

Reforms and the revolutionaries

"Can the (socialists) be against reform? Can we counterpose the social revolution, the transformation of the existing order, our final goal, to social reforms? Certainly not. The daily struggle for reforms, for the amelioration of the condition of the workers within the framework of the existing social order, and for democratic institutions, offers to the (socialists) the only means of engaging in the proletarian class war and working in the direction of the final goal — the conquest of political power and the suppression of wage labour. Between social reform and revolution there is then for the (socialists) an indissoluble tie."

Rosa Luxemburg

By John O'Mahony

THERE IS MASS HOSTILITY to what the Tories are doing to the NHS, and to the Welfare State in general. But the Labour leaders, though they seem to be willing to say and do anything they think will win them votes, make little attempt to harness this anti-government feeling to Labour's cause. Why? Because they themselves no longer believe in the underlying principle of the health service Labour established in the 1940s: universal state-of-the-art health care, free at the point of consumption. They accept the monstrous Tory argument that Britain can not afford the best health care for the sick poor. Labour's leaders

have no intention of restoring the health service.

That is a fundamental part of the explanation for the weakness of the labour movement's response to the Tory offensive against the Welfare State. But there is more to it. What about the left, the "revolutionaries", of whom there are quite a few thousands in Britain still? They do not share the Tory belief that state-of-the-art health care is not for the poor. Unlike the present Labour leaders, they do believe in the NHS. Why has the left done so little in the way of organising a fightback?

"The demand for universal health care encapsulates a whole philosophy of class and human solidarity."

The pressure of a hostile political environment, and the collapse of much "old socialist" self-confidence, is only part of the explanation. Far more central is the ultra-leftism and ingrained contempt for "reformism" which is endemic to most of the revolutionary left in Britain now.

Of course, they will praise and "defend" old reforms, Labour's reforms of the 40s, but reluctantly. They do it disdainfully and

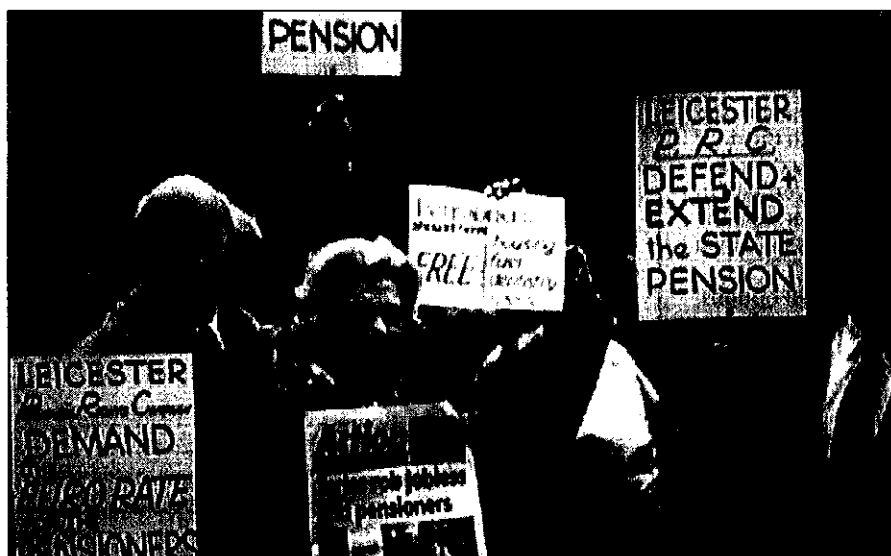
perfunctorily and as an opening gambit to allow them to talk of the need for "revolution."

What is wrong is not that they try to convince people that only socialist revolution can guarantee the reforms we win: socialists who do not do that in their propaganda and basic educational work are foolish or simply not serious. What is wrong is that these "revolutionaries" are, in practice, indifferent or hostile to the fight for reform now.

The SWP, for example, the biggest ostensibly revolutionary organisation, denounces Tory counter-reforms, and denounces the Labour Party for not fighting the counter-reforms. But it does not concern itself with any positive fight for reforms now. That is not in keeping with its self-image. They are not "social workers"! To organise around the fight for reforms would be "not revolutionary."

The job of the revolutionaries is to "make the revolution", said the Latin American guerrillas of the 60s and 70s before launching brave kamikaze military actions. In Britain now the job of most "revolutionaries" is? To call for "revolution", exhort "revolution", praise "revolution" — in short, talk about it. "Revolution" — any revolution — wins praise from *Socialist Worker*. "Why we need a revolution in Britain" alternates with "Is revolution possible?" as perennial subjects for public meetings. It is a major part of their activity. Yet "mass activity" and public meetings on such topics now are worse than useless and may even be counterproductive.

For much of the "revolutionary left" an anarchoid culture in which phrasemongering, mock-heroic posturing and "calls" for the millennium has taken the place of the proper central concern of Marxist revolutionaries — to help the working class and its movement develop, by encouraging its most advanced layers to go forward in practical action. The fight for reforms has a central role here, especially in British conditions now when the working class is beaten down, hamstrung by anti-union laws, and mass socialism is at its lowest ebb for decades. That is how Marxists help the working class prepare itself for the revolution that the anarchoids can only chant and talk about. This culture, which is pseudo-revolutionary rather than revolutionary, helps divorce socialists from the working class as it is — from the class we must grapple with and win to our ideas if



Welfare State Network lobbies Parliament on Budget Day, November 1994

socialism is not to remain forever the mere dream of an ineffectual minority.

At its core, despite the hollow 'revolutionary' shouting, is a defeatist giving up on the working class and an implicit, unconscious, acceptance of what the right-wing propagandists say: the mass of the workers are lost to socialism.

In fact there is an astonishing parallel, an exact symmetry, between these "r...r...revolutionaries" and Labour's right-wingers. Both neglect, for their different reasons — middle-class fear and pseudo-revolutionary snobbery — the potent mass anger that exists against the Tory counter-reforms. Neither has any use for the mass support there is for maintaining and restoring a proper health service. There is an important difference between them though.

Given what they are politically, Blair and the other bob-a-job careerists who lead the Labour Party act rationally on this question. They do not want to raise a mass movement against the Tory demolition of the Welfare State because such a movement would then confront a Labour government with the demand to rebuild what the Tories destroy. At every turn Blair and the others rat on the working class, but what they do makes sense from *their*

"The Welfare State Network corresponds to the real needs of workers and of the labour movement now."

point of view. The behaviour of the "revolutionaries" makes no sense at all.

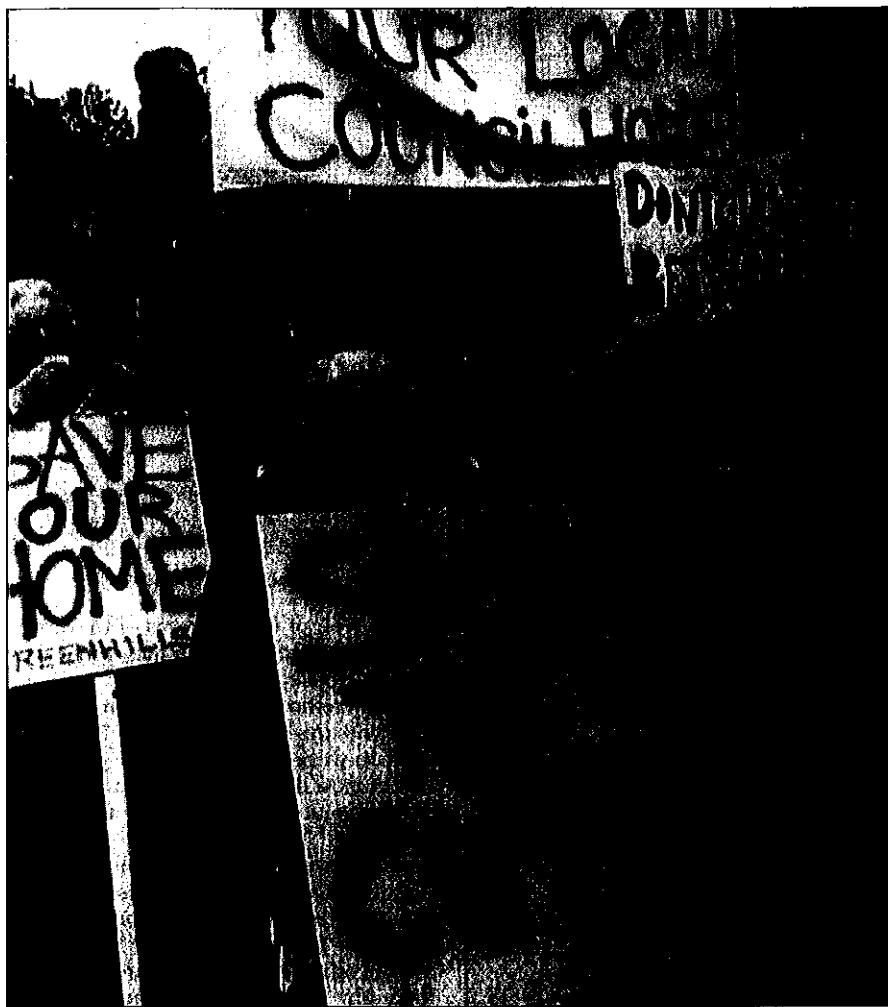
There will be no revolution without the working class. Very few workers can be won to abstract calls for "revolution." Those young workers so won will grow rapidly disillusioned with it unless they are set to sensible activity in the working class movement to convert it to socialism. If they stay in politics, they will go over to the right wing.

The struggle for reforms is now the indicated way the working class and the labour movement can revive; it is the tool socialists have for use in the work of reviving it.

Reforms — restoring the health service, for example — are not enough? No, but the focus on reforms does not, in logic or in reality, set prior limits to the march of the workers who fight for them. It does not rule out rapid and even explosive advances in that combativity which in turn can lead to the development of mass revolutionary consciousness.

Far from ruling it out, it can help it develop. In terms of things the revolutionaries can do at will, building a movement to fight for reforms — the health service is the best example — is the right thing to do for socialism now.

ALL THIS is ABC for Marxists who stand on the tradition of Lenin and Trotsky's Com-



Elderly people are falling victim to Tory welfare cuts. Photo: Mark Salmon

intern. It is best expounded in Trotsky's 1938 work known as *The Transitional Programme*. Trotsky put the attitude of revolutionaries to reform like this in 1938:

"The Fourth International does not discard the programme of the old 'minimal' demands [reforms] to the degree to which these have preserved at least part of their vital forcefulness. Indefatigably, it defends the democratic rights and social conquests of the workers. ... Insofar as the old, partial, 'minimal' demands of the masses clash with the destructive and degrading tendencies of decadent capitalism — and this occurs at each step — the Fourth International advances a system of transitional demands, the essence of which is contained in the fact that ever more openly and decisively they will be directed against the very bases of the bourgeois regime."

Take, once more, the Welfare State. Should they decide to fight, by occupying hospitals or by (illegal) protest strikes or by mass demonstrations, in the course of such a struggle the workers who began with their own and their neighbours' felt needs would have to think about all sorts of related issues — the nature of society, of bourgeois politics, of Labour leaders who won't fight for their members' interests, of the social and philosophical implications of such a reform demand as "state-of-the-art, universal, free health care for everyone." The arguments of the right would compel them to.

The demand for universal state-of-the-art health care, free at the point of consumption, encapsulates a whole philosophy of class and human solidarity. It is the opposite of the dominant Tory and right-wing Labour outlook on society and on life. It is in condensed form a demand that society be reorganised around our principles, around "the political economy of the working class", not as now around the profit-worshipping and human-being-devouring political economy of the bourgeoisie. It is what Trotsky means by a "transitional demand."

To convince workers and the labour movement to fight for this single demand is to convince them to embrace the rudiments, or at least one potent and fecund element, of the socialist — worker-solidarist outlook on the world. They would learn as the fight developed — helped by the propaganda and all-round explanations of the socialists, and be recruited, at first, in ones or small groups, to the ranks of organised socialists.

That is why the Welfare State Network is important. Its demands correspond to the real needs of workers and of the labour movement now. Its work is the most profoundly revolutionary activity possible in Britain today. It points, if we build it into the mass campaign it clearly can become, to a rebirth of a large-scale militant socialist consciousness in the labour movement.

It is, incidentally, the logical concrete

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Attacks on the Welfare State are making thousands of young people homeless

expression of the concerns of those who have come back to labour movement activity in defence of Clause Four.

This method of work is entirely consistent with the ideas of Lenin and Trotsky on how to work in conditions like ours.

Yet most of the "Leninist" and "Trotskyist" "revolutionaries" boycott and disdain this work. Thus they display — without enough awareness to be ashamed of it — the awful symmetry that exists between the ultra left and the anarchoid "revolutionaries" on one side and the Labour right on the other. Their motives are, of course, different from Blair's. But the anarchoids too, brandishing their apolitical and ahistorical fetish of "revolution" (or "the party"), are a part of the reason why the Tories are getting away with murdering the Welfare State and the National Health Service. A big part of it.

At issue here are questions Marxists first confronted nearly a century and a half ago: what is "revolutionary" and who are the revolutionaries? It isn't enough to shout for "revolution"; just wanting "a revolution" does not make you effectually a revolutionary in relation to the world around you. In history, the Marxists have more than once had to insist, against anarchists and socialist shouters for "revolution now", on the need to step back from talk about the "ultimate goal" so as to prepare for it in the only way it can consciously be prepared — by convincing workers to organise and struggle for their own interests on a day-to-day and year-to-year basis, and in the course of this teaching them to accept socialist goals.

A little after the *Communist Manifesto* was written, Marx and Engels were the minority in a bitter struggle within the Communist League against people who said it was either "revolution now", or all would be lost. The Marxists had to insist on the need to accept an evolutionary conception of social development towards socialist revolution — not vulgar evolution, real evolution, of which revolutionary breaks are an integral part. Famously, Marx told them, with not a little scorn, that they themselves needed 10 or 20 years to make them

fit for revolution.

So also the experience of the Russian Marxists. Against the vaguely defined but very "revolutionary" terrorist populists — most of whom said that they were socialists — the Marxists were the "right" wing insisting on patient, unspectacular work to prepare the working class. It was not, as Trotsky later put it, those who started with bombs and guns, but those who started with the weighty books of Marx and Plekhanov, who buried Tsarism.

Right now in Britain the revolution-shouters are not in any real sense — other than the subjective one — revolutionaries. They need to step back; they need to "retreat" from their imaginary vanguard role — as shouters! — and learn the difference between Marxism and anarchism. ☐

Welfare State Network
working conference

Saturday 18 February

12-5pm, University of
London Union, Malet
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- Benefits for youth and students ● 21 hour rule
- Job Seeker's Allowance
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Speakers include:

Tony Benn MP, Alan Simpson MP, Sarah Wellings NUS Women's Officer, Jill Mountford Welfare State Network, John Lister London Health Emergency

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