

## The debate on the Workers' Government

# I. How best to mobilise

**T**HIS debate is essentially about the condition of the Labour Party and about how revolutionaries should relate to it in the current period.

What is the condition and direction of the Labour Party? The Blairites work to transform the Labour Party from a trade union based party into an open bosses' party. They are poised to enter government on an anti-working programme which accepts the legacy of the Thatcherites (Kenneth Clarke's public expenditure programme, the deeply regressive tax structure, and the anti-union laws). The Blairites plainly see their governmental programme as an integral part of the process of turning the Labour Party into a business party. It is a programme which sets them on a collision course with the unions. An election victory will augment the ability of the Blairites to transform the Labour Party and so push the working class out of politics.

What is at stake? Trade unionism in politics: the existence of the Labour Party as any sort of workers' party (and despite its political degeneracy, the Labour Party remains a type of workers' party). If they succeed — and that looks likely at the moment — then the Blairites will have thrown the working class movement back to the pre-1900 period, before the Labour Party was founded as the expression of trade unionism in politics. One may further say that what is at stake is a workers' government in the sense that the purpose of workers collectively participating in politics as a class is to impose its will on a society-wide or governmental level. In the here and now and for the period ahead, with a Blair-Labour government looming, the issue at stake is the nature of the Labour Party and the political life of the working class. This distinction is vitally important in determining our tactics and ability to relate to the movement as it exists.

The key question for serious socialists is this: either we defeat the Blairites' efforts to transform the Labour Party or we must win sufficient forces within the labour movement to refound a working class political party. There are of course no guarantees in life and so we must prepare for the latter in fighting for the former. The key question for serious socialists is thereby posed — how do we mobilise, educate and take forward the necessary mass opposition to the Blairite project? What, in Lenin's phrase, "*is the particular link in the chain which must be grasped with all one's strength to keep the whole chain in place and prepare to move resolutely to the next link?*"

The whole line of march indicates a united front between the left and at least seri-

ous elements of the trade union bureaucracy and the "old" Labour rightwing. Given the current parlous political, organisational, and numerical state of the left there is no other way of seriously pushing the Blairites back. We will either succeed in moving such forces — at least partly against their will and certainly under pressure from the ranks — around those core demands which most urgently meet the needs of the working class (a minimum wage, the rebuilding of the welfare state, and so forth), campaigning for the union-Labour link on that basis, or we will not succeed at all. We have plenty of material to work with: all the unions have policies to the left of Labour which the union bureaucrats have sat on to avoid embarrassing the Blair leadership.

In this respect our message to the movement is clear: "While the Blairites retain their control of the Labour Party they will come back time and again, as often as it takes, to break the union-Labour link. In the meantime they will give us nothing voluntarily." The whole logic of the struggle points to agitation on the basis of "*enforce the union policies*", "*break with the Blairites*". Such slogans point to the immediate threat of the Blairites, their anti-working class programme, and the need for a "united front". They are slogans which can be used in the affiliated and non-affiliated unions, the broad lefts, the local Labour Parties, and broad campaigns.

Indeed they point up what is really and immediately at stake — the future of the Labour Party as trade unionism in politics. If "*the Labour Party remains the bourgeois workers' party it always was, but now with a radical shift towards the bourgeois pole of the dialectical, contradictory, formation*" (editorial, *Workers' Liberty* 35) then either we turn that radical shift around by breaking the grip of the Blairites or the Labour Party is dead as any sort of workers' party. This is the essential message we are seeking to give the movement. In this sense any call to "*fight for a workers' government*" leaps over what one comrade has called "*the missing link... the workers' party*". Only a workers' party will create a workers' government, but where is this party? It cannot in any sense be the Labour Party undergoing "a radical shift towards the bourgeois pole" *unless we convincingly beat the Blairites*.

We urgently need to explore the possibilities for some sort of Labour Representation Committee (or Rank and File Mobilising Committee for Labour Representation) which goes beyond, but does not at this stage replace, the Keep the Link Campaign. If the Blairites keep the link while gutting it of all meaning then a specifically "keep the link" campaign could become a trap for the left. With a wider and more politically aggressive remit, a Labour Representation Committee could campaign on the need to renovate working class representation, and restate the purpose of working class politics while campaigning on basic class issues. Potentially it would tie welfare state campaigning to the necessary fight within the unions and the Labour Party. If it was able to take affiliations it would give the left the measure of its (hopefully) growing influence in the fight against the Blairites.

This whole line can easily be translated during the general election as "*enforce work-*

*ing class representation and interests against Blair*". It gives a practical meaning to the slogan unanimously adopted by the January AWL National Committee, "*vote Labour and fight, rebuild the welfare state, for a workers charter of union rights, for a minimum wage*" (despite the earlier claims that such a slogan is insufficient by itself, which it is, and illusory, which it is not).

The Blairites' political strength is derived in large measure from the weakness of the labour movement and the desperate fear of the Tories being reelected. The Blairites feed off this fear by blackmail — "do as we want, or split the party pre-election and endure the Tories for another five years" — that is the essence of Blair's "strong leadership". The flip side of an election victory for the Blairites is that it will break this paralysing fear.

With the election of a Blair-Labour Government we will — against our desires, if only the world was different, but then we are Marxists not daydreamers — be going through a necessary experience with the class. It is true that workers are more than ever cynical about the differences between the two parties, but some comrades underestimate the very real and contradictory extent to which workers still identify with Labour and see it as the only chance of respite from constant attack by the class enemy, the Tories.

Serious socialists will call for the return of a Blair-Labour Government on the basis "*that the roadblock can be broken and the working class begin to raise itself*" (editorial, *Workers' Liberty* 35). "Vote Labour and fight, enforce working class interests and representation against Blair" flows from the developing situation: the fight within the Labour Party is not yet over, the election of a Blair-Labour Government will "break the roadblock", freeing up the class struggle within as well as without the Labour Party, and the Blairites' governmental programme sets them on a collision course with the unions.

Plainly *against* Blair, this approach avoids unfortunate and utterly counter-productive formulations such as "let's make this Labour (ie Blair) government a workers' government".

We should therefore be unequivocal in calling for a Labour Government with the invocation, "fight!" (enforce working class interests and representation against Blair). We should reject the suggestions that "*...if Blair wins the general election the result will not be a Labour Government in any meaningful sense (true) — and we will also have lost the Labour Party*" (false); and that a Labour victory will at best be "*a kamikaze victory*", a victory achieved by a labour movement suicide attack on the Tories which leaves the Blairites as the sole survivors (editorial, *Workers' Liberty* 35, my emphasis).

Similarly we should reject the argument that the call for a fight against a Blair Government is essentially syndicalist (i.e. industrial) because the political channels within the party are blocked. The channels are badly gummed up (largely because that is what the trade union bureaucrats *permit*), and critically close to blockage, but they are not *blocked*. Witness the Blairite's frantic efforts to bring the union bureaucrats on board against Barbara Castle's pensions proposal at

the last Labour Party Conference. Bickerstaffe has been moved by rank and file pressure over Clause Four and the minimum wage. Serious socialists must seek to act as a lever on all the union bureaucrats.

In propagandising vote "Labour and fight!" our primary role is clearly not to be the election foot soldiers of Blair. I have never understood that to be the role of British Marxists who have called previously for a Labour vote. In the current condition it would be even less excusable to fall into simply being Labour Party canvassers. The whole emphasis of our propaganda and agitation must clearly be on fighting the (Blair) Labour Government and more so than in past general elections. But we are still for voting Labour.

This points up the difficulty of calling for a "fight for a workers' government" in any central way during the election, alongside the critical, qualified call to vote Blair-Labour. We will appear either as if we are simultaneously calling for a Blair-Labour Government and a different type of government not yet on the horizon; or as if we believe that a Blair-Labour Government can be turned in some meaningful sense into a workers' government. In the first instance we will look eccentric, in the latter, mad.

Yet one leading comrade has argued "let's make this Labour (ie Blair) government a workers' government." Such a slogan has absolutely no grip on the widespread hatred of Blair; it would cut us off from relating to those serious militants ready to give up on meaningful politics while not helping us to relate the broader masses. In the January edition of *Workers' Liberty* the same comrade argued that another way of saying "fight for a workers' government" would be "keep the link — and use it in workers interests". Yet it is nothing of the sort — if we keep the link then we will have kept Labour as some sort of workers' party against the Blairites; if we use it with any success in workers' interests then we will have enforced some working-class interests against the Blairite government. But this is not describing a workers' government but the united front struggles touched on earlier. We may help effect very large struggles through united front activity and these may result at some stage in a workers' government, but we cannot simply collapse such speculation into our understanding of the current and likely political situation.

To fit the call to "fight for a workers' government" into present realities, to make it rational to the labour movement (really only an issue if we are going to make the call central to our practical activity and agitation, really *fighting* for such a government in the immediate period) comrades necessarily pare its meaning down to a Labour government of the *normal kind*. Hence the editor tells us "the 'workers' government' I'm advocating would not be socialist; it is based on specific limited class demands, welfare state, trade union rights... it is on the extreme right of the 'workers government' spectrum described by the Comintern."

But why do we need to advocate such a government? It doesn't help us to fight the Blairites in any meaningful way in the here and now. It simply reads like an eccentric way of saying "we're for a 'real' Labour government".

If we reject the notion that we can transform a Blair government into a workers' government — as we must — and that it will

only carry out serious reforms if it is forced to do so, and if we further say that the movement can only preserve its collective political voice against the Blairites, then we are pointing the way to tremendous class battles, both to defend and advance the working class's most urgent needs and to politically reorganise and reorientate the labour movement. In truth the Blairites have set themselves on course for a fight with the unions. In advance of such struggles it is unnecessary, miseducating and potentially self-defeating for us to advocate some minimalist (*ostensibly*) workers' government. It is a projection into the future of the current political level of the labour movement and can only serve to cut us off from more radical possibilities.

Effectively equating a workers' government with non-Blair Labour governments cuts across the sharp lessons which are necessary to prepare the future (and that is why in debate I have highlighted one leading comrade's claim that a 'workers government' is defined by *what it is, not by what it does*). The Blairites are not simply some product of the Thatcherite era but of the failure and decrepitude of British reformism, of trade unionism in politics (as illustrated by the last Labour government). We are for such trade unionism in politics against the Blairites, but we are for much more.

Used intelligently, propaganda for a workers' government is of use now. It can be used to draw out the lessons of past Labour history, the origins and rottenness of the Blair regime, and the fight for something more. But in the here and now the message we are taking to the movement is "defend class politics, defend the political representation of the working class — refound a workers' party if necessary, and fight for the fundamental needs of the working class." This points — in the midst of big struggles — to a transformation of the labour movement and to a government of a radically different kind to past Labour Governments.

Frank Murray

## II. The European dimension

I FEEL there are problems with both the workers' government slogan and the slogan "Vote Labour and fight".

The workers' government slogan is often used as a maximum demand, like demanding a socialist government. In the present political climate a workers' government seems a long way away.

"Vote Labour and fight" is like the slogan "build the revolutionary party": it begs questions like why? and how? In the past "vote Labour and fight" would have meant for those involved in the Labour Party: "Vote Labour and fight to make it more democratic and the leadership accountable and to put pressure on the government to carry out socialist policies". For trade unionists, it meant: "Vote Labour but pre-



pare to take action against a government likely to carry out anti-working-class measures".

Now "vote Labour and fight" has little meaning for Labour Party activists as there is now little scope for socialists to work to transform the Labour Party. The slogan is now a syndicalist slogan.

Though some people feel the idea of a workers' government may not adequately relate to the situation facing the working class in Britain we can use the slogan for a workers' Europe to relate to the strike movements sweeping across continental Europe. The idea of a workers' Europe clearly poses the question of what kind of Europe we want, whether it's a workers' Europe or a bosses' Europe. It can provide a focus for working-class action throughout Europe and also counteract British chauvinism.

The application of the slogan 'fight for a workers' Europe shows how the *fight for a workers' government* can be used as a transitional demand. A workers' government, like a workers' Europe, is something that works in the workers' interests, that makes the bosses pay for the economic crisis.

The two slogans can be linked and a demoralised working class movement in Britain can derive inspiration from what is happening on the continent.

I live in a constituency (Easington) that is probably the safest seat for Labour in England. Recently, a television programme included an interview with a woman from Easington who said she would not be voting Labour because they are identical to the Tories. There are many more people like her in Easington and similar constituencies. These people represent the more advanced sections of the working class — much more advanced than those sections of the working class who have illusions in a Blair-led Labour government.

As well as relating to Labour Party members fighting Blair's proposals to transform the Labour Party into something indistinguishable from the Tories, we should be relating to the many working-class people who have no illusions in Blair and are looking for an alternative.

The workers' government slogan can provide them with a positive alternative to "New Labour".

Gary Scott

## III. Confusion at election time

*"The slogan of a workers' government (or a workers' and peasants' government) can be used practically everywhere as a general agitational slogan. However as a central political slogan, the workers' government is most important in countries where the position of bourgeois society is particularly unstable and where the balance of forces between the workers' parties and the bourgeoisie places the question of government on the order of the day as a practical problem requiring immediate solution."*  
(Theses on Comintern Tactics 1922)

THE current debate about the use of the workers' government slogan is in the first place a debate about the way we use the slogan. No one so far as I know is proposing its use as a central political slogan, and every one in the debate seems to accept it as a general agitational slogan. However its promotion now is a significant change in the AWL's literature and is hailed by its supporters.

Tom Willis tells us in WL37: "The very words 'workers' government' encapsulates the class issue of working-class representation versus a collapse back into liberalism raised by the current battles in the Labour Party."

Supporters of the increased use of the workers' government slogan attack as inadequate the long-standing AWL election slogan of "Vote Labour and Prepare to Fight". For its supporters, then, the workers' government slogan is needed in the run-up to the election and its promotion is to be on a much higher level than our timeless use of it in the past. Indeed Richard Kinnell tells us in WL37: "But the significance of slogans is what they mean to the average worker or student within earshot of us".

The sad truth is that the claimed magical powers of the workers' government slogan in the pre-election period are akin to Tommy Cooper's failing conjuring tricks. The promotion of the slogan now is far from useful, it is confusing to the very workers and students 'in earshot' we aim to reach.

At first the case for the increased use of the workers' government slogan is very appealing: we have to raise the alarm about Blair's project, we need to prepare for a fight to the death (of the party), we need to plan if necessary for the re-creation of a trade union-based party. But we are also in an election period, when all sides of the debate accept we have to call for a Labour vote. That is not just a vote for the neo-Tory policies and Blairite scum, it is a vote for a party dominated by Blair which will give him the power of the state office and finance to destroy the union link.

Yet there are good reasons for voting Labour. Firstly the Party still has the union link. Secondly, the history of the link and the hatred of the Tories means that even the most sceptical sections of the labour movement

want Labour to kick out the Tories. Thirdly, a Labour victory will open up the political situation. And, fourthly, we are not strong enough, and there is no working class force strong enough, to challenge Labour in the election.

The election, like it or not, is the main event in politics even for the left of the Labour movement, no slogan we can use will change that fact. The slogan workers' government appears to fit into the election framework, but its prominent use along with the call for a Labour vote is extremely confusing.

What workers' government is on offer in the election? The use of the workers' government slogan during the election can mean several things to those 'in earshot'.

Firstly, and most absurdly, it could mean that Blair's government will be a workers' government, a version of 'Labour to Power' i.e., for a Labourite, an election slogan in Trotsky speak, "Labour Taking Power".

Secondly, it could mean vote out the Tories, Labour are the best of a bad bunch, but also work towards a workers' government one day, giving up on Labour — 'Vote Labour but build a workers' government alternative.'

No slogan stands alone yet, once explained, the real meaning of the slogan appears to be: "Vote Labour — split Labour — build a new workers' party — fight for a workers' government!"

Proponents of the workers' government reply that they do not rule out beating Blair and keeping Labour a bourgeois workers' party or even transforming it into a workers' party, but their case for promoting the workers' government slogan is that the situation has changed since 'Vote Labour and Fight' encapsulated that perspective.

In labour movement politics we have to understand the current centrality of the general election: it weakens the left and greatly strengthens Blair, but a slogan will not change that.

In this situation a high profile use of "workers' government" aimed at those 'within earshot' is confusing, even when we know what we are talking about.

That is not to say that very soon such a slogan may be invaluable in helping to regroup the best elements of the workers' movement into a new trade union-based party, neither is it to suggest that nothing has changed in the Labour Party — the slogan "Vote Labour, Fight Blair" might better sum up our ideas in the election.

Immediately, we must build the biggest fight over the link possible. The fight should be as political as possible to attract militant workers, not just Labour hacks. Within the campaign and the movement in general the AWL must emphasise what is at stake and prepare for the worst by making sure that a Blair victory leads to the biggest split possible into a new party of labour.

The exaggerated use of the workers' government slogan in the election period is a confusing result of an attempt to sum up these tasks. Unfortunately our tuneful tin-whistle call for a workers' government when everyone is being deafened by the Wembley stadium Spice Girls concert of the election, results only in confusion for those within earshot, especially when we sold them tickets.

Mark Sandell

## A wedge between the classes

FROM the united front flows the slogan of a workers' government. The Fourth Congress submitted it to a thorough discussion and once again confirmed it as the central political slogan for the next period. What does the struggle for a workers' government signify? We Communists of course know that a genuine workers' government in Europe will be established after the proletariat overthrows the bourgeoisie together with its democratic machinery and installs the proletarian dictatorship under the leadership of the Communist Party. But in order to bring this about it is necessary for the European proletariat in its majority to support the Communist Party.

But this does not obtain as yet and so our communist parties say on every appropriate occasion:

"Socialist workers, syndicalist workers, anarchists and non-party workers! Wages are being slashed; less and less remains of the 8-hour working day; the cost of living is soaring. Such things would not be if all the workers despite their differences were able to unite and install their own workers' government."

And the slogan of the workers' government thus becomes a wedge driven by the Communists between the working class and all other classes; and inasmuch as the top circles of the Social Democracy, the reformists, are tied up with the bourgeoisie, this wedge will act more and more to tear away, and it is already beginning to tear away the left wing of Social Democratic workers from their leaders. Under certain conditions the slogan of a workers' government can become a reality in Europe. That is to say, a moment may arrive when the Communists together with the left elements of the Social Democracy will set up a workers' government in a way similar to ours in Russia when we created a workers' and peasants' government together with the Left Social-revolutionaries. Such a phase would constitute a transition to the proletarian dictatorship, the full and completed one. But right now the significance of the slogan of a workers' government lies not so much in the manner and conditions of its realisation as in the fact that at the present time this slogan opposes the working class as a whole politically to all other classes i.e. to all the groupings of the bourgeois political world.

Leon Trotsky