organisation of the whole working class (which is not possible in a capitalist system), at least of its broad masses.”

“The Communists have no reason, either in their ideology or their organisation, to hide themselves behind the trade unions.

They do not misuse the trade unions for machinations behind the scenes. They do not split the trade unions when they are a minority in them.”

The right wing had split the French union federation in 1920. But the Communist Party wants the broadest possible unity and development of the trade unions:

“They do not in any way disturb the independent development of the trade unions, and they support trade union struggles with all their strength.”

e. THE PARTY PURSUES “ITS OWN” GOALS

Yet, in doing that, the Party pursues its own goals. It is not defined by the narrower goals of trade unionism, and politically, it is entirely independent of the unions:

“The Communist Party reserves the right of expressing its

opinion on all questions in the working-class movement including the trade union question, to criticise trade union tactics, and to make definite proposals to the trade unions, which on their part are at liberty to accept or reject these proposals.”

Trotsky, of course, is not thinking of a passive Communist Party, which “presents” its proposals to the unions, as a waiter presents a menu to a diner. The Communists are an organised combat formation fighting for their policies against other political currents in the unions, and against the trade union bureaucracy:

“The party strives to win the confidence of the working class, above all, of that section organised in the trade unions.”

f. DOES THE WORKERS’ PARTY EMERGE FROM THE TRADE UNIONS?

Robert Louzon, basing himself on opinions of Karl Marx about the British trade unions, has argued that the unions are in their fundamental nature more important than the Communist Party. Trotsky applies the historical method of Marx to what Marx had said decades earlier. He measures the general significance of what Marx had said about the British trade unions against the broad subsequent experience of the working class.

“It is a fact that Marx wrote in 1868 that the workers’ party would emerge from the trade unions...”

Historical experience has in general confirmed Marx’s prophecies insofar as England is concerned. The English Labour Party has actually been built up on the foundation of the trade unions.”

According to what Louzon has written that would, logically, make the British Labour Party especially, quintessentially, proletarian.

“But does Comrade Louzon really think that the English Labour Party, as it is today, led by Henderson and Clynes, can be looked upon as representative of the interests of the proletariat as a whole? Most decidedly not. The Labour Party in Great Britain betrays the cause of the proletariat at just as the trade union bureaucracy betrays it, although in England the trade unions come closer to comprising the working class as a whole than anywhere else.”

At the time there are perhaps four million trade unionists in Britain. Trotsky has the perspective — which he will outline further in his 1925 book, *Where is Britain Going?* — that the Communist Party will assume the leading role, replacing the Independent Labour Party in the role it had hitherto played, within the political structures of the British labour movement.

“We cannot doubt but that our Communist influence will grow in this English Labour Party which emerged from the trade unions, and that this will contribute to render more acute the struggle between the masses and leaders within the trade unions until the treacherous bureaucrats are ultimately driven forth and the Labour Party is completely transformed and regenerated.”

It will not happen. The 1925 Liverpool Conference will end the practice of allowing Communist Party (CP/CPGB) members to be trade union delegates at LP Conference. The Stalin-

ist's "Third Period" ultra-left turn after 1928 will destroy the CP's influence in both the Labour Party and the trade unions. When, in the mid '30s, the CP emerges from its crazed sectarianism, it will be to the right of the right-wing leaders of the Labour Party, advocating a Popular Front with Liberals, "progressive Tories" and others.

Trotsky recalled that the history of the labour movement showed that in most countries the Party did not emerge from the unions. In fact in most countries — Russia and Germany, for instance — the unions had been founded by the proletarian party.

g. TRADE UNION INDEPENDENCE FROM THE PARTY?

Trotsky argues that the independence of the trade unions is no supra-historical goal. It can not be properly assessed except in terms of historical and social context.

"When the English trade unions alternately supported the Conservatives and the Liberals and represented to a certain extent a labour appendage to these parties... Marx demanded the independence of the trade unions from all parties."

Trotsky's summary of Marx's position has perhaps a special relevance for us now, faced with the hijacking of the Labour Party and the consequent historical regression of the party which the unions founded, and still fund, into something akin in class alignment to what the Liberal Party was in the 1890s.

"This formula [trade union independence] was dictated by the desire to counterpose the labour organisations to all bourgeois parties, and to prevent their being too closely bound up with socialist sects. But... Marx... founded the First International... the object of which was to guide the labour movement in all countries, in every respect, and to render it fruitful."

This... International created by Marx was a party. Marx refused to wait until the international party of the working class formed itself in some way out of the trade unions. He did his utmost to strengthen, within the trade unions, the influence of the ideas of scientific socialism..." (emphasis in original)

Today, in the era of Blair, "independence of the trade unions", whether or not that should be a slogan for us, is by no means an irrelevant idea should be the unions are an appendage of the Blair Party; when their relationship to Blair's Labour Party, despite their formal but in practice notional weight within its structures, has come to resemble the unions' relationship with the Liberals 100 and more years ago.

T & M (see appendix 2) get the relationship of the Party and the trade unions upside down! The central point in this discussion, as also the most important event in British politics for many decades, is that the relationship between the trade unions and "their" party has undergone a dialectical change within those elements of the old forms of the LP-TU relationship that have survived the Blair counter-revolution.

"When Marx demanded for the trade unions complete independence from all existing parties and sects, that is, from all the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois parties and sects, he did this in order to make it easier for scientific socialism to gain dominance in the trade unions. Marx never saw in the party of scientific socialism one of the existing political

parties (parliamentary, democratic, etc.).

For Marx the International was the class-conscious working class, represented at that time by a still very small vanguard."

Trotsky spells out the logic of Louzon's position: "If comrade Louzon were consistent in his trade union metaphysic and in his interpretation of Marx, he would say, 'Let us renounce the Communist Party and wait till this party arises out of the trade unions.'"

And this would mean for the trade unions?

"That kind of logic would be fatal, not only for the party but for the union."

Actually, the present French trade unions can only regain their unity and win decisive influence over the masses if their best elements are constituted in the class-conscious revolutionary vanguard of the proletariat, that is, in a Communist Party."

Marx gave no final answer to the question of the relations between party and trade unions, and indeed he could not do so. For these relations are dependent on the varying circumstances in each separate case... The forms of organisation may alter, but the fundamental role of the party remains constant."

h. PARTY IS NOT UNION; UNION IS NOT PARTY

Trotsky ends by spelling out the difference between trade unions and the party of the working class:

"The party, if it be worthy of the name, includes the whole vanguard of the working class and uses its ideological influence for rendering every branch of the labour movement fruitful, especially the trade union movement."

But if the trade unions are worthy of their name, they include an ever growing mass of workers, many backward elements among them. But they can only fulfil their task when consciously guided on firmly established principles. And they can only have this leadership when their best elements are united in the party of proletarian revolution."

i. UNIONS MORE PROLETARIAN THAN PARTY?

Replying to Trotsky, Robert Louzon adjusted his "position" in order to take into account the realities of relations between the French working class and the unions, admitting that the unions were not 'the working class as a whole'. Trotsky summed up Louzon's reply, in an article, *The Anarcho-Syndicalist Prejudice Again!*, dated May 8, 1923.

[Louzon says that] "the French trade unions are not actually the working class as a whole, but only the active minority of the working class."

But Louzon still asserts a modified version of the idea that the trade unions are identical with the working class: the unions are not the working class as a whole, but, still, they are more proletarian than the party. Here Louzon harks back to the old distinction between the unions and the pre-war socialist party. Trotsky:

[Thus] "Comrade Louzon acknowledges that the trade unions form a sort of revolutionary party. But this syndical-

ist party is distinguished by being purely proletarian in its constituents; here lies its tremendous advantage over the Communist Party...

Louzon... systematically ignores that 'national' question put to him in our former article: What about the role played by the CGT during the war? The role played by [CGT leader, Leon] Jouhaux was by no means less treacherous and despicable than that played by [Socialist Party Leader, Pierre] Renaudel."

Trotsky once more restates the importance of the distinction between trade unions and political parties: the union, which strives to unite as much of the proletariat as possible around trade union concerns, should not try to be a political party: the members of a party, as distinct from a union, are selected on the basis of political programme. The union will, if it tries to be a political party, hinder itself as a trade union.

j. TRADE UNION UNITY?

Trotsky poses the question of trade union unity:

"And how is it today? Does Louzon desire the union of the two confederations? We desire it. The International deems it necessary. We should not be alarmed even if the union were to give Jouhaux the majority."

Jouhaux had been the central leader of the pre-war CGT. The French language uses the same word, "syndicalisme", both for trade-unionism in general and for the political current which subsumes all working-class politics into trade-unionism. Trotsky here uses "syndicalism" in the same double sense, to mean both the pre-1914 CGT, the quasi-party, the movement that Trotsky insists was a party in fact if not by name, and also to mean trade unionism as distinct from the overt political party.

"Naturally we would not say — as does Comrade Louzon — that syndicalism, although headed by Jouhaux [etc], is the purest form of proletarian organisation, that it embodies 'the working class as a whole,' etc., etc. — for such a phrase would be a travesty of the facts."

But the bigger the trade union, the better it could hope to fulfil its tasks as a trade union:

"We should consider the formation of a larger trade union organisation, that is, the concentration of greater proletarian masses, forming a wider battlefield for the struggle for the ideas and tactics of Communism, to be a greater gain for the cause of revolution."

But for this the first necessity is that the ideas and tactics of Communism do not remain in mid air, but are organised in the form of a party."

Trotsky too wants to improve the class composition of the PCF, and of its leadership. He thinks it has been greatly improved by the secession of the last of the unteachable pre-war leaders. But that is not the same idea as that of Louzon and his co-thinkers:

"Comrade Louzon does not pursue his thoughts to the end. But his logical conclusion would be the substitution of the trade union organisation of the 'active minority' for the party."

It is plain that Trotsky thinks that, despite all their great merits, Monatte, Louzon and their friends, with their hybrid

notion of a union-party, harm both the trade unions and the Communist Party by not properly distinguishing between them.

"The inevitable result of this would be a substitute party and substitute trade union, for those trade unions required by Comrade Louzon are too indefinite for the role of a party, and too small for the role of a trade union."

k. "COMMUNISM AND SYNDICALISM"

In fact the reunification of the two French trade union federations, the revolutionary-led CGTU and the reformist-led CGT of Jouhaux, would never happen in the way Trotsky hoped. The two trade union organisations did unite in the mid-thirties. That is, in Trotsky's terms, the two trade union "apparatuses" united (see below). But by then the Stalinists had consolidated their hold on the once-revolutionary sections of the French labour movement, and pursued cross-class Popular Front policies.

The trade union organisation would split again after World War Two, when an anti-Stalinist minority split off to form a new federation, Force Ouvrière.

Monatte and his comrades would be early victims of the Zinoviev-Stalin bureaucratic coup in the Communist International. Late in 1924, at the height of the Stalinist bureaucracy's campaign against Trotsky, most of the leaders of the PCF criticised the Russian leaders for that campaign.

The idea that they thereby sided with Trotsky politically is a myth. Explicitly, they did not. Their attitude might be summed up as a demand for "fair play" for the senior surviving leader of the October revolution. The leaders of the Polish party, who were evolving into supporters of the emerging Bukharin right wing of the Comintern, passed an almost identical pro-Trotsky resolution.

Indeed even the most political of the old syndicalist grouping, Alfred Rosmer, was so disoriented by events in Russia that in 1926 he welcomed Stalin's victory over his erstwhile partner, Zinoviev.

Making a fetish of trade union unity, the Monatte group disagreed with Trotsky's condemnation of the Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee, even after it had helped wreck the 1926 British General Strike.

After their expulsion-break (it was both) from the PCF at the end of 1924, the Monatte syndicalists were a small propaganda group around a monthly magazine, *La Révolution prolétarienne*, which they would publish for decades. They formed the Syndicalist League, a small quasi-party.

In October, 1929, Trotsky, trying after his deportation from Russia to organise the International Left Opposition, returned to the disputes of 1923. He dealt in systematic thesis form with the points in dispute. His article was published as *Communism and Syndicalism*.

l. THE PARTY IS THE FUNDAMENTAL WEAPON

Trotsky:

"The Communist Party is the fundamental weapon of revolutionary action of the proletariat, the combat organisation of its vanguard that must raise itself to the role of leader of the working class in all the spheres of its struggle without exception, and consequently, in the trade union field. (Thesis 1)

Those who, in principle, counterpose trade union autonomy to the leadership of the Communist Party, counterpose

thereby — whether they want to or not — the most backward proletarian section to the vanguard of the working class.”

The trade unions, though they are of central importance in the class struggle, are in comparison with the revolutionary Marxist organisation, “backward”. The trade unions have a built-in tendency to limit the concerns of the workers, counterposing: “The struggle for immediate demands to the struggle for the complete liberation of the workers, reformism to Communism, opportunism to revolutionary Marxism.” (Thesis 2)

Working class political independence is not something which, once won, is thereafter a stable condition. The struggle on the front of ideas, politics and organisation is endless. Working class political independence can be won, and then lost. The struggle, on the conscious level, for class-political independence is a prime concern and central role of the revolutionary party.

“Independence from the influence of the bourgeoisie cannot be a passive state. It can express itself only by political acts, that is, by the struggle against the bourgeoisie. This struggle must be inspired by a distinct program which requires organisation and tactics for its application.

It is the union of program, organisation, and tactics that constitutes the party.

In this way, the real independence of the proletariat from the bourgeois government cannot be realised unless the proletariat conducts its struggle under the leadership of a revolutionary and not an opportunist party.” (Thesis 8)

m. TRADE UNIONS NOT SUFFICIENT

The idea that the trade unions, wherein the struggle for working class independence from the bourgeoisie has to be waged, by way of the struggle of political tendencies, are enough for

the proletariat, makes no sense.

“The... syndicalis[ts] would have one believe that the trade unions are sufficient by themselves. Theoretically, this means nothing, but in practice it means the dissolution of the revolutionary vanguard into the backward masses, that is, the trade unions.”

Trotsky reiterates the idea that the criteria for the union and the revolutionary working class party, are fundamentally different:

“The larger the mass the trade unions embrace, the better they are able to fulfil their mission. A proletarian party, on the contrary, merits its name only if it is ideologically homogeneous, bound by unity of action and organisation. To represent the trade unions as self-sufficient because the proletariat has already attained its ‘majority’, is to flatter the proletariat.

[It] is to picture it other than it is and can be under capitalism, which keeps enormous masses of workers in ignorance and backwardness, leaving only the vanguard of the proletariat the possibility of breaking through all the difficulties and arriving at a clear comprehension of the tasks of its class as a whole.” (Thesis 9)

But doesn't that imply substituting the revolutionary party for the unions? Doesn't the Communist drive for leadership inevitably mean that the Communists must to some extent come into conflict with trade unions as trade unions, and with the proper day-to-day work of the unions? No, insists Trotsky:

“The conquest of the majority by the Communists in the directing organs” [of the trade unions and, implicitly, in Trotsky's perspective then, of the trade union-based Labour

What we stand for

Today one class, the working class, lives by selling its labour power to another, the capitalist class, which owns the means of production.

Capitalists' control over the economy and their relentless drive to increase their wealth causes poverty, unemployment, blighting of lives by overwork; imperialism, environmental destruction and much else.

The working class must unite to struggle against the accumulated wealth and power of the capitalists, in the workplace and wider society.

The Alliance for Workers' Liberty wants socialist revolution: collective ownership of industry and services, workers' control, and a democracy much fuller than the present system, with elected representatives recallable at any time and an end to bureaucrats' and managers' privileges.

We fight for trade unions and the Labour Party to break with “social partnership” with the bosses, to militantly assert working-class interests.

In workplaces, trade unions, and Labour organisations; among students; in local campaigns; on the left and in wider political alliances we stand for:

- Independent working-class representation in politics
- A workers' government, based on and accountable to the labour movement

- A workers' charter of trade union rights — to organise, strike, picket effectively, and take solidarity action
 - Taxing the rich to fund good public services, homes, education and jobs for all
 - Workers' control of major industries and finance for a rapid transition to a green society
 - A workers' movement that fights all forms of oppression
 - Full equality for women, and social provision to free women from domestic labour. Reproductive freedoms and free abortion on demand.
 - Full equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people
 - Black and white workers' unity against racism
 - Open borders
 - Global solidarity against global capital — workers everywhere have more in common with each other than with their capitalist or Stalinist rulers
 - Democracy at every level of society, from the smallest workplace or community to global social organisation
 - Equal rights for all nations, against imperialists and predators big and small
 - Maximum left unity in action, and full openness in debate
- If you agree with us, take copies of *Solidarity* to sell — and join us! See: workersliberty.org/join-awl

Party in Britain?] “takes place quite in accordance with the principles of autonomy, that is, the self-administration of the trade unions.

On the other hand, no trade union statute can prevent or prohibit the party from electing the general secretary of the Confederation of Labour to its central committee, for here we are entirely in the domain of the autonomy of the party.”

n. TRADE UNION OR PARTY DISCIPLINE?

Communist victory in the unions, the victory of communists openly acting as communists, will be a product of working class upsurge and therefore of mass participation. But Trotsky does not contemplate an appeal to the “backward” mere trade union “masses” against the revolutionaries!

“It is clear that the influence of the Communist Party in general, including the trade unions, will grow, the more revolutionary the situation becomes. These conditions permit an appreciation of the degree and the form of the true, real and not the metaphysical autonomy of the trade unions.”

But which discipline do Communists operate under in the trade unions? Are they bound by trade union discipline? Won't the ‘discipline of the Party’ and the discipline of the trade unions make conflicting demands on the communist militants? Trotsky's answer is both “yes” and “no”:

“In the trade unions, the Communists, of course, submit to the discipline of the party, no matter what posts they occupy. This does not exclude but presupposes their submission to trade union discipline. In other words, the party does not impose upon them any line of conduct that contradicts the state of mind or the opinions of the majority of the members of trade unions.”

Trotsky knows that there will be times when the Communists put their own Party discipline before the discipline of the union. This will not be a matter of the Party bureaucratically hijacking the trade unions, but of communists being ready to lose union posts if principle demands it:

“In entirely exceptional cases, when the party considers impossible the submission of its members to some reactionary decision of the trade union, it points out openly to its members the consequences that flow from it, that is, removals from the trade union posts, expulsions, and so forth.” (Thesis 11)

There are times when the Party just “goes along” with what the union does, recognising a primary division of labour between union and Marxist party.

“In times of ‘peace,’ when the most militant forms of trade union action are isolated economic strikes, the direct role of the party in trade union action falls back to second place. As a general rule, the party does not make a decision on every isolated strike.”

o. PARTY CALCULATIONS HELP UNIONS

The Party “helps” the union. How?

“It helps the trade union to decide the question of knowing if the strike is opportune, by means of its political and economic information and by its advice. It serves the strike

with its agitation, etc.

First place in the strike belongs, of course, to the trade union.”

But first place, even in ‘union affairs’ does not always belong to the union:

“The situation changes radically when the movement rises to the general strike and still more to the direct struggle for power. In these conditions, the leading role of the party becomes entirely direct, open, and immediate.”

The Party exercises open leadership here by influencing some unions, which in this situation “become the organisational apparatus” of the Party — and by engaging in open conflict with others.

“The trade unions — naturally not those that pass over to the other side of the barricades — become the organisational apparatus of the party which, in the presence of the whole class, stands forth as the leader of the revolution, bearing the full responsibility.

In the field, extending between the partial economic strike and the revolutionary class insurrection, are placed all the possible forms of reciprocal relations between the party and the trade unions, the varying degrees of direct and immediate leadership, etc.

But under all conditions, the party seeks to win general leadership by relying upon the real autonomy of the trade unions which, as organisations — it goes without saying — are not “submitted” to it.” (Thesis 13)

p. TRADE UNION “INDEPENDENCE” A MYTH

For Trotsky there is no such thing as a stable equilibrium of trade union ‘independence’ outside of the class struggle. ‘Independence’ of the unions is an unreachable chimera, a myth.

“Facts show that politically ‘independent’ unions do not exist anywhere. There never have been any. Experience and theory say that there never will be any...”

The [Syndicalist] League [of Pierre Monatte, etc] does not act openly in the name of the right and the necessity for the advanced minority to fight to extend its influence over the most backward masses; it presents itself masked by what it calls trade union ‘independence.’ From this point of view, the League approaches [the politics of] the Socialist Party which also realises its leadership under cover of the phrase, ‘independence of the trade union movement.’ The Communist Party, on the contrary, says openly to the working class: here is my program, my tactics and my policy, which I propose to the trade unions.

The workers should have a double and triple distrust toward those pretenders to leadership who act incognito, under a mask, who make the proletariat [believe] that it has no need of leadership in general.” (Thesis 14)

Trotsky now brands the slogan of “independence of the unions” as not a working class slogan at all, but something alien to the working class:

“The ideology of trade union independence has nothing in common with the ideas and sentiments of the proletariat as a class. If the party, by its direction, is capable of assuring a

correct, clear-sighted, and firm policy in the trade unions, not a single worker will have the idea of rebelling against the leadership of the party.

It is clear that the abstract slogan of independence can under no condition come from the masses. Trade union bureaucracy is quite another thing. It not only sees professional competition in the party bureaucracy, but it even tends to make itself independent of control by the vanguard of the proletariat.

The slogan of independence is, by its very basis, a bureaucratic and not a class slogan." (Thesis 17)

q. THE FETISH OF "UNITY"

What about trade union unity?

"After the fetish of 'independence' the Syndicalist League also transforms the question of trade union unity into a fetish.

It goes without saying that the maintenance of the unity of the trade union organisations has enormous advantages, from the point of view of the daily tasks of the proletariat as well as from the point of view of the struggle of the Communist Party to extend its influence over the masses."

But the revolutionary party works by fighting against other — political and bureaucratic — forces within the trade union too:

"The facts prove that since the first successes of the revolutionary wing in the trade unions, the opportunists have set themselves deliberately on the road of split. Peaceful relations with the bourgeoisie are dearer to them than the unity of the proletariat. That is the indubitable summary of the post war experiences.

We Communists are in every way interested in proving to the workers that the responsibility for the splitting of the trade union organisations falls wholly upon the social democracy. But it does not at all follow that the hollow formula of unity is more important for us than the revolutionary tasks of the working class." (Thesis 18)

But who will unite?

"In fact the future of the revolution depends not upon the fusion of the two trade union apparatuses, but upon the unification of the majority of the working class around revolutionary slogans and revolutionary methods of struggle.

At present the unification of the working class is only possible by fighting against the class collaborationist (coalitionists) who are found not only in political parties but also in the trade unions." (Thesis 19)

r. WHAT IF "THE PARTY" IS WRONG?

But isn't all talk such as Trotsky's about "the Party" invalidated by the reality of the Stalinised PCF and its destructive 'Third Period' antics? At that time, the Trotskyists still considered themselves a faction of the Comintern ("Communist International").

"One may seek to object that all the preceding considerations would be correct only on condition that the Communist Party has a correct policy. But this objection is unfounded."

It is also to depart from a principled approach to the issues involved.

"The question of the relationships between the party, which represents the proletariat as it should be, and the trade unions, which represent the proletariat as it is, is the most fundamental question of revolutionary Marxism.

It would be veritable suicide to spurn the only possible principled reply to this question solely because the Communist Party... is now conducting a false policy towards the trade unions, as well as in other fields."

What that undoubted fact imposes on the real communists, the Left Opposition, organised as an expelled faction of the Comintern parties, is that:

"A correct policy must be counterposed to a wrong policy. Towards this end, the Left Opposition has been constituted as a faction. If it is considered that the French Communist Party in its entirety is in a wholly irremediable or hopeless state — which we absolutely do not think — another party must be counterposed to it. But the question of the relation of the party to the class does not change one iota by this fact."

Then he spells it out clearly:

"The Left Opposition considers that to influence the trade union movement, to help it find its correct orientation, to permeate it with correct slogans, is impossible except through the Communist Party (or a faction for the moment) which, besides its other attributes, is the central ideological laboratory of the working class." (Thesis 24)

s. AGAINST GANGSTER TACTICS

However, the Communists — and the Trotskyist faction — do not aim to win influence in the trade unions at any cost. Trotsky now criticises the Stalinised CPs in terms that have great relevance to those confronted with the antics of kitsch-Trotskyist organisations such as the SWP, and before it the Healyite Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP), acting like political bandits and gangsters for whom anything is permitted so long as it helps "build the party". What Trotsky condemns here is what many, perhaps most, of the kitsch-Trotskyist groups do and for decades have done.

"If the party buys its influence in the trade unions only at the price of a narrowing down and a factionalising of the latter — converting them into auxiliaries of the party for momentary aims and preventing them from becoming genuine mass organisations — the relations between the party and the class are wrong."

For all his criticism of Robert Louzon earlier, and repudiation of the idea that the revolutionary Party is necessarily antagonistic to the unions, and even to the working class, Trotsky, drawing to a close, now gives his own version of the idea that the Party cannot behave like a bureaucratic 'boss' towards the working class. Again, Trotsky might be commenting on the antics of the present-day kitsch "Trotskyists" who believe that "the Party" and its growth is properly the all-defining concern of revolutionary socialists:

"The changeability of the official Communist policy reflects its adventurist tendency to make itself master of the working class in the briefest time, by means of stage-play, inventions, superficial agitation, etc.

The way out of this situation does not, however, lie in counterposing the trade unions to the party (or to the faction) but in the irreconcilable struggle to change the whole policy of the party as well as that of the trade unions.” (Thesis 25)

t. WHAT SHOULD THE TROTSKYISTS DO?

Trotsky now defines the tasks of the International Left Opposition in relation to the trade unions:

“The Left Opposition must place the questions of the trade union movement in indissoluble connection with the questions of the political struggle of the proletariat. It must give a concrete analysis of the present stage of development of the French labour movement. It must give an evaluation, quantitative as well as qualitative, of the present strike movement and its perspectives in relation to the perspectives of the economic development of France.”

The Opposition criticises the ultra-left Stalinist from the “right” and is habitually denounced as rightist Social-Democratic faint-hearts and traitors by those who, from the mid-30s, will spend decades denouncing “Trotskyites” as “ultra-lefts” and “sectarians.” In doing that, the Opposition, “firmly” and “implacably” acts “against the supposedly revolutionary rantings of the (Stalinist party) bureaucracy, against political hysteria which does not take conditions into account, which confuses today with yesterday or with tomorrow.”

So the Marxists can and should, against the crazed Stalinists, unite with their opponents on the right, with the Social Democratic and trade union bureaucracies, and with backward, but sane, elements of the working class? No!

For Trotsky, the more firmly the Opposition fights the

“hysteria”, etc, of the ultra-left Stalinists, then “the more firmly and resolutely must it set itself against the elements of the right that take up its criticism and conceal themselves under it in order to introduce their tendencies into revolutionary Marxism.” (Thesis 26)

Finally Trotsky has a word for those appalled at the splits and divisions between old friends and comrades that Trotsky’s polemic reflects and prosecutes.

The chaos on the ostensibly revolutionary left does not suggest to Trotsky that the Opposition should seek refuge in the broad masses of the working-class movement, irrespective of politics. It does not suggest diplomatic “live and let live” arrangements between small “revolutionary” groups. It suggests to him that the Opposition must fight still harder, implacably, irreconcilably, ruthlessly, for its ideas.

“A new definition of boundaries? New polemics? New splits? That will be the lament of the good but tired souls, who would like to transform the Opposition into a calm retreat where one can tranquilly rest from the great tasks, while preserving intact the name of revolutionist “of the left.” No! we say to them, to these tired souls: we are certainly not travelling the same road. Truth has never yet been the sum of small errors. A revolutionary organisation has never yet been composed of small conservative groups, seeking primarily to distinguish themselves from each other. There are epochs when the revolutionary tendency is reduced to a small minority in the labour movement. But these epochs demand not arrangements between the small groups with mutual hiding of sins but on the contrary, a doubly implacable struggle for a correct perspective and an education of the cadres in the spirit of genuine Marxism.

Victory is possible only in this way.”

How to fight elections

The story of Labour's socialist campaign in Wallasey, 1987



Norman “Fatboy Slim” Cook hushes the crowd as fellow Housemartin Paul Heaton canvasses for Lol Duffy in Wallasey, 1987

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II: What do Marxists do in the labour movement?

From Workers' Liberty 33, July 1996, with some amending and updating in 2004

"It is necessary to find the particular link in the chain which must be grasped with all one's strength in order to keep the whole chain in place and prepare to move on resolutely to the next link."

V I Lenin

What is the role of Marxists such as the supporters of *Solidarity* and *Workers' Liberty* in the labour movement? Is it only to develop the influence of Marxism by making propaganda in the existing broad labour movement, essentially now, the trade unions? Or is it to build a revolutionary organisation — an organisation integrated in the broader labour movement, but nevertheless also a distinct entity already having some of the essential structures and activities of a fully fledged independent revolutionary party? If the answer is — "both", how do they fit together? The view that making propaganda is sufficient is more often expressed in the routine labour movement practice of ex-revolutionaries than in coherent argument, yet it is a very important current of thought in the labour movement: it is the "position" of vast numbers of ex-WRP and ex-SWP members who turn the sectarian fetish of "building the party" inside out. Who opt for a politically passive 'citizenship' in the existing labour movement.

This is an important question. On the broad political level, the counterposition of "developing the influence of Marxism" in the existing movement to "party-building" — the creation of a Marxist movement that is politically independent of the existing mass working-class movement and, organisationally, has concerns, rhythms and short term concerns "of its own" — goes to the heart of left-wing politics now, and of the difference between *Solidarity/Workers' Liberty* and the many "independent Marxists" — in the Socialist Alliance, for example — who have not properly assessed their experience in organisations like the SWP, or some other pseudo-Leninist grouping, and who think they can dispense with building a Marxist organisation and nevertheless be "practising" Marxists in the labour movement. The point is that you can't meaningfully develop the "influence of Marxism" as a revolutionary force without building a "revolutionary party."

Solidarity/Workers' Liberty's notion of revolutionary activity and organisation is rooted in the basic Marxist proposition that the class struggle takes place on three fronts, not one: the economic, the political, and the ideological. We work towards integrating the three fronts into a coherent strategy of class war and, ultimately, the struggle for working-class state power.

Certainly, the struggle for socialist ideas against bourgeois ideas, that is, the struggle on the "ideological front", conditions the other two; this struggle for ideas and programme is the unique and irreplaceable role of the revolutionary group or party. Yes. But if a group only conducts "ideological battle", and organises itself as a group only to fight on that front, inside the existing labour movement, then it is no revolutionary organisation. Moreover, it will not be effective even on that front in spreading Marxist ideas.

The purpose of socialist organisation cannot possibly be defined as just diffusing "the influence of Marxism" and Marxist politics within the structures of an existing, reform-minded mass movement now, pretending that the structures of either the old Labour Party or the trade unions can substitute for the specific structures required for all-round Marxist activity on the three fronts of the class struggle. [Here we do not attribute such ideas to T & M ("Jack" and "Susan"). They do not make such a counterposition. "T & M" were two other participants in the debate inside *Workers' Liberty* and *Solidarity* in 2004. T & M wrote appendix 2. The bulk of this pamphlet — parts III-X — was written as a polemic against their arguments. This article — reprinted as part II — was written in response to ideas of three comrades who left to join *Briefing* in 1995. It seemed to us that certain things in T & M logically lead in the same direction.]

Those who counterpose "ideologically rearming the workers' movement" to "building the party" beg the question: what exactly do you think such general ideas as "rearming the labour movement" with socialist and Marxist ideas mean if not the creation over time of a powerful revolutionary party at the head of the broader labour movement, in the first place, of the trade unions? To counterpose "politically rearming the labour movement" to "building the party" is not to know the arse from the elbow of what serious socialist activity in the labour movement is. At the end of the day, both formulas mean one and the same thing. At the end of the process, both formulas will have matched up and merged into one: a mass revolutionary party at the head of the broader labour movement.

Beyond those generalisations, it is a matter of working out concretely at a given moment which is best of the possible ways the organised collective of Marxists, be they more or less numerous, can relate to an existing mass reformist labour movement so as to bring about its transformation, or the next step in its transformation. The growth of the Marxist organisation is both a measure of how the process of transformation is proceeding and progressing, and a necessary instrument for further transformation.

More: the Marxists must organise themselves so as to fight the class struggle on all fronts now, despite the dominance of the trade union bureaucrats. Or does someone think we can transform the labour movement apart from the class struggle? Or that Marxists must wait until the movement is transformed before immersing themselves in immediate class struggle? Or that an organised collective of Marxists able to act coherently as a combat organisation is useless in the class struggle here and now? Nobody could be that stupid!

Developments in the Labour Party, and the consolidation of Blairism there for example, have greatly depended on affairs in industry. Think of recent labour movement history.

In 1984-5, the miners' strike could have been won by solidarity from dockers and other key workers, even though the TUC leaders sold it out. A network of rank-and-file activists in key positions across industry, even if only a few thousand strong, might have won solidarity for the miners — that is, made the difference between victory and defeat. If the min-

ers had won, things would have gone very differently in the Labour Party... Blairism, if it had appeared at all, would have been crushed before it became a powerful force.

In future struggles a rank-and-file network of the revolutionary minority in industry may make the difference between victory and defeat in big struggles, and thus affect the whole mood and potential of the political movement. Who will build that rank-and-file movement if not the Marxists organised as a distinct, militant, “tightly knit” minority?

The organised revolutionary minority pursues all sorts of tactics, in part dependent on its own size and possibilities, in working towards reorganising the existing mass labour movement. But the *sine qua non* of being able to work out any tactics, and then put them into practice, is the existence of a revolutionary organisation. Without that we can only babble.

This is the answer to those who conclude from a bad experience with, for example, the SWP that everything a small Marxist organisation does, beyond what a group of vaguely propagandising supporters of a socialist paper might do, is futile and sectarian and, therefore, that instead of “building the party”, we should just be a laid back, lazy group, desultorily promoting “the ideological rearmament of the labour movement”. Revolutionary socialists must indeed be in the labour movement on pain of sterility. They must also on pain of a different sort of sterility be autonomous — retaining the will and the ability to promote workers’ and young people’s struggles which take place outside of, and outside the tempo of, the existing labour movement.

A “Marxist” group, not to speak of solo Marxist individuals, content to jog along within the tempo of the reformist labour movement, telling itself that it is promoting “ideological rearmament”, and “the influence of Marxism” would at best develop only a vague, unstructured and diffuse influence for a blunted, abstract “Marxism”. A “Marxism” lacking embodiment in a militant organisation which strives for leadership in economic and political struggles would be like the clock with no spring: a poor joke.

It seems to us that the tasks of socialists now are, by way of Marxist propaganda and agitation:

- to educate, multiply and group together the Marxists;
- to bind them together in a coherent organisation, capable of both collective political thought and united action; and capable of knitting together the political and industrial fronts of the class struggle with a coherent battle on the “ideological” front for a consistently proletarian world outlook;
- to organise Marxist fractions in the trade unions and Labour Parties, and among unorganised groups of workers, youth, etc.;
- to work towards building a rank-and-file movement in the trade unions;
- to organise a class-struggle left in the Labour Party and trade unions;
- to promote the class struggle day to day;
- to work steadily towards the subversion of the structures and institutions of the existing labour movement, and towards the movement’s reorganisation — augmented from the very large layers of workers presently unorganised — into a new movement, led by and grouped around a revolutionary Marxist programme and party.

The Marxist organisation needed to do those things has to be built now. They simply cannot happen without the continual

interaction of the Marxist organisation with the class struggle and mass movement. If that interaction happens fruitfully then the Marxist organisation will grow — before the full transformation of the labour movement — by ones and twos, then dozens and hundreds, and then by thousands and tens of thousands. It is a key index of the maturation of the British labour movement and a prerequisite for its successful transformation. Ever watched water boil? All the bubbles don’t cascade at once.

Serious socialists do not, like the sectarians, try to “build the party” irrespective of and wilfully apart from the labour movement and the working class, but, equally, we do not sink the revolutionary group into the rhythms and norms of a labour movement which is not revolutionary and which involves only a minority of the working class. That is as much a recipe for suicide as the antics of the sectarians — by an overdose of sleeping pills rather than an excess of acid, or some other sectarian hallucinogenic.

To deny that a militant Marxist organisation — and not just some Fabian-Marxist “think-tank” — must be built continuously, in the ongoing class struggles and inside the very process of transforming the labour movement, is either to think that the transformation will happen “of itself”, spontaneously and mechanically, or else to believe that someone or something else will bring about and consolidate the transformation of the labour movement. Who, if not us, the Marxists, might they be? Marxists who deny this do not, when you come down to it, have much use for their own “Marxism”.

Can that transformation happen spontaneously, as a result of economic class struggle? It will not. Unless the Marxists are strong enough to shape events you will probably get fiascos and muddle and confusion like that experienced by the Bennite left of the 1980s.

The idea that revolutionary socialists relate to the Labour Party and trade unions like a farmer waiting for his crops to grow implies not only a vulgar-evolutionist ripening of the Labour Party, but fond belief in a stable, peaceful never-to-be-disrupted development for capitalism, too. And this old “Militant” [Now the Socialist Party and *Socialist Appeal* — the latter has since, in the 2020s, become the “Revolutionary Communist Party”.] idea that the Labour Party was organically ripening towards full Marxism, looks not too convincing today in the era of Blair: Lenin-weaned Marxists however know that as well as evolution there is devolution.

Serious socialists fight for the hegemony of Marxism in the labour movement, and to do that we must build, as slowly as necessary and as quickly as possible, a coherent three-front class-struggle Marxist organisation. If socialists don’t build up now by way of the ones and twos and threes that can be won, we will never be big enough to win over the tens, hundreds, thousands and millions.

Spain in the 1930s illustrates the foolishness of counterposing the building of a revolutionary organisation now — even if it is no more than the rough draft of the mass party of the future — to reorganising the labour movement. There was a strong labour movement in Spain. Much of it was anarchist. The second most important current was reformism. How might the mass revolutionary party have emerged out of that labour movement? For sure not by the small group of Trotskyists burying themselves in the mass movement, eschewing autonomy and party initiatives, and waiting for History to do its work. Trotsky rightly criticised the quasi-Trotskyist POUM for political woolliness and lack of vigorous intervention directed towards the mass anarchist movement.

The tactical choices of the Marxists at crucial turning

points were decisive. For example, in 1934 the Socialist Party youth — the youth of the reformist movement, whose leader, Largo Caballero, had been a state councillor of the recent dictator Primo de Rivera — came out for a Fourth International. The Trotskyists were too stiff and proud to do the entry work Trotsky advocated. The Stalinists got in there and hegemonised the youth, thus marginalising the Trotskyists.

And a few years later, in large part because of the strength of the Stalinist Party, fascist catastrophe engulfed the whole Spanish labour movement before it could be reorganised. We are not, in Britain or in Spain, guaranteed a happy ending to these affairs! Defeat, defeat for a whole long historical period, is possible. We are today still living out the consequences of the defeats of the working class in the 1920s and '30s.

The lesson of history is that even an initially small but competent and combative revolutionary Marxist party can be decisive; that it can make the difference in the heat of mass struggles between the labour movement being able to reorganise itself and win, and crushing defeat.

That is the truth taught to us positively by the victory of the Bolsheviks in 1917 — and negatively by the tragedy of the Spanish working class in the 1930s. In Spain if they had been sharper and harder, more “sectarian” in the sense of politically intransigent and less sectarian in the sense of being passive and inert, then the small Trotskyist group of the early 1930s, out of which emerged both the centrist POUM and the Bolshevik-Leninists, might have secured the victory of the proletarian revolution.

That is why revolutionary politics is not something for the future — “on the barricades”, as the old middle-class cliché has it — but for here and now. There is an organic relationship — seed to luxuriant growth — between selling papers and magazines on a street corner now and victory or defeat in mass revolutionary struggles in the future.

If we do not build now, even when the mass political labour movement is in the doldrums, then we will not be able to seize chances when they come, as they will certainly come. We may not be able to avoid catastrophe.

What was wrong with the old WRP Healyites, and what is wrong with the SWP now, is that they do not understand how the work of building the revolutionary party — which is the epochal task of those who accept the programme and tradition of Lenin and Trotsky — must be related to the already-existing mass labour movements. Where their mirror-image “Marxists” sink — often without trace — completely into the existing labour movement, the sectarians conceive of “building the party” as a process more or less fully autonomous from the existing movement and even, sometimes, from the working class.

The idea that we can be fully autonomous is absurd. Yet some autonomy of the Marxists is essential. You cannot do what we need to do and aim to persuade millions of workers to do by way of the existing structures of the British labour movement alone! Even if we led the labour movement, all the time we would strive to develop the existing structures and go beyond them. Would we not promote workers’ councils during revolutionary struggles? What are workers’ councils and soviets to Marxist theory except recognition that even

the strongest labour movement under capitalism, even with the greatest “influence of Marxism”, is limited and inadequate to the tasks of working class revolution?

Therefore, while socialists work in the labour movement structures and promote our politics, projects and perspectives within them, we do not voluntarily confine ourselves to them or depend on them. If we had enough people we would do things criminally neglected by the labour movement now, like organising young people. We would turn those young people towards the labour movement, but we would not give a damn for the “legality” of that movement if we could ignore it with impunity and still do our work with them.

We do not go quiet when the official structures go quiet. If some parts of the labour movement die — and that is what the Labour Party as a workers’ party faces if the Blairites succeed — we will not die. We will work to build — better! — replacements.

Serious socialists have to reject both SWPish sectarianism towards the existing labour movement, and also the attitude of those “Marxists” who would become mere passengers, enunciating an occasional message to their fellow-passengers. Passengers are not builders of new tracks and better engines! The sectarians are sterile and impotent because they stand aside; the others are sterile because they cling self-distortingly to the existing structures and become parasitically dependent on them, incapable of independent initiative. They fail to develop the sinews and muscles of an independent organisation in relation to the class, the class struggle, and the existing reformist labour movement. They fail to be what socialists must be: the representatives of the movement’s future, active in the here and now to carve out that future. James Connolly said it well: “The only true prophets are those who carve out the future they announce”.

We repeat: the point is that, ultimately, both come to the same thing in relation to the existing labour movement. Both remove or minimise the creative activity of Marxists as an organised force in the future evolution of the mass labour movement.

If the above points are agreed, then we can agree that the Workers’ Party USA of the 1940s, rejecting JP Cannon’s idea of a semi-monolithic party, presents us with one of the best models of how the Marxists should organise — the way in fact that Lenin’s party organised.

Of course, the majority at a given moment has to set the politics and the organisational goals of the organisation, and democratically elected officials have to be given authority to direct work day-to-day. Within that framework, without which the organisation would be nothing but a talking shop, there has to be full democratic freedom of opinion and freedom to express that opinion.

The November 1995 Workers’ Liberty conference wrote into our constitution the long existing right of people with dissenting views to publish these views in our press.

The alternatives are the SWP’s replica of an autocratic cult or the loosely structured regime in, say, *Briefing*, which is the private property of a small clique, organised for nothing more onerous or ambitious than publishing a few timid little “left consensus” articles without tang, substance or consequence.

III: Trotsky and anti-Labour candidates in the 30s

“Q: Was the ILP correct in running as many candidates as possible in the recent General Election, even at the risk of splitting the vote?”

Trotsky: Yes. It would have been foolish for the ILP to have sacrificed its political programme in the interests of so-called unity, to allow the LP to monopolise the platform as the Communist Party did. We do not know our strength until we test it. There is always a risk of splitting, and of losing deposits, but such risks must be taken: otherwise we boycott ourselves” (emphasis Trotsky’s).

(Once again the ILP, November 1935. Interview by E. Robertson).

“While the revolutionary organisations are struggling to gain influence in the working class, the bourgeois ideologists counterpose the “working class as a whole” not only against the party of the working class but against its trade unions, which these ideologists accuse of wanting to “annex” the working class... The bourgeois ideologists counterpose the working class as object to the working class as conscious subject. For it is only through its class conscious minority that the working class gradually becomes a factor in history... It is wrong for Louzon to employ the terminology customarily used by our opponents...”

Leon Trotsky

“The Fourth International resolutely rejects and condemns trade union fetishism, equally characteristic of trade unionists and syndicalists.

(a) Trade unions do not offer, and in line with their task, composition, and manner of recruiting membership, cannot offer a finished revolutionary program; in consequence, they cannot replace the party. The building of national revolutionary parties as sections of the Fourth International is the central task of the transitional epoch.

(b) Trade unions, even the most powerful, embrace no more than 20 to 25 percent of the working class, and at that, predominantly the more skilled and better paid layers. The more oppressed majority of the working class is drawn only episodically into the struggle, during a period of exceptional upsurges in the labour movement. During such moments it is necessary to create organisations ad hoc, embracing the whole fighting mass: strike committees, factory committees, and finally, soviets.

(c) As organisations expressive of the top layers of the proletariat, trade unions, as witnessed by all past historical experience, including the fresh experience of the anarcho-syndicalist unions in Spain, developed powerful tendencies toward compromise with the bourgeois-democratic regime...”

Trotsky, The Transitional Programme, 1938

“Without the party, independently of the party, skipping over the party, through a substitute for the party, the proletarian revolution can never triumph. That is the principal lesson of the last decade. To be sure, the British trade unions can become a powerful lever of the proletarian revolution. They can, for example, under certain conditions and for a certain period, even replace the workers’ Soviets. But they cannot play such a role without the Communist Party and certainly not against it, but only provided that communist influence in the trade unions becomes decisive. We have paid too dearly for this conclusion as to the role and significance of the party for the proletarian revolution to renounce it so lightly or even to have it weakened.”

Trotsky: Lessons Of October, mid-1924

1. INDEPENDENT LABOUR PARTY CANDIDATES?

We have seen what Leon Trotsky thought about the big questions raised by T & M (see appendix 2) of the trade unions’ relationship with the working class and the revolutionary party. We will now discuss the question of electoral tactics, etc.

The easiest way into what is wrong with T & M’s presentation of the issues we face is first to discuss their quotations from Trotsky. They quote:

“A party’s inability to establish correct relations with the working class reveals itself most glaringly in the area of the trade union movement... The fatal excesses of the ‘third period’ were due to the desire of the small Communist minority to act as though it had a majority behind it... No better favour could be done for the trade union bureaucracy. Had it been within its power to award the Order of the Garter, it should have so decorated all the leaders of the Comintern and Profintern.

“The revolutionary proletarian Party must be welded together by a clear understanding of its historic tasks. This presupposes a scientifically based programme. At the same time, the revolutionary party must know how to establish correct relations with the class. This presupposes a policy of revolutionary realism.”

Leon Trotsky, “The ILP and the New International”, 1933

“For every revolutionary organisation in England its attitude to the masses and to the class is almost coincident with its attitude toward the Labour Party, which bases itself upon the trade unions. At this time the question whether to function inside the Labour Party or outside it is not a principled question, but a question of actual possibilities. In any case, without a strong faction in the trade unions, and, consequently, in the Labour Party itself, the ILP is doomed to impotence even today... Yet, for a long period, the ILP attached much greater importance to the ‘united front’ with the insignificant Communist Party than to work in mass organisations...”

“But isn’t it a fact that a Marxist faction would not succeed in changing the structure and policy of the Labour Party?”

With this we are entirely in accord: the bureaucracy will not surrender. But the revolutionists, functioning outside and inside, can and must succeed in winning over tens and hundreds of thousands of workers...

Leon Trotsky, "Once Again the ILP"

Trotsky is answering questions put by the Canadian poet Earle Birney (E. Robertson), a Trotskyist and a member of the ILP. It is late 1935. Britain has recently had a general election in which the Labour Party confronted a bloc of Tories, National Liberals and National Labour — the supporters of the outgoing "National Government". This "National Government" had been set up in 1931 when the minority Labour Government (1929-31) split, as did the Labour Party, on the Labour Government leaders' proposal to cut the unemployment benefit of millions of workers.

The Labour Prime Minister, James Ramsey MacDonald, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Philip Snowden, together with the former railworkers' leader and Cabinet member J H Thomas, have formed the National Labour Party and joined a section of the Liberals and the whole Tory Party to form a so-called "National Government". In the ensuing 1931 General Election the Labour Party has been reduced to not many more MPs than it had had when it made its first decisive breakthrough in 1906. MacDonald remains Prime Minister until the eve of the 1935 General Election. The "National Government" is essentially a Tory Government, and, in 1935 the Tory leader, Stanley Baldwin, becomes Prime Minister.

Some variant of the 1931 split, we have argued, is the very best we could now hope for with New Labour. But whereas in 1931 only a handful of MPs went with MacDonald and Snowden, the rest of the PLP going with the TUC, if the TUC were to break with Blair now the big majority of the PLP would, for certain, go with Blair or Brown...

After the 1931 split, the Labour Party veered sharply to the left, electing as Leader the ineffectual pacifist George Lansbury, the Michael Foot of the 1930s (only far better — in 1922 he had led the Councillors of Poplar, East London into defying the Government and going to jail in defence of the unemployed in the borough). In the 1935 election, though the "National Government" emerged with a big majority, Labour did considerably better than in 1931.

This is the situation Trotsky is talking about when he says what he does about ILP candidates in the 1935 general election — that the ILP was right to stand as many candidates as they could against a Labour Party that was tied to the TUC and virtually run by the union leaders.

In the same year, Transport & General Workers Union (T&G) leader Ernest Bevin destroyed the leadership of George Lansbury, and put Clement Attlee in as Labour leader. Bevin would be one of those who pioneered the Labour Party's turn from the 19th century economic Liberal assumptions that had led MacDonald and Snowden to try to "balance the books" by cutting the dole, towards the "deficit budgeting" Keynesian policies that would constitute the reformist/bourgeois consensus for the next 40 years.

The Labour Party of 1935 was not only seen by workers with any degree of class consciousness as their Party. It was their Party. It was the trade unions' Party in a sense that is a million political miles from the relationship the unions and the working class have now with Blair's New Labour Party. We can describe that Labour Party and the present Labour Party both as "bourgeois workers' parties", as we do, but it is a deliberate exercise in political self-blinding if we do not also recognise that they are radically different things. They

are at opposite poles in the hybrid, unstable concept we call a "bourgeois workers' party".

And what was the ILP? Founded by Keir Hardie in 1893 — with the support of Frederick Engels — the ILP had, together with the unions, been the main founder of the Labour Party in 1900 and after. Until 1918, when Constituency Labour Parties with individual members were first set up, there would be no individual members of the Labour Party, only members of affiliated unions and of the affiliated socialist societies, of which by far the most important was the ILP. Together with Keir Hardie, until he died in 1915, MacDonald and Snowden had been the leaders of the ILP. They were pacifists during World War One. In 1921 the ILP came close to affiliating to the Communist International and "contributed" to the new Communist Party such important people as Rajani Palme Dutt, the central political leader of the CP until well into the 1960s.

In 1932 the ILP split from the Labour Party (leaving a lot of former members behind). In 1935 the ILP was the leftist remnant of the old party, under the leadership of James Maxton MP, John McGovern MP and Fenner Brockway. The ILP had disaffiliated from the Labour Party over the question of whether its MPs would be under Labour Party or ILP discipline. It had gravitated towards the Stalinist International, and ultimately a big Stalinist faction had split off to join the CP.

By 1935 it was something upwards of 5,000 strong, with a handful of MPs, most importantly the Clydeside MP Jimmy Maxton. It had declared for a Fourth International (though its affiliation throughout the 1930s would be with the international association of "Right Communists" — the German Brandlerites, the US Lovestoneites, etc). A Trotskyist fraction had developed in the ILP, led by CLR James.

The ILP had never developed politically beyond a left centrism in which the elements of reformism, pacifism and revolutionary Marxism were incoherently mixed together. As the CP moved further and further to the right — by 1938, advocating a coalition government with "progressive Tories" like Winston Churchill, it was to the right of the right wing of the Labour Party — the ILP was the most important group on the British left. The working class mobilisation in 1936 to stop the fascists marching into Jewish East London, which deliberately cultivated myth attributes to the CP, was first and foremost the work of the ILP.

What about entryism into the Labour Party? Trotsky favoured entryism in the Labour Party. The first British Trotskyist group had emerged from the CPGB in late 1931 when a small handful of Trotskyists — led by Reg Groves and Harry Wicks — had split off. After our movement's break with the Communist International in response to the Stalinist's peaceful surrender to Hitler in Germany — Jan-March 1933 — Trotsky suggested to this British group that they should join the Labour Party. Not fully emancipated from the CP's Third Period sectarianism towards the Labour Party, and afflicted with propagandist passivity, they refused. By the late 30s the leaders of this group were in the Labour Party, not as entryists but as citizens — and Reg Groves was a correspondent of *The New Leader*, the US social democratic paper run by those right-wing social democrats who had split off from the left-moving Socialist Party with which the American Trotskyists had merged for a while in the mid-1930s. [See James P Cannon's *History of American Trotskyism*].

In 1935 Trotsky probably still had some hope left of winning the ILP to his politics. He expressed the opinion, obliquely, that the basis of their split from the Labour Party had been

stupid, but he did not propose that the ILP re-join the Labour Party. He did advocate that the ILP, where it was not standing candidates itself, should support Labour Party candidates. (In the 1935 elections, the ILP had supported only some LP candidates, those who had opposed League of Nations sanctions against Italy for its recent invasion of Ethiopia. This was on the ground that serious sanctions imply war, and to call for sanctions was to implicitly call for war).

2. FOR TROTSKY THE NORM IS THAT SOCIALISTS CONTEST ELECTIONS

“Q: Was the ILP correct in running as many candidates as possible in the recent General Election, even at the risk of splitting the vote?”

Trotsky: Yes. It would have been foolish for the ILP to have sacrificed its political programme in the interests of so-called unity, to allow the LP to monopolise the platform as the Communist Party did. We do not know our strength until we test it. There is always a risk of splitting, and of losing deposits but such risks must be taken: otherwise we boycott ourselves.”

To Trotsky it is the norm that, when it is a practical possibility, the revolutionary organisation stands in elections, even if that means letting in the Tory or Liberal — or, for that matter, the fascist.

Decades may, and did, pass during which a group of Marxists work in the Labour Party, either because the Marxists lack numbers, or because the Labour Party is as wide open as it was in the 1970s and 80s, or both, and for that reason let themselves be bound by Labour Party discipline not to stand against the party. We do so for *our own* reasons, not out of any general principle of deference to the Labour Party or the trade unions, or any general principle that we cannot stand in elections until we have majority support in the working class.

We no longer have any such good grounds to accept the discipline of the Labour Party; and we have never accepted the discipline of the trade unions over our political activity. (The idea of trade-union discipline over our *politics* is entirely alien to our conceptions of both politics and trade unions.)

What does this picture of Trotsky's politics on how revolutionary socialists should have behaved in the general election of 1935, say to us about our situation now?

It says that for people with our politics, *the fundamental and overriding question* is that the Marxist organisation, the bearer of the revolutionary socialist programme, political culture and perspective should exist, should propagate its own politics, should recruit members and build its strength — *whatever about the reformist mass working class trade union-based bourgeois workers' party, and even if the standing of socialist candidates should split the working class vote and let the Tory or Liberal in.*

The Marxists do not politically boycott themselves!

The nearest thing to an adequate socialist organisation in Britain when Trotsky wrote was the ILP, within which the Trotskyist faction functioned openly. Trotsky responds with some vehemence to the idea that the ILP — not the Trotskyist movement but the left centrist ILP, of whose actual tactics in the election, voting for some Labour candidates only, Trotsky disapproved — should not stand candidates.

What about the idea, which has arisen amongst us, that a prerequisite for standing a socialist candidate against Labour is the previous endorsement of that candidate by a sizeable section of the local trade unionists and even of the local La-

bour Party? It plays no part in Trotsky's assessment. No part at all.

It is plain he assumes that the trade unions nationally and locally, and most trade unionists, will vote for the Labour Party and against the ILP candidate.

For Trotsky the question resolves into “boycotting” or not “boycotting” ourselves politically, programmatically.

The election is an opportunity for agitation and propaganda, and for educating, recruiting, grouping and regrouping the workers around the socialist organisation. It is an opportunity to make the socialist organisation a better and more powerful lever in its broad labour movement — in the first place, trade union — work.

He accepts that sometimes a socialist candidate will split the vote and let the Tory in. But we are not, he has said elsewhere, *inspectors-general of history* or of the broad labour movement — we are militants fighting to build an organisation that will be able to make our politics into a living, shaping force in the subsequent development of the mass labour movement.

Trotsky knew the part socialist candidacies had played in spreading socialism and in winning trade unions for independent working-class politics in the past.

Even if T & M did not, as they do, muddle and confuse all the concepts employed in *“The Case for Revolutionary Realism”*, for people in Trotsky's tradition nothing they say would amount to a serious argument against standing socialist candidates even against *the old Labour Party in one of its better periods* (1935). It is a sobering thought to imagine what Trotsky would say if he came upon us now, faced with the Blairite party, engaged in this very odd discussion! (On the other hand, for our side of the argument, it is an encouraging thought to imagine what he'd say to T & M and their co-thinkers!)

Even at the beginning of the 1980s, when the Labour Party was wide open to socialists, the Labour Party in the country had been bitterly at odds with the recent Labour Government, and virtually everything we needed to do could be done openly and through the Labour Party — even then we never argued that it would be *wrong in principle* to stand candidates against the Labour Party.

For example, the General Election of 1979 was one of the great turning points in 20th century British history. It put the Thatcherites in power, with all that followed from that. We understood and publicly explained what was at stake. We denounced the stupid sectarian antics of the left coalition called Socialist Unity which stood a few candidates. We organised the Socialist Campaign for a Labour Victory (SCLV) which, under the Labour Party banner, stood socialist candidates who openly criticised and condemned the outgoing Labour Government and used the SCLV literature we produced in their campaigning. (We used as our model the Communist Party in the early 20s, when Communists were still able to stand under the Labour banner).

In 1992, the Kinnockite Labour Party was gestating the Blairite coup. We opposed the anti-Labour candidacy of the Militant in the Walton by-election, a candidacy backed by virtually all the left. One of us wrote a series of bitter polemics against the antics of the sectarians in Walton. Even then we wrote in one of the polemics that opposing anti-Labour candidates for us was not and never could be more than a matter of calculations that in the given situation it did not make political sense.

The survey above of Trotsky's comments on the 1935 General Election does not deal with the question of trade union affiliation to the Labour Party. Trotsky did not want the un-

ions to disaffiliate. But Trotsky's keynote idea, that you do not *boycott yourself* and your own politics, together with his hard-boiled attitude to the likelihood that socialist candidates will sometimes do damage to the trade union-based mass "workers' party", by splitting the working class vote and letting the Liberal or Tory in — does, in fact, amount to a pretty clear implied statement. If union support for socialist candidates led to disaffiliation he would have had the same attitude to that as he takes to trade union splits resulting from right-wing reaction to militancy and the growth of the influence of Marxists.

You do not boycott yourself politically even to avoid episodic damage to the broader labour movement. That idea indicates an implied attitude to what we are discussing.

3. T & M CLING TO OUTMODED "NORMS"

T & M cling to the "norms" that made sense to us when we did much of our political work in and through the Labour Party — long after everything that dictated that approach has changed radically and when changed circumstances have given that approach a radically different class content.

In effect, they say, the revolutionary socialists should accept the political discipline of the Blairite party in order to preserve the unions' links with the Party!

For T & M, *not* standing in elections, not challenging the Labour Party, even the Blairite New Labour, is the norm.

They say they will make an exception if a candidate with strong union backing is blocked by the Blairites. *Then* the unions may be asked to give money for the campaign against the official Labour candidate — but not otherwise!

What is wrong with that? It puts up an enormously high threshold of trade union support to be reached before we can get, or try to get — right now that is all it means in practice — union support against New Labour. For anything more than an odd, freakish such candidate to be possible, the process of unions separating from New Labour must already have gone a very long way.

Their conclusion for now and for the calculable future is that we accept — and defend against "the sectarians" — the Blairite/union-leader status quo.

We give "the unions" a veto on what we do in politics! We are bound by the discipline of the Labour-TU relationship! We give the Blairite party a veto on what we do to fight them!

And if socialists or labour-representation candidates stand? We say to them — hands off union funds! All you want is for "the working class organisation to hand over money to somebody else".

It all adds up to a position that the Marxist political organisation should subordinate itself to the status quo and go on letting the Blair Labour Party have a monopoly on "labour movement" candidates. Indefinitely.

That would be suicidal nonsense!

Repeat: the norm is for the Marxist organisation to stand where it can in elections.

On principle we reject all restrictive bourgeois state rules that require that a candidate must have the prior endorsement of a sizeable number of electors.

We reject on principle all rules that demand of a candidate a deposit which may be "lost" if the candidate gets too few votes.

We do not do that to then accept that a self-imposed, prohibitively high threshold of trade-union support can be used to inhibit revolutionary socialists standing in elections. Trotsky said it: "We do not boycott ourselves".

The measure of T & M's politics is that this is exactly what they want socialists to do.

In practice all sorts of tactical questions, including local trade-unionist support, would come into our calculations. But in *principle* we accept no minimum of trade-union support without which we cannot act or support others acting. Election work can help us win support from trade unionists which we did not have before.

4. REVOLUTIONARY MARXIST OR TRADE UNIONIST POINT OF VIEW?

If the trade unions unanimously or in their big majority made a co-ordinated effort to reclaim the Labour Party, to end their subordinate donkey-to-rider relationship to the Blairites, then a great deal could be done. The election of new trade union leaders has opened up possibilities of a fight here that for years simply did not exist. We urge the trade unions to fight to assert themselves in the Labour Party. We urge the more combative unions to do that even if the majority lags behind and tries to use the call for "unity" to hold them back.

The results of a big union fight-back would certainly be to split the New Labour Party; and almost certainly the "reclaimed Labour Party" would shed the big majority of the PLP. *It would be in effect the foundation of a new trade union based Labour Party.*

Short of that concerted action, or a sudden miraculous change of heart or collapse of self-belief in the dominant Blairites, the trade unions are tied to an explicitly pro-bourgeois parliamentary party — to a big bourgeois party in the narrowest and most clear cut day-to-day sense.

The idea that nothing has changed except that the PLP reflects the change of the unions to "business unionism" is, as a historical account of how "New Labour" replaced Old Labour, plain nonsense. Even in terms of "business unionism" this government is more or less entirely on the bosses' side — *with* the bourgeoisie and against the business unionists.

There is no partnership with the business unionists, such as there was between previous Labour governments and the reformist trade unions. The only way you can argue otherwise — as for example Polly Toynbee does regularly in the *Guardian* — is to point to things like low inflation, employment figures and the minimum wage, and claim that these are great gifts from the New Labour Government to the labour movement.

A symptom of T & M's one-sidedly trade unionist point of view is the strange deployment of a quotation from Trotsky — the first of their epigraphs — in which Trotsky is concerned with the *revolutionary organisation's relations to the trade unions*. It has nothing to do with the points in dispute! Nothing whatsoever.

The first quotation at the top of *their* piece is strung together by way of making very large cuts in Trotsky's texts. Because so much that they say rests on a conflation of the trade unions and the Labour Party, it is worthwhile to quote here what was cut from Trotsky. We allege confusion, not chicanery.

Trotsky: "A party's inability to establish correct relations with the working class reveals itself most glaringly in the area of the trade union movement ... " — so far T & M. This is how Trotsky continues:

"That is why I consider it necessary to dwell on this question. The trade unions were formed during the period of the growth and rise of capitalism. They had as their task the raising of the material and cultural level of the proletariat and the extension of its political rights. This work,

which in England lasted over a century, gave the trade unions tremendous authority among the workers. The decay of British capitalism, under the conditions of decline of the world capitalist system, undermined the basis for the reformist work of the trade unions. Capitalism can continue to maintain itself only by lowering the standard of living of the working class. Under these conditions trade unions can either transform themselves into revolutionary organisations or become lieutenants of capital in the intensified exploitation of the workers.

The trade-union bureaucracy, which has satisfactorily solved its own social problem, took the second path. It turned all the accumulated authority of the trade unions against the socialist revolution and even against any attempts of the workers to resist the attacks of capital and reaction. From that point on, the most important task of the revolutionary party became the liberation of the workers from the reactionary influence of the trade-union bureaucracy. In this decisive field, the Comintern revealed its complete inadequacy.

In 1926-27, especially in the period of the miners' strike and the General Strike, that is, at the time of the greatest crimes and betrayals of the General Council of the Trades Union Congress, the Comintern obsequiously toadied to the highly placed strikebreakers, cloaked them with its authority in the eyes of the masses and helped them remain in the saddle. That is how the Minority Movement was struck a mortal blow. Frightened by the results of its own work, the Comintern bureaucracy went to the extreme of ultraradicalism." (After this comes the second part of the T & M quote: "The fatal excesses of the 'third period' were due to the desire of the small Communist minority to act as though it had a majority behind it... No better favour could be done for the trade union bureaucracy. Had it been within its power to award the Order of the Garter, it should have so decorated all the leaders of the Comintern and Profintern.").

But Trotsky continues thus:

"As was said, the trade unions now play not a progressive but a reactionary role. Nevertheless, they still embrace millions of workers. One must not think that the workers are blind and do not see the change in the historic role of the trade unions. But what is to be done: The revolutionary road is seriously compromised in the eyes of the left wing of the workers by the zigzags and adventures of official communism. The workers say to themselves: The trade unions are bad, but without them it might be even worse. This is the psychology of one who is in a blind alley."

And their quote on "revolutionary realism" is cut in the middle of the sentence. "This presupposes a policy of revolutionary realism, equally removed from opportunistic vagueness and sectarian aloofness."

"Opportunistic vagueness" is not a bad description of what T & M seem to be advocating...

The bits T & M cut are, like the bits they quoted, not to the direct point in our discussion. They are, however, very much to the point of a more general issue behind this discussion: the difference between the revolutionary Marxist and the left trade union point of view.

We are not in the same sort of historical period as Trotsky. That fact has to be taken into account when we evaluate these words of Trotsky for what they may tell us about our situa-

tion. But much of the picture he paints of the nature and limitations of trade unions and of the trade union bureaucracy is as true for us as it was for Trotsky.

The role of the trade union bureaucracy in the victory and consolidation of Thatcher in the country; in the victory and consolidation of Blairism in the Labour Party; and in creating the self-induced prostration of the trade unions before Blair and Brown for so long, is known to us all. *Solidarity* published an editorial nearly a year ago arguing that the fundamental significance of the emerging "left" trade union leaders lies not in their "leftism", which by no means is to be trusted, but in the fact that their emergence signals the revival of real trade unionism, of unions that pursue the interests of their members (however inadequately).

The quotation from Trotsky used as their second epigraph in *The Case for Revolutionary Realism* (which is mislabelled and misdated: it is taken from *In The Middle Of the Road*, November 1935) is from their point of view scarcely less maladroily chosen than the one we have been discussing.

Trotsky pictures a Labour Party that "bases itself on the trade unions", a Labour Party that has such close relations with the trade unions and the labour movement that one's attitude to the Labour Party "almost coincides" with — is pretty much the same thing as — one's attitude towards "the masses and the class". He pictures a world in which if the ILP has fractions in the trade unions, it will, he thinks, automatically have a Labour Party dimension.

The Labour Party we are discussing, and the trade unions, and we ourselves, do not live in such a world!

The use of that quotation suggests that T & M think the situation which Trotsky describes, or something close enough to it to make Trotsky's quotation relevant, exists now. Does it? In fact isn't it downright ridiculous to assert or imply that anything like the situation Trotsky depicts exists now, and that the issues in play in our discussion are the issues that Trotsky outlines?

The dominant forces in the New Labour Party and its government are organically tied not to the working class, "the masses", or to the trade unions, but to the big bourgeoisie. There is none of the ambivalence of the past. For over six years they have used repressive Tory legislation to curb the labour movement.

Contrast the 1945 Labour government's immediate moves to repeal the repressive legislation that the Tories had introduced in 1927 after the defeat of the General Strike. Or, for that matter, the moves by the newly elected Liberal Government of 1906 to legislate to undo the effects of the Taff Vale judgement — which made trade unions financially liable for damages inflicted on an employer by strike action; and their eventual legislation to undo the Osborn judgement of 1909, which worked against trade union financing of the new Labour Party.

Of course no one should idealise the past of the Labour Party: in 1951 the government brought dockers' leaders to court under unrepealed wartime legislation. The point is that, even the worst of the old Labour leaders, even the Gaitskellites, who ruled the Party from 1955 to early 1963, felt some commitment to the labour movement, and to egalitarian social reform.

The allegiance of Blair and those who dominate New Labour lie elsewhere — entirely and unambivalently. In terms of the past, the best you could say of Blair and company is that they correspond politically to the Liberal Party/Radicals of around 1890.

Today things are not remotely as they are in the picture

Trotsky draws or takes for granted. Certainly the trade unions could do a great deal more in the Labour Party, as we continue to urge them to, and they still give Labour a lot of money. But the idea that the existing relations of the trade unions, the trade union bureaucracy, and Blair's Labour Party to the working class "masses" amount to the same thing as painted in the picture by Trotsky in 1935 — that is simply ridiculous (as is the pedantry of T & M, attempting to assert on the basis of one resolution carried at Labour "Conference" that the Labour Party rank and file can as of old counterpose itself to the government).

What are we discussing? What to do in the trade unions about the hijacking of the trade-union party by the Blairites. How to evaluate the Blair Labour Party. How to combine urging that the unions should fight within the Labour Party with challenges to the Labour Party in elections. By way of this quotation, these issues are presented as if they add up to *the same question* as how the revolutionary socialist organisation relates to the basic organisations of the proletariat — the trade unions *as trade unions!*

This mixing up of trade union and political organisation (in fact, both the Labour Party and the AWL itself) is central to T & M's confusion. The substitution of what Trotsky says on the trade unions — and on the CP's crazy Third Period attitude to them — for an answer in our discussion about the Labour Party now, is a graphic illustration of the way they conflate and mix up quite distinct things.

They take a trade unionist and not a revolutionary Marxist point of view — and then they talk about the Labour Party as if it is exactly the same thing as the unions!

The way they draw an equals sign between Blairite Labour and the trade unions now would have been utterly wrong and politically crippling even when the old Labour Party was at its best in terms of representing the labour movement and the working class. Reread what Trotsky says about the ILP standing against the 1935 LP!

They quote Trotsky in order to imply an analogy between AWL and the SWP now, in the SA etc., and the ILP and the Communist Party in the early 30s. Phobia of the SWP — "SWampophobia" — is, for political health, too big a part of their motivating concerns.

"Yet for a long period, the ILP attached much greater importance to the 'united front' with the insignificant Communist Party than to work in mass organisations"

The point is not well taken.

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AWL has attached much greater importance to the "united front" with the SWP than to work in mass organisations? Where? When? Which mass organisations? The trade unions? Preposterous nonsense!

By the "mass organisations" that are neglected they mean the Labour Party? Then they should say that and argue for it. In terms of membership involvement — not to mention working class involvement — the Labour Party is not a mass organisation. And in terms of even a passive membership, they have been losing tens of thousands in the last period. For example, the number of people who attended the recent AGM of the Nottingham South Labour Party, Alan Simpson's constituency note, was just eight!

Certainly, the Blair LP still has electoral support, but from the point of view of socialists investing their resources in LP structures, it matters how many or who attend meetings, or can be expected to. A "correct policy" which would focus our efforts on powerless resolution-peddling to desultory, infrequent, and small meetings of elderly hold-outs is, in real life, not so "correct" after all.

Trotsky does not say that the ILP — still less the Trotskyist group — should pay no attention to the CP. Indeed it was out of the CPGB that the first Trotskyist nucleus had been won. Until mid-1933 the Trotskyist organisations everywhere had confined themselves almost exclusively to an orientation to the Communist Parties.

Even if one describes the Socialist Alliance as a united front, our relations with the SWP have had nothing in common with the ILP's relation with the CP!

For this discussion to be useful we need to disentangle the stuff in *The Case for Revolutionary Realism* about Marxist tactics in the trade unions from what we are discussing — our policy in the trade unions about how they should relate to politics, to the Labour Party and to independent socialist candidacies.

5. THE DISCIPLINE OF WORKING CLASS ORGANISATIONS?

"Marxist trade union tactics have to start from the reality of the class as it is, rather than as we would like it to be. We ground ourselves in the collective discipline of working class organisation and struggle, and we seek to hammer out a line of march, a set of tasks around which we group militants and fight."

Again, this is a crass example of substituting a *trade unionist*, "citizens of the existing labour movement", point of view for the outlook of revolutionary socialists. Of course, we "start from the reality of the class as it is". Of course we "seek to hammer out ... tasks around which we group militants".

But what does "ground ourselves in the collective discipline of working class organisation" mean in the context of our discussion? What can it mean?

In the trade union struggles, we "ground ourselves" for certain things in the union's discipline. Where else? And in fact there are exceptions even to that. In certain circumstances, in the interests of the *struggle as defined by the revolutionary organisation*, we act entirely contrary to the union's discipline, which too often is the bureaucrats' discipline! We have seen Trotsky discuss this in "*Communism & Syndicalism*".

There might be circumstances when we would not accept the discipline even of rank-and-file trade unionists, fellow workers, taking strike action in what they saw as their own best interests. In a racist strike, for example. And racist strikes have happened.

It would be a purely tactical question whether you would cross a racist picket line, that is, scab on your racist fellow workers, or stand outside the gate with a placard denouncing the strike.

When, early in 1968, London dockers struck work and marched in support of the racist Tory Enoch Powell, militant dockers who disagreed with them faced just that choice. For example, take the case of Terry Barrett, Secretary of the London Docks Liaison Committee, the rank-and-file organisation.

Just a few months earlier, Barrett had led these men in a heroic ten-week strike against the Labour government's plans to reorganise the ports in the bosses' interest. What should he have done when they marched for Powell? Accepted their "discipline" in an action which they thought was in self defence but he knew to be shameful, stupid, and in the long run suicidal?

In fact, he "scabbed". He made a point of crossing their picket line. One may think it would have been better if he had stood at the gate with a placard denouncing the strike. One of us did think that at the time. But that was only a question of tactics.

In the substance of the thing, Barrett was 100% right. Had any action been attempted by, let us say, his union branch, to "discipline" him for scabbing, we would have defended him. On what grounds? That there was something involved that was higher and more important than trade union discipline!

In that case "we" could not accept the "discipline" even of striking workers who at that time were the most militant and combative trade unionists in Britain. So what exactly do T & M think they are talking about?

In the context they seem to imply that for big-P Politics we "ground ourselves in the discipline" of both the status quo in the Labour Party — which of course is the Blairite status quo — and the dominant tempo of the broad labour movement in politics, in this case of the trade union leaders in the Labour Party, and of the Labour Party parliamentarians to whom they are tied.

If this is not what they mean to say, or half-mean to half-say, it is difficult to decipher what they think they mean.

It is a recipe for political suicide!

Different things are conflated in their presentation of the issues.

Certainly, *we can ultimately do nothing without the working class*. For mass actions we are perforce tied to its "discipline" and its tempo. We always put forward perspectives for the working class and the broad labour movement.

But in our practical immediate politics, that is, in what the revolutionary socialist organisation says, does and urges those it influences to do, the only "discipline" we accept is our own collective discipline.

Accepting the discipline of the workers' movement in politics would in virtually all cases now mean ceasing in politics to be what we are — political pioneers of working-class politics.

It would mean politically liquidating the organisation into the broad labour movement.

The tenor of *"The Case for Revolutionary Realism"* (appendix 2) implies cutting ourselves down from revolutionary socialists into trade unionists: its core point of view, if they understand what they say and mean it, is that of trade unionists, not revolutionary Marxists.

Implicitly they are advocating that AWL should cut itself down into a political pressure group in the unions.

Do they mean what they seem to say? Do they "forget" that

the broad labour movements are bureaucratised, class-collaborationist, at best reformist, labour movements? Of course, "in general" they don't! But in this exposition, yes they do.

Obviously, Marxists will try to keep within the rules of labour movement organisations. But were we to accept the existing movement's "discipline" in any spirit other than accepting formalities interpreted flexibly and intelligently so as neither to prohibit the activities specific to ourselves nor to involve us in needless conflict with the trade unionists we want to influence and re-educate, then we could not work to transform that movement by, where necessary, counterposing ourselves to the union's dominant politics and modes of operation.

That is often true even on narrowly trade union questions; it is more or less always true in politics.

We are both citizens of existing labour movements and also, simultaneously, citizens of those labour movements we exist to shape and create: citizens of a labour movement that will not exist, apart from us and a few others, until we have radically transformed the existing movements.

We exist in the tension between this, so to speak, dual citizenship — citizenship in both the labour movements now and in the reconstructed and politically transformed labour movements of the future.

We *take account of* the discipline and the tempo of the existing movement, otherwise we are political fools. But we are neither confined to, nor defined by those things.

What we seem to be faced with in T & M's document is people going beyond our characteristic concern with the existing movement, in which we "accept the discipline" etc. in order to radically transform the movement, into an urge to merge, subsume, collapse AWL into that movement. These are two very different, and quite incompatible, things.

6. YES, WE NEED CONCRETE ANALYSIS!

"A rational perspective requires a 'concrete analysis of a concrete situation'."

Yes indeed!

They present "the basic facts":

"The Labour affiliated trade unions encompass the overwhelming majority of the organised working class in industry, and the bulk of low paid workers in the public sector. At the same time a decisive majority of class-conscious workers continue to vote for and support the Labour Party. Meanwhile the revolutionaries are a tiny minority with extremely tenuous connections to most of the class. The Labour Party has won two landslide election victories and looks certain to win the next. In England and Wales socialist candidates get an average of less than 2% of the vote. No more votes than any left-wing challenge over the last 30 years. In Scotland that figure is 7%".

But this is a broad-brush description, not a "concrete analysis of a concrete situation". It ignores many things that "concrete analysis" could not afford to ignore, such, for instance, as the falling-off in old-Labourite working-class support for Blair in the last general election. Their "concrete analysis" loses this in the phrase: "At the same time the decisive majority of class conscious workers continue to vote for and support the Labour Party", as if voting Labour were a function of their class consciousness!

They ignore the fact that only a fairly small minority of industrial workers, and a tiny proportion of young workers, are

in the unions, and the other important fact here, that industrial workers constitute only a minority of overall trade union membership.

Not only do T & M over-egg it a bit with their talk of the overwhelming majority of class-conscious workers choosing to back Labour, and in implying that their doing that is a function of their being class-conscious. While being severely precise in their figure for Socialist Alliance results in elections, they use a general phrase — “the overwhelming majority of the organised working class in industry” — to hide the reality that the unions are not the working class.

Worse than that. They paint a picture of “Labour” and the trade unions forming an overwhelming mass compared to “the revolutionaries”. The point? The point seems to be that it is hopeless to step outside the concerns, structures and “discipline” of that mass.

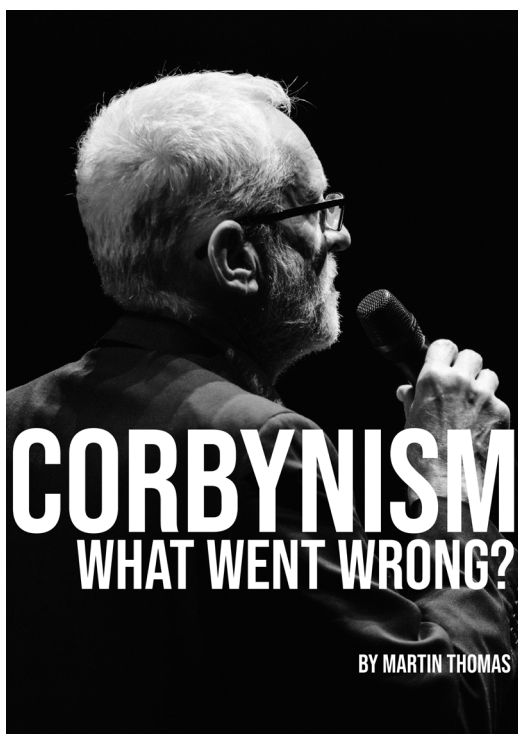
Develop that idea a little bit further along its own trajectory and the conclusion must be that it is hopeless to be revolutionary socialists in this situation.

The labour movement as it is, is everything, the revolutionaries, and *Solidarity* and Workers’ Liberty, nothing.

Where their picture is contradicted by facts, as in Scotland, they note: “In Scotland the figure is 7%” — and hurry on.

What is most surprising is that they seem to forget that this discussion of ours is happening because the long-stable block of “Labour” and the unions has been undermined and destabilised by the hijacking of the Labour Party and the record of the New Labour government.

We provided a “concrete analysis” and a comprehensive one in “*A workers’ voice in politics*” (WVP — Appendix 1). They ignore most of it and instead devote themselves to attitude-mongering and cloudy philosophising. Why?



In summer 2015 things suddenly “went right” for the left in an unexpected way, with Jeremy Corbyn’s election as Labour leader. By December 2019, they had evidently “gone wrong” again. That can’t be explained just by ill-will from the media and the Labour right: those were always there. This booklet offers an attempt to analyse the setbacks, learn lessons, and sketch a way to renewed efforts.

• 60 pages, £4: workersliberty.org/books

IV: The basic issues in dispute

7. NO CHANGE IN CLASS CHARACTER OF THE BOURGEOIS WORKERS' LABOUR PARTY?

“Defeats there have been, but there has been no decisive irreversible shift in the class character of the Labour Party.

It remains a bourgeois workers' party. If any qualifications need to be made to this formula they would be that it has become a neoliberal, business unionist, bourgeois workers' party. Labour has never been a workers' party in any meaningful political sense, it has always been a bourgeois political machine sitting on top of the trade union movement. The union-Labour link has always functioned in the last analysis as a mechanism tying the bedrock organisations of the class to the capitalist state. The fact that, through this mechanism of ruling class domination, the trade unions have also secured piecemeal reforms and concessions is no more remarkable than the idea that the union leaderships can sometimes achieve concessions through agreements regulating the terms of the labour contract”.

This stark and hard definition of the Labour Party throughout history is usually stressed by “ultra-left” sectarian socialists opposed to any involvement with it — “Labour has never been a workers' party in any meaningful political sense.” It is used here to underpin a “rightist” position, the conclusion which others have drawn from stressing the “workers” element in the “bourgeois workers' party”: soft accommodation to the status quo.

The perfectly correct designation of the Labour Party as a “bourgeois workers' party” is used here to confuse things by making it more difficult to see clearly *what is new* in the movement that has indeed, all through its history, been a “bourgeois workers' party.”

But the dispute is about what conclusions AWL should draw from what is new in the “bourgeois workers' party”!

T & M settle the question for themselves by saying, truly, that in terms of its historic class character, the Labour Party was never anything else, that it was always a bourgeois workers' party; and by slipping in the enormous lie (in the first place, we guess, lying to themselves...) that *therefore*, in terms of immediate on-the-ground working-class politics, the Labour Party always was what it is now and is now everything it always was.

The Labour Party was never other than what it is now? That is only true on a very high level of abstraction. It is used here to avoid the “concrete analysis of a concrete situation” which they call for at the beginning of their document.

It was the characteristics of the Labour Party “below” the level of how we classify it in history, and in its overall place in the British body politic, that determined for us the approach we used to have to the Labour Party.

We have argued that there has been a massive shift to the bourgeois pole of this still highly contradictory phenomenon. T & M hide the concrete issue we face right now in generalities that are not in dispute amongst us.

There really is no problem you see — so long as we follow

them in *substituting general historical truths for the concrete questions we face now!* They define the problem we face in the Blairite Labour Party out of existence.

In fact, on the ground, the “bourgeois workers' party” is very, very different from what it was in the 30, and even in the 90, years before Blair!

Where have we encountered this sort of polemic recently? Yes, in the irresponsible and unserious idiot polemics of the oxymoron-mongering in *Weekly Worker* [the newspaper of the left group which calls itself the “CPGB-PCC”]!

And where before have we encountered the method of substituting historical generalisations for concrete questions of tactics? In the Militant (RSL) of the 1960s and 70s. (See “*What We Are and What We Must Become*”⁵). But then the practical conclusion which the Grantites drew from this operation placed them in a living Labour Party and Labour youth movement. Thereby their tendency grew. T & M's conclusions would give us no such advantage. The very opposite, in fact. There is very little life in the Labour Party; the Young Socialists is long gone.

8. WHAT IS THE “CLASS CHARACTER” OF THE TRADE UNIONS?

This method of dissolving tactical questions into broad historical generalisations is a dangerous weapon for people who, like T & M, choose to look at the issues we face now from a narrowly trade unionist standpoint. On the same level of historical-social abstraction at which the Labour Party undoubtedly is and always was a bourgeois workers' party, what are the trade unions?

Sociologically they are working-class organisations. But they usually have petty-bourgeois leaderships. Sociologically, that is what the union bureaucracies are, a layer of trade unionists who have attained petty-bourgeois and even bourgeois standards of life as a caste of specialists in bargaining within the wage-system.

The trade union *exists* to bargain within capitalism. In the conduct of its daily business, in discharging its *raison d'être*, the trade union bargains *within* the wage-labour relationship. For practical purposes even the most left-wing trade union *accepts* the wage-labour system.

Militant unionists often fight to win or maintain differentials in wages as between themselves and other workers, differentials based on the market value of different kinds of labour-power. This often sets worker against worker.

The trade unions in the course of their daily business inevitably work to convince workers that the market relationship of wage-labour to capital is normal, natural and proper. The trade unions are organisations of workers within capitalism and rooted in capitalist marketism. Aren't they? Listen to what Trotsky wrote in the mid-1920s about the centrality of the bureaucratised British trade unions:

“From the example of England, one sees very clearly how absurd it is to counterpose ... the trade union organisation and the state organisation. In England more than anywhere else, the state rests upon the back of the working class ... 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."

And just as all sorts of sectarians have used the correct historical designation of the Labour Party to justify having nothing to do with it, so there have been people — not only the more stupid anarchists, for example, but the "Council Communist" tendency in the early Comintern — who have concluded that those who want to uproot the wage-slave system must have nothing to do with trade unions.

9. GENERAL TRUTHS DON'T NECESSARILY ANSWER SPECIFIC PROBLEMS

"The changes to the Labour Party rulebook introduced with Partnership in Power are the alibi, not the crime. To argue that the rule changes are decisive is to lapse into constitutional fetishism and a morbid variant of 'Resolutionary Socialism' which deludes itself about the realities of party democracy in Classic Labourism. After all, the normal practice of Labour governments over the last 80 years is to ignore Party Conference. Nor is Blair the first leader to say that he will govern in the interests of the 'nation' not the working class. That fashion started with MacDonald. Remember what Trotsky said: the bureaucracy will not surrender".

What Camille Desmoulins said during the French Revolution: "The great are great only because we are on our knees", is in general almost always true. But to pretend that we can at will call forth what the class, or the organised trade union movement, *could* do, and deploy the general truths as answers to specific problems that have the form they have because the class, the trade-union rank and file, and the bureaucracy are "on their knees" — that is simply foolish.

Like the mystic who thinks his spirit soars above crude corporeality, Jack ("T") doesn't think the rules count for anything. With the same sort of "what if...? approach, you could say what he says about the Labour Party rules and with far more justification about the anti-union laws.

You could truly say that if at any time in the last 22 years the labour movement had used its strength and acted resolutely in a body, then we could have ripped up the current anti-union laws as we once ripped up those of the Heath government.

Yet in fact, in the absence of such a vast upsurge, the anti-union laws have often crippled action which groups of workers have taken, and the solidarity there might otherwise have been.

If T ("Jack") had a stable point of view, he could not write like this about the "rule changes". He could not dismiss the changes in functioning and interrelationships that have gutted the Labour Party as mere "rule changes" that only have effect because the trade union bureaucrats want an alibi.

For T, the utter destruction of the Labour Party as it was is not "real" — so long as the trade union bureaucrats use it as an "alibi"!

It is the same technique as using the very abstract truth that the Labour Party, which is still a bourgeois workers' party, was always a bourgeois workers' party, to hide what is new. Labour Governments over 80 years have ignored Party conference — ergo, nothing is new, not even when Blair has gone much of the way to abolishing Party conference!

T can't recognise qualitative change when it hits us repeatedly in the face.

Yes indeed, James Ramsey MacDonald proclaimed himself the representative of the nation and not of the working class.

So did one-time railworkers leader Jimmy Thomas, the Alan Johnson of his day.

The nine-months Labour government of 1924 was a helpless minority government existing on the sufferance of the Liberals and Tories.

But the 1929-31 minority Labour government fell apart when MacDonald, Snowden and others proposed to cut the dole. The Labour Party split.

The 1945-51 Labour government created the modern welfare state and repealed the anti-union laws imposed after the defeat of the General Strike.

Even the Wilson and Callaghan governments of 1964-70 and 1974-9, whatever anyone said about the "national interest", had ties to the labour movement and made concessions.

To pretend that the Blair government does not represent a radical break with the Labour governments of the past is to show yourself as either too ignorant to hold an intelligent discussion on the subject, or politically and intellectually un-serious in your attitude to it.

In defence of their thesis that there is nothing new to get excited about, T & M indirectly and unwittingly wind up as apologist for the Blairite status quo. It isn't really much worse than the Labour governments that have gone before ...

They are gripped by the logic of a false point of view. In short, this is scandalously unserious and irresponsible.

10. THE POLITICS OF ABRACADABRA!

The basic position of T & M is that we and the pseudo-left combined are too weak to stand credible election candidates even in a few constituencies. They even exaggerate our admitted weakness, and leave out of the picture the price the Socialist Alliance has paid for the political and organisational grip of the SWP. But abracadabra! Suddenly we find them talking as if the self-same forces are big enough to soon take control of the labour movement from the bureaucrats, and the Labour Party from Blair.

Suddenly Jack ("T") is elatedly striding around our political world like a colossus, dismissing our Lilliputian small-minded "fetish" of such things as the Labour Party rules. Rules — ha! He isn't bound by such things!

The rule changes "are the alibi and not the crime"? The union bureaucrats use them to excuse doing nothing or not enough? Ergo, there is no problem. If only... If only we could control what the bureaucrats and the unions they control do, then the rules would be no problem at all! What may be alibi for them, is, of course, shackling objective fact for us.

One minute we are a small propaganda group — albeit a fighting propaganda group — locked into the structures of the labour movement, into the real condition of the trade unions, and into the real working class. Then suddenly we rise up above it all, surveying it from the heights. The rules? Only "alibis". Only lesser people are inhibited by such things!

It is all just too much like the famous Ambrose Bierce story, "Incident at Owl Creek". A captured Confederate spy, his arms tied behind his back, a rope round his neck, is being marched by Union soldiers to be hanged off a bridge. They push him off the bridge into oblivion. Or so the deluded Union untermenschen think.

The spy knows better. He knows he is superior to such things as gravity. The rope breaks, he gets his arms free, he swims safely to the shore and starts running. In no time at all he is back at his country mansion, still running. He sees his wife with her arms out to hug him warmly ...

And then the rope twangs taut with his weight and breaks his neck. The whole story was a fantasy flashing through his

mind in the time from when his feet left the bridge until he ran out of rope and died...

It is not quite as desperate as that for us. But to dismiss the rule changes and so on as T & M do is delirious fantasy. The soaring is all in T's head. And that is shown in his conclusion, which, stripped of grandiloquence, is very tame indeed: a propaganda campaign in the unions to get the bureaucrats to do something.

The problem is not with the idea that we might run such a campaign, but with their insistence that we confine ourselves to such work and, more or less on principle, rule out using elections against New Labour.

11. A NEOLIBERAL BOURGEOIS WORKERS' PARTY?

"If any qualifications need to be made to this formula [bourgeois workers' party] they would be that it has become a neoliberal, business unionist, bourgeois workers' party".

Much has been made of this sort of thing. In fact it is anything but a new idea amongst us. Our tendency for decades stressed that we were not in the Labour Party because of its politics — because of the "socialist" "Clause 4" for example (the clause committing the Labour Party to an attempt "to secure for the workers by hand and brain", the means of production. The Blairites got rid of it in 1995).

We knew and explained that at different times in its history the Labour Party had had different political outlooks, and that it tended to keep in step with the swings of bourgeois public opinion, usually lagging a little behind the pioneering thinkers. For example, the Labour Party picked up Keynesianism and then moved away from it broadly in step with the shifting bourgeois wisdom of the day.

Blair, in keeping with the Labour Party's long tradition of playing chameleon to the changes in bourgeois thinking, has come to embrace Thatcherism. For example, *Workers' Liberty* 20 (April 1995) illustrated the idea on the cover, with a picture of Thatcher using a Tony Blair face mask to hide her own, with the headline "Who put the 'new' in New Labour?". That cover was made by Jack ("T") to the specifications of one of the authors.

But for us, the changes in the structures of the party and in the party's relationship with the trade unions and with the working class are more fundamental.

In the past, whatever the dominant political and economic philosophy was — that of a MacDonald, an Attlee, a Wilson or a Callaghan — the Labour Party was organically tied to the working class. It had "open valves" to the affiliated bedrock organisations of the working class. When Wilson in 1969 tried to bring in anti-union legislation, internal Labour Party opposition — allied with big militant demonstrations — could stop it before it became law. Now? Blair could promise the Tory *Daily Mail* in 1997 before the Election that under New Labour Britain would keep the most restrictive union laws in the western world. Seven years later we still have those laws. There hasn't even been noticeable pressure in the PLP for their repeal.

The description "neoliberal, business-unionist, bourgeois workers' party", whether it is an apt description or not, is *beside the point of our differences*. It is an attempt to substitute an ideological description for an answer to the issues in dispute: the structures of the Labour Party and its political relationship to the working class, to the trade unions and to the trade union bureaucracy. That tag — "neoliberal, busi-

ness-unionist, bourgeois workers' party" — adds nothing to our understanding here; it is an obfuscation.

If it is intended to explain the structural changes, then plainly it doesn't. You have only to compare the structural changes in the Labour Party with the Australian Labor Party after it embraced neoliberalism (for its 1983-96 period in government) to see that it doesn't. The Australian Labor Party adopted the same neoliberalism as the British Labour Party, *without altering its relationship to the trade unions and without closing down its internal life*. (Its internal life did weaken, but not nearly as much as the British Labour Party's).

The British Labour Party has changed its structures and its relationships to the working class and to the trade unions. That is the point.

The structures because of which, and by way of which, trade unionists and socialists found it worthwhile to work in the Labour Party, the things that once made the British Labour Party different from other "bourgeois workers' parties", either no longer exist or have been qualitatively diminished. *That is the point*.

Even if — and this seems to be their thought — the present structures and relationships in which the Labour Party, including the affiliated trade unions, is entangled, correspond to what you would expect in a "neoliberal, business-unionist, bourgeois workers' party", that does not get us away from the fact that the old structures and relationships and modus operandi on which our old attitude to the old Labour Party rested, have changed fundamentally.

"Rationalising" and "explaining" things by calling New Labour a "neoliberal" bourgeois workers' party is beside the point in dispute.

It cannot lead *people who pursue our objectives, and who worked in the old Labour Party in the way we did and for the reasons we did*, to the conclusion T & M draw — Labour Party business as usual, because the Labour Party was never other than a bourgeois workers' party. It cannot undo the fact that enormous changes have taken place in the Labour Party that make it very different from the party we used to relate to in the way T & M want to go on relating to New Labour.

Those changes require of us, if we are to go on serving the goals we used to serve by working in and through the Labour Party, an understanding that neither we nor the labour movement can continue to go on in the old way.

Just as the changes have, inside the old forms, given a different class-political content to the Labour Party/trade union relationship, so also the changes mean that there will be a different class and political content to our work if we continue to relate to Blair's Labour Party as we used to relate to the old Labour Party.

Yet, unless we misunderstand them, that is how T & M want to go on relating to it. In a modified way, to be sure.

Even if we were to accept their description — we don't — for us, the proper conclusion *would be*: in the era of the "neoliberal, business unionist, bourgeois workers' party", we can no longer go on in the old way with the LP.

12. A DEFORMED AND DEGENERATE BOURGEOIS WORKERS' PARTY?

One could without injustice describe T & M's attitude as the belief that the Blair party still has a positive role for now as a repository, so to speak, a parking place, for trade-union affiliations and trade-union political funds. The LP affiliation to and funding of the Blairite Party is, they say, better than "a de-collectivised anarchist mess".

Better than making it "perhaps too easy" for the unions

to back non-Labour candidates. It is better for now that the unions and the Blairites stay together and — if T & M will forgive us repeating the idea! — preserve the union affiliation fees as one mass of political money.

Their idea here is weirdly akin to the notion that the Stalinist bureaucracy, despite everything, acted as a “guardian” of the collectivist property of the “workers’ state”, acting as a locum for the working class. We do not say that T & M think like this; only that the striking parallel exists and it is illuminating.

The neo-“Trotskyist” ideas about the Stalinist “workers’ states” were wrong and nonsensical in premise and conclusion, but they made a sort of sense. There was something real — nationalised property — that the bureaucrats did “preserve”. That nationalised property was, according to the argument of the neo-Trotskyists (never of Trotsky himself), intrinsically “working-class”, and so, until the working class was ready and able to “take it back” from them, the bureaucrats played a positive role by preserving it from “bourgeois restorationists”.

But what is it that the Blairites are “preserving” of the old Labour Party, of the old working-class representation? What is it that the Blair party and its union financing preserve that is better than a fragmentation that might see money which now goes to the government party going to, say, Plaid Cymru, the SWP, the SSP, even the Greens?

They preserve nothing except, maybe — and this is what T & M seem to think — the *potential* of the “unified mass” of money being kept intact to pass on to a “reclaimed” Labour Party, or a new one founded by the unions.

The idea that this now serves the working class — or the unions — is about as sensible as the idea that nationalised property in the USSR, etc, served the working class!

We argued in “*A workers’ voice in politics?*” that this attitude amounted in the real world to a hopelessly conservative and sterile defence of the status quo.

Other than the idea that continuing trade-union affiliation to the Labour Party is unconditionally a good thing, whatever its political content, we can think of only two possible arguments for it.

1) The argument of “left” Blairites that the Labour Party, presiding over low unemployment, low inflation, the minimum wage and so on, serves the working class well, and for that reason should be supported.

Even if one agrees that these things are better than some other alternatives under capitalism, that in itself would not for us indicate even broad, old-style support for the Labour Party. One can point to meaningful distinctions between the US Democrats and Republicans — the Republican tax cuts for the rich, for example — things that lead the US unions to back the Democrats, and yet reject the idea that socialists should even vote for the Democrats.

2) Keeping out the Tories. That is what the Blairites argue, conjuring up an image of ultra-reactionary Tories to whip trade union and other opposition into line. But given what New Labour is, what the Government does and doesn’t do, that is now absurd. Is it not?

It is anti-Toryism reduced to absurdity. We have over many years criticised and debunked the hollow “anti-Toryism” of the left as only negative, and, because it is only negative, treacherous.

But what would the Tories in power do now that Blair isn’t doing? The protracted Tory crisis is rooted in the fact that the Blairites are the best Tories, and are in Government.

We are left only with the fact of continued trade union af-

filiation to the Labour Party to justify defending union-affiliation! That affiliation is now in practice without any of the characteristics which led us in the past to support and defend it.

The unions’ links with New Labour now play an almost entirely negative role, precisely in relation to working-class representation, which New Labour has more or less completely destroyed. We are in a situation of transition and flux.

Certainly we want to *use* the trade unions’ affiliations in order to take the fight into the Labour Party. For that reason we oppose disaffiliation. We want the unions to break with Blair through a positive political mobilisation of their members, flexing their political muscles by trying to use the unions’ positions in Labour structures for working-class ends. But keeping the affiliations in place is not all-defining.

The difference is that for T & M it is all-defining.

Partly, this is a matter of assessment. We do not think it anything like as certain as T & M seem to think it is that there will be a concerted union attempt to reclaim the Labour Party. We will have to see what comes of the new union leaders’ talk on this matter, and we are far less certain than they are that action will match talk, or that things will be pushed to a break with the Blairites — and nothing less will now suffice.

This assessment would inform rather than rule out AWL involvement in attempting to mobilise the unions for a fight inside the Labour Party structures.

The unions continue to have links with Labour, and so do working-class voters (though the 2001 General Election showed that those ties have seriously eroded and continue to erode). That is the reason why we still advocate a Labour vote as against Tories and Lib-Dems.

What T & M propose is New Labour conservatism rooted in the vague and fantastic underlying idea that New Labour performs a sort of holding operation for the working class to stop the emergence of an “anarchist mess”.

Until such time as the political funds can be “handed over” to the union-based successor party, or the Labour Party is taken “back” by the unions — until the unions organise a “political revolution” — T & M advocate an utterly conservative immobilism.

They make an absolute, all-devouring fetish of the idea of urging the unions to fight in the Labour Party.

13. SUBJECTIVE BLUSTER IS NOT MARXIST REALISM!

T & M’s document relies on bad logic and rhetorical bluster instead of an objective posing of the issues. Read: “We should focus on the fight to reclaim the Labour Party because...”

Because? “Because the struggle starts from the real working class and labour movement as it actually exists and not as it will be in the future”.

Does it? No, not quite.

We try to bridge the gap between the present and future labour movements. Naturally, we need a firm grip on reality [Our quarrel with T & M is rooted in the fact that *they* do not have a sufficiently realistic picture of the Blairite Labour Party.]

In fact T & M’s argument here is sleight of hand. We should “focus on the fight to reclaim the Labour Party because ...” Not because of any specific facts of the present day, but “because” — a would-be grand generality — we “start from the real working class and labour movement”.

No, the issue between us here is:

a) assessing exactly where the labour movement in politics is at; and

b) what we should do about it.

Whether your approach makes sense or not can only be assessed by arguments about the facts, not by proclaiming yourself as automatically in consonance with reality! We have seen this same trick of argument deployed again and again.

"The starting point of the militant revolutionary outlook is the defence of every gain that the working class has made and an unwillingness to surrender any ground without a fight".

Yes, we defend every gain the working class has made; but we also must know when something is lost, when we no longer are on the ground on which we once stood. To pretend otherwise is not the way to win the ground back, or achieve something better. It is the way to political irrelevance.

"The struggle" "starts with the real working class"? Since we are arguing about policy in the trade unions, both sides "start from the real working class". Don't we?

Jack thinks that this rhetoric establishes that his policy not only — like ours — starts from the real working class and labour movement, but is thereby certified correct!

The bluster about "unwillingness to surrender" expresses an emotional attitude — with emotion substituted for a reasoned case for what Jack wants!

The reasoned case would have to show that refusing to recognise that ground has already been lost — refusing to recognise the enormous implications of the Blairite hijacking of the Labour Party — really makes sense. It needs reason, not bluster.

"Unlike generals and armies who can leave the field of battle after a defeat, or middle-class radicals who can run after the next project or stunt, the working class stays put and lives with the consequences of defeat every day".

And this says what exactly to the issues we are discussing? Throughout the text, instead of delineating and discussing what really divides us, he has tried to wrap himself up in postures and attitudes and inconsequential rhetoric. Here Jack thinks it adds *virtue* to the case he has, to use a good old Irish expression, made a *hames* of presenting!

No, we wrong him! That last bit of rhetoric is meant to prove something. He goes on:

"This is true of the political arena as it is of the workplace".

And? One of the most preposterous ideas in the whole tract:

"If it were not true then the workers would have abandoned support for the Labour Party long ago".

So the fact that the left has not been able to win larger numbers of workers, the fact that inertia and demoralisation has kept a large portion of the working-class electorate behind Blair, is not a defeat, not a regrettable result of working class disorientation and of the left's weakness, but an expression of positive working-class virtue? Of the intransigence and determination of the Blair-voting workers, as opposed to the whimsy of, say, SSP voters in Glasgow? It is the *class-conscious* workers who will stubbornly go on backing Blair?

What if T & M's comments were applied to labour movement history?

The Stalinist-poisoned workers remained with the CPs even after the 1930s betrayals in Russia, Germany, France, Spain, not because they were politically disoriented by the defeats, but because of their innate proletarian virtue?

The reader can add many other episodes to the list started

here with the Stalinist betrayals of the 1930s — for example, the survival of the trade union and labour leaders after they betrayed the General Strike in 1926.

Follow T & M and you will see labour movement history in a radical new light! (But see the discussion on the class, the party and leadership in the Spanish Revolution on the internet and Trotsky's 1936 or 37 discussion with CLR James — "Against the Stream".)

Now a bit of mock-profound tautology.

"To say that we are not yet ready to push for a new trade-union party and disaffiliations, implies that we are not yet ready to surrender the Labour Party to the Blairites and pronounce that all the unions can do is give up and start again from scratch".

Here in his own way Jack focuses on the central illogicality in the case he is pushing.

From the fact that "we are not ready" to "push for a new party", etc., it does not follow — there is no necessary connection between one and the other — that there is scope for the sort of stuff he wants in and around the Labour Party. There might be, but it would not follow at all from our unreadiness or otherwise to build an alternative.

And who proposes that the unions "give up"? Again and again Jack is incapable of loyal and honest discussion of the real issues between us!

We are for a trade-union fight in the Labour Party. Those of us who have no time for what Jack says here, have over the last year written articles and editorials in *Solidarity* advocating it. We think AWL members should vote against motions advocating that unions disaffiliate.

The issue is whether such an approach rules out anti-Labour candidates or asking trade unions for money and support for such candidates.

Nobody says the unions should give up. We say they should indeed fight in the Labour Party. *The difference is that we want to say other things too.*

Again, here, we have rhetoric pressed into service as pretend argument. "We are not ready to surrender the Labour Party". Who is the "we" who possess the Labour Party and are unwilling to give it up to a new owner?

What does this bluster mean when in fact the Labour Party is tightly controlled by those who have made it very much an anti-Labour party?

"To walk away from a political fight is not the way of Marxists. We stay with the class".

Again — and again — vague emotionalism in lieu of argument! This empty bombast reminds one of us of the most pitiable thing he ever saw in politics.

It is 1968. The Russians have just invaded Czechoslovakia to stamp on "socialism with a human face" there. The British Communist Party, for the first time ever, has condemned something the Russians have done. It has come out against the invasion of Czechoslovakia.

The Young Communist League, youth section of the CPGB, publishes an issue of its magazine *Challenge*. What will they say about the invasion and about their "socialist fatherland" Russia? All they have to fall back on is bluff, bluster and childish unrealism. They put a photo of a good-looking woman in a militant posture on the cover of *Challenge*. She looks boldly into the camera, finger pointing. She speaks for the YCLers to the reader with the following words:

"If you think Communism means that the tanks can roll in

at dawn, then you're bloody wrong!"

That was exactly what the tanks had done! Empty, pitiable bluster, reflecting the politics of the Communist Party and the YCL.

The empty, pitiful bluster deployed by T & M is neither admirable, nor useful to *Solidarity* and Workers' Liberty. "Revolutionary Realism" is the last thing it offers.

14. ARE ALL DEFEATS REVERSIBLE?

"This is not a question of denying that Blairism is a defeat. All that is being said is defeats are reversible and that they are normally reversed by the methods of class struggle. The class has hundreds of years of experience in reversing defeats. It is not a new idea. Defeats there have been but there has been no irreversible shift in the class character of the Labour Party. It remains a bourgeois workers' party".

Here bluster, bad rhetoric and great general truths are pressed into use to evade a clear definition of what we are arguing about! Great historical generalities are substituted for a discussion of the points in dispute. Things are merely asserted that need to be convincingly argued for.

Defeats are reversible; and the working class has much experience at surviving and reversing defeats: — and? And therefore? Because defeats are reversible (all defeats? the status quo ante is always restored?) there has been "no irreversible shift in the class character of the Labour Party" "It remains a bourgeois workers' party". (We are meant to read: it remains the bourgeois workers' party it always was; the relationship between the two contradictory poles, the bourgeois pole and the workers' pole, is still in the ratio and balance it once had...)

But 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. History doesn't work like that. Sometimes defeats are only reversed in a new age, where forms and relationships are very different. How did William Morris express it, dealing in *A Dream of John Ball* with the defeat of the peasant risings in 1381? (It was a defeat whose fighters won a partial victory in that villeinage was not restored.)

"I pondered all these things, and how men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name".

Or take the first great political workers mass movement, Chartism. It fell apart in the years after 1848, despite the efforts of Ernest Jones and others, backed by Marx and Engels, to save it. 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. One very important political demand of the Chartists has not to this day been won — annual Parliaments. When Thatcher was entrenched in power by a Parliamentary majority, but very unpopular, before the Falklands War — so the files of *Socialist Organiser* testify — we thought the old failure to win Annual Parliaments very important.

Or take the experience of the workers in recent decades. The defeats will be reversed? Yes! But the old forms may not have much part in the "reversal" — more precisely, in the future working-class victories.

In the days of the great labour militancy from the mid-1950s to the late 70s, no group of workers was more combative or more powerful than the teeming hordes of men employed on the docks. They had the power to bring the country to a stop in a matter of days. There are not too many dockers left now, after the technological revolution in the ports of the last three and a half decades. The once hundreds-of-thousands strong movement of coal miners has gone. Coal miners have almost vanished, as a section of the working class.

We will win victories, and *the* final victory over the bourgeoisie, but some of the battalions that went down to defeat will not be restored, any more than the Labour Party movement picking up the struggle of the Chartists could call back the hand-loom weavers, the backbone of the earlier movement...

The permanent technological revolution which is a central feature of capitalist dynamics means that there is an endless flux in the composition and structure of the working class.

To use sweeping rhetoric, as T & M do, and 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 — that is a roundabout way of signalling that you haven't a clue about any of it...

V: Methods, models, mystifications

15. A WISH-LIST IS NOT A MARXIST PERSPECTIVE

“We would like to see the political funds above the affiliation fee used to organise a wide range of assertive campaigning and organising initiatives both inside and outside the Labour Party. Unions could insist on only funding MPs who would be prepared to be accountable to them. The union could seek to group together and organise pro-trade union MPs, preferably alongside other unions. Support could be given to a campaign to reclaim the Labour Party. Local campaigns could be organised to deselect Blairite MPs and promote democratically accountable trade union candidates. If solidly based trade union candidates were blocked by the Blair machine that would include using the fund to support that candidate and campaign against the official Labour candidate”.

This passage shows what is wrong with T & M’s approach. Some of it reads like a not-very-good trade union conference resolution. They would “like to see” “a wide range of assertive campaigning and organising initiatives both inside and outside the Labour Party”, etc. There are some good and possibly good ideas here. But they all belong to the category of “wouldn’t it be nice if”. If Long Jack Silver and Hopalong H. ruled the world, if wishes were horses.... The key phrase is “we would like to see”, followed by the “good ideas”.

They are all presented as generalities, not as specific proposals. Get them passed at a trade union conference, and everything would still be left for interpretation and implementation to the trade union leaders.

The central thing wrong with the “good ideas” presented here is that none of them depend on us just deciding to do them. All the ideas, the vague and not so vague proposals do not concern things that are ours to do at will. They are “good ideas” for us to advocate within the unions, things for the unions and union leaders to do, no more than planks in an AWL propaganda campaign.

In fact, were a union or group of unions to do these things in a serious and sustained way, they would be well on the way to splitting from the Blair party. But all that is open to AWL is propaganda for those ideas. And propaganda alone cannot conceivably lead to their adoption by the union leaders.

Let us, if only for the sake of argument agree that AWL should do such a propaganda campaign. And? More or less on principle, accepting “the discipline of working class organisations”, for an indefinite period ahead, the revolutionary socialists do nothing else about working-class representation in Parliament? We leave the entire field to the Blairites (and the sectarians)? In practice, of course, AWL alone might have little choice but to do that. But T & M do not argue it from practicalities, but from different general principles.

The last part of this passage shows what they really think about standing anti-Labour working-class candidates. “If solidly based trade union candidates were blocked by the Blair machine that would include using the fund to support that candidate and campaign against the official Labour candidate”.

But it is only something we might do when there is already a strong upsurge against the Blairites and, in fact, when the

labour movement is already in a process of splitting.

16. “PROSPECTS” ARE NOT THE SAME THING AS MARXIST PERSPECTIVE

“The fact that there is so little political life in the Labour Party flows fundamentally from the politics and passivity of the trade union leaders... What is decisive and all-shaping in the Labour Party today is the refusal of the union leaders to fight Blair and their bureaucratic grip on the unions preventing the rank and file doing so...”

Bits of truth, here as throughout *The Case for Revolutionary Realism*, are mixed with nonsense and stirred into a hopeless muddle.

If the trade union leaders, or a substantial minority of them, launched a serious and sustained struggle to gain control of the Labour Party; if they appealed for people to join the Party to back them up; if they would offer a credible perspective of either winning control of the Labour Party or splitting it and founding a replacement LP — then most likely there would soon be a burst of new life in and around the Labour Party. If...

True, the changes in rules and functioning in the Labour Party would inhibit that new life and work to minimise it for as long as those rules held.

But the rules might be defied, perhaps even at Conference.

When the Healyites split the Young Socialists in 1964/65, the rump remaining in the Labour Party had crippling restrictions imposed on it, including a ban on political discussion at what was still to be called a Conference.

At the first Conference, in Easter 1965, the delegates voted overwhelmingly to defy the new rules and the full-time officials in charge of the Conference, daring the Labour Party to close them down. It didn’t; they won; the NEC backed down.

But that was a time of a tremendous loosening up of a party in which the Bevanite rebels of a decade before, including Prime Minister Harold Wilson, had unexpectedly come into control of the Party with the sudden death of the right-wing leader Hugh Gaitskell.

Of course, one can indeed blame the trade union leaders’ failure to launch a big determined fight for the lack of life in the Labour Party. An editorial by one of us in *Solidarity* in August 2002 pointed to the new possibilities that the rise of the new trade union leaders could open for the Labour Party.

“The incumbent trade union leaders have for five years betrayed the labour movement by belly-crawling to Blair. They seemed to have forgotten what trade unionism is for, and what the unions had in mind when they founded the Labour Party a hundred years ago. These have now been replaced by people who may have learned something from the bitter five years of Tory Blair government.

In any case, those who have elected new trade union leaders — the unions’ rank and file — have learned ...

Despite the structural changes that have more or less gutted the old Labour Party, the trade unions still have a great deal of power in the Labour Party. They should begin to use it.

Many things that were up to now unthinkable are again

possible. The trade unions can recompose a working class presence in politics by concertedly demanding that the Government begins to do things like repeal the Tory anti-union laws which New Labour has made its own. They can organise to fight this government when it refuses.

.... The trade unions need a political voice ... New Labour is not and cannot possibly be such a voice. Blair's is the voice of second-string Toryism and, indeed, of sublimated Thatcherism.

It is scarcely conceivable even in the most favourable course of events that the unions could simply run the film of the last decade in the Labour Party backwards and root out Blairism. Probably the best that could be hoped for would be a concerted trade union break with Blair and the majority of the Parliamentary Labour Party, backed by a minority of the PLP.

That, it should be stressed, is a long way off. But now it is an objective possibility. It raises for the left fundamental questions of strategy and perspective — for example, it puts the question of the trade unions' political funds in a new light."

That sober registering of newly emerging possibilities contrasts sharply with T's fuses-blown-out — everything has already changed! — response to these possible prospects. But speculating about possible prospects is not the elaboration of Marxist "perspectives". The perspectives the AWL elaborates for itself are a different thing entirely.

The question is: out of these possibilities what can we do to facilitate the most favourable developments for us?

The problem AWL confronts is how do we combine advocacy of a fight in the Labour Party by the trade unions — or even an attempt to organise such a fight, or, anyway, a campaign advocating it — with such things as standing in elections. Can we combine them? That can only be worked out concretely. It cannot simply be read off either from possible prospects or general principles or pseudo-principles.

For example, one could base a wish-infused speculative scenario for future Labour developments on the precedent of the replacement of the hard-nosed right-wing Gaitskellites by Wilson and his friends in 1963.

Blair serves his natural political time in the leadership, or he is forced out, or goes to the USA to try for the Presidency... Or he drops dead: not only was Labour Party history changed by the sudden death of its leader Hugh Gaitskell in 1963, so, earlier, was that of the TGWU⁶ by the death of General Secretary Arthur Deakin and then, very soon, of his successor Tiffin.

Tiffin dropping dead suddenly and opened the way for the leftish CNDer Frank Cousins as General Secretary, thereby making the then biggest union, the TGWU, a force for the left in the LP.

Someone like — just for illustration — Peter Hain replaces Blair. The Labour Party re-knits its strained links with the unions. The rules that have stifled political life in the Labour Party are relaxed, some of them defied, some repealed.

Something like the old ramshackle Labour Party reappears, chastened perhaps by 10 or 15 years of Blair-Brown government followed by electoral defeat and recoil against the Blairite years.

The cry that went up after the fall of Callaghan's government in June '79, might be heard in the labour movement once more: — "never again!"

Such a thing, like the trade union leaders starting an all-out fight against Blairism, may well be possible, if not now, then in 5, 10 or 15 years from now.

What happened in February 1963, when Gaitskell died, was unpredictable and very unexpected. For thirty years it took the Labour Party off the track on which parties such as the German Social Democrats (who had got rid of their "socialist Clause 4" in 1959) continued to travel, and back on to which the Blairites shunted the Labour Party in the 1990s.

Such things are all possible. Whether they are probable is a different question entirely. But what has that got to do with AWL hammering out a perspective for work, for what we do, in the period ahead?

There is nothing we can do to make such possible developments come about. Is there? So what should we do? Sit around hoping that in a decade or twenty years from now something like the old Labour Party will be restored in some such scenario as the one we've sketched out above? Meanwhile? We commission a voodoo doll of Blair and stick pins in it?

Should we — as T & M seem to want — *confine ourselves* to a propaganda campaign in the unions, with some such slogan as "Make the trade union leaders fight Blair"?

That we should call on them for such things is common ground. The difference — if we understand it — is on whether to make that the main content and more or less exclusive focus of our political activity in the years ahead; and on whether that can or should be combined with electoral activity in which we try to get the unions to back anti-Blairite working-class candidacies.

Simply pointing out that if the union leaders were different, then much else would be different — or credulously suggesting that the whole picture is already different because some union leaders have *promised* to act differently — has the attraction of seeming to, maybe, offer a quick political fix. Even if one sees that their talk may open up new possibilities for action by AWL, as, for example, the August 2002 editorial in *Solidarity* did, there is still an enormous gap between these perhaps-possibilities and their realisation.

We do not mean by this, to rule out the idea that AWL might attempt by way of an organised campaign to make the most of the fighting talk of some of the new union leaders. "Passive propaganda", if that is all we think we might be able to do, is, after all, better than mere passivity... But the distinction between such a campaign and an AWL *perspective* for restoring the working class political representation, which Blairism has destroyed, is very important.

For anything we do to be a realistic perspective for restoring working-class representation that we might at will engineer into existence, we would have to have large-scale fractions in the trade unions, on the scale of the Minority Movement.

17. IF ONLY MY AUNT HAD WHEELS

And if we did have large scale trade union fractions? That too would change many things! It would entirely change what we could try to do. We would not be calling on the trade union leaders to fight, not as a fundamental emphasis; we would be calling on workers to put them out and replace them with a leadership that would fight for our politics.

We would not necessarily be calling for the restoration of the pre-Blair Labour Party/trade union status quo ante. We would be able to go for a great deal more than reconstructing the old Labour Party! We would be able to go for a politically reorganised labour movement, perhaps on the pattern which Trotsky advocated in 1925, around *Solidarity* and Workers'

Liberty.

T & M's approach is abracadabra politics, what Trotsky once called "alchemist politics", not Marxism. It resembles the way some people — the Grantites, for example — used the idea of a peaceful socialist revolution, and it is in the same order of things.

If, Ted Grant used to argue, the leaders of the Labour Party and the trade unions were to mobilise the strength of the working-class movement, and had won a Parliamentary majority which they intended to use to expropriate the capitalists, then they could do it peacefully. We could have peaceful revolution in Britain.

The proof offered was 1945, when the mood of many millions who voted Labour to secure irreversible change was that they would not go back to the 1930s. That mood affected the armed forces, who voted Labour in their big majority. Ergo there could then have been a peaceful revolution.

But it is the old "if my aunt had wheels, then she'd be a bicycle" conundrum.

If the Labour leaders, who for five years (1940-45) had been in a coalition government, had been remotely likely to attempt a socialist revolution, or if there was a calculable likelihood that they would be pushed aside by people who would, then the ruling class would never have let things get to the point where peaceful expropriation of the capitalists was "objectively" possible. It was only a "possibility" in an artificial scenario, concocted from selected bits of reality, wrought into something that could not in reality ever have come into existence.

It was, so to speak, allowed to appear as a "real" possibility in 1945 only because in the world as it was it was not a real possibility at all.

18. MARXISM IS A KNOW-NOTHING EMPIRICISM WRAPPED IN MYSTICISM?

T & M's preposterous "methodological" observations — the quote from Karl Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* — advocate a crass know-nothing empiricism, decked out in mysticism

Marx makes a vast generalisation about the relationship between theory and practice in human history. What is its relevance to the specific and clearly definable and calculable things in dispute? They know. Listen:

"For Marxists it is impossible to gauge what the actual (!) and lasting (?) impact (!) of Blair's constitutional reforms have (?) been on the nature of (?) the Labour Party until they are put to the test by a militant trade union struggle. Just as (!) in the process of production (!), where there is no other (?) way for the worker to test the strength of any material except (!) by (!) applying (!) pressure to it (!) to determine the breaking point, also in the class struggle — there is no other (!) way (!) to assess (!) the ruling classes' defences, but to probe, apply pressure (!), get a struggle going and see (!) what happens. The same goes for the bureaucratic structures of the labour movement. To look at the question any other way is pure scholasticism."

Chou En Lai is supposed to have responded to the question "Was the French Revolution a success?", with, "It is too early to say." Has the Blairite revolution succeeded? Has the Labour Party been radically transformed? Has its relationship to the trade unions and the working class changed? T & M think it is too early to say! We won't know until after the trade unions have mounted a concerted effort to undo Blairism, and failed!

A thing has not happened, cannot with its effects and consequences be defined as a definite event until the maximum

conceivable forces have made an effort to reverse it and failed!

If this is meant seriously, it is advocacy of crass, blind, mindless empiricism!

In terms of what is in dispute about the Labour Party now, it is as we shall see, a trick argument of the sort which we have often encountered in discussing Ireland. (You have no right to discuss Catholic-Protestant relations in Ireland, comrade! These are things for the Irish to decide. We in Britain have no right to discuss internal Irish affairs. We have no right to do anything but fight to get the Brits out! Except that that attitude implies an undisclosed analysis of internal Irish affairs and a taking of sides in the issues that divide the Irish by the very people who told us that we had no right to make an analysis!)

We can't "know", survey, gauge, assess, measure, calculate what the effect of the Blairite transformation of the Labour Party has been on the "nature of" the Labour Party? The transformation was possible only because some trade unions did not fight against it, and others actively supported it. Therefore, we can't know what is what until after we have tested it by a militant full-scale, all-out trade union struggle to sideline or reverse the Blairite coup?

That is utterly preposterous! Of course we know.

What for T & M is the point of this? To take refuge in mystification; to deny "philosophically" what in our real world is glaringly obvious! For now and for the future, it implies waiting, perhaps indefinitely, for something to happen — a full-scale, concerted trade union attempt to reverse and overthrow Blairism — which may *never* happen and which anyway we can't make happen until we become a dominant force in the unions.

It is reminiscent of a certain type of "left faking" by trade union and local government leaders — although T & M are of course sincere — the refusal to do anything in their own area but mark time on the grounds that only a general strike, which depends on others to organise it, can succeed. The NUM leader Joe Gormley used it to argue against action by the miners in the 1970s; some of the local government left used it after Thatcher came to power in 1979 (arguing that only a general strike could stop Thatcher and until that happened the local government left would have to cut services, raise local taxes etc).

But we have to function now, in this situation, where the Blairite coup in the Labour Party and its consequent destruction of working class political life and parliamentary representation dominate working-class politics. That is not something whose "nature" is indiscernible but something real, indeed an all-pervasive reality in working-class politics.

One way of testing T & M's ideas is to apply their approach to other things. Say — all proportions guarded — to Germany in mid-1933 or mid-1934.

Hitler's victory most likely would not have been possible without the surrender and even the help of the Stalinist and social democratic parties. "Therefore we can't know what lasting impact Hitler's constitutional reforms have had on the nature of the German state and the German body politic until they are put to the test of a full-scale CP and SPD working class struggle against them! The immediate changes are of no consequence. They are just the alibi, not the crime. Communists don't need to go underground or take precautions against the police. We must advertise our meetings as before, meet openly. We scorn the 'you-can't-do-that-Hitler-will-stop-us' scholastics and the Trotskyite sects".

In fact, the "Third Period" German Stalinists did say something like that for 18 months or more after Hitler came to

power, insisting that only wretchedly faint-hearted, 'capitulating', right-wing Trotskyites, who vastly overestimated the Hitlerites, could insist that the German working class had suffered a catastrophic defeat.

Or take the much more mundane matter of an engineer in a factory dealing with delicate material. He breaks every piece of work he tries to do by putting too much pressure on it. But he refuses to learn. As the detritus piles up around him, he keeps on insisting to the indignant foreman that there is "no other way"... "to test the strength of the material except by applying pressure to *each and every piece* of material to determine the breaking point. You", he insists to the foreman, "are a hopeless scholastic with your abstract models and calculations."

Or apply T & M's preposterous put-out-your-own-eyes generalities to a trade union struggle. Miners, say, are discussing strike action, and their chances of victory. Someone says that there are coal stocks that will last for months and therefore it might be best to wait until stocks are down.

Trotsky above, discussing relations between trade union and political party, says that the Marxist party "helps the trade union to decide the question of knowing if the strike is opportune, by means of its political and economic information and by its advice". That is, by its "scholastic" calculations. T & M are not to be impressed. They insist: "You can't know that by calculation or by just looking passively at the piled up coal! There is no other way to assess the ruling classes' defences, but to probe, apply pressure, get a struggle going and see what happens."

Or imagine that Jack and Sean are four stories up and Jack is about to step out of the window. SM says: "Thousands of human generations have understood it from experience, and in the last 300 years scientists have defined it: something called the force of gravity exists, and if you continue out of that window, Jack, you will fall and break your neck".

Jack has just re-read Marx's Theses on Feuerbach. He is full of himself — and of undigested "Marx".

He insists: "This is not a question of theorising, comrade, but a practical question! There is no other way for me to test the strength of gravity outside this window except to apply the pressure of my weight to the air beneath me — get a struggle going and see what happens. Disputation over the reality or non-reality of the law of gravity which is isolated from practice is a *scholastic* exercise! You should leave the 'you-can't-walk-on-air-because-gravity-will-stop-you' faint-heartedness to the scholastics and sectarians."

Goodbye Jack!

The idea that you start a struggle "and then see" is often the best approach. But in fact any such approach if it is to be rational is *always* grounded in calculations and *always* based on assumptions about what is actually possible in such a struggle. Nobody sane would proceed otherwise.

19. THE METHOD OF THE MIGs IN THE FALKLANDS WAR?

T & M don't do the sort of sober "concrete analysis" they call for. Their approach reproduces a very familiar pattern in "revolutionary" politics. The Mandelites — the International Marxist Group: IMG or "MIGs" after a Russian airplane — used to specialise in it, in international affairs.

You take the elements in the present situation. Out of them you extrapolate an elaborate, optimistic, best-case scenario.

7 And it wasn't only the Mandelites. The Thornettite half of our organisation at that time adopted the same approach. The consequent division in the group proved irreparable and led first to a series of small splits from the Thornett side of the organisation and then to us expelling the Thornettites.

Then you read back from that best-case scenario recipes for what you do now, in order to get to the ideal situation. Take, for example, what they did with the British-Argentina 1982 war.

Argentina invades the Falklands Islands, to which it has no valid claim that consistent democrats or socialists recognise. It is 500 miles from Argentina; its population is and for 150 years has been British. Britain prepares to go to war to take the islands back. Is this an Argentine war of liberation? Is it just British imperialism throwing its weight about? It is neither. In fact it is a freakish event, not part of any general pattern.

So: define it as such, as we did, and, while opposing Thatcher's war, also oppose the mini-colonial enterprise of the murderous Argentine military dictators? No! This is an unexpected chance for anti-imperialists to show their anti-imperialism!

But it has nothing to do with anti-imperialism? That's only the appearance of things, comrade: the trouble is that you don't really want to fight imperialism!

So? Imagine that the sordid little invasion of the Falklands by the discredited blood-soaked Argentine military dictators, seeking popularity at home, provokes a great popular war of "Argentine liberation" against Britain. Imagine further that the left and then the Argentinian neo-Trotskyists (the Moreno group) gain the lead of that mass popular movement.

Imagine that in the course of the war of Argentine liberation — 500 miles from Argentina! — the Argentine neo-Trotskyists thrust the bourgeoisie aside and became the leaders of the Argentine "masses". Then you have an Argentine socialist revolution!

Conclusions for now? You back the military dictators who have annexed territory and English people on islands 500 miles from Argentina; you proclaim their war with Britain an anti-imperialist war of Argentine liberation (though in fact it has nothing liberating or anti-imperialist about it!).

With this method the optimistic scenario may be more, or less, plausible, more, or less, fantastic (in this case it was simply lunatic, dependent as it was on suppressing the basic facts of the situation and operating with deliberately falsified definitions of the forces in play!). It will serve. So you shout for Argentinian victory and "defend" the butcher-dictator Galtieri, more for what you have projected on to the situation than for anything in play in it (in the real world, the one you actually live in), or likely to emerge out of it.

That happened as we have described it⁷. In fact the self-deluding mental operation served, and in such cases *always* serves, mainly to assist their accommodation to those who shape the events — the wretched Argentine junta and its political manoeuvres to regain support in Argentina. In the case of T & M, the optimistic scenario serves to assist accommodation to the non-revolutionary left in the trade unions.

For AWL, it would mean tail-ending the dominant trade union bureaucracy or its "left wing" for an entire political epoch. Even if we were running a campaign in the unions to get them to fight New Labour, that could not be how we relate to these people.

20. ELEPHANT OR SHEEP?

"The revolutionary, however, also needs to be able to distinguish the first weeks of pregnancy from the last, and to be able to spot the difference between a genuine movement of

the workers and a populist bandwagon”.

Trotsky was fond of this image, applying it to a society he thought was “pregnant” with socialist revolution. He employed it against the Stalinists in their pseudo-ultra left “Third Period”.

But before you can usefully start to assess what stage a pregnancy is at, you must first make certain preliminary assessments. What species of beast is this — placental, marsupial, or monotreme (egg-laying creature)? Is the thing you are talking about pregnant at all? If it is pregnant, how long does pregnancy last in this species? And so on.

If you think a sheep has the same gestation-time as an elephant, you can spend most of two years, the elephant gestation-time, waiting for a sheep that is merely fat to produce lambs.

Alternatively, if you base plans to use elephant traction power to erect barriers against a seasonal flood which you expect some months in the future on the misunderstanding that an elephant gestates and grows to maturity in the same time as a sheep, you may wind up drowned.

All images carry the danger of confusing the image with that for which it is supposed to be a stand-in, the danger that you may find yourself discussing not the issue in dispute but the image.

All images are treacherous when they are used not to nail down a point independently argued, but, as T & M use this

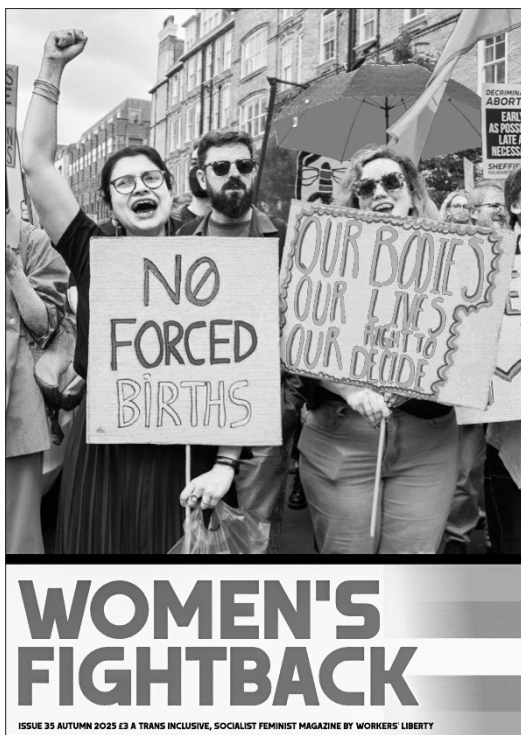
image of gestation, as a means of letting them (and, they hope, you, the reader) assume that which, in the discussion, has to be proved.

“Organic” metaphors don’t help a serious and honest discussion of whether or not the new Labour Party is “pregnant”; and then whether it is “pregnant” with a clone of the parent that gave it birth or something else entirely. That can only be assessed by way of concrete and detailed analysis of the state of the labour movement nearly a decade after the old Labour Party was hi-jacked.

And, if we choose to deal in organic metaphors, we should be careful not to forget that a social and not a biological entity like the Labour Party may be pregnant with something other than a modified replica of itself. That it is not predetermined *what* progeny the “organism” will produce, how long “gestation” will take, or what you should do to affect the nature of that which you believe is in gestation.

We, and others before us, for decades hoped that the old Labour Party would, with our intervention, aided by the logic of the class struggle, produce something closer to what socialists exist to build than to the old Labour Party. In fact, it gave “birth” to Blairism.

That was not inevitable: it was affected by the fate of the labour movement in the broad class struggle and by what the socialists did...



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VI: Marxists, militants, and working-class socialism

21. CAN THE PSEUDO-LEFT POLITICALLY HIJACK THE UNIONS?

T & M argue:

“These facts indicate that a general policy of attempting to win official union backing for socialist electoral challenges to Labour has no grip.

Such a policy could only be implemented if one of two conditions held true: either that we had no intention of allowing the union members a real say in the decision, or, we were deluded enough to think that if we acted as if the majority of the class supported us, they would.”

How could we conceivably engineer “a general policy of ... official union backing for socialist electoral challenges to Labour” without “allowing the union members a real say in the decision”?

T & M write as if the Trade Union Congress General Council has been taken over by the ultra-left...

They are probably right that official trade union backing for genuine socialist candidates is a long way off. We have, let us remember, put our stress, as regards broad perspectives for the labour movement, not on “building a socialist alternative” but on restoring labour representation. Mass trade union backing for working-class representation is much closer. This idea has guided our work in the SA and in elections.

So what concerns T & M? They fear that “left” trade union bureaucrats may hijack the unions. They want us to defend the “discipline” of the inactive conservative majority against such hijackers!

In any case everything said here relates only to whether socialist candidates can hope to get trade union backing. It says nothing to us about whether or not socialists should stand in elections — unless the message is an argument for giving up such activities in despair, and possibly giving up all the typical activities of revolutionary socialists now, and “accepting the discipline of” labour movement bodies and their passive majorities.

And if there is no chance of getting union backing for socialist candidacies, why do they get in such a lather about splintering the unions politically? They worry lest the SWP can carry its wishes in badly attended meetings. In such a situation we “represent” the “silent majority”? It is difficult to see what else they mean.

This is a *conservative* plea for political immobilism on politics in the unions until the passive majority moves!

The judgement here implicitly devalues *any* decision of such meetings, the typical trade union meetings now. It ties us to the opinion — or rather what *they think* is the opinion — of the inactive “mass”. It pits us against not only the SWP when it is being foolish, but also against others who are attracted to the idea of *doing something*, and who will go along with the pseudo-militant SWP by default if we orient to the passive mass.

T & M should read what Trotsky says (above) about the way

the idea that the militants “annex” and usurp the majority of the working class has always been used by reactionaries ...

Or is it that T & M don’t want to differentiate from the “common wisdom” of an anti-SWP section of the “left”? People with whom we have not more and frequently less in common than with the SWP. Certainly, that is the positive result.

They adopt the viewpoint of “left” trade unionists who have no perspective but trade unionism and no goal but to “re-store” the Labour/union link to something like what it was.

That is not AWL’s politics or AWL’s perspective!

22. HAS THE CLASS POLITICAL CONTENT OF THE LABOUR PARTY CHANGED?

“The most important unions organising the key sectors of the working class are now — and will remain for the foreseeable immediate future — Labour Party affiliated organisations. Therefore, we strive to find ways to express our ideas in a form that makes sense given this reality. When addressing the unions we should raise the question of working class political independence in terms of what the union is, or is not doing, to fight for trade union control of the Labour Party and of Labour government policy.”

For five years the AWL has argued that the class content and political substance of the unions’ affiliation to the Labour Party has changed radically within the old forms. Jack put it as sharply as any of us:

“In this context, we can no longer unconditionally defend the link against the growing mood for disaffiliation which is spreading among the trade union rank and file; nor, however, should we concede to that mood. We are for the radical destabilisation and shaking up of the trade union link. In any union where we can influence events we should attempt to organise around the idea of the rank and file presenting an ultimatum to the union leadership: ‘Fight for union policies and Labour democracy-or stop paying fees’. This could be popularised around the formula, ‘No say, no pay’.”

Now, with a great sweeping generality which they call “concrete analysis”, T & M brush all that aside — everything which had led us to our assessment. Because the shifts in Labour-union relations have not gone as far as we (and Jack more than anyone else in the AWL) expected; because the Blairites have been able to get their way without needing to amputate the unions: they want AWL to pretend that the political content of the link has not been turned into its opposite, into a barrier to working-class representation in Parliament.

They have not presented any detailed argument against the Sean Matgamna [JN]⁸ piece of five years ago in *Workers Liberty*, or our analyses since, summarised in Discussion Bulletin 237. They give no reasons for their conclusion. It is so! Jack has spoken. That is all.

8 Some of the articles discussed in this pamphlet were published under the name “John Nihill” or “John O’Mahony”, both pseudonyms for Sean Matgamna. For clarity, in this pamphlet we refer to Sean Matgamna, plus initials of the pseudonym if used: [JN] or [JO] respectively.

This indicates a change of mood rather than of analysis. How *does* Jack reach his conclusions?

Of course, we should argue in the unions “to fight for trade union control of the Labour Party and of Labour government policy”. We do it. But their argument is a trick “argument”, one that assumes as given what it is arguing for. It assumes that the whole, or the main part, of our “ways to express our ideas” is to be filtered through “addressing the unions”. Here, as elsewhere in the article, “the unions” are presented as a bloc, with no differentiation between bureaucracy and rank and file.

We propose policies in the unions. Why does that rule out socialist candidacies as well, “wherever possible”, to quote what Trotsky said to the Independent Labour Party? If “class-conscious workers” vote for Blair, it will be with gritted teeth and by default. (Or have T & M discovered a new category of class-conscious workers — class-conscious workers who are hopeless political idiots, incapable of seeing the Blair Government as the big-business government it is?)

Why should we rule out trying to get a local union to back a “labour representation” or socialist candidate? Or is the idea that the Blairites and the trade unionists who support them, even reluctantly, are so powerful and so entrenched that socialists should *disarm politically* in face of them? That is, in Trotsky’s expression, “boycott ourselves”, by here and now, accepting the “collective discipline of working class organisations”?

23. CHAMPION THE PASSIVE MASS AGAINST MISGUIDED MILITANTS?

Because of their fearful conservatism, they look to the bureaucratic rules and regulations of the union to hold things in check. For that reason they offer AWL political paralysis and disintegration. Read again: to the idea that rule changes would “make it easier to support non-Labour candidates”, they reply:

“The problem is that it would perhaps make it too easy. The formal bar on backing non-Labour candidates means that left activists have to be sure of solid support in the workplace before supporting challenges to Labour”.

Perhaps we should praise them for candour before shooting them for political fuckwittedness! It is notable that they who airily dismiss the effect of the rule changes on the Labour Party, here think rules are all-important and all-powerful. The rules are what keeps “left activists” from acting out of step with the “workplace”.

(How do they know, by the way? If there were union-backed electoral challenges to Labour, it is a safe bet now that there would be working-class support — from workers who fell away from New Labour into abstention at the last General Election, for example. One of the most instructive failures of the Socialist Alliance — in so far as it was a matter of method and approach, here mainly that of the SWP — was its failure to win such people. But the problem was not that those workers who abstained had illusions in Blair’s Labour Party!)

Read:

“Without that control provided by the rules it is absolutely certain that the sectarians would siphon off branch money without any proper democratic mandate”.

The rules that mandate exclusive backing for the Blairites play the useful role of stopping money going to e.g. the SWP! We argue against union branches backing the “Respect” coa-

lition. We do that by explaining that a union-backed left challenge to Blair is a good idea — but not with *these* politics and *this* leadership. But here T & M seem to want us to do it by basing ourselves on “the rules” which insist that union cash should instead go to the Blairites.

By “democratic mandate” T & M here seem to mean mandate from the inactive members who do not attend union branch meetings. And again, the question confronts them: why is it better that it should be decreed, by power of inertia and pro-Blair rules, that the unions’ relations with the Blair Labour Party should be what they are? Why is it more democratic that entrenched rules rather than the active union members — sectarian though some may be — should determine what happens?

They answer strangely:

“The formal bar on backing non-Labour candidates means that left activists have to be sure of solid support in the workplace before supporting challenges to Labour... That is why there are so few solidly rooted electoral challenges — the support isn’t there in the working class”.

Eh? Do they really mean to explain the political disorientation of the Labour-loyal activists as a healthy inhibition rooted in “the working-class mind” on this question — not in the politically confused Labour-Party and “anti-Tory” mind of too many activists?

If left activists do not make more challenges to Labour “solidly rooted”, it is because they reflect the mass of workers — and that is good! (In any case, better than what the sectarians want.)

And what is the reliable guardian of the interests of the mass of the members against the errors of the activists? The rules against backing non-Labour candidates!

One of the reasons why we favour soviets over Parliament is that delegates to the soviet can be recalled at the will of the electors, easily, immediately and without bureaucratic obstacles being placed in the way of it. But here T & M see bureaucratic rules as powerful guardians of the “democracy” of the non-participants and a healthy restraint on what the activists do. (Meanwhile, the Labour Party’s changed rules, which for example make it very difficult for rank-and-file activists to get their propositions onto conference agendas, are of no importance at all, significant only as an “alibi”.)

Our political fore-parents, you see, were wiser than we are, and imposed rules on us that are a sort of political entail: the

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present activists cannot dispose of the basic assets. The rules work like the US Supreme Court as a check on impetuous democracy, if democracy means the majority will of those present and voting. Alternatively, T & M think that bowing to what they claim is the will of the inactive union members is more democratic than having the activists give money to the sectarians.

We do not want to follow Jack's bad example and exaggerate wildly, but what hits you in the face here is that if T & M mean what they say, then they have a lot of agreement with the Blairites and the trade union bureaucrats who argue that some of the Tory anti-union legislation is good and democratic. Of course neither T nor M holds to such an opinion. Yet it is the logic of some of the things they write.

"If you try to get the union rules to move ahead of the class—as most of the left now wants to do—you simply reproduce the same danger of elitism and bureaucratic substitutionism as in any other attempt to shortcut the necessary work of convincing and mobilising the workers".

There is nothing "elitist" and "bureaucratic-substitutionist" about the existing rules and the way they inhibit the most active part of the unions?

T & M proclaim it a principle of working-class democracy that:

"We should sharply oppose any attempt to change the political fund rules to indicate support for political parties other than Labour, without first putting the proposed rule changes to a ballot of the membership."

But to keep the existing rules in place without a ballot of the membership is fine and good!

In other words, we are not only champions of the rules as the embodiment of the wisdom of our ancestors — dealing with a different Labour Party — but we also rely on and champion what we think are the attitudes of the mass of the least involved union members to keep the rules in place against the possibly rough hands of the activists chafing against the healthy restraint of the rules that now serve the Blairites.

The abstentions in the last General Election suggests that there has been quite a working-class shift from Blair-Labour. We think that local union-backed and union-financed candidates challenging the Blairites might get a lot of the traditional core Labour/trade-unionist vote. There are enormous obstacles to mounting such candidacies in inertia, the weight of the union bureaucracy, and so on. T & M champion the obstacles and the restraints!

For T & M, before such a thing can be mounted by us, or us and others, we must first either be confident enough to break the union rules — rules which they themselves strongly defend — or put the proposition to a national ballot of the union (something easier said than done in any context other than the union bureaucracy wanting it).

According to T & M, we must make insistence on such a ballot about rule changes a central concern of the AWL.

They say we should insist on prior agreement by a majority of the *whole* union before the rules which act to restrain the activists and stop them moving ahead of the working class can be changed — rules which were imposed a political age ago to regulate relations between the unions and their political creature, the Labour Party, and which now serve to finance the Blair Party.

They want the maximum restraints, inhibitions and obstacles in the way of any challenge to New Labour, and any

support to a labour-representation or socialist challenge to New Labour.

The rules and the mass of inactive members are the guarantee against "bureaucratic substitutionism" — not, note, against the Blairite hijackers "substituting" an out-and-out anti-labour, anti-working-class party for the old Labour Party, but against "left", "socialist" and pseudo-socialist bureaucratic self-substitution.

The implication is that not only are the ancient rules democratic and "progressive", but also that relatively, their guardians, the trade-union bureaucrats, are too, at least on this question. They play a progressive role in keeping open the option — which they don't use, and may never use! — of a serious fight to "reclaim the Labour Party" and in protecting the inactive majority against the activists.

The curious parallel with the idea that the ruling Stalinists, despite all that could be said against them, preserved nationalised property, is again forced on the reader of T & M.

The trade union bureaucrats, of course, have always claimed that this is what they do!

The fact that the working class and the trade unions are now the victims of an enormous political fraud, a hijacking (there is no hyperbole in calling it a hijacking) that has substituted the Blairite "changeling" for the older party — that is all right for now. (It corresponds to the state of mind of the working class: that is plainly T & M's train of thought). Nothing can be done about it, and nothing should be done about it, except by way of a ballot of the whole union!

The point here is not that we are against ballots. Where they can be organised, their usefulness in getting the political debates out to wider circles of workers may well outweigh the risk that they allow the passive majority to hamstring the activists. The point is that T & M would have us argue and campaign to demand that the union bureaucrats initiate such a ballot not to test whether the members really do want to stick with the Blairite monopoly. No: the demand for a ballot comes into play, and should be "sharply" insisted on, as a fallback defence of the status quo, should the left manage to defeat the bureaucrats at union conference and vote through a rule change.

This is more than conservative. It is not just a trade-unionist as distinct from a revolutionary socialist point of view. It is the point of view of the politically backward, timid and disoriented trade unionists, and of the incumbent trade union bureaucrats!

The argument is not made any better by the explanations about the danger of "moving ahead of the class" and of being elitists and bureaucratic substitutionists who attempt to short-cut the work of "convincing and mobilising" the workers.

Is it alright for AWL, as AWL, to be ahead of the class? Maybe. But we must not take the unions ahead of the class! The common-sense rule of thumb that militants can't do anything if they fail to carry the rank and file with them, is here translated into a prohibition on being ahead of the mass in the sense of giving leadership.

Do they mean to say these things? Possibly not. If we "exaggerate", or misunderstand, we will be happy to be corrected.

24. WORKERS' DEMOCRACY

Now we move into strange and unexpected territory.

"The AWL should not take the initiative in proposing fragmenting the trade union political funds. Not because we are conservatives who desire to control developments,

but because we are working class militants who believe in workers' democracy."

But of course we desire to "control developments". Don't T & M? "What else" — as Frederick Engels once put it — "are we here for"? The point we made before, which they respond to in such an odd way here, is that the desire to control developments, when we can't, can lead to us becoming prisoners of the larger forces which do have at least a measure of control, and thus falling into a sort of conservatism.

The difficulties we outlined are rooted in the fact that we can't control developments and the danger, therefore, that dissatisfaction with the fragmentation possibly consequent on initiative and movement will lead us into a conservative defence of the Blairite status quo, "until" things break from their present pattern *immediately into the pattern we would like*.

Whether they know it or not, that is exactly the position T & M are letting themselves be pushed into.

The appeal to "working class democracy" here can only mean that we ourselves submit in politics to *what we think* is the viewpoint of the silent rank and file and to the "discipline" and tempo of their movement. What else can the approach they advocate come down to in practice?

That is better than "sectarianism" towards the labour movement? No it isn't — it produces exactly the same results as the most stupid sectarianism!

Not to dare to differentiate and go our own way politically has exactly the same consequence vis-a-vis the "mass movement" as cutting ourselves off from it by sectarianism, that is, by being so far ahead that development and fruitful interaction with the mass of workers is ruptured.

It would make us politically irrelevant in the affairs of the labour movement, in this case by having us politically "boycott ourselves".

No! We go our own political way.

It needs to be said clearly: we do not believe in what is quaintly misdefined here as "working-class democracy", understood as getting in line docilely behind the broad, now inert, mass of the working class in trade unions.

The idea is not made any better or rendered less of a political suicide note for AWL by defining the policy of doing nothing to upset the status quo vis-a-vis the unions and New Labour — the idea that you do not break up, fragment, the unions' political funds in any way — as "working-class democracy".

It is plain here that what we defined as the crux of the issue, the danger of becoming conservative guardians of the status quo, is exactly what T & M are doing here, whether they understand it or not.

They more or less candidly describe this condition in themselves, at the same time as denying its existence:

"When proposing a policy for the unions, as unions, we should do nothing that undermines the fundamental collective purpose and class solidarity of the trade unions and renders them incoherent and ineffectual. If there is to be a meaningful political aspect to the unions [emphasis added], it has to be collective and unitary; anything else is out of kilter with the essential nature of trade unions as the embodiment of the principle of class solidarity"

This is downright nonsensical. It sinks *politics* into trade unionism. It conflates the point, impulse and content of trade-unionism — unity, collective action — with working-class *politics*. It proposes that we sink our politics for the

working class and the unions into *trade unionism*.

In politics — as distinct from trade unionism — the basic principle is not unity but programme, goals, etc. In a world where socialism is very much a minority view, to limit ourselves to what is "collective and unitary" is an ultra-conservative doctrine of immobilism which cannot but help bolster the status-quo.

It cuts against the militants, the awkward squad, the pioneers of something better.

This is what the nonsense at the start about trade-union discipline comes to. It is the sort of thing trade-union officials and time-serving Labour politicians say, to rubbish the left and excuse and defend themselves and their "realism" (unlike T & M, they don't call it "revolutionary realism" just "realism"...)

It is perfectly true that we never take the initiative in splitting a union along political lines. But we may well push policies, including political proposals, which we think are necessary to the working class, even if our opponents will hive off or expel the minority and thus split the union "as a union". If we are urging the unification of politically divided trade unions into an umbrella organisation in which the communists will be in the minority — say, the policy Trotsky advocated for the French trade unions, split by the right wing in the 1920s — especially then we will not accept the "political discipline" of the union. In terms of the history of labour movements, the claim that "if there is to be a meaningful political aspect to the unions, it has to be collective and unitary" is way off the mark. To say the very opposite would be more true to history and reality.

In many countries of Europe there have been trade union federations defined by political alignments — Christian-Democratic, social-democratic, Stalinist. In France there were historically three large union federations and are now half a dozen.

What do we argue in such a situation? Of course we want trade union unity. But we do not say that the principle of working class unity demands of *revolutionary socialists* that they sink into the largest trade union federation and accept *its political "discipline"*. Our French comrades have never done that! The idea is as absurd as it would be suicidal.

We do not apply the trade union principle of unity to working-class politics. There the decisive thing is political programme and combat for ideas and actions against every other tendency.

The first sentence — "do nothing that undermines the ... class solidarity of the trade unions", etc. — is a flat truism. And a pretty useless one in and of itself when we have to assess the effect of a policy or initiative.

The way T & M put it, the tenor of the truism and the conclusion it implies is starkly conservative. If we take it literally, it means *do nothing on political or even trade union affairs that may divide the working class*. Don't risk rocking the boat of the "fundamental collective purpose and class solidarity of the trade unions", which they implicitly (but falsely) assume to be on an even keel and the right course so long as we "do nothing" to disturb it. It conjures up such bits of trade-union routinist wisdom as "a bird in the hand is worth two in an unrealistic pay claim".

In its emphasis on warning against making the movement less effective by creating divisions, it implicitly puts the onus of responsibility on those who want to challenge the status quo. It is up to them/us to do things so as not to take risks. In the 30 Theses we published in *Solidarity*, to which T & M's piece was a reply, we quoted Trotsky:

"If it be criminal to turn one's back on mass organisations for the sake of fostering sectarian fictions, it is no less so to passively tolerate subordination of the revolutionary mass movement to the control of openly reactionary or disguised conservative ('progressive') bureaucratic cliques. Trade unions are not ends in themselves; they are but means along the road to proletarian revolution."

25. WORKERS AND THE SOCIALIST SOMEBODY ELSE

The thoroughly unserious approach to the points in dispute that runs through every part of T & M's document is again dominant in the next passage.

"Bloxam and Matgamna [JO] tell us that 'logically' there are only two possible uses of the fund: 'One possibility is to argue for continued exclusive support of the New Labour Party... the second possibility is to argue for the tactical use of existing funds' by which they mean 'tactical fragmentation of the funds' to support left-wing, or labour movement electoral challenges. This is a prime example of an attempt to fit reality into a pre-conceived schema to suit your argument."

"They use this a priori construction in order to portray those who want a serious and active trade union led fight in the Labour Party as 'conservative upholders of the status quo'. It won't work. We are proposing an aggressive tactical use of the funds to complement and fund activity to fight for working-class control of union representatives. All they propose is the working class organisation handing over money to somebody else. What is most worrying is that you can only think that tactical use of the funds equals support for non-Labour candidates, if you have already given up on a struggle within and through the Labour/union link".

The first thing that strikes you here is the political disorientation expressed in the workerist demagoguery, the narrow trade-unionist point of view. We (Bloxam and Matgamna [JO]) propose, they say, that "the working class organisation hand over money to somebody else". The trade unions "handing over" — that is, donating — money to socialist or labour-representation candidates is "the working class organisation" giving money to "somebody else"?

Does the counterposition of "somebody else" to "the working class organisation" include AWL? In relation to the working class and working-class organisations, are we "somebody else"?

It is hard to see how we would not be included in this "somebody else". Why wouldn't we be (especially if we continue to do the things T & M object to)? It is difficult when you read stuff like this to believe that it is written by members of AWL.

This sort of workerist demagoguery would not be acceptable even if they were to direct it exclusively against the SWP. Our objection to the SWP is to its politics and its typical modus operandi.

It might very well be in order for us in a trade union branch to oppose giving a donation to some SWP electoral or other project. It would be entirely out of order to back up our op-

9 A year or so after that, one of us had the experience of being denounced at an open air mass meeting of upwards of 1500 dockers by a Catholic Action rank-and-file leader, inspired by both Wilson and the Tory press of the time, as a "minority of a minority" — which was perfectly true — and "a politically motivated home-wrecker". His crime was to advocate that dockers oppose and fight reorganisation of the ports in the bosses' interests, which both the dockers unions, the TGWU and the NASD — of which the Catholic Action rank-and-file leader, Joe Barry, was a member — had accepted.

10 Workers' Liberty #26, "Trotsky on the Spanish Revolution: Class, party and leadership": bit.ly/t-spain

position to the specific proposal by deploying such an appeal to narrow trade-union-mindedness — us workers against the petty-bourgeois socialists! Wouldn't it?

26. MINORITY MOVEMENTS

Some questions to T & M. In British working-class history, back at least to the "labour unrest" before World War One, at what point did the Tories, Labour right-wingers and trade-union bureaucrats (and, where Trotskyists were involved, the Stalinists) not condemn the activists, the militants, the communists, the Trotskyists, as "unrepresentative minorities of troublemakers" and — as Harold Wilson infamously said of the 1966 seafarers' strike leaders — "politically motivated men"?⁹

How did the Minority Movement in the 1920s get that name? They picked up a dismissal of them by a union leader as "just an unrepresentative minority" and wore it proudly as a badge of honour.

Much of the real rationale and public justification of the series of anti-union laws brought in 1981 and after was precisely the need to rein in the militant minority. Thus the imposition of strike ballots and so on.

Already in 1923, Trotsky had to take the syndicalist-communist Robert Louzon to task for blundering into the habitual language of the reactionaries in denouncing socialist minorities: "It is wrong for Louzon to employ the terminology customarily used by our opponents in their fight against the revolution — it is a question of winning the confidence of the proletariat. And it is only possible to do this with correct tactics, tested by experience."

Don't T & M think that the arguments they have been forced into using to defend their stand are indecently close to the age-old arguments of the reactionaries?

27. DO BUREAUCRATS REFLECT THE RANK AND FILE?

All the issues in this section are summed up in the answer to this question.

In fact, even in a period of working-class quiescence such as this, it is nonsense to present things as if the incumbent trade union bureaucrats merely reflect the passive rank and file. The interaction is more complex. With better leaders the class would not be quiescent. If the "left" had constructed an equivalent of the rank-and-file "minority movement", able to give a lead and challenge the incumbent trade union leaders, the working class would not be quiescent. There are huge possibilities for competent militant leaders to cultivate working-class combativity.

Politically the RMT leaders leave a lot to be desired, but they have helped encourage and cultivate railworkers' militancy.

Comrades should have a look at the way Trotsky discusses these questions in the texts on class, party and leadership in the Spanish Revolution in *Workers' Liberty* 26.¹⁰

No sensible activist will substitute himself for the members. Yet our movement rejects all the formal and bureaucratic breakwaters against "impulsive" rank-and-file initiatives — that is, against the democracy of the activists.

We reject the counterposition of the inactive members to

active, and the raising of the former above the latter.

We reject the idea that AWL looks to the rules to impose political wisdom on activists who might “rush too far ahead”.

We treat with the contempt they deserve all those, be they trade union bureaucrats, Labour Party politicians, or Thatcher Tories bringing in anti-union laws, who claim to “democratically” represent the inactive or “silent” majority against “unrepresentative” activists and militant minorities.

The entire approach T & M advocate is entirely out of line with the ethos of Marxist socialism and sharply at variance with the traditions of our movement.

If AWL were to assume the role of guards for the status quo against the SWP and suchlike — no matter how politically idiotic one thinks the SWP to be! — we would be signing our own political death warrant.¹¹

28. CONSERVATIVE UPHOLDERS OF THE STATUS QUO

And what do they counterpose to “the working class organisation handing over money to somebody else”?

“We are proposing an aggressive tactical use of the funds to complement and fund activity to fight for working-class control of union representatives”.

Translation: they propose a campaign of propaganda within the unions, advocating that the unions should deploy their political donations “aggressively” to influence sponsored MPs. That is their “working-class control of union representatives”.

Fine. None of us is against that. We have been advocating that for a long time. It is one of a number of things we should do, and continue to do. We are, however, against dressing it up so grandiloquently that no-one, including ourselves, knows what we are talking about.

We are against pretending that such propaganda in trade unions can lead to “working-class control of union representatives”. Against pretending that it is the self-sufficient road to restoring working-class political representation.

The worst thing here, though, is when they complain that our attempt to delineate the logical possibilities sharply and clearly is an “a priori construction” chosen in order “to portray those who want a serious and active trade union led fight in the Labour Party as ‘conservative upholders of the status quo’...”

It would be better for them to reply to the substantive point — that we risk being trapped by our desire to see the unions move as quickly and in as straight a line as possible to recreate a labour party, into being defenders of the status quo against

anything which contradicts the pattern we want.

We wrote explicitly — have in our press written explicitly, again and again, for years — that we want a serious fight in the trade unions to make the unions fight. The crux of the argument is whether that is compatible with standing labour-representation or socialist candidates in elections. We think they are compatible.

But what exactly is a “union-led fight in the Labour Party” in this connection? How can we arrange this “union-led” fight? What else can “union-led” mean other than “led by the existing leaders of the unions”?

That is a long stage ahead of the immediate possibility for us — a propaganda campaign by us and other socialists to get the unions to fight in the Labour Party.

We advocate that. But *there is no guarantee that “the unions”, as a body, will ever do that.* We could not take the one-sided course T & M advocate without warping AWL into an utterly narrow sect focused for politics exclusively on its propaganda campaign in the unions — a campaign based on a preconceived scenario and commitment to the belief that the labour movement can develop from where we are now in one way and one way only.

There is a serious question embedded in the bluster. There is no getting away from the need for honest calculation and concrete assessment.

What calculation do they ground themselves on?

They say that our approach means culpably “giving up on a struggle within and through the Labour/union link”. What is *their* alternative? It is to jolly themselves along with rhetoric, close their eyes to realistic assessment, and commit themselves exclusively (the practical difference between us is defined by the word “exclusively”) to the idea that trade union leader-led “struggle within and through the Labour/union link” can be mounted on a serious enough scale to have a chance of success, and in a reasonably short time.

There are only two possible ways this can happen. Either that the present union leaders will carry through a successful struggle against the Blairites. Or that the unions will be radically shaken up, and we, or people like us, will soon win leadership in them, or enough support to exercise decisive influence.

In practice, as an immediate policy, inside a time frame which would not mean leaving the electoral arena to the Blairites for a political epoch, this idea can only mean having unlimited confidence that the new trade union leaders will break the Blairites and their grip. Without a firm confidence in the new leaders to do that, T & M’s policy just does not make sense.

That is, indeed, the undertext of the document, and per-

¹¹ There will be a few people in the AWL who perhaps are groping in their memory to uncover where they have heard this sort of stuff before. In fact it is very like what the Tearseites in IS (SWP) used to argue. Their insistent wisdom — and in an era of mass militancy — was that the militants should not go ahead of the masses.

The Tearscites started as a small sub-faction within our faction in the IS/SWP, the “Trotskyist Tendency”. They were influenced by a once-prominent but long-retired member of the 1940s Revolutionary Communist Party, Roy Tearse. One weekend in July 1971, during the Aggregate of the Trotskyist Tendency, they suffered a split in their own ranks, and both of the sub-groupings then split from us, one on the Saturday, the other on the Sunday. (Intending to split, they had recruited a certain M. Thomas to increase their vote at the Aggregate. After listening to the debate all day Saturday, he stayed when those who had recruited him walked out...) One group went on backhandedly to help expel us from IS in December 1971 and then to form an inchoate all-inclusive Opposition in IS that called itself the “Revolutionary Opposition”, but was better named by its opponents as the “Right Opposition”. They grew quite significantly. 80 or so of them were expelled by IS in 1973. Out of IS, they soon scattered to the four winds. Their faction became the immediate ancestor to quite a sizeable number of groups — the RCP, the RCG, and the Chartist majority.

What was left of the core group wound up collaborating with Ken Livingstone in the early 1980s on *Labour Herald*, the paper of the class-colaborationist local government left financed and edited by the Healyite WRP (which in turn was financed by Libya, etc.). One of the three up-front editors of *Labour Herald*, alongside K. Livingstone and Ted Knight, was a Tearseite, Matthew Warburton. The member of the Right Opposition (the *Labour Herald* section) whom most comrades will remember is Sheila Cohen, who used to publish a trade-union newsletter and considered herself an expert on other people’s “sectarianism”.

haps the source of some of the unqualified identification of “the unions”, as a bloc, with workers’ control, working-class democracy, etc.

29. WE MUST LEARN TO WALK ON TWO LEGS

But having unlimited, unqualified confidence in the new trade union leaders does not make sense either!

Thinking that “tactical use of the funds equals support for non-Labour candidates” (as a possibility) proves that “you have already given up on a struggle within and through the Labour/union link”?

More to the point: if you think tactical use of the funds cannot mean anything more than unions putting financial pressure on sponsored Labour MPs — if you rule out going outside the existing Blairite-union framework — then what right do you have to get indignant when someone says you have let yourself be boxed into a conservative defence of the status quo (defending it because you hope the union leaders will soon transform it into a modified, better version of that status quo)? What right?

The inalienable human right to splutter and bluster when you have boxed yourself into a corner and can’t think of anything intelligent to say?

But why do T & M want us to switch from the existing AWL policy of walking on two legs — electoral work and a labour-movement campaign — to the Long Jack Silver policy of hopping around on just one leg?

In so far as we can make sense of it, it is triggered by the statements of some of the new trade union leaders. Jack is bowled over.

What is the difference between us here? It is not, certainly not, about whether we should treat the new developments in

the union leaderships very seriously and try to build on them. We started to do that many months ago, in editorials in the paper in August 2002 and in October 2002.

The difference is that they want nothing else. (We will give our reasons for thinking that their nominal commitment to some independent candidates amounts to very little.)

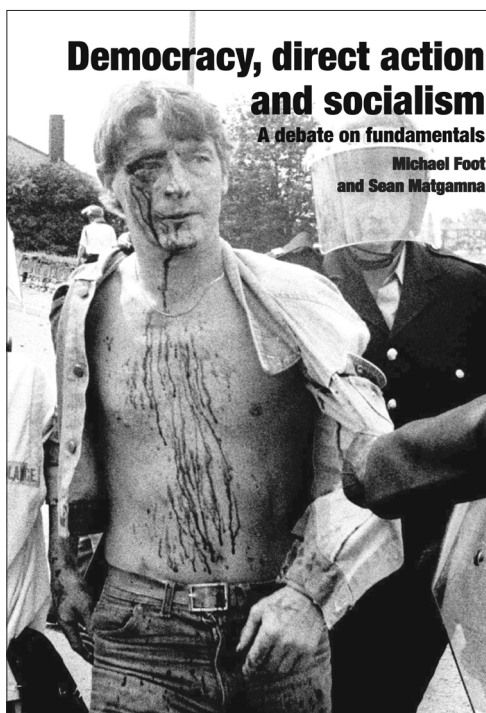
The Socialist Alliance experience, with its large blanket of “Socialist Alliance” — largely SWP — candidacies, is coming to an end, and in any case, outside a few exceptions, has not been a good example of electoral work. Their Long Jack Silver policy may be given a certain appeal and even some credibility by recoil from the Socialist Alliance experience.

We should not just recoil from it. We should analyse, understand and learn from it. We should also learn from the not-at-all-so-bad experience of the Scottish Socialist Party’s election candidacies.

We need to keep firmly in mind that the bad experience of the Socialist Alliance, and the further bad experience now being prepared with the “Respect” coalition, has no proper bearing on whether there actually is an alternative “Labour Party” option — a turn back to the Labour Party — for us to take. The one-sided policy T & M propose makes no more sense now, even with the coming of the “left” trade union leaders, than it would have made four or five years ago when we adopted our present “walk on two legs” policy.

What they propose is nothing like a viable worked-out Labour Party policy. Why? *Because there isn’t one, short of a concerted trade union drive against Blairism. We want that. But we can’t bring it about at will.*

We are forced to recognise that it may never happen. And while advocating it, for all the reasons above, *we do other things too.* This is the crux of our differences.



A head-to-head debate between the revolutionary left (Sean Matgamna) and the traditional Labour left (Michael Foot), focused on the alternatives posed to the labour movement in the fight against the Thatcher Tories from 1979 to the mid-1980s. The core political arguments remain crucial.

• 28 pages, £1: workersliberty.org/books

VII: Politics and trade-unionism are not the same thing

30. COLLAPSING POLITICS INTO TRADE UNIONISM

“The fact, that through this mechanism of ruling class domination [the Labour Party] the trade unions have also secured piecemeal reforms and concessions, is no more remarkable than the idea that the union leaderships can sometimes achieve concessions through agreements regulating the terms of the labour contract”.

Here too, one of the old descriptive commonplaces of our tendency — that the Labour Party was the trade unions extending their bargaining on behalf of the workers into Parliament and generalising it into society-wide interests and demands — is invoked, but given a new content.

The problem is that the generally true description is here used to collapse the qualitative political advance by the working-class which even the old “bourgeois-workers-party” Labour partly embodied, when it went in for society-wide political “bargaining”, back into routine trade unionism, pretending that there is no meaningful difference. But there is.

Lenin described politics as “all issues to do with the overall running of society”. Generalised to the whole of society by way of a political party created for just that purpose, “bargaining” necessarily deals with society as a whole: with the social context in which the exploitation of labour is carried on, in which worker-bourgeois wage bargaining takes place.

That is a qualitative step forward into something radically in advance of trade-union bargaining within a wage-labour relationship set in a social context over which the workers or their trade unions can attempt no control.

Why else would we be advocating a “workers’ government” as a transitional form to working-class revolution?

We do not, of course, pretend that this Labourist step of the unions into generalised bargaining on the level of society, that is into politics, is adequate. We do not forget the state power which the capitalists would retain even under a “left-Labour” government.

But T & M’s conception of the relationship between mere trade unionism and the unions in politics sinks the working-class movement in politics by way of the Labour Party back into the mere trade unionism from which the LP emerged.

It is enormously to undervalue the old Labour Party both for what it was and for what it might have been a step towards. It is not — like so many things in their polemic — to know the difference between quantity and quality.

That Jack makes this mistake in the course of advocating a variant of our old attitude to the Labour Party suggests that the explanation for his muddle is that he did not in the past understand, or has now forgotten the whys and wherefores, of our involvement in the Labour Party and the perspectives we fought for in relation to it.

It belongs to the same order of things, it is the same sort of mental operation, performed for the same reasons, as the use of the great historical abstraction, “bourgeois workers’ party”, to avoid registering the difference between New Labour and Old Labour. “Concrete analysis?” Please!

31. CONFLATING THE UNIONS AND THE LABOUR PARTY

But there are other important things wrong with T & M’s approach. What they suggest would in practice mean a political orientation — and an exclusive orientation at that! — not to a political party, that is to people who are members of that party by way of some degree of political self-selection, but to the trade unions, whose members are selected not by politics but by the needs of self protection on the job and the defence and betterment of wages and conditions!

It is not to be taken as given that all or most trade unionists will even have “Labourist” politics. There is no element of political selection in the British unions, such as there is or used to be in, say, France.

Nor should we pretend that trade union affiliation to the Labour Party amounts to the same thing: one of the developments that put Thatcher in power in 1979 was that a segment of skilled workers switched to voting Tory.

In the 1960s and 70s we had to argue with the Grantites (now Socialist Party and Socialist Appeal) that the passing of trade union conference resolutions in favour of “nationalisation” could not be taken as indicating that there already was a viable “socialist consciousness in the labour movement” (as they used to put it: see *What We Are And What We Must Become*). Events since then do not suggest that we got that wrong. Nor were we wrong to see what the Grantites made of that idea as the cultivation of self-poisoning delusion.

The attitude of T & M is made even odder when one remembers that they are at pains to rule out the idea that the socialists and pseudo-socialists who often make trade union decisions should be taken as representative.

Or is it that they think it out of order for an unrepresentative manipulative minority to decide “bureaucratically” to give money to the Socialist Alliance, or whatever, but alright for a similar group of people to hold the New Labour Party link in being?

32. TRADE-UNION CONTROL OF MPS?

Nor is trade-union control of the Parliamentarians necessarily one of our goals. It depends.

Right now, for the trade unions to “control” the Labour Party even in the sense they once did, would be better than what exists. But we are not syndicalists.

Our viewpoint is not that of trade unionists, even the very best of trade unionists.

We want to restructure the labour movement so that the Parliamentarians are under the control, and *the trade unions under the leadership of*, a Marxist party.

One of the reasons for socialists standing in elections now is that it contributes to the building up of such a party, and therefore to its work in the unions.

Not the least problem with the politics of T & M is that their talk of the unions controlling the parliamentarians presupposes — if they have in mind, politically, anything like what we have in mind, and we assume they do — that the existing labour movement, in the first place the trade unions, have *already* been radically changed, from top to bottom...

That is a programme for an entire period of unknowable duration.

“For the union to be unable to speak with a unified political voice is to put the union in a subordinate relation to the parliamentarian — or would be parliamentarian. Only if the union has a unitary bond with the parliamentary representatives and their party, is any form of accountability possible.”

A “unified political voice” means what? A whole world outlook?

This, if they are serious about it, is a syndicalist position. It is not a revolutionary Marxist position.

It is not even the world outlook of *revolutionary* syndicalism.

Trade union control of the parliamentarians is not our goal! Our goal, as above, is that the parliamentarians should be firmly under the control, and the trade unions firmly under the leadership, of the Marxist party.

33. WHEN HAVE “THE UNIONS” CONTROLLED THE MPS?

All sorts of questions are begged in what T & M write. A “concrete analysis” is precisely what they don’t make! For example: the unions don’t, in fact, *control* their sponsored MPs.

Since the days of the Arthur Deakin-style stone-age right-wing trade union barons, half a century ago, the unions have not even *appeared* to control what Labour MPs do in government or in opposition. [Deakin was the General Secretary of the TGWU, then the biggest union in Britain.]

There is no trade union control or LP accountability in the situation T & M want to conserve. In which period of the trade union-LP tie-up was there ever real trade-union control of the MPs, or anything approximating to it? What “precise” — controlling — link is there between any MP and any union now?

In fact the Prime Minister and his Office control the Parliamentary Labour Party, about 200 of whom are union-sponsored MPs, and they in turn “control”, what, by way of them, the unions do in politics.

The old notional control and accountability depended on the structures and rituals of the *pre-Blairite* Labour party. *It is the central pillar of our case that that sort of thing has already been changed out of all recognition.*

At best T & M are saying that they want to get back to it and that we should not do anything to change the elements of an entity which they hope one day to turn back to what it was.

They spin and misdiagnose what the old system was in terms of the trade union accountability of MPs in order to recommend a status quo which they find as uncongenial as we do.

Independent working-class politics is rendered impossible with such an approach. *If we adopted it, it would make us into a political tail of the dominant forces in the Labour Party and trade unions alike.*

The present situation is one of flux, of interregnum. Many things are unclear. The future shape of relationships in the labour movement is unclear. To let that fact (together with revulsion against the experience of the SWP-dominated Socialist Alliance) demoralise us into a timid, inert conservatism would be a gross dereliction of our political duty.

In fact, however, other questions are raised here.

Since when have we thought that the old Labour/union relationship was ideal? In practice, the dominant union influ-

ence on the Labour Party was always the influence of trade union bureaucrats — at first, a century ago, people of liberal political outlook, then of reform “socialists”.

At the crucial turning point eight or nine years ago, the dominant influence was that of bureaucrats turned Blairite.

If there was accountability, it was always accountability to the trade union barons. We never thought the old situation was even tolerable, let alone ideal. We argued for a trade union rank-and-file movement. We argued for the possibility of subdividing the trade union block vote.

Back in that strange political world that came into existence for a while after Thatcher beat the incumbent Labour Government in the 1979 general election, when we found ourselves with Moss Evans, leader of the TGWU, in meetings to plan the campaign for Labour Party democracy, we did not fail in *Socialist Organiser* to point out the disabling contradiction in having the head of the TGWU, which was far from a model of democracy, fighting alongside us for democracy in the Labour Party. We advocated a rank-and-file movement in the trade unions. Didn’t we? Don’t we?

34. WORKERS’ CONTROL AND DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY

“The most powerful objection to what the Socialist Alliance proposes is that it misses the central concern of Marxists — not just in relation to the fight for a workers’ party, and workers’ candidates but in relation to all our work in the class movement — the idea of workers’ control and democratic accountability. We want candidates, councillors and MPs who are answerable to the trade unions and accountable to them. One cautious pro-Labour proposal that seeks to impose a measure of control and accountability on union representatives in the Labour Party structures or Parliament, or which seeks to get more workers into parliament to promote union policy, embodies more of our programme than the Socialist Alliance’s ill-disguised gambit to get its hands on union money. We should vote accordingly.”

Note how unambitious and “evolutionary” they are here. Not accountability but only “a measure of control and accountability” will satisfy them. And “a measure of control and accountability” to? “The trade unions”!

The phrasing here, (“embodies more of our programme”), suggests that the “text” running through Jack’s pre-conscious as he formulated the words quoted here was Karl Marx’s well-known statement that “every step of real movement is more important than a dozen programmes”. Jack, in his own mind, invokes Karl Marx’s sense of a “real” movement steadily evolving and growing. The trouble is that he applies it inappropriately to... the Blair *retrogression* from the Labour Party and our bureaucratised trade unions.

Plainly he sees the Labour-union framework as (a) what it was throughout the 20th century; and (b) as entirely adequate, and, it seems, “reclaimable”.

The other “trouble” with what Jack writes is that it deals in phantoms, fantasies, falsifications of the past, and definitions arrived at by way of false-bookkeeping.

Jack applies the great generality, “workers’ control and democratic accountability”, in the way we have seen him again and again misapply generalities and “big ideas”. “Workers’ control and democratic accountability” of ...? Of the Blair party. Who, which workers, are going to exercise it? Not workers organised in soviets, not workers led by a revolutionary party, but... the bureaucratised trade unions!

VIII: Marxism and Syndicalism

35. SYNDICALISM

Syndicalists varied greatly from place to place and had varying relationships with left-wing politicians.

The pre-World War One syndicalists in Britain — Tom Mann, etc. — recoiled against the weak-kneed parliamentarians of the MacDonald-led Labour Party and disappointment with the effects of early labour movement Parliamentary action.

The Labour Party, still heavily entwined with the Liberals in politics, and in many constituencies entangled in electoral pacts with them, must have looked like only another edition of the pre-Labour Party “Lib-Labs” MPs fielded by the trade unions under the Liberal banner at the end of the 19th century.

In France the syndicalists and the Socialist Party were, respectively, working-class and petty-bourgeois in composition: there was a clear class, and to an important extent, also a regional, distinction between them; and they were all conscious of it.

As Trotsky pointed out at the Second Congress of the Communist International in 1920, the French syndicalists were, in fact, a party, albeit one that shunned conventional politics.

In Ireland, the syndicalists, Connolly, Larkin, William O’Brien and others, working in what for the labour movement was by and large politically untilled terrain, thought they could shape a political party to their own purposes, avoiding the faults and weaknesses they saw in the early Labour Party in Britain.

They founded the Irish Labour Party on a motion from James Connolly, backed by Jim Larkin, at the 1912 Irish Trade Union Congress conference in Clonmel.

They decided to organise the Labour Party as the political wing of the Irish trade union congress (which had been founded in 1894, 26 years later than the Britain Trade Union Congress). They tried organically to fuse two fronts of the class struggle, the political and the economic, by organisationally fusing the unions and the Labour Party.

They named the organisation: “the Irish Trade Union Congress and Labour Party”.

Thus, they believed, the ideal of trade-union control of the parliamentarians could be realised. Between the formation of the Irish Labour Party in 1912 and the formal separation of the Labour Party and the Irish Trade Union Congress in 1930, the trade unionists, in theory, controlled the parliamentarians. And?

Politically, the result was disaster for working-class politics!

In the Irish national revolution and the Anglo-Irish war (1919-21), the unions tail-ended the bourgeois nationalists. They played an important part in the national struggle. They organised a general strike. But *politically they played no independent part at all* (Connolly was dead and Larkin in America.)

The central miscalculation of Connolly and Larkin was in thinking that the ITGWU would remain the militant organisation they led; that the union, itself free of the corrupting pressure of parliamentarianism, would control the parliamentarians and make them politically serve the working class as the unions did.

In fact in the period after Connolly’s death (May 12, 1916)

and Larkin’s American exile (1914-23), the ITGWU, led by William O’Brien, expanded greatly but became heavily bureaucratic.

When Larkin came back in 1923 and tried to shake things up, all he managed to do was create a smallish, mainly Dublin-based, split-off, the Comintern-linked Workers’ Union of Ireland. (It reunited with the ITGWU, after over half a century, as SIPTU).

36. THREE FRONTS TO THE CLASS STRUGGLE AND WHAT THAT MEANS HERE

For us the point is that there are three fronts in the class struggle and *the schema of trade union control of the parliamentarians lacks the essential third dimension of class struggle* — the class struggle on the ideological front. What happens on that front ultimately shapes the outcome of the battle on the other fronts of the class struggle too.

Working-class movements have won tremendous victories on the other fronts and ultimately lost out because of weaknesses on the third front.

There are many examples of this, but perhaps the most terrible is what happened in Spain during the civil war.

The working class in Catalonia took power but, led by anarchists, was dominated by radically false ideas about the state which stopped them consolidating the power they had in fact won.

The result was first Stalinist victory in Catalonia and, ultimately, fascist victory in Spain followed by fascist rule for four decades...

In 1945, the majority of the working class in Britain wanted to smash capitalism, but their ideas of what this involved were grossly inadequate.

The result was a Labour Government that carried out important reforms, clearing islands in the capitalist swamp, but only islands: the swamp was not drained, as it needed to be if the islands were to be secured. The swamp has since once more engulfed a lot of the territory then cleared...

Trade unions are organisations of broad layers of the class, not entities whose members have emerged through a political and ideological selection. The class struggle on the ideological front has to be fought *within the trade unions too*.

The decisive question is not trade union control of the parliamentarians, but who leads the unions and what their politics are.

Victory for consistent class-struggle politics has to be won *inside* the unions. Without that, “trade union control” of MPs could, at best, produce only a replica of the old Labour Party.

That can only be done by an organisation whose members are selected by way of political ideas and political programme, as well as by raw commitment to defending their own and other workers’ interests and well-being. An organisation which is able to win the leadership of the trade unions. That is, a Marxist party.

This is the element missing in T & M’s schemas. And it isn’t just omitted because they assume that we can all take these ideas as something that can go without saying with us. What they do say contradicts those ideas.

37. THE LIMITS OF TRADE UNIONISM

“Without the possibility of accountability, of replacing those who act against you, of subordinating them to the basic class organs, then what is proposed is not the Marxist idea of the trade unions creating and controlling a new workers’ party, but trade union financial support for various incoherent, social democratic-cum-populist initiatives. This would mean reproducing all the worst characteristics of the Labour Party in miniature while losing sight of the revolutionary democratic working class principle of a party controlled by the workers”.

We have seen that “united” union control of the party is not secured by mere unity, and still less is control by people with adequate working-class politics.

T & M worry about anti-Blair initiatives “reproducing all the worst characteristics of the Labour Party in miniature”, and conclude from that, that our governing programme must be to subordinate everything else to keeping open the possibility of recreating the Labour Party in its old large self from within its present union-Party relationships in the Blair Labour Party.

And, reading back from that goal, they propose what, now?

That the AWL guards the possibility of re-reaching that goal by fighting against the SWP and others to maintain the trade unions’ horse-to-rider relation to the Blairite Labour Party (which, by the way, T not long ago used to define as Christian-Democratic).

Finally, they conflate the working class with the trade unions (and, in actual implications, the trade unions with the bureaucracy), by writing nonsensically of some “revolutionary democratic principle of a party controlled by the workers”.

Trade-union control is not synonymous with working-class control; authentic working-class control of the trade unions is possible only by means of a party, a combative minority, acquiring democratic hegemony within (in that sense, “control over”) the trade unions.

Even though they manage to bamboozle themselves, the incoherent syndicalism here is not hidden but brought into focus by the grandiloquent description of the trade unions as “the basic class organs”.

The unions are indeed “the basic class organs”, but they are not even remotely adequate “class organs” for the purpose AWL exists to promote and help realise, the socialist transformation of society.

In a future union-created or “reclaimed” Labour Party, the Marxists would have to fight for influence against the many political trends that always exist and always will exist in the trade unions *precisely because they are the basic class organisations*, built not by way of a political selection but on an occupation, that is, a trade union basis.

The trends that we will have to fight politically in the unions include those who think that what is involved in the fight for a consistently class-conscious mass working class party based on the unions is just *trade union control of the workers’ party* — the de facto syndicalists. That is, those who seriously believe in and consistently hold to the politics expounded in T & M’s document.

We have already looked at syndicalism in working-class history. Syndicalists come in many *political* varieties, from right-wing chauvinists to revolutionary (or embryonic revolutionary) socialist. The thing that the best syndicalists promote, militant working-class industrial mobilisation, is the bedrock on which we too erect all our hopes and perspectives.

But even the best, the organised revolutionary syndicalists,

those who are in effect a revolutionary party, lack essential organs that the fully developed revolutionary party must have.

There is thus, from a Marxist viewpoint, an impermissible demagoguery — “basic class organs” — in the way T & M formulate the question. The trade unions are the “basic class organs”, but the trade unions are not capable of emancipating the class either from bourgeois ideas, in society and *in the labour movement itself*, or bourgeois rule. That is the lesson of history. The international working-class has paid a very high price for that lesson.

It is what separates us from even the best “mere” trade unionists and the best revolutionary syndicalists.

38. BUREAUCRACY AND RANK-AND-FILE MOVEMENTS

There is an organic tendency in trade unions under capitalism to throw up bureaucracies which develop distinct caste interests of their own. Their politics *tend* to reflect and serve what they are. Our answer to that is a never-ceasing struggle against bureaucracy and bureaucratism.

We put up alternative rank-and-file leaders, and prepare to throw up replacements for these too, if they go rotten.

The decisive factor in determining what happens with both the parliamentarians and the trade unionists is the existence of a revolutionary Marxist organisation which understands what has to be done and organises to do it by educating a political cadre *able to work in trade unions, in trade union leaderships or bourgeois parliaments (or, for that matter, military formations) as Communists*.

Why else do we try in the unions to organise rank-and-file movements as distinct from confining ourselves to winning positions in the bureaucratic structures?

We can agree that the assumption of union control of the Labour Party and a large union break with the Blairites would be qualitatively better than what exists now. It would put the labour movement back in politics and restore some measure of working-class representation in Parliament. We advocate and fight for that.

But we know, and where appropriate we say, that it wouldn’t necessarily solve anything politically.

At best it would restore the status quo ante. When that existed, we fought to change it. We were not, even then, just citizens of the existing labour movement...

Everybody knows what Lenin said about what made the difference between the Catholic trade unions in Italy and the socialist unions in Germany: in one case it was “the consciousness of priests” that interacted with and leavened the working-class movement, and in Germany the consciousness of Marxists.

“To say, however, that ideologists (i.e., politically conscious leaders) cannot divert the movement from the path determined by the interaction of environment and elements is to ignore the simple truth that the conscious element participates in this interaction and in the determination of the path. Catholic and monarchist labour unions in Europe are also an inevitable result of the interaction of environment and elements, but it was the consciousness of priests and Zubatovs and not that of socialists that participated in this interaction”.

(A Talk With Defenders of Economism. *Iskra*, no. 12, 6 December 1901. Collected Works, Volume 5, pp 313-320).

It is a fact that the trade unions and the trade union bureaucracy had a great deal of influence, if not control, in the

Labour Party ten years ago. They supported Blair, and continued to support Blairism until the trade union leaders involved retired.

We repeat: the whole way T & M cast the question is trade unionist, syndicalist, not Marxist (albeit a platonic, notional syndicalism, and an all-too-real conservatism vis-a-vis the existing trade unions).

For trade union control of the Labour Party to even partially serve our politics we would require not only the defeat of the incumbent Blairites, but also the creation and victory in the unions or most of them, of militant rank-and-file movements led by Marxists, who could win leadership and organisational-political control in the unions.

It would require the defeat and replacement of most of the new trade union leaders.

In terms of time we cannot measure how long that will take. It could happen in a comparatively short time. But *in terms of what it entails, it is the programme for an entire epoch.* Meanwhile?

39. WE ARE NOT GUARDIANS OF THE TRADE UNION STATUS QUO

Meanwhile? We keep the existing structures and relationships, *which now serve the Blairites*, resolutely in place so that they can be there one day to let the trade unions exercise control of the parliamentarians?

We guard the status quo, which includes the existing rider-to-donkey relationship of the Blairite Labour Party and the unions?

We act as their political frontier guards against the fuck-wit sectarians of the SWP?

In the political struggle against Blairism, we insist that nothing moves until the unions move as unions, or as the Trade Union Congress?

We apply to the *political struggle* within the working class the idea that governs trade unions as trade unions — unity and collective action at almost any cost.

The very idea that that is the role for *Solidarity* and Workers Liberty to play is *ridiculous*! The only thing more ridiculous is the idea that if we did that, we would still be acting as revolutionary Marxists.

It is nothing less than a programme for the political self-elimination of the AWL.

T & M concede that we may, while waiting for a rebirth of Old Labour, in certain circumstances stand socialist candidates and appeal to trade unionists for their votes — either our own political candidates or other more-or-less, socialist candidates who advocate our axial demand for the restoration of working-class representation. But only for their individual votes!

We cannot under any circumstances appeal to trade unions to “fund” such candidacies and stop funding the Blairites!

Why not? Because we must above all preserve the existing union-New Labour financial relationship! That is sacrosanct!

In effect, T & M think *you should not do anything about socialist or labour representation candidacies within the unions.*

The unions must be allowed to continue in their present relationship to the Blair Labour Party until the unions — in big clumps, in unison or in their big majority — decide to act to break from the Blair Party for the working class interest in politics.

Not the least of what is wrong with this is that it removes from our hands one important tool for fighting the political fight in the unions now: agitation and propaganda to convince workers that trade unionists should act, even in a

limited, local way, to win back union representation by supporting labour-representation or socialist candidates.

That they should act not only as individual citizens but collectively, as unionists willing where they can to throw union backing, local or whatever, behind anti-Labour candidacies.

40. HOPELESS CONTRADICTIONS

T & M say that they support the idea that we should in trade union branches, etc., advocate support for a given socialist candidate by the branch, etc. But they would draw the line at using union funds to back this and other such candidacies. Having successfully argued that a branch, district, whatever, should back the socialist candidate, they would do a quick-change act should some “sectarian” suggest giving union money — or challenging rules that would restrict them in doing that — and using the ensuing conflict to pose sharply the absurdity of the union being tied to the Blairites financially.

This combination would involve us in hopeless contradictions.

It is not far from the absurd “transitional” position which IS (SWP) adopted briefly in the Summer of 1971, when its central leaders were engaged in doing a complete backflip into the camp of the anti-European chauvinists. In a trade union discussion of the issue, we would, Tony Cliff told the National Committee and the organisation, continue to argue for European working-class unity, continue to point out that in Europe or out of it workers would still have to fight the same fight. But then, once our amendment had been defeated, we would vote with the chauvinists! [He said: “Vote with the left”].

The hopeless, absurd, contradictions involved in this position led within weeks to *Socialist Worker* publishing articles directly backing the “no” vote — and the chauvinists! But Tony Cliff was engaged in tricking and manipulating the organisation, and T & M are serious in what they say...

In practice, the logic of what T & M say would more or less rule out a fight within the local unions for union support for a given candidacy, or at least would rule out using such a candidacy to pose the political issue of the union funds going to Blairites.

The use of labour-representation or socialist candidacies as a tool for shaking up the unions by sharply bringing out the absurdity of trade-union support for this Blairite Government, and help get us to a situation in which sizeable sections will be willing to back labour-representation or socialist candidates — that, say T & M, is ruled out.

There has to be a rigid separation between our trade union work and our election, that is an important part of our directly political, work.

This is split-personality politics! It ignores the very important part which candidacies — especially local government candidacies — played in creating the Labour Party over 100 years ago. Logically T & M should completely oppose the standing of non-Labour candidates for the entire period ahead.

Their expressed attitude, that it's alright for labour representation and socialist candidates to stand, so long as that does not impinge on the trade unions' relationship with the Blairite Labour Party, is a recipe for tokenism in elections.

This attitude also implies a crevice down the middle of the revolutionary organisation between trade unionists and others.

41. THE LOGIC OF CLASS STRUGGLE

But don't we *want* the unions to act against the Blairites, that

is, to use the existing links? Of course we do!

But if we go from that to turning ourselves for the indefinite future into champions and guardians of the status quo for the sake of keeping open those possibilities, *we will thereby be turning ourselves, in immediate politics, for the foreseeable future, into conservatives, militants against any change unless it is to our recipe.*

We would cease to be governed “by the logic of the class struggle” and become a sect in the classic Marxist definition, people with a (bureaucratic) recipe to impose on the labour movement, insisting that there can be only one road out of the situation created by the Blair hi-jack — through the channels now held by the Blairites. The conceit that thereby we were “staying with” the mass of the trade unions would hide the fact from some of us, but that is how it would be.

In practice we would ally with status-quo-conservatives and God knows who else in the unions. We would have to. The logic of our politics would compel us to it.

That would blight our prospects of making AWL into a force capable of using the possibilities we would be trying to maintain — turning ourselves inside out politically to maintain.

Even under their new leaderships, the unions may never get around to developing the full possibilities that objectively exist for those who control the unions to challenge the Blairites and restore working-class representation.

That now would certainly mean splitting the Labour Party into “New Labour” and something like Old Labour. And in that event there would be people, cynical manipulators and political idiots, to read us lessons about the need for working class unity, who would blame the class-struggle left for disunity.

The split might well be untidy, with a number of unions remaining with “New Labour”.

In 1900 the new Labour Representation Committee had the affiliation of unions and trades councils representing only 353,000 members. Even ignoring double-counting that was a small proportion of the two million trade unionists in Britain then. The Miners’ Federation, then by far the biggest union, remained Liberal until 1909.

If the socialists in 1900 had adopted T & M’s approach — unity at all costs, and moving forward only in unison — it would have paralysed them. It would have worked powerfully against the emergence of the Labour Party.

T & M’s political ancestors were not amongst the pioneers of the LP-Union relationship which they now fetishise!

42. CAN WE COMBINE THE TWO THINGS?

The decisive question is whether it is possible to combine the two things: can we, on one side, advocate that the trade unions and their leaderships should challenge Blairite control of the Labour Party for the purpose of restoring working-class representation; and on the other, stand or support labour-representation or socialist candidacies, and urge local and national trade unions to give support, and finance, to such candidacies?

That is how it should always be posed by us: restoring working-class representation.

To limit ourselves to advocacy that the mass trade unions as trade unions support socialist candidates would be a form of sectarianism. The old Socialist Societies which founded the Labour Party appealed as socialists for support to trade unionists, but those of them who took the working-class movement seriously motivated the advocacy of a trade-un-

ion-based Labour Party on the need to secure working-class representation in Parliament.

The early Labour Party, which was not until 1918 even nominally socialist, came into existence around the “minimal” demand for working-class representation in Parliament.

We believe it is possible to combine an active and independent policy in the electoral arena with advocating a fight by the affiliated trade unions, as unions, within the Labour structures.

The basic political argument is that revolutionaries’ minority initiatives and activities cannot in general be subordinated to the tempo of (or calculations of the direction of) the broad development of the broad movement.

Today, the stifling of political life inside the Labour Party; the widespread working-class resentment against New Labour from the left; the great increase in working-class abstentionism, and the reluctant, inertial, lesser-evil character of much of the remaining working-class Labour vote; and the proven successes of the Scottish Socialist Party in circumstances not fundamentally different from those in England and Wales, all point to the desirability of socialist minority initiative in the electoral field.

What about the organisational and tactical problems? The danger of getting trade-union organisations which we want to have leading a fight within the Labour structures prematurely cut off because they have supported socialist candidates? Or of having leading AWL trade-union activists disabled from participation in unions’ Labour Party business by what they have done in election campaigns?

All those can be resolved practically, case by case, if the basic political approach is understood. Well into the 1970s, after all, our French comrades faced more-or-less automatic expulsion from the country’s biggest and most militant trade union federation, the CGT, as soon as they were identified as Trotskyists. They understood that they must combine patient work within the CGT with open, visible Trotskyist activity.

So they found compromises and stratagems. They had divisions of labour where one comrade would keep his or her head down in the CGT (selling papers, attending meetings, and so on, only where there was little risk of the CGT bureaucrats finding out); another would openly risk expulsion; and a third conducted his or her main activity outside the union.

If they could do it, we can do the vastly less difficult job of combining open AWL activity with the necessary “burrowing” work within the unions.

And what if we were to decide that advocacy of a union fight for the Labour Party is incompatible with standing socialist or labour representation candidates? If this choice had to be made, *how would we go about choosing? What should our criteria be?*

In principle it would be very simple and straightforward: we can only advocate leaving electoral politics, that is mass labour movement politics, to the Blairites, accepting their monopoly of the union political fund, etc, if:

a) we calculate that the Labour Party could and would be “reclaimed”, and

b) we calculated that it could be “reclaimed” within so short a time that AWLs renouncing electoral politics now would not amount to a policy of passive waiting on others to reclaim or recreate the old Labour Party — that is, restore the political dimension to the labour movement.

Otherwise advocacy of an exclusive focus on reclaiming the Labour Party would be to advocate that the workers and trade unions leave the Blairites with their monopoly of “trade union” politics, and the labour movement effectively without

its own Parliamentary representation, for an indefinite period ahead.

There is no way in this discussion that we can get away from political assessment and calculation, and instead reel off a policy from the great “general truths” that T & M invoke.

We have for five years based ourselves on the calculations and assessments in the Sean Matgamna [JN] article in *Workers' Liberty* (whose policy Jack had some part in making).¹² We presented an assessment of how things stand now in *WVP* (*A workers' voice in politics*, appendix 1 of this pamphlet). Is there reason for revising the “pessimistic” assessment made there? In their “*The Case for Revolutionary Realism*” (appendix 2), T & M do not give us reasons, only timeless “general truths”.

Any reassessment of the case we made 5 years ago could only be grounded on the implications of the election of the new trade union leaders, and the newly rebellious Labour MPs.

This, of course, is a very important question. If we don't keep living events under review, and submit our earlier calculation to repeated review in the light of new developments, then we will cease to be a living tendency.

Otherwise we will flutter like a pennant in changing winds. We have tried in *WVP* to go beyond impressions and most-favourable-case extrapolations from the new events.

But we have to work with sober and serious calculations. The way to do that is to honestly and soberly reassess our earlier assessments, measuring them in the light of events, and events in the light of our basic analysis.

Of course, we should evaluate our Labour Party *prospects* and *perspectives* in the light of new events (and prospects and perspectives for Marxists are radically different things, despite the fact that in common parlance the two words are synonymous. One is calculation of passive prospects. The other implies an active role in shaping events).

In fact one of us did that in *Solidarity* in August 2002; MT did the same sort of thing in a later article. (See Appendix 4).

43. CAMPAIGN FOR THE TRADE UNION LEADERS TO FIGHT

By advocating that the trade union leaders fight — as we do — and making propaganda around the whys and wherefores of the fact that they don't, or don't fight seriously or do it inadequately, and so on, we can, of course, hope to gather forces around us. But in order to hope to prevail over the bureaucracy — to really “make the union leaders fight” — such forces would have to be very large indeed.

In practice, what T & M propose is that we collapse our political dimension — other than general propaganda — into internal union propaganda to get the unions to act in politics to revive or refound a Labour Party.

Now the idea that we should campaign for the unions to fight is common ground. We have advocated that for a long time. But even good ideas that are common ground become proposals for political self-liquidation when presented in the one-sided and unbalanced way of T & M.

Why should we confine ourselves self-mutilatingly to that one — intra-trade union — focus in politics? It would help to build our trade union fractions? But the variant of what they propose that is common to them and to us — a fight within the unions to get the unions to flex the muscles they still have vis-a-vis the Labour Party — would do that. Wouldn't it? Why wouldn't it?

The exclusion of electoral activity, in so far as it would cut

us off from some possible youth recruits that might eventually find their way into our union fractions, will make our trade union campaign less than it might be, confining us more than would otherwise be the case to recruiting within the narrow circles of existing union activists.

44. DO WE TELL WORKERS THE TRUTH?

Worse than that. The variant of campaigning in the unions that is common to T & M and us would allow us to tell the truth about the overall situation in those campaigns. T & M's one-sided version of it would not allow us to call it as we see it. We would have to argue and make propaganda to justify our artificial one-sidedness.

We would have to work to discredit “left” electoral initiatives as for example we rightly did in the Walton by-election eleven years ago. Wouldn't we?

The point is that the approach of T & M is unbalanced and false, and contrary to our understanding — even T & M's understanding — of the situation the working class is in now.

Inevitably, it would distort everything else.

We spelled out and advocated everything rational in what they propose about campaigning in the unions, in the context of the new union leaderships, many months ago.

What they themselves propose is collapsing the political dimension of AWL into the non-political labour movement.

They accuse us of misrepresenting the situation in order to “justify” turning away “for now” from starting any fight in the mainstream of the labour movement”.

The unions are... trade unions. Define them as “mainstream” or “bedrock” labour movement, or whatever, they are limited working-class organisations.

And why is that current of trade-union opinion that wants to stay behind New Labour — it includes trade union leaders who make fighting noises, and some of whom may actually try to do something — why are they “the mainstream”?

Whether or not we “turn away” from that current — as distinct from turning away from the unions in general — and the particularities of how we relate to them if we do: all that depends on our concrete analysis of what's what and what is possible.

In all cases we retain our strict political independence — in public, and in our own thinking — from these people.

45. TROTSKY AND THE DEGENERATE COMMUNIST INTERNATIONAL

But, after all, didn't Trotsky fight for years before mid-1933 to reclaim the Communist International and its parties from Stalinism and for communism; and didn't he defend this policy by saying that even if it should prove impossible to achieve this goal the cadres of the new international would be won and educated in the fight for the old one? What's the difference?

The first difference between Trotsky's situation and ours is where exactly in its evolution the Comintern was when Trotsky held that view, and where we are in the evolution of New Labour out of Old Labour.

The Blair coup is nearly a decade in the past already. The New Labour Government has ruled Britain as a stable Government of the big bourgeoisie for six years now.

Short of some unpredictable melt-down, comparable to what happened to the ultra-corrupt Christian Democrats in Italy after their *raison d'être* as a bulwark against Stalinism had vanished with the USSR, the Blairites are sure to win at least the next and probably the next two elections.

It would need an unprecedented electoral switch from New Labour to the Tories or Liberals to defeat Blair or Brown in the next election. It took three elections to erode the majority Margaret Thatcher built up in 1983. It will probably take as long for the Blairite majority to erode.

The Blairites have control of all the commanding posts in the Labour Party.

In terms of a comparison, with Trotsky's pre-1933 policy in relation to the Communist International, an exclusively trade union campaign now to get the unions to "take back" the Labour Party would, amongst other things, be the equivalent of a proposal that the Trotskyists should orient exclusively to the Stalinist in the Popular Front period, say in 1936 or even ten or twenty years later.

We hope that no-one will try to cloud the issue here by recalling that Trotsky urged his US comrades in 1940 to make a turn to the CPUSA, which was then, during the Hitler-Stalin pact, opposed to the war. In the first place, what he proposed was a fundamentally different type of orientation from that followed by the Trotskyists before 1933 — a momentary seizing of political opportunity, not something rooted in Trotsky's pre-1933 position that the CPs were the epochal parties of the revolutionary workers.

In the second place, the US Trotskyists, discussing Trotsky's proposal with him, unanimously rejected it, on the grounds that such a "turn" to the Stalinist party would destroy their prospects with politically healthy or potentially healthy elements in the US labour movement who loathed the CPUSA for its antics in the labour movement during the previous decade.

For what it's worth, it seems to us that Cannon and the other US Trotskyists, who knew the terrain in which they worked, were right, and Trotsky was mistaken. When they rejected his idea, Trotsky, who was not easily discouraged when he thought he was in the right on questions he thought important, did not press the idea...

46. THIS OR ANOTHER TRADE UNION MOVEMENT?

"Marxists normally support limited and partial proposals because they embody an aspect of our programme. The SA motions do no such thing. They contain a de-politicised organisational formula in lieu of a political proposal. They fail to embody anything of our central concern here, which is, working-class representation through trade union control and accountability of candidates, representatives and parties. In conference debates we should sharply distance ourselves from the sectarians. We should speak against along the following lines: 'Blair would not worry for one moment if the union voted to one day, maybe, support the odd protest candidate. What he fears is a fight by the unions to take back control of the Labour Party. To start that fight, the union should take a vote of no confidence in Blair. That is something that really would send ripples through the labour movement.'"

Again, and even more explicit and clear-cut, the nonsensical

and plainly syndicalist formulation: "Our central concern... is working-class representation through trade-union control and accountability of candidates, representatives and parties".

This is *not* our politics!

For it even to begin to make sense you have to presuppose a different trade union movement from the one they are writing about.

Such a trade union movement could only ever conceivably emerge as a byproduct of the existence and dominance of a revolutionary Marxist party. *But for that party to develop and win leadership, it first has to reject the doctrine of "trade union control" over itself.*

What of the Socialist Alliance model motions? The evolution of the SA indicates for the future more AWL distance from it. Nobody in AWL has advocated an automatic calculation-free support for such motions in all circumstances.

We keep open the option of rejecting such a motion as a bad idea in any specific situation. That is where we divide from T & M.

They seem to want to make it a matter of principle, or something like it, that we *always* and *everywhere* join with Blairites and trade union bureaucrats to vote down any proposal — and not only from the Socialist Alliance — that would allow for trade union backing for non-Labour candidates; *and that we do not make any such proposals ourselves.* In conferences we should always oppose "the sectarians" (defined in this context as all those wanting to break with the Blair party).

47. SYNDICALISM OR SOVIETS?

We have already seen why this formula is intrinsically syndicalist and entirely wrong. The viewpoint of trade unionists, even the most militant trade unionists, is at best only one component of our outlook. We know how far from what we want, how far from any authentic "democratic accountability", the Labour Party was when the unions notionally were in control.

The idea of "union representatives" in the Labour Party, in councils and in parliament — not only "answerable", T & M insist, repeating themselves for emphasis, but "accountable" too — unmistakably implies a model of future working-class democracy in which the unions are the basic skeleton of the future workers' republic.

If we want to look at this idea when it was at its strongest and most attractive, before it was debunked by working-class experience, we must go to writers like Daniel De Leon (who died in 1914) and James Connolly (who was shot in 1916). Both De Leon and Connolly have a great deal to teach us, but Communists long ago went beyond their syndicalist ideas.

The unions are too narrow. Within capitalism the unions are bureaucratised. They are not consistent embodiments of militancy or democracy, let alone of political clarity. They do not normally embody the whole of the working class or anything like it. The system of democracy and accountability we are for is one of democratic soviets.

T & M's idea here is anachronistic and has been proven again and again to be utterly inadequate.

IX: FBU, RMT, and AWL

48. SHOULD THE FBU HAVE STOOD CANDIDATES?

“There is another issue. Which concerns the advocacy of trade union candidates against Labour, without the preliminaries of a fight for the Labour ticket.

This is an area of great confusion. For instance, we still await a clear answer from John Bloxam and Sean Matgamna [JO] on whether they wanted the AWL to intervene into the current firefighters dispute by calling on the FBU to stand official union candidates against Labour in the recent local government elections (which we think would have been a disastrous counterproductive diversion), or whether they just thought it would have been nice if it had happened, just as it would have been nice if the TUC had called a general strike! They really should explain what they mean by the sentence: ‘We support any solidly based moves by trade unions to counterpose themselves electorally to New Labour, for example FBU candidates in local elections.’”

The first thing that strikes you here is the tone of it. This is the tone of incumbents, of office-holders. The second is the unrealism of the way they pose it: “advocacy of trade union candidates against Labour, without the preliminaries of a fight for the Labour ticket”.

In principle, as we made clear, we “support any solidly based moves by trade unions to counterpose themselves electorally to New Labour, for example FBU candidates in local elections”.

It is possible, in specific cases like that of the FBU, to think candidacies more or less a good idea for reasons of practical calculation. Would the votes which a hasty FBU challenge to New Labour be likely to get strengthen the position of the FBU against the Government, or be so few, because of lack of time to prepare it and rally wider trade-union backing, as to weaken the FBU’s position?

One of us thinks there might well be a strong practical case for thinking it most likely that such candidacies would demonstrate FBU weakness rather than strength, and that therefore it might be wise for that reason to reject the idea.

The other believes that advocacy would be clearly tied to, and conditional on, careful selection and proper preparation. Given this, standing targeted FBU candidates could have added an important political dimension to the dispute that T & M effectively rule out.

All specific suggestions for anti-Labour candidates will have to be assessed in this way. That is not what exercises T & M, though!

They reject the idea of FBU candidates out of hand “without the preliminaries of a fight for the Labour ticket”. Here the urgencies and exigencies of a class-struggle union confronted with this neo-Tory government are, as a matter of high and general principle, subordinated to the rhythms and norms of the Blair party!

And in fact they are largely fantasy norms! What does “the fight for the Labour ticket” mean here? It is not as if the FBU could enter an equivalent of the US primaries, in which alternative bidders compete for the candidacy of a party.

In fact they mean that the FBU, if it came to the conclusion

that it made sense to stand in elections, should have started a process of politicking and lobbying among local Labour Party members and affiliated trade unions to win the nomination within the New Labour Party. It should not think of standing against the Labour Party unless after winning the nomination according to the LP’s “normal processes” — how else? — they then had it blocked by Labour Party HQ.

Timescale? God knows. And what if a majority of the affiliated unions and CLP members — the branches and office-holders, who would decide — rejected the FBU candidacy?

What if the FBU comes across a CLP — like some of those still known to have some life — where the majority of the individual activists, though opposed to the Iraq war, were middle-class enough to oppose the firefighters? What if they came across what the bulletins of the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy, for example, describe as a typical CLP these days, its members mostly young middle-class careerists and elderly people who dislike Blairism but have been Labour all their lives and can’t summon up the energy to attempt a new course now? With trade union delegates “as rare as hen’s teeth”?

What if in some constituencies where it was proposed to have FBU candidates it proved impossible to convince a majority of the local Labour Party members and affiliated union activists to see things the FBU’s way? Why then, the embattled FBU, or any similar union, would just have to pretend this was the old Labour Party and meekly accept the veto!

The central foolishness here would lie in acting towards the Blair party and its “processes” as though it is still the pre-Blair Labour Party.

Just as with T & M’s general idea that socialist or labour-representation candidates should only be promoted when they have the prior backing of a local majority of the labour movement, here the same approach is applied to a union that might choose to take its conflict with the Government to the Labour electorate. It should “accept the discipline of working class organisation”...

The reason for standing such candidates would be to help workers in the class struggle, but in T & M’s pixillated version of things the rhythm of the class struggle would have to accommodate itself to the rhythms of the Blair Labour Party.

The point is not whether or not it would be good to mount a campaign to get local Labour Party backing. Other things being equal, of course, it would. The point is that T & M would make any initiative dependent on the prior persuasion of the majority of the local labour movement bodies, as measured through the very imperfect processes of the Blairite Labour Party, skewed as they are by the fact that the incumbents will have been selected over the last period for conformism, conservatism, and compliance.

The idea of using an election campaign to drum up support for the FBU — support from rank-and-file trade unionists and others who would not be part of any official union consideration on whether to support or reject an FBU proposal for a candidate — that is ruled out, like the more general idea of using socialist and labour-representation candidates to pioneer political change.

But more. In what conditions would the FBU (or any other union) be likely to get the support of a majority of the unions across the country in every relevant area for a break and then

an electoral challenge to the Blair Labour Party?

When there was intense and active support for the FBU and active hostility to the Blair Party because of its attitude to the firefighters; when the majority of the trade unionists throughout the country were convinced, beyond mere discontent with the Government, of the need for a positive break with the Blairites; where there was active support for choosing FBU candidates. (And, therefore, where necessary, for upending the normal timetable for candidate selections and pushing aside the existing candidates, who might have trade-union support. Or would T & M like to argue that such an electoral challenge to Blair could only be mounted at a certain time in the normal political cycle for choosing candidates?)

Here too, their approach would more or less absolutely rule out any trade-union candidates against Labour until the whole or most of the labour movement — including not only trade unionists but also individual members of the Labour Party — was already in an advanced state of ferment and willing to break with Blair.

The practical implication is the same as with everything else we have examined: nothing but propaganda can be done as a minority labour-movement initiative, or just a revolutionary-socialist, initiative to win labour movement support. The support must already be there and willing to break with the Blair party.

In the FBU case, if what is being discussed is standing in a wide range of elections, T & M would require that much of the existing trade union movement is already ready for a break, or can in the brief course of a campaign to win support for the FBU candidacies be incited to a break.

The consequences are:

- a) Nothing like such trade-union candidacies can ever be done in conditions such as ours, or indeed in conditions far more advanced than ours;
- b) Electoral activity as a tool of winning support from a low starting point — for labour representation or socialist candidates, or for independent trade-union candidates or embattled trade unionists — is simply ruled out;
- c) Meanwhile we accept (and, for T & M, we *defend and propagandise for*) the Blairite-trade union bureaucracy monopoly of labour-movement politics.

49. THE RMT AND AFFILIATION

“The RMT rail union leadership proposes a set of rule changes that would open the way to the union supporting SA and SSP candidates, left Labour MPs and elements of Plaid Cymru. It is not unreasonable to suspect that Bob Crow and friends are attempting to engineer a situation in which the Labour Party will disaffiliate the RMT. This will give them plenty of opportunities to play the brave socialist martyrs, a role normally carried out in real life by their members who have to live with the shoddy deals they stitch up.

Should the RMT be disaffiliated it would go without saying that socialists will campaign for the union to be re-admitted to the Labour Party. We should advocate that the unions do everything in their power to force the re-admission of the RMT. The fear though, is that the RMT leadership may not help the fight for re-affiliation and therefore winning the argument will be difficult especially with Labour voting trade unionists who will want to see the union stop supporting anti-Labour candidates”.

T & M take exception to having their position described as

that of conservatives defending the status quo, but here they seem bent on caricaturing even our picture of them.

Bob Crow and his friends may be trying to engineer the RMT's disaffiliation from the Labour Party. If the RMT is disaffiliated “it goes without saying that socialists will campaign for the union to be readmitted to the Labour Party” and advocate that “the unions” do “everything in their power” to force that readmission.

But they “fear” that the RMT leaders “may not help the fight for reaffiliation” and “winning the argument will be difficult especially with Labour-voting trade unionists who will want to see the union stop supporting anti-Labour candidates”.

Of course we advocate that the RMT should resist disaffiliation, that other unions should vote against it on the Labour Party National Executive, and so on. But what world do T & M live in? What decade are they in? Where and how will “socialists” “campaign” for RMT readmission to the Labour Party? In the local Labour Parties?

One of the central determining facts is that such a campaign would count for nothing.

In the unions? How would “we” answer those who would say: “only if they stop supporting non-Labour candidates”?

Do we urge the affiliated unions to act as go-betweens, negotiating a change by the RMT back to exclusive support for Labour? Would we support making that a condition of their readmission?

How *could* T & M, given their whole argument, not support making it a condition?

Or would we advocate that the affiliated unions campaign to get rid of exclusive support for Labour as a condition of affiliation? Plainly, for T & M, that option is ruled out. They would have to take the other one, urging the RMT to return to accepting the Blairite monopoly (or what would the “Labour-voting trade unionists” say?)

Could anything illustrate better the foolish, fussing, sheep-dogging, “inspectors-general of history and of the labour movement” role which we accused them of wanting to impose on *Solidarity* and Workers' Liberty?

Even if we thought it sensible to want to pull the RMT back into Blairite line — and that is absurd — we simply could not play that role to any effect.

If the RMT and the Labour Party break the link between them, then, not forgetting the political peculiarities of Bob Crow and the RMT leaders, in “objective “terms” it will fundamentally be the natural working-through of the consequences of the Blairite hijacking of the Labour Party.

To do what T & M want would be to commit ourselves to campaigning to put Blair Labour back together on the pretence that it is Old Labour — or that Old Labour will eventually re-emerge out of it!

They started off arguing that we should live with the status quo because it is allegedly based in “overwhelming” working-class support, and only “a tiny minority with extremely tenuous connections to the working class” want to change it. They shaded over into defending that status quo against “sectarian” challenges which, so they evidently believe, might well win support from much more than “a tiny minority” of the active union members. They invoked the inactive members: even if the active members want to change things, the status quo must remain, so long as the incumbent bureaucrats can command a ballot majority of inactive members to sustain it.

Now they want to commit us to putting the status quo back together again if moves for change break through all those defences!

Do they really mean all this?

To be guided by their ideas would be to make ourselves the die-in-the-last-ditch guardians of the Blairite/union-bureaucrat status quo ante — the very opposite of the role we must play now!

Our central political role is to try to identify and indicate the way forward from Blairism for the broad labour movement.

Right now, we should be mapping the way forward from the condition of political disenfranchisement which is enshrined and buttressed, as well as being disguised, by the union-Labour links (which T & M regard as sacrosanct, even though the political content of those links has changed into the opposite of what it was throughout the prior history of the Labour Party).

T & M would replace that role with its very opposite. AWL would become guardians of an untenable status quo, frantically jumping up and down *and pointing backwards!*

And how would we argue it? “Don’t go ahead of the class”? Preserve the formation in which the unions support an anti-Labour government so that one day the unions can go forward in the same formation to “reclaim” the Labour Party?

We would be turning ourselves inside out politically!

We would not be the vanguard on any level, but the bone-headed rearguard lost in our own daydreams — foolish, hectoring grand-strategists (in our heads).

We are nothing like that. We are militant socialists, trying to educate militants and regroup the militants so that they can lead the class forward.

These are incompatible roles.

50. RAIL WORKERS AS LABOUR CANDIDATES?

“In reality the rule changes are a huge diversion. The union should be fighting to secure the selection of rail workers as Labour candidates on a programme of re-nationalisation and union rights and be prepared to stand them independently if they are bureaucratically blocked. Labour NEC reps who oppose union policy shouldn’t just be removed from the NEC, they should be removed from union office. The RMT seems set to go from having no democratic control over its representatives in the Labour Party to no representation at all. Taking the debate on the rule changes into the workplaces and having a ballot on them would surely be too good an opportunity for a left-wing union leadership to miss”.

T & M’s alternatives to the rule changes may be “good ideas”, albeit routine ones — but for a different situation than ours, indeed for a different political world. Here Jack is like someone in a state of traumatic denial, fussing over tomorrow’s menu as the Titanic sinks under his feet.

Why stop at proposing railworkers as Labour candidates? What about stipulating that they should be MPs on a workers’ wage?

Would a few such MPs now make a difference to the overall situation? Not much.

What would prevent those railworkers becoming replicas of Alan Johnson, the former General Secretary of the CWU who is now a Blairite minister? Union control? “Union control” has never done that. In fact it would do nothing of the sort — less so now than in the past.

The idea of the union standing against Labour if the candidate is bureaucratically blocked is there for cheap effect as the analysis above shows.

Would a candidate emerging through the New Labour

structures be likely to be blocked?

Or is the argument that the union should claim the sole right of selecting the candidate, and demand that New Labour nods it through?

In practice this is a proposal for the union to reconstitute itself politically and then work through the New Labour party. The programme? Renationalising the railways is an attempt at tame “state capitalist” reform. Someone speaking for that would not necessarily be unacceptable to New Labour.

T & M want tame tinkering that might have had some grip twenty years ago but has little now, as the sole and sovereign remedy for a situation in which the trade-union-founded party has been hi-jacked and the working class politically disenfranchised. And the controlling, regulating element would be “the union”.

This is the equivalent of playing fantasy football!

51. FIGHT TOMORROW: MAÑANA MILITANCY

“It would, of course, be contemptible for Marxists to run scared from threats of Labour Party disaffiliation issued to a union that dared to back trade union candidates against New Labour. The problem is that comrades entirely miss the point about how the issue of disaffiliation is used in the unions. It is not that workers fear it as a threat. They want the union to stay in the Labour Party and distrust as manipulative schemers those who deny it is an issue. Many militants would be prepared to face down the threat over a big issue—Livingstone for instance—but they will not do so for the Socialist Alliance”.

So, don’t let anyone think that this is just an anachronistic trade unionist’s perspective on the labour movement offered to counter a “sectarian” one.

It would, they boast, be “contemptible” to “run scared” from threats of disaffiliation? Yes, but only so long as they are “issued to a union that dared to back trade union candidates against New Labour”.

Given all the qualifications and restrictions which T & M have already insisted on before any trade-union candidate should be run, this is a promise of a firm stand against the threat of disaffiliation — in some future time when the trade-union opposition to Blairism is already far advanced and the unions are confident enough to break with Labour in order to run their own candidates.

They promise to be very militant and brave in a future situation that is — in terms of political development — a very great distance ahead of where we are now. Meanwhile? If the RMT is disaffiliated, we focus on a campaign to get it re-affiliated, and, by way of persuading the RMT to return to accepting the Blairite monopoly on working class “representation”?

At the end of 5,000 words they tell us that:

“It is not that workers fear it as a threat. They want the union to stay in the Labour Party and distrust as manipulative schemers those who deny it is an issue. [How do they know? How do they know in advance the outcome of the ballots of inactive members which they recommend?] Many militants would be prepared to face down the threat over a big issue—Livingstone for instance—but they will not do so for the Socialist Alliance”.

Big issue? “Livingstone, for instance”, they write. Last time round Livingstone could be said to be a big issue. Despite his politics, but by virtue of the fact that he was clearly the choice

of the majority of the unions and individual Labour Party members.

This time? From a socialist point of view, our point of view, what good reason could we have to back Livingstone, the GLA coalition-monger, if he were standing against New Labour, or an independent socialist candidate?

Here, despite all their self-gratifying claims that we are wrong because we, unlike brave Jack, “fear to be out of step with the left”, it is they who passively fall in with the left consensus.

The thing that hits you again and again here is the absence of a stable overview, of clear principles, of an overall viewpoint about the development of the labour movement and where it is now — or about the development and role of the AWL.

There are only prejudices and phobias, likes and dislikes. They hate the SWP — as indeed they should — but perversely they like the maverick Popular Front careerist politician Livingstone. If the RMT supports Livingstone, it is alright to risk disaffiliation, but not if it supports a genuine left winger!

“There is a perfectly simple way of dealing with the question of non-Labour working class candidates. We apply the criterion of workers’ democracy. If the workers support the candidate the union should. There is nothing to be gained from trying to get artificial trade union support for limited and selected socialist candidacies”.

This is entirely apolitical! How can we know *in advance* of the election if “the workers” — which workers? — back the candidate?

Why do we rule out in advance that socialists can stand before they get majority working-class support, as part of our effort to win that support?

Where would this criterion leave us in the early days after 1900 of the Labour Representation Committee, when the big majority of “the workers” — and important trade unions like the Miners Federation — still backed the Liberals?

Where would it leave socialists in the USA now, where most unions ally with the Democratic Party?

Are there no political criteria? The unions should back candidates which the majority of the workers support, and to hell with what T & M have written about the importance of staying with the Labour affiliation, which this idea contradicts, or at least seriously (and arbitrarily and subjectively) modifies?

Why is trade-union support for “limited” and “selected” socialist candidates “artificial”? Is this passage anything other than a rationalisation for supporting Ken Livingstone?

Whatever it is, it shows that T & M have no coherent or consistent view of any of these issues.

52. WE MUST COMBINE THE TWO POLICIES!

“The example of the FBU 2002 conference discussion is also misunderstood. Andy Gilchrist and the EC majority overturned the 2001 conference decision on non-Labour candidates by touring the branches and securing mandates which pointed out that the rule changes requested were not practical, because a union couldn’t be affiliated to the Labour Party and also affiliated to another party that stood candidates against it. The union would have to choose between pursuing policies through the Labour Party or standing candidates against it. It wasn’t that the firefighters sunk back in fear at the prospect of being disaffiliated—they positively wanted to stay in the Labour Party and fight. They

accepted the honest argument that you can’t do both. In fact, in the trade unions you will find only a limited number of master dialecticians who think that you can do both. The experience of the dispute means that it is now much more likely that the union will respond with some kind of demonstrative gesture—like totally withholding funds. This is totally understandable, but risks failing to face up to the task of the FBU leading a movement in the Labour Party to try to hold Blair and Prescott accountable for their actions in the dispute”.

As above, the crux is: can you combine the two policies — advocacy that the trade unions fight in the Labour Party and, where appropriate, the running of independent candidates?

For AWL they oppose advocacy of anything other than “internal” politicking within the unions. Such a policy could only make sense for AWL if we were to ignore what the Labour Party now is in relation to working-class representation and working-class interests.

T & M’s is not just a conservative policy. *It is a make-believe conservative policy* — rooted in the pretence that the Labour Party is still what it was before the Blairite coup.

Miseducate ourselves and others, in the unions and outside, about where things are at; don’t “tell the truth to the masses” — ignore the overall picture and focus on “tactics” and tinkering?

An FBU leadership that then had immense credit with a membership in which no rank-and-file opposition was organised manages to win a majority on the basis of promises to fight within the Labour Party — promises which they have not kept. And T & M paint up that outcome as a healthy revolt by the bedrock membership against the leftists who had won the 2001 conference motion!

Gilchrist is a man with a realistic strategy... Is he? Does he have a strategy? Did he actually carry through the fight in the Labour Party which he counterposed to the 2001 conference resolution?

At the end of the paragraph we again lapse into a dream-world of make-believe, of not knowing what decade this is in terms of the evolution of the Labour Party.

Read:

“The experience of the dispute means that it is now much more likely that the union will respond with some kind of demonstrative gesture—like totally withholding funds. This is totally understandable, but risks failing to face up to the task of the FBU leading a movement in the Labour Party to try to hold Blair and Prescott accountable for their actions in the dispute”.

It is common ground that we want the affiliated unions not to disaffiliate but to organise and fight to assert themselves within the Labour Party structures. But what does trying “to hold Blair and Prescott accountable for their actions in the dispute” mean?

It is business as usual, or as of old, in a common party? But it can’t be, short of an orchestrated fight — which would, as we have argued, certainly split the party.

Jack’s instinct here is to sheepdog the FBU away from hitting back at the Blairites, after he has endorsed Gilchrist’s campaign to reverse the decision to back non-Labour candidates.

What he counterposes here as everywhere to the untidy forms taken by the unravelling of the old union-Labour relationship is to hold the status quo in place and repair it.

And AWL? AWL’s chief role is to be a voice of caution,

counselling unions and even union leaders against precipitate, hasty, and impetuous action against New Labour!

This is *not* rooted in a realistic picture of where we are at in the Labour Party.

It is rooted in an anachronistic working model of the Labour Party which does not correspond to what exists now.

It is based on “forgetting” what the purpose of AWL itself is.

53. BUT WE DO NOT OPPOSE CROW FROM THE RIGHT!

“Bloxam and Matgamna [JO] fail to focus clearly on the tasks before the class... Their... logic... is that... we should not even aspire to play a role in initiating, organising and preparing the ground for what they describe as the ‘epochal’ battle for control of the Labour Party. No, that is for the future and to be organised ‘from above’ by the official leaderships. We must know our place. We build the new party ‘from below’. In the here and now all we can do is get involved in small-scale local electoralism, or travel as reluctant passengers while Bob Crow and his friends derail the RMT as a political force in the workers’ movement”.

And what do T & M counterpose to “building from below”? A propaganda campaign to get Crow and others to “reclaim” the Labour Party “from the top”!

A small propaganda campaign fuelled by a tankful of fantasies of the sort dissected and analysed throughout this document.

The central fact of what we are discussing is that the RMT and the other affiliated unions have already ceased to be “a political force” in the sense that they were one throughout the 20th century. That is what the Blairite hijacking, whose class political nature is made very clear by the record of the government, means.

The “task before the class” is to restore working-class representation. Political fuckwits or not, Crow and his friends can do the sort of thing T & M describe and fear because the old relationships between the unions and the Labour Party have already been politically disrupted.

Because the discipline of the rank and file that would in the past have stopped any of the old CP trade union leaders from breaking with the Labour Party, is not — to say the least — what it was.

T & M want AWL to assume the role of telling the unions to pretend that things are what they once were. That is not serious politics.

It is not Marxist politics because it does not, despite their bluster and patter about “realism”, start from *political reality*. It starts from denial and then goes deep and deeper into fantasy politics.

We oppose such “Crowisms” as supporting Plaid Cymru or Galloway because we want the union to foster independent working-class politics not popular-frontism. We do not do that from the standpoint of second-string Blairites, guardians of the status quo.

But that is what T & M counterpose to what we all object to in Crow.

At every turn, you peel away Jack’s obfuscating (in the first place, self-obfuscating) words, and you reach the idea that Blairism, the now-Blairite Labour Party, is positively better than groups like Plaid Cymru, the Greens, the Liberals, the kitsch-revolutionaries of the SWP.

The point is that it isn’t any more.

Observe the underlying train of thought in what is said

about the RMT — “while Crow and his friends derail the RMT as a political force in the workers’ movement”. What are they talking about? What workers’ movement, outside the RMT and the other unions? The Blairite party is the workers’ movement?

By being independent of the Blairites, a trade union ceases to be a political force in the workers’ movement?

The idea that this trade union can only be a force in the workers movement if it works through the anti-Labour machine that still calls itself the (new) Labour Party is absurd!

As a comment on the real world, a decade after the Blairite hijacking of the LP, this is sheer gobbledegook!

The only way the unions can become a force again is by taking steps which, if they are seen through to the end, will split the Labour Party.

Once again, the starting point of this discussion should be the fact — and it is a fact — that “The Labour Party” is Blair’s New Labour, not “the workers’ movement”!

They mean that the RMT is getting out of step with the other unions? Our role then is to shepherd the RMT back in line with the other unions... and the Blair Labour Party?

Certainly we want concerted trade union action. Playing the sheep dog’s role will not secure that. It will politically derail AWL, in the first instance by involving us in Jack’s fantasy-football version of “big” politics (as counterposed to the “small-scale local electoralism” which they so contemptuously dismiss).

54. GEORGE GALLOWAY, THE SOCIALIST ALLIANCE AND PLAID CYMRU

“The Socialist Alliance are proposing motions to union conferences calling for the political funds to support non Labour candidates as long as they make a vague commitment to ‘support the policies and principles’ of the union. We believe these proposals should be voted down. It is not just that they are a manipulative back door way of proposing trade union funding for the SA and George Galloway MP, and in reality inseparable from that. Or that they are pitched in such a way as to appeal to people who want to open the door for support for Plaid Cymru, the SNP, Greens and Lib Democrats. Nor is our objection based only on the fact that the proposal deliberately ignores the need for a fight to control what the unions’ representatives do in the Labour Party and is usually motivated by people who would rather such a fight didn’t happen. Nor are we opposed just because we think that if the people proposing the motions were serious, they would put forward an actual rule change, which workers could support or not on its merits, rather than a vague gesture.

The most powerful objection to what the Socialist Alliance proposes is that it misses the central concern of Marxists— not just in relation to the fight for a workers’ party, and workers’ candidates but in relation to all our work in the class movement—the idea of workers’ control and democratic accountability. We want candidates, councillors and MPs who are answerable to the trade unions and accountable to them. One cautious pro-Labour proposal that seeks to impose a measure of control and accountability on union representatives in the Labour Party structures or Parliament, or which seeks to get more workers into parliament to promote union policy, embodies more of our programme than the Socialist Alliance’s ill-disguised gambit to get its hands on union money. We should vote accordingly”.

The Socialist Alliance is supporting George Galloway, you see, and — therefore! — proposals for supporting non-Blairite candidates are proposals for funding Galloway!

So: we should vote down Socialist Alliance resolutions at union conferences calling for the funding of non-Labour candidates who support the policies and principles of the union because these “appeal to people who want to support Plaid Cymru, the SNP, Greens and Lib-Dems”?

T & M exclude without comment the idea that we should amend those Socialist Alliance motions to stipulate support for working-class and socialist candidates, or propose our own motions, including motions to condemn Galloway as a mouthpiece for the fascistic regime of Saddam Hussein.

They simply urge us to defend the existing union rules.

This takes us back to the core of our differences: the implication that support for the Blair Labour Party is better than support for Plaid Cymru and suchlike. Why? The Blair party is the Labour Party?

Blair’s party used to be the Labour Party: the point is that — even if one believes, as we do, that the “process” of transformation is not over yet — it isn’t any more.

In fact all the groups T & M list are, in terms of policies, better than the Blair party. Even the Lib-Dems are to the left of the Blairites. It is, of course, uncontroversial that we oppose motions specifically backing Plaid Cymru or similar, as we did at the RMT conference.

To the question, why should we be for unions backing the Labour Party exclusively, traditionally we would answer: it is the trade unions’ party. So now, in the era of New Labour, we oppose motions which seek to move the unions away from an exclusive political relationship with the Labour Party and might have the effect of giving funds to the parties listed because Labour is the unions’ party?

That argument is now a vicious circle. It is a nonsense.

What T & M need to make it not nonsense, is a reason that is consonant with our politics why we want the existing link with New Labour to continue.

We have already listed the possible reasons: to keep the stumbling, mumbling, brain-damaged Tories out, and the smart, glib, effective Blair Tories in; or, to preserve the concentrated mass of union funds that now goes to finance this anti-Labour, anti-working-class government so it can pass as an intact heritage to new owners “when” the union leaders have “reclaimed” the Labour Party or split it and founded a replacement for it.

The crux of the whole argument is that T & M want us to play the role of guardians of the Blairite/union-bureaucrat status quo in a situation where a breakup of the old concentrated mass of union political money is already starting, and where we cannot control events or steer them so that the controlled, coherent break of the unions from New Labour that we would like is the definite and visible alternative to the status quo.

Because we can’t control the results of the recoil from Blair’s Labour Party, T & M want us to devote our political energies to defending the status quo until such time as the unions are ready for the desired tidy and coherent “reclaiming” of Labour. And, in fact, since we are not strong enough to be decisive here either, all we could achieve by following their policy is to turn ourselves inside out politically. That is the crux of it.

55. GALLOWAY, THE LABOUR MOVEMENT AND POLITICAL HOPELESSNESS

T & M:

“Some comrades will no doubt argue that despite everything, we should back the SA motions because they establish the principle that the union will support working class candidates against New Labour. True, but the motions also establish the principle that George Galloway and any other skilful opportunist from say the SNP, PC, the Greens or the Liberal Democrats who says they support the “principles and policy of the union” can have union support too. So the motion “in principle” supports both genuine working class and faking anti-working class candidates. It allows for the independence of the working class and the subordination of the working class to alien class forces. Some principle”.

Again the demagogic brandishing of an effigy of George Galloway! All right. Let’s discuss that, then. Why does George Galloway have credibility with the labour movement? The answer is another question: would he have that credibility if the ostensible revolutionary left, the left trade union leaders, and respectable Labour MPs such as Corbyn, and McDonnell did not give it to him? No, he wouldn’t.

And it is not only and not even primarily the politically disoriented SWP. In fact, when the Galloway affair “broke” in April, the SWP was at first noticeably cautious. Only after they had checked that Galloway would be backed by the broad *Guardian*-reading Labour and trade-union left — as he was — did they start being loud and forthright in supporting him.

Some of the best of the new trade union leaders back Galloway, too. It is a political problem. The paper has been carrying an account of how we were heresy-hunted by the WRP in 1983 with the help of sections of the “broader left” (not the SWP, in that case). That episode, like the current Galloway business, reflects the state of the left and of the labour movement.

Outside our own ranks, the only people who have the proper attitude to Galloway also have a very improper attitude to... Bush and Blair.

Attitudes to Ken Livingstone over many years — though Livingstone is less gross than Galloway — reflect the same problem of political culture.

And why do T & M not mention Livingstone here too? Because Jack’s “favoured” union leaders, the “reclaim-Labour” types, back him. A “reclaim-Labour” line, and a stern defence of the general rules enforcing a Blairite monopoly of electoral politics, is no protection against being seduced by demagogues like Livingstone — or Galloway.

Our answer to this political problem of “faking anti-working-class candidates” of the Galloway or Livingstone type is to tell the truth and plug away at defending and spreading it. In other words, to conduct political education. Isn’t that what we are here for?

What is their answer? They look to the Blairites to deal with the Galloways! They want to use, or rather to hide in, the bureaucratic structures which enshrine the Blair-Labour-union entwinement!

Never mind that those structures serve the Blairites, and that a system set up originally to secure working-class representation in Parliament now acts to block working-class representation!

This is a strong recurring theme in T & M’s piece, not something accidental that has glitched its way into a text to which it is alien. In this passage Jack sounds like a tired old world-weary one-time radical seeking refuge, security and peace in the tried and tested old structures (which no longer exist, or exist only in qualitatively changed forms).

He is actually seeking refuge from living politics and from the political rottenness of the kitsch-Trotskyist left — for that is what the widespread tolerance of George Galloway means. And politics is the answer to it. AWL is the answer to it — vigorous and combative assertion and reassertion of our politics.

When they list the problems and difficulties of a political opening-up of the labour movement, as they do here, and offer as a “solution” sticking with the poisonous Blairite/union-bureaucrat status quo, it is a laughable example of people looking for succour and salvation to the wisdom of our ancestors enshrined in the ancient rules and laws.

It is an expression of political hopelessness and demoralisation.

When we said that they were “conservative”, we meant that they were caught up in a logic that inexorably led them to advocate conservation of the status quo lest worse succeed it. Here we have conservatism on a far more profound psychological level.

It is a state of mind that many will recognise who have encountered the writings or conversations of chastened ex-radicals.

Do they mean it? We hope they don’t, but it is impossible to know for sure. What you can know from this passage is how deep a part of their psychology — in any case, T’s — it now is.

T wants the manifold political problems we face in the flux and uncertainty of the labour movement at its present conjuncture to just go away.

The result for *Solidarity* and Workers’ Liberty, if we ourselves were to follow the implications of what they say and half-say, is that we would politically “go away” — far away from revolutionary politics.

56. “NO CONFIDENCE”, BUT NO CHALLENGE EITHER?

A vote of no confidence in Blair is not, despite what they sug-

gest, an alternative to voting to allow support for non-Labour candidates. Both can and should be pushed. The truth is that the Blairites could, if they had to, live with votes of no confidence provided the union didn’t follow through with practical blows against the Blairites. One of the most important blows would be backing non-Labour candidates.

If that is excluded in principle — or in all circumstances short of those where we are strong enough to break those same rules which, according to T & M, we should now strongly defend — then the Blairites know that they always have a monopoly of political representation and government.

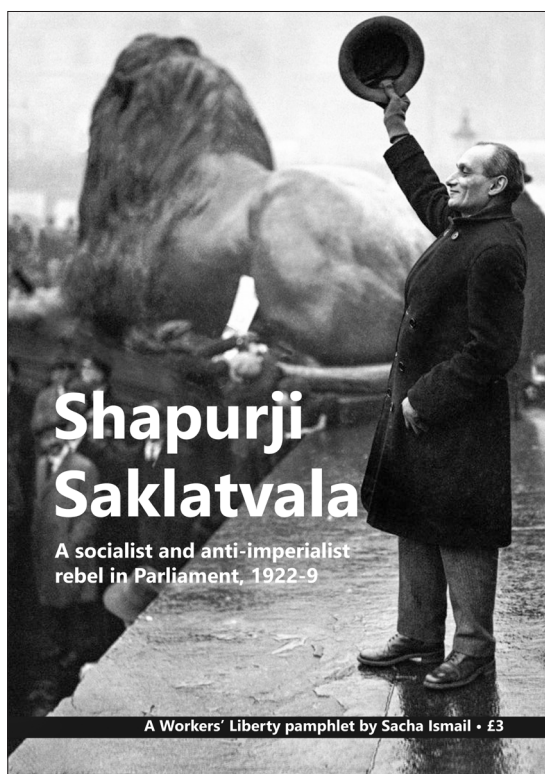
If others in the unions besides us want to back not socialist or labour-representation candidates, but, say, the SNP — that is something we will have to fight politically, by reason and argument and struggle to elect our and not their delegates.

It is apolitical and bureaucratic to seek refuge from that political struggle in the rule-enshrined “wisdom of our ancestors”.

What does the idea of resolutions of no confidence in Blair, coupled with active resistance to any proposal to strike at Blair by backing anti-Blair candidacies amount to? For example, opposition on principle to backing a socialist or labour-representation candidate against Blair in his own constituency unless we had first won a local Labour Party vote to deselect Blair?

In the Marxist tradition, such a “mixed” approach is called centrism. It is also the typical evasive method of the trade-union bureaucrats and left-faking old-style Labour MPs!

No, we aren’t arguing: agree with us on motions for supporting non-Labour candidates, or you are a centrist! We have argued that issue on its merits. We are pointing out the evasiveness of the idea that a vote of no confidence in Blair is more of a threat than a proposal for action.



Shapurji Saklatvala, revolutionary socialist, Indian nationalist and Labour’s first BAME MP, was elected in 1922. Representing radical local and international workers’ and anti-colonial struggles, he suffered ostracism, surveillance, imprisonment and exile from India to fight against capitalism, racism and imperialism: for working-class self-liberation.

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X: AWL and “the sects”

57. “THE SECTS” AND PROLIER THAN THOU PHILISTINISM

“With the class or with the sects? Bloxam and Matgamna [JO] fail to focus clearly on the tasks before the class.

The entire logic of their argument is that because we cannot control what happens — a mind-numbing banality — we should not even aspire to play a role in initiating, organising and preparing the ground for what they describe as the “epochal” battle for control of the Labour Party. No, that is for the future and to be organised “from above” by the official leaderships. We must know our place. We build the new party “from below”. In the here and now all we can do is get involved in small-scale local electoralism, or travel as reluctant passengers while Bob Crow and his friends derail the RMT as a political force in the workers’ movement”.

You can “derail” only what was previously on the tracks, and following the right course. Do they really intend to say what they imply, that the RMT was “on track” politically under Knapp, and becomes “derailed” only by turning left?

Again, the demagoguery! Here, in fact, it is vintage Ted-Grant-speak that Jack will have heard in the Labour Party Young Socialists when he was young. By “the sects” here he means primarily the SWP.

But, no, we don’t relate to that organisation, the biggest ostensibly revolutionary-socialist organisation in Britain, by sinking our political differences with them into “sociological” abuse!

We would not use such demagoguery in a trade union branch to carry our point against a proposal to give money, or whatever, to some project we rejected. Would we?

We would not argue on the basis of a crude “workerism” — “we’re with the workers”, “we don’t counterpose ourselves to the workers, and, yah boo, you do!”

We do, and we most certainly should, counterpose ourselves to the politics of both the pseudo-left and the right of the existing labour movement.

We are “with the workers” in politics only on our own political terms. We “stay with the class” to educate it politically, not to use it to camouflage our own political demoralisation. That applies to the present situation vis-a-vis the Labour Party.

“Because we cannot control what happens” — so T & M claim that we argue — “we should not even aspire to play a role in initiating, organising and preparing the ground for what they describe as the “epochal” battle for control of the Labour Party”.

Here we have demagoguery again — or maybe Jack (“T”) can’t understand what he reads. We used the word “epochal” in this context:

“Advocacy of our ‘epochal’ concern — the mass trade union break with Blair and move to a new workers’ party — should not shade into a conservative defence of and support for the Blair-serving status quo against immediate limited initiatives, left-wing or labour-movement electoral challenges to the New Labour party; things which, on their merits, we should support here and now”.

We said that the transformations of the unions which are implied in the idea of the unions “reclaiming the Labour Party” is the task of an epoch. We did that in the course of questioning whether the Labour Party can in fact be what they call “reclaimed”. We argued that the best that can be hoped for is to split the Labour Party, which we said was a variant of the unions refounding a labour party.

58. SWAMPOPHOBIA

T & M:

“What is conservatism—the dim-witted conservatism of fearing to be out of step with the left—is to pretend to be an independent force, while we tag along on the road of protest candidates behind a motley crew of bombastic trade union leaders, the manipulative sectarians of the SWP, self-confessedly ‘apolitical’ trade unionists, opportunists from Plaid Cymru, the Greens and the Liberal Democrats, not to mention George Galloway MP and the MAB”.

We are people who “fear being out of step with the left”? Right...! This is not disgraceful demagoguery only because it is disgraceful self-defeating silliness! That they can say this about the organisation and its orientation for the last half decade or so, is evidence of how disoriented T & M are on this issue. Yet a serious issue is embedded in this blustering.

It is this: do we let our heartfelt and entirely justified disgust with the pseudo-left like the SWP determine what we do in this field? Because we don’t like or politically approve of the groups and individuals T & M list, do we then turn away in disgust and leave electoral activity to them? (And of course to the Blairites. There is a symmetry in their conclusions from awe at the survival of the Blairites and disgust at the pseudo-left: both lead to one conclusion). Do we ignore the youth who gather around this unprincipled sect for their ostensibly left-wing militancy on the war? We should do neither.

The idea that we followed the SWP into electioneering does not accord with the facts and the chronology of the events that led to the existing Socialist Alliance. We arrived at the opinion that the hijacking of the Labour Party placed the issue of working-class representation in Parliament centre stage before the SWP joined the Socialist Alliance and for the first time since the late mid-70s decided to stand in elections. Our involvement in the SA and the stress on restoring working-class representation which we have fought for in the way SA candidates present themselves — to be focused on the need to restore working-class representation in Parliament rather than the need for a “socialist alternative” — flowed from that.

The stress on restoring working-class representation in our own election campaigns — Pete Radcliff’s distinctive and comparatively successful electioneering, for example — was the result of the analysis we made of the situation of working-class politics in Britain: it predates the SWP’s turn to “politics” and elections.

We were in what became the Socialist Alliance before the SWP affiliated to it. Should we have abandoned our analysis of how things stood and the conclusions we drew from it, and left this field of work to the sectarians once they moved into it? The approach is utterly subjective and politically unserious. So subjective that they misrepresent the recent history of their own organisation.

And yet, one of the central factors in play in this discussion is the widespread disgust in the group with the SWP. What might be called "SWamPophobia".

Maligned, naïve, or presumptuous observers sometimes say that we are motivated in this or that policy by hostility to, or competition with, the SWP. There is never a word of truth in it!

One of the central things we can see at play in destroying the old left, properly speaking, the pseudo left, is their mere negativism towards capitalism and their progressive loss over many years of an adequate positive definition of what they stand for. That, if we understand it properly, is the prerequisite for much we all find intolerable in the pseudo left.

That being so, *it would be preposterous to define ourselves negatively in relation to the SWP.*

Of course some of the things we focus on and the way we deal with them are determined for us because of the prevailing attitudes around us — most notably, on the Middle East, our propaganda against demonising Israel. If the rest of the left were not as they are on this question, we would be able to concentrate now almost exclusively on solidarity with the Palestinians, expressing our Two-States argument as a demand for a Palestinian state. But the *content* of what we say is not determined by the "left" around us. We neither succumb to the pressure of that left nor let ourselves become a mere negative imprint of it. We make our own independent analysis, here as everywhere else. Only after that is done do we let "the left" influence us.

Would T & M seriously, as distinct from demagogic bluster, contend that we don't? On the facts, they couldn't sustain such a charge. In fact they can't even formulate it plausibly. The underlying thought in the passage above is that we are not "independent" because the SWamPies share something like our conclusion — stand candidates, etc. And what about the political distinctions between us and them inside the SA, even on electioneering? We have not been remiss in noting the faults of the SWP or of the SWP-dominated "independents" and SWP-satellites like Workers' Power and the *Weekly Worker* group. One of us wrote this assessment of the Socialist Alliance in the 2001 General Election:

"We have something to congratulate ourselves for in having organised such a widespread public challenge to Blairism. The Socialist Alliance has little else to congratulate itself for. With very few exceptions our impact on the electorate was not noticeably greater than that which any halfway presentable socialist candidate would have made in any suitable constituency at any time in the last hundred years."

One of the things on which developing a rational discussion on this question depends is that we separate out common negative assessment of the Socialist Alliance from our assessment of the Labour Party, etc. What we have said about the Labour Party may be true or false, but that does not depend on whether the SA is a viable enterprise or not...

59. MISREPRESENTING AWL: WHO "STARTS FROM THE SECTS"?

The AWL fought in the RMT against Crow's moves to "seek closer links" with Plaid Cymru and to reduce the union's Labour Party affiliation to a token level. We did not do so on the basis of second-string Blairism, and not on the basis of telling the RMT to get back into Blair's "workers' movement".

Comrades may recall Jack's violent speech at the second-last conference accusing us of being driven by personal feeling in our criticism of Ken Livingstone (a performance so obviously

full of his own "personal feeling" that it provided an instant auto-antidote to what he was saying, as he was saying it). He does something of the same here.

"The root of this loss of focus comes from the fact that the comrades start their analysis from the sects, not from the class. They have accepted much of the basic framework with which the sectarians relate to the labour movement. Remember, it was the sectarians who started the whole debate going about the political funds. From the very start their intentions have been clear: not to organise a workers' party, but to use workers' money to fund their own".

In which analysis did we "start from the sects and not from the class" and the state of the labour movement? The Sean Matgamna [JN] piece in *Workers' Liberty* five years ago? The issues raised in the "workers' government" discussion before that?

In the argument about the centrality of workers' representation? The analysis of the transformation of the Labour Party (against which the SWP argues that nothing fundamental has changed in the Labour Party?)

The analysis that led us to help found the proto-Socialist Alliance before the SWP was ready to join?

The answer may lie in the function of this sort of thing for its authors. For it is a way of denying that anything fundamental has changed in the Labour-union relation in politics.

It is not, you see, that we have modified our views in response to changes such as the Blairite hijacking of the Labour Party and the blatantly anti-working-class character of the Blair government over the last six years. No, it is that we lack Jack's solid Bolshevik objectivity!

The discussion about the political funds does not come from the actual political relations of the Blair government to the trade unions and to the working-class: it comes from the "sectarians'" desire to enrich themselves with "workers' money".

(The only basis on which AWL could object to that is our political criticisms of the SWP: apart from that, they are perfectly entitled to try to secure financial support from the labour movement. The whole tone of what T & M write is that of "workerist" resentment of any politics outside the trade unions. That is not the AWL's approach).

In fact every step we have taken on this question has been interrogated and measured by our basic analysis and previous positions. Our basic viewpoint and objectives have not changed at all.

"The sectarians seek to focus all the working-class discontent and frustration at Blair, not as it should be focused, on a fight for union control of the Labour Party, but on stunts and gestures of mock defiance. The union leaders then came along and started playing their part in the game. People who had absolutely no intention of fighting Blair started to make vague threats of backing candidates against Labour... Empty postures to strengthen [their] hand in negotiations with the Government. To read these threats as a sign that the labour movement really is entering an epoch of fragmentation is worthy of the IMG, but not serious Marxists".

Again, the typical mix of denial, ignoring objective background facts, and ridiculous blustering. Jack *knows* that nothing has changed, that there can be no fragmentation as a result of the fundamental change brought about by the Blair hijacking.

Certainly we disagree with the SWP where we advocate a union fight within the Labour structures. But Jack and the SWP are twins: he thinks we should focus all the discontent into the Labour Party structures.

The IMG was the Mandeliste organisation in Britain until some time in the 1980s — the forerunner of the ISG [in 2025 its successor is Anti*Capitalist Resistance, or a tendency within A*CR (sic.)]. What were the dominant political traits of the IMG? A high degree of unrealism, of refusing to be deterred by the hard facts from their “big idea” at a given moment; a bee-in-the-bonnet focus on only what they wanted to see and promote; refusal to admit complexities suggested by reality; an altogether too easy dismissal of those who disagreed.

And in fact in this discussion Jack is the “IMGer”, living in an imaginary world, where things are still what they once were in working-class politics. For Jack it is not the past but the present reality of the labour movement that is “a foreign country”!

60. “A UNIFIED MASS OF POLITICALLY DIRECTED MONEY”

Jack is too keen to show off his knowledge of union rule books.

“The desire of Bloxam and Matgamna [JO] to play spin-doctor rather than analyse reality doesn’t end with the new union leaders. Here is another oddity: “The political funds that go to New Labour (are) a unified mass of politically directed money”. No they are not. The political funds do not belong to the Labour Party they belong to the trade union. It is simply not the case that all the money is directed towards the coffers of the New Labour machine. A portion (roughly 40% on average) must be paid to the Labour Party for affiliation — the remaining 60% can be spent as the unions decide. (As the comrades Bloxam and Matgamna [JO] support the idea of maintaining Labour Party affiliation, then they are as guilty as anybody else of wanting “a unified mass of politically directed money” to go to New Labour).

The issue is how that 60% remaining in the fund is spent. We think it should go to organising activities by workers organising to control the mass political wing of the labour movement and not to keep the presses of the SWP rolling producing glossy election material. In the CWU, which is affiliated to the Labour Party, the 60% is spent on supporting some constituencies, campaigns and pressure groups and in the case of some London branches even backing candidates against Labour. In other unions it is mainly used to bankroll Blairites. The way the fund is spent reflects the state of union democracy and crucially the level and form of political activity in the union. It could not be otherwise”.

As a reply to what we wrote, this is obfuscation. Whether it is 100% of union political money or less that goes to the Labour Party, the money that the unions send to Labour is “a unified mass of politically directed money”.

What is interesting here is that T & M understand perfectly well that in terms of union money going to the Labour Party or elsewhere, there is no necessary financial conflict. It is possible in terms of union finances for a union to remain affiliated to the Labour Party and also give money to labour-representation and socialist candidates.

T & M admit that what we propose — union money for

anti-Labour working-class candidates — is financially quite feasible. But they think that the money “should go to organising activities by workers organising to control the mass political wing of the labour movement and not to keep the presses of the SWP rolling producing glossy election material”. (Or the presses of the AWL? Or the SSP? Or any other socialist organisation?)

“Activities”, unspecified; “workers” standing in for the trade union machines; “organising” — what?; to “control” — how exactly?; “the mass political wing of the labour movement” — meaning the present Parliamentary Labour Party (all of it? Most of it?) ... As we have seen, what the high-sounding but vague phrases come down to is a propaganda campaign advocating that the unions do this and that.

In practice, until we have become a major force in the unions, the stuff T & M list would in practice come down to maybe a donation here and there to various mild Labour-left enterprises, and nothing more.

Having shot one horse from under himself — the ideas that there is a stark either/or financial choice in the use of union political money — Hopalong H. has nothing to support his case against walking on two legs but the fear that any union money going to a non-Labour candidate would lead to the union’s disaffiliation from the Labour Party. So long as the unions remain affiliated to the LP that is how it will be? So long as affiliation continues it will be the governing duty of AWL vis a vis elections to sustain affiliation?

Anybody who seriously believes that it is intolerable for the present union/New Labour relationship to continue would see conflict between the unions and the New Labour party over the union backing a good non-Labour candidate as a big opportunity on the propaganda level — the only level involved in any of these proposals — to get the union discussing the issues that concern them.

For the same reason, candidates now can help us win support in the unions.

In a sense the dilemma resolves itself. If we were strong enough, had won through propaganda enough support in the unions to generate such a crisis in relations with the Labour Party, then all sorts of other possibilities would open up.

Anywhere we are strong enough to get the union to donate money, we should be strong enough to develop the campaign within the union, perhaps spurred by a crisis in the Labour-union relationship arising out of a decision to give money to a non-Labour candidate. Why not?

The answer you get from what they write is that they can’t see anything in the business of non-Labour candidacies but the SWP. And that begs the further question: why do they not think it enough for AWL to reserve the right to vote in a specific case against giving out political funds?

One core and much-shaping issue here is the attitude to the SWP. Arguing with Rosa Luxemburg about national freedom for Poland, Lenin accused her (whether rightly or wrongly we leave aside) of paying too much regard to the nationalism of the Polish Socialist Party, and simply inverting it. He characterises what he says is her over-concern with the PSP like this:

“To the mouse there is no animal bigger than the cat”.

There is a lot of evidence in T & M’s text that they are over-concerned with the SWP. It has already been discussed. It is improbable that either of the present writers has more liking or respect for the SWP than T & M have. But we can’t let animosity and contempt for the SWP push us into the role of guardians of the Blairite/union-bureaucrat status quo!

61. "ECONOMISM"?

Historical parallels are never exact. In the nature of things they cannot be. But they are sometimes illuminating.

Let us compare certain things in our own situation to the situation in the nascent Russian labour movement 100 years ago. There are certain limited but piquant parallels between Lenin's opponents, the people he called "Economists", and T & M.

The Economists concluded from the perspective agreed by all Marxists then that Russia was moving towards a bourgeois-democratic revolution, that therefore the Marxist organisation should confine itself to organising the workers on the economic front, pursuing only such politics as flowed out directly from that, and making socialist propaganda. Wider immediate politics could be left to the liberals, for now, since they embodied the inevitable next step, a bourgeois revolution.

Most of the Economists became Mensheviks, and the two currents merged into one because they agreed that the "next step" in Russia's development was, for now, the bourgeois revolution, and therefore the bourgeoisie had to be in the ascendant.

They praised and exaggerated any moves by the bourgeoisie to act against Tsarism. They had a rigidly stageist conception of future development. Some of them wound up arguing that the working class should do nothing to frighten or alarm the liberals.

And what has all that got to do with us, or with such Bolsheviks as T & M? Their approach leaves the entire field of electoral politics "for now" to the Blairites (and secondarily to the sectarians). They want to subordinate everything AWL does to a rigid scheme in which the trade union leaders are seen as the historically "anointed" leaders in the "next stage" which has to be the reclamation and restoration of the Labour Party.

In terms of British experience they parallel Militant (the SP) in the 1960s and 70s. For Militant the inevitable "next

stage" was the development of the British labour movement towards Militant's politics was the emergence of "the mass left wing" which would be led by the Tribunites — people like Michael Foot. Nothing could be done about that. All Militant could do was explain this to them and to the labour movement. They denounced those who rejected this rigid schematisation.

So with T & M's outlook on the "reclamation" of the Labour Party. It is conceived as a rigidly necessary stage of development.

We are, they think, locked into a preordained stage of going back to something like the old Labour Party. Defeats are always reversed, remember? The old *form* will, they think, *certainly* reappear. We should not do anything — like risk getting a trade union disaffiliated by the Blairites — which upsets the preordained pattern.

We should now make it our "central priority" (in a more candid or lucid exposition they would say, our only activity in this field) to make the trade union leaders fight to reclaim the Labour Party. We can only act through them.

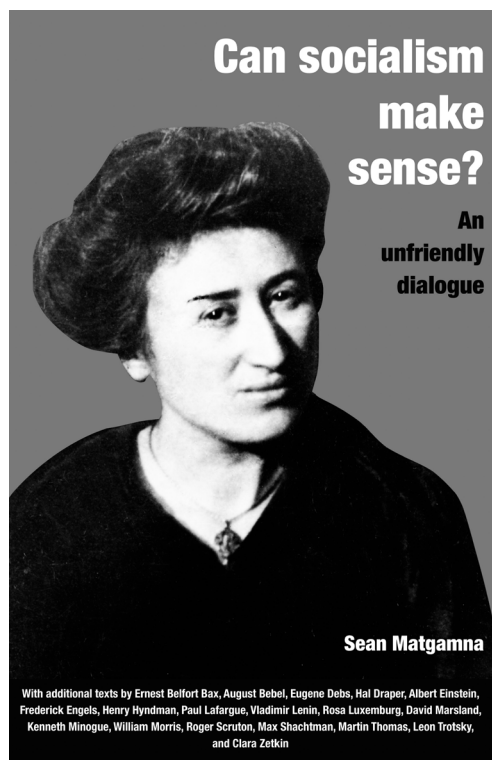
This and the foreseeable period ahead is, so to speak, their era. We must leave immediate electoral politics to them (which in practice means to the Blairites...).

We cannot do anything directly ourselves; we certainly cannot try to get the unions to back independent working class electoral challenges to the Blairites.

We have already noted the rigid compartmentalisation implied even in the idea that we can stand and support anti-Labour working-class candidates so long as we do not ask for union money for them. The compartmentalisation now, and the stages for the future (first get the union bureaucracy to fight, before anything can be done directly), mean that we rule ourselves out politically for the indefinite future. Our role is to argue, cajole and try to compel the trade union bureaucrats to act to remake the Labour Party.

The combined effect of all this if Jack has his way would be to reduce us to work in the trade unions, even for politics.

John Bloxam, Sean Matgamna. 21st July 2003



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Appendices

The main body of this pamphlet was originally published in April 2004. Appendices 1-7 were earlier articles and resolutions, republished in that same pamphlet — part of the background to that debate. Appendix 8 is a resolution from 2010, appendix 9 from 2011, and appendices 10-12 are resolutions from 2025. Appendices 8-12 are first republished in the second, 2025 edition of this pamphlet — as background to the current discussions.

1: A workers' voice in politics

John Bloxam and Sean Matgamna [JO], Solidarity 3/29, 1st May 2003

1. The Labour Party is still what Lenin called it in 1920, a bourgeois workers' party. In the last decade, there has been an enormous shift within this contradictory phenomenon towards its bourgeois pole. The "New Labour Party" is the result. It retains its trade-union affiliations; it is still reliant on trade-union financing; but the relationships and structures that now constitute New Labour are radically different from those of "Old" Labour.

2. New Labour differs from Old Labour in these respects:

- The trade union share of the vote at Party conference and of direct and indirect representation on the National Executive has been substantially cut.
- The role of both Annual Conference and the National Executive in the affairs of the Labour Party has been changed qualitatively. Essentially, they no longer control Labour Party policy, or what happens in the party, even in theory.
- Through a series of procedural checks and controls, it has become the norm for New Labour that regional and even national conferences no longer discuss political issues. With these new structures, the Labour Party "in the country" cannot counterpose itself politically to the Government.
- Thus, the forums in which and through which the political life of the Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs) expressed itself have been cemented up.
- The leader of the party, elected by the plebiscitary pseudo-democracy of one person one (postal) vote, has been raised above the party and its affiliated trade unions into a Bonaparte figure with enormous political power. The leader's "office" — lieutenants, advisers, spin-liars, etc. — financed by big capitalist donations and state funds, is the real centre of the party. All key policy and other decisions are taken there, outside all possible control by the party or the unions. When the leader is also Prime Minister, his power vis-à-vis the party is vastly increased.
- Central control over and vetting of Labour candidacies at parliamentary and local government level has been greatly increased. The possibility of rank-and-file control through selection and deselection of candidates has been greatly reduced.

3. The atrophying and accelerated bureaucratisation of Parliament parallels the changes in the Labour Party described above and reinforces them.

Where in theory Parliament controls the executive, the reality is that the Government rigidly controls Parliament, by way of controlling its majority. Mass revolts by MPs, as we saw during the recent build-up to war, are still possible. The

norm, however, has been for the parliamentary Labour Party to be as rigidly controlled and powerless as the Labour Party "in the country" has been.

The New Labour Party in government has openly repudiated any working-class allegiance in explicit and brutal words and in such deeds as keeping the Tory anti-union laws on the statute books.

Outside of an unpredictable meltdown of its electoral support on a scale to match that of the Italian Christian Democratic Party or the Canadian Tories in the 1990s, New Labour is in power for the next decade at least. Blair has personally been strengthened by the events surrounding the second Gulf war.

4. For these reasons we have advocated independent working-class electoral challenges to New Labour. We never saw such things as ruled out on principle. We rejected them previously only because of the practicalities, chief of which was the open nature of the Party and what socialists could do in it.

5. The decisive changes are not, it must be stressed, primarily a matter of the policies of New Labour, important though those are to defining what New Labour is, and inextricably linked though they are in the actual history in Britain with what the Blairites have done to the Labour Party structures.

It is the changes in structures and in relationships between the Party and the unions, the blocking-off of the channels of working-class representation and of possible effective labour-movement opposition to Labour government policy, that are decisive here.

Other social-democratic formations — for example the Australian Labor Party — have adapted to and even pioneered neoliberal policies without undergoing the same transformation of their relationship to the working class as Blair's New Labour. Decisive about New Labour is the structural changes, the fact that all the old forums and channels through which the labour movement could discuss and pronounce on such policies are gone or radically changed. The Blairites have built on Thatcherism, and on the tremendous defeats inflicted on the working class by Thatcherism, to transform the Labour Party radically.

6. But the trade unions continue to back New Labour? Before they founded their own party, the trade unions backed the Liberal Party, and regularly got a group of MPs elected under Liberal Party auspices, the so-called "Lib-Labs". In the last two decades of the 19th century, the pioneer socialists stood in elections, in the main but not only in local elections, against a Liberal Party which had trade union backing.

The unions continue to have organic ties to New Labour, not least financial ties, that the late 19th century trade unions did not have with the Liberal Party. Acknowledge that difference; understand that the trade unions could do much more

than they now do inside the Labour Party to fight Blairism; advocate that the rank and file of the trade unions should demand of the trade union leaders that they do fight Blair and Blairism within the Labour Party — and nonetheless there is an important degree of parallel between the position of socialists now standing against the trade-union-backed Labour Party, and our predecessors a hundred years ago standing against a Liberal Party which had trade-union backing.

7. A simultaneous mass revolt by the CLPs and the trade unions — crucially, by the mass of the unions — could, of course, quickly re-open, cleanse and democratise the New Labour structures. We can expect that some MPs who rebelled in Parliament against the war will more easily rebel in the future. It may be that a new offensive for privatisations and so on by a post-Gulf-war Blair, feeling strong, will generate concomitant opposition by MPs and others.

The most important fact for now, and calculably, is that nothing short of a large-scale general revolt can break the hold of the New Labour machine. New Labour can see off partial revolts, even large and important ones. Only a large, determined and simultaneous revolt could swamp the breakwaters.

Constitutional formulas, legalities, and rule changes are never all-decisive, in the Labour Party or in the class struggle at large. Some struggles can break through undemocratic rules; or entrenched leaderships can find ways to suppress the rank and file even if the formal rules are democratic. But rules matter.

To say that the rule changes in the Labour Party do not signify much would be as wrong as saying that the anti-union laws do not matter much for the industrial struggle, or that the different Labour Party rule changes of the early 1980s, in favour of democracy, were a diversion.

8. The transforming changes affect precisely those areas where the political life of the old Labour Party, that is of the old labour movement, expressed itself, and into which socialists could intervene as we did.

If there is some political life in a local CLP it cannot now — short of a very large-scale simultaneous revolt in other parties and the unions — go beyond local opposition. Nor can it feed into the old national forums like National Executive and Conference, and thus stimulate and coalesce with other local groups. The pockets of local life bear the same relationship to the old national Labour Party life that rock pools bear to the receded sea.

9. The working-class movement has effectively been deprived of its old political dimension. The trade-union political funds that help sustain New Labour do not now operate to secure working-class representation in Parliament. Those funds now go to sustain an anti-working-class government party.

The fact that the break has not been done cleanly, completely, or even, perhaps, definitively, serves the Blairite machine in two ways. It secures continued trade-union provision of money for it. More importantly in political terms, it makes what has been done less obvious than it should be and thus works to head off moves to restore working-class political representation in opposition to New Labour.

10. What we want to happen in response to this situation has been set out in resolutions and in articles in *Solidarity* and *Workers' Liberty*. The trade unions should oppose Blair within the Labour structures, push things to a break with New Labour as in 1931 they broke with James Ramsey MacDonald, and refound a trade-union-based Labour Party.

11. It can be calculated that only a not-very-big minority

of the Parliamentary Labour Party — which has no working-class roots worth recording — would split from Blair in those circumstances.

12. In the last decade, if there had existed even a small non-sectarian Marxist party of a few thousand — the size of the Communist Party of Great Britain in the 1920s — then something like the “National Left Wing Movement”, the network of CLPs disaffiliated from the party in the 1920s for refusing to expel communists, would have come into existence, linking up such forces as the Leeds CLP members who split over the Liz Davies affair. It did not exist. In the drift and then stampede to the right that began in 1982-3, the once left-wing CLPs had in the main been transformed into organisations whose dominant drive was to get the Tories out at any price, and finally even at the price of accepting the neo-Thatcherite politics that Blair’s and Brown’s ascendancy had made Labour Party policy. That limited the size of Leeds-style revolts.

In fact, the political life of the CLPs is at a low ebb. The uniform submissiveness of local Labour councils and the dearth of strong local rank-and-file Labour revolts against them is one clear measure of that.

13. In this situation, the sort of rationally-controlled moves that we want to see in response to New Labour have not happened. Disappointment with Blairite control of the Labour Party and the trade unions has taken the form of the election of a wide range of new trade union leaderships committed at one level or another to defending their members’ immediate interests — that is, of a drive to recreate real trade unionism.

Without the support or tolerance of the trade union establishment, the Blair-Brown-Mandelson New Labour coup in the political wing of the British labour movement could not have been made, or not without a major 1931-style split in the Labour Party.

Many of the leaderships that supported Blair in his coup are now gone or going. To the new trade union leaders we say: counterpose the unions to New Labour immediately, and take the fight if necessary (as we think it will be necessary) to an open break and a refounding of labour representation.

We are, however, nowhere near the possibility of controlling what happens. The new leaderships are not doing what we think the situation indicates.

Some of them have an “outsider” attitude akin to that of some trade unions in the USA to the Democratic Party: New Labour is something to get the best you can from, rather than the trade unions’ own party. The idea of fighting to reclaim the party or of “refounding the Labour Representation Committee” as yet has little weight even with the new layer of trade union leaders. They have not even organised a strong campaign to have the anti-union laws removed from the statute books (though there is now more activity on that front than for two decades). In the run-up to and at the start of the recent Iraq war, not one single union got its representative on the Labour National Executive to stand up for union policy against the war. Every union representative toed the Government line.

14. There is not a united, “strategically coherent” response by the political elements in the trade unions. There is a fragmentary, incoherent response.

Instead of a coherent “strategic” movement towards transferring the political funds of the unions, as a body, from New Labour and into recreating a real Labour Party, we have all sorts of proposals about those union political funds. Thus, for example, we get the bizarre advocacy by Bob Crow, the ex-SLP leader of the RMT, of support for Plaid Cymru.

15. The absence of a coherent, co-ordinated union response

is a result of our weakness as a force in the labour movement; but we are where we are.

Centrally, we advocate that the unions fight within the Labour Party against New Labour, and fight — if necessary, as we think it will be — all the way to a break and the refounding of a real Labour Party. But that is not all we do. In the actual situation of flux, we break down that central idea into immediate tactics. And we relate to inchoate responses as militants, not as “inspectors-general” of history or of the labour movement.

16. What are the logical possibilities for what we say and do about how unions use their political funds?

One possibility is to argue for continued exclusive support of the New Labour Party. We could now adopt such a position only on one of two grounds. Either, that we expect the new bourgeois excrescences to be shrugged off the body of the Labour Party, and old Labour to re-emerge.

Or, that we want to keep the trade union funds that go to New Labour as a unified mass of politically-directed money that can then tidily be transferred to the replacement mass trade-union-based party which we advocate.

We have argued that Blairism will not easily be shrugged off, and that even a concerted trade union break with New Labour would take only a small part of the Parliamentary Labour Party (and, possibly, unless there had been, in the interim, a sizeable influx and a revival of political life) not even most of the CLPs. It would in effect be the foundation of a new party.

To argue for the status quo until either the Blairites are cut away and New Labour is turned back into Old Labour, or until the unions break from New Labour and found a new workers party, would be to appoint ourselves as guardians and advocates of doing nothing about the funds for an incalculable period of time, and anyway for the foreseeable future.

17. The second possibility is to argue for the tactical use of existing funds.

Our central political “demand” on the unions — that they fight Blairism within the Labour structures, right through to a break, and found a new working-class trade-union-based party — does not oblige us to oppose everything short of that. It does not oblige us to oppose any “tactical” fragmentation of the union political funds.

18. Advocacy of our “epochal” concern — the mass trade union break with Blair and move to a new workers’ party — should not shade into a conservative defence of and support for the Blair-serving status quo against immediate limited initiatives, left-wing or labour-movement electoral challenges

to the New Labour party; things which, on their merits, we should support here and now.

19. The situation is further complicated by the activities of sectarians like the SWP and the Socialist Party. The SWP has no strategic overview and uses elections in a catchpenny, opportunist “build the SWP” spirit. The SP has a wrong assessment of the situation, believing that the entire process of destruction of the old Labour Party has been completed.

The phrase, “democratise the political funds” was initially used to express the correct broad idea of the FBU May 2001 decision — that the union, nationally and regionally, should critically examine election candidates seeking its support, and consider backing independent working-class candidates against New Labour. That broad idea always involved accepting the risk that a drive to reassert independent working-class representation will, in the given circumstances, involve, or open the door to, some fragmentation and false starts. But the SWP, in particular, has cumulatively reinterpreted “democratisation of the political funds” as positive advocacy of fragmentation and “diversification” of the political funds. They have proposed having money allotted branch-by-branch or in proportion to different parties’ support in the membership. We are against fragmenting the funds in such a manner, which will end up (i) providing a safety-valve for the bureaucrats, freeing them to back Blair with the bulk of the political funds as long as they allow a few branches to give money elsewhere; (ii) drifting towards business-unionism, i.e. giving money to whatever mainstream party candidate seems friendliest or most susceptible to lobbying.

20. However, a policy of no changes in the distribution of trade union political funds until either the Labour Party has been won back from the Blairites, or a new workers’ party is launched by the trade unions, would for socialists be a policy of long-term inertia. It would be a de facto acceptance of Blairism as working-class politics for the foreseeable future, and, by way of that, a long-term policy of de facto abstention from electoral politics. Under the guise of strategic thinking we would adopt a policy of passive waiting for “something big” to happen. Such an approach is not a conceivable option for us. It would destroy the AWL as an interventionist political force.

21. We made the following harsh but true and just assessment of the performance of the Socialist Alliance in the 2001 General Election. “We have something to congratulate ourselves for in having organised such a widespread public challenge to Blairism. The Socialist Alliance has little else to congratulate itself for. With very few exceptions our impact on the electorate was not noticeably greater than that which any halfway presentable socialist candidate would have made in any suitable constituency at any time in the last hundred years.

“So far, the main significance of the Socialist Alliance lies in its impact on the left, where it has brought a number of tendencies together in a loose collaboration, rather than in its impact on the working-class electorate or the broad labour movement. So far, the latter is slight... The Socialist Alliance waged a campaign that was shaped and limited by the politics and by the organisational practices of the SWP...” (Workers’ Liberty 2/1).

For any collective that has our concern with mass working-class politics, a recoil is a natural response to this reality of the Socialist Alliance.

But recoil from inadequate and often toytown electoralism into some variety of the policy of passive waiting outlined

Our news, meetings, and events

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above would simply be a form of political suicide, motivated on our disappointment with the “revolutionary” left.

The point is that the AWL has to recreate a revolutionary left — one that can interact healthily with the existing broad labour movement. One of the central arguments for electoral activity — as against doing nothing in that arena — is that it will help us in our work of recruiting, regrouping and educating the revolutionary socialist forces to make a difference in the mass labour movement.

22. We cannot adopt one sweeping, generalised “line” for all the permutations we face in the flux around us. We cannot respond as “inspectors-general of history”, saying that nothing should move unless it accords to our strategic conception of the speedy replacement of Blairism by a trade-union-based working-class party.

We may calculate that there is a drift towards depoliticising the unions. We may observe that in practice it is sometimes hard to disentangle proposals on the political funds which allow support for Socialist Alliance and independent working-class candidates from trends that might mean furthering the drift towards an attitude of backing various friendly politicians from the “outside” instead of asserting an independent role for the trade union movement itself inside the existing Labour Party structures, as an alternative to continued and in fact passive affiliation to the Blairite New Labour party. All we can do about that is to fight for our alternative, and to argue politically against the trends to depoliticisation.

We cannot be the “inspectors-general” of the broad labour movement, either. We cannot allow our own fight for our own politics to be stifled by cautious reluctance to trigger debates which may be risky for the movement as a whole. We are militants fighting within the movement to shape and reshape it, and fighting to group enough revolutionary socialists to do that. It would be a foolish error for us to fear to play the role of militants, fighting to group and recruit militants, because of a detached long-term estimate of the risks to the broad movement from destabilising the status quo. We will only be able to remake and reshape the movement if we succeed in organising the militants now around healthy Marxist politics.

The signs are that there will be much fragmentation of what exists now before the movement can gather itself together coherently. We cannot respond by mechanically saying no to any initiative by the sectarians, because that would inevitably mean leaving to them elements of a response to the situation we are in that make sense or partial sense. We should always try to recast anything sensible in what they propose — independent working-class electoral challenges to New Labour, and trade-union involvement in such challenges — in our own political framework, by putting down our own resolutions and amendments.

23. We should advocate local labour movement political action committees, and where possible treat Trades Councils as potentially such committees. We support any solidly-based moves by trade unions to counterpose themselves electorally to New Labour, for example FBU candidates in local elections.

We are in favour of winning support from Labour-affiliated unions, or (the more realistic option now) from local or regional union bodies, for authentic independent working-class electoral challenges to New Labour. Obviously how and when this is done is a tactical question, but in general we favour it.

24. To campaign now in unaffiliated unions for them to affiliate to New Labour, on the basis of joining a general trade-union fight against the Blair machine within the La-

bour structures, would be inept — a piece of project-monogery that could not be shown to make sense to thinking militants. Such a fight does not exist in any halfway coherent, concerted or large-scale fashion.

A campaign for affiliation would inescapably imply commitment to a narrow preconceived scenario for the future, that the unions will fight in a co-ordinated fashion to reclaim the Labour Party, or, in an equally tidy and co-ordinated fashion, disaffiliate to form a new party. There is no warrant in what has happened, or what is foreseeably likely to happen, for tying our tactics to that scenario.

25. We are against disaffiliation, which in practical terms could only mean the Labour-affiliated unions ducking out of the fight-to-a-break against the New Labour machine which we advocate.

26. But what if a decision by a trade union — say the RMT — to let branches back non-Labour-Party candidates leads to the Labour Party disaffiliating the RMT? Isn’t support for local trade union branches having the right to back non-Labour candidates only the advocacy of trade union disaffiliation “by the back door”? Won’t it come to the same thing? And we are not for disaffiliation, are we?

The reasoning here is only a variant of the idea that we want everything done in an orderly, co-ordinated fashion, that we want the unions as a body to fight Blair and then, when it proves necessary, to move as a body to found a replacement trade-union-based working-class party.

Therefore? Therefore we don’t dare move for anything partial lest we thereby spoil the prospects for the more orderly changes we would like? Since we cannot control what the whole trade union movement does, therefore in spheres where we have some say we adopt a policy of passive waiting, not daring to fight in individual unions for the right of local organisations to back other than New Labour candidates?

An analogy will help clarify things here. We do not want to split the trade unions. So therefore the rank and file should never push a conflict with an entrenched trade union bureaucracy as far as a split, or the risk of a split? Such a policy would amount to setting artificial *a priori* limits to the rank-and-file struggle for control of the union. It would amount to saying that if the bureaucracy is pushing things to a split, then the rank and file will capitulate — in advance! — to the entrenched bureaucracy, rather than letting the logic of the struggle decide.

Trotsky dealt with this in a famous document. “If it be criminal to turn one’s back on mass organisations for the sake of fostering sectarian fictions, it is no less so to passively tolerate subordination of the revolutionary mass movement to the control of openly reactionary or disguised conservative (‘progressive’) bureaucratic cliques. Trade unions are not ends in themselves; they are but means along the road to proletarian revolution”.

We must fight for working-class politics in the labour movement. We do not fight in the most advantageous, still less ideal, conditions. We cannot let fear of damage that will be done during that struggle stifle the will of the rank and file to fight. We cannot fetishise the existing links and relations between the New Labour Party and the trade unions. We must advocate a fight on every level, and now.

It is not at all certain that New Labour would rush to cut off its trade union sources of income because local trade unions backed non-Labour candidates. Or if it was inclined to rush, that it would not back down faced with a widespread trade-union revolt against its moves to disaffiliate a dissident union.

In any case, we cannot let ourselves be blackmailed into passive acceptance of the political dominance of the Blairites. We must fight our way out of the political impasse of the labour movement.

RMT Assistant General Secretary Patrick Sikorski explains that the rule changes he wants to see at RMT conference this year will open it up so that the union can “support those who support our policies. They will emerge from the SSP in Scotland, the Socialist Alliance in England, members of Plaid Cymru in Wales, and others who will be to the left of Labour. Also it will involve socialists still inside Labour”.

Against the idea of backing Plaid Cymru, we counterpose the principle of independent working-class political representation — not the idea that the union must stick to exclusive support for New Labour candidates.

27. We should propose in each union a national policy which would establish a framework for the union’s political activities and use of its political fund set by union policies and the principle of independent working-class representation in politics.

In pursuit of this national approach, we should argue against automatic support for New Labour and its candidates, and for the possibility of supporting independent working-class candidates. We explain openly that we want the unions to consider support only for working-class and socialist independent candidates, not for any independent candidates sympathetic to the policies of the union, and that our aim is not “diversification” but the recreation of a trade-union-based workers’ party. We argue for decisions about such alternatives to be taken, where appropriate, at regional and local level in the unions, subject to the fullest democratic control (e.g. workplace and membership ballots).

We are also for:

- Reducing union contributions to the Labour Party to the flat affiliation fee, ending extra donations, as the CWU has done. (We are not for reducing the level of affiliation).
- Making union representatives in New Labour structures fight for union policy.
- Withdrawing union sponsorship to MPs who flout or oppose union policies (as the RMT has done).
- Challenging, expressing no confidence in, and where possible de-selecting councillors, MPs and leaders who refuse accountability to the labour movement and oppose working-class interests. No confidence in Blair as Labour leader!
- Using union funds for independent working-class political campaigning — e.g. for referenda on privatisation, for a European workers’ charter rather than supporting bourgeois yes or no campaigns on the euro.

cal campaigning — e.g. for referenda on privatisation, for a European workers’ charter rather than supporting bourgeois yes or no campaigns on the euro.

Where we come across motions in the unions expressing some of these ideas, but in an inadequate framework, we should seek to amend them so as to set them clearly within the framework of the fight for independent working-class representation.

Where our amendments fall, or circumstances prevent us from proposing them, the way we vote on such motions must be judged tactically in each case, in the light of both their wording and the meaning given to those words by the conditions and balance of forces in each union. Such tactical judgments should be made by our union fractions in consultation with the Industrial Committee and the EC.

28. In fact, the fight on the different fronts — to get the trade union leaders to fight Blairism within the Labour structures, and to get the trade unions to back working-class and socialist candidates against New Labour — is inseparable from the work of building a cross-union rank-and-file movement. The trade union leaders who will not fight for working-class and trade-union interests now, within the structures of the Labour Party, are not likely to support the formation of an anti-Blairite working-class party to replace New Labour. Here too, on the question of backing anti-Blairite working-class election candidates, the old watchword offers guidance: if the leaders won’t lead, then the rank and file must.

29. We should pay more attention to the Labour Party. We should improve our efforts in pushing affiliated unions to fight the Blairites — that is, get our trade-union work better organised and fight systematically to get our own resolutions on political funds to the union conferences. Socialists should reorganise and reactivate our Labour Party fraction, but not, unless there is a major change in the condition and levels of life of the CLPs, significantly increase the number of comrades assigned to such work.

30. The central conclusion from the reality of the fragmented responses to the Blairite coup is that only a coherent Marxist organisation can in itself act to co-ordinate in any thoroughgoing way the different responses evoked in the labour movement. We, as a living organisation, have to respond to the “fragments”. AWL has to co-ordinate our different fields of work — trade union, youth, students, No Sweat, Socialist Alliance, SSP, Labour Party — integrating them both politically and organisationally.

2: The case for revolutionary realism

Solidarity 3/30, 14th May 2003, Susan (“M”) and Jack (“T”)

Susan Jackson and Jack Hamilton (“M” & “T” respectively) continue our debate on the unions’ political funds, with a reply to John Bloxam and Sean Matgamna’s [JO’s] contribution in the last issue of *Solidarity*. We invite further contributions.

“A party’s inability to establish correct relations with the working class reveals itself most glaringly in the area of the trade union movement... The fatal excesses of the ‘third period’ were due to the desire of the small Communist minority to act as though it had a majority behind it... No better favour could be done for the trade union bureaucracy. Had it been within its power to award the Order of the Garter,

it should have so decorated all the leaders of the Comintern and Profintern.

“The revolutionary proletarian Party must be welded together by a clear understanding of its historic tasks. This presupposes a scientifically based programme. At the same time, the revolutionary party must know how to establish correct relations with the class. This presupposes a policy of revolutionary realism.”

Leon Trotsky, *“The ILP and the New International”*, 1933

“The decisive changes are not, it must be stressed primarily

a matter of the policies of New Labour... It is the changes in structures and in the relationships between the party and the unions, the blocking off of the channels of working-class representation and possible effective labour movement opposition to Labour government policy, that are decisive here."

John Bloxam and Sean Matgamna [JO], "A workers' voice in politics", 2003

"For every revolutionary organisation in England its attitude to the masses and to the class is almost coincident with its attitude toward the Labour Party, which bases itself upon the trade unions. At this time the question whether to function inside the Labour Party or outside it is not a principled question, but a question of actual possibilities. In any case, without a strong faction in the trade unions, and, consequently, in the Labour Party itself, the ILP is doomed to impotence even today... Yet, for a long period, the ILP attached much greater importance to the 'united front' with the insignificant Communist Party than to work in mass organisations..."

"But isn't it a fact that a Marxist faction would not succeed in changing the structure and policy of the Labour Party? With this we are entirely in accord: the bureaucracy will not surrender. But the revolutionists, functioning outside and inside, can and must succeed in winning over tens and hundreds of thousands of workers..."

Leon Trotsky, "Once Again the ILP", 1936

Marxism is the theory and practice of working class self-liberation. It involves the extension of the realm of reason over the irrational. Marxist trade union tactics have to start from the reality of the class as it is, rather than as we would like it to be. We ground ourselves in the collective discipline of working class organisation and struggle, and we seek to hammer out a line of march, a set of tasks around which we group militants and fight.

A rational perspective requires a "concrete analysis of a concrete situation". So, let us start with the basic facts. The Labour affiliated trade unions encompass the overwhelming majority of the organised working class in industry, and the bulk of low paid workers in the public sector. At the same time a decisive majority of class-conscious workers continue to vote for and support the Labour Party. Meanwhile the revolutionaries are a tiny minority with extremely tenuous connections to most of the class. The Labour Party has won two landslide election victories and looks certain to win the next. In England and Wales socialist candidates get an average of less than 2% of the vote. No more votes than any left-wing challenge over the last 30 years. In Scotland that figure is 7%.

These facts indicate that a general policy of attempting to win official union backing for socialist electoral challenges to Labour has no grip. Such a policy could only be implemented if one of two conditions held true: either that we had no intention of allowing the union members a real say in the decision, or, we were deluded enough to think that if we acted as if the majority of the class supported us, they would.

Trade unions are the bedrock, primal form of elementary working class organisation. We should not treat them as if they are select debating societies, or socialist political organisations. The strength of the unions comes from the fact that they are all-inclusive class organs that unite workers on the basis of occupation or industry. The most important unions organising the key sectors of the working class are now—and

will remain for the foreseeable immediate future—Labour Party affiliated organisations. Therefore, we strive to find ways to express our ideas in a form that makes sense given this reality. When addressing the unions we should raise the question of working class political independence in terms of what the union is, or is not doing, to fight for trade union control of the Labour Party and of Labour government policy.

A party controlled by workers

The AWL should not take the initiative in proposing fragmenting the trade union political funds. Not because we are conservatives who desire to control developments, but because we are working class militants who believe in workers' democracy.

When proposing a policy for the unions, as unions, we should do nothing that undermines the fundamental collective purpose and class solidarity of the trade unions and renders them incoherent and ineffectual. If there is to be a meaningful political aspect to the unions, it has to be collective and unitary; anything else is out of kilter with the essential nature of trade unions as the embodiment of the principle of class solidarity.

The problem with proposals to parcel up the trade union political fund with different branches backing different parties or multi-party affiliation in which there would be no precise link between any union organ and any candidate, is that they would politically splinter the union and render accountability and control impossible. For the union to be unable to speak with a unified political voice is to put the union in a subordinate relation to the parliamentarian—or would be parliamentarian. Only if the union has a unitary bond with the parliamentary representatives and their party, is any form of accountability possible. Without the possibility of accountability, of replacing those who act against you, of subordinating them to the basic class organs, then what is proposed is not the Marxist idea of the trade unions creating and controlling a new workers' party, but trade union financial support for various incoherent, social democratic-cum-populist initiatives. This would mean reproducing all the worst characteristics of the Labour Party in miniature while losing sight of the revolutionary democratic working class principle of a party controlled by the workers.

As a result of a serious fight by the trade unions to regain some control over the Labour Party, it is highly likely that the issue of supporting working class candidates against imposed Blairites will arise. This would be the actual counterposition of a significant part of the workers' movement—at a local level—to the Blair machine. Once such a fight develops it is impossible to predict how it will evolve, except to say that it will be uneven and will of necessity defy the ability of any budding master strategists to make it run along neat and tidy lines. That is the beauty of the class struggle; it is explosive, unpredictable, in a word revolutionary.

The revolutionary, however, also needs to be able to distinguish the first weeks of pregnancy from the last, and to be able to spot the difference between a genuine movement of the workers and a populist bandwagon.

What is proposed here is not conservatism. It is a fighting policy to unite and organise a broad trade union resistance on the political front, and to organise this opposition around the principle of workers' democracy. What is conservatism—the dim-witted conservatism of fearing to be out of step with the left—is to pretend to be an independent force, while we tag along on the road of protest candidates behind a motley crew of bombastic trade union leaders, the manipulative

sectarians of the SWP, self confessedly “apolitical” trade unionists, opportunists from Plaid Cymru, the Greens and the Liberal Democrats, not to mention George Galloway MP and the MAB.

There are only two serious orientations to mass trade union politics today. Either, we fight for the trade unions to regain some kind of control over the Labour Party and in the process rally and organise the forces of a new proto party within the womb of the old. Or, we can declare that Labour is irreformable and immediately press for the unions to organise a new workers’ party.

It is clear that the present writers support the first option. The problem dogging this debate is that the other side in this discussion wants to back both options, as well as situating themselves at all points north, south, east and west of the argument.

Marxism or scholasticism

“The question of whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. In practice man must prove the truth, that is the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question.”

Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, 1845

For Marxists it is impossible to gauge what the actual and lasting impact of Blair’s constitutional reforms have been on the nature of the Labour Party until they are put to the test by a militant trade union struggle against them. Just as in the process of production, where there is no other way for the worker to test the strength of any material except by applying pressure to it to determine the breaking point, also in the class struggle—there is no other way to assess the ruling classes’ defences, but to probe, apply pressure, get a struggle going and see what happens. The same goes for the bureaucratic structures of the labour movement. To look at the question any other way is pure scholasticism.

We should apply the activist, interventionist, practical, and working class approach, to the urgent need for a fight by the trade unions to reclaim the Labour Party. We can leave the “We can’t do that, the Blairites will stop us” scholasticism to the sectarians.

This is not a question of denying that Blairism is a defeat. All that is being said is that defeats are reversible and that they are normally reversed by the methods of class struggle. The class has hundreds of years’ experience of reversing defeats, it is not a new idea.

Defeats there have been, but there has been no decisive irreversible shift in the class character of the Labour Party. It remains a bourgeois workers’ party. If any qualifications need to be made to this formula they would be that it has become a neoliberal, business unionist, bourgeois workers’ party.

Labour has never been a workers’ party in any meaningful political sense, it has always been a bourgeois political machine sitting on top of the trade union movement. The union/labour link has always functioned in the last analysis as a mechanism tying the bedrock organisations of the class to the capitalist state. The fact that, through this mechanism of ruling class domination, the trade unions have also secured piecemeal reforms and concessions, is no more remarkable than the idea that the union leaderships can sometimes achieve concessions through agreements regulating the terms of the labour contract.

The fact that there is so little political life in the Labour Party flows fundamentally from the politics and passivity of the trade union leaders. In point of fact it is doubtful if Blair could possibly have hoped for more support from the trade union leaders than he has received. What is decisive and all-shaping in the Labour Party today is the refusal of the union leaders to fight Blair and their bureaucratic grip on the unions preventing the rank and file doing so. The changes to the Labour Party rulebook introduced with Partnership in Power are the alibi, not the crime. To argue that the rule changes are decisive is to lapse into constitutional fetishism and a morbid variant of “Resolutionary Socialism” which deludes itself about the realities of party democracy in Classic Labourism. After all, the normal practice of Labour governments over the last 80 years is to ignore Party Conference. Nor is Blair the first leader to say that he will govern in the interests of the “nation” not the working class. That fashion started with MacDonald. Remember what Trotsky said: the bureaucracy will not surrender.

There are now limited, but very encouraging signs that with the election of new leaders the support that Blair could take for granted—despite token protests—from the retiring generation of union leaders is no longer guaranteed. Workers are slowly becoming more assertive and want to know what the union is getting from the Labour Party.

We propose as an immediate central priority of the work of all AWL fractions in the affiliated unions, and of the Marxist socialists active in the Labour Party, that we seek to help organise a united front campaign involving union organisations, existing campaigns and CLPs around the theme of “Reclaim the Labour Party”. This campaign should be trade union based and would focus on specific demands to reverse the Blairite constitutional changes, restore the formal powers of Labour conference and promote the idea of de-selections and the selection of trade union candidates.

Facts or spin?

John Bloxam and Sean Matgamna [JO] make some very odd statements in their piece in the last edition of *Solidarity*. The statements are part of painting a picture which justifies turning away “for now” from starting any fight in the mainstream of the labour movement. For instance, consider the claim that: “Regional and National conferences no longer discuss political issues. With these new structures, the Labour Party ‘in the country’ cannot counterpose itself to the government”. Not true. The 2002 conference voted to oppose government policy on PFI. Blair did what every other Labour Prime Minister has done and announced he would ignore conference. So, the party in the country can counterpose itself to the government.

Another strikingly odd proposition—intelligible only as an excuse for inactivity—is that: “The idea of fighting to reclaim the party or of ‘refounding the labour representation committee’ as yet has little weight, even with the new layers of trade union leaders.” This is a perverse claim, a serious piece of “top spin” driven, we fear, by a desire to force the facts to fit the perspective. What are the facts? Mick Rix of ASLEF has called for the removal of Blair and for the unions to reclaim the Labour Party. Andy Gilchrist of the FBU has been witch hunted for calling for the “Real Labour Party” to assert itself against Blair. Billy Hayes of the CWU has spoken on platforms with a “Reclaim the Party” theme. Derek Simpson of Amicus [which would merge in 2007 with TGWU to become Unite the Union] was elected in part because he promised to stand up for the union in the Labour Party, rather than

simply rubber stamp Blair. The TGWU's Tony Woodley has said one of his first priorities, if elected, would be to convene a meeting of trade union leaders to plan a campaign to reclaim the party. Even establishment candidates like Curran in the GMB have had to campaign on a platform of asserting union interests against Blair. The right-wing Labour machine in the Unison affiliated fund has shown which way the wind is blowing with the declaration that the Partnership in Power structures aren't working. What more evidence do the comrades want?

The desire of Bloxam and Matgamna [JO] to play spin-doctor rather than analyse reality doesn't end with the new union leaders. Here is another oddity: "The political funds that go to New Labour (are) a unified mass of politically directed money". No they are not. The political funds do not belong to the Labour Party they belong to the trade union. It is simply not the case that all the money is directed towards the coffers of the New Labour machine. A portion (roughly 40% on average) must be paid to the Labour Party for affiliation; the remaining 60% can be spent as the unions decide. (As the comrades Bloxam and Matgamna [JO] support the idea of maintaining Labour Party affiliation, then they are as guilty as anybody else of wanting "a unified mass of politically directed money" to go to New Labour).

The issue is how that 60% remaining in the fund is spent. We think it should go to organising activities by workers organising to control the mass political wing of the labour movement and not to keep the presses of the SWP rolling producing glossy election material. In the CWU, which is affiliated to the Labour Party, the 60% is spent on supporting some constituencies, campaigns and pressure groups and in the case of some London branches even backing candidates against Labour. In other unions it is mainly used to bankroll Blairites. The way the fund is spent reflects the state of union democracy and crucially the level and form of political activity in the union. It could not be otherwise.

Tactical use of the funds

Bloxam and Matgamna [JO] tells us that "logically" there are only two possible uses of the fund: "One possibility is to argue for continued exclusive support of the New Labour Party... the second possibility is to argue for the tactical use of existing funds" by which they mean "tactical fragmentation of the funds" to support left-wing, or labour movement electoral challenges. This is a prime example of an attempt to fit reality into a pre-conceived schema to suit your argument.

They use this a priori construction in order to portray those who want a serious and active trade union led fight in the Labour Party as "conservative upholders of the status quo". It won't work. We are proposing an aggressive tactical use of the funds to complement and fund activity to fight for working-class control of union representatives. All they propose is the working class organisation handing over money to somebody else. What is most worrying is that you can only think that tactical use of the funds equals support for non-Labour candidates, if you have already given up on a struggle within and through the Labour/union link.

We would like to see the political funds above the affiliation fee used to organise a wide range of assertive campaigning and organising initiatives both inside and outside the Labour Party. Unions could insist on only funding MPs who would be prepared to be accountable to them. The union could seek to group together and organise pro-trade union MPs, preferably alongside other unions. Support could be given to a campaign to reclaim the Labour Party. Local campaigns could be

organised to deselect Blairite MPs and promote democratically accountable trade union candidates. If solidly based trade union candidates were blocked by the Blair machine that would include using the fund to support that candidate and campaign against the official Labour candidate. The precise way this is done is also a tactical matter.

Take for instance the case of the imposed ex-Tory minister Shaun Woodward in St Helens. FBU militant Neil Thompson, who had been carved out of the Labour selection, stood against him on the Socialist Alliance ticket. Nothing could stop a trade union putting out a leaflet saying that the union did not recognise the ex-Tory minister as a bona fide Labour candidate. Nor could anything stop a union spending money and resources on a campaign in the area on public services and trade union rights and seeking out the views of different candidates. Branches confident of support from their members could also have openly backed Thompson. It is simply wrong to suggest that branches, regions and whole unions couldn't campaign for solidly based labour movement challenges to an imposed Blairite. What is more, this can be done without rule changes that would transform the unions' political arrangements into a de-collectivised anarchist mess.

When militants are considering organising union support against New Labour in elections what is decisive is the strength of the union organisation and the views of the workers, not the formal rules. Comrades will no doubt reply, but wouldn't a rule change make it easier to support non-Labour candidates? The problem is that it would perhaps make it too easy. The formal bar on backing non-Labour candidates means that left activists have to be sure of solid support in the workplace before supporting challenges to Labour. That is why there are so few solidly rooted electoral challenges—the support isn't there in the working class. Without that control provided by the rules it is absolutely certain that the sectarians would siphon off branch money without any proper democratic mandate. If you try to get the union rules to move ahead of the class—as most of the left now wants to do—you simply reproduce the same danger of elitism and bureaucratic substitutionism as in any other attempt to shortcut the necessary work of convincing and mobilising the workers. In line with the principle of workers' democracy we should sharply oppose any attempt to change the political fund rules to indicate support for political parties other than Labour, without first putting the proposed rule changes to a ballot of the membership.

There is another issue. Which concerns the advocacy of trade union candidates against Labour, without the preliminaries of a fight for the Labour ticket. This is an area of great confusion. For instance, we still await a clear answer from John Bloxam and Sean Matgamna [JO] on whether they wanted the AWL to intervene into the current firefighters dispute by calling on the FBU to stand official union candidates against Labour in the recent local government elections (which we think would have been a disastrous counter-productive diversion), or whether they just thought it would have been nice if it had happened, just as it would have been nice if the TUC had called a general strike! They really should explain what they mean by the sentence: "We support any solidly based moves by trade unions to counterpose themselves electorally to New Labour, for example FBU candidates in local elections".

Workers' control or sectarian charity?

The Socialist Alliance are proposing motions to union conferences calling for the political funds to support non Labour

candidates as long as they make a vague commitment to “support the policies and principles” of the union. We believe these proposals should be voted down. It is not just that they are a manipulative back door way of proposing trade union funding for the SA and George Galloway MP, and in reality inseparable from that. Or that they are pitched in such a way as to appeal to people who want to open the door for support for Plaid Cymru, the SNP, Greens and Lib Democrats. Nor is our objection based only on the fact that the proposal deliberately ignores the need for a fight to control what the unions’ representatives do in the Labour Party and is usually motivated by people who would rather such a fight didn’t happen. Nor are we opposed just because we think that if the people proposing the motions were serious, they would put forward an actual rule change, which workers could support or not on its merits, rather than a vague gesture.

The most powerful objection to what the Socialist Alliance proposes is that it misses the central concern of Marxists—not just in relation to the fight for a workers’ party, and workers’ candidates but in relation to all our work in the class movement—the idea of workers’ control and democratic accountability. We want candidates, councillors and MPs who are answerable to the trade unions and accountable to them. One cautious pro-Labour proposal that seeks to impose a measure of control and accountability on union representatives in the Labour Party structures or Parliament, or which seeks to get more workers into parliament to promote union policy, embodies more of our programme than the Socialist Alliance’s ill-disguised gambit to get its hands on union money. We should vote accordingly.

Some comrades will no doubt argue that despite everything, we should back the SA motions because they establish the principle that the union will support working class candidates against New Labour. True, but the motions also establish the principle that George Galloway and any other skilful opportunist from say the SNP, PC, the Greens or the Liberal Democrats who says they support the “principles and policy of the union” can have union support too. So the motion “in principle” supports both genuine working class and faking anti-working class candidates. It allows for the independence of the working class and the subordination of the working class to alien class forces. Some principle.

Marxists normally support limited and partial proposals because they embody an aspect of our programme. The SA motions do no such thing. They contain a de-politicised organisational formula in lieu of a political proposal. They fail to embody anything of our central concern here, which is, working-class representation through trade union control and accountability of candidates, representatives and parties. In conference debates we should sharply distance ourselves from the sectarians. We should speak against along the following lines: “Blair would not worry for one moment if the union voted to one day, maybe, support the odd protest candidate. What he fears is a fight by the unions to take back control of the Labour Party. To start that fight, the union should take a vote of no confidence in Blair. That is something that really would send ripples through the labour movement.”

The RMT and disaffiliation

The RMT rail union leadership proposes a set of rule changes that would open the way to the union supporting SA and SSP candidates, left Labour MPs and elements of Plaid Cymru. It is not unreasonable to suspect that Bob Crow and friends are attempting to engineer a situation in which the Labour Party will disaffiliate the RMT. This will give them plenty of oppor-

tunities to play the brave socialist martyrs, a role normally carried out in real life by their members who have to live with the shoddy deals they stitch up.

Should the RMT be disaffiliated it would go without saying that socialists will campaign for the union to be re-admitted to the Labour Party. We should advocate that the unions do everything in their power to force the re-admission of the RMT. The fear though, is that the RMT leadership may not help the fight for re-affiliation and therefore winning the argument will be difficult especially with Labour voting trade unionists who will want to see the union stop supporting anti-Labour candidates.

In reality the rule changes are a huge diversion. The union should be fighting to secure the selection of rail workers as Labour candidates on a programme of re-nationalisation and union rights and be prepared to stand them independently if they are bureaucratically blocked. Labour NEC reps who oppose union policy shouldn’t just be removed from the NEC, they should be removed from union office. The RMT seems set to go from having no democratic control over its representatives in the Labour Party to no representation at all. Taking the debate on the rule changes into the workplaces and having a ballot on them would surely be too good an opportunity for a left-wing union leadership to miss.

It would, of course, be contemptible for Marxists to run scared from threats of Labour Party disaffiliation issued to a union that dared to back trade union candidates against New Labour. The problem is that comrades entirely miss the point about how the issue of disaffiliation is used in the unions. It is not that workers fear it as a threat. They want the union to stay in the Labour Party and distrust as manipulative schemers those who deny it is an issue. Many militants would be prepared to face down the threat over a big issue—Livingstone for instance—but they will not do so for the Socialist Alliance.

There is a perfectly simple way of dealing with the question of non-Labour working class candidates. We apply the criterion of workers’ democracy. If the workers support the candidate the union should. There is nothing to be gained from trying to get artificial trade union support for limited and selected socialist candidacies.

The example of the FBU 2002 conference discussion is also misunderstood. Andy Gilchrist and the EC majority overturned the 2001 conference decision on non-Labour candidates by touring the branches and securing mandates which pointed out that the rule changes requested were not practical, because a union couldn’t be affiliated to the Labour Party and also affiliated to another party that stood candidates against it. The union would have to choose between pursuing policies through the Labour Party or standing candidates against it. It wasn’t that the firefighters sunk back in fear at the prospect of being disaffiliated—they positively wanted to stay in the Labour Party and fight. They accepted the honest argument that you can’t do both. In fact, in the trade unions you will find only a limited number of master dialecticians who think that you can do both. The experience of the dispute means that it is now much more likely that the union will respond with some kind of demonstrative gesture—like totally withholding funds. This is totally understandable, but risks failing to face up to the task of the FBU leading a movement in the Labour Party to try to hold Blair and Prescott accountable for their actions in the dispute.

Bloxam and Matgamna [JO] fail to focus clearly on the tasks before the class. The entire logic of their argument is that because we cannot control what happens—a mind numbing ba-

nality—we should not even aspire to play a role in initiating, organising and preparing the ground for what they describe as the “epochal” battle for trade union control of the Labour Party. No, that is for the future and to be organised “from above” by the official leaderships. We must know our place. We build the new party “from below”. In the here and now all we can do is get involved in small-scale local electoralism, or travel as reluctant passengers while Bob Crow and his friends derail the RMT as a political force in the workers’ movement.

The root of this loss of focus comes from the fact that the comrades start their analysis from the sects, not from the class. They have accepted much of the basic framework with which the sectarians relate to the labour movement. Remember, it was the sectarians who started the whole debate going about the political funds. From the very start their intentions have been clear: not to organise a workers’ party, but to use workers’ money to fund their own. The sectarians seek to focus all the working class discontent and frustration at Blair, not as it should be focused, on a fight for union control of the Labour Party, but on stunts and gestures of mock defiance. The union leaders then came along and started playing their part in the game. People who had absolutely no intention of fighting Blair started to make vague threats of backing candidates against Labour, or started warning that their union was about to split off. These “threats” to Blair were merely empty

postures to strengthen the bureaucrats’ hands in negotiations with the government. To read these threats as a sign that the labour movement really is entering an epoch of fragmentation and reconstitution is worthy of the IMG, but not serious Marxists.

We should focus on the fight to reclaim the Labour Party because the struggle to revolutionise the working class, so that it is capable of revolutionising society, starts from the real working class and labour movement, as it actually exists, not as it will be in the future. The starting point of the militant revolutionary outlook is the defence of every gain that the working class has made and an unwillingness to surrender any ground without a fight. Unlike generals and armies who can leave the field of battle after a defeat, or middle-class radicals who can run after the next project or stunt, the working class stays put and lives with the consequences of defeat every day. This is as true of the political arena as it is of the workplace. If it were not true, then the workers would have abandoned support for the Labour Party years ago. To say that we are not yet ready to push for a new trade-union party and disaffiliations, implies that we are not yet ready to surrender the Labour Party to the Blairites and pronounce that all the unions can do is give up and start again from scratch. To walk away from a political fight is the not the way of Marxists. We stay with the class.

3: *The rebirth of trade unionism!*

From Solidarity, August 2002

It is a slight but permissible exaggeration to describe what is happening in Britain now as a rebirth of trade unionism. There is an echoing wave of grassroots trade union militancy and more strikes than for a very long time.

New trade union leaders have been elected by Amicus (engineers, electricians, manufacturing union), by the PCS (civil servants), by Unison (public sector workers), by the RMT and ASLEF (rail workers). One of these, Mark Serwotka of the PCS, is a Marxist. Some, Bob Crow and Mick Rix (RMT and ASLEF) have a — sort of — left-wing past. One, Derek Simpson (Amicus) was a member of the old CPGB, drifted out before the Berlin Wall fell and in 1992 joined the Labour Party.

But, immediately of greater importance than their place in the political left-right spectrum is the fact that these are people committed to real trade unionism and to a renewal of the labour movement.

Real trade unionism demands trade unions that assertively defend and try to improve the wages and conditions of their members and trade union leaders who are loyal to traditional labour movement values. That trade unionism has been eclipsed in Britain for many years.

John Edmonds of the GMB has spoken up against the government on behalf of the labour movement, but he has been notably the exception. Industrial militancy has been at an all-time low. The trade union leaders have been so much under the heel of the New Labour Government that Blair and his cronies could spurn and abuse the labour movement knowing that the miserable worms leading the trade unions would not turn.

There are many ways of measuring the class alignment of the Blair Government elected five years ago, but the clearest and simplest indication of what they are is their attitude to the anti-trade union laws which Blair inherited from 18 years

of Tory rule: they have left these laws on the statute book.

Before the 1997 election Blair, the leader of a party founded and still mainly financed by the trade unions, solemnly promised the rich and their press, whose good opinion he was courting — he was talking to the implacably Tory *Daily Mail* — that under the Labour Government he hoped to see elected, “Britain will remain with the most restrictive trade union laws anywhere in the western world”.

No unction, no hypocrisy, nothing two-faced — blunt, brutal and clear-headed: “the most restrictive trade union laws anywhere in the western world.” He meant it; the unions stood for it; most of what remains of the old Parliamentary Labour Party left has been silent about it. One-time leftists in the Parliamentary Labour Party, such as Dennis Skinner, have turned themselves into toy poodles decorated with duck-egg blue ribbon, who fawn on Tony Blair.

Five years after the election of the Labour Government, British trade unionism still exists within a legal framework which outlaws everything, in the first place solidarity strikes, that makes for effective trade unions.

It is a measure of the state of the labour movement that it is only now that some of the new trade union leaders — notably Mark Serwotka — are beginning to campaign for the removal from working class life of the shackles riveted on the labour movement two decades ago by the Thatcherite Tories.

What happened to the labour movement? How did it get into the conditions from which it is only now beginning to recover? On an understanding of that will depend the future of the left — and of the labour movement.

The trade unions were powerful enough in 1974 to take on and drive from office the Tory Government of Edward Heath. Tremendous industrial militancy in which large numbers of workers acted as if they wanted to “tear the head off capitalism” was itself politically headless — a large, amorphous

movement that could not realise its potential because of its own political limitations. Having forced the Tories into a General election which they lost (February 1974) the working-class movement could only replace it with a treacherous Labour Government, led by Harold Wilson.

Compared to Blair's, Wilson's was a left-wing government, over which the left-wing trade union leaders of that time — Jack Jones of the TGWU and Hugh Scanlon of the AEUW (now part of Amicus) — exercised considerable influence. That government and those trade union leaders demobilised industrial militancy; the Labour government timidly began — in 1976 — to introduce IMF-dictated cuts in social expenditure; they disillusioned those who put them in power; and finally, they went down before the Thatcher Tories in the General Election of 1979.

An industrial slump soon afterwards led to mass unemployment — up to four million workers — which undermined the preconditions of industrial militancy. The Tory Government deliberately smashed up whole industries and the working class communities around them — steel for example. They brought in the first of a long series of measures to restrict what trade unions could legally do. It was clear — a predecessor of *Solidarity*, *Socialist Organiser*, spelled it out week after week — that if the labour movement did not rouse itself for concerted counter-attack, it would experience a historic defeat.

The trade union leaders did not rise to the challenge: they slunk away. That surprised nobody who knew these people for what they were. The trade union militancy that had marked the British working class for the previous 25 years had largely been an affair of unofficial strikes, “wild cat” action, against the will of the trade union leaders. It fell to the revolutionary left to organise a rank-and-file movement in the unions to oppose the leaders, elect better leaders when the chance offered itself, and in periods of class struggle contest with the trade union bureaucracy, for the leadership of the embattled workers. No such movement existed in 1980.

The Communist Party of Great Britain (*Morning Star*) had a “rank-and-file” movement that was in the pockets of incumbent trade union leaders. The IS/SWP had made a promising start with a rank-and-file movement in 1974, but quickly suppressed it as a distraction from “building the revolutionary party”.

They had picked up a self-paralysing defeatism from the right wing of the CPGB — from people such as the academic Eric Hobsbawm — which they expressed in “the theory of the downturn”. Prematurely accepting defeat without a fight, they concluded that nothing was possible except the odd local struggle and propaganda for “the revolutionary party” — a “revolutionary party” preaching retreat, surrender and passivity at the crux of the greatest crisis the British working class had faced since the 1920s!

The decisive struggle for the future of the British working class came to express itself in the Labour Party. That Party was then, unlike now, a functioning democratic organisation in which the unions had decisive weight. The Labour Party had been bitterly at odds with the Labour Government that fell in 1979. Now there was an upsurge of the left, led by Tony Benn. The soft-left Michael Foot was elected as leader.

Most important here was the fact that though the Thatcherites had control of the state, Labour was moving towards control of the key centres of local government — in London, Manchester, Sheffield etc. Thatcher was very unpopular — she only achieved security and political dominance after the Falklands War in mid-1982 — and could have been brought

down as Edward Heath had been, by a combination of industrial action and mobilisation to resist government cuts by left-wing led local councils.

Left-wing leaders talked a big anti-Tory fight, they promised to make Labour local government fortresses against Thatcherism once they were in office. But everywhere leaders like Ken Livingstone (at the Greater London Council), Margaret Hodge (in Islington) and David Blunkett (in Sheffield) buckled.

And the self-proclaimed “revolutionary left”? The bulk of the revolutionary left stood on the sidelines during the fight in the Labour Party. The SWP denounced the Bennite left for refusing to understand that nothing could be done.

Thus the Thatcherites were allowed to entrench themselves in power without an adequate fight by a labour movement that at the beginning, with a different leadership, could have fought and might have defeated Thatcher. We suffered defeat without a fight — the worst and most demoralising of all possible sorts of defeats.

The Great Miners Strike of 1984-5 came very late in the day. There was much demoralisation in the movement, mass unemployment still blighted working class lives and hopes, and a network of anti-union laws was in place, outlawing solidarity strike action. The much-compromised ex-lefts still in control of some local governments stood idly by and left the miners to fight alone.

The “revolutionary left”? For the first six months of the Great Strike, the SWP denounced the Miners Support Committees as “left-wing Oxfam”. They could not quite believe what was happening. SWP leader Tony Cliff thought it a lost cause. In April 1984 he wrote in *Socialist Worker* that the strike was “an extreme example of what we in the SWP have called the ‘downturn’ of the movement.” Black is only an “extreme example” of white!

Even where “Marxists” controlled a council — the Socialist Party (then Militant) in Merseyside — and were in conflict with the Tory government, they made a separate deal with the government and left the miners in the lurch.

After the defeat of the miners the Tories were riding high. They systematically set about undoing as much as they could of such achievement of the labour movement as the welfare state which Labour had set up in 1945. The state of the NHS today is one consequence of this.

Whole areas of working-class militancy were destroyed when the Tories destroyed industries such as coal. Trade union membership fell by millions. The trade union leaders became even more docile and housebroken.

The soft left — Neil Kinnock — allied with the right to take over the Labour Party. The goal of defeating the Tory Party in “the next election” came to dominate and shape labour movement political life.

At first, Labour counterposed to the Tories old-style reformism. Then, as the Tories worked through their social and political agenda, the Labour Party leaders, backed by the trade union leaders, came more and more to mimic Thatcherism, to let themselves be hegemonised by it, to accept its premises and most of its conclusions.

After 1945, for three decades, Labour had hegemonised the Tories, who accepted the welfare state and other measures which Labour had forced through. Something like that now happened in reverse when Labour accepted Thatcherism. By the early 90s Labour would not even commit itself to the restoration of the welfare state and the NHS.

Blairism was the culmination of this process: outright Toryism in policies and a radical reshaping of the Labour Party.

The power of Labour Party Conference and of the National Executive Committee were radically cut down; the power of the unions in the party greatly reduced. Labour took a long step away from being any sort of working class party. “New Labour” was born.

There was reason to think that the return of a Labour government in 1997 would lead the labour movement to take a cold look at where the blows and the social and political hegemony of Thatcherism had landed us.

It has taken a lot longer than we hoped.

Nonetheless, it is beginning to happen. The incumbent trade union leaders who have for five years betrayed the labour movement by belly-crawling to Blair, who seemed to have forgotten what trade unionism is for, and what the unions had in mind when they founded the Labour Party a hundred years ago, have now been replaced by people who may have learned something from the bitter five years of Tony Blair government.

In any case, those who have elected new trade union leaders — the unions’ rank and file — have learned. The defeat of Sir Ken Jackson by Derek Simpson in Amicus was an intended slap in the face not only for Tony Blair’s “favourite trade unionist” but for Blair and his government. Those who elected Derek Simpson have not forgotten what trade unions are for! Despite the structural changes that have more or less gutted the old Labour Party, the trade unions still have a great deal of

power in the Labour Party. They should begin to use it.

Many things that were up to now unthinkable are again possible. The trade unions can recompose a working class presence in politics by concertedly demanding that the Government begins to do things like repeal the Tory anti-union laws which New Labour has made its own. They can organise to fight this government when it refuses.

The unions are opposed to privatisations and to the public-private partnerships the Government promotes. The rank and file of the unions are militant on wages and conditions. The trade unions need a political voice on such issues. New Labour is not and cannot possibly be such a voice. Blair’s is the voice of second-string Toryism and, indeed, of sublimated Thatcherism.

It is scarcely conceivable even in the most favourable course of events that the unions could simply run the film of the last decade in the Labour Party backwards and root out Blairism. Probably the best that could be hoped for would be a concerted trade union break with Blair and the majority of the Parliamentary Labour Party, backed by a minority of the PLP.

That, it should be stressed, is a long way off. But now it is an objective possibility. It raises for the left fundamental questions of strategy and perspective — for example, it puts the question of the trade unions’ political funds in a new light.

We will be discussing these questions in future issues of *Solidarity*. We invite contributions.

4: Organise the awkward squad

From Solidarity 3/14, 11th October 2002

Before the Labour Party conference last week in Blackpool, the Labour leadership was assiduously briefing the media to tell them that “Labour Party conference no longer decides party policy”.

Those media briefings showed two things. First, that the New Labour hierarchy knew they would be defeated at conference on central issues, and wanted to discount those defeats in advance. Second, that they were confident that they could get away with blatant dismissal of democracy.

In fact there has been no formal, constitutional abolition of Labour conference’s power to make party policy. On the other hand, in Blair’s “New Labour”, party conference is no longer what it was in the 1970s or ‘80s, let alone back in 1944, when it was a conference vote that pushed a reluctant party leadership into including extensive nationalisations in Labour’s 1945 manifesto.

It is not new for Labour Party leaders to ignore, evade or flout conference decisions. However, they used to have to wriggle through a more or less loud outcry.

The union leaders who defeated Blair on the Private Finance Initiative (bringing private contractors in to build, operate, and profit from public services), and half-defeated him on the war, made no great outcry against the Government’s arrogant dismissal of the conference. In that respect, the patterns of the late 1990s still hold: Labour conference as primarily a media show, speaking time heavily controlled from the platform, agenda and constituency delegates manipulated to suppress dissent, the whole operation swamped by a crowd of commercial sponsors, lobbyists and media people who outnumber the actual delegates ten-to-one. The constituency delegates, as distinct from the trade-union representatives, still mostly voted with the platform.

Amidst much unsurprising continuity, the Blackpool con-

ference also showed important change. For the first time since Blair started his “New Labour” hijacking of the labour movement, a large cluster of trade unionists flatly defied him and started to map out a different political direction.

What now? It would be stupid to push for the more assertive and militant trade unions to disaffiliate from the Labour Party. Those unions would spiral off into “non-political” or “pick-and-mix” trade-unionism — the direction sketched in a recent pamphlet by CWU general secretary Billy Hayes, one of the so-called “awkward squad” of left trade union leaders, which advocates unions “engaging with” the Lib Dems, Scottish Nationalists, and Plaid Cymru. Blair would be left with a docile rump. The revival of trade-union politics would be aborted.

On the other hand, there is no prospect of the Labour Party being returned to its patterns of the 1970s, or 1940s, in the fashion of an easy swing of the pendulum. Blair has changed Labour’s structures fundamentally. On top of the “Labour” structure, he has constructed his own “party-within-a-party”, an army of thousands of spin-doctors, advisers, media-people, assistants, and so on, recruited and financed almost entirely from outside the labour movement.

That “party-within-a-party” has made it very clear that, rather than submit to any serious accountability to the organised working class, they will cut loose entirely and go for state and big-business funding. They can almost certainly take most of the Labour MPs with them on such a course.

In 1997, in the earlier years of the Blair project, socialists advocated the idea of “a new Labour Representation Committee” to regroup the working-class core in the Labour Party against the “New Labour” leadership. London UNISON activist Geoff Martin wrote in *Workers’ Liberty*:

"There is now a solid case for reforming the Labour Representation Committee as a pressure group within the party. This was originally formed by trade unionists and socialists who realised that the old Liberal Party could not be relied upon to represent the interests of labour. More than 100 years later, a similar set of conditions has been created by the hijackers behind New Labour.

"A reformed Labour Representation Committee makes great sense in the current political climate. To be successful, it would need to involve trade unions at a national level, along with a solid core of Labour MPs..."

In the earlier years of the Blair government, almost all the union leaders were servile and compliant, and the notion of a broad new political action committee based on at least a significant minority of trade unions came to look remote and unrealistic. Socialists still pursued the general argument for trade-union self-assertion and for independent working-class political representation, but the specific "Labour Representation Committee" formula lacked grip.

Labour Party conference 2002 changes that. Whether the phrase "Labour Representation Committee" will catch on or not, socialists should be arguing for the trade-union "awkward squad" to get together, to organise links down to local and grass-roots level, and make itself an organised, consistently-campaigning force in the labour movement, together with those Labour MPs and constituency activists willing to challenge Blair.

Such a body should, for example:

- Build both industrial and political support for the fire-fighters;
- Go ahead and implement the Labour Party conference decision which Blair has dismissed, for an independent inquiry into PFI, while at the same time campaigning to stop PFI and other privatisations, for example PPP on the Tube;
- Campaign against the war on Iraq, not just by adding unions' names to lists of sponsors for big demonstrations, but by organising leafleting, petitioning and meetings at workplaces;
- Work to get class-struggle trade-unionists selected as Labour candidates through mass sign-up campaigns in workplaces, directed not at supporting the Labour Party in general but at getting candidates selected to represent working-class constituencies who are committed to trade-union rights and to public services.
- Set and proclaim the aim of winning a workers' government, answerable to the labour movement, pushing through policies to serve working-class interests.

We still need the Socialist Alliance: we cannot afford to wait until the trade unions move, or slow down the tempo of socialist political and electoral activity to the pace of the mixed bag of "awkward squad" trade union leaders. But socialists need to transform the labour movement, not just build an "alternative" alongside it. Socialist Alliance activists in the unions should assist, ally with, and promote the organisation of the "awkward squad" right down to grass-roots level.

5: The Labour Party in perspective

Workers' Liberty 28, February 1996

By Sean Matgamna [JO]

"The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working-class parties. They have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole. They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement... The Communists are, practically, the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others; on the other hand, theoretically, they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement."

Marx and Engels, Communist Manifesto

"To say that ideologists (conscious leaders) cannot divert from its path the movement created by the interaction of the environment and the (material) elements is to ignore the elementary truth that consciousness participates in this interaction and creation. Catholic labour unions are also the inevitable result of the interaction of the environment and the material elements. The difference, however, is that it was the consciousness of priests... and not that of socialists that participated in this interaction."

Lenin

"It is not enough to be a revolutionary and an advocate of

socialism in general. It is necessary to know at every moment how to find the particular link in the chain which must be grasped with all one's strength in order to keep the whole chain in place and prepare to move on resolutely to the next link."

Lenin

The Labour Party is now led by open enemies of socialism. That is nothing new. But the present Labour leaders are open enemies of trade-union involvement in running the party too, that is, of the very character of the Labour Party as it has been for nearly a century. This is new. The unions, bureaucratically controlled, have always been the bulwark of the right wing in the Labour Party.

If Tony Blair has his way, Labour-union links will eventually be severed. The Labour Party will become something like the Liberal Party was before the First World War, and Labour will have been pushed back into the womb of Liberalism, from whence it emerged in the first two decades of this century. Labour's separation from Liberalism was at first no more than organisational. Where before 1900, for three decades, the unions got a handful of "Lib-Lab" MPs into Parliament under the Liberal banner, after 1900 the trade unions backed their own open candidates. Even then, the Lib-Lab MPs from the tightly-knit mining communities did not join the Labour Party until 1910.

Winning 30 seats in the 1906 election, the trade-union

MPs formed the Labour Party. It was at first a party without individual members, a conglomeration of trade unions and affiliated societies like the Independent Labour Party, the Fabians, and, from 1916, the British Socialist Party, formerly the Social-Democratic Federation, the main precursor of the Communist Party of Great Britain (1920).

Despite the socialist societies involved, this party was still politically Liberal, and it was not fully independent even electorally. In every election before 1918, Labour operated an election pact with the Liberals. Labour became a modern party only in 1918, when it created constituency parties with individual members, adopted a general socialist (though not Marxist) objective, the famous Clause Four (“to secure for the workers by hand and brain the full fruits of their labour”), and abandoned its electoral pact with the Liberals.

The “New Labour” Party of 1918 was both a maturation of the labour movement towards revolutionary socialist politics, and a powerful block to its further development on that road. “Each progress in organic evolution is at the same time a regress, by fixing a one-sided development and barring the possibility of development in a number of other directions” (Engels). What happened both before and after 1918 depended not only on the “natural” and “organic” evolution of the British labour movement, but also, as we will see, on the battle of ideas within it, Fabianism against Marxism, revolutionary socialism against reformism, militancy against moderation, democracy against elitism, and on what the revolutionary socialists did or failed to do.

Here I make not a detailed summary of Labour Party history, but an attempt to analyse how and why the British labour movement evolved the way it did, and how, for good and bad, Marxists have interacted with the processes that shaped the political labour movement the Blairites are now trying to destroy. I am concerned with drawing conclusions for Marxist work now. What were the forces that went into the making of the new Labour Party of 1918? What had changed?

The trade unions had evolved politically. In the 1880s the unions had been Liberal in politics. Reflecting the dominant ideas of late Victorian bourgeois society, they were unable to conceive of ameliorative state action, and looked to “self-help” and their own benefit systems where later generations would look to the welfare state. The new unions of the dockers and other “unskilled” workers, after 1888-9, did not have high dues and good “welfare” benefits like the old craft unions, and naturally they began to look at “socialism” and the reforming state for welfare. By 1918 state action was widely accepted in bourgeois society and (in part as a consequence of that) demanded by the trade unions.

From the 1890s, “constructive” Liberalism and Tory self-serving paternalism had progressively embraced the idea that the state had to take direct responsibility for social engineering and social welfare in the ultimate interests of the ruling class. In Germany, the pressure of the powerful Marxian socialist movement had induced Bismarck to bring in social insurance as a means of undermining the socialists and guaranteeing healthy, educated workers and soldiers.

The discovery of the extent of malnourishment among British soldiers in the Boer War (1899-1902), where at first they did very badly, alarmed the ruling class. The example of their German imperialist rivals helped convince both Tories and Liberals of the need for state action. After 1906 the Liberals laid down the first foundations of a welfare state. Old age pensions — which gave large numbers of old workers an alternative to the workhouse prisons for the indigent — had been discussed for decades. In 1908 Lloyd George brought in

old age pensions, then in 1911 National Insurance.

On a certain level, this bourgeois approach, which in part reflected working-class (including international working-class) pressure, was in principle indistinguishable from reform socialism, the difference at most being one of degree and extent. Constructive Liberalism, the calculated paternalism of imperialist Toryism, and Fabian reform socialism were all of a family by the First World War. This helped transform the labour movement — and also to confuse it about what socialism was and was not.

The other great shaping force was organised socialist propaganda, sustained over decades. Socialism revived, after decades of eclipse, in the early 1880s, when both the (Marxist) Social Democratic Federation and the Fabian Society were founded. These bodies, and after 1893 Keir Hardie’s Independent Labour Party, plugged away with criticisms of capitalism and socialist propaganda for a different society. Against the others, the Marxists explained the class difference between socialism and bourgeois welfare-ism.

By 1918, a powerful if undefined socialist collectivism held sway over much of the labour movement. The National Council of Labour Colleges, an independent working-class educational body, had been set up as the “Plebs League” in 1909 by students at Ruskin College, the trade-union education centre in Oxford. Demanding Marxist education, they seceded and organised a big network of socialist lectures in basic non-denominational Marxism. This was a great force for working-class enlightenment.

And then came the Russian Revolution. The first revolution in February 1917 had a tremendous impact in Britain. In July 1917 the Leeds Convention, at which large numbers of workers were represented, issued an appeal for soviets in Britain. Future Labour prime minister and future renegade Ramsay MacDonald backed the call! When in October 1917 the Bolsheviks demonstrated what soviets could mean, Russia remained tremendously popular.

In 1920 the trade union leader Ernest Bevin and others organised a powerful network of “Councils of Action” across Britain to mobilise the working class to stop the British government helping the Poles in the Russian-Polish war. In London dockers struck work to prevent the loading of a munitions ship, the “Jolly George”, for Poland.

Labour had had ministers in the wartime government, Henderson and Barnes. During the war the trade unions had greatly increased in numbers. By the beginning of 1918 the Labour Party leaders, encouraged by the mid-war split in the Liberal Party, spurred by working-class militancy, and frightened of being outflanked from the left, reorganised the party.

This was, explicitly, a reformist, non-Marxist party. The Marxists, whose organisation was the oldest socialist group, had been defeated by Fabians, Christian Socialists, pacifists, and “constructive Liberal” refugees from the breakdown of their party. Why?

We must go back again, briefly, to the beginning. The historic reputation of the early British Marxists has been given to them by their Fabian and ILP enemies and by their Marxist successors, who had revolted against their inadequacies. They have, I think, received more abuse than they deserve. For the one-third of a century before World War 1 they educated workers in basic Marxism, such as the mechanics of the exploitation of wage-labour (the labour theory of value) and the need for a working-class socialism. They fought for a hard, distinct, durable class outlook. They helped organise the burgeoning labour movement, and trained generations of leaders of the labour movement — of trade unions and of the

Labour Party, too.

Those today who find it discouraging to have to explain to young people not only what socialism is, but also basic trade unionism, should note that Eleanor Marx had to teach the gasworkers' organiser and future MP Will Thorne how to read and write.

Even Clement Attlee, and the future Labour right-winger Herbert Morrison, passed through the SDF/BSP.

Yet as Frederick Engels, who was in general too hostile to them, rightly said: they tended to see Marxism as a salvationist dogma, a shibboleth, to be brandished aloft before the labour movement, which was asked to accept it as cure-all, whole and at once. They did not use it as a guide to Marxist action that would help the workers' movement develop. They disregarded the guidelines of the Communist Manifesto: "The Communists have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole".

It disparaged trade-union action, seeing the making of propaganda about its real inadequacy as the specifically Marxist task. In the great upsurge of semi-syndicalist militancy in the years before the World War, the SDF, as an organisation, tended to stand aside, supporting the workers but disparaging the action, instead of throwing itself into what was a tremendous revolt of raw working-class militancy. In other words, where the job of Marxists is to fight the class struggle on the three fronts of industry, politics, and ideas, and of the Marxist organisation to link and integrate those fronts into one coherent strategy, the SDF overemphasised the "propagandist" side of things. As a consequence, the beneficial effects of SDF propaganda and of the influence they gained for basic Marxist notions was diffuse and not organised in a revolutionary movement. The Marxists were unable to shape the growing labour movement into a coherent socialist force. Tasks neglected by the SDF/BSP for "purist" sectarian reasons became the province of the reformists. The Fabians and the Christian Socialists gained a dominant influence.

The decisive weakness of the SDF was probably its attitude to trade unionism and trade-union militancy — disdainful support combined with the fostering of trade union officials who gave their own increasingly bureaucratic caste meaning to the SDF/BSP's "Marxist"-sectarian incomprehension of raw militancy.

The SDF's approach to the Labour Party was also a prize example of sectarianism. When in 1900, the trade unions, still essentially Liberal in politics, responded to a court ruling which removed their immunity from employers' claims to make good losses inflicted during a strike by setting up the Labour Representation Committee, the SDF promoted it. At the second LRC conference in 1901, the SDF moved a motion committing the Liberal or Tory trade unionists to recognition of the class struggle; when the motion was voted down, they just walked out, leaving the political movement of the trade unions and of the organised working class to the ILP, the Fabians, and the Christian Socialists!

Instead of working to develop the Labour Representation Committee towards their ideas, they denounced from outside what was in fact the movement of the organised working class into politics. It was the beginning of a tradition.

After 1906 sections of the SDF, including H M Hyndman, wanted to affiliate to the Labour Party, but it would be a decade before the majority agreed to do so. That was 1916, in the middle of the World War, as the BSP split — both sides would be in the Labour Party. Even after the shake-up of ideas following the war and the Russian Revolution, and the transfor-

mation of the BSP into the CP (1920), the sectarian approach continued, though often repudiated in words.

After considerable discussion and at Lenin's urging, the Second Congress of the Communist International (1920) came out for CP affiliation to the Labour Party.

"The Second Congress of the Third International should express itself in favour of Communist groups, or groups and organisations sympathising with Communism in England, affiliating to the Labour Party... For as long as this party permits the organisations affiliated to it to enjoy their present freedom of criticism and freedom of propaganda, agitational and organisational activity for the dictatorship of the proletariat and the Soviet form of government, as long as that party preserves its character as a federation of all the trade union organisations of the working class, the Communists should without fail take all measures and agree to certain compromises in order to have the opportunity of influencing the broadest masses of the workers, of exposing the opportunist leaders from a platform that is higher and more visible to the masses and of accelerating the transition of political power from the direct representatives of the bourgeoisie to the 'labour lieutenants of the capitalist class' [the Labour Party] in order that the masses may be more quickly weaned from their last illusions on this score..."

Of course, the CP view of the Labour Party was true. In 1922 the CP anatomised the Labour Party thus:

"A Labour Party which was ruled and organised primarily by officials of independent and often warring unions inevitably became entirely divorced from the socialist or revolutionary idea. Its leaders, in their overwhelming majority, were financially and otherwise no longer members of the working class, but of the middle class. They were often Liberals, and might be conservatives, in all else but defence of their own unions, finances and privileges. (This was particularly noticeable, again, in the Parliamentary group).

"Thus, even before the war, the Labour Party had become quite distinctly a class organisation of the proletariat which was dominated by that section of the middle class whose profession it was to organise trade unions".

Nevertheless, this was the actually existing labour movement in politics — the highest level the mass of workers had so far achieved, and along the right road.

In fact Labour was as yet no closed-off, tightly-controlled party. The ultra-left communist Sylvia Pankhurst was a delegate to its 1918 conference. The major component of the new CP, the BSP, was affiliated to it. The CP could simply have informed the Labour Party that the BSP had changed its name. Concerned to raise a clear, visible banner of communism and to take their proper place within the ranks of the new Communist International, the CP leaders emphasised their separateness and sought affiliation as if going through a ritual. Leaders of the party like J T Murphy — who came from the small De Leonite Socialist Labour Party, a breakaway from the SDF in 1903 which, though it had merits of its own, exaggerated and systematised the sectarian faults of the parent body — made speeches that were not designed with diplomacy in mind. "We take them by the hand today the better to take them by the throat tomorrow", said Murphy. They were refused affiliation.

Yet there was, in 1922-24, even a London Communist Labour MP, Saklatvala. He was no ordinary MP. The best de-

scription, telling us much about the Labour Party then, is that of the communist and Trotskyist veteran Harry Wicks:

"In the twenties, to the consternation of the Liberal-minded Labour leadership of Henderson and MacDonald, Battersea North elected as their member of parliament the Indian Saklatvala. Not only was he an Indian but a Communist, and he was sponsored by the united Battersea labour movement.

"The link that Saklatvala established with his worker constituents was not that of the proverbial surgery: 'Can I help you?', 'Have you any problems?' At that time the entire working class had a problem, that of survival against the employers' lock-outs, widespread unemployment and the downward slide of the sliding scale of wages agreements.

"Saklatvala spoke at factory gate meetings and introduced the monthly report-back from Westminster. There were great meetings. Long before the doors of the town hall opened, queues formed just like they used to at Stamford Bridge.

"The platform was always crowded. Sak, as he was affectionately known, was flanked by the entire executive of the Trades and Labour Council and numerous representatives of Indian and colonial organisations. He was short in stature, broad-shouldered, with flashing eyes, and was a magnificent orator.

"Those monthly report-back meetings on the doings in Parliament stirred hundreds into activity. The Battersea labour movement pulsed with life and was united. Marxist classes held by the old Plebs League flourished. Trade union branches were crowded"

Despite refusals, the question of Communist Party affiliation remained open for years. Until the Liverpool conference of 1925, Communists could be trade union delegates to Labour constituency committees and to Labour Party conference. After 1925, three dozen Constituency Labour Parties let themselves be disaffiliated rather than expel Communists, and formed an organisation of the disaffiliated Labour Parties, the National Left Wing Movement, which also embraced left-wing groups in other constituencies.

In the unions, the CP, working from the low point of trade-union defeat and depression in 1922, built the rank-and-file "Minority Movement" into a force claiming as its affiliates trade union bodies enclosing a quarter of the organised trade unionists, then numbering about four million. In retrospect the experience in Britain fits into this summary of the historical experience: wherever mass reformist organisations of the working class existed at the time of the formation of the Communist International, if the CI failed to win over the majority or a big minority of the old organisations then the CI failed to become the main force in the working-class movement.

That is a true general summary, but it obscures the processes that shaped the events in Britain. Up to the middle 1920s it was still possible for communists to have superseded the reformists as the dominant force in the British labour movement. The small CP, pursuing an orientation to the mass labour movement, trade unions and Labour Party alike, was, despite, sometimes, a sectarian style and manner, essentially not sectarian. It put forward perspectives for the labour movement and the objective needs of the working class, and fought for them throughout the labour movement, engaging in united-front work with the reformists.

It had great and growing influence in the trade unions, organising the rank and file, building on rank-and-file militancy where the SDF had not known what to do with it. It had influence and supporters in the Labour Party. Above all, the class struggle was moving to the biggest confrontation in British history: the battle between reformist and revolutionary perspectives was far from settled.

Even after the nine months of minority Labour government in 1924, the Labour Party had not yet hardened definitively into the reformist mould. It was the subsequent policies of the Marxists, as much as the desires of the reformist leaders, that gave to the political labour movement the shape it was to have for the rest of the twentieth century, just as the SDF's deficiencies had let reformist leaders call the tune in the development before 1918.

It was the rise of Stalinism that destroyed the CP's prospects. From far away Stalin shaped the history of the British labour movement.

In Russia a new bureaucratic ruling class moved towards displacing the working class from power by first producing its own world outlook. The Bolsheviks had made a revolution in backward Russia believing that socialism was impossible there: the October revolution was but a first step of the world revolution. Civil war and wars of intervention followed. The revolution survived, maimed and isolated. As the bureaucrats infesting the state that the workers had erected in self-defence moved to take to themselves material privileges and to seize power for themselves, their leader Stalin proclaimed that backward Russia could build "socialism in one country", despite the domination of the world by capitalism. The CPs outside Russia might as well act as political border guards for the Soviet Union.

This was not said clearly, but the logic unfolded very quickly. In Britain it meant that since the CP was small, Stalin looked for more powerful local support for Russia. While being anything but revolutionary at home, many trade union leaders were friendly to the Russian Revolution. The Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee linked Russian trade unionists with British trade union bureaucrats, some of whom had been in the BSP. It gave them prestige with the left and made control of the rank and file easier. That is how it was when in May 1926 the TUC called a general strike to defend the miners. Britain was now in a revolutionary situation. For nine days the strike developed and grew in strength and confidence. On the ninth day workers were still coming out. And then the TUC called it off, leaving the miners to fight on alone for six months to ultimate defeat.

It was a classic betrayal of the workers' interests by trade union bureaucrats. Here was a tremendous opportunity for the CP at least to settle accounts with the reformists and compromisers, if not yet with the bourgeoisie. In fact the CP was hamstrung as a revolutionary organisation, fighting the incumbent leaders, by the involvement of some of those leaders in the Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee.

The CP raised the slogan "All Power to the TUC General Council" — the TUC General Council that was selling out the strikers! Despite its sincere intentions, it helped the traitors. Even though the CP grew in the aftermath of defeat, the attrition of working-class morale and combativity was tremendous. This was the working class that would be hit soon by the great slump and pushed down further.

Worse was to come. In 1928, reflecting Stalin's final cataclysmic seizure of power in the USSR and the beginning of forced industrialisation and collectivisation, the Communist International proclaimed that the world had entered

the “Third Period”. The first period after the World War had seen working-class upsurge and defeat; the second, capitalist consolidation. The Third Period was the period of revolution everywhere.

Everything that happened could be and was construed according to that scenario. A religious pogrom in Palestine could be transmuted into an anti-imperialist struggle; fascists in Germany seen as misguided fighters against the Versailles Treaty; nationalist leaders toggled out as incipient communists — everything in fact which a later generation would come to know as post-Trotsky “Trotskyism” was pioneered here.

The dogma explained delays in the world revolution in terms of the Social Democrats, and concluded that they were the main enemy, the “Social Fascists”, to be smashed at all costs. It made sense to ally with Hitler’s Nazis in Germany against the Social Democrats, “the murderers of Liebknecht and Luxemburg”, and suicidally, the German Communist Party did that. In Britain the Third Period made the CP regard the left-wing movement of disaffiliated Labour Parties as a roadblock to CP growth rather than a bridge to the Labour Party, and the trade-union Minority Movement as a buttress of the bureaucrats rather than the agency for their eventual removal. The National Left-Wing Movement in the Labour Party was liquidated, the Minority Movement turned into an attempt to create new trade unions. It was a great self-liquidation by the Communist Party. A couple of tiny “red” trade unions, among miners in East Fife and clothing workers in East London and Leeds, were the only result.

This marked the end of any large-scale challenge to the dominance of Labourism. When the CP pulled out of its bureaucratic ultra-left craze in the mid-1930s, it was only a tool of Russian foreign policy, a source of totalitarian pollution in the labour movement and politically a force pulling Labour to the right — into a “popular front” with Liberals and “progressive” Tories. The Trotskyist groups which tried to maintain the politics and perspectives of original communism were tiny and of no account in mass working-class politics.

Thus a history which might have gone differently actually saw the consolidation of a reformist labour movement. The trade union bureaucracy was strengthened by the defeat of the General Strike and then by the dampening of spirits in the great depression. Trade union leaders became more and more enmeshed in collaboration with the state.

In the late 1920s and ‘30s collectivist ideas were dominant in the unions. But it was a reformist socialism, at best, without any conception of struggling for working-class power.” In practice, for the Labour Party leaders, “socialism” was a political artefact, camouflage, not a guide to action. Then as now, their operational ideas were strictly in line with the bourgeois consensus.

In October 1929 Labour formed its second minority government under Ramsay MacDonald, and it proved feeble and helpless in face of the catastrophic world slump. Even a left winger with some serious credentials, George Lansbury, concerned himself with potty pre-World-War-1 vintage schemes of organised emigration to Australia as a solution to unemployment. When Labour minister Oswald Mosley advocated Keynesian solutions — that the state should organise the capitalist economy, boosting consumption and thus production and employment — he was isolated in the government... and went off to found the British Union of Fascists.

Faced with the crisis, the Labour prime minister, MacDonald, the Chancellor, Philip Snowden, and the former railworkers’ leader Jimmy Thomas, opted in July 1931 to cut

the miserably inadequate dole of the unemployed workers in the interests of a balanced budget. They split from Labour and coalesced with Tories and Liberals to form the National Government, with MacDonald continuing as Prime Minister.

The number of Labour MPs fell from 288 in 1929 to 52 after the 1931 election, fewer than the 63 elected in 1918. But now there was no competition from the left, except from the vacillating Independent Labour Party, which split from Labour in 1932 with about 15,000 members. Labour swung left, electing Lansbury, the Michael Foot of the 1930s, as leader for a while. But in fact no real balance-sheet of what had led to the collapse of the Labour government was drawn. Those who had shared responsibility for the government up to the final split blamed everything on MacDonald’s villainy, not on the politics and approach they shared with him. Soon the trade-union bureaucracy, in the person of Ernest Bevin, boss of the TGWU, reasserted a brutal control. Clement Attlee replaced Lansbury as leader in 1935.

Labour recovered some of its electoral fortunes in the 1935 election, which the Tory-controlled National Government again won. It formed a coalition government, with Attlee as deputy prime minister under Churchill, in 1940, and remained in it until Hitler was defeated. Old-style Toryism had been heavily discredited even among the intelligentsia in the 1930s, and ended in the catastrophe of war. 1945 was the reckoning. Labour won by a landslide.

What was the Labour Party of 1945? It was, as before, an extension of trade-union bargaining into Parliament. It was wretchedly non-militant, judged by the needs of the working class. But it was a party of genuine reformists. They wanted change in the interests of the working class, an end to things like the means test for unemployment relief.

It was a movement led and staffed on the trade-union level and even, though less so, on the parliamentary level, by men and a few women of genuine conviction, tempered in the struggles that had shaped the labour movement. The honest communists of that period — the Trotskyists and, to some extent, the ILP — rightly denounced them for their inadequacies and there is no reason to gainsay any of that. But their inadequacies were those of a reformist labour movement.

If they could be justly denounced in the last analysis as Liberals, they were on the whole sincere liberals who believed in human equality and wanted to extend it.

They saw the labour movement of which they were organically part or to which they had attached themselves as the essential force for progress. In their own way they were loyal to that movement.

The scope of the Labour victory and what followed should not be misconstrued. It was immense. Vast masses of workers wanted a socialist revolution in 1945 and voted Labour to get it. They had seen what the state could do in the organisation of society during the war: they wanted the same scope of action in peacetime, for peacetime objectives — for life rather than death. They were determined not to return to the 1930s. They had no use for the Tories, even though Tory leader Churchill was popular as the war leader who spat hate and defiance at Hitler.

Lenin once summed up the three cardinal conditions for a revolution thus: the rulers cannot rule in the old way; the ruled are not willing to go on being ruled in the old way; and there is an available, mobilised alternative to the old order. In 1945 the ruling class could not go on in the old way because the working class (and others) were not prepared to tolerate it. Even the Army was massively anti-Establishment and pro-Labour. And there was an alternative — Labour. A

Labour Party armed with a programme of nationalisation which had been imposed on the leaders at the 1944 conference (one of them, Herbert Morrison, told a left-wing delegate: you have just lost us the election!).

Certainly, Labour after 1945 merely continued the tradition of capitalist state amelioration that stretched back to World War 1 and earlier. Certainly, blueprints for a welfare state were drawn up at the behest of the wartime coalition by Lord Beveridge, a Liberal. Even so, political victory for the labour movement in 1945 was decisive for realisation of the welfare state. It happened the way it did only because Labour was available to carry through a revolution.

It was, of course, a limited revolution. All Labour's revolution did was establish a welfare state and a certain level of economic activity by the capitalist state. The commanding heights of the economy were left in the hands of the capitalist class, as was state power, which the Labour leaders considered a neutral force.

Thus was the apogee of the reformist labour movement. It imposed the welfare state and a "left" consensus on the Tories for 40 years. In the boom years the Tories maintained the Labour-established status quo, working with the unions. They vied with Labour in this regard. For example, in 1951 they promised if elected to build 300,000 houses within a year — and did. Even after the Tories took back control of government in 1951, the impact of the 1945 revolution continued, amidst the long post-war capitalist boom. Trade unions had great weight, with Tories no less than Labour.

Reformism had shot its bolt with the creation of the welfare state. The socialist goal of the suppression of capitalism and true social democracy free from wage slavery was never their goal. All the reformist-led movement could do was mark time, work at narrow trade union concerns, and see its structures rot inwardly. After 1945 the reformist leaders had succeeded far more than they had dreamed they might, and had nowhere to go but down. In retrospect you can see the ravages of decay within the imposing outward forms of the labour movement from the 1950s to the 1970s. Political impotence and prosperity had killed off Chartism in the 1850s. A century later, "power" without control amidst prosperity sapped the strength of the labour movement. Over time the union bureaucracy became more and more middle-class and university-educated, at the top the MPs less working-class. Now they lacked not only ideological independence from the middle class, but even the basic sociological identification with the working class which had given life to the old reformism.

The official structures of the labour movement decayed — while the rank-and-file working-class movement was, uncomfortably for the Labour and trade union leaders as well as for the ruling class, and Labour governments in the 1960s and '70s, very much alive.

For 25 years, up to the mid and late 1970s, a great simmering — essentially unofficial — strike movement, rising and falling, was a stable feature of life in Britain. The working class reacted to prosperity and full employment with steady assertiveness, pushing up wages, expanding areas of working-class control within the wage-slave economy. Because Labour, the political wing of the labour movement, was at a loss to say what it stood for — except the administration of capitalism, in fact more ineptly than its natural party of government, the Tories — the working class was thrown back on assertive trade unionism.

They reacted to the tepid and conservative official labour movement by sloughing it off like dead, drying skin, burrow-

ing down to grassroots militancy: the political dimension of the labour movement began to atrophy and this would have great consequences for the working class, because the reliance on rank-and-file militancy was only possible in a full-employment economy. Militancy alone, small-scale wage "reformism", was no answer to the basic problems of the working class at the level of the general administration of society.

Yet it was a tremendous thing in itself, this stropky bloody-mindedness and determination not to give an inch. It was the basic substance of all working-class socialist perspectives. But without politics it could not develop.

Thus the working class marked time through the years of boom, building unstable islands of prosperity, control and dignity within capitalism. Through those decades, the militant working-class rank and file, in defiance of Labour and trade union leaders, time and again prevented the ruling class from running its own system as they thought they needed to run it. It was impasse. Even Labour governments, faced with the rank and file, could not impose the ruling class's preferences.

The Wilson government [1964-70] was defeated when it tried to bring in anti-union legislation in 1969. All that government could do was grapple with the problem of Britain's expiring dog-end of empire and an ailing economy. It brought in a "National Plan" which was an abject failure. Its major reforms were all (valuable) liberal adjustments: abortion rights, gay rights. The working class was disappointed but, relying on industrial muscle, faced the Tory government returned in 1970 with confidence. The Tories came back to power determined to sort out the labour movement, to put the working class in its place, to restore the untrammelled right to rule as it liked to the ruling class after 25 years; to boost profit.

Labour's attempt to legally shackle the trade unions had failed because Labour was entwined with the unions, whose leaders then did not think they could police the rank and file as Labour's abortive 1969 legislation would have required them to. The Tories put laws on the statute books — but they could not make them stick. In July 1972 a quarter of a million workers struck and forced the Tories to release five dockers jailed for picketing. The anti-union laws were immobilised.

In the 1970s, as in the '40s, the ruling class could not go on ruling in the old way; masses of workers did not want to go on being ruled in the old way. But there was no revolutionary force ready to take over. Nor was there any equivalent of what the Labour Party had been in 1945.

Reformism had been bankrupted by its own seemingly durable successes of the '40s. It had no place to go. The increasing purposelessness of the reformists, together with the decay of the reformist officialdom, at Labour Party and trade union level, and the ineptitude of the Marxist left, left rank-and-file militancy headless — divorced from any politics that expressed its own drive even on a minimal political level. That is what shaped the 1974-9 Labour government.

In 1974 industrial militancy derailed the Tory government, which called an election to get a mandate against the unions and lost it. Largely ignoring the Labour Party, the masses of industrial militants had taken on the Tories and beaten them. But when it came to government, they could turn only to Wilson.

The contradictions of the reformist labour movement as it had evolved since 1945 were exposed self-destructively in the aftermath of Labour's February 1974 election victory.

The Wilson-Callaghan government of 1974-9, for part of its life a minority government, inherited a major social crisis of working-class bedrock revolt. At first it bowed to the tre-

mendous militancy. Tony Benn, an important Labour minister, received large numbers of requests from shop stewards' committees to nationalise their industries. They wanted socialism, and thought "nationalisation" was the way to it.

The trade union leaders were an essential prop of the shaky Labour government, and of the state. At no other time in the century was Trotsky's diagnosis of the role of the trade union bureaucracy as a pillar of the British state more visibly true than then:

"From the example of England one sees very clearly how absurd it is to counterpose, as if it were a question of two different principles, the trade union organisation and the state organisation. 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... in England, the classic country of trade unions, is only a political transposition of the same trade union bureaucracy. The same leaders guide the trade unions, betray the general strike, lead the electoral campaign and later on sit in the ministries."

"The Labour Party and the trade unions — these are not two principles, they are only a technical division of labour. Together they are the fundamental support of the domination of the English bourgeoisie. The latter cannot be overthrown without overthrowing the Labourite bureaucracy. And that cannot be attained by counterposing the trade union as such to the state as such, but only by the active opposition of the Communist Party to the Labourite bureaucracy in all fields of social life: in the trade unions, in strikes, in the electoral campaign, in parliament, and in power."

In 1974-5, an opinion poll reported a majority believing that TGWU leader Jack Jones was more powerful than prime minister Harold Wilson. Sections of the army talked seriously of organising a military coup, as the then chief of staff would later publicly admit.

The government and the trade union leaders turned their energies to dampening down militancy, trying to run the capitalist system as best they could. And, because the rank-and-file militancy was politically headless, they succeeded in their negative task. They could do nothing positive. It started to unwind the film of reformist progress even on the level of welfare, initiating cutbacks in 1976. It prepared the way for the Thatcherite counter-revolution.

Symbolically, the so-called winter of discontent of 1978-9 heralded the end of Labour government and sent it out of office with the noises of disgruntled trade union militancy ringing in its ears.

The failure of the Tory "get tough" policy initiated by Edward Heath in 1970, ending in Tory defeat in 1974, revolutionised the Tory party. The Thatcherites who came to power in June 1979 embodied the embitterment of the ruling class and its thirst for revenge and counter-revolution against the achievements of 1945.

Aided by slump and mass unemployment, which they deliberately encouraged, they wreaked havoc on the disorientated labour movement, inflicting the worst anti-union laws in western Europe on what had been one of the most militant working classes in Europe. Trade union leaders were driven out of the corridors of power and scapegoated for the past.

The final turn on the road that led to Blairism was made here. Thatcher had not defeated the working class; no-one had. If the working class had mobilised in all-out resistance to anti-union laws, to the cuts and to the naked class rule unleashed by Thatcher, then the Thatcherites could have been beaten. Even if they had beaten us in a fight, we would be in better shape to prepare a new round. That was not done, not attempted, before, belatedly, the miners made a stand in 1984-5.

Out of office, Labour went through a tremendous crisis in which the contradictions of decades exploded in confusion and bitterness. A mass revolt of the rank and file for democracy — that is, for the next Labour government to be accountable to the movement — was incongruously aided by leaders of far-from-democratic unions. The focus was on the structures of the movement, rather than the politics. The big events, like Tony Benn's candidacy for deputy Labour leader, were symbolic contests rather than contests for real power. Here was the point at which a real new turn might have been made: if the local government left had fought; if most Marxists had not held aloof from the struggle in the Labour Party. Tony Benn talked about the need to "refound the Labour Representation Committee". It was not to be. There was no sufficiently big effort to organise a fight for rank-and-file control and militant policies in the trade unions parallel to the battle in the Labour Party. Where the trade union militancy of the 1970s had finally run aground for lack of a political dimension, the political revolt of 1979-81 failed for lack of a trade union dimension and of political clarity.

The Labour and trade union leaders did not fight back against the Tories; the "left" leader, the George Lansbury of his age, Michael Foot, launched a crusade against "extremists" and "anti-democrats" — in the labour movement! By the late 1980s the Tories rode around like victorious horsemen on a battlefield, targeting anything wearing labour movement colours that still twitched.

That is where Blairism came from, the victory of Thatcherism. If Labour after 1945 imposed a "left" welfare-state consensus on the Tories, which they did not break for three decades, the Tories have now imposed a "marketist" consensus on the Labour Party. Hungry for political office on any terms, backed by a rank and file wanting the Tories out on any terms, the Labour leaders have moved inexorably to reflect Tory politics.

They accept the Tory media's approval or disapproval as the highest court of judgement on what they say or do. In a country where most of the things that make trade unionism effective — solidarity strikes, for example — are illegal, the "party of the trade unions" does not now propose to scrap the anti-union laws.

They accept the Tory argument that "society" cannot afford to give the poor state-of-the-art health care free at the point of consumption. They will not, unless they are forced to, restore the Health Service.

Now, the Labour leaders have always more or less accepted the going wisdom of the bourgeoisie. They did not become Keynesians until the bourgeoisie did in world war two; and they did not sit long at Keynes's feet after the bourgeoisie moved on. What is new is the extreme distance the Blairites have travelled from the key notions of reform and old-style liberal democracy. In their ideas these people have little in common with even such an old-style labour movement right-winger as Roy Hattersley.

These middle-class "Labour" politicians are eager to emancipate themselves from the trade unions. They want Labour

to be a modern “mass” party of late-bourgeois passive pseudo-democracy, in which the politicians relate to a passive membership through the bourgeois-owned mass media, probably with state funding of political parties. Blair and Brown have already set up a large personal staff, largely funded by donations from big business, separate and independent from the official Labour Party machine. The trade union leaders, increasingly university-educated middle-class men and women, with no real background in working-class struggle, or any sort of struggle of the sort that shaped even the old reformists, have bowed under pressure of Tory blows to the de-politicisation processes. The working-class movement is being pushed out of the direct access to politics it won when it established the Labour Party. Large dimensions even of the bourgeois democracy of the past are thus being cut away.

Of course, it does not follow that the union leaders will go on letting them push the unions out of politics. When the Tories have been kicked out and Prime Minister Blair is in no.10 Downing Street, the demands and expectations of the labour movement, at all levels, will escalate.

Among the sectarian left, it has become an “established fact” that the 150,000 new members who have joined the Labour Party over the last two years are all middle-class and right-wing: yet the facts are that a big proportion joined on the cheap rate as members of affiliated trade unions, and a recent opinion survey showed that most wanted unions to be more active in the Labour Party and wanted a figure set for a legal minimum wage before the General Election.

Even so, the trade unions may well let the Blairites push ahead to a complete rupturing of Labour-union links or be unable to stop them. This would create a situation at the end of the 20th century not unlike that which the labour movement faced at its beginning. In that way, Blair is the legatee of Margaret Thatcher, who set out to destroy socialism in the labour movement.

If this happens, it will be a historic defeat for the British working class. Now Marxists of all people did not expect steady progress, ever upwards, under capitalism. There is no stable victory for the proletariat, no long-term historic resting place, until it has crushed the bourgeoisie. Nor did we expect the steady improvement of the Labour Party, its evolution towards a better and better approximation to working-class socialist adequacy. The first political statement by the first forerunner of Workers’ Liberty summed up the perspective like this:

“The idea of an automatic adjustment by the existing movement in response to changing events stands in the way of our serious striving to influence events in a Leninist spirit. The views of the leading comrades [of Militant] on such things as Clause IV show that they see the movement as slowly maturing and Clause IV as an organically evolved first fruit of this process. The dialectical view is abandoned, the need to see the future sharp breaks, leaps, etc. (and the need to prepare for these, rather than wait passively).”

“There will be no automatic upwards spiral here: because of the abortive nature of the present movement, events far from elevating it automatically to a higher stage could plunge the class downwards and backwards in a sharp crisis. More — it must be said that in view of all the past this is inevitable.”

And what of the Marxists during the decline and possibly the fall of old reformism? The communist “old believers”, the followers of Trotsky, were a marginal force, for decades, some-

times working in, sometimes outside the Labour Party.

In the late 1960s and ‘70s, “Trotskyists” became quite numerous. But they proved utterly inadequate. Instead of relating to the real working class and the only labour movement we have, many Marxists lost themselves in fantasies about third world Stalinist socialism, or anarchist sloganising about “revolution now.” Where one Marxist organisation, the Revolutionary Socialist League (Militant) gained real influence, it subordinated the interests of the class struggle to its supposed private interests as an organisation; doing a cop-out while the miners were fighting the decisive battle of the Thatcher years.

If it had used the needs and logic of the class struggle as a compass, Militant would have deliberately looked for a link up with the miners and if necessary let the logic of the struggle lead to a break between the Liverpool Labour Party and the Labour leadership. Instead, they ducked out of the struggle and, picked off by the Tories once the miners were defeated, soon scuttled off in a private adventure out of the political labour movement.

The SWP first followed the drift of rank-and-file militant work away from active political reformism into reliance on industrial militancy, evolving an ideologically impure but functional syndicalist “politics” and perspective around it. When the strike and election of 1974 proved the continuing importance of the Labour Party, when workers needed a governmental alternative, they went on a brief mad period of ultra-militant “steering left” which wrecked their trade union base, then flipped back to take refuge in caricature sectarianism. The solution to the problems of the working class was to “build a revolutionary party”, completely separate from it — a party with the implicit perspective of rebuilding the labour movement from the ground up. They became utterly defeatist for the foreseeable future, until “the party” has been sufficiently “built.” They continue the British “Marxist” tradition.

Yet the case for real Marxist politics could scarcely be better made than in the history I have analysed and outlined above.

Things have gone as they have because the early Marxists did not build an organisation able simultaneously to make socialist propaganda, educate Marxist cadres, link up with bedrock working class militancy, and use a combination of reformist, transitional and revolutionary demands to gain the leadership of the British labour movement. They did not know in practice how to link up and knit together the three main fronts of the class struggle — trade unionism, politics and ideas — into a coherent strategy.

We can not go back and relive that history to produce a better result. We can learn from it and bring those lessons to bear on the class struggle and the struggle inside the labour movement. We can build an organisation that knows both how to relate to the existing mass movement and how to act as an independent Marxist force in all the facets of the class struggle. Through all this history, the failures and weaknesses of the Marxists have played, again and again, a deadly anti-Marxist role.

The Blairites have not yet destroyed the Labour Party. To accept it as given that they will is premature, unnecessary. They must still be fought every inch of the way in the Labour Party and in the trade unions as the “Keep the Link” campaign fought John Smith in 1993 and the Clause Four campaign fought Blair in 1994-5.

We will best fight them by rousing the bedrock of the labour movement in defence of things long taken for granted by working class people like the welfare state.

Speculation about what may happen in the Labour Party is useful only if it leads us to a clear idea of our own social-

ist identity and the tasks socialists face now. Whatever happens with the Labour Party these tasks essentially remain the same, though circumstances and therefore details vary. If the Blairites destroy the political mass labour movement, then we will agitate in the trade unions for a political party of the unions, this time with better politics. The immediate task is to build our own socialist movement now. That way we will be better able to handle whatever comes.

Antonio Gramsci put it well, long ago, writing in an Italian fascist prison: "The most important observation to be made about every concrete analysis of forces is this: that such analyses cannot and must not be ends in themselves (unless one is writing a chapter of past history) and they only acquire significance if they serve to justify practical activity, an initiative of will. They show what are the points of least resistance, where the force of will can be applied most fruitfully; they suggest immediate tactical operations; they indicate how a campaign of political action can best be presented, what language will

be best understood by the multitudes, etc. The decisive element in every situation is the force, permanently organised and pre-ordered over a long period, which can be advanced when one judges that the situation is favourable (and it is favourable only to the extent to which such a force exists and is full of fighting ardour); therefore the essential task is that of paying systematic and patient attention to forming and developing this force, rendering it even more homogeneous, compact, conscious of itself." From *The Modern Prince*.

Confronting a worse catastrophe than any we face, the possible victory of fascism in France, Trotsky put the same idea more directly in 1934. "Under the least favourable hypothesis, the building of a revolutionary party would mean to speed the hour of revenge. The wisecracks who duck away from this urgent task by claiming that 'conditions are not ripe' only show that they themselves are not ripe for these conditions."

6: A workers' government

By Jill Mountford, published in Solidarity around the time of the 2001 General Election and abridged here

Under the Blair government the gap between the rich and poor has widened; our health service continues to crumble; council homes have been given away to private developers. The Government gives billions to big corporations to build and run schools and hospitals — and to make fat profits.

This is a government for the bosses, for the powerful and the rich. This is a government for people like the crooks who run the private rail companies, who take public money to line their own pockets, while lives are put at risk.

In the past, Labour governments, for all their faults, used to have to take some account of what working class people wanted. This "Labour" Government is different.

Tony Blair prefers to listen to the Government's special advisers (there are 78 of them and collectively they earn over £10 million a year).

New Labour prefers to listen to the big-business directors who sit on the Government Task Forces — unelected committees which decide on much Government policy. Only two percent of the Task Forces' 2,500 members come from trade unions. The rest are people like Low Pay Commission member Stephanie Munk, who as a director of the Granada Group earns £230,000 a year. Her company faced industrial action when they tried to cut workers' wages from £140 to £100 a week.

People like Munk see profit as a god. For these men and women workers' lives are mere items in a balance sheet. They have been responsible for throwing on the scrapheap many tens of thousands of workers whose jobs they axed. They have unhesitatingly shattered the lives of workers and their families when profitability demanded it. Now they shape and steer the policy of the Government.

The Government prefers to listen to the millionaires who fund the Labour Party — people like Robert Bourne, who bid to buy the Dome at a knock down price of £165 million. Robert Bourne has donated thousands of pounds to the Labour Party.

And Labour has its own millionaire Ministers — people like David Sainsbury who, as Minister for Science, can promote his biotechnology business.

New Labour is so completely dominated by these people

because it has closed down the channels of Labour Party democracy which used to make the Labour leaders vulnerable to pressure and influence from the trade unions and the constituencies.

A capitalist government like the New Labour government is the "executive committee" of the capitalist class. Behind the committee stands, not only the network of string-pulling capitalists we have described, but also the state, the army, the police, the judiciary, the prisons and the civil service. Look at the role of the police, the courts, the prisons and the army during the 1984-85 miners' strike. The state upheld the system that was crushing the mining communities and destroying workers' lives. The state is run by unelected and unaccountable groups tied to the capitalist class.

Individual capitalists, such as Rupert Murdoch and other press barons, also exert their influence through the pages of the newspapers, magazines, and television stations they own. As well as accumulating profit, the media capitalists make propaganda for the system. They are its ideological high priests and policemen. They want us to believe that the capitalist system is natural, fair and irreplaceable.

Workers and bosses will never be united

The "People's Prime Minister" keeps telling us that he rules in the interests of all the people. But that is not possible. We live in a class-divided society where a small class of people own factories, offices and big businesses, and enjoy unbelievable luxury. A much larger class of people, the working class, owns nothing but our ability to work and some personal possessions. The two classes have distinct sets of interests.

For the bosses, wages are just one of the costs of production. He or she must keep wages, like all other costs, to a minimum in order to undercut other capitalists and maximise profits. To the workers, on the other hand, wages are the only means of livelihood for themselves and their dependents.

Workers have no choice but to organise and take on the might of the bosses and their government when they are threatened with wage cuts, job losses, longer working hours. Class conflict is inevitable. It is the very pulse-beat of our class-divided capitalist society.

Workers need the right to combine and work together

with others in the same situation to push for improvements. Workers need to organise themselves as a class in trade unions. If they can not organise freely — as they cannot now under New Labour's restrictive trade union laws — that is a massive advantage for their class enemies, the capitalists.

The “general public” or “the people” are made up of distinct groups with conflicting interests — workers and capitalists. Because it is impossible to serve all of the people all of the time the notion of a “general public” is an ideological myth which serves those who dominate in our society.

Even a generous Labour Government, with ministers who want to do their best for the working class, is more geared to defending the system that allows a tiny minority of bosses to accumulate wealth than it is to defending and guaranteeing full rights for workers.

All past Labour leaders have set out believing that they can manage capitalism less brutally than the Tories, the bosses' first-string party of government. But it is not possible to put a properly human face on the monstrous system that inflicts needless insecurity and poverty on large sections of the working class.

Blair is a different kind of Labour leader. He is committed to most of the policies introduced by the Thatcherite Tories in the 1980s. He is on the side of the bosses.

What do workers need?

Working class people in Britain today need something more than even the best of past British Labour governments. We certainly need something much much better than the New Labour brand of “Labour” government. To accept that New Labour is the best that working people can hope for would be like saying politics is not the business of the workers, let the bosses get on with exploiting us.

Working class people need representatives in Parliament who will fight for the working class — the kind of people who are fighting in this election under the banner of the Socialist Alliance. Working class people also need a government that acts for the workers!

Ultimately our goal is a socialist society — a world free of the poverty and insecurity workers suffer. A socialist society is a democratic society. The needs of the majority are put first and are not crushed beneath the drive to create profits for the few.

A socialist workers' government would begin to organise society to meet human need. It would organise industry so that everyone who could work has a job and the chance to contribute to the common well-being. The technological advances made under capitalism would, if rationally developed and organised for people and not for profit, allow the working week to be cut, probably halved, without loss of pay and, indeed, with a large-scale levelling-up of wages so that many millions would benefit from a minimum wage very much higher than the miserable £3.70 per hour introduced by this government.

A workers' government would close the vast gap between the richest in our society and poorest at the bottom of the heap. A workers' government which came to power alongside a mass movement of workers fighting for their demands would lay the foundations for the complete transformation of our present capitalist society into a socialist society, a society where all class differences would be abolished once and for all, a society organised at every level for the benefit of the whole population.

Imagine if a government based on the labour movement were elected in 2001. What would it do first? It would push

through an “emergency plan”, measures such as:

- A workers' charter of trade-union rights to strike, to picket, to take solidarity action;
- The restoration of the National Health Service and the welfare state;
- A decent minimum wage for all;
- Equal education opportunities and free education for all;
- The return to public ownership of the privatised industries, this time under workers' and community control.
- Taxation of the rich, and expropriation of the big banks and financial institutions which dominate economic life through the “casino economy” of high finance.

How do we get a workers' government?

If this Government does not represent the workers, then we need people, MPs, trade union leaders, campaigners that do stand up for the workers. That is something we can start to build now.

We need a revival of mass, trade union-based, working-class politics. Such a movement will bring to the fore people who can speak for the working-class and could create a new mass workers' party. A new mass workers' party, based on the trade unions, could form a workers' government. Such a movement would be able to stand up to the sabotage that the capitalists will inevitable organise against a workers' government.

Without such a party to galvanise, generalise and solidify mass struggles, victories — such as that against the poll tax in the early 1990s — will always stop short of making a step forward to abolish this system that crushes the minds, bodies and spirits of the working class. At worst the movement will be smashed by the combined power of the capitalist state.

Making possible a new workers' party depends on the work socialists and working class militants do now to build, rebuild and renovate the labour movement into a force that is capable of defeating the capitalists.

We need to get down to the long-term serious fight to build a mass democratic workers' party. That work must focus on the unions.

The Blairites have stopped trade unionists and Labour activists from having any say over what the Government does. The links between the Labour Party and the trade unions — which meant that Labour governments had to, at least in part, listen to workers — have not been severed, but that is only because trade union leaders have let the unions be reduced to dumb extras in Blair's pageant. The unions still have a lot of reserve power, should they choose to use it. Seven million people are organised in trade unions. The unions still have some channels in the Labour Party structures which they can use to assert themselves politically — if they have the will to do it.

The way to get the unions to protest against the Government it is not to campaign for unions to disaffiliate from the Labour Party. If a large enough group of unions were prepared to do that and to set up a radical workers' party immediately, then they would also be able to use their positions in the Labour Party to mount a major challenge to Blair there and rally other unions and constituency Labour activists around them. Doing that first would be much better than simply walking away, even if the struggle inside New Labour would end with a split, which it almost certainly would.

As things are with the unions today, the only likely success for a disaffiliation campaign would be to get one or two unions to cut their Labour links and abandon political activity, as much on a sentiment of general disillusion with politics as

on any positive programme.

Politically-minded trade unionists can have much more impact by campaigning for their unions to use their positions in the New Labour structure to fight for union policy, on issues like privatisation, rail renationalisation, trade-union and employee rights, and the health service. This should not mean, however, that we “sit out” election campaigns while we wait for rank-and-file assertiveness in the unions to rise to the level where it forces the union leaders to come out sharply against Blair.

Trade-union funding is still vital for New Labour. Trade union activists should campaign for their union to withhold money unless New Labour commits itself to demands such as:

- No bosses as Labour ministers;
- Full positive trade union rights;
- End privatisation schemes like PFI and PPP.

Advocating that the union goes on “financial strike” against the New Labourites is not the same as advocating disaffiliation. It can stir up a struggle. And we should advocate that union branches and unions gain, or are granted, the right to give money to labour movement candidates more authentically in line with union policy as well as to official Labour candidates.

And we should say that, if the New Labour leaders refuse to budge, the unions should put up trade union candidates against New Labour. We believe independent socialist candidatures must be coupled with a consistent and patient fight inside the trade unions for the unions to assert themselves politically; and we would argue for socialists to rally behind any genuine and broad-based independent trade-union candidates against New Labour, even if those candidates’ political platforms are much more limited than we would wish.

The battle to get the union leaders to fight the Blairites goes hand in hand with the struggle to democratise the labour movement, to put an end to the power and privileges enjoyed by bureaucratic officials. We should insist union officials face re-election every year or two years. No official should earn more than the average shop-floor rate. All officials should be held to account for their actions and be immediately recallable if the majority vote for it. There would be an end to electing officials who try to manage capitalism on behalf of the bosses. We fight to develop within the labour movement a much higher level of democracy than the sham democracy of the bourgeoisie — a workers’ democracy.

The ideology of “partnership”, that the interests of business are the interests of workers too, is false and dangerous. It is a tool of the bosses in their battle to control workers. If there is no class struggle any more, why do working class people bother with unions at all?

We know that conflict is inevitable between the labour movement and the government, even if it has not yet burst out: we saw signs of it when tube workers struck against privatisation of London Underground. The labour movement will fight back, learning to demonstrate its strength and

building up its confidence by way of action — initially by limited strikes, by petitions, and by demonstrations. We have done it before and we will do it again!

Socialists and the workers’ government

The transformation of the labour movement will not happen spontaneously as a reflection of economic class struggles. We believe we will also need a militant socialist organisation because socialists can play a decisive role, fighting for the kind of ideas that we set out here.

The state of the health service, education, jobs and workers’ rights are pressing issues for the working class. Out of struggles on these questions will come the organisation, experience, confidence and education that will prepare large numbers of workers to pose the need for socialist revolution. That is why we need to build campaigns and initiatives that relate to the working class now. This is the best way to convince many working-class people, whether they are active now or not, of the need for a workers’ government and for remaking the labour movement.

There can be no predicting how or when the revival of class struggle will start. For Solidarity the task is to raise the demands and develop the politics in any way we can, including standing in elections, and organise where we can for the self-renewal and transformation of the workers movement.

The struggle for a workers’ government starts from today’s battles. In the course of these battles, we want to build up a movement of the rank and file in the unions — and across the unions — to oust those who presently mislead the movement. We will seek to organise with what remains of the left in the Labour Party. We will seek to link the battles within the existing labour movement structures to the dynamism and energy of the young people who are involved in the movement against the exploitation and environmental deprivation caused by global capitalism.

The broad movement of resistance to Blair and Blairism can only be built if we have a clear working-class political perspective, an idea of a different kind of government. Without that idea, we may be able to defeat particular attacks, but we will never really defeat the politics and interests that Blair represents.

We live in an apolitical climate where there is very little criticism about the most obvious failures of capitalism — unemployment, social deprivation and deep-rooted evils such as physical and mental ill health among the poorest in society. The weak — asylum seekers — are often scapegoated. Socialists have to be the most trenchant critics of the exploitative and unjust world in which we live. We try to put up a real “third way”, an alternative to Blair and Brown’s “third way”. We call it independent working-class politics. For us politics flow from no other concerns except those of the workers. We say the only way forward is to fight for a workers’ government. Fighting on class issues can win!

If, by the time you have finished reading this, you think what we say makes sense, then we urge you to join us!

7: Class, Union, And Party

Resolution adopted by the AWL National Committee, 27 March 2004

1. The Labour Party is still what Lenin called it in 1920, a bourgeois workers’ party. In the last decade, there has been an enormous shift within this contradictory phenomenon towards its bourgeois pole.

2. New Labour differs from Old Labour in these respects. The trade union share of the vote at Party conference and of direct and indirect representation on the National Executive has been substantially cut.

The role of both Annual Conference and the National Executive in the affairs of the Labour Party has been changed qualitatively. Essentially, they no longer control Labour Party policy, or what happens in the party, even in theory.

Through a series of procedural checks and controls, it has become the norm for New Labour that regional and even national conferences no longer discuss political issues. With these new structures, the Labour Party “in the country” cannot counterpose itself politically to the Government.

Thus, the forums in which and through which the political life of the Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs) expressed itself have been cemented up.

The leader of the party, elected by the plebiscitary pseudo-democracy of one person one (postal) vote, has been raised above the party and its affiliated trade unions into a Bonaparte figure with enormous political power. The leader’s “office” — lieutenants, advisers, spin-liars, etc. — financed by big capitalist donations and state funds, is the real centre of the party. All key policy and other decisions are taken there, outside all possible control by the party or the unions. When the leader is also Prime Minister, his power vis-à-vis the party is vastly increased.

Central control over and vetting of Labour candidacies at parliamentary and local government level has been greatly increased. The possibility of rank-and-file control through selection and deselection of candidates has been greatly reduced.

3. The New Labour Party in government has openly repudiated any working-class allegiance in explicit and brutal words and in such deeds as keeping the Tory anti-union laws on the statute books.

3a. There has been a considerable erosion in traditional working class support for Labour, particularly amongst young people. Symptoms include the increase in electoral abstention, particularly in inner-city areas, and the growth of the BNP.

4. For these reasons we have advocated independent working-class electoral challenges to New Labour. We never saw such things as ruled out on principle. We rejected them previously only because of the practicalities, chief of which was the open nature of the Party and what socialists could do in it.

5. A mass revolt by the CLPs and the trade unions — crucially, by the mass of the unions — could, of course, quickly re-open, cleanse and democratise the New Labour structures.

The most important fact for now, and calculably, is that nothing short of a large-scale general revolt can break the hold of the New Labour machine. New Labour can see off partial revolts, even large and important ones. Only a large, determined and simultaneous revolt could swamp the breakwaters.

Constitutional formulas, legalities, and rule changes are never all-decisive, in the Labour Party or in the class struggle at large. Some struggles can break through undemocratic rules; or entrenched leaderships can find ways to suppress the rank and file even if the formal rules are democratic. But rules matter.

To say that the rule changes in the Labour Party do not signify much would be as wrong as saying that the anti-union laws do not matter much for the industrial struggle, or that the different Labour Party rule changes of the early 1980s, in favour of democracy, were a diversion.

6. The transforming changes affect precisely those areas where the political life of the old Labour Party, that is of the old labour movement, expressed itself, and into which socialists could intervene as we did.

If there is some political life in a local CLP it cannot now — short of a very large-scale simultaneous revolt in other parties and the unions — go beyond local opposition. Nor can it feed into the old national forums like National Executive and Conference, and thus stimulate and coalesce with other local groups. The pockets of local life bear the same relationship to the old national Labour Party life that rock pools bear to the receded sea.

7. The political life of the CLPs is at a low ebb.

8. The trade unions should oppose Blair within the Labour structures, push things to a break with New Labour as in 1931 they broke with James Ramsey MacDonald, and refound a trade-union-based Labour Party.

9. It can be calculated that only a not-very-big minority of the Parliamentary Labour Party — which has no working-class roots worth recording — would split from Blair in those circumstances.

10. Disappointment with Blairite control of the Labour Party and the trade unions has taken the form of the election of a wide range of new trade union leaderships committed at one level or another to defending their members’ immediate interests — that is, of a drive to recreate real trade unionism.

Without the support or tolerance of the trade union establishment, the Blair-Brown-Mandelson New Labour coup in the political wing of the British labour movement could not have been made, or not without a major 1931-style split in the Labour Party.

Many of the leaderships that supported Blair in his coup are now gone or going. To the new trade union leaders we say: counterpose the unions to New Labour immediately, and take the fight if necessary (as we think it will be necessary) to an open break and a refounding of labour representation.

11. We are, however, nowhere near the possibility of controlling what happens. The new leaderships are not doing what we think the situation indicates.

The absence of a coherent, co-ordinated union response is a result of our weakness as a force in the labour movement; but we are where we are.

Centrally, we advocate that the unions fight within the Labour Party against New Labour, and fight — if necessary, as we think it will be — all the way to a break and the refounding of a real Labour Party. But that is not all we do. In the actual situation of flux, we break down that central idea into immediate tactics. And we relate to inchoate responses as militants, not as “inspectors-general” of history or of the labour movement.

12. Our central political “demand” on the unions — that they fight Blairism within the Labour structures, right through to a break, and found a new working-class trade-union-based party — does not oblige us to oppose everything short of that. It does not oblige us to oppose any “tactical” fragmentation of the union political funds.

Advocacy of our “epochal” concern — the mass trade union break with Blair and move to a new workers’ party — should not shade into a conservative defence of and support for the Blair-serving status quo against immediate limited initiatives for genuine left-wing or labour-movement electoral challenges to the New Labour party; things which, on their merits, we should support here and now.

13. The situation is further complicated by the activities of sectarians like the SWP and the Socialist Party. The SWP has no strategic overview and uses elections in a catchpenny, opportunist “build the SWP” spirit. The SP have a wrong assessment of the situation, believing that the entire process of destruction of the old Labour Party has been completed.

14. The phrase, “democratise the political funds” was initially used to express the correct broad idea of the FBU May 2001 decision — that the union, nationally and regionally, should critically examine election candidates seeking its support, and consider backing independent working-class candidates against New Labour. That broad idea always involved accepting the risk that a drive to reassert independent working-class representation will, in the given circumstances, involve, or open the door to, some fragmentation and false starts. But the SWP, in particular, has cumulatively reinterpreted “democratisation of the political funds” as positive advocacy of fragmentation and “diversification” of the political funds. They have proposed having money allotted branch-by-branch or in proportion to different parties’ support in the membership. We are against fragmenting the funds in such a manner, which will end up (i) providing a safety-valve for the bureaucrats, freeing them to back Blair with the bulk of the political funds as long as they allow a few branches to give money elsewhere; (ii) drifting towards business-unionism, i.e. giving money to whatever mainstream party candidate seems friendliest or most susceptible to lobbying.

15. However, a policy of no changes in the distribution of trade union political funds until either the Labour Party has been won back from the Blairites, or a new workers’ party is launched by the trade unions, would for socialists be a policy of long-term inertia. It would be a de facto acceptance of Blairism as working-class politics for the foreseeable future, and, by way of that, a long-term policy of de facto abstention from electoral politics. Under the guise of strategic thinking we would adopt a policy of passive waiting for “something big” to happen. Such an approach is not a conceivable option for us. It would destroy the AWL as an interventionist political force.

16. Against ideas such as the RMT backing Plaid Cymru, we counterpose the principle of independent working-class representation, not the idea that the union must stick to exclusive support for New Labour candidates.

17. We should advocate local labour movement political action committees, and where possible treat Trades Councils as potentially such committees. We support any solidly-based moves by trade unions to counterpose themselves electorally to New Labour.

We are in favour of winning support from Labour-affiliated unions, or (the more realistic option now) from local or regional union bodies, for authentic independent working-class electoral challenges to New Labour. Obviously how and when this is done is a tactical question, but in general we favour it.

18. We are against disaffiliation, which in practical terms could only mean the Labour-affiliated unions ducking out of the fight-to-a-break against the New Labour machine which we advocate.

19. But we must fight for working-class politics in the labour movement. We do not fight in the most advantageous, still less ideal, conditions. We cannot let fear of damage that will be done during that struggle stifle the will of the rank and file to fight. We cannot fetishise the existing links and relations between the New Labour Party and the trade unions. We must advocate a fight on every level, and now.

We cannot let ourselves be blackmailed into passive acceptance of the political dominance of the Blairites. We must fight our way out of the political impasse of the labour movement.

20. We should propose in each union a national policy which would establish a framework for the union’s political activities and use of its political fund set by union policies

and the principle of independent working-class representation in politics.

In pursuit of this national approach, we should argue against automatic support for New Labour and its candidates, and for the possibility of supporting independent working-class candidates. We explain openly that we want the unions to consider support only for working-class and socialist independent candidates, not for any independent candidates sympathetic to the policies of the union, and that our aim is not “diversification” but the recreation of a trade-union-based workers’ party. We argue for decisions about such alternatives to be taken, where appropriate, at regional and local level in the unions, subject to the fullest democratic control (e.g. workplace and membership ballots).

We are also for:

- Reducing union contributions to the Labour Party to the flat affiliation fee, ending extra donations, as the CWU has done. (We are not for reducing the level of affiliation).
- Making union representatives in New Labour structures fight for union policy.
- Withdrawing union sponsorship to MPs who flout or oppose union policies (as the RMT did with Prescott).
- Challenging, expressing no confidence in, and where possible de-selecting councillors, MPs and leaders who refuse accountability to the labour movement and oppose working-class interests. No confidence in Blair as Labour leader!
- Using union funds for independent working-class political campaigning — e.g. for referenda on privatisation, for a European workers’ charter rather than supporting bourgeois yes or no campaigns on the euro.

Where we come across motions in the unions expressing some of these ideas, but in an inadequate framework, we should seek to amend them so as to set them clearly within the framework of the fight for independent working-class representation.

Where our amendments fall, or circumstances prevent us from proposing them, the way we vote on such motions must be judged tactically in each case, in the light of both their wording and the meaning given to those words by the conditions and balance of forces in each union. Such tactical judgements should be made by our union fractions in consultation with the Industrial Committee and the EC.

21. The fight on the different fronts — to get the trade union leaders to fight Blairism within the Labour structures, and to get the trade unions to back working-class and socialist candidates against New Labour — is inseparable from the work of building a cross-union rank-and-file movement. The trade union leaders who will not fight for working-class and trade-union interests now, within the structures of the Labour Party, are not likely to support the formation of an anti-Blairite working-class party to replace New Labour. Here too, on the question of backing anti-Blairite working-class election candidates, the old watchword offers guidance: if the leaders won’t lead, then the rank and file must.

22. We should pay more attention to the Labour Party. We should improve our efforts in pushing affiliated unions to fight the Blairites — that is, get our trade-union work better organised and fight systematically to get our own resolutions on political funds to the union conferences. Socialists should reorganise and reactivate our Labour Party fraction, but not, unless there is a major change in the condition and levels of life of the CLPs, significantly increase the number of comrades assigned to such work.

23. The central conclusion from the reality of the fragmented responses to the Blairite coup is that only a coherent Marxist organisation can in itself act to co-ordinate in any thoroughgoing way the different responses evoked in the labour movement. We, as a living organisation, have to re-

spond to the “fragments”. AWL has to co-ordinate our different fields of work — trade union, youth, students, No Sweat, SSP, Labour Party — integrating them both politically and organisationally.

8: Our “perspectives” resolution, 2010

Workers’ Liberty conference passed the following motion in October 2010, our first conference since Labour were voted out of government in the General Election earlier that year. This followed substantial debate since 2009 over the issues. See the pull-out Workers’ Liberty 3/23, “Debate on the unions and Labour Party”: bit.ly/d-u-lp

1) World Crisis

The banking crisis of 2007-08 and after changed politics everywhere in ways that are still unfolding. The possibility of a “double-dip” economic slump looms threateningly. Even without that it is now commonplace for economic commentators to talk of now as the worst economic crisis in 80 years. There is enormous unemployment in Europe, America and other areas.

The cost to states such as the British of shoring up the banks, and the bankers, has locked governments like Britain’s into a vicious circle that may turn into a steeply downward spiral. Increased state debt makes them vulnerable to the moods and swings of international money market speculation. That leads to government drives to cut back on state expenditure so severely that the consequent weakening of effective demand — social service cuts, withdrawal of state contracts for goods and services, etc., unemployment — becomes a major force pushing economies towards the “double dip”, a deeper and worse slump than that triggered by the banking crisis, whose tsunami ramifications are thus still working through economies and societies.

2) The New Labour government’s response to the crisis

In Britain the New Labour government responded to the banking crisis with decisive action to stop the banks collapsing. It put a strong state scaffolding around the banks to shore them up, putting the state and its resources in their place. In fact, it responded rather as the right-wing US Bush government did. It put in vast amounts of “public money”, taxpayers’ money, and nationalised the most insolvent and most threatened financial institutions.

The New Labour government had worked through eleven years of prosperous times, since it took power in 1997, to serve the rich and to maximise private gains from public institutions they own and control. It now acted decisively to “nationalise” the losses the rich would otherwise have suffered. Though its actions probably did prevent the public catastrophe of the banks and the credit institutions, and the high street cash machines, seizing up, it acted as the ideologically tooled-up market-worshipping government of the rich that it had been and still in the new conditions was. When prosperity returned, the nationalised banks would be restored to their previous owners so that profits could again be privatised. As it turned out, the government would even let the crisis-breeding bankers still siphon off their accustomed enormous bonuses. Within the framework of capitalism and its laws of operation, they acted very effectively to manage the crisis.

Yet at the same time, their action made the fundamental case for socialism — that the social economy, privately

owned, needs to be socially owned and controlled.

3) Britain in the new “age of austerity”

The dawning of a new age of austerity and government retrenchment has transformed British politics in the following main ways:

It made it imperative, from their point of view, for the bourgeoisie and their governments to inflict enormous cuts on welfare provisions and in government economic activity. The New Labour government said it would “do what was necessary” here, as did the Tories, the then-ostensibly alternative government. But New Labour talked of a different pace of cuts, and a different balance between tax rises and cuts (and so, about 60% the amount of cuts advocated by the Tories).

For the first time in two decades, serious political and social differences emerged between Labour and the Tories, between the two main parties of neo-Thatcherism. This was expressed in the Tories’ objections to the Keynesian government role the New Labour government had operated in meeting the crisis. It was expressed as a different time-scale for cutting the deficit, and a different balance between tax rises and cuts. That was no small division.

It had enormous implications for the scale and severity of the assault on living standards which both New Labour and Tories said was necessary. There was a difference between the two parties in who should pay, and how much, in the era of cuts.

To say here “oh, New Labour too would cut severely”, while true, would be to miss the whole political dynamic in the political space between Labour’s probable cuts and the Tories’. It would be so “abstract”, so far above it all, as to eliminate a vision of the terrain of British politics for years to come.

In short, in 2008-10, the relative-boom conditions that had shaped the quiescence of the labour movement in the long years of prosperity under a New Labour government and the almost universal acceptance of market economy as the only possible economy, were radically changed.

4) The Labour Movement and the Crisis

Labour movements in history respond differently to crises as they are solved by the ruling class. The recent or not-so-recent experience of a labour movement determines how it will respond. Labour movements differ in their recent history and therefore they will respond differently [see endnote].

What is the state of the working-class movement now as it begins to face the coalition government’s assault?

a) The working class and the labour movement have experienced 15 years of comparative prosperity, low unemployment — 13 of those years with a New Labour government that, while blatantly serving the rich, also engaged in expansion of public services and low-level redistribution by instruments such as tax and pension credits.

b) There are 7 million organised trade unionists. But whole areas of the economy are non-union. Ideas and labour movement goals of socialism, even in the vague and incoherent sense, inadequately-defined but heart-felt by many, have been marginalised. Thinking in market terms — acceptance of capitalism — is predominant.

c) In the 1990s the trade unions helped create New Labour. Since then the trade unions, despite occasional flurries of verbal protest and with a couple of exceptions, have supported New Labour and the New Labour governments. They remained tied to that government until the end. The emergence of a new generation of union leaders after about 2000, the so-called “awkward squad”, proved a false dawn. With few exceptions, those leaders have so far offered little more than verbal leftism to differentiate them from the previous right-wing generation of union leaders.

d) The Tory anti-union laws which Thatcher enacted 30 years ago as an essential part of defeating and subjugating the militant labour movement and the working class remain on the statute books after 13 years of government by a party still heavily on labour movement financing. The union leaders’ acceptance of that and their failure to do anything about the anti-union laws, alongside their submission to New Labour politics of which keeping anti-union laws was part, is perhaps their single greatest crime since they left the miners to fight alone in the great strike.

e) Through the 20th century the Labour Party was the party of the labour movement, the bourgeois workers’ party. Since 1994-7 it has had many of its old structures and its modes of relating to the trade unions and the working class destroyed or changed radically in terms of their previous function.

Annual conference as a living congress of the labour movement in politics no longer exists. Most constituency Labour Parties are depleted in membership, political life, and ability to intervene in the national Labour Party.

In the late 1970s the Labour Party counterposed itself to the Wilson-Callaghan government as critic and medium of protest and organised resistance, but the Labour Party in the New Labour epoch was gutted by the New Labour leaders. This was done deliberately with the intention of freeing a future Labour government from the pressure of the labour movement and of the militant Party rank-and-file — to destroy potential agency of working-class resistance to such a government.

The renegade-leftist Labour Party leader from 1983-92 Neil Kinnock said: “We’ll get ‘our betrayal’ over and done with before we form a government”. And Blair carried through that programme, winning the 1997 election with an explicit promise to keep the anti-union laws and to try to make New Labour “the party of business”.

As our press has many times pointed out, this disenfranchised the working class to an enormous extent. It greatly devalued the power of the working-class vote to affect affairs of state — even if only as loud criticism and organised opposition to government — and therefore devalued its democratic value. Without its own party, even in the very limited sense in which old Labour was its own party, the working-class vote was nullified.

f) There is in the working class a widespread, self-dividing chauvinism, fomented by sections of the millionaire press. Unless it is successfully fought it will hinder working-class development.

Thus the working class enters the crisis in poor condition. It also, however, enters it without a recent history of crushing defeats: the miners’ defeat of 1985 is old history to anyone

under the age of 40. There are great difficulties in the way of an effective working-class fightback against the coalition government, but not such as to guarantee in advance that there will be no militant resistance.

As revolutionaries, we register the difficulties; we do not deceive ourselves by painting up small fightbacks as much bigger than they really are; we keep in mind that when resistance comes, it may well be in places, at times, and on issues that we did not exactly expect; but we advocate and orient to the best possibilities of resistance. We do not accept defeat in advance. If we did so, we would make ourselves a factor working against effective resistance, not for it.

5) The Election and After

Coming on top of the widespread and deep disillusionment with the Iraq war, and with Prime Minister Brown’s limitations as a Blair-style PR-adept politician, the economic crisis put the lid on the coffin of the New Labour government.

In mid-2009 opinion polls pointed to a crushing general election defeat, perhaps even electoral meltdown, for New Labour, and a big Tory majority in the post-general election parliament.

In fact that did not happen. Labour lost, but the Tories did not win the election. The Labour vote held up better than looked likely.

The Tory cuts programme is being implemented, commitments of the Liberal-Democratic Party in the coalition government. The Lib-Dems campaigned in the general election against most of what it will help the Tories carry through. The coalition government lacks a democratic mandate for what it is now going to do.

Why did the general election produce results that a year earlier would have astonished us?

By the time of the election there was a far wider public understanding than the polls could accommodate that the difference between the projected Tory and Labour cuts was enormously important to working-class lives. That understanding triggered and connected with working-class memories of Thatcher Toryism in the economic slump of the 1980s, to make anti-Toryism a powerful force in the election. Brown and New Labour made the economic differences between themselves and the Tories the axis of their election campaign.

Labour came to seem to large chunks of the electorate to be preferable, more trustworthy than the Tories. The pre-election surge in popularity for Nick Clegg and Vince Cable probably expressed a widespread wish that there was a better choice. But in the end that did not translate into seriously-increased votes for the Lib-Dems.

The outgoing Brown government attained a level of credibility as critics of the Tories and as a more trustworthy government that would have seemed miraculous a year earlier. In their opposition to the Tory programme, the New Labour leaders chimed in with what the trade unions were saying. It may also be that voters who had benefited from such New Labour reforms as tax credits were influenced: there is a danger that our standpoint in judging New Labour and its deficiencies can make us miss things like that on our political radar screens.

There was a sizeable element in the Labour election vote of “Labour returnees” — of once-Labour voters rallying in the crisis in response to fear of the Tories, rooted in memory as well as in concern with current political issues. That fear was a major thing among organised workers.

The fact that Labour would also have made cuts, and the fact that Labour councils will make cuts in response to Lib

Dem-Tory government constraints (while saying that they are softening those cuts as much as they can), will not change that picture, any more than similar facts about Labour and Labour councils have changed it in previous periods of Labour-union opposition to aggressive Tory policies. We demand that Labour councils refuse to cut, and that Labour and the unions organise militant action, not merely verbal protest, against cuts; but to think that Labour failing to meet our demands wipes out the fact of Labour and the unions being the large, “credible” alternative to the Tories with some working-class links would be totally to misestimate our own clout.

6) *Outside-Labour left electoralism*

The other fact established by the general election was the failure of the attempts, since 2000, to use electioneering during the years of New Labour rule to build on working-class resentment at that rule and against New Labour’s suppression of effective working-class political representation and to regroup a substantial body of left and working-class activists.

Maybe things could have been different if the small beginning — very small and shaky though we said it was, at the time — made by the Socialist Alliance in 2001 had been built on positively, rather than trashed by the SP and SWP. In fact anti-Labour left electoral efforts were already in decline by 2004, and passed through periods of farce (Respect, the SSP split, No2EU), before arriving at a desultory and politically very thin effort, mainly by the SP but with token participation by the SWP and a few others, at the 2010 general election.

In principle we are for socialist candidates challenging Labour. We are for continuing the fight for working class political representation in the main ways proposed since 1997 and the Blairite coup in the Labour Party, including anti-Labour electoral challenges. The practicalities depend on the circumstances and the quality of the socialist, or would-be socialist, candidates.

For the next period there is no prospect of an anti-Labour electoral project being an axis around which a big and healthy left-wing force can be regrouped. However in the course of positively advocating and arguing for “left unity” we could have a good impact on activists around the left and there may be limited opportunities. We do not have the resources to run an electoral effort big enough to make a generalised impact as the AWL alone but that should not rule out singular limited local electoral initiatives under our own banner where this makes sense. There is no value for us in becoming fifth-wheel helpers to desultory campaigns by the Socialist Party and its occasional allies.

Anti-Labour electoralism cannot be a priority for us in the coming period, but there may be limited opportunities. There may be cases where we will back solidly-based socialist or labour movement candidates, or stand our own candidates, in order to challenge slavishly cutting Labour councillors. The difficulties that would cause for our Labour Party fraction work should not be decisive against such activity we would assess such candidacies on a case by case basis.

7) *The Labour Movement in Politics After the Election*

a) The central fact that the AWL must register — the AWL, which has become progressively disgusted and alienated at New Labour in government and the leaders’ stifling and strangling of the old Labour Party — is that the union link has survived the long period of New Labour government. The political history of the British labour movement, of the interaction of its trade union and political parts, and the in-

teraction of both with the working class, now begins a new chapter.

The undemocratic structures imposed on the Labour Party in 1997 are still there, but to fetishise those structural changes as the sole defining factor would be as wrong as dismissing them as inconsequential.

The New Labour political machine is intact. Its first-sight reality is no longer as the “party of business” ostentatiously marginalising the trade unions, but a Labour Party substantially defined, in popular awareness, by its opposition, in common with the trade unions, to “extreme” Tory cuts. For the next period, the working class, the unions, and the Labour Party are pushed together, and in a situation where there is no other political force even loosely connected to the working class which stands as a credible political alternative to the Tories.

b) One union has disaffiliated from the Labour Party (FBU) and one has been expelled (RMT). These unions are of course very important, and especially important for us as areas of higher-than-average militancy. But, as the election showed, they are a politically marginalised element of the trade union movement, and with not even the most roughly adequate political basis to create a viable alternative to the Labour Party.

To focus our political agitation on the creation of “our own” small militant political labour movement, grouped around the RMT leadership, and defined essentially by the quality of not being affiliated to the Labour Party, would be sectarian project-mongering of the sort which Trotsky defined in the *Transitional Programme* of 1938 as functioning above all to take pockets of militants out of the broader labour movement.

It would mean the AWL giving up on the prospect of socialists influencing and transforming the bigger unions, that is the main trade unions, the major part of the labour movement.

It would mean the AWL renouncing an across-the-board fight in the labour movement for our class-struggle politics in favour of pleas directed at and conditional on the RMT leadership.

c) Thus, the Labour-union links, through seriously changed, have survived. The history of the interaction begins again and in radically changed conditions to those of the last 20 years.

When the prospects seemed to be of New Labour continuing to rule for a long time in conditions of prosperity and of chronic Tory disarray with the unions continuing for an indefinite period to play dumb horse to the New Labour rider, we floated the overarching conceptualisation of some sort of CIO-like regrouping of the militant unions, Trades Councils and perhaps other elements, as an organising centre. It was seen an open-ended formula, not exclusively limited to battle within the Labour Party, but it was never presented as “our alternative to the Labour Party”, or linked with a call for more militant unions to disaffiliate. It was suggested as a storyline that would allow people to make sense of the situation.

We refused to accept the invitation of some comrades to play the role of trade union sheepdogs for the Blairites by opposing on principle any action that might lead to unions being expelled from the Labour Party. Until our 2008 conference, our own basic line was that affiliated unions should begin a fight to transform the Labour Party, and if that fight led to expulsion, well and good. We advised a fight, not a policy of pick up your marbles and withdraw.

Events have now re-invigorated that policy. With Labour in opposition and opposing the Tory cuts, the political alignment of Labour and the unions is restored. There is no visi-

ble or foreseeable trigger that will separate off the affiliated unions from New Labour. If disgruntled militants advocate disaffiliation, our job will be to explain to them that a union willing

to fight can achieve much more by agitating within the main bloc of politically-active unions than by hiving off, and we point to the experience of the FBU to confirm that.

d) If the sharp polarisation that existed in the General Election with Labour and the unions aligned against the Tories continues, and it probably will, there are likely to be serious moves in the disaffiliated or expelled unions to reaffiliate to the Labour Party. It is probably too early in the post-election evolution of the Labour Party for us to take the initiative and advocate that, as we did in the RMT in 2007, but we should take no dogmatic positions against it.

Concretely, in current or near-future conditions, RMT or FBU reaffiliation to the Labour Party would add lively pressure there in favour of reconstructing Labour Party democracy, in favour of a firmer stand against cuts, and so on.

It could also make for more fruitful political life in RMT and FBU, promoted by the “feedback” from Labour Party battles into those unions.

We should not trip ourselves up by moving too fast on this. But if serious moves for reaffiliation develop within either union we should not oppose them, even if, for example, they come from people not on our political wavelength such as soft-left Labourites.

In all cases, we assert our own politics and our own views on how affiliation should be used, by amendments, by speeches, or by leaflets and articles.

8) *The Limits on Labour Revival*

In the last year there have been some moves by the unions to restore Labour Party conference, and since the general election some tens of thousands of people have joined the Labour Party. A further inflow of new life may come if the Labour party, allied to the unions, is the centre of opposition, even if only verbal opposition to the “Tory cuts”.

These small stirrings, though small, indicate that we should seriously explore the life of local CLPs and Young Labour groups, and again make a practical reality of our never-formally-abandoned policy of doing limited but organised “fraction work” in the Labour Party and in the Labour-related structures of the affiliated unions.

However, the pressure for a radical restructuring and revival of the Labour Party as a living organisation that a massive defeat might have produced does not now exist.

That Labour in opposition would “oppose Tory cuts” and chime in with the unions was entirely predictable. But the General Election and its outcome will shape events in the labour movement very differently from what might have followed a crushing defeat for New Labour, and a convincing Tory victory.

In such a situation there would be no prospect of an early return of Labour to government in a routine election, not for a long time. Now however we face a situation where Labour can reasonably hope to win the next election.

Indeed, the Tories do not have a working majority. It is possible (though unlikely) that the Lib Dem-Tory coalition will fall apart before its five years are up.

The government will incur great unpopularity from the butchery its cuts will inflict on the people. Thatcher was rescued from that sort of unpopularity by the Falklands War. Labour’s dangerous disarray greatly contributed to the Tories’ 1983 election victory. There is now no equivalent for Camer-

on and Clegg for what the Falklands War was for Thatcher.

A corollary of the common front of Labour and the unions against the Tory-Liberal cuts will be to focus trade unions and the Labour Party rank-and-file on winning the return of a Labour government in the next general election, soon. That will create great pressure not to “rock the boat”. (A great upsurge of industrial militancy might change all that, of course, in ways we cannot foresee).

Within the Labour Party and in the trade unions, the leading layers of New Labour politicians, especially the younger ones, are not utterly discredited, as they might have been by a crushing Labour defeat and outright Tory victory.

The feebleness of the Labour Party organisation in the country and the lack of other than a token youth movement probably made the difference between Labour defeat and victory in the May 2010 election. Those who run the Labour Party must know it. Both the Milibands look to something like the “Obama model” — an ad-hoc organised network of loose supporters beyond the party — as their guide for restoring the Party’s fortunes. That is not at all necessarily counterposed to restoring or renovating the Party structures, and some of it would certainly feed into the Party structures.

A modest revival of Labour Party life is likely, but it starts from a very low level, and the urgent pressure for shake-up and restoration which crushing defeat would have brought is not there.

There is no mandate for the elaborate and costly evasive action which full-scale AWL reinvolvement in local Labour Parties would require. What is indicated now is serious exploration and a restart of Labour Party fraction work. The exact scale and proportions should be decided and reviewed in line with events and evidence.

9) *The workers’ government*

The considerations above about the limits of life in the Labour Party structures are important in deciding how much involvement in the Labour Party and its structures the AWL should have now. They cannot decide the general political attitude we should take to the Labour-union bloc.

Speculation here is not the prime business of the AWL. We need to work out a line of intervention in these fields which will allow us to build our own organisation and multiply its contacts with the organised working class.

Our general policy for opposing the government and its cuts is outlined in other documents and need not be repeated here in detail. We fight for social provision under democratic control, against privatisation and marketisation. We fight for an effective right to strike, to take solidarity action, and to organise, against anti-union laws.

The key conclusion from the experience around the election, what it delineates and tells us about the political state of the labour movement and the working class in politics, and the facts of the new government, is that for now and for the next foreseeable period the Labour-union bloc is still central in working-class politics, and cannot be “bypassed”.

Agitation to “make Labour fight” — including “make Labour councils fight” — has to be a central political theme. It has to be a central theme irrespective of calculations we can make that official Labour’s “fight” against the Tories will be feeble. It is one of the day-to-day expressions of the general agitation, which we should continue, for a workers’ government.

By workers’ government, we mean a government based on the labour movement — the actual labour movement, not some selected small “left” splinter of it — accountable to the

movement, and serving the working class.

"Of all parties and organisations which base themselves on the workers... and speak in their name, we demand that they break politically from the bourgeoisie and enter upon the road of struggle for the workers' government. On this road we promise them full support against capitalist reaction. At the same time, we indefatigably develop agitation around those transitional demands which should in our opinion form the program of the 'workers' government'.

"Is the creation of such a government by the traditional workers' organisations possible? Past experience shows, as has already been stated, that this is, to say the least, highly improbable...

"However, there is no need to indulge in guesswork. The agitation around the slogan of a workers'... government preserves under all conditions a tremendous educational value... [to] aid the striving of the workers for independent politics, deepen the class character of these politics..."

In the unions (mainly) and through our Labour Party fraction work, we fight for the reconstruction of Labour Party democracy, including the full rights and function of Labour Party conference, and the mandatory reselection of MPs and other representatives. We agitate for the unions to use their positions in the Labour structures to reconstruct Labour Party democracy and to push the policies decided by their members for social provision, for union rights, against cuts, etc.

Within the sizeable group of unaffiliated trade unions, we continue to argue the need for politics and a political voice for workers (including active use of political funds; continuing moves to support labour movement candidates supporting union policies and action against the cuts etc; participating in forums about advancing working class political representation; affiliation to the LRC).

We defend the unions' right to participate collectively in politics, and thus fight against any moves by the Lib Dem-Tory government to legislate against collective union funding of political parties.

10) Left unity

We call for unity of the activist left on these class-struggle axes, on every level from unity in local anti-cuts committees, in local class-struggle-based anti-fascist campaigns, and in rebuilding Trades Councils, upwards. We should not have any illusions about full-scale unity between the bigger left groups — SWP, SP, AWL — happening without huge political reorientations of a sort not likely short of big changes around us. There is a big gap, not only of day-to-day political differences, but of basic political approach and culture, between us and the kitsch left. Agitation for unity (that is, for those political reorientations) is still a necessary part of political education. It is a necessary tool in our battle to spread our ideas and build the AWL.

11) The AWL

We must raise the AWL to the level demanded of it by the scale of the capitalist crisis, the assault being made on the working class by the new government, and the challenge posed to the labour movement.

This calls for "Leninising" the AWL — shedding the sluggish discussion-circle habits which we have contracted in the

long period of relative political quiet, increasing the tempo and the discipline of our activity, turning outwards.

It also calls for a renewed drive to educate ourselves and convert the educated into educators, so that each one of our activists can be a centre of political energy and enlightenment in their anti-cuts campaigns, in their union, or on their campus.

The details of what we must do on these counts are dealt with in other documents.

Endnote

For instance, once the American workers got over the shock that began with the Wall Street slump in late 1929 and the mass unemployment and destitution that followed, they went on the offensive and created the CIO and the modern US industrial unions. By contrast in Britain the slump dampened down the British trade union movement and crushed much of it. The explanation for the difference was in the different history and recent history of the British and US labour movements.

The British labour movement came out of World War One greatly strengthened in organisation and militantly combative. It remained comparatively militant even in the period that followed the betrayal of the General Strike and the onset of the slump. The workers' previous disappointments, the inconclusive nature in terms of stable gains of the great struggles, the defeat and betrayal of the General Strike, and the demoralising experience of the Labour government of 1929-1931, prompted a collapse of industrial militancy in the 1930s.

The American workers had had no such disappointed militancy or betrayal and defeat. In the 1920s vast numbers of them had bought into the "American Dream" of an ever-upward cycle of capitalist prosperity — as indeed so many British workers have bought into such ideas in the last 15 to 20 years. Therefore they brought no baggage of experience comparable to that of the British into the slump.

After a while they got their bearings. The Ford cars of workers, which in the 1920s had been cited as the visible manifestation of American prosperity and proof that the US working class was "bourgeoisified", were used to facilitate the innovation of flying pickets as the workers confronted the employers.

In Britain in the decade and a half before Thatcher, the workers showed tremendous militancy, even bringing down the Tory government as a result of direct action (in February 1974). For much of the 1970s there was a rippling wave of factory occupations. The political result was only the Wilson-Callaghan government; the economic result, wages barely keeping pace with inflation; the result in terms of working-class consciousness, bafflement. The most tremendous industrial struggles since the 1920s — in which vast numbers of workers had wanted generally and all too vaguely a fundamental change in British society — had produced only a Wilson government. Faced with the tremendous slump and mass unemployment from 1980 and the determined class-war-waging Tory government, militancy collapsed. When the miners struck in 1984-5, it was against the background of a very crestfallen labour movement, very damped-down, shackled by anti-union laws, and unwilling to give the miners the solidarity they needed to win.

9: From our 2011 document

Workers' Liberty conference voted for the following in 2011, as the fourth section of a document "AWL and the next year" — analogous to the "perspectives" resolution in the appendix above

The wretched Ed Miliband and slow Labour stirrings

When Ed Miliband was elected Labour leader in September 2010, by union votes and against the wishes of the Shadow Cabinet and the majority of Labour MPs, we commented that his repudiation of "New Labour" and his re-statement of some "old Labour" attitudes would "resonate in the labour movement and in a working class faced with the coalition onslaught".

At the same time we warned: "Neil Kinnock, Labour leader from 1983 to 1992, and political father or grandfather of New Labour, backed Ed Miliband. He sat in the hall beaming at his protégé's performance. Kinnock, too, started on the soft left. The precedent was probably lost on Ed Miliband: it should not be lost on socialists... No one should rely on Miliband supporting any strikes!" Both comment and warning have been confirmed.

The warning, in spades. There has been very little union and Labour-left pressure on Ed Miliband. Despite his stated repudiation of New Labour, he has operated in line with his record as a New Labour minister and the pressure on him from diehard-Blairites in Labour's extensive wonkosphere of advisers, media people, and think-tankers. His response to the riots (demanding more cops, criticising the Tories for cutting police numbers) and his explicit support for the Dale Farm eviction only the day before the United Nations, no less, criticised that eviction, are only the latest examples.

Ed Miliband's political aim appears to be a Labour/ Lib-Dem coalition government after 2015. We oppose this and urge the labour movement to fight for a clear Labour victory along with pressure to make the Labour government carry out pro-working-class measures incompatible with a Lib-Dem coalition. Partly because 2015 is distant, and partly because of the political weakness of the labour movement, there is no groundswell against Miliband on this issue yet. We should raise the issue and work to educate the labour movement against such coalitionism.

Ed Miliband and his cronies have made the promised review of Labour Party structures a manipulated, botched exercise. Even though Ed Miliband has not attempted the sharp further destruction of Labour Party democracy which David Miliband seemed intent on, the supposed democratic consultation will end with a mostly-regressive package of changes cooked together by apparatchiks at the last minute and bounced through Labour Party conference as take-it-or-leave-it. All the serious democratic changes proposed during the consultation have been marginalised (by an artificial ruling-out of rule changes tabled by CLPs in good time), and the right wing remains on the offensive, demanding further talks on a cut in the union vote at Labour conference. The basics of the New Labour structure remain.

Yet the Labour-union links, through seriously changed, have survived. The history of the interaction has begun again, and in radically changed conditions to those of the last 20 years.

We would be "getting in our own light" if we thought that Ed Miliband's scandalous statements on Dale Farm, or the riots, or 30 June (which we should expose and condemn) will stop the broad working-class public seeing the Labour Par-

ty as the practical, available, mainstream alternative, loosely linked with the union movement, to (at least) the severity of the Lib/Tory cuts.

However we should note the results of the 2011 Scottish Parliament elections where Labour lost 22 seats to the SNP including all of their once traditional heartland constituency seats in central Scotland. This points not to the popularity of nationalism among working class voters (there remains a clear majority against independence) but rather to the vulnerability of traditional Labour support in the face of an SNP that had carried out Old Labour welfarist policies such as ending prescription charges, freezing the council tax, scrapping tuition fees, ending council house sales, and preserving free personal care for the elderly. Elsewhere the absence of such any other credible force — and the Lib Dems' role in government — means that Labour remains the electoral alternative to the Tories for working class voters but this should not necessarily be mistaken for an active approval of Labour policies.

Labour Party membership has increased by a number modest in broad historical terms but large compared to its shrunken level in May 2010 (and large compared to our numbers). The precise figure given at Labour's November 2010 National Policy Forum was 45,803 new members since May 2010. In June 2011, Harriet Harman claimed that the influx had risen to 70,000. The unions' decisions to vote through OMOV for constituency representations on Labour's National Policy Forum (2009) and to compel reinstatement of political motions at Labour Party conference (2010) were small but significant moves to reopen the party.

Even when a crushing Labour defeat in the 2010 general election, and thus a severe discrediting of the whole New Labour gang, seemed probable, we warned that the whole condition of working-class public opinion made it unlikely that a revival of the affiliated-unions/Labour complex would take a left-wing character, even by "old Labour" standards of what is left-wing.

Given the surprisingly close election result, as we noted in 2010, the pressure for a radical restructuring and revival of the Labour Party as a living organisation that a massive defeat might have produced has not existed.

Within the Labour Party and in the trade unions, the leading layers of New Labour politicians, especially the younger ones, are not utterly discredited, as they should be and might have been by a crushing Labour defeat and outright Tory victory.

On the evidence, most of the new members are "left-wing" only as far as disliking the coalition's cuts and wanting something a bit more socially-generous and humane. There are some pockets of more serious leftists; there are more twitches of life on the Labour left than for a while (things like the walk-out of discontented delegates at the Young Labour conference 2011); there is no coordinated, revived Labour Left.

The most likely prospect for the next year or so is a continued slow, low-level increase in the low level of life in the Labour Party. By 2014 or so, pressures to "batten down", swallow dissent, and rally to the incumbent leadership for the next general election will be strong; but that is in the future, and it is not even clear that the greater pressure to "batten down"

will push things significantly lower than they are already. (The 2009 Labour Party conference saw the unions defy the leadership more — though still very limitedly — than any for some years, despite it being the pre-election conference).

That low level of life is not just a reflection of the adverse change in Labour Party structures (though it is that too), but also part of a general low level of working-class political life. It would be wrong to read the narrowness of Labour Party political life as proof that there must elsewhere be broad avenues of workingclass political life bypassing the Labour Party.

There is no im-mediate prospect of a militant syndicalist upsurge attempting to by-pass the Labour Party. The idea that a group of smaller supposedly “fighting” unions, RMT and others, might generate a political alternative to the Labour Party, which was a half-thought behind the establishment of the Trade Union Coordinating Group of leftish unions in 2008, was never viable. It is more obviously unviable after 30 June, when three of the six TUCG public-sector unions took no part in the strike, and the TUCG as such could do no more than issue a bland statement of support, similar to Unison’s but less noticed. Developing rank and file networks and initiatives in the bigger unions is indispensable politically as well as industrially. The small stirrings visible in those big unions are thus very important.

Rioting and looting is a loud signal of social discontent, but not a workable means of positive political action. or now and for the next foreseeable period the Labour-union bloc is still central in working-class politics, and cannot be “bypassed”.

The May 2010 general election established the failure of the attempts by the left groups (including AWL) since 2000 to use electioneering during the years of New Labour rule to build on working-class resentment at that rule and against New Labour’s suppression of effective working-class political representation and to regroup a substantial body of left and working-class activists.

The desultoriness of anti-Labour left electoralism now — chiefly the SP’s TUSC — indicates that it cannot provide any large-scale political expression for a working-class fightback, and moreover is of small effectiveness even in what it might more plausibly do, i.e. provide a socialist propaganda voice. That general judgement does not rule out limited and local exceptions where socialist or labour-movement anti-Labour candidates could do a useful job, but it does mean that in the mappable future they will be limited exceptions.

There was nowhere in May 2011 where AWL members thought it wise to propose AWL council candidates or active AWL involvement in the campaign of other left council candidates, and the general trend (with possible exceptions, of course) will be for the fact of Tory-led government to push discontented working-class voters towards Labour and make the terrain more difficult for anti-Labour left electioneering.

Agitation to “make Labour fight” — including “make Labour councils fight” — has to be a central political theme. It has to be a central theme irrespective of calculations we can make that official Labour’s “fight” against the Tories will continue to be feeble. It is one of the day-to-day expressions of the general agitation, which we should continue, for a work-

ers’ government.

By workers’ government, we mean a government based on the labour movement, and serving the working class.

“Of all parties and organisations which base themselves on the workers... and speak in their name, we demand that they break politically from the bourgeoisie and enter upon the road of struggle for the workers’ government. On this road we promise them full support against capitalist reaction. At the same time, we indefatigably develop agitation around those transitional demands which should in our opinion form the program of the ‘workers’ government’.

“Is the creation of such a government by the traditional workers’ organisations possible? Past experience shows, as has already been stated, that this is, to say the least, highly improbable...”

“However, there is no need to indulge in guesswork. The agitation around the slogan of a workers’... government preserves under all conditions a tremendous educational value... [to] aid the striving of the workers for independent politics, deepen the class character of these politics...”

In the unions (mainly) and through our Labour Party fraction work, we fight for the reconstruction of Labour Party democracy, including the full rights and function of Labour Party conference, and the mandatory reselection of MPs and other representatives. We agitate for the unions to use their positions in the Labour structures to reconstruct Labour Party democracy and to push the policies decided by their members for social provision, for union rights, against cuts, etc.

We defend the unions’ right to participate collectively in politics, and thus fight against any moves by the Lib/Tory government to legislate against collective union funding of political parties.

The still-weak state of Labour Party life means there is no mandate for the comprehensive evasive measures, inevitably reducing our public political profile, which would be necessary for thorough immersion in Labour Party activity. The proper course is fraction work, with limited evasive measures by selected people.

As of now, our problem in this field is not excessive immersion and evasive measures, but too few of our people involved in the fraction work. Openings (limited openings, but openings) in Young Labour and in the review of Labour Party structures have been seized by us less vigorously than they should have been because of the small numbers of our people actively involved. The exploratory and investigative work in local Labour Parties which we decided on over a year ago still lacks feedback from many areas. A measured increase in fraction work is called for.

Although the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) is weak in terms of campaigning or of having local groups, it has a large-ish audience and can run large meetings. We should raise our profile within it, starting with the November 2011 LRC conference.

10: Our motion on the Labour Party, 2025

Workers' Liberty conference voted for the following in April 2025, our first conference since Labour was elected in July 2024. See the appended motion on "We Demand Change" for important context

1. **We should continue** to encourage friends of Workers' Liberty to be active in the Labour Party for socialist ideas, and to step up the consistency of the work.

2. The conditions for the work are difficult, and there is no guarantee of quick improvement.

3. However, this orientation, alongside investigating the possibility of electoral challenges, puts us in a good place to maximise labour-movement revival. And if done consistently it spreads our ideas, wins contacts, wins forces for campaigns, and gives activists training in how to intervene which will serve us well for future and larger interventions.

4. Since 2019 the Parliamentary leadership has moved to the right and the regime has been tightened.

5. Probably most of the "Corbyn surge" people ("returners" who had been active in the 1980s, quit, and then came back) have dispersed or become inactive. Most have quit voluntarily. Some have been expelled, but nowhere near as many as in 2015 and 2016, and expulsions are now running at a low level. Supporters of the Parliamentary leadership now control the key official positions in most CLPs. Young Labour is dormant; Labour Students not all sewn up, but weak.

6. Membership was 339,000 at the end of 2024. It is still slowly drifting downwards (432,000 at the end of 2021; 485,000 at the end of 2019; 570,000 at the Corbyn peak in mid-2017), but is still considerably higher than in the Miliband or late Blair-Brown years (156,000 at end of 2009; 193,000 at the end of 2014).

7. Union leaders are still willing and able to push the Labour leadership on trade-union and workers' rights. However, after the Blairite counter-revolution in the structures, they no longer have the majority weight they previously had. Last year's Labour Party Conference underlined this. A number of unions, and UNITE in particular, moved to reject the leadership's slashing of pensioners' winter fuel payments. Their resolution was scheduled for the beginning of Conference, but then bureaucratically shunted to the end, with the leadership openly saying they would not take into account what they said, whatever the decision. The unions, led by UNITE, won the vote and it was ignored. Since then, UNITE in particular and despite its politics on some other issues, has organised a grass roots campaign (demonstrations, lobbies, etc) to overturn the decision. Also, many of the union leaderships protested before the election at the widescale and bureaucratic exclusion of leftist candidates, including their own members, and there was just a single example of the leadership back-tracking (Dianne Abbott). Union delegates in local CLPs are few. There has not been a sustained fight by the unions to push the Labour leadership on cuts, welfare, pay, etc. We will organise in our unions for this.

8. In summary, the situation is adverse but not all sewn up. Where friends of Workers' Liberty overcame qualms and pushed motions for Gaza ceasefire and "two states" after 7 October 2023, almost everywhere they won. It is still common to get left-wing motions through CLPs where the right wing controls the officer positions. It is not rare for left wingers to be able to work as Trade Union Liaison Officer or Political Education Officer or LGBT officer in a CLP where the right wing has most officers. At Labour conference 2024, our friends were able to weigh perhaps decisively on one debate (getting the "Border Security" motion withdrawn), get

a good response to literature, and make good contacts. In recent years many more copies of Women's Fightback have been sold at Labour conference than anywhere else.

9. Intervening in a local Labour Party enables activists to develop skills in speaking, in combating bureaucratic obstruction, in identifying possible contacts, etc. which will be vital for future activity. And with relative ease, and in a framework where the efforts of activists in different localities mesh together in a collective effort.

10. The efforts of the dispersed Corbyn people who have sought to create "alternatives" have so far been very poor (Workers' Party, Transform, Collective, Majority, "local independents", etc.) It would be disorienting for us to fix our eyes hopefully in that direction and rely on waiting for a good political vehicle to emerge out of the blur.

11. Local Labour Parties are in most places the best political forums available for us to intervene in terms of potential immediate results, if only because there are few other available schedules of meetings which take motions, debates, etc. There is more to it than those immediate results, though. After leading and supporting strikes and intervening in union branches, the Labour Party is the best place to push to maximise labour-movement revival. Certainly much better 10 than placing hopes in Collective or one of the other Corbyn-diaspora efforts at "local" and "independent" politics.

12. In the era of Trump 2.0, the plates of politics are shifting.

13. The whip of the far-right danger is by no means to be welcomed, but it may galvanise in a way that the prospect of a return to unpleasant-but-familiar Tory rule did not in the past. To repeat: positioning our small forces in the right place, pushing in the right direction, does not guarantee success in the coming years. We are not strong enough to guarantee anything. But we will make ourselves strong only by doing what is responsible and rational in terms of working-class politics, and developing energy and drive in convincing others to do it with us.

Motion on "We Demand Change"

Workers' Liberty's Executive Committee passed the following motion in 2025 shortly before our national conference at which the motion above was passed, and was important context for it:

1. **We will join** We Demand Change where they are set up and are reasonably open (e.g. have meetings where discussion is possible)

2. In the groups we argue for them:

- To be democratic

- Immediately, to focus on help to initiate broad union-Labour-disabled-etc campaign committees to defeat the benefit cuts in the coming weeks

- To work with Stand Up To Racism to act as levers to initiate broad and democratic broad union-Labour-community anti-racist campaign committees

3. Generally, we argue for them to act as bodies to initiate broad campaigns drawing in union and Labour organisations and people, rather than as an "alternative labour movement"

4. If the groups discuss electoral candidacies in May 2026 — it's not clear, given the discrepancy between what was said at the event and the subsequent *Socialist Worker* reporting of

it — we argue for:

- Full discussion
- A political profile focused on socialism and working-class political representation and continuing organisation, on the model of the Socialist Alliance rather than Respect or Collective

5. We are against We Demand Change groups becoming support agencies for candidacies with a primary profile which is “local independent” (such as the Broxtowe Alliance or the Islington Independents or Majority) or (by strong implication) “against Ukraine, for Hamas” (which the SWP may favour).

11: Motion on the Sultana-Corbyn initiative

Workers’ Liberty’s National Committee passed the following motion in August 2025, shortly after the new initiative was announced, and a few months after our conference passed the motion reproduced in appendix 10.

The Sultana-Corbyn initiative [“Your Party”] has larger chances of organising a sizeable part of the “Corbynite” diaspora, and people who were not active or too young to have been active during Corbyn’s time as leader, than the other “new party” initiatives since July 2023 (Transform, Collective, Majority, various Community Independent council groups).

While we are concerned about the very possible political trajectory of Your Party, and the likely political influence within it of people with very different “socialist” politics to ours, and while we recognise that a great number of the claimed 600,000 plus people who have signed up for further information are unlikely to be active, we also recognise:

1. The possibility of us finding amongst that extremely large number of people:
 - An audience in various areas with whom we may debate our politics and seek to recruit.
 - Individuals who are relatively politically raw — and therefore relatively uncompromised by the politics of much of the contemporary UK left — and more open to our ideas.
2. Our responsibility for trying to render as politically healthy as possible such a potential initiative on the ostensible left, and partial forces and elements within that initiative.
3. Our right and duty to seek to build our organisation and our political reach within such an initiative.

Sultana-Corbyn promises a democratic conference, and so in line with our conference decision we should intervene without giving up on the struggle and our work within the Labour Party (LP).

All of us should sign up to “keep informed”. We do not resign our Labour Party membership and we do not cease our work in the LP, or advise others to.

Our comrades who are active in the LP will seek to work with the Sultana-Corbyn initiative in class-struggle activities such as strike support and anti-cuts battles if it engages in such activities as well as electoralism, and attend public meetings if the initiative calls them, etc.

Within the Labour Party we will argue for better organisation on the Labour left, for a more serious fight against the Starmer leadership, and for united front work with Your Party activists against the far right, in support of migrants and asylum seekers, in support of disputes, and against the cuts.

Everyone will sign up to keep informed about “Your Party” and those of us excluded from LP, plus others agreed by the EC, will seek to join “Your Party” as an organised faction and argue in any local or national in-person meetings for;

- democratic structure and accountability of council and

parliamentary representatives; working-class socialist and internationalist politics.

- activism in workplaces and on streets, not narrow electoralism.
- Your Party requiring working members to be members of a trade union and encouraging them to be active in their trade unions to build union density, as a key basis of workers’ power and leverage.
- a thought-through anti cuts strategy as basic to any left challenge in council elections.
- United Front work with LP members.

We will demand democratic meetings to decide structures, and argue that any organisation founded must be genuinely democratic, advocating the following general principles:

1. Local branches that meet at least monthly.
2. Party policy and programme decided by a conference that meets at least annually.
3. Democracy includes not only the right to vote on questions handed down by leaders, but rights for the rank-and-file to put forward our own proposals and amendments, and to participate and be heard in debate on proposals. Top-down plebiscites and gimmicks like sortition are not the basis of a meaningful democracy.
4. Between conference, the party should be led by elected committees, not by MPs and/or other public office holders, and certainly not by technocrats around Corbyn/Sultana/etc. Collective leadership is preferable and cultism around Corbyn or any other figure must be sharply resisted.
5. Public-office-holders associated with the party must be subordinate to the party’s democratic decisions and subject to mandatory reselection.
6. Groups facing special oppressions (including women, LGBT+, disabled and racialised people) have the right to self-organisation within the membership
7. Open differences of opinion among the membership must be allowed. We make the case for acting together where there is agreement and openly debating our differences where they exist.

We will say that a thought-through anti-cuts strategy is essential in the May 2026 elections and counterpose that to the record of the Pendle independents, running their council in alliance with the Lib Dems, are to be the model for “new party” in local government.

We say that a presence in Parliament is useful only if used to advance working-class socialist politics, and contrast that to the record of the “Gaza Independents” in Parliament and indeed even of Corbyn in the July 2024 election

We say that to contribute positively, the project has to offer better than the Greens, who already exist and have a form of

democratic structures, i.e. it has to offer working-class socialist politics (which we spell out).

We should do all this in a mode of “patiently explaining” and a constructive rather than sneering tone.

It is conceivable that this could produce on the scale of the initial Mélenchon “Parti de Gauche” in France, or WASG in Germany. However, while we should not get bowled over by the large numbers signing up to keep informed, and while the “Corbynite” diaspora is sizeable, but of poor political quality, and has been largely inactive in recent years, the claimed registered numbers clearly exceed that former Corbynite base.

Sultana announces the aim of the venture as to win government in 2029, perhaps as part of a Popular Front, which does not look realistic. The venture has no class-struggle politics

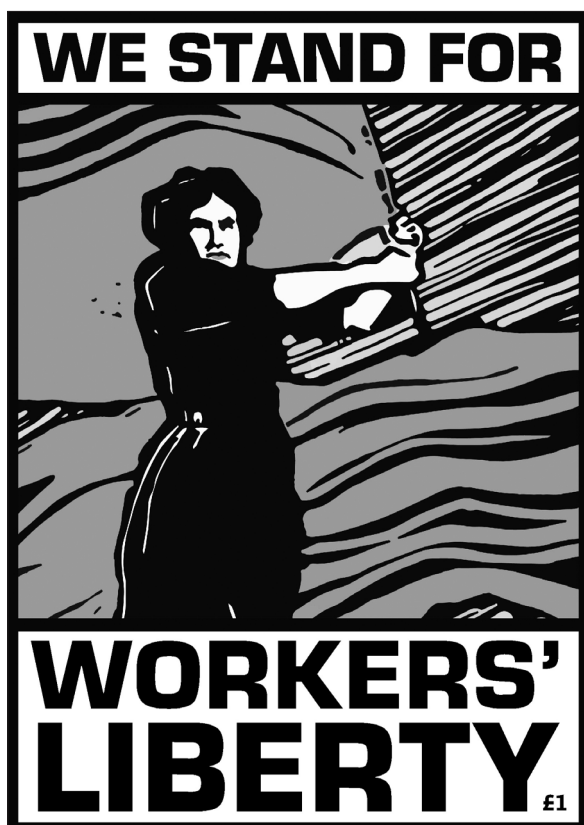
for its next focus, the May 2026 local elections, and makes no offer of non-electoral class struggle in the meantime. Again, we seek to operate as a small lever wherever we can for better politics.

The situation ahead of us is not entirely predictable. The NC will keep our orientation under review as events unfold, and in the light of our experiences within the LP and Your Party. For instance, we will need to develop our position(s) within non-LP affiliated unions, where we can expect a push at NEC level to swing (some sort of) support behind Your Party and where, for our own reasons, we would want Corbyn and Sultana to work with Labour MPs and suspended Labour MPs in support of our unions’ campaigns.

12: Further reading on “Your Party”, Labour, etc.

The political situation is developing fast. For more coverage, check out:

- Our latest articles on the Sultana-Corbyn initiative, “Your Party”, including our bulletins, proposed amendments, etc. — workersliberty.org/your-party
- The publications advertised throughout this pamphlet — all at workersliberty.org/books
- Our fortnightly newspaper — workersliberty.org/sub
- Our weekly email — workersliberty.org/signup
- Articles on Labour — workersliberty.org/labour-party
- And more articles, events, and debates via our website



Workers’ Liberty is a socialist organisation. Our members are active in workplaces, Uni campuses, trade unions, the Labour Party, and left politics. We think it is possible to replace capitalism with a better society — socialism. We think that the people who can do this are the working class.

This pamphlet sets out what we think, what we do, and what makes us different from other political groups and NGOs. It tells you what is involved with being a member.

- 12 pages, £1: workersliberty.org/books