

Is Militant Marxist?



A Socialist Organiser pamphlet 50 pence

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POF Socialist Organizer

PO Box 322, London SE15 4NA

Cover Photo: Militant theorist Ted Grant

Is Militant Marxist?

The Militant tendency is still perhaps the biggest and best-known of the left groups in this country. But where do Militant really stand? Clive Bradley investigates. Part Two next week

If you ever hear the Militant tendency talk about the rest of the 'far Left', you'll notice they describe everyone as 'the sects'. But Militant are themselves a real sect, even if an unusually large one by British standards. They're a bit like a religious sect — a group walled off from the rest of the world convinced they've got the tablets of stone, and seeing their own interests as the most important thing.

Debate on the left is as important as unity, if we're to build an intelligent socialist movement. Different left groups should argue, debate and criticise each other — and unite against the right-wing.

What is a Marxist tendency? Marxism is a way of analysing society which understands politics as the sum total of struggle between different classes — mainly between big business and the working class. We think real change comes about when people fight for it. A national dock strike, if the whole labour and trade union (and student) movement back it, will have more effect in turning the tide on the Tories than glitzy Labour Party TU commercials.

So Marxists don't just analyse the world — we work to change it. We try to find a link between our ideas about society and the struggles that take place.

The working class will change society. And the working class in Britain has built a movement — the Labour Party and the trade unions — over 200 years. We get involved to change this movement so that it can change the world.

The movement won't change all in one go. The working class learns lessons from its different struggles; but sometimes it is a slow process and the job of Marxists is to help the working class learn, not like teachers with a blackboard, but by being part of the education itself.

A Marxist tendency is that section of the movement that has studied and understood the big

lessons of the class struggle. It tries to help the rest of the movement learn the same lessons by fighting alongside it, and within it.

A sect, on the other hand, just sees changing society as a matter of gradually getting bigger. It sees getting bigger as more important than the development of the whole movement.

Back in the heady days of 1968 Militant was a small very lacklustre part of the left. In the '70s it grew to a few thousand supporters because it had control of the Labour Party Young Socialists (LPYS). It took control in 1969-70, when the rest of the left had left the Labour Party — sometimes out of stupidity, sometimes to get involved in big struggles against the Labour government in the late 'sixties, and the Tories in the early 'seventies.

The 17 years or so during which Militant ran the LPYS were a strange time in the history of Labour's youth movements.

Outside those 18 years, the entire history is of radical, combative groups gaining support among the youth and coming into stormy conflict with Labour's bureaucratic leaders. But the 17 years of 'revolutionary Marxist' leadership by Militant were years of peace and quiet. And then when Neil Kinnock decided to shut down the LPYS it went with scarcely a whimper.

When Militant took over the LPYS, it was a shell with a few right wingers in it. The Labour Party leadership had imposed undemocratic rules on the LPYS, because in the early 'sixties the LPYS had been too radical.

Militant never changed those rules, and fiercely opposed those of us who wanted them changed.

For example, LPYS National Committee was not elected by its annual national conference — regional conferences elected one representative each. Instead, this meant that the NC was not accountable to the conferences that made the policy it was supposed to act on.

It also meant that minority views never had any hope of representation. Unlike the National Union of Students for example, there was never any provision for minority viewpoints to be reflected on the the leading committee. If NUS Exec was elected in the way LPYS NC was, Militant would not have anybody on it.

So the LPYS was generally not very democratic. At national conferences the overwhelming majority of speaking time was

taken up by Militant (often through long 'summing up') with very little debate. Debates were often stitched-up to make sure as few non-Militant supporters as possible got to speak.

Democracy and debate aren't just nice thoughts for the working class movement. We need debate, so we can be sure about what we're doing.

Worse, the LPYS was never much more than a stage with a Militant speaker on it. It never intervened in the world around it. Two examples:

1. In the late 1970s, there was the biggest radicalisation of youth since the Vietnam war, focussed around the Anti-Nazi League (ANL).

The ANL was set up by the Socialist Workers' Party. It had lots wrong with it, and eventually declined because it failed to defend black people from fascist attacks. In October 1978, the ANL deliberately avoided a clash with fascists threatening the Asian community in East London, and marched tens of thousands of people to a pop concert instead.

But thousands of youth involved in and around the ANL wanted to do something to stop the National Front, who had been getting high votes in by-elections. And the ANL certainly did help force the NF into the retreat.

A socialist youth movement should have got involved wholeheartedly in the ANL, built it, been the best activists in it, and tried to give it a socialist direction. That way, it would have built itself.

The LPYS largely sat on the sidelines, complaining that the ANL wasn't socialist. Militant wasn't in East London, helping the Asian community to beat back the fascists — and it wasn't visible at the ANL pop concert either!

This was typical Militant. Their argument ran: "We know how to fight fascism — fight for socialism. That's the only way — anything less is a blind alley. The ANL are wasting their time."

For Militant, 'understanding' or 'seeing the need for socialism' was an alternative to actual struggle in the here and now. They just criticised the ANL (sometimes fairly, often not) rather than try to convince ANL activists by fighting alongside them.

The end result, of course, was that the ANL collapsed and very few of the youth in it got involved in the LPYS.

2. A few years later, there was another youth radicalisation, around Youth CND. It was a repeat performance.

The Militant-dominated LPYS did almost no work in the YCND. Instead it lectured YCND that 'only socialism can stop war' (which is

true) and felt very pleased with itself. Another opportunity was wasted.

Again, Militant's arguments were typical of them. They had a very off-hand attitude to the threat of nuclear war (implying it was impossible because the working class was too strong) and were opposed to British withdrawal from NATO (because it would make no real difference).

They didn't understand that a struggle against nuclear weapons — or NATO — could make far more difference to people's understanding and to their real ability to achieve socialism, than Militant's 'patient explanations'. Explanation is fine — but it must be connected to struggles around us, or it doesn't really contribute to building a socialist movement. Militant counterposed a future socialist movement to the current-day 'raw material', like YCND activists, who could create such a movement.

Year after year for 17 years, Militant had declared at each year's LPYS conference that it was the best ever. "The Marxists" were going ever onwards and upwards, building a strong movement of working class youth.

When Kinnock finally moved against it, that movement proved to be dead and hollow. It crumbled into dust, Militant moved shop into the Youth Trade Union Rights Campaign and the National Union of Students — and there was nothing left.

Empty, lifeless, bureaucratic, radical in its words about 100% nationalisation but timid and narrow-minded in activity — that, on the evidence of the LPYS, is what a Militant-led youth movement looks like. Students attracted by Militant's new upbeat style in the National Union of Students should take note.

Because Militant only saw the LPYS as a theatre to perform in, it remained small and ineffective. When the Labour Party leadership decided to axe it, they met little real resistance.

The whole story of the witch-hunt is instructive too. The current Kinnockite leadership of the Labour Party came about because of the 'rise and fall' of the Labour Left. Militant's sectarianism throughout that process cut their own throat later.

Thatcher won the election of 1979 because the previous Labour government had been a disaster. Labour Party activists resolved 'never again' to allow a Labour government like it — right-wing, cut-making, ignoring conference policy, anti-working class. A powerful campaign for democracy was organised.

Its culmination was the campaign to elect Tony Benn as Labour Party Deputy leader, in

1981. He was very narrowly defeated. Other victories had been won — that Leader and Deputy Leader were elected at all, for example. But thereafter, for reasons we will go into, the movement declined.

Militant played very, very little role in all this — except in their usual way of making general propaganda. When the right wing counter-attacked after 1981, Militant argued it was impossible for them to win, because the left was too strong.

Militant itself was a big target for the right-wing, of course — not because it had been the main force fighting for change, but because it was visible and unpopular. The witch-hunt was launched.

Just as Militant had little to do with the democracy campaign, it also had little to do with fighting the witch-hunt. It had its own front, and paid little attention to Labour Against the witchhunt, the campaign run by Labour rank and file activists. In fact, Militant tended to be far more timid than most Labour Party activists. Instead of mobilising, it went to the capitalist courts. This was wrong in principle — we don't want the capitalist courts deciding the internal affairs of the labour movement — and foolishly short-sighted in practice.

When the knives came out for the LPYS from 1986, Militant put up very little opposition. LPYS national conference was abolished and Militant's campaign to save it was too little, too late.

By then, something else had happened which had shaped British politics generally, and to which Militant had been central: Liverpool.

Local government proved to be both an opportunity and a snare for the Labour Left. The same Labour Left that had fought the right wing on democracy found itself in many cases in control of local town halls in the early 1980s.

There was a great opportunity to use Labour councils as the organising centres for war on the Tory government; instead, over time, the left councils gave up the idea of fighting the Tories and set about making cuts and in many instances acting like old-style employers. So the Labour Left was defeated — and defeat propelled it to the right.

In Liverpool Militant was the dominant political force. Liverpool City Council decided on a policy in 1983, that committed it to an all-out fight with the Tories. Unlike other councils, they worked hard to convince local working class people that a fight was necessary and possible. In later 1983, Liverpool saw a one-day general strike in support of the council and in defiance of the Tories.

But the campaign never reached such a pitch again.

It was wound down after the local elections in May 1984. By then the miners' strike was underway — the biggest single working class struggle since World War Two. And the miners' strike created a context that both Liverpool and the Tory government had to be aware of. The Tories were: Militant weren't.

In his book 'Inside Left', Derek Hatton recounts how a Tory MP told him: "You do realise that we had to tell Patrick to give you the money. At this stage we want Scargill. He's our priority. But we'll come for you later."

In short, Liverpool were being fobbed off to divide the labour movement. This is what Militant called a 95 per cent victory!

Then things got worse and worse. Militant began to alienate important sections of the community in Liverpool, notably the section of the black community represented in the Black Caucus. The Caucus had been recognised as representative by the council; but Militant picked a fight with it by appointing a Militant supporter, Samson Bond, as Race Relations officer.

Who was right in the dispute that followed isn't really very important. The council needed full support against the Tories; if a fight with the Black Caucus was necessary, it could have waited. But to achieve their own objective — a political appointment (one of many), Militant were prepared to provoke a bitter and deeply divisive controversy.

In typical Militant style, they then demanded full support against the Black Caucus from the rest of the left, denouncing left-wing critics as 'witch hunters'. This was a technique they repeated throughout the coming months.

Meanwhile the council was sleepwalking towards disaster. It made general agitation about fighting the Tories but ran no real campaign like the one it organised in 1983-4. Periodically council leaders predicted all-out struggle in the next few days. Workers in Liverpool got confused, then demoralised. Support for the council faded.

In September 1985, the council committed the fantastic blunder (later admitted by Militant as 'a mistake') of sending sacking notices to all 30,000 of its staff, because money was running out. In the chaos that ensued, a Swiss bank came up with the money, and more breathing-space was found.

But the council never recovered.

It had been defeated; soon, left wing councillors were fined and barred from office.

But it turned out the deal with the Swiss bank had been concluded two months before it was made public. So for two months, the council had been playing games with its own supporters. That alone is a disgrace.

The disgraceful behaviour of Derek Hatton, who increasingly became an embarrassment to Militant, was just the public face of the inner political collapse of the Militant in Liverpool.

Like other Labour lefts, they 'seized control' of the local government machine — and in the end the machine seized them.

Their much-vaunted 'Marxism'

Part 2

Last week we argued that the Militant tendency is a typical sect, self-absorbed, arrogant, disdainful, despite having its home in the Labour Party.

Its sectarian approach — just belabouring itself, increasing the number of Militant supporters, even at the expense of wider struggles, as in Liverpool — is very sharply expressed in the trade unions. Here also Militant has a 'front organisation', the Broad Left Organising Committee (BLOC).

BLOC was set up in 1981. Its first couple of conferences were large and relatively lively. The platforms were heavily dominated by Militant speakers, but many other socialists turned up. It looked promising.

But soon BLOC became nothing more than a signboard for Militant rallies. It ran no campaigning activity. In late 1983 thousands of activists mobilised to support the NGA print union picket lines against Eddie Shah in Warrington. It was a crucial test battle for the Tory anti-union laws. BLOC took no initiative at all.

In 1984 a BLOC conference coincided with the start of the miners' strike. The conference passed a bland resolution of general support for the miners, and then for the whole year of the strike BLOC did nothing beyond issuing one leaflet and calling one lobby of the TUC.

When a Mineworkers' Defence Committee was formed to unite and organise activists, it was Socialist Organiser and Briefing who took the initiative, not BLOC. BLOC played no role at all.

Where is BLOC now? Nobody knows. It has shown no signs of life for some time. From the thousands of activists who were attracted to BLOC when it was launched Militant has created something even more lifeless than the Communist Party's old Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions.

Before the 1980s, the old trade union Broad Lefts were usually dominated by the Communist Party, which was a very bureaucratic organisation (and is now two very bureaucratic organisations — one trendy and right-wing, the other pro-Moscow). The Broad Lefts were never active, democratic rank and file movements: they were machines for winning elections. Today's extreme-

ly didn't help much. There were two main reasons for this.

First, Militant see control of the machine almost as an end in itself (as we shall see when we look at the unions).

Second, Militant's 'Marxist perspective' always says that the situation will improve. If the future is going to prevent better opportunities for socialists, why

ly right-wing leadership of the electricians' union, the EETPU, dates back to a big scandal in the early 1930s when it was proved that the previous CP leadership had rigged elections to keep control.

By the early 1980s the old Broad Lefts had largely died away and been replaced by new ones, dominated by Militant. Some of these are still more than Militant fronts, and other socialists, like Socialist Organiser, are often involved in them. But it is an uphill struggle to stop Militant stifling even the best of them; and they are just as much electoral machines as the old Broad Lefts.

Militant looks to capturing the apparatus of the trade unions, and devotes lots of energy to winning elections in them. In itself, this is reasonable and necessary; but Militant look no further.

The trade unions are the basic, 'bedrock' organisations of the working class. Partly because their job is to bargain within capitalism, the unions have developed a powerful bureaucracy — a distinct layer of full-time officials who see their role as negotiators as the be-all and end-all. Because big strikes often threaten the position of the bureaucrats, they frequently sell them out.

Socialists need to democratise the trade unions, and fight to replace bureaucrats with a new fighting leadership. Elections are important — it makes a difference whether a union is led by Eric Hammond or Arthur Scargill.

But the key to transforming the unions is the rank and file itself. A socialist policy tries to develop the confidence and organisation of the rank and file. So while fighting to replace old, right-wing leaders, we have to build a rank and file movement that can, to a degree, act independently of the officials. The lack of such a rank and file movement across the unions was one of the reasons the miners' strike of 1984-5 lost: when the TUC refused to do anything to help the miners, those activists who did want to do something had no means to build solidarity.

The Broad Lefts could have helped build a rank and file movement. They didn't because Militant had no interest in fighting for that. Just like the CP before them, they did not represent a fighting leadership in the unions.

'risk anything in struggles now?

Due partly to luck and partly to its position in the Labour Party, Militant was able to grow. Even so, it has always been a sect. It only acts out of self-interest; when it controls something — like the LPYS — it strangles it. What the working class needs is a different sort of 'Marxist tendency' altogether.

The Broad Lefts they dominated were either largely lifeless front organisations, seen as recruiting grounds to the Militant or, where they did have life, were electoral machines.

The jewel in BLOC's crown is the Broad Left in the Civil and Public Servants Association (CPSA). This Broad Left is large and used to be quite active and lively; but now it does very little outside of union elections. A Militant motion to BL conference in 1987 argued: "...the priority must be the re-election of the Broad Left NEC."

That year Militant supporter John Macreadie had his election as General Secretary ruled out by the CPSA President. Macreadie took the CPSA to court — at a cost of £20,000 — violating the principle of trade union independence from the courts. He never consulted the Broad Left — and then had the nerve to ask the BL to pay for it! He lost both court case and re-run.

Militant frequently oppose the extension of union democracy. For example, they are against the annual election of full-time officers like Macreadie, who is now Deputy General Secretary for a five-year period. Militant say five years is short enough...

They see the Broad Left as their property. When a policy was passed by the Broad Left that the Militant leadership disagreed with, committing the BL to fight for action over the sacking of trade unionists at GCHQ, Militant supporters who are Broad Left officers just ignored it. They even refused to put out a Broad Left leaflet explaining the policy. A fine example of commitment to rank and file control and workers' democracy!

Broad Left conferences are like Militant rallies, with guest (Militant) speakers who even intervene in debates on contentious issues.

The BL have controlled the CPSA Executive twice. They did so in 1982-3 — and their record, matched against the class struggle, was not impressive.

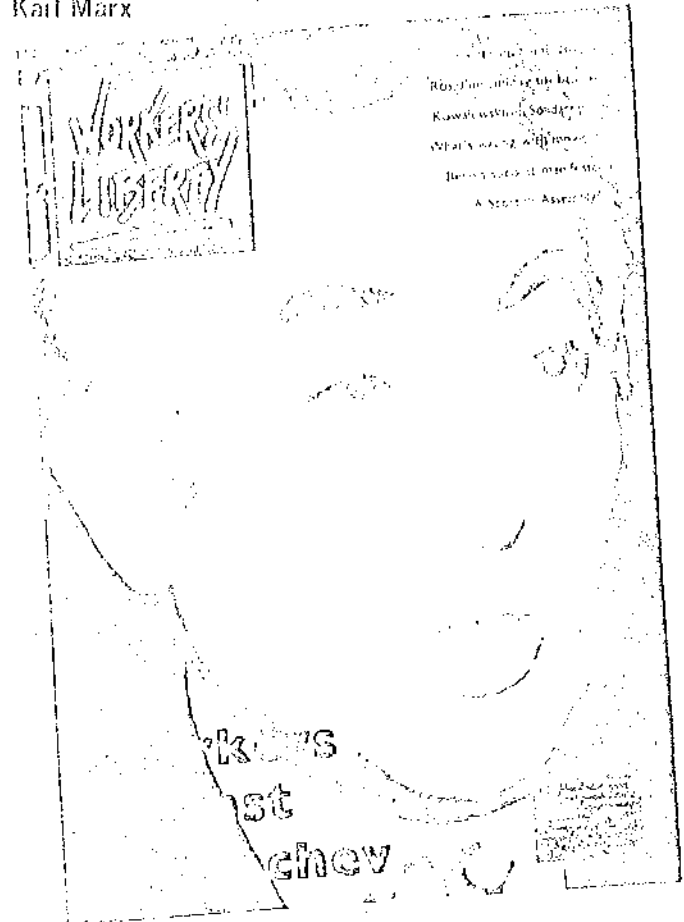
The big battle during their period of office was by DHSS workers in Oxford and Birmingham, against job cuts. Militant argued for a return to work from the beginning. They said that workers should keep their powder dry for a bigger struggle later, over pay. They organised

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Karl Marx



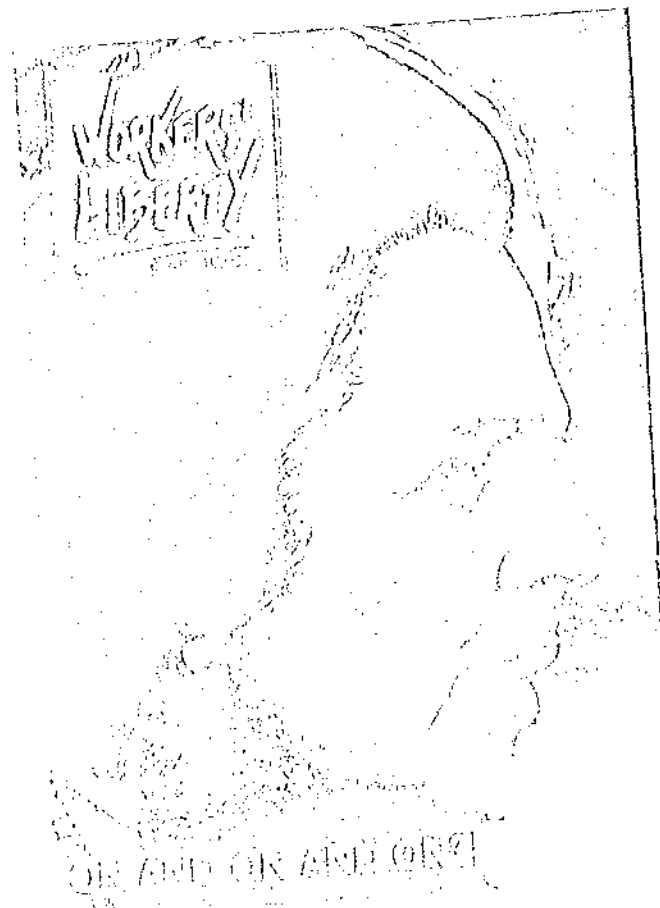
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no mass pickets or demonstrations. After four months, the NEC balloted for a return to work. Nothing was won — and no bigger struggle over pay followed.

In 1977-8, Militant were no better. The NEC under their control failed to organise any strike action against YTS, although sporadic strike action was already taking place. They stuck to producing a few glossy leaflets.

They failed to hold a Labour Party affiliation ballot, although it was conference policy to do so, because the Treasury threatened to stop the deduction of union contributions at source. There was no campaign against the Treasury, or even an attempt to find ways round it.

The NEC failed to call out civil servants on the one-day strike over the NHS on 14 March 1988. John Macreadie (who is the CPSA delegate to the TUC) called on the TUC to have a one-day strike instead. The TUC should have had a strike; but Militant's policy was just a posture.

The Broad Left National Committee did not meet for four months after the NEC victory, and never consulted the BL about its actions.

As a result the BL was effectively paralysed as a serious rank and file organisation in the vital period of the 1987 pay claim. This paralysis allowed the right-wing to step in and do their best to sabotage the ballot for all our strike action. The BL lost that ballot and the seeds were sown for the return of the right to power in the union in 1988.

That defeat at the '88 conference was rationalised by Militant as a mere 'lull before the storm'. We'll be back next year they vainly boasted. Tragically the BL's inactivity over the last few months makes that prospect unlikely.

Militant ran the DHSS Section Executive from the early 1980s until 1988, when they lost it to the right-wing. They ratted on BL and Section policy to fight the Fowler Social Security Reviews (1986-7) by refusing to ballot on strike action — for fear of the courts.

They refused to spread limited (but successful) action against Limited Period Appointments (casuals on fixed contracts) brought into the DHSS to implement the Fowler Reviews.

Now the DHSS looks set to lose 15,000 jobs. The new right-wing leadership, which won't fight, was voted in on a backlash against Militant.

BLOCC has had little presence in any of the big battles of the past few years. In the 1988 NHS dispute, Militant bureaucratically strangled the shop stewards' structure that health workers were creating. Militant wanted the whole thing co-opted by BLOCC. Failing that, they weren't interested in it. By the rank and file organisations needed to go forward.

In the biggest of all recent battles, the miners' strike, Militant could

have played an important role — via Liverpool — and failed. They had little involvement in miners' support groups (usually setting up separate ones with only themselves in them).

They played stupid games with the vital slogan of the general strike. If the labour movement had mobilised its full force alongside the miners, they could have won — and much more could have been achieved. Militant called for a one-day general strike only, hardly enough to win.

Except for a couple of days. In the middle of LPYS summer camp in 1984, South Wales NUM had its funds sequestered. The LPYS NC called a special meeting, at which they called for an all-out general strike. Everyone was very hyped up.

But a Militant Special Edition that week just called for a one-day strike again. The discrepancy was never explained. But the hyping-up had served its purpose — to browbeat the left in the LPYS.

Militant never understood one of the most important lessons of the miners' strike — the role of women. Women Against Pit Closures — the organisation of women in pit communities — showed how politically powerful an independent movement of working class women could be, fighting as part of the labour movement.

Militant tried to reinterpret WAPC according to their own theories, but never very convincingly. For Militant had always opposed the 'autonomous' organisation of women, or other oppressed groups. Their support for WAPC (and other groups, like Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners), was always at odds with their general policies. They had always argued that such organisations, and Black Sections, were 'divisive' (although for a very brief period, in 1977-8 they had built a 'black section' of the LPYS — the Youth Section of the Jamaican People's National Party — under their own control, of course).

In the 1970s Militant were vehement enemies of 'feminism'. And for years they refused even to discuss lesbian and gay rights at LPYS national conference.

All this calls into question the very idea of socialism Militant have. A test for this is their attitude towards the so-called 'socialist' countries, the USSR, China, Eastern Europe and similar societies.

Following Trotsky, Militant is very hostile to the governments in the USSR and similar societies. But they consider the social system (nationalisation and planning) to be an advance on capitalism. They call them 'degenerated and deformed workers' states. So do many other would-be Trotskyists. But Militant have a version of this theory that is particularly appreciative of the alleged economic advances in these countries.

The clearest example of what this

meant in practice for Militant was the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan at the end of 1979 and beginning of 1980.

Now, in 1989, the USSR has left Afghanistan, and socialists should side, for the time being, with the USSR's former Afghan allies against the Islamic fundamentalists. But for nine years, the USSR carried out a brutal colonial-type war to subdue the peoples of Afghanistan — using napalm, demolition of villages and so on.

"The Militant tendency is not Marxist, and it is not revolutionary. It is a bureaucratic sect which destroys what it runs"

Militant never supported the invasion itself, but they justified the occupation — in brutal terms. Because the USSR would create a 'deformed workers' state', Militant argued that their occupation of Afghanistan was the motor of historical progress — not ideal, but the best available. Nothing else was possible for what they once called the 'dark masses' of Afghanistan.

This is like the old 'white man's burden' argument of classical colonialism. Imperialism — the USSR — was bringing 'progress'. So it was just tough for the Afghan people.

This was an outrageous stand from a socialist point of view. The Afghans have every right not to be napalmed into progress; and if the Mullahs are now so strong, it's the USSR's fault.

When the USSR decided to withdraw last year, Militant's 'analysis' was simply ridiculous. The 'counter-revolution', they said, had been defeated (Militant, 13 May) — which will come as a shock to most Afghans. Militant denounced 'the confused analyses' of the capitalist media, which portray the Russian withdrawal as a defeat.

The idea that the USSR and similar systems are progressive is common to many socialists. Yet these regimes are totalitarian police states in which the working class has fewer democratic rights than it does in Western Europe.

Militant agree, in general, with making a revolution against these regimes. But if workers' revolution is not on the cards — like in Afghanistan — a totalitarian police state is, in their eyes, at least a big step towards socialism. It tells you something central about Militant's

whole idea of socialism.

It tells you even more when you read that Militant sees Stalinism as the only way forward not just for exceptionally underdeveloped Afghanistan, but also for most of the world. "Even the victory of a Marxist Party...would not be sufficient to prevent the deformation of the revolution on Stalinist lines," wrote Militant leader Ted Grant in his major article on the "Colonial Revolution". "Revolutionary victory in backward countries, such as Algeria, under present conditions, while constituting a tremendous victory for the world revolution and the world proletariat...cannot but be on the lines of a totalitarian Stalinist state."

Algeria is far from being one of the world's most backward countries. If Algeria has no better possibilities, then so has most of the world. The only Third World countries for which any better possibilities are even hinted at are India, Sri Lanka and South Africa. And in its time the Militant tendency has also welcomed as a huge step forward the creation of "deformed workers' states" in Europe — in Czechoslovakia and in Portugal.

For Militant, progress means annals — carried out by

whom, and under what conditions for the workers, is secondary. Workers' liberty is a desirable but optional, and in most circumstances, impossible, extra. The emancipation of the working class is not for them, as it was for Marx, the task of the workers themselves, but the task of the progressive state bureaucrats.

Socialist Organiser is a revolutionary socialist tendency, not because we think revolution is a nice, romantic idea, but because revolution is necessary to defeat once and for all the capitalist class.

They won't give up power without a fight, if necessary a violent one. Moreover, real socialism — democratic workers' control of society — will have to be created from below. No government in Parliament can introduce socialism from above.

On both these aspects of a revolutionary programme, Militant are a long way from Marxism. Each week in their *Where We Stand* column they argue that peaceful change — without serious ruling class resistance — is possible through an Enabling Act in Parliament. After

scenes during the miners' strike or at Wapping, who could believe that?

Militant's call for a government to 'nationalise the monopolies' by passing an 'Enabling Act' in Parliament is a strategy for socialism 'from above', which wouldn't work, and wouldn't achieve socialism.

Revolutionaries don't ignore Parliament. And we do want a Labour government! But we don't pretend that such a government could achieve socialism — although we would fight for a left Labour government to support workers in struggle, who could achieve socialism.

The Militant tendency is not Marxist, and it is not revolutionary. It is a bureaucratic sect that destroys what it runs, and participates only to take control. The front organisations it has set up have all been exactly that — fronts, woefully inadequate to the tasks of the class struggle.

Socialists need a different sort of Marxist tendency — one that builds the broad movement as well as itself, and sees no conflict between its own interests and those of the working class as a whole. That is what Socialist Organiser aims to be.

Militant's record on Ireland

Since 1970 Militant has failed to give any support to the struggles of the oppressed Catholic minority in Northern Ireland.

Support for working class unity and socialism is not unique to Militant. What is unique is the use of abstract lectures about socialism to evade the issues and the struggles of the here and now.

Initially it opposed the deployment of British troops on the streets after August 1969, and sympathised with the Catholics. It quickly veered (by 1970 or '71) to an attitude of condemning the 'reactionaries' and then the 'terrorism' of the Catholics. It was like its attitude to the struggles of blacks, women, gays and others in Britain itself: the Catholic revolt in Northern Ireland was a complication which it wished would go away.

Ever since Militant has not supported the last revolt of the Catholics. Within the labour movement they are among the most vicious opponents of any attempt to get a calm discussion of the Republicans, their struggle and their objectives. Militant peddles its own caricatures and noxurms, like the famous 'trade union defence force'.

In 1969, it speculated, fantasitically, about the prospects for a pioneering socialist society in...the

Six Counties unit!

"If the demands (minimum wage; equal pay; crash building programme; take over big building companies; improved social services) are pressed home in action, it can be linked up to the demand for the taking over of the big monopolies and the establishment of a democratic socialist society — which would have immediate repercussions in the South, in Britain, and internationally..." (*Militant*, May 1969).

Then, responding to the slaughter of 14 Catholics by the British Army in January 1972, Militant waxed eloquent about...organising the British Army for socialism.

"A campaign of individual assassinations...of the British soldiers can only provide excuse for further repressions...Also it can only reinforce the hostility of the ordinary soldier to the Catholic population...(Rank and file soldiers) could be appealed to on a class basis and won away from the army brass, if a clear socialist alternative was given to them." (*Militant*, February 4, 1972).

Faced with what looked like civil war in mid-'72, Peter Taaffe wrote this: "But, given the failure of the trade union leadership to initiate a trade union defence force, every working class area must have the right to defend itself." (*Militant*

no.113, July 1972).

You're on your own boys! In fact this was to give the seal of Militant's approval to the Protestant-biased Ulster Defence Association (UDA). It should be remembered that it was the Catholics who were likely to need defending if it came to an all-out war.

Militant's main slogan has been the 'trade union defence force', although the communal clashes against which defence must be organised were in a different world from the trade unions.

At the same time Militant has speculated about the processes going on in the UDA that would produce class consciousness.

"The development of the UDA with its veneer of...class consciousness shows that Protestants are well aware of their class position..." (*Militant* no.113, August 13, 1972).

During the Orange general strike of 1974 Militant opposed any action by the Labour government to break the reactionary — and even racist — strike, thus telling British workers that the strike was entitled to be treated as a working class action, if not quite a proper or normal one.

1980-81 Militant opposed the passing of political status to the Republican hunger strikers.

For centuries the Irish people

were oppressed by British imperialism. In 1920-21 Southern Ireland won independence — but half a million Catholics were trapped in a 'Protestant state for Protestant people' in Northern Ireland. The British government, allied with the Northern Protestants, partitioned Ireland undemocratically.

In the 1960s the Northern Catholics finally rebelled. Signs of some desire for reform from Britain — which had mended its relations with Southern Ireland — and the model of the Civil Rights Movement in the USA encouraged them.

Northern Ireland had been run as a one-party Protestant state, with Protestant workers getting preference for scarce jobs and houses. Behind the Catholic revolt the Protestant workers saw the prospect of a reunited Ireland with a

Catholic government in Dublin which would oppress them as they had oppressed the Catholics in the North. They reacted with panic and bigotry.

The artificial Northern Ireland state began to fall apart into civil war. British troops went on the streets to hold it together. Britain's strategy was to control the situation by beating down the rebellious Catholics, then impose reforms.

The reforms faded away after a Protestant general strike in 1974 toppled a British-sponsored 'power-sharing' (joint Catholic-Protestant) government in Northern Ireland. The repression against the Catholics remained.

The Catholics are fighting against British repression, and a British-dominated state, that they never wanted to be part of. Socialists

must support them. At the same time we must put forward ideas for a positive solution.

Replacing a half-million oppressed minority of Catholics in Northern Ireland by a million-strong oppressed minority of Protestants in a united Ireland would not be progress; and anyway, given the strength of the Protestants, it is not possible.

A serious drive to push the Protestants into a united Ireland by brute force would result only in full-scale civil war and repartition. That is why Socialist Organiser argues for a free federal united Ireland, with regional autonomy for the mainly-Protestant areas.

Militant answers none of the issues. Instead it preaches about abstract socialism to evade them.

Militant and the CPSA

The CPSA — the union which organises clerical workers in the civil service — has had a Broad Left majority on its National Executive Committee for the last year.

The dominant force in that Broad Left is 'Militant', an avowedly Marxist tendency. As the CPSA approaches this year's conference, on 7-13 May, and awaits the results of this year's elections for the NEC, what is the record of the year of Broad Left leadership?

The first major issue confronting the new leadership in June last year was the ballot for all out strike action over the pay claim. It took place in extremely difficult circumstances. The right had refused to hand over the leadership; the Broad Left didn't take over until the beginning of June. The call for all out action did not come until 14 June, with two weeks of selective action still to go. CPSA members were tired after the long drawn-out selective action under the old right-wing leadership. The SCPS (now the NUCPS) had withdrawn from the joint action after Thatcher's victory in the general election. The vote went against an all-out strike, although there was a substantial minority for action.

Probably the vote could not have been won even if the Broad Left had run the best campaign imaginable. But it did not. The Broad Left machine was set into operation as if this was another election. It was assumed that left branches would deliver the vote. The arguments for the strike were simply not put.

That ballot defeat led straight in to an important climbdown in the DHSS section.

There was a seven month struggle

A balance-sheet of the Broad Left NEC, 1987-8

in the DHSS around the introduction of the Tories' social security changes (the Fowler Reviews) and of Limited Period Appointments (LPAs). February 1987 saw the beginning of staff training for the new system. The policy of the CPSA's DHSS Section conference was for non-cooperation and limited industrial action. Departmental management said they would apply for a writ as the action was political.

The Section Executive was split between the Militant majority and a left-wing minority including the Socialist Caucus (a left grouping within the Broad Left which includes SO supporters), SWP and others. Militant argued for a retreat. The DHSS was only one section of a right wing dominated union. Any action would therefore be unofficial. The only course open was a 'political campaign'.

Victory for the Broad Left in May radically changed that situation. Here was an opportunity for the left under the leadership of the 'Marxists' to put into practice what it preaches about the need to turn back the Tories' offensive. The left could use its new position as leadership to mobilise against the Tories.

In June the Fowler issue was shelved in favour of the campaign for an all-out strike on pay — even though by this time the second stage of the reform was being implemented, the introduction of

Limited Period Appointments or casual workers.

The union was told that LPAs would only be introduced to help get over the initial work on the Fowler package. But in fact these casual workers have been earmarked, are central to the Government's strategy for undermining the unions and reshaping the civil service. For instance they will be used to help the introduction of new technology, which will result in the loss of 20,000 jobs in the DHSS alone.

In early June the Section Executive agreed to launch a campaign over LPAs. No clear strategy was adopted; they just wanted to get something going.

The July Quarterly Executive reviewed the situation. The left wanted the fight against LPAs to be linked to a fight against the whole Fowler package, due to come into effect from April 1988. But now Militant argued that the union was in no position to break the law... They had moved the goal posts. The conclusion — no industrial action — was the same as before; only its justification had changed.

A campaign was launched around LPAs. The Section Executive decided on a four-week campaign leading up to a ballot on all-out strike action. And there was a militant response from the members: over 70 offices took action 4 or 5 all-out strike action, the rest taking regular selective strike

action.

Within two weeks, Militant called an Emergency Executive which overturned the strike call.

What had changed? According to Militant, losing the earlier ballot over pay would mean losing on this issue as well — and we must avoid another defeat for the left.

Militant explained the climbdown as a 'necessary retreat' and they congratulated those members who had taken strike action. But what about the needs of the members to defend their jobs? In fact Militant were putting their own prestige and power within the union above their members' interests. Defeat in a ballot would undermine the 'socialist leadership' within the branches.

It wasn't deliberate betrayal. But the union, under the leadership of the 'Marxists', went from a policy of industrial action to defeat the legislation to a policy not even of paper opposition. This resulted in demoralisation among the most active members and a management offensive.

The government now has a toe-hold for LPAs. After this debacle the union effectively lost any overall strategy of fighting government attacks.

Since then the policy of the Militant supporters on the NEC has been to support local strikes — which is good — but to refuse to give any lead themselves. Meanwhile they are busy trying to fill the union's appointed full-time official positions with Militant supporters — and they do not want to take any risks which could upset that.

The Camden DE strikers had to fight to overturn the Militant's position that the strike could be won in one office. At the national executive the Socialist Caucus supporters were the only two to support the strikers' call for official action. Militant initially wanted to put it through the unions' dispute panel.

The role of John Macreadie — the union's Assistant General Secretary, and a Militant supporter — in the health dispute is also instructive. He quite correctly called on the TUC to call a one-day general strike for the 14 March Day of Action. But propaganda on the TUC General Council is one thing, action is another. In fact, there was no real commitment from the CPSA leadership to winning workers to strike action over the issue.

The central problem here was the law. The left had been told by John Ellis, the right-wing General Secretary of the CPSA, that the action would be 'secondary' and so be taken to court.

Many other trade unionists did strike on 14 March without getting taken to court. But still, maybe you could argue that this was not the

issue to fight on. The problem was that for the Militant leadership no issue is the right one to fight on.

And the union leadership's line was weak even if you agree that it would be too risky to make an official strike call. There wasn't much of an unofficial campaign, either. A circular calling for local ballots was put out. The right wing on the NEC blocked them getting the ballot papers out.

A circular went to branches a week before the 14th which said that if the branch wished the Executive would give backing to take action. There was no real co-ordination, no use of the Broad Left to plan for unofficial action. It was just left to individual branches to organise.

The other problem about the way the Militant has led the union has been the lack of accountability of the Broad Left members on the NEC to the Broad Left rank and file.

In August the left leadership did begin to develop closer links with its base in the Broad Left. Under pressure from the Socialist Caucus and some Militant supporters a two day meeting took place in Liverpool with all the Broad Left Convenors and left NEC members.

The meeting set out a programme for the coming year. For example a programme was agreed for a campaign around Labour Party affiliation which would start in October, with the ballot held in March.

It still hasn't happened. Meetings between the leadership and the Broad Left have been minimal. At the November Broad Left Conference, a censure motion over this put by Socialist Caucus supporters was passed. The NEC lefts' defence for loosening their links with their base has been lack of time.

Meanwhile, they are losing precious time for the union by constantly postponing a serious fight with the Government.

The Tories' plans are clear: large-scale job cuts, attacks on working practices, and privatisation. Either the unions capitulate, and just try to regulate job losses and changes in working practices; or they realise that they are going to come into direct confrontation with the government.

The CPSA, like other public sector unions, has very little economic power in the individual workplace. In order to win on a major issue, the union must see it as a national struggle rather than the concern of only one section.

A national strategy very quickly merges into a struggle against the government. For example a national strike by the CPSA against the introduction of a privatised labour force is not only a defensive struggle around jobs and services; it also is a direct challenge to government policy.

How has Militant squared up to this task? Their record is not one of this or that error, this or that mistake, but a consistent pattern of evasions and climbdowns which stem from their basic understanding of the struggle for socialism.

Central to this is a division between propaganda for socialist ideas and the day-to-day struggles within the working class.

For Militant the most important thing is to be in a position of power within the movement, to make propaganda for Militant. In their brain-damaging 'Marxist view of history' the class is driven ever-onwards towards 'Marxism'. They see themselves gradually 'becoming' the labour movement. Until that day 'the Tendency' has got to be defended first and the class second. This is the core of their conservatism and timidity.

They cut out the central question of self-activity: the implicit power of the working class which finds expression in the trade unions and which socialists attempt to unleash. The question of being part of that struggle is never posed. The struggles are just another vehicle for propaganda for Militant; so ultimately they are secondary.

Militant's view of the unions allows them to inhabit the higher echelons without fundamentally challenging the bureaucracy. Their central project in the unions is to win the leadership — so that they can make propaganda for 'socialism' (ie the Militant). In this way they are beginning to fill the position once held by the Communist Party.

They are becoming the left wing of the trade union bureaucracy. How far they will go down this road is still an open question. However, the failure to bring Derek Hatton to account in Liverpool has led to a further decline into evangelism. Their record in the CPSA all points to the 'machine' dictating the politics to the supporters.