

Revolutionary unity and the struggle for the Labour Party

Labour movement at the crossroads

“Comrade Gorter looks upon trade unions and parliamentarianism as supra-historical categories, as magnitudes that are given once and for all. And since the utilisation of the trade unions and parliamentarianism by the Social Democracy failed to lead to revolution, therefore Comrade Gorter proposes that we turn our backs upon the trade unions and parliamentarianism, not noticing that he thereby is, at the given moment, turning his own back upon the working class itself”.

Leon Trotsky, 'On the Policy of the KAPD', 1921. In 'The First Five Years of the Communist International', vol.1, p.180.

THE BOURGEOIS press is full of the crisis which Labour's Right is experiencing. You have to read the press of the revolutionary Left, and with some care, in order to appreciate the crisis which is being brought to a head for the far Left groups by the events in the Labour Party since the defeat of the Callaghan government 18 months ago.

Socialist Worker has responded to the Wembley conference, where the trade unions gained the major vote in electing a future Labour prime minister, by telling its readers that it is unimportant and that they should not join the Labour Party to help the Left because, 'if you want to push a wheelbarrow, you don't sit in it'.

These are parallel crises.

The entire far Left either came into existence during the years after Wilson formed his majority government in 1966, or, where groups like the present SWP and Militant existed before that, they have been radically reshaped and remoulded by the experience of Labour in government after 1966 and by the character of the class struggle since then. Of course, the overwhelming majority of individuals in the far left spectrum are people who have come in since 1966.

What has shaped this far Left?

- Disappointed with the Labour government, then joining the angry resistance to it, all the left groups except Militant left the Labour party between 1964 and '67.

- Then, and in the 1970s increasingly so, there was the pull of the industrial direct action, which was where the power of the working class was manifested, time and time again, to the culminating point of shouldering the Heath government off the track and into an election which it lost.

- It has been influenced by the guerilla, insurrectionary, and sometimes terrorist third world — and Irish — struggles; by the generally petty-bourgeois composition of the far Left itself; and by the 'confrontation now' spirit of student politics, which was partly an extrapolation from third world struggle but fundamentally expressed the short life-span of student radicalism. The labour movement was not merely a different world; the idea of a long haul to transform it belonged to a different class outlook.

- The weakness of any stable and tempered revolutionary tradition, the habitual chameleon-like willingness to adapt to its environment of the USFI, and

the sheer paucity of revolutionary cadres with any sort of political education, experience, or tempering, allowed an extraordinary luxuriance of left fads and experimental ideas of an ultra-left character to develop and continue for a long time.

- The women's movement gave a valuable dimension to the post-'68 left, bringing forward issues that had previously been part of the far Left but only in the pages of old books (for example, the chapter on women, youth, and the family in Trotsky's *Revolution Betrayed*). At the same time it added to the pressures on and within the left which pushed it away from the political labour movement — for of course that movement congeals, in its practices and attitudes, everything oppressive of women in capitalist society and restricting the exercise of equality. And the women's movement boosted lifestyle-ism.

- The toxic increase in both official state racism and freelance racism, after the Labour government slammed the door on Asian passport-holders from Kenya, has made necessary the self-organisation of blacks in parallel to the labour movement — generating pressures away from the labour movement similar to those generated by the women's movement.

The result is that the far Left now looks something like this.

There is the Socialist Workers Party with two or three thousand members. It does trade union work, mainly though not exclusively in white collar unions; and it makes propaganda for socialism and for 'building the party' which is the only thing that supposedly links the trade union struggle with socialism and indeed with politics.

There is Militant, 1500 to 2,000 strong, making passive propaganda in the Labour Party and in the unions. There is the IMG, 600 or 700 strong, whose last conference decided that they should really be in the SWP, except that the SWP won't have them.

Round *Socialist Organiser* a tendency has developed which is active on a revolutionary basis in both the trade unions and the Labour Party. Then there is the WSL, and beyond that an enormous galaxy of political meteorites and cosmic political dust.

Essentially this fragmentation is a product of the fact that the SWP became a tightly-controlled and bureaucratic organisation almost a decade ago (after the ejection of the Workers' Fight tendency in December 1971).

Beyond the organisations there are a lot of individuals, generally 'revolutionary' but alienated from the revolutionary left. Some of them are in the Labour Party. The dominant trait of this far Left however is that it has taken shape apart from the labour movement, and therefore apart from the working class in so far as it has yet organised itself as a coherent social or political force in our society. In many cases it stands apart from real work in the unions; in its big majority, it stands apart from, and counterposes

itself organisationally to, the workers' political movement. The post-'68 radical left differentiated fundamentally on the issue of whether or not to have a working class orientation; but even those, the IS-SWP (including at the time Workers' Fight), who opted for such an orientation, opted for a purely trade unionist, syndicalist definition of what they recognised as the workers' movement.

Militant, apparently the opposite of the extra-Labour Party left, was in fact moulded negatively by the same experiences. Confronted in 1965-6 by the reactionary Labour government, it abandoned struggle of any sort and retreated up the ladder of propagandist abstraction, as a technique of peaceful coexistence with the Labour bureaucracy. It abstained from solidarity movements like the Vietnamese, ignores the women's movement, and disregards gay rights. At every point, politically and organisationally it has adapted and accommodated to the movement that the others were repelled by. The task, however, is neither to run away from it, nor to accommodate and absorb its backwardness, but to change it.

The picture which the disunited and squabbling far Left presents today is an offputting one, indeed often a disgusting one. Yet much has in fact been achieved in the last 15 years. Many thousands of people are acquainted with the ideas of revolutionary Marxism. Ideas about revolution, knowledge of the real history of the modern socialist movement — these are very widespread now. The literature of Marxism, much of it out of print for decades, is now widely available. The forces of revolutionary Marxism are potentially very powerful already, if only we can organise ourselves, and if the forces of the left can reorientate to the working class and the working class movement as they exist in Britain now.

The way the present far Left came into existence in the period since 1966 has equipped it very badly to do the first job of revolutionaries — to reach and mesh with the existing working class and labour movement. Betrayals and cynicism, such as those of the Wilson and Callaghan governments, take their toll also by what they do to socialist consciousness. The forces and experiences which allowed the far Left to reach an unprecedented level of growth after 1967, together with the disgust caused by Labour in power, have created a widespread sectarianism, and made it very difficult for revolutionaries to begin to reorientate after 1974.

The experience in 1974 of mass working class direct action resulting in a Labour government, was the point at which, all prior knowledge and understanding from the history of the working class discounted, it became a to-be-or-not-to-be question to face the conclusion that:

- Direct action was not enough; and, short of general strike, had no possibility of generating the necessary society-wide answers. For that reason the reformist leaders of the Labour Party were able to derail the movement.