

• The Labour Party was far from being a spent force in working class politics, as it had seemed to be in 1969 and as it deserved to be. It became necessary to understand that a 'revolutionary movement' like the SWP built outside the real workers' political movement was a white elephant, a stupid repetition of the sectarian mistakes of the SLL in the '60s and the CP earlier. It was in fact not a revolutionary movement at all, but a caricature of one — what Tony Cliff used to call 'toy-town Bolshevism'.

Most of the revolutionary Left failed to make the necessary reassessment. Ever the Workers' Fight group, which had begun to reorientate in 1972 and, with more energy, in 1973, found itself inhibited and dragged back by the combined weight of 'left' emotionalism and propagandist methods. The IMG, which began to orient to the Labour Party in 1975, turned to the sectarian fantasies of Socialist Unity's toytown electioneering a couple of years later. The truth is probably that in terms of numbers, the major reorientation by far Left forces was the one made by separate individuals going into the Labour Party.

These individuals were undoubtedly a leaven for the fight within the political wing of the labour movement to make sure future Labour government could not ignore the labour movement like Wilson and Callaghan did. This movement for Labour democracy, provisionally victorious at Wembley, was the proof that the toytown 'Bolsheviks' had gone off at a tangent. Instead of the Labour Party being irrevocably discredited, the flexibility of the movement allowed a powerful campaign for political renewal and reclamation of the political wing of the movement to develop.

Even if it should prove true that such a campaign for political renewal cannot possibly conquer the whole Labour Party, it remains a fact that now, with a great political ferment going on in the labour movement, based on an attempt to draw lessons from past failures and betrayals and to adopt measures to guard against a repetition, the possibility of serious workers breaking organisationally from the Labour Party to join a group like the SWP is non-existent. Nobody in their senses would want to opt to build from the ground up if the chance exists to fight to claim the existing movement for working class politics.

*And that chance does exist.*

The fact that the Labour Left is active — albeit with the collaboration of union leaders who pursue other and separate interests and goals — and capable of winning the existing labour movement to new methods and policies, does not just indicate that the anti-Labour Party revolutionary Left has taken a wrong turning, but also that one of the facts of political life that has shaped the far Left — since the early '60s, in fact — is changed.

For the sectarianism which has settled itself into place as the gravitational axis of the far Left (beginning with the SLL/WRP in the early '60s, and continuing with groups like the IS/SWP in the mid-'60s) was only one side of a phenomenon. The other side of it was the collapse, feebleness, and inconsequentiality of the Labour Left after its surrender to/defeat by Gaitskell on unilateral disarmament in 1961. In the same way, the rightism of the Italian CP and the terrorism of the

Red Brigades are also two sides of one phenomenon...

All of this means that the decisions of Blackpool and Wembley pose the question to the revolutionaries even more sharply than it is posed to the Parliamentary Liberals calling themselves 'social democrats' — where do you stand in relation to the labour movement? Not some past or future or fantasy labour movement, but the one that exists and is struggling to sort itself out politically.

True to form, the IMG has absolved itself of its Socialist Unity stupidities and irresponsibilities, and is trying to snuggle up to the Labour Party. But the important far Left force outside the Labour Party is the SWP. Its reaction to Wembley shows the pressure it is feeling.



As we saw above, its response has been to tell its readers that what is going on in the Labour Party is not very important! The unions are the important thing.

But when the unions have appropriated 40% of the vote for the next Labour prime minister, when the labour movement can dominate Parliament, to counterpose the importance of the unions to the political concerns of the labour movement is effectively to advocate that the trade unions abstain from politics! In fact, the opposition of the SWP to the Labour Party is grounded on a half-heartedly expressed, but in practice dominating, rejection of the use of Parliament.

Workers vote, so the SWP said vote Labour in the last election. But its whole thrust of criticism is towards the view that Parliament does not matter and is a sideshow to distract attention and to damp down the 'real' — industrial direct-action — struggle. Workers' Action holds no brief for Parliament, nor for the view that power is to be found there. But the choice for the labour movement is either that it will engage in the political processes and institutions of the society in which it exists — even if its purpose is to subvert and replace them — or it must abstain from effective political action in the here and now, either rejecting politics explicitly in favour of trade unionism, as syndicalist movements have done, or confining itself to propaganda. The SWP tries to combine both of these alternatives to politics in its own small sideshow.

Events have destroyed the pretence, behind which the SWP long hid, that the Labour Party and the unions exist in separate compartments. They don't. More and more the SWP is forced into explicitly opposing the participation of militant workers in the political processes in which the trade unions are central — a position which serves only the right wing, and is thus reactionary.

Paul Foot, the SWP's leading anti-Parliamentarian and therefore a propagandist for the view that the Labour Party is an irrelevance, made his major — and already much-quoted — contribution to maintaining SWP militants in frozen irrelevance with the feeble joke —

'If you want to push a wheelbarrow, don't sit in it'. What is it supposed to mean? The class has pushed the Labour Party — because it hasn't confined itself to internal Labour Party concerns. Therefore, comrades of the SWP, don't join the Labour Party! Anything more maladroit from Foot's point of view, and more stupid, is hard to imagine! The

deadweight, the people who hold back the movement and therefore the working class, are those who abstain from the struggle, confine themselves to cold and lifeless assessments, and stay fixed in hopeless political demoralisation instead of throwing their weight behind the drive of the militant Left to make the political wing of the unions an instrument of the working class.

Foot's attitude is a million miles from the spirit of Marxism. If the trade unions did not have a political wing, we would have to advocate that they create one and engage in politics. We would try to ensure that a labour movement party adopted revolutionary politics. The SWP can't recognise that something similar is going on — or can be made to go on — within the shell of the existing political labour movement. Even the Fabian ex-Minister Tony Benn has a better sense of history than these Marxists, when he says it is a matter of refounding the Labour Representation Committee.

The tradition of British Marxism is a sectarian tradition for the 100 years of its history. The Fabians got more influence on the labour movement than even the objective conditions of British capitalism would have given them because of the sectarian abstentionism of the Marxist SDF.

The peculiarities of British history and the accumulated wealth of privileged British capitalism, which on the one hand created, with the help of Fabians and sectarian Marxists alike, a reformist labour movement, at the same time have preserved that movement in a flexible form that allows it to recast itself in a different mould, and perhaps in a fundamentally different mould. The test for Marxists is whether they can make themselves into a force that can, unlike our predecessors when the Labour Representation Committee was being formed, win the movement to our politics. History does not often allow such second chances!

The tasks and opportunities we face in Britain now parallel what the world revolutionary Marxist movement faced after world war 1. It tried to claim and reshape all or sections of the existing labour movements for our politics. It is well known that Leninism took shape as a repudiation of reformism. It is known that it was shaped too by a conflict with ultra-leftist rejection of parliament, of united fronts, etc. It is less well known that the fully-developed ultra-lefts, as distinct from people guided by ultra-left moods and partial views, had a completely worked-out position which paralleled [and reflected] the opportunists'.

These were the Communist Workers' Party of Germany (KAPD) and their co-thinkers in Holland. Their leaders were Gorter and Pannekoek. Essentially they said that the Second International had been a mistake. A newer and purer movement had to be built, eschewing parliamentary action and trade unionism alike.

In contrast, Lenin and Trotsky and their comrades set out to reclaim and reorient the labour movement built in the period of the Second International, and thus to undo the work of those in the Second International who had betrayed socialism and the working class by supporting their own governments in world war 1. Otherwise, the project of building the Third International would have been at