

# Alliance for Workers' Liberty

## Discussion Bulletin 248

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### Revolutionary politics or trade-unionist politics?

#### *The issues before AWL conference*

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*"The authors of the theses stand up not as propagandists of Leninism but as benefactors of the human race. They want to reconcile the reformists with the Stalinists, even at their own expense. Still worse, they say so in advance, before being compelled to do so by the situation. They capitulate in anticipation. They retreat out of platonic generosity. "All this contradictory reasoning, in which the authors feel themselves simultaneously the representatives of a small minority and the inspectors-general of history, is the unhappy result of the trap that they set for themselves with the slogan of organic unity detached from all content or charged with a 'minimum' content".*

Leon Trotsky, On the Theses 'Unity and the Youth', 1934  
*"Trade unions do not offer, and in line with their task, composition, and manner of recruiting membership, cannot offer a finished revolutionary programme; in consequence, they cannot replace the party... Trade unions, even the most powerful, embrace no more than 20 to 25 per cent of the working class, and at that, predominantly the more skilled and better-paid layers... As organisations expressive of the top layers of the proletariat, trade unions... develop powerful tendencies toward compromise with the bourgeois-democratic regime... In times of war or revolution, when the bourgeoisie is plunged into exceptional difficulties, trade union leaders usually become bourgeois ministers..."*

Leon Trotsky, The Transitional Programme.  
*"It is never permissible for us to use or encourage faulty logic, the substitution of emotion for reason, or any of the other advertising tricks which are the stock in trade of bourgeois politicians and some of the self defined left..."*

TR and TC, point 3

*"Oh that God the gift should gie [give] us  
To see ourselves as others see us".*

Robert Burns

#### Introduction

We want to start by touching on something recently dealt with in another document. On the one hand, AWL is an organisation that bases itself on the Marxist tradition, on the

positions of the Comintern before the 5th Congress (1924), on Trotsky's movement for the Fourth International, and on the past history of our own organisation, critically digested.

That is, we have a definite method, tradition, theories, and encoded experience, including our own.

On the other hand, we allow for, and allow, a very wide range of differences within AWL and in our press, recognising that on the basis of our tradition and theories people may in good faith arrive at different opinions on many questions. We would not necessarily exclude from our ranks someone who, while accepting AWL's goals and programme, and in general fighting for our politics in the working class and among the left, rejected one or more of the theories or positions that are important to us. We have no heresy hunts.

These two things – constituting the organisation on a specific tradition and specific policies, and having a free and easy attitude to political and other differences within the Alliance – are on a certain level in contradiction with each other. Our free and easy attitude to divergences from our established politics might over time destroy the political basis on which AWL is constituted.

What is it that stops freedom of opinion in the organisation from eroding, undermining, and ultimately subverting the tradition and politics of the AWL?

Not bureaucratic stifling, but the collective consciousness and public opinion of the AWL does that, by responding to and examining and sifting ideas raised in the organisation, attitudes of indifference to or contempt for our traditions, and so on.

However, the "public opinion of the AWL" is not itself fixed and immutable, nor free from the possibility of decay, corruption, degeneration, and disintegration. It is something created and recreated by basic education, daily discussion, the coverage of events in our press, polemic with the left and pseudo-left, and in the course of dealing with challenge and dissent inside the organisation.

Maintaining the revolutionary Marxist consciousness – "public opinion" – of the organisation in fighting-fit

condition is the responsibility of every AWL member, but especially of the leading committees and of the individuals who staff them – that is, the elected leadership. In practice, this modifies or modulates the freedom of opinion in the organisation.

If someone in principle has the right to propound any opinion, others have the right and duty to respond in an appropriate manner. If we do not, we contribute in our own way to AWL's political corruption and dissolution. Tolerance is not tolerance in the sense and spirit of 'live and let live, and don't be rude or offensive to anyone'. It is not indifference. It is not letting antagonistic or half-antagonistic ideas stir in together in an undifferentiated, incoherent mess, that is, in our Marxist terminology, into a *centrist* hotch-potch.

It is not contenting oneself with 'liberal' clichés like: 'This comrade is entitled to think that, and I will respect that right by not obtruding my opinion'.

That is not 'liberalism' in the good sense, but 'rotten liberalism' – indifference and irresponsibility towards the political and methodological basis of the organisation. In the face of more or less pernicious nonsense, just to say: 'He has a right to his opinion', is not enough. Each comrade has a duty to respond politically.

In the late 1930s, Trotsky condemned one comrade (A) for having what he thought was the wrong view of the USSR, and another comrade (B) responded that comrade A was perfectly entitled to hold such an opinion. Trotsky replied that at issue was not the 'juridical' question of whether A was entitled to hold an opinion, but whether the opinion was right or wrong; and whether, if one thought it wrong, emphasising A's right to hold an opinion meant not trying to discredit, debunk, and arm comrades against A's views. By substituting the 'juridical' question of A's rights for the political point at issue, B inadvertently made himself the champion and defender of A's ideas (which he did not share).

If the public opinion of the AWL does not respond appropriately to the stupid 'Trot-baiting' in T-T's conference resolution, then one must conclude that the public opinion itself needs waking up and repair.

Trotsky once wrote that 'to leave error uncorrected is to encourage intellectual immorality'. For the members of an organisation like AWL, where opinion is free, quietly to tolerate TR's impudent Trot-baiting and misrepresentation of our (and his own) political history on the Labour Party would be evidence that our tolerance had turned into indifference, irresponsibility, and political and ideological decay. (The same is true of the attitude we should take to the ridiculous diatribes of GB – see 'Private Frazer in the AWL').

## The two Toms

Tom C, in contrast to Tom R, has a long-held view of the labour movement. In the main, the TC/TR resolution embodies his ideas. Tom C never shared our analysis – if we understood him – of Blairism, while Tom R helped formulate it. That is, Tom C has always been at a certain tangent to the AWL on these questions. He is politically stable, and he 'represents' within AWL an important element of the trade union movement. We think it good that, despite the political differences which neither side would want to blur or deny, he wants to connect himself with AWL.

Tom R zig-zags wildly. When he was on the EC, he was sometimes a valuably innovative contributor. His tendency to frequent zigzags were held in check. Outside the EC –

and, in recent times, the NC – he has evolved into a political wild man.

He has, for a number of conferences now, been starkly at odds with most of us, but from varying directions. Comrades will remember his wild denunciation of the rest of us for our lack of sufficient love and enthusiasm for the anti-Labour London mayoral candidate Ken Livingstone. In 2002 he tried to get us positively to support Bush and Blair in the Afghan war. It was only his penchant for inconsistency that prevented him following the logic of that position into support for Bush and Blair in Iraq, that is into the position now taken by comrade Alan Johnson.

TR's present politics on AWL and the labour movement are no less a departure from AWL politics than his views on the Afghan war.

In fact the methodological root and underlying political psychology of TR's politics here on AWL, Blair and the trade unions are essentially the same political methodology and the same political psychology as those which led him at the 2002 conference to argue that we should support Bush and Blair in the Afghan war – that is, that we should divest ourselves of our identity and class intransigence towards 'powers' who do something we in parts approve of.

In the labour movement, TR is guided by the false idea that the status quo, the trade unions 'united' in subordination to the Blair government, is better than having some of them disrupt that 'unity' by getting themselves expelled from the Labour Party. He confuses the basic principle of trade unionism - maximum unity - with the principles of revolutionary Marxist politics, which involve separating out the militants and organising them in a revolutionary party whose members are selected on their adherence to the programme.

In the case of the Afghan war, Bush and Blair were doing something – smashing the vile Taliban regime in Afghanistan – which from a certain angle we approved of; and TR's conclusion was that therefore we should forget our radical revolutionary Marxist hostility to them and everything fundamental that they stand for, and turn ourselves into approving propagandists for a war they conducted in their own way and for their own, not our, reasons.

At least in the war, there were certain real things we approved of. Here, on the union/ Labour Party question, what TR 'approves' of – trade-union political 'unity' under Blairite hegemony – is not a real prize, but something he sees as such only by reading backwards from a mechanical scenario for the future in which the trade unions take control of what is now the Blairite party.

## T-T's catch-all resolution

A number of comrades complain that they can't quite work out what the issues are in the dispute between Tom and Tom (T-T) on one side, and the National Committee (NC) on the other. They see that the two positions overlap at various points, and find it hard to separate one from the other.

It is perfectly true that there is a great deal of overlapping. Instead of focusing on and confining themselves to points of differences, and thus making clear what the disputed issues are, T-T's resolution is a catch-all document, which repeats points that are common to them and the National Committee, often in a manner which suggests that they are claiming those points as innovatory ideas unique to them, and that we are opposed to them.

We will begin by defining the main differences between the NC and T-T.

## “Trade-union control of political parties”

The T-T resolution consists of a number of elements, some of them contradictory and mutually exclusive of each other.

It combines TC's trade-unionistic – that is, organically right-wing, and even social-democratic – bias vis-a-vis the labour movement and the Blairite party with demagogic “militant” rhetoric and with the high-falutin but risible philosophical musings of TR, who increasingly specialises in such stuff.

The resolution's core position is that the vehicle of working-class self-liberation is the trade unions.

Pt 41: *“our central concern... is working-class representation through trade union control and accountability of candidates, representatives, and parties”*.

Pt 38: *“We want candidates, councillors and MPs who are answerable to the trade unions and accountable to them”*.

Pt. 39: *“The principle here is of working-class or labour representation. The working class must liberate itself... We propose to the working class organisations that they put workers from their own ranks up for selection through the Labour Party as candidates... and... the union hold them to account and binds them with its collective discipline”*.

Pt. 28: *“The Marxist tactic [is] the trade unions supporting, creating and controlling a new workers' party”*.

Pt. 27: *“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”*.

Pt. 6: *“There is only one coherent orientation to mass trade union politics today, that is to trying to mobilize the unions as unions to... assert control over the Labour Party, to fight to transform it into an organisation that represents the working class and in the process rally and organise the forces of a new proto party within the womb of the old”*.

The idea that the trade unions can be the central instrument of working-class self-emancipation was determinedly rejected by the Communist International, yet it is the axis on which all the other elements in T-T's resolution revolve. It underpins T-T's other all-shaping idea, which generates its own important implications for what AWL does and is in the labour movement: that our primary role now should be to sheepdog the unions in Blair's corral until they move en bloc; that our first duty now is to preserve the political unity of the trade unions under Blairite hegemony, in order to prepare for the future when the unions, en bloc, will liberate the working class.

It is a right-wing syndicalist position. Most syndicalists – Connolly and Larkin were exceptions – are against any parliamentary political action, and T-T are not. But we do not tax them with being coherent and consistent. Their axial idea is that of syndicalism – that the trade unions are the central organisations in working-class self-liberation. Not revolutionary but right-wing syndicalism, not pure but a hybrid syndicalism.

It flatly contradicts the political assumptions on which the AWL is built, and the goal for which we strive, winning the leadership of the working class and trade unions for a revolutionary Marxist organisation.

If it were to be taken seriously, and its implications worked through rigorously, it would imply the liquidation of AWL as a Marxist organisation.

A proposal fundamentally to revise our politics – the politics of our tendency back to the 19th century – should not be proposed to conference hidden in a mass of words. It should be presented up front and discussed honestly. One

interesting question is: do they themselves understand the ramifications of their “big idea”?

## Labour and the unions: nothing changed?

Most of the unions retain their links with the Labour Party. The old Blairite leaders have been replaced by people like Tony Woodley in the TGWU and Derek Simpson in Amicus. T-T conclude that our assessment of what has happened to the Labour Party in the last decade has been shown to be entirely wrong. There was, they say, no qualitative change with Blairism.

The National Committee does not agree that there has been no large change in the Labour Party over the last ten years. But it was not either of the Toms, but SM and CN, in an editorial in *Solidarity* nearly two years ago, who first posed the need for us to understand that the changes in the unions might be opening up new possibilities for fighting the Blairites in the Labour Party, possibilities that had seemed entirely sealed off.

We wrote in August 2002:

*“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 concerted 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 possible be such a voice. Blair's is the voice of second-string Toryism and, indeed, of sublimated Thatcherism”*.

But we were not blown backwards by the new winds stirring in the labour movement. We saw and measured the new changes, and gauged what might now be possible that had seemed impossible.

AWL had *never* thought that the process of Blairite transformation was finished, cut and dried.

The editorial in *Solidarity* went on: *“It is scarcely conceivable even in the most favourable 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”*.

The course of events since August 2002 has shown not that CN and SM erred on the side of caution about what the new trade union leaders might do against the Blairites, but that they erred on the side of exaggerated optimism. At the 2003 Labour Party conference the new union leaders, whose unions have always had the right to decide four motions for the agenda, chose to move oppositional motions, though not on the hot questions of Iraq or anti-union laws. They backed a rule change that will allow CLPs, in future, the right to four motions too.

But on the whole, and with the notable exception of the RMT, they have, for now, settled into a mutual accommodation with the Blairites. New possibilities have been opened up, but there is no warrant for T-T's sweeping conclusions.

Serious divergences between T-T and the National Committee open up in the conclusions T-T draw from the fact that the Blairite counter-revolution in the Labour Party has not been carried through to a clean break with the unions.

## What is T-T's picture of the labour movement now?

T-T's conclusions are, to us, not only unwarranted but simply amazing. These are, if we understand them:

### No coup? No Blairite hijacking?

a) That the Blairite 'coup' or hijacking never happened (pt. 11).

Last year TR argued that the dominance of the Blairites was not yet 'real' because the unions have not made a concerted attempt to reverse it. Until they do that and fail, the reality of Blairite dominance is only the surface appearance of things.

Now he goes further and argues that Blair is simply 'a typical Labour leader' (pt. 15).

The New Labour Party is a 'business-unionist' party, which reflects the trade-union and working-class reality (pts. 8 to 11).

Because the trade union links have not been cut, not only does the Labour Party remain *in general terms* what Lenin called it, a 'bourgeois workers' party' – we are all agreed on that, and never said otherwise – *but also* the balance as between the bourgeois and worker poles of that contradictory and unstable phenomenon remains more or less what it was throughout most of the 20th century.

b) That Tony Blair is not only as much a Labour prime minister as any Labour prime minister ever was – 'a typical Labour leader' (pt. 15) – but he is one of the best Labour prime ministers ever: *'The Blair government... has not attacked and reduced working-class living standards as the Wilson, Callaghan and MacDonald governments did'* (pt. 16).

c) That Blairism is only a normal reflection of 'some of the most advanced workers' who freely 'voted [Blair] into the leadership' (pt. 11) and 'the bulk of the working class [who] agree with [the Labour leadership] on most things' (pt. 9).

d) That working-class support for the LP is as strong as ever, or stronger (pt. 17).

e) That the changes in rules and structure that have strangled the life out of the Labour Party are of no importance except as excuses offered by the union leaders (which? The old ones, active supporters of the Blairite coup, or the new ones? Both?) for not fighting Blairism within the Labour Party (pts. 19 and 20).

f) That the Blairite changes in rules and structures, and the destruction of the old Labour Party democracy, present no great new practical difficulties for socialists in the Labour Party. *'All the post 1994 changes have done is to provide... a more serious obstacle to the AWL in our attempts to organise as we used to do in the old days of the ultra-open conference around highly critical motions'* (point 20).

(In fact, Labour conference is now not just not 'ultra-open', it is tightly closed. One measure of it is that the

decision last year to allow all 600-plus Constituency Labour Parties, between them, *four* motions to annual conference, is, in terms of the Blairite norms, a giant liberalisation.)

g) The loss of life in the CLPs and ward branches of the Labour Party has no decisive bearing on whether an organisation like AWL should do its political work through the Blair Party.

(It is instructive to recall on what grounds and conditions Lenin in 1920 urged British communists to affiliate to the Labour Party. It was not on the grounds that on principle Marxists must be in line with the trade unions politically, but on grounds of 'the fact that, in the ranks of the Labour Party, the British Socialist Party enjoys sufficient freedom to write that certain leaders of the Labour Party are traitors... When the Communists enjoy such freedom, it is their duty to join the Labour Party.... The British Communist Party must retain the freedom necessary to expose and criticise the betrayers of the working class'.)

g) The entire turn we made five years ago towards exploring the possibilities of independent socialist electoral work (we helped set up what became the Socialist Alliance, and supported SA candidates in the 2001 general election; we joined the SSP) was mistaken and even – this is the unavoidable implication – wrong in principle. In fact, the implication of what they say is that, on this, AWL has *always* been wrong in principle.

We will now discuss those ideas.

### Anti-Labour candidates wrong in principle?

Our attitude to socialists standing against the Labour Party has always been that it should be decided on the basis of practical considerations – the place of the Labour Party in working-class life and politics; the existence of freedom to fight for socialist politics within the Labour Party (which has been narrower or broader at different periods in the history of the Labour Party); the relative size of our own organisation; etc.

When we measure the Blairite Labour Party by these criteria, the conclusions for now are stark and clear. They are shouted at us from every point on the political compass: where we practically can, we will stand against the Labour Party, or support socialist or trade-union candidates standing against New Labour.

That we define the Labour Party as still 'basically' a bourgeois workers' party does not change that. There is no principle of Marxism which says that revolutionaries should not stand in elections against bourgeois workers' parties.

Where we do not stand against them, it is for reasons more specific than their characterisation as 'bourgeois workers' parties'. In many countries (France, for example) the revolutionaries have regularly contested elections against the bourgeois workers' parties for many years now, and with our approval.

T-T's proclaimed 'principles' of trade-union control of candidates (pts. 39, 41, etc.), and the unions having to move in politics all together or not at all (pt. 27), make it for them a matter of principle not to stand candidates against the party to which the trade unions are affiliated, irrespective of all the practical considerations above.

For them, *the policies* of the Labour Party in government do not matter. Neither does it matter if there is no working-class life in the Labour Party, if the place of the Labour Party in working-class life is entirely negative, or if the Labour Party functions to prevent the working class expressing itself politically.

Nothing matters but that the trade unions are politically affiliated to the Labour Party and *may one day* put the Labour Party under trade union control.

In terms of basic political attitudes, that is what T-T seem to say. Before they drafted their resolution for 2004 AWL conference, TR did not rule out that AWL might stand or support anti-Labour candidates, but they placed more or less impossible conditions on it.

Remember what TR's "position" was? We could, they argued, stand a socialist or "labour representation" candidate, but only where we have large local labour movement support; and even then, or perhaps especially then, we could not appeal to trade unions as trade unions for financial or other support in our socialist election campaign. That would bring the union into conflict with the Labour Party and maybe lead to its disaffiliation. The overriding rule, to which any socialist candidacy is subordinate and must forever remain subordinate, was not to antagonise the Blairites sufficiently to trigger disaffiliation.

That was TR's position last year. Whether by oversight or a shift in thinking, it is not in T-T's resolution to conference.

In their document we can find reference only to *trade union* candidates, and even then only if they have won selection through regular Labour Party channels. E.g. pt 41: *"our central concern... is working-class representation through trade union control and accountability of candidates, representatives, and parties"*. Pt 38: *"We want candidates, councillors and MPs who are answerable to the trade unions and accountable to them"*. Pt. 39: *"We propose to the working class organisations that they put workers from their own ranks up for selection through the Labour Party as candidates..."*

They have in this document withdrawn their old "concession" that it may sometimes be legitimate for socialists to address themselves to the whole working class at election time without first passing through the double gate of (a) trade union sponsorship (b) regular Labour Party selection procedure.

## How socialists use elections

In the history of the socialist movement, local government and parliamentary candidacies have been used to build up support in the working class and in the trade unions. That was true of the socialist organisations before the Labour Party, which helped found it in 1900. It was true of the Communist Party in the 1920s, when it was "our" Communist Party. For a few years at the start of the 1920s, they could stand some Communists under the Labour Party banner – they got one, Saklatvala, elected in London – but they also continued to stand candidates against the Labour Party.

It was true of the biggest independent socialist organisation of the 1930s, the Independent Labour Party, whose standing against the then left-wing Labour Party in the 1935 general election, even at the risk of thereby letting the Tories or Liberals win seats, Trotsky advocated with the cry: "We do not boycott ourselves". It was true of the Trotskyists during World War 2.

Undoubtedly, both the CP and the ILP had some working-class support where they stood, but nobody thought to propose a principle that they could not stand until they had first gained a solid working-class base in a constituency, thus ruling out elections as a tool for winning that working-class support. When the Trotskyist Revolutionary Communist Party stood Jock Haston in the Neath by-election in 1945, they had few if any contacts in that constituency, let alone

members. Those who were to run the campaign arrived from London on the train.

The ILP had some solid working-class support in Glasgow, but – with Trotsky's explicit support – they stood in a sizeable number of constituencies outside Glasgow.

T-T repudiate all that part of our history. They also repudiate the recent experience of the Scottish Socialist Party. Indeed, they seem very bizarrely to suggest that AWL should argue that the SSP should dissolve into the Labour Party (pt. 31).

## What are T-T's practical conclusions

What are the practical conclusions in the T-T resolution?

### 1: They want AWL to prioritise work in the Blair Labour Party

T-T argue that AWL should do full-scale and exclusive entry work in the Blair party. (We do not say here "resume" entry work, because the entry work T-T propose would be something qualitatively different from anything we have done in the past).

Our *"immediate central priority"* would be *"to direct and mould the emerging Labour Representation Committee into a campaign involving union organisations, existing campaigns and CLPs around the theme, 'Reclaim the Labour Party'. This movement should be trade union based and would focus on... the selection of trade union and working class socialist candidates...* All comrades who are not members should join the Labour Party..." (point 25, our emphasis).

The logical conclusion of what they write (e.g. pt. 6) is what TR proposed last year, that we should also campaign in unions like the PCS and NUT which are not affiliated to the Labour Party for them to affiliate. TR dropped that proposal then. But it is still implicit in what T-T propose now.

### 2: They want AWL to argue that the SSP should dissolve

In Scotland we should advocate that the SSP do the same: *"a reorientation back to Labour Party work"* (pt. 31). T-T concede critical support for the SSP, for now, *"on condition of... a struggle within it... for a reorientation back to Labour Party work"*. If we fail to reorient the SSP, their implication is that we go into the Labour Party ourselves. (They amalgamate, by bracketing them together, the SSP with Respect and George Galloway. It is one of the most scandalous pieces of demagoguery in a resolution that is not short of demagoguery).

### 3: AWL should condemn socialist candidacies

That we should "critically" but in practice exclusively support the Blair party and condemn socialist candidacies. We do not in any actually foreseeable circumstances stand or support socialist or working class candidates against New Labour. "The conditions are not right for the tactic. The support is not there in the class" (pt. 11. See also pt. 31, 32, etc.)

### 4: AWL should not "unfurl the banner"

They want to make it a guiding principle that we do not "unfurl our banner".

They express this thought by denouncing a preposterous caricature of what the National Committee wants to do – telling us we must not *‘assume that if we unfurl the banner the class will flock to us’*, etc. – rather than directly (pt. 11).

Nevertheless, what they say and their way of saying it, their contempt for ‘unfurling the banner’, makes it unmistakably clear what they mean.

Of course, “unfurling the banner” will not bring us mass support immediately. But if we do not unfurl the banner, then we will not even win the individual activists and small groups now who can win the masses later.

There are times and circumstances when revolutionaries operate, in part of our work or even, for short and exceptional periods, in all of it, with our banner “furled” to some degree. But, for Marxists, that always requires specific justification.

T-T make no claim of special conditions of exceptional liveliness and ferment in the Labour Party to justify furling our banner. They simply decry and disdain “unfurling our banner” in general.

## 5: “Trot-baiting”

T-T indulge in the most preposterous – but revealing – “Trot-baiting”, *directed at AWL*.

Their point 11 encapsulates most of the wide range of incomprehension, misrepresentation and hostility that smart-ass philistines have thrown at Trotskyists since they were thrown at Trotsky in the 1930s.

Who *‘adopt[s] an attitude to the working class movement which assumes that we have some sort of mystical right to lead the class’*? Do these incoherently spluttering comrades think AWL has, or ever had, such an attitude? When? Where? How?

Mysteriously, T-T do – or else why is that sentence there?

They go on: *“... and that it was only the betrayal of Blair or the bureaucrats that prevents us from adopting our rightful place at the head of the class and leading it to the seizure of state power”*.

To show off their powers of pretentious silliness, they add: *‘To do so is no much better than claiming the Gods are angry and have turned their faces from us’*.

This brainless stuff is copied straight out of the manual of general-purpose hostile caricature of Trotskyists.

What sort of people normally use it?

People who think that our talk of missed revolutionary possibilities and of the effects of bad or treacherous leadership – in Spain in 1936-7 for example – is entirely misconceived; that to attribute fault to the failures of the working-class organisations and of their leaderships only begs the question, why did the workers submit to the bad or treacherous leadership; and that the fault lies in the workers, not in the ‘leadership’, even in situations like Spain.

Such stuff was a stock-in-trade of the 1960s ‘Luxemburgist’ IS.

We find it impossible to believe that the two Toms do not know the provenance of this sort of stuff. But they have not finished yet. They go on:

*‘We detect a strong undercurrent of this in the idea that Blair has ‘hijacked’ the Labour Party or carried out a ‘coup’. He did not. The workers – and not the most backward, but some of the most advanced – voted him into the leadership of the Labour Party. We need to earn the right to lead the class, rather than assume that if we unfurl the banner the class will flock to us’*.

The reader should keep it in mind that this stupid social-democratic abuse – and in a conference resolution! – is here

a central part of T-T’s argument about the state of the Labour Party and what AWL should do.

They use this Trot-baiting as a negative “argument” to justify what they themselves now stand for, the cutting back and reduction of AWL to a propaganda group in the trade unions (and in the Blair party – but, in practice, nothing much would come of that). (See JB’s and SM’s pamphlet).

## 6: The politics of the trade-union submariner

T-T preach thinly disguised defeatism in the guise of advocacy of subordination of everything else to work in the labour movement, by which they understand immersion in the trade unions and Blair Labour Party, irrespective of what is going on there or outside.

## 7: AWL must base its tactics on utopian scenario-mongering

T-T argue that all tactics must be shaped and subordinated to an effort to mobilise *‘the unions as unions’* to *‘put their collective weight on the political scales’* (pt.6, pt. 25, etc).

In fact, of course, the unions have had their weight on the political scales for many decades.

Elsewhere (point 14) T-T are at pains to insist that *‘the Labour Party was handed to Blair by... the trade union members... because the CLP-based left... had not won even a significant minority in the unions’*.

What T-T must mean here is that we must *first* win the unions to *our* politics, or at any rate to some of our politics, before we can *‘fight for the trade unions to assert control over the Labour Party’*.

Of course we fight to win trade unionists to our politics, but we are quite a distance yet from winning enough trade unionists to our politics and organisation to be able through them to control what the trade union movement does vis-à-vis the Labour Party.

Self-contradictorily, T-T also scornfully declare that the unions have *never* controlled Labour governments (pt.15).

None of us ever claimed that the unions had controlled Labour governments. For T-T to suggest that there has never been significant union influence in the Labour Party, or the union-Labour link never offered openings to working-class politics, or that there has been no change in those respects, is quite another matter.

T-T’s fundamental case is that there has been no serious change; if the unions have no influence on the Labour leadership now, well, they never did have.

What it comes down to, though T-T do not say it, and may not themselves understand it, is that T-T propose that the AWL adopts their project of creating an *entirely new* Labour Party, a union-Labour relationship that has *never existed or even been approximated to* in Britain before.

(In fact, effective union control of the Labour Party did exist in Ireland for a decade and a half before 1930 – and showed its gross inadequacy for socialist politics there. See the pamphlet ‘The trade union movement...’).

T-T’s project would be one for an entire political age.

If we got to the point where we were strong enough in the unions to get them to do what we wanted with the Labour Party, and strong enough in a revived and transformed Labour Party to win it to acceptance of trade-union control (politically, *our* trade-union control), then the socialist revolution would be on the agenda at the next big capitalist crisis after that.

Their vision of the future is a speculative one, and one that might never come into existence, for it is neither decreed by our basic political theory, nor suggested by the history of the socialist movement, that a revolutionary party must win overall control of the unions, and create a union-sponsored party, before leading a revolution.

But to that vision T-T propose to subordinate all our tactics today.

## 8: AWL must act as sheepdog for the Blair Party in the unions

AWL must work to restrain more combative unions from doing anything which might encourage the Blairites to disaffiliate them.

The role of AWL in this period is to base ourselves on the broad union membership and restrain the “sectarians” and militants who do not have T-T’s “Marxist” overview.

Essentially T-T’s idea is that, since we would like the whole existing bloc of trade union affiliations and trade union money to go as a unit to a better place than the Blairite party, and since we can’t secure that, we take up the role of guards of the union/ Blair-Labour status quo.

Motivated by a desire not to see the political funds “fragmented”, they want AWL to act as political sheepdogs for the Blairites.

In the case of the RMT now, that means what? It can only mean something like what T-T propose for the SSP – liquidation “back” into the Labour Party. We would urge the RMT to toe the Blair party line and “go back in”? On what political terms? Minimally they would include accepting the Blairite monopoly on trade-union-backed - or indeed any - electoral activity.

We don’t and can’t know exactly how the crisis of working-class politics epitomised by the political hegemony of the Blair Labour Party will evolve or find its first, perhaps interim, resolutions. The case of the RMT show that it may result in incoherent breaks in the existing structures.

We don’t know. But we should not, as T-T want us to, assign to the AWL the primary role of sheepdogs in the unions for the political status quo. That way lies the political transformation of AWL into a conservative and even reactionary force, animated by the risible pretention to police the trade unions and the Labour Party.

## 9: We must scale down AWL work to trade unionism

In toto, where in the National Committee’s view the need is to enhance, strengthen and sharpen the public presence of AWL, as AWL and not only in the various fields of separate AWL activity, T-T want a scaling-down of AWL work into trade union work and “work” in the Blair party (where little activity for our politics and our organisation-building project is in fact possible).

In practice this would mean the effective political liquidation of the AWL into routine trade union work and a fantasy project of “work” in a Labour Party that no longer exists, politically or organisationally, in the form it had when we did fruitful work in it.

## Start from what “reality” of the class?

Essentially, T-T motivate their conclusions on an attitude of bowing down to accomplished facts in the labour movement, the very opposite of the spirit revolutionaries need.

The ‘*tactics of the Marxist organisation in the trade unions and labour movement [read: the Blair Labour Party] have to start from the reality of the class as it is, rather than as we would like it to be*’ (pt. 4).

In fact their assessment of “the class as it is” is warped by their own subjectivism. The SWP, and in the past the WRP/SLL, have often hypnotised themselves with anecdotes of exceptionally militant sentiments or actions by groups of workers. T-T do the same sort of thing now, with anecdotes about exceptional *lack* of militancy.

‘*Some of the most advanced workers*’ backed Blair (pt. 11, 14); ‘*working class support for the Labour Party remains strong... talk of an erosion of core working-class support for Labour lacks any real factual grip*’ (pt. 17); there is no socialist element in the SSP vote (pt. 5).

A Marxist organisation must plot its course in relation to at least three points on the political map: where the various layers of the working class are, politically and in terms of combativity; where the revolutionary Marxist organisation is – in terms of size, numbers, implantation in the working class, working-class support; and the more or less distant point, the socialist revolution, towards which we want to encourage and lead the working class.

Trotsky once rightly wrote that without a revolutionary perspective there could be no revolutionary politics, no conscious goals, no revolutionary orientation in the maelstrom of petty everyday concerns, no idea of the necessary evolution of society and the working class – only crass bowing down to what is, and “worship of the spontaneous labour movement” (as Lenin expressed it).

What Marxism brings to the working class is an overall conception of the necessary evolution of society and the historical role of the working class as the gravedigger of capital.

Of course, in what we do and say, we take account of the state of the working class, its consciousness, morale, objective place in society, etc. etc. But that is only one part of the equation.

What T-T do is remove the Marxist part of the equation, the role of the revolutionary organisation, leaving only the self-subordination of the revolutionaries to the working class as it is under capitalism.

Their approach is also, essentially, apolitical. It substitutes crude sociology for politics. It would be better to have working-class trade unionists as Labour candidates rather than the typical Blairite MP, but there is no reason to think that getting trade unionists – irrespective of their politics – into parliament would necessarily achieve, or advance, any of our socialist and revolutionary goals. It would depend on their politics, for a start.

## T-T take Gramsci to heart!

In their resolution T-T make themselves the militant debunkers of all ideas that the working class is anything but an inert mass.

In point 5, for example, they are at pains to insist that there is no ‘*element of intrinsic socialist bias on the part of the Scottish working class*’ in the SSP vote.

After more than a hundred years of socialist tradition in Scotland, it is no element of “socialist bias” that boosts the SSP, but only Scottish nationalism!

What is distinctive about the SSP in Scottish elections is not the nationalism – which the SNP can promote with greater resources – but its socialism.

Yet T-T *know* there is no “socialist bias”. They are keen to stress and insist on it.

They counterpose to the idea of any electoral autonomy for the Marxist organisation every fact and figure they can find or conjure up. Stand socialist candidates? They add up the figures for Labour votes and trade union members affiliated to the Labour Party, and counterpose them to the socialists, to socialist hopes, and to the possibility of any socialist action other than internal trade-union/Labour Party propaganda.

The situation is one in which there are abundant signs of volatility and instability. The RMT's expulsion is one of them. But T-T can see nothing but the overwhelming power and strength of the Blairites and the reactionaries within the labour movement. They falsify the picture of reality to make it worse for socialists than it actually is, and the position of the Blairites stronger and more impregnable than it is.

They disparage the first big rebellion against Blair by a trade union – the RMT – so as to present it as a loss to the left and not to the Blairites.

They slant even the figures so as to strengthen their case.

Citing the figures for Labour union affiliations and election victories, they gloss over the falling-off in old-Labourite working-class support for Blair in the last general election, and ignore the facts that only a fairly small minority of industrial workers, and a tiny proportion of young workers, are in the unions, and that industrial workers constitute only a minority of overall trade union membership.

Antonio Gramsci, discussing socialists and the perspectives they elaborate, once wrote: *"To put aside every voluntary effort and calculate only the intervention of other wills as an objective element in the general game is to mutilate reality itself. Only those who strongly want to realise it identify the necessary elements for the realisation of their will..."*

T-T do exactly the reverse!

(Footnote: T-T minimise the SSP vote. In their amended text (DB246) they specify: *"7% in a PR election"*. In fact the SSP got 7.7% of the list (PR section) vote in 2003, and 7% of the first-past-the-post vote in the constituencies where they stood. In Glasgow they averaged 14.5% in the first-past-the-post vote.

In point 11 T-T even manage to misrepresent the undisputedly bad results of the Socialist Alliance in 2001, claiming that the SA got no more votes than the crazy WRP in 1983. In fact the SA got an average of 1.62% across 98 constituencies, while the WRP in 1983 got an average of 0.4% over 21.

We explained why the SA results were bad in WL 2/1: it was not there was no possible support in the working class for left-of-Labour candidates, or that socialist electoral work was hopeless, but, in large part, because of the false political choices of the SWP and its domination of the SA.)

## The sectarianism of T-T's platonic project-mongering

T-T minimise the role of the Marxist organisation (or, precisely, reduce it to propaganda within the trade unions – even they can't really think that much can be done in the CLPs now by way of Marxist propaganda). At the same time, they discuss what needs to be done and what we can do as if AWL were, instead of the small organisation we in fact are, a mass organisation, able to soon transform the unions and the Labour Party. For example:

*"There is only one coherent orientation to mass trade union politics today, that is to trying to mobilize the unions as unions to put their collective weight on the political scales: to fight for the trade unions to assert control over the Labour Party, to fight to transform it into an organisation that represents the working class and in the process rally*

*and organise the forces of a new proto-party within the womb of the old"* (point 6, their emphasis).

Elsewhere they insist that this trade-union control over the Labour Party has never been achieved or even approximated in the past (point 12 and 15), not even when the Labour Party was its most open, democratic, and lively; yet, they insist, AWL must now achieve that before the socialists can emerge from the chrysalis of the Blair Labour Party and 'unfurl our banner' to the broad public!

And this approach is *"start[ing] from the reality of the class as it is, rather than as we would like it to be"*? It is nothing of the sort!

It is a scenario for the future. It is tactics for today read backwards from a desirable future political world (trade-union control of the Labour Party), which on their own account has never been achieved or approached in the past, and may never be achieved in the future either. Yet our independent electoral work, and other raising-the-political-banner work, must wait until it has been achieved! T-T's approach is a recipe for stultifying and politically liquidating AWL.

It is tactics read back from a notion of the complete transformation of elements and entities which now exist into something radically different.

More: it is not only the elaboration of a scenario, but the counterposing of that unrealistic scenario to 'the reality of the class as it is', to the labour movement as it is, and to what the small forces of authentic socialism *can in fact do now*. It is the worst sort of sectarian schema-mongering.

Like all *sectarians*, T-T counterpose their pet schema to the reality of the labour movement and the (probable) evolution of that reality.

## T-T's scenario is politically regressive

T-T's propose AWL must take as our goal and overall political objective, trade-union control of the Labour Party. That is, they propose a new *raison d'être* for AWL and a new conception of the relationship between trade unions, parliamentarians and the revolutionary Marxists.

In our established theory, we work to build a revolutionary party that will win leadership of the trade unions and control over the parliamentarians. Our assumption is that trade unions cannot possibly play the role of the revolutionary leadership of the working class.

What T-T propose is plain nonsense! You can only believe what T-T seem to believe about the future role of the trade unions if you ignore the whole of 20th century working-class history.

The entire history of pre-World War 1 revolutionary syndicalism – a movement which had great virtues and was rightly described by Trotsky as a 'rough draft' of communism – makes it impossible today to maintain that trade union control of a Labour Party would produce anything like the politics we wanted in the labour movement and the working class.

The trade unions are organically 'a culture medium of opportunism' (Trotsky) because their business is *bargaining* within the capitalist system. Even the once revolutionary-led unions of Kaiser Germany were just that for German socialism. They prepared the collapse of German Social Democracy in 1914, which was the key event in the collapse of the Second International.

What is our programme in the trade unions? *Democracy*; regular replacement of trade union leaderships, because we know that most of them will, given the chance, rot



politically; and a fight to gain hegemony within them for a revolutionary party.

We *‘should always strive not only to renew the top leadership of the trade unions, boldly and resolutely in critical moments advancing new militant leaders in place of routine functionaries and careerists, but also to create in all possible instances independent militant organisations corresponding more closely to the tasks of mass struggle against bourgeois society; and, if necessary, not flinching even in the face of a direct break with the conservative apparatus of the trade unions.*

*‘If it be criminal to turn one’s back on mass organisations for the sake of fostering sectarian factions, it is no less so passively to 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’.*

(Trotsky, The Transitional Programme)

## T-T misrepresent the issue in dispute

T-T misrepresent the issue in dispute scandalously. Baldly they say (point 7): *‘We reject the alternative of declaring that Labour is dead and immediately pressing for the unions to walk away and organise a new workers’ party as a sectarian/opportunist dead end’.*

The other Tom should have restrained Tom R’s urge to verbal excess and demagoguery! This is scandalous misrepresentation of what the NC proposes and what the AWL has proposed over the last ten years.

Who says the unions should ‘walk away’? Where? When? We urge the trade unions to assert themselves – all the way to a split if necessary, and we think it will be necessary – inside the Labour Party.

Who ‘declares’ the Labour Party dead? We say ‘the process’ of transformation is not complete. Indeed, we say, and we said it in *Solidarity* nearly two years ago, that the shifts in the trade union leadership reopen possibilities of action in the Labour Party that had been closed off for a long time.

We say the unions should fight. But we also say that the socialists should fight, and where appropriate stand candidates.

## Blair-Labour a “business-unionist” party?

Is Labour still a bourgeois workers’ party? We say ‘yes’, but that the ratio and balance has been shifted enormously to the bourgeois pole, more by far than ever before. This takes the form of government policy and changes in party structure and union/ Labour relations.

T-T (pt. 8) say that ‘if’ any ‘qualifications’ need to be made to the old formula, *‘they would be that it has become a neo-liberal, business-unionist bourgeois workers’ party’.* In fact the formula does not need to be ‘qualified’, it needs to be concretised – that is, the exact relationships and balance of the elements in the bourgeois workers’ party need to be examined concretely to produce a living picture of what is by its nature an unstable and volatile entity.

T-T confine themselves to a description of policy changes (‘neo-liberal’) – which anyway they minimise – and avoid the issue of structures which seems to us to be decisive.

The Labour Party has always been dominated by bourgeois ideas. Even the ‘socialist’ commitment to Clause Four was bourgeois in that it was entwined with entirely false ideas about means and ends, in a political organisation which

believed in a parliamentary road to socialism. Even when, in 1945, vast masses of people wanted radical and irreversible change towards socialism, they did not know how to get it. As Lenin said in 1920:

*‘Of course the bulk of the members of the Labour Party are workers; however whether a party is really a political party of the workers or not, depends not only on whether it consists of workers, but also upon who leads it, upon the content of its activities, and of its political tactics. Only the latter determines whether we have before us really a political party of the proletariat.*

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

Calling the Labour Party a ‘business unionist workers’ party’ is, we think, wrong. Not the least thing wrong with it is that it uses an unfamiliar name for a familiar trade-union thing – bargaining within the system on the basis of the market value of labour power.

Are T-T counterposing ‘business-unionist workers’ party’ to reformist workers’ party?

And even if the designation ‘business-unionist workers’ party’ were right, it would be beside the point.

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.

## Is the LP still “business-unionist” with Woodley, Simpson, and Hayes leading the unions?

What does T-T’s ‘business union’ tag mean now that the unions have new leaders, not only ‘lefts’ but much more importantly – as *Solidarity* pointed out in August 2002 – people who are primarily distinguished from their Blairite predecessors in that they believe in trade unionism – that it is the trade unions’ business to fight to improve their members’ wages and conditions?

We should be careful not to exaggerate even that, but where does the new situation in the unions leave the designation ‘business-unionist bourgeois workers’ party’? Who are the ‘business unionists’ now? The Blairites? But that is too ridiculous even for TR to resort to.

## Does Blair just reflect the working class?

After defining New Labour as a ‘business-unionist party’ (pt. 8), T-T write:

*‘Marxists should not be surprised or express horror to find that in a bourgeois society the dominant ideas are bourgeois, or that the default political understanding of the world in the working class is bourgeois, or that the ruling ideas are those of the ruling class. Whatever else would comrades expect it to be? Nor should we be shocked to note that the politics of the Labour leadership and the TU leadership are the same, and what is more, the bulk of the working class agrees with them on most things’.*

Plainly they see point 9 as a continuation or expansion of their point 8, the definition of the Labour Party today as a ‘neo-liberal, business-unionist, bourgeois workers’ party’.

What are they saying here? That New Labour, the “business-unionist bourgeois workers’ party” merely reflects the common mind of the working class? That “business unionism” does?

On one level point 9 is just TR, in his cloudy philosophising way, throwing in great general truths as specific explanations. But in its last sentence, it comes down to specifics, with some astonishing assertions.

*“The politics of the Labour leadership and the trade union leadership are the same, and what is more, the bulk of the working class agrees with them on most things.”*

The new union leaders – Woodley, Simpson, Hayes, Serwotka, Crow, the rest – have the same politics as Blair? And “the bulk of the working class” have the same politics too? Blair is just doing what the workers want...? That is, astonishingly, what T-T write.

Not only do they write about socialist work in a Labour Party that exists more in their heads than in reality, they write about a working class and a set of union leaders that exist only in their heads – and in one of the worst chapters of recent working-class history!

## The workers get the leadership they deserve?

Working-class consciousness today is neither a virginal political condition, nor “default” political and social “understanding”. It has been shaped by the organic class struggle, the interaction of Marxists and the working class, and, for what concerns us here, the class struggle on “the ideological front”, the battlefield of ideas.

It is the product of all that went before, most importantly in the last three decades.

Blairism is not a “natural” condition of bourgeois ideological domination of the working class, but a product of defeats.

To discuss it in T-T’s terms is to miss the point. It also makes a nonsense of their whole approach.

If the existence of a Labour Party and of trade unions had no effect on the consciousness of the working class – if it remains a mere passive imprint of the bourgeois society around it – then what sense could there be in their orientation towards trade-union mechanics, trade-union control of politics, and so on?

What point would there be to any socialist activity other than educational propaganda?

T-T’s way of presenting the issue misses out on the whole question of the dynamics of the Labour Party. That is why they cannot seem to register what has happened there. They miss out on the whole dialectic of “leadership” and “masses”.

T-T reject the Trotskyist understanding here, that of such articles as Trotsky’s “Class, Party, and Leadership”.

*“Imitating the liberals, our sages tacitly accept the axiom that every class gets the leadership it deserves. In reality leadership is not at all a mere ‘reflection’ of a class or the product of its own free creativeness...”*

*“The Marxist interpretation, that is, the dialectical and not the scholastic interpretation of the interrelationship between a class and its leadership, does not leave a single stone unturned of our author’s legalistic sophistry...”*

*“The secret is that a people is comprised of hostile classes, and the classes themselves are comprised of different and in part antagonistic layers that fall under different leadership; furthermore every people falls under the influence of other peoples who are likewise comprised of classes.”*

*“Governments do not express the systematically growing ‘maturity’ of a ‘people’ but are the product of the struggle between different classes and the different layers within one and the same class, and finally, the action of external forces – alliances, conflicts, wars, and so on. To this should be added that a government, once it has established itself, may endure much longer than the relationship of forces that produced it. It is precisely out of this historical contradiction that revolutions, coups d’etat, counterrevolutions, etc. arise...”*

(Trotsky: [archive.workersliberty.org/wlmags/wl26/trotsky.htm](http://archive.workersliberty.org/wlmags/wl26/trotsky.htm))

## Why no fight against anti-union laws?

T-T reject Trotsky’s approach explicitly in point 11, which, as we have already seen, is a stupid piece of vintage “Trot-baiting”. Since it cannot on the facts refer to anything in the whole history of our tendency, its deployment here against the National Committee’s position – implicitly, against the very existence of AWL as it has so far existed – is a revealing piece of libellous misrepresentation of their own organisation.

*“The organisation cannot adopt an attitude to the working class movement which assumes that we have some sort of mystical right to lead the class and that it is only the betrayal of Blair or the bureaucrats that prevents us from adopting our rightful place at the head of the class and leading it to the seizure of state power. To do so is not much better than claiming the Gods are angry and have turned their faces from us.... We need to earn the right to lead the class, rather than assume that if we unfurl the banner the class will flock to us.”*

*“Blair [did not] ‘hijack’ the Labour Party or carr[y] out a ‘coup... The workers – and not the most backward, but some of the most advanced – voted him into the leadership of the Labour Party... The fundamental lesson of the failure of Socialist Alliance to do any better in elections than the lunatic WRP managed in the 1980’s is that the conditions are not right for the tactic. The support is not there in the class”*

Not any fault, error, or incompetence on the part of the SWP leadership of the SA. Nothing better could have been done. “The support is not there in the class” for us. The leadership of the SWP would appreciate T-T’s exculpation of them!

Specifically, this stuff is supposed to “explain” the problem posed at the end of point 8: why has “there... not been a greater trade union revolt against the anti-union laws”?

Why hasn’t there been? Because only “mystics” can think there is any element of betrayal, or indeed of anything but Blair doing what the unfortunately bourgeois-minded workers want, in New Labour’s record...

## No Blairite counter-revolution in the Labour Party?

First let us establish the facts. We talk usually not about a “Blair” coup, but about a “Blairite” coup, in acknowledgement of the fact that it was not one man’s affair, but the culmination of a whole process that predated Blair’s leadership of the Labour Party. In the literature of AWL there are amply detailed analyses and descriptions of what actually happened before and after Blair became leader.

You could object to the use of “coup” on the grounds that there was no single Labour Party equivalent of the “seizure” of an office, a state building, or a capital city. But that would

be idle pedantry. We have never suggested it was a “coup” in that literal sense.

Why call it a “coup”, then? Because there was, over time, by way of a cumulative series of events, and, notably, actions from above, a radical shift of power in the Labour Party to the leader and the leader’s office.

“Coup” here is more than a useful metaphor. There was a dramatic transformation from one thing to something very different. It was imposed from above by a faction that had got control of the “commanding heights” of the Labour Party. “Coup” sums it up succinctly and dramatically.

It is impermissible to use the word “coup”? What about the infamous “coup” of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte? He was elected president in 1848; he was overwhelmingly endorsed as Emperor in a plebiscite, and not by the most backward but by people who thought they stood in the tradition of the Great French Revolution. He represented the ideas and delusions of the great revolution-worshipping peasantry. Coup? What coup?

Or even Hitler. He became Chancellor in January 1933 through the due constitutional processes.

Essentially the same with “hijack”. Nobody who is not an idiot will understand “hijack” literally, to mean that we are saying that Blair flagged down the Labour Party on the highway, hit the driver on the head and drove it off. “Hijack” conveys the idea of the working-class, trade-union party being “captured” by a faction and a leadership that could, in the person of Blair, promise – and keep its promise – to the bourgeoisie in an interview with the *Daily Mail* that he would maintain “the most restrictive labour law in the western world”.

The same idea was expressed in a famous “old Labourite” column in *The People* which was headlined: “Give us back our party”.

There is nothing wrong with using the terms coup and hijack to sum up the dramatic realignment that has taken place. TR used terms like “coup” and “hijack” for a number of years.

The idea here that workers who voted for Blair are among the most advanced parallels the idea discussed in JB’s and SM’s pamphlet, that it is the advanced workers who now vote Blair-Labour, and that they do so as a function of their class consciousness.

It connects also with the idea that we back these Blairite “advanced workers” against impatient militants.

At best here T-T have a linear, non-dialectical idea of development: the conservative, cautious, entrenched Labour-loyalist workers are simply “more advanced” than the more rebellious but maybe rawer ones.

## **The SWP is blameless? The SA could not possibly have done better?**

At least T-T are consistent here in one respect: in everything they underestimate the role of leadership, faction, party. For T-T, political organisations and factions really play no part. Everything is a function of a given level of consciousness in the working class, which in its turn is a function of the general nature and conditions of capitalism.

Thus: *“The fundamental lesson of the failure of the Socialist Alliance [electorally]... is that the conditions are not ripe for the [electoral] tactic. The support is not there in the class”*.

Things are given or not given. There is nothing we can do about it. Nothing would make any difference. The SWP had nothing to do with it at all!

The fact that the SWP ran the 2001 Socialist Alliance general election campaign using slogans and issues in a thoughtless SWP “business as usual” agitation, that they did not even raise the central issue of working-class representation, or that, bizarrely, they banned canvassing – all that had nothing to do with the SA’s dismal results.

T-T do not even seem to register that where we did better – in Nottingham, for example – we did it in part by having working-class representation as a central theme.

No, for them, politics and organisation made no difference in the election. It was all a mechanical function of the state of the working class. That, too, is what causes the SWP to go for Respect (p.11). And when the SWP banned canvassing, they were right, because it could not have made any difference?

## **T-T falsify the history of the Labour Party**

In points 12 and 15 T-T justify entry into a Labour Party in which there is no life to speak of in a curious, contorted way, by falsifying the history of the Labour Party.

Point 12: *“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.”*

But Labour *has* been a reformist party. It has secured serious reforms. It did, in a number of areas, win elements of what Karl Marx once called “the political economy of the working class” within capitalism.

It did have an open regime, much broader than other bourgeois workers’ parties. It was the major focus of mass working-class politics and of the trade unions in politics at all levels.

It was those conditions that made entry into the Labour Party a sensible activity for revolutionary socialists.

In order to justify proposing entry as our main work outside the unions in a period where none of those conditions exist, T-T are forced to radically falsify the history of the Labour Party, to poke out their own historical eyes.

They use the fact that the 1945-51 Labour government did on a number of occasions use repressive existing laws and old techniques – sending troops into the docks during a strike, for example – to obscure the big fact that one of that government’s first acts was to repeal the anti-union legislation introduced after the General Strike (in 1927) by the Tories.

This lawyers’ attitude to the history of the labour movement – they will pick up whatever detail they need – is one of the most pernicious elements in T-T’s document.

In order to pretend that nothing important has changed, that the opportunities for socialist work are now what they have been in the past – no better, no worse – and that something like the old life exists now in the wards and GCs, T-T are forced at every turn to insist that the Labour Party in the past was no better than it is now.

Their unwillingness to face reality now forces them to falsify the past.

Not only do they offer no positive picture of the Labour Party now that would justify their entry proposal; they leave you wondering why we ever worked in the Labour Party!

The picture they paint of the Labour Party never affecting a Labour government or anything else, of the old Labour conferences counting for nothing, and of the CLP-based left being only a confection of “debating society skills and conference tricks” with no working-class support (pt. 14), is exactly the picture that opponents of entry work in the old Labour Party used.

So is the extreme stress that T-T place on the idea of Labour never having ‘been a workers’ party in any meaningful political sense’ and the union/ Labour link always having functioned only as a ‘mechanism of ruling class domination’ (pt. 15).

T-T’s picture of, for example, Labour conference never affecting what happened, is seriously wrong.

In 1944 the Labour conference adopted a resolution on nationalisations that Labour leaders like Herbert Morrison opposed it, on the grounds that it would lose them the General Election. The Labour Party fought the 1945 general election on broadly that policy, and carried it out.

T-T take a picture of the Labour Party normally painted by wooden-top sectarians – and combine it with an AWL-liquidationist commitment to entry work, banner furlled, characteristic of those who think that the Labour Party is, uncomplicatedly, ‘the workers’ party’. How to explain this?

For all his ‘philosophising’, TR has a metaphysical picture of the Labour Party. It is not something that lives in real history, that undergoes flux and change, that can embody quite different ratios between the ‘workers’ and ‘bourgeois’ elements that compose it and still be a bourgeois workers’ party. The Labour Party is an ideal metaphysical ‘essence’!

T-T’s picture of labour movement history is ridiculously ahistorical. Nothing much has changed in the last ten years, or indeed *ever*, since Labour became a mass party. For the future they envisage no possibility other than their favoured scenario, the unions rising en masse to ‘restore’, or rather create for the first time, a party controlled by the unions.

## AWL exaggerates the changes?

T-T write (point 13):

*“To exaggerate the differences between Old and New Labour as the organisation has done since Blair took over the leadership is to allow ourselves to become the victims and unwitting prisoners of the ideology of the Blair faction.”*

If we did ‘exaggerate’ the differences, then none of us did it so wildly as TR, who described the Labour Party under Blair as Christian Democratic and thought that the hegemonic Blairites would quickly break the trade union link.

One-sided and undialectical as always, T-T conclude now that since the link has not been broken, *nothing* has happened worthy of special notice. It is still the same old Labour Party!

In their fixed idea that the survival of the union-Labour link, in whatever form, means that nothing much has changed, T-T are in a vicious circle comparable to the one Trotsky was in about the USSR in the 1930s – until he began to revise it in 1939. The commitment to the ‘defence’ of the USSR because of nationalised property meant that nothing the USSR government or state did, no matter how monstrous, other than ‘privatising’ the nationalised industry, could qualify our allegiance to ‘defence of the USSR’. But T-T, unlike Trotsky, artificially and mechanically create their own vicious circle.

## Since some things remain the same, nothing has changed?

Point 13: *“To talk of the Blairite coup representing the end of Labour as any kind of workers’ party and the end of any kind of working class representation in parliament is wrong headed in the extreme.”*

Who is this aimed at? Who are they arguing against? Not the AWL National Committee, anyway! We say that the Labour Party remains a bourgeois workers’ party, but that

the balance within that contradictory phenomenon has shifted radically in favour of the outright bourgeois pole. As JB and SM outlined in the pamphlet, we do not even exclude – in five, ten, fifteen or twenty years’ time – the restoration of something closer to the old Labour Party than New Labour is now.

T-T’s incapacity to register exactly what we say when it is nuanced like that is of a piece with their own dominant one-sided, undialectical approach.

The idea that the Blair party represents the workers in Parliament now, that the working class has not been effectively disenfranchised by the hijacking of the Labour Party, is another example of the effect of T-T putting out their own eyes in order to maintain the fantastic notion that nothing basic has changed.

## Are T-T serious about prioritising work in Blair’s party?

T-T formally propose that the whole of AWL should work in the New Labour party, but it is not clear that they themselves take this proposal seriously. TR has at various times in the past six years had responsibility for organising the work of those AWL comrades who remain active in the Labour Party. He did not do it.

There are people and groups, self-proclaimedly Trotskyist or near-Trotskyist groups like *Socialist Appeal*, *Workers’ Action*, and *Briefing*, who do try in the changed conditions to work in New Labour. Do they say, like T-T, that nothing has changed in the Labour Party, or in the relations between the Labour Party and the working class?

Do they hold that there is no ‘qualification’ to what Labour used to be, except that it is now a ‘neo-liberal business unionist’ bourgeois workers’ party rather than some-other-sort-of-unionist bourgeois workers’ party?

That the role of conference and the National Executive has not changed importantly?

That the Blair government is more benign towards the working class than previous Labour governments? That working-class support for the Labour Party ‘remains strong’ and has suffered no ‘erosion’? That ‘the bulk of the working class agrees with [Blair] on most things’?

Far from it! They would dismiss T-T’s argument that essentially nothing has changed as simply bonkers. They would tag it for what it is, irresponsible theorising from afar by people who do not do work in New Labour. (ME is an exception: but she did not write the extravagances in T-T’s document).

## What *Briefing* says about Blair-Labour

*Briefing* sums up its view in a resolution for its conference on 24 April 2004:

*“The enormity of the crisis of New Labour... has been expressed in a number of ways.. the haemorrhaging of party membership and party structures... The working class in the UK is facing a growing crisis of representation... New Labour’s prostration before the dictates of British and global capital and its attempts to take over and destroy the Labour Party have left the labour movement more and more politically and electorally disenfranchised.*

*“Outside the structures of the Labour Party there is a mass, amorphous movement of opposition, most graphically revealed in the anti-war movement but present also in different layers of struggle. This opposition has, however, found the most limited expression within the structures of the Party.*

*‘The constituency parties are still in decline and membership is reducing... especially following the war on Iraq, there are fewer constituency delegates to annual conference and the constituency left is still small and poorly organised... There is every threat that New Labour’s historic task of destroying the Labour Party, as a party of labour, will succeed’.*

## **What Socialist Appeal says**

*Socialist Appeal*, in line with its whole tradition, philosophises more blithely about the masses “inevitably” swinging back into the Labour Party any time now to mend things, but does not dispute that there is a great deal to be mended.

*‘The whole structure of the Party apparatus was reformed so that full time staff worked for the Leader, not the Party...*

*‘[In 1994] Blair, a dogmatic moderniser was elected as Party leader... Many of the policy changes were already in place. But Blair wanted more than that. He wanted to finish off the Labour Party and to detach it from its trades union roots.*

*‘The trades union influence within the Labour Party has declined... Reforms such as OMOV (one member one vote) had the aim of limiting the influence of the trades union block vote... Trades unions once financed the Labour Party to the tune of 90% of its overall income. It is now down to 35%... [But] Blair’s attempts to turn the Party into one of big business are on shaky grounds.*

*‘The Blair government has moved to the right, with policies such as foundation hospitals, part privatisation of the tube, top up fees for students and a militarist foreign policy (four wars so far!). These are all policies that have never appeared in a Labour manifesto. They have never had the backing of the ranks of the party...’ (Socialist Appeal, September 2003)*

Nor, in *Socialist Appeal*’s view, have they had the backing of the working class. They write of “*decline in Labour’s support... unprecedented level of disillusionment amongst party members... The only reason Labour did not fare even worse was that in this contest to find the most unpopular party they were beaten by the Tories... [The SSP got a] highly significant vote... an extremely important illustration of the fact that the electorate is now far to the left of the Labour leadership*”. (Socialist Appeal analysis of May 2003 elections).

*Socialist Appeal* claim that “*if the unions were to send 50 members into every constituency party, they could take it over...*”

To them that proves how easy it will be for the inevitably-coming surge of the left-wing masses to “reclaim Labour”. More realistically, it is a telling verdict on how shrivelled the CLPs are, and how weak they are in relation to the swollen New Labour apparatus, centred, as *Socialist Appeal* points out, above the party, in the Leader’s office, rather than in the party proper.

## **What Workers’ Action says**

According to *Workers’ Action*: “*Trade unionists are sick of being treated with contempt and the services they run and use being treated only as a potential profitable opportunity for multinationals. They, and socialists in the Labour Party, would prefer a little less of New Labour’s Big Conversation, and a little more action on the defence of public services and the repeal of the anti-union laws...*

*‘[But] the more unpopular the government is in the country, the more determined Blair and his clique appear. It*

*is almost as if Blair is determined to saw off the branch on which he’s sitting...*

*‘We have never argued that carrying out a fight against New Labour within the party was going to be easy. Against us we have a well-organised clique, with its hands on the apparatus of power. It knows exactly what it wants, and if it cannot use the machine it has created to get it, it will make up the rules as it goes along... However... There Is No Alternative’.*

WA, like *Briefing*, is less pollyannaish than *Socialist Appeal* about the ever-imminent “swing of the pendulum” back to a left-wing Labour Party, and more inclined to justify its orientation on the grounds that all initiative outside the Labour Party is hopeless (so that work inside, though not exactly hopeful, is the least bad option). It is far from claiming that nothing serious has changed in the running of the party.

## **The old Labour left was just ‘conference tricks’?**

T-T believe that the Blairites have a natural right to rule the labour movement, and that they reflect the “class consciousness” of the working class.

*‘Our task is... to understand that Blair did not steal the Labour Party, there was no coup. The leadership of the Labour Party was handed to Blair by the members, including the trade union members... Kinnock was the leader who smashed the organised left in the party. He could only do this because the CLP based left, for all its debating society skills and conference tricks, had not won even a significant minority in the unions’* (point 14).

The Bennite left never won “even a significant minority in the unions”? So in the early 1980s, when some unions repeatedly voted with the Bennites, that was real “hi-jacking”, by left-wing union leaders who were acting without the approval of “even a significant minority” in the rank and file?

With all its limits, which we criticised at the time, the old Labour left was a real left, not a pseudo-left like that of “Respect”, etc. We ourselves were part of it. T-T’s loathing for it is palpable. “Debating society skills and conference tricks”!

But the Kinnockites and Blairites also used demagoguery and “tricks” to create the New Labour Party. Those tricks and demagoguery corresponded to the real wishes of the “advanced workers” who backed Blair? Whether they know it or not, whether they mean to say it or not - that is implicitly what T-T say!

All the struggles and battles of the 1980s, including the miners’ strike, are replaced here by a flat, undialectical, undynamic conception of how things were. Note T-T’s language about the left. Whose language is it? That of boneheaded, right-wing, “salt of the earth”, old-Labour trade unionists! T-T tacitly accept the postal vote for Blair as an authoritative gauge of the state of the working class, and dismiss the Labour left’s previous victories as mere “conference tricks”.

## **Why is there no ferment in the CLPs?**

T-T say that nothing fundamental has changed in the Labour Party. Blair is “a typical Labour leader” (point 15c:i).

Even if we stress “fundamental” here, this is an astonishing statement. It leaves us with a plain mystery. T-T insist that nothing has changed – and yet, indisputably, everything has changed.

The once-teeming life in the Labour Party does not exist any more. One of the recurring Labour Party patterns all through the 20th century was that when a Labour government was in office, the Labour Party in the country rebelled, to one degree or another. That was true in the 1930s and even the 40s.

The political life of the labour movement existed mainly in the Labour Party. It expressed the organic contradiction between the advanced layers of the working class and labour movement, and the Labour and trade union bureaucracy and all the bourgeois-Labour governments. Even in the late 1960s, when the life in the Labour Party almost collapsed, there were large and partly effective rebellions on anti-union legislation and the Vietnam war.

Labour Party life quickly picked up again after 1970, and – to our astonishment at the time – was thriving by the very early 1970s.

Disappointment with the Parliamentary Labour Party has also frequently generated a swing to industrial action. Even the pre-World War One ‘labour unrest’ was in part generated by disappointment with the first fruits of a Labour Party in Parliament.

Usually the ferment in the CLPs did not come from the trade unions as trade unions. Normally the block vote was solidly against the Labour Party rank and file – against the Bevanites, for example. The experience in 1979-82 was unusual in that we had the support of, for example, the TGWU leader Moss Evans. It was anomalous, and we pointed that out then.

In terms of the entire history since 1900, one of the most remarkable features of the last seven years has been the absence of any rank and file ferment, protest or agitation in the Labour Party. We have seen some pretty big parliamentary revolts. In the past these would have been complemented ‘on the ground’ by mass protest in the CLPs. Even during the great reforming Labour government of the late 1940s, when MPs organised a ‘ginger group’, Keep Left, they aroused a response in the CLPs, and prepared the way for the large Bevanite revolt in 1951 and after.

Now, even the very large anti-war demonstrations have not aroused a noticeable response in the CLPs. (There was a ‘Labour Against The War’ conference of about 300, which we actively intervened in; but it produced no follow-up). Why? Self-evidently, something has changed.

However one chooses to explain it, that is a central fact of labour movement politics. For over seven years now, we, including TR, have explained what has happened in terms of the changes in structures and relationships outlined in the National Committee resolution. For many years before that, from 1982-3 onwards, we had, stage by stage, analysed the decay and transformation of the Labour left that prepared the way for Kinnock and then Blair.

What do T-T offer as explanation for it? In so far as we can make sense of what they say, they offer only general explanations: that workers in bourgeois society have bourgeois ideas; that ‘the bulk of the working class’ therefore agrees with Blair; that Blair did not hijack the Labour Party, but was elected by ‘some of the most advanced workers’; that ‘working class support for the Labour Party remains strong’ and has suffered no ‘erosion’, etc.

## **Labour has not been hijacked, but the RMT has?**

T-T’s account is very odd, if you think about it. Throughout the lives of previous Labour governments – let us say from 1945 onwards – governments which at least paid lip service to working-class concerns, and sometimes, in terms of reforms, more than mere lip service – sections of the Labour Party went into revolt. Only this hard-faced, ostentatiously anti-working-class government has managed to avoid it.

Why? Because this government – so we understand T-T to say – is representative of the working-class and the labour movement. That is why this government, and it alone, has avoided repeating the pattern of revolt.

Measure that against what has happened in the RMT. In the past, RMT activists would, in conflicts with the government, have been drawn into opposition activities in their wards and GCs, and would thus have resisted Bob Crow’s moves to break with the Labour Party. But nothing like that has happened. There has been no significant rank and file resistance to Crow over the RMT’s rupture with the Labour Party. That was a major element in Crow’s situation.

And nothing has changed? Nothing except that, uniquely among Labour prime ministers throughout our history, Blair has the support and loyalty of the workers (‘not the most backward, but some of the most advanced’)? And the attitude of the RMT members? When other workers back Blair, railworkers freakishly do not?

How do T-T square all this? The Labour Party has not been hijacked, but on T-T’s account the RMT has: its revolt against Blair is merely a ‘*leadership stunt*’, a piece of ‘*manipulative bureaucratic posturing [by] the RMT leadership*’ (pt.24), way out of kilter with genuine working-class sentiment.

That could be done, perhaps, with a Stalinist regime in the RMT. In fact the RMT’s regime under Crow is somewhat more democratic than under Knapp.

## **Working-class electoral abstentions mean nothing?**

One might point to the large working-class abstention in the last General Election to refute T-T. That would not shake them. In *Solidarity* last year, TR insisted: ‘*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!

The Blairites and the Kinnockites themselves explain the silence of the grave in the Labour Party as the result of their foresight and the changes they made in the Labour Party. T-T? It is mind-boggling, but they deny that anything ‘fundamental’ has changed, and do it in such a way that – as their proposal for the whole AWL membership to be active in the Labour Party illustrates – for practical purposes they talk as if nothing important has changed in the Labour Party.

## **The backward march of Labour halted?**

Most of T-T’s discussion of the structural changes in the Labour Party (point 15) consists of pettifogging and quibbling. It is not in dispute that Labour Party/ union links remain, and that this may be important in the long term.

On one point they are probably right. We would not choose to put it in their terms – and we have not when discussing the same substantive issue – but the Blairite

counter-revolution in the Labour Party may have run out of steam before its work is completed. It is vulnerable to a counter-attack, as, in our own way and not in a preposterous backflip like TR's, we began to explore in August 2002, long before TR caught on.

However, it is also possible that Brown, replacing Blair, would restore momentum to the Blair-Brown 'project'.

T-T's idea here is something else entirely: that therefore a small Marxist organisation can organise and coordinate a labour-movement/ trade-union counter-offensive; that we should act as if we could and confine ourselves to propaganda for that counter-offensive inside the unions and the Labour Party and to resisting the pseudo-left 'hijacking' sectarians.

To do any of the mass mobilising T-T want we would have to be a mass organisation: but that is ruled out by what they propose (relegating ourselves to a quiet propaganda existence, 'banner furled': if we take their advice, AWL will, at best, wither and shrivel into a great deal less than it is now).

Their essential case, here and elsewhere, is that if the big unions wanted things different, then much could be done and Labour's rule changes could be rendered irrelevant. That is not in dispute. We have explained it in our press a dozen times. But things are as they are. AWL cannot at will change the unions entirely.

As a political organisation, we cannot subsist on fantasies of how different things would be if we could.

T-T's way with this is to talk as if because one can imagine a different scenario – which we are powerless to bring about unless we suddenly become a mass movement in the unions – *therefore* what exists does not really exist. But it does! What does not exist is their fantasy Labour Party and the phantom prospects they want us to join them in orienting to.

Their arguments here do not get them very far – unless they want to deny that there is no life in the Labour Party – and so they are forced into a mental world of political make-believe and preposterous denial of realities staring them in the face – and, as we saw, falsifying the history of the Labour Party..

They conflate the question of whether the Labour/ union link still exists with the distinct question of the immediate state of the Labour Party. That second question is what is decisive for whether AWL should do the sort of 'Labour Party work' they propose.

We, AWL, have never accepted or used any argument for not standing candidates against the Labour Party other than that it was possible to do the same work of socialist advocacy as might be done in independent candidacies within the Labour Party, and do it better or more fruitfully there.

## Blair is one of the best Labour prime ministers ever?

In JB's and SM's exchange with TR and ME in Solidarity last year, they pointed out that the only way you could present the Blair government as other than an anti-working-class government is to use the argument of such 'left' Blairites as Polly Toynbee in the Guardian – low unemployment, a (lousy) minimum wage, and so on.

Lo and behold, T-T use exactly that argument in their point 16. They are so out of touch with reality that they are not ashamed to 'talk up' the claim that Tony Blair is a Labour prime minister, and even assert that he is the best

Labour prime minister so far! Read: *'The Blair government – despite its open right-wing rhetoric and its neo-liberal ideology – has not attacked and reduced working-class living standards as the Wilson, Callaghan and MacDonald governments did'*. You never thought of that, did you? You don't know when you are well off!

T-T don't care about consistency. When it suits them, everything is explained mechanically as a reflex of the 'background' material situation (point 9). And when it suits them, the entire material background is ignored!

The Blair government presides over a relatively booming economy; courtesy of Margaret Thatcher, it has the trade unions gripped in an iron legal vice which excludes 'wildcat' actions and makes more or less impossible the sort of guerrilla strikes which pushed up working-class living standards in the 1950s and 60s. T-T are not concerned with any of that, so long as they can make a debating point. And it is a very silly debating point!

A political position that obliges its devotees to talk up Blair's credentials as a Labour prime minister, and as the best Labour prime minister in 70 years – that, we suggest, comrades R and C, is a position you should pause to think about.

The honest 'left Blairite' Polly Toynbee is more balanced in the picture she paints. For example, she wrote in the Guardian (30 April 2004):

*'The government has managed, more or less, to stop the gap growing worse for most people, helping the poorest. Except at the far top end, where a great spike of mega-wealth shoots into the air like a monstrous carbuncle.'*

*'What does Labour think about it? Some express anxious concern, but still the official response is: 'It really does not matter.'*

*'Professor Tony Atkinson's graphs of top incomes from the start of the last century tell the story of the march of social progress from Lloyd George's day until Healey's, but after that the rich soared away, never to return. Historically, we are back to inequality levels of the 50s. In a decade, unless top tax rates rise, we shall be back to 1932's gulf between top and bottom''.*

## No erosion of workers' support for Labour?

In point 17 T-T assert that *'working-class support for the Labour Party remains strong'*, the *'working-class component of the declining Party membership is still high and getting higher'*<sup>\*</sup>, and *'talk of an erosion of core working-class support for Labour lacks any real factual grip'*.

This is the Mandelsonian 'propaganda' technique of flat assertion of the opposite of the truth.

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<sup>\*</sup>T-T's attempt at detailed substantiation in DB 246, taken from Guardian articles of 24 February 2004, is based on a survey showing that only 25% of Labour Party members are "AB" (professional and managerial). But the survey also found that the members it polled were elderly (55% over 55, 54% of them not or no longer in work). Only 28% of them had joined since 1994, and the average length of membership was 26 years.

In other words: most of the new members who joined around 1994 have gone; a core of older people remains, stuck to Labour by lifelong loyalties and lack of sufficient energy to attempt anything new. They are mostly not 'Blairites', but they are less radical than the working-class average: 'they generally give the government in office a far more generous scorecard than Labour voters do'. Only 33% told the Guardian that Blair had taken Labour too far to the right. The rump Labour Party membership is not a feisty bunch.)



## Now only the bureaucrats hold us back?

T-T's point 19 shows that they have no idea of what an organisation like AWL has to do.

*'What is decisive and all-shaping in the Labour Party today is the refusal of the union leadership to fight Blair and their bureaucratic grip on the unions preventing the rank and file from doing so. The changes to the Labour Party rulebook... provide small-scale secondary obstacles limiting what small organisations with poor roots in the union and constituency rank and file can do, but they amount to no serious obstacle to the trade unions if they were led by people serious about confronting Blair. Nor would they be any more of a serious obstacle to a revolutionary organisation of a few thousand people rooted in the workplaces, unions and constituencies than the rules were in the 1980s'.*

And if SM were the rightful king of Ireland, he'd be called O'Connor, not O'Matgamna. If he had wings he'd be a sparrow. If TR were a ship, he would have an anchor, and, perhaps, he would not bob around so much. If the union leaders were working-class militants and we had a large revolutionary organisation in the trade unions, then the socialist revolution would be near...

Here again, T-T have no objection to having one segment of their resolution contradict another one.

They argued earlier that the Blair Labour Party is a straightforward reflection of the working class as it is. Here they say that the thin layer of top union bureaucrats could at will see Blair off, and could at will mobilise that very same working class whose "most advanced" members voted Blair to leadership, who "agree with [Blair] on most things", and who still strongly support Blair's government!

How could these "serious" people get to the top of the unions, when the rank and file are still more or less content with Blair? T-T do not explain. They just blithely contradict themselves.

In point 18 that same rank and file is now aching to assault Blair, and prevented from doing so only by the "bureaucratic grip" of the leaders (even the current leaders, the Woodleys and others for whom T-T usually have only praise)!

The fact that the changed rules create very large-scale obstacles to what an organisation of some hundreds could do, to what the rank and file in unions can do to push their leaderships into concerted revolt against Blair, and to what smaller unions (all but the big four) can do, even if their leaders are "serious", escapes T-T's notice, so swiftly does their gaze switch from the dull but inevitable present – a working class largely content with the best Labour government for 50 years – to the glowing future of mass union revolt.

## Or do T-T base everything on the current bureaucrats starting a fight?

Beyond dispute, if the union leaders made a concerted fight against Blair and Blairism, they could... what? 'Reclaim the Labour Party'?

Reclaim from whom? The workers who "agree with [Blair] on most things"? And reclaim? When T-T are emphatic that the unions never had any effective "claim" over the Labour Party?

In fact, unless something made the Blairite machine lose the will to fight, what a concerted union revolt would most likely do is *split* the Labour Party.

We used to think that such a union-organised political split would take not many members of the Parliamentary Labour Party with it. The emergence of something like a Labour Party opposition in Parliament suggests that they would take more.

But many who revolted against the Iraq war would not necessarily go with the unions. Most of them have no record of opposition to Blair on working-class issues, most importantly the anti-union laws.

Some might go with the unions for calculations of career prospects, as many Liberal MPs and ex-MPs joined the Labour Party 85 years ago.

That a concerted union fight would have such prospects has been said again and again in *Solidarity*. The editorial in August 2002 noted that the emergence of new union leaderships objectively opened up the possibility of a trade-union fight within Labour structures.

What, to T-T, is the difference here? We suspect that the basic impulse that has induced their self-contradictory nonsense is the election of the new trade union leaders.

Last year, TR was taking every promise of those leaders as immediate good coin. Deriding the cold assessment by JB and SM that "the idea of... 'refounding the labour representation committee' as yet has little weight, even with the new layers of trade union leaders", he cited promises by Rix, Gilchrist, Hayes, Simpson and Woodley – even Curran and the Unison leadership – and exclaimed: "What more evidence do the comrades want?"

He is more prudent now. Maybe the philosophising about why we should not be surprised to find "the bulk of the working class" agreeing with Blair serves as a safety valve here: if Woodley moves slowly, well, what else could he do, when the workers largely love Blair and oppose him only on odd issues?

But the basic assumption remains: that we can take a mass union revolt against Blair, led by the Woodleys, as a more or less solid certainty on which to base AWL tactics and activity now.

## Which 'Gods' are against us?

Or does it? Are T-T asking us to subordinate everything to the scenario of a mass fight for trade-union control of the Labour Party because they expect Woodley, Simpson and the others to start that fight very soon? Or, on the contrary, because they think this fight is brewing in the rank and file and stalled only by the "bureaucratic grip" of Woodley and Simpson?

Up to point 19 in their text, T-T have been scornful of any "Trotskyist" talk of misleadership, betrayal, and so on. Things are as they are because the working class in a bourgeois society has bourgeois ideas, and that's that. The Labour Party is as it is because the workers support Blair.

In point 19 they switch – from one level of one-sided generality to another. They present ideas that have been commonplaces, even banalities, with us for much of the 20th century as if they are new.

There is a trade union bureaucracy; it "grips" the unions and "prevents" the rank and file "fighting" Blair. But if they would lead the unions in a fight back (against Blair or against capitalism!), then we would live in a different political world. Not only we, but our fathers and mothers would have lived in a socialist world.

Despite their earlier blame-the-rank-and-file-for-Blair line, and their insistence that to talk of "betrayal" to explain Blairism is like saying that "the Gods are against us", T-T now embrace the idea of bureaucratic betrayal – in the



oversimplified form which “Trotskyists” like the old Healyites favoured, the sort of thing that once gave credence to the hostile “Trot-baiting” caricatures they themselves invoked in point 11. Which “gods” are against us? The trade union bureaucrats!

They present the idea that the union bureaucracy is an all-shaping reality for the working class and for socialists as a new discovery – too new, it would seem, to affect even the earlier parts of their own text!

They write not only as if the discovery is new, but as if their discovering it points to an immediate solution – as if all that has held us back over the 90 years since the collapse of the Second International is the absence of a definition of what it is.

On one level this is extremely gauche and naive – simple-mindedness with delusions of grandeur! T-T discover the trade union bureaucracy! The mystery is solved! They can’t last long now that Holmes and Watson are on to them!

It would be funny and touching, if they did not use it to propound attitudes and tactics for our small Marxist organisation that make no sense for the world we are in. (And it would never make sense to confine ourselves to the role of propagandists within the trade union around the slogan which, though they do not propose it, sums up what they say: ‘Make the trade union leaders fight in the Labour Party!’)

## Not by rules alone? But the rules do matter!

Despite T-T’s point 20, no-one argues that the rule changes alone explain the state of the labour movement. We do argue that those rules now choke the Labour Party. Here again what Holmes and Watson lack is any applied notion of the dynamics that shaped the history of the labour movement in the last 20 to 25 years.

Quite plainly, no rule changes would have held against the rank and file of the Labour Party as it was 25 years ago. Edward Heath’s anti-union laws, backed by the power of the courts and the police, did not hold against the active opposition of trade unionists. We ripped them up and drove Heath out of office.

A whole series of disappointments and defeats were necessary before the anti-union laws and the changes of rule and procedure in the Labour Party could be enforced.

The Tories did not bring in the anti-union laws we have now in one go. They began rather modestly in 1981. Thereafter, as the class was ground down, they brought in more laws, one by one.

In the Bible story the Philistines and their agent Delilah have to get Samson drunk and while he sleeps cut his hair – the source of his God-given strength – before they can put shackles on him. In his strength no shackles could have held him. But once he was chained up, the shackles did hold him, and made it possible for them to enslave him, chained to a millwheel, until his hair and his strength grew again, when he broke the chains and pulled the idolator’s temple down on their heads.

That story prefigures what the working class will eventually do to the bourgeoisie and the edifices of its power. But we aren’t at that stage yet; and the way to it is not necessarily along T-T’s scenario.

The transformation of the Labour Party in the 1990s was prepared by a long period during which the Party members and the union leaders were “softened up” by events to let the Blairites hijack the Labour Party. Once in place, however, the new structures hinder and prevent the existence of anything like the old political life in the Labour Party, as the

anti-union laws hinder and prevent militant trade-union action.

A dialectical understanding of what happened, of the relationship between events here, may be helped by recalling Trotsky’s discussions of the effects of industrial slump on working-class militancy.

In Britain, the Great Depression of the 1930s pushed the working class and the labour movement down; in the USA, after the first shocks, the slump triggered working-class action in the early stages of economic recovery to create powerful modern industrial unions, the CIO.

So, does a slump generate or depress militancy? It can do either. Everything depends on the prior experience of the working class before the onset of the slump.

In Britain, the defeat of the 1926 general strike, and subsequent defeats, weakened the working class and its movement. The eruption of mass unemployment pushed it down further.

In the USA, the workers had experienced a great capitalist boom in the 1920s. They were confident; then disappointed; then angry. They went in the opposite direction.

Something like what happened in Britain after 1926-7 recurred with us at the beginning of the 1980s. Militancy unprecedented since the mid 1920s had won us victories, but the 1974-9 Labour government, for which the trade-union militancy had battered the way, produced disappointment and anger.

Working-class militancy declined in the late 1970s. Important sections of the skilled working class in the Midlands switched to vote Tory in the 1979 election. Then a very severe economic depression hit. There was persistent mass unemployment for the first time in over 40 years. The slump, the militant Tory government, and industrial defeats like that of the steelworkers, pushed the working class down further. The left-wing attempt to remake the Labour Party failed.

The need to get the Tories out progressively replaced all other goals for the Labour left. The soft left round Kinnock allied with the Right, isolating the serious left.

A whole series of steps and stages marked the progression of the once-left Labour Party towards acceptance of the Blairite coup. As T-T rightly say (repeating what we have often said before), it was not just Blair’s work. It had been prepared by Kinnock and Smith.

Once the transformation of rules, procedures, structures, and relationships had been made, at the end of a long period of defeat, retreat and decline, it stopped a revival of the old Labour Party constituency life. Cause generates effect – and then effect is itself cause, in a long chain.

If T-T were not so disdainful of our history – in part their history too – they would recall that *Socialist Organiser* step by step fought against the degeneration of the Labour Party and specifically of its left wing. We analysed it step by step too. We predicted step by step what has actually happened.

We even ‘predicted’ something like Blairism, at the start of the Bennite movement. SM wrote two pieces, in *Workers’ Action* and *Socialist Organiser*, pointing out that if the Bennite movement let itself be defeated, then the victorious right wing would most likely replace the old Labour Party with something like continental social democracy. For that to happen, the working class had first to be comprehensively defeated.

Of course, the trade unions could break the shackles; of course, a large influx of militant left-wingers into the Labour Party would at the least put the rules to severe test. If a large body of unions were simultaneously on the offensive, they would break the chains as Samson, his strength restored,

broke his chains. They would bring the New Labour temple down around Blair's ears...

Short of that, however, the rules are very effective. To point out that if a whole series of events happen, then we will be able contemptuously to dismiss the rules, does not make that series of events happen; it does not make them more likely to happen, still less make them inevitable; nor does it make the rules less effective now.

AWL naively reducing itself to a propaganda sect in the unions (and the New Labour party!), with its essential role being to call on the trade union leaders to make our scenario happen, and on the rank and file to 'make the bureaucracy fight' – that won't make it happen, either! All it will do is stultify AWL – and, if we still exist as anything like what we are now, make us less capable of affecting events when the working class goes on the offensive.

## Now there's 'widespread disaffection'?

In point 21, T-T are inconsistent again. When they want to argue with us that Blairism is the natural reflection of the working class, of 'reality as it is', they say one thing. When they want to damn the idea of standing election candidates against New Labour they sing the opposite tune: mass working-class disaffection exists, but Socialist Alliance candidates have 'failed to provide a focus for widespread disaffection with Blair's Labour government'.

Back in point 11, they explained the poor results of the Socialist Alliance as the inevitable result of 'the conditions... The support is not there in the class'. There was no 'widespread disaffection' to focus. T-T tend to 'see' what serves the argument they are making in a given section of their resolution.

What is more to the point on the issue we are debating, and what they glaringly ignore, is that the very 'widespread disaffection' with the Blair Labour government has found virtually no active reflection in the Labour Party (though it has stirred up the unions).

## The SWamPing of the Socialist Alliance does not vindicate the idea of work in the Labour Party!

In point 22, T-T attempt to deduce from the claim that electoral initiatives have failed the conclusion that we must go back to the Labour Party.

The experience of the Socialist Alliance, and now the SWP's effective replacement of the Socialist Alliance with Respect, does not necessarily have any bearing at all on what it is possible to do with the Labour Party! It is a complete non sequitur.

The state of things in the Labour Party remains essentially what it was when we helped set up the Socialist Alliance in 1998-9. The 'widespread dissatisfaction' with the Blair government has produced no noticeable movement in the Labour Party. The 'Reclaim the Labour Party' conference in July 2003 was largely a tired affair of trade-union lefts, elderly Labour Party routinists, and ailing ex-revolutionaries let out for the day from the *Briefing* hospice, the *Socialist Action* lunatic asylum, and the *Socialist Appeal* old folks' home.

Such facts, not the difficulties and failures of the Socialist Alliance enterprise, are what determines our attitude to the New Labour Party and work there to 'reclaim' it.

Of course, we continue to urge the trade union leaders to fight. Of course, we try to get resolutions about that through

trade union branches, Executives, and conferences. Where it is appropriate and feasible, we will do that alongside organising or supporting socialist election challenges to New Labour.

Our 'strategic' concern is what it was when we were in the Labour Party – the creation of a mass working-class party with socialist politics that will fight for a workers' government. We pursued that by work in the Labour Party when there was a lively Labour Party to work in, by advocacy for a workers' government, and so on. In changed circumstances we do it now by calling on the trade union leaders to fight, by organising in the rank and file for initiatives when the leaders won't lead, and by independent socialist agitation.

## Tactics now must be based on reality now

In point 22 T-T try to deduce entryism in the Labour Party from what is our common strategic objective. It is charlatantry!

Entry or not cannot be deduced from 'strategic' scenarios but only from detailed examination of the realities and real possibilities on the ground – 'concrete analysis'; T-T!

The changes in the Labour Party determine our tactics for now, whether or not they may some time in the future have to be reversed.

Again and again, T-T do not seem to be able to take in what we are saying (and what TR himself used to say).

In point 22 they write: '*A policy of calling for the trade unions to form a new party to fight the Labour Party in elections*' has 'no grip'.

Who calls on the trade unions now to form a new party? We call on them to fight within the Labour Party. We explain what we think that means – a split, a new party – but what we call on them to do is not split, but fight.

How do T-T wind up writing polemics against the National Committee in which they resort to the same sort of unscrupulous misrepresentation that, say, *Workers' Power* and the *Weekly Worker* use in polemics? Who is this nonsense aimed at?

## Can the LRC be the focus of all our work?

We have called for a new Labour Representation Committee for many years. We are involved in the preparations for the conference under this name being planned by John McDonnell for July 2004. (The big four unions have refused to support it, by the way).

From this, in point 25, T-T spin out the nonsensical idea that all AWL members should join the Labour Party in order to further this work.

It is long-standing AWL policy, not controversial on the National Committee, that all AWL members should if possible hold Labour Party membership cards. This keeps open our options for the future, but we have been clear that it does not mean all AWL members trying to be active in their CLPs now.

Entry into a Labour Party in which what life there is is Blairite or demoralised soft-left – and very little of that – makes no practical sense at all.

For the National Committee, Labour Party work is fraction work for a segment of the AWL. T-T would make it the central focus for the whole organisation. That, in a nutshell, is the difference between T-T and the National Committee.

## A right-wing interpretation of ‘workers’ representation’

T-T want the Labour Party entry work they propose to be “trade union based” and focused on demands to “restore Labour Party democracy” – restore something they say elsewhere in their document never really existed, and moreover has not seriously diminished!

*As I was going up the stair  
I met a man who wasn't there.  
He wasn't there again today;  
Oh how I wish he'd go away!*

And what would the central plank be of the work that T-T propose to “restore Labour Party democracy”? “The selection of trade union and working-class socialist candidates”.

We have over the last years made the slogan “working-class representation” central to our work – including our work in the Socialist Alliance and in elections where we have had candidates.

We have advocated – by all means feasibly to hand, including through socialist candidates in elections – the idea that the working class must reassert itself in politics, chose and vote for its own representatives, and fight for a workers’ government.

The slogan does not mean that socialists cannot stand in elections unless they first (and how?) establish themselves as representing the majority, or at least a big minority, of the working class in their area. To interpret it that way would give it a destructive right-wing, “tailist” twist. But T-T make it more right-wing still.

They would reduce the idea of working-class representation to manoeuvring within the largely inert Labour Party to get a Blairite candidate here and there replaced by a “trade union and working-class socialist candidate”. In the real world and the real Labour Party, what would that mean?

A few of us, in a constituency, should start a propaganda campaign against the existing MP? Slowly – and it would be very slow in almost all cases, years and years – we would perhaps build support for the idea of “trade union and working-class socialist candidates”. Eventually we would win a vote to throw out the existing MP and put in a “trade union” candidate?

If the Blairite centre (or the Brownite, or post-Brownite, centre – we are dealing with a perspective of years here, and possibly many, many years) refused to endorse the candidate, we would then, maybe, think of standing them against the Labour Party.

Now every comrade who has worked in the Labour Party knows that even in the good times of working-class, trade-union, and Labour ferment, that level of control and political leadership in a variegated CLP was almost never won by revolutionary socialists. Almost always the best you could do was form “alliances” with left prospective parliamentary candidates or MPs.

To do anything like what T-T propose would require not only a far larger revolutionary left organisation in the Labour Party and the trade unions, but also a very large working-class ferment outside them.

Unless, that is, what they really mean is that we should toil away at trying to get Blairite candidates replaced by soft-lefts, or “trade unionists” with god knows what politics. What sense could it make to scale ourselves down to such horizons? And what would there then be to stop us following *Socialist Action* into the delusion that the primary business

for revolutionary socialists now is working for positions of possible influence in MPs’ offices and so on?

If T-T’s proposal is anything more “serious”, then it is a variant on the crazy tune Chris Knight of Chartist and Briefing used to sing when they fantasised about taking over the Labour Party and Parliament next week or next month. Only we would do it more “modestly”, constituency by constituency, bit by bit.

It is a recipe for destroying the organisation by having us busy ourselves in a hopeless and impossible “task”. And suppose after many years we got some soft-left or other as a Labour MP in place of a Blairite? That could only be of great value to us if we had adopted a perspective of rebuilding a Labour “soft left” as a first stage towards building a Marxist current, in a caricature of what some would-be Trotskyists proposed in the 1960s, that a “mass centrist current” should be built as the first stage. It would be a different matter if the trade unions were to organise and evoke a concerted movement to deselect Blairites, even if at first they wanted to replace them by soft-lefts. For us to devote our resources to trying to simulate or prefigure that movement in a few constituencies makes no sense.

In practice, whatever our “big” perspectives, AWL would become an organisation which in the real world devoted itself to routine trade union and Labour Party work.

## Trade-union unity is more important than political demarcation?

T-T’s points 27 and 28 confuse the principles of trade unionism (uniting and not fragmenting) with the principles of politics – which involve delineation, argument, and separation. They are discussed in JB’s and SM’s pamphlet.

The whole idea of “trade union control” of MPs is a radical departure from the politics of Marxism. It is, as we saw above, a hybrid syndicalism – and, as JB and SM established in their pamphlet, not revolutionary syndicalism but right-wing syndicalism..

## Should AWL advocate that the SSP dissolve?

T-T’s point 31: *‘The SSP is only supportable critically and on condition [that we] struggle within it.. for a reorientation back to Labour Party work’*

T-T’s “concession” here seems to be purely opportunist, designed to placate AWL members. On the basis of their text so far, why support the SSP? The SSP’s vote reflects no “socialist bias on the part of the Scottish working class” but only an “appeal to Scottish nationalism” and “impermissible concessions to Scottish nationalism”; “the conditions are not right” for socialist candidates against Labour; “the support is not there in the class”.

What do they mean by “reorientation back to Labour Party work”? If they mean that in the SSP we raise the need to put forward broad perspectives for the whole labour movement, and that this must include “orienting” to Labour-supporting trade unions, trade unionists, and honest Labour Party activists, then it is common ground. Is that all they mean?

It seems not. They want SSP “reorientation back to Labour Party work”? “Work”? We hesitate to attribute to T-T or anyone else an idea which is utterly idiotic, but this seems to mean that AWL urges the SSP to go back to “work” in the Labour Party. Entry?

What do they have in mind here?

That we should mechanically transpose Trotsky's idea that the ILP must recognise that the Labour Party was the mass party of the British workers, and that the British Trotskyists should join the – then radically different – Labour Party?

But Trotsky also rightly said that the ILP was right to stand in the 1935 General Election even if it meant letting a Tory or Liberal win the seat against the Labour Party.

"We do not boycott ourselves!"

The idea that we should baldly now propose to the SSP that it liquidates into the Blair Labour Party is, we suggest, a measure of just how disoriented T-T are politically.

## **RMT bad, Livingstone good?**

In point 34 T-T tell us that the disaffiliation of the RMT was a "defeat for the principle of class solidarity", and in points 35 and 36 they stress this again. This is yet again the substitution of trade-union norms – the broadest unity and solidarity across the whole class – for the norms of political demarcation and delineation.

But why do they think that the entire process of political reorientation in the labour movement in response to Blair, of which the separation of the RMT and the Labour Party is part, is at an end now that the RMT is out of the Labour Party? It is not.

They refuse to understand that it may well be the case that the "fragmentation" of the unions now united within the Blair party will be the consequence of a fight back against Blairism. Why? Because the shaping fact is that we, who have a coherent overall picture of the labour movement and what it should do, do not lead that movement.

T-T want us to behave as if we do, as if we should defend the union/Blairite status quo in the name of an operational anti-Blairite alternative to "fragmentation".

T-T approach the RMT conflict with the Blair Labour Party with the chagrin of rejected labour movement "strategists". They see only negative things in the revolt of the RMT against Blairism. They equate the separation of the RMT from the Blair party with disunity in the trade union movement and the working class, and blame the left for it!

(No, T-T, the RMT has not left the TUC... We will not pursue the question further here, but T-T's confusion of politics and trade unionism is probably the root of all the nonsense they generate.)

They turn themselves, and seek to turn AWL, into puggled and uncomprehending guardians of the New Labour status quo – no union should antagonise the Blairites too much, because that would disrupt unity.

That is not what they want to do, or think they do, but they do it.

What do they think we should have said at the RMT's 2003 Annual General Meeting, and its 2004 Special General Meeting? We supported, in principle the rule change to allow branches, with Executive approval, to back parties other than the Labour Party; specifically opposed the motion to back Plaid Cymru, and explained that we supported backing the SSP or labour-representation and solid socialist candidates, but not middle-class parties; criticised Crow's reduction of the RMT's Labour affiliation to a token level; voted against the RMT backing down to the Blairites; argued for the RMT to work with other unions to oppose the Blairite expulsion and start a fight for labour representation. T-T said nothing about this at the time. What do they think AWL should have said?

One of the oddest things in the resolution is the favourable attitude T-T express towards Livingstone – the only person in British politics licensed by them to contravene "the

principle of class solidarity and workers' unity", as expressed in sticking to majority Blairite/trade-union discipline!

In politics Livingstone now is a full-scale popular-frontist – the cabinet of his London government includes Tories, Lib-Dems and Blairites – as well as being what he always was, an unprincipled and occasionally eccentric old gobshite! Livingstone in London has realised the "rainbow coalition" he has publicly toyed with for 20 years.

## **Are we inspectors-general of the labour movement?**

In point 36, T-T argue that the "policy of simultaneously backing Labour and anti-Labour candidates and being serious about staying in the Labour Party" is shown to be impossible by the experience of the RMT.

Suppose it is? Then our choice is either to fight in the world as it is, in the actual relationship of forces, or else to submit to the Blairite (and sectarian) monopoly of trade-union-linked candidacies.

T-T choose submission to the Blairites, and leave open militant opposition to the Blairites to the sectarians!

In fact the RMT experience does not prove what they say it proves. When it suits them, T-T stress that Crow wanted disaffiliation. If Crow had not tacitly colluded with the Blairites, but instead had manoeuvred without accepting the Blairite claims to monopoly, then the expulsion, if it came, would not have come the way it did.

In any case, here too, "we cannot boycott ourselves" politically and submit to Blairism. Read the quotation from Trotsky in 1934 about "organic unity" at the head of this article. That expresses our attitude in such a situation.

T-T's fixation with "unity" – transposing trade-union principles inappropriately into politics – renders them incapable of anything but submission to Blairism for the foreseeable future – until all the unions move in lockstep against Blair or away from Blairism! Thereby they surrender our political autonomy to the established leaders of the unions (and the Labour Party) and urge us to do it too.

Marxists organise as we do to group and regroup the militants. We know we can't now control what happens in the Labour Party. We are not, as Trotsky put it, the inspectors-general of history.

Effectively, T-T want to reconcile the Crowites with the Blairites, even at the expense of AWL politics. In this scenario, the AWL's job would be to find formulas in the trade unions to placate the rebellious while keeping them within the limits of Blair-dominated unity.

No. We must work by way of militant agitation and propaganda, and by building AWL.

If we try to be the inspectors-general of history, or of the structures of the labour movement; if we subordinate ourselves to a spurious, quasi-academic, "disinterested" overview; then we will be unable to fight as working-class socialist militants.

We do have an overview, and a conception of the necessary evolution of society and of the labour movement, but we get to our goal through conflict, struggle, and splits.

The status quo in society has to be disrupted, and in the working class and the labour movement too. The other, manipulative and speculative, approach would make of us pseudo-Fabian grand strategists pulling strings (in our heads). It would turn us into something like what Max Shachtman and his immediate circle made themselves in the

mid 1960s – would-be ‘inspectors-general’ of the US labour movement, pulling strings. That is not AWL’s road!

The status quo in the labour movement, in the trade unions, has led us into the present blind alley. If we fear to break and disrupt the present status quo except when we are guaranteed an outcome nearer to our desires, and that outcome immediately upon the disruption of the old conditions – here, movement of the trade unions from subservience to Blairism, smoothly, in one ‘united’ movement – then we will never do anything.

We are not academics or pseudo-academics striving for a spurious objectivity, but fighters who know we cannot ask of history that it first guarantees a positive outcome. Otherwise we would never do anything, and, conversely, we would condemn all those who did things that failed – from the Spartacus slave rebellion of 70 BC through the Paris Commune to the October Revolution.

We are militants, or we are not revolutionaries! Thinking, responsible militants, but militants nonetheless.

We use reason and calculation in deciding what we do, but we do not rest on notions like (to adapt something one of us heard someone say at a crucial turning point, when the SCLV we had set up split, and the class-collaborationist local government left around Livingstone and Ted Knight parted company with us): ‘a Blairite or Blair-submissive bird in the hand is worth two mere socialist projects’.

## Lessons from the early Communist Party

In point 37, T-T argue that attempting to get money from trade unions for anti-Labour candidates was no feature of the Communist Party when it was a revolutionary organisation, that is, in the 1920s. If so, why might that be, comrades R and C?

In the first place, was it quite the same Labour Party? As late as 1925, Trotsky sketched a ‘perspective’ of the Communist Party displacing the ILP of Ramsey MacDonald as the leading force in the Labour Party. But what was the 1920s CP attitude to dividing ‘the unity of the workers’ movement’ in politics?

When, after the decisions of the Liverpool Labour Party conference in 1925, the Labour Party drew sharp lines against the CP, excluding CPers from being trade union delegates to constituency GCs and to Labour Party conference, did the CP throw their hands in the air and cry ‘Woe is us! We have disrupted working-class unity! We will back off from a clash with the right wing, which will expel us and thus disrupt the unity of the workers’ movement. We will now proceed to boycott ourselves politically!’

Like hell they did! They continued where they could to get themselves sent as union delegates to Labour Party GCs, and did what they could to get GCs to refuse to obey Labour Party conference. 100 divisional and borough parties resisted the edict. As local Labour Parties got themselves expelled for refusing to exclude CPers, the National Left-Wing Movement (NLWM) was launched on CP initiative in December 1925.

The CP did their best to rope in as many local Labour Parties as possible to the NLWM. At its second conference in September 1927, 54 local Labour parties sent delegates, claiming to represent 150,000 members.

They did not split the unions. They organised the Minority Movement in the unions. They had a different attitude to splits in the unions and in the Labour Party.

Unity across the whole working class, or as much as possible of it, is the cardinal principle of trade unionism. It is not any sort of principle of working class politics.

Once again, it is clear that T-T do not understand that trade unions and political parties are different things, that they confuse the two, and that this is a main root of their proliferating errors about both the unions and the Labour Party. (See Trotsky’s discussion of this central point in JB/SM’s pamphlet).

## Lessons from Germany and France

But, T-T will say, ‘we are concerned with the disaffiliation of trade unions from the Labour Party, with their political disunity’.

When it was a revolutionary organisation, the CP had the perspective of winning leadership of the unions – the National Minority Movement had on paper the affiliation of about a quarter of the organised trade unionists in Britain. Of course they did not want trade unions disaffiliated from the Labour Party. They worked both in the trade union Minority Movement and with the expelled Labour left wing.

The perspective of gaining a communist majority in the British labour movement, trade unions and Labour Party, was by no means unrealistic. We don’t know whether the CP ever deliberately backed off from a confrontation on unions financing CP candidates. (There was no General Election between late 1924 and late 1929, by which time the CP was deep into the ultra-left ‘Third Period’ phase of political madness). But if they did, it was in pursuit of the broad and quite short-term perspective.

What if the CP had not played the role it did, under Moscow guidance, in the General Strike of 1926 and after, covering for the traitorous trade union bureaucrats? If it had not turned crazily to the ultra-left in 1928? If it had been a real Marxist movement, and had consolidated the leadership of at least a big minority in the unions and the Labour Party (NLWM)?

Then a split in the broad labour movement would probably have been the outcome – as happened in Germany (1921), France (1920), and Italy (1920). The right wing might even, as in France, have split the unions. Would a revolutionary CP have run away from a break? Bowed down to right wing rule? The idea is ridiculous.

Their attitude would have been that which Trotsky summarised in 1938:

*‘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.’*

And we do not have to guess, because we have the experience of Germany, France and Italy to go by.

In Germany the communists won over the majority of the ‘Independents’ (who had split from the right-wing, pro-war SPD in 1916), but were a minority in the political labour movement, the majority being the right-wing SPD, which a minority of the Independents, people like Karl Kautsky and Eduard Bernstein, had rejoined when the majority went to the Communist International. The German CP did not win over the unions. So, out of deference to the fact that the SPD had the unions, they refrained from standing in elections, or trying to win the unions to support their candidates? Of course they didn’t! The idea is ridiculous!

There is no exact parallel between Britain now and Germany then, but there is enough to shed light on our problem with the Labour Party now.

In both France and Italy, the majority of the old Socialist Parties voted to join the Communist International, but the consequent social-democratic split-offs in fact quickly became the majority tendencies in the working class, at least electorally. In France the right wing (socialists and syndicalists in alliance) split the trade union federation, the CGT.

What did the French CP do? Rush to liquidate into the majority party? The French CP did advocate reunification of the unions, but they did not propose thereby to surrender politically to the right wing. What prompted the union split in 1921 was that the right wing, though it had had large majorities at the 1919 and 1920 CGT conventions, had only a narrow edge at the July 1921 one, feared it would soon lose control, and so expelled the left wing pre-emptively. But the CP's approach would not have been different even if they were clearly the minority in the unions.

## Lessons from the LRC of 1900

In fact, the nearest parallel to our situation now was in Britain at the end of the 19th century. The trade unions backed the Liberal Party. They financed a number of trade unionists as Liberal MPs (state payment of MPs did not exist until 1911, so the unions paid the election expenses and wages of the MPs).

In the years before 1900, the socialist pioneers and eventual founders of the Labour Party had to defy the trade-union majority in order to challenge the Liberals in elections.

They did what they could to rupture the unions' links with the Liberals. They made a great breakthrough when some unions helped them found the Labour Representation Committee in 1900. But only 353,000 trade unionists were represented at the LRC's foundation (by unions or Trades Councils, i.e. with some double counting), out of two million trade unionists in Britain then.

There was a longish period of transition, with some unions continuing to link themselves to the Liberal Party. The miners' union remained with the Liberals until 1909.

At least one Lib-Lab MP, the famous John Burns, one of the leaders of the dockers in 1889, who had been close to Frederick Engels, went the other way, becoming a Liberal minister in 1906. Until his death in 1941, Burns believed that the break with the Liberals had disrupted 'left unity', helped the Tories, and had on the whole been a disastrous mistake.

Precedents and partial parallels can only serve to throw light on our situation, not to give us precise recipes. Today the Labour Party is no longer what it was. We cannot do what T-T want and adopt as our first priority the maintenance of the political unity of the trade unions under the Blairites-Brownites.

## Is "trade-union control" AWL's answer?

T-T's points 38, 39 and 40 are an awful mix of demagoguery, confusion and wrong politics.

*'We want candidates, councillors, and MPs who are answerable to the trade unions'— and, they repeat themselves for emphasis – "answerable to them". 'Our central concern is working-class representation through trade-union control and accountability of candidates, representatives, and parties'. 'The principle.... is of working class or labour representation... the working-class organisations [i.e. the trade unions] put workers... up for selection through the Labour Party... and... the union holds them to account and binds them with its collective discipline'. 'The Marxist tactic [is] the trade unions*

*supporting, creating and controlling a new workers' party... [it embodies] the revolutionary democratic working class principle of a party controlled by the workers'.*

Politically, all this is nonsense – and, as we have already shown, precisely definable nonsense. Despite being concerned to elect and 'control' MPs, it is syndicalist delusion (syndicalist because it gives the central political leading role not to the revolutionary political party but to the trade unions), and *right-wing* syndicalist at that.

The syndicalism of T-T here is not revolutionary syndicalism, but the syndicalism of the CGT majority of Leon Jouhaux in France after 1914.

We want to build a revolutionary party able to win leadership of the unions and exercise control of the elected representatives.

Our proposal that the unions should assert the working-class interest against the Blairites in the Labour Party is not our full programme for reorganising the British labour movement, but only one element, one stage, of it.

It cannot serve our political goals if the Marxists tie themselves to the idea of the trade unions "*as unions*" (T-T pt. 6) playing the leading role T-T attribute to them.

The idea that 'the working class can liberate itself, not look to saviours from above' only through trade-union control of politics – that is a hybrid right-wing syndicalism, wrongly applied to political representation.

The trade unions in Britain have never exercised such detailed political control over their members, nor have Marxists demanded that they should.

T-T's scheme is unrealisable, and if it were realisable, the whole history of trade unionism tells us that it would not serve working-class self-liberating politics.

T-T's 'principle' of trade-union-controlled MPs is not AWL politics. For it to become AWL politics would require a radical political transformation of the organisation's outlook. It is slightly mind-boggling that comrades should propose this 'principle', casually, in passing, as a subordinate part of a prolix and lengthy resolution.

## Motions in the trade unions

Will AWL members vote in the trade unions for resolutions coming from the SWP and others for trade-union political funds to support non-Labour candidates? Sometimes we can move clarifying amendments. Sometimes we can vote against. No-one suggests that from now on we vote for any and every motion so long as it proposes to break the Blair party's monopoly of union political funds, and certainly not if the motion is explicitly or de facto a proposal to give money to Respect or, say, Plaid Cymru.

We will examine each case on its merits and demerits. We can not without political self-destruction do as T-T want and commit ourselves on principle – and that is what it is with them – never to support, or ourselves propose, any such motion.

The difference in principle between T-T and the National Committee can be succinctly expressed like this: T-T are on principle against us ever foreseeably moving or backing any proposal to give trade-union money to anti-Labour candidates.

We, on the other hand, now, under Blairite hegemony, are in principle in favour of giving trade union funds to anti-Labour socialist candidates.

The rest here is a series of concrete cases which we will decide on their political merits.

For shameless demagoguery, matched by shameful confusion, T-T's point 40 is hard to beat: *'Between cautious pro-*

*Labour [pro-Blair-New-Labour?] proposals that introduce a measure of accountability, and radical postures that propose the trade unions writing blank cheques to the likes of Galloway there is a class gulf”.*

Between honest political discussion and brain-dead demagoguery there is also a gulf! How many George Galloways are there?

What T-T try to do here is smuggle in their own “principle” of never voting trade union money to non-Labour candidates under covering of denouncing Galloway.

Who is this aimed at?

Of course we should not vote trade-union money to Respect. But we should not base our opposition to that in a trade union branch on workerist demagoguery. We should explain it in terms of our political criticisms of Galloway and Respect (or of Plaid Cymru, etc.)

## Trade-union control of AWL?

What do T-T counterpose to what Respect is and does? Not AWL politics, but their own hybrid syndicalism. We should, they say, oppose money for Respect because *“they fail to embody any of our central concern here, which is, working-class representation through trade-union control and accountability of candidates, representatives and parties”*.

Here, our common proposal that the trade unions should assert themselves in the Blair Labour Party is turned into a full programme, into a utopian right-wing hybrid-syndicalist plan for the reorganisation of the labour movement!

The Marxist idea of party “control” (in the sense of freely-won leadership) of the trade union movement is inverted.

T-T advocate not revolutionary-Marxist political control of the trade unions, but “trade union control of... parties”.

Of all parties? Trade-union control of AWL? It is absurd, but it is actually what is implied by T-T’s proposal that we burrow into New Labour, avoiding anything that will disrupt “unity” until the big unions move on unitedly to the next stage (“it has to be collective and unitary” – pt.27). We – the revolutionary organisation – do not move until the unions move unitedly!

The trade unions will control the MPs? And who will control the unions? Who will turn the trade unions into entities capable of exercising revolutionary political control over the political candidates and representatives? That is, enable the trade unions to do the job which in AWL politics is the function of the revolutionary Marxist organisation which “controls” the trade union leaders as well as the elected representatives.

In practice, the sort of control over MPs and councillors that would hold them to a working-class political line can not be done except by a revolutionary party.

T-T’s proposal here, and the implied understanding of the nature of trade unions, social-democratic union-based political parties, and revolutionary parties, and of the necessary content of “working-class self-liberation”, is not on any level AWL politics.

## Either/ or?

T-T, point 42: *“Either we are for the unions supporting non-Labour candidates and accepting disaffiliation... or we are for the trade unions asserting themselves within the Labour Party”*.

This is as much of a non sequitur as the analogous idea that because the SA has been disappointing, ergo Labour Party entry now makes sense.

We are for the unions asserting themselves within the Labour Party. It would, if you think about it, be very, very improbable that a motion to support anti-Labour candidates would get through a trade union movement seriously engaged in asserting itself within the Labour Party, on any level but, perhaps, in a politically freakish branch. The experience of the RMT here was shaped by the fact that Crow wanted out.

It is when the unions are not asserting themselves that proposals to back non-Labour candidates – which would cut across the unions’ fight if it were being waged – will get credence.

Our priority here is clear: we are for union self-assertion in the Labour Party.

Where T-T and the National Committee part company is that we do not therefore conclude that we must confine ourselves to making propaganda for union self-assertion within the Labour Party, and in the meantime oppose any sensible initiative to use union funds for non-Labour candidates.

Our central role is not to conserve the union-Labour links in the hope that the unions will one day assert themselves in the Labour Party.

The point is that we cannot control what happens, either way, and the notion that we should throw all our efforts into conserving the possibility – which may never be used – of a concerted trade-union fight in the Labour Party, would commit us to be a tool of the Blairite and semi-Blairite, or the Blair-hegemonised, segments of the trade union movement.

We are not for rules which provide for branches to give money to diverse candidates, piecemeal, without the national union deciding general guidelines. The National Committee’s position is that:

*“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”*.

Our differences with T-T are that:

(1) we refuse to rule out voting for union money to non-Labour working-class and socialist candidates;

(2) we do not propose that the SSP should liquidate itself and go back into the Labour Party;

(3) we do not give up hope that we can again put together something like the Socialist Alliance, only better, or that we can do useful work around other socialist or labour-representation candidates.

There is a difference of principle here. T-T do not proclaim their position – never vote for union money to a non-Labour candidate – but in practice what they say would always mean that (except in the case of the gamey popular-front blatherskite Ken Livingstone!). For them it is a principle.

For the struggle of living political and class forces, they substitute fearful calculations in advance – calculations saturated with wrong basic ideas on the relations between trade unionism and politics, and unions and the revolutionary Marxist organisation.

In a word, T-T want to commit AWL, to political immobility until such time as things move the way we would like them to, in a concerted drive by the trade unions to assert themselves in the Labour Party against the Blairites.

## **Is the Labour Party something that is ‘burs’ and must not be ‘surrendered’?**

In point 43, T-T end with the fatuous mock-tough-guy declaration that revolutionary politics starts with:

*‘the defence of every gain the working class has made and an unwillingness to surrender any ground without a fight’*

It shows they simply have not registered what has been going on in working-class politics for the past decade and longer!

It is not working-class “gain” that they pixillatedly “defend”, but bourgeois-Blairite gains and working-class losses!

The assertion that “we” – who? – “are not yet ready to surrender the Labour Party to the Blairites” is, in face of the facts, nothing short of self-contradictory blustering political idiocy!

In the earlier parts of their text, they have told us that the Labour Party has never been controlled by “us” (the Marxists, the working class, or even the unions) and that Blair is nothing new but ‘a typical Labour leader’. Now, as their text draws to its close, suddenly the Labour Party is for them something that “we” still possess and are not willing to “surrender” to the Blairites!

Some of the two Toms’ bluster is so out of touch with the facts that they sound like people who have recently escaped from Monty Python’s ‘Life of Brian’! AWL has to live in the world and with the trade unions and Labour Party that really exist. If we refuse to see the labour movement as it actually is, we will never be able to transform it.