

Should socialists leave the Labour Party?



By Arthur Scargill

AT this year's Labour Party conference Tony Blair and the party leadership destroyed Labour's socialist "birthright" when they ditched the historic commitment to common ownership, and committed new Labour to the "free market" and capitalism.

Speaking at this year's annual conference — to delegates so desperate to remove the Tory government that they were prepared to adopt any measure, accept any proposal — Blair was finally able to get rid of Clause Four.

Delegates who enthusiastically cheered Blair's keynote conference speech may now be realising that the pledges and promises were not what they seemed.

What did Tony Blair really say on issues which fundamentally affect the lives of every adult and child in our society — privatisation, the national minimum wage, unemployment, pensions, anti-trade union laws and the party itself?

On privatisation he confirmed that Labour would not renationalise our key industries, but merely use the "excess" profits of those industries and utilities to help pay for its programme of work and education.

A Labour leader committed to public ownership would have said that Labour would renationalise water, electricity, coal, gas, British Telecom and all the public industries and services which have been privatised over the past 16 years — including restoration of our railways — that's something which, according to the latest opinion polls, nearly 60 per cent of the public supports.

On the national minimum wage, Blair undertook to introduce a statutory mini-

mum wage but refused to specify a formula of state a figure.

On unemployment, his statement that "no-one pretends that we can solve unemployment overnight" is a warning that unemployment will continue under a Labour government.

The truth is that we can solve unemployment overnight by introducing a four day working week with no loss of pay, banning all non-essential overtime and bringing in voluntary retirement on full pay at age 55.

On pensions Tony Blair made it clear that the Labour Party is departing from the essential principle of "universal" pensions and said that Labour is looking at ways for people to "put together" income from public and private sources.

In other words, workers are going to pay an additional "insurance policy" to guarantee a minimum standard of pension.

On anti-trade union laws, Tony Blair — although well aware that picketing, solidarity action and the right of unions to determine their own rule books without state interference are all regarded as human rights by the United Nations charter — has declared that Labour in government will retain the vicious laws which have been

used over the last 16 years to boost unemployment and enforce low pay.

A number of trade union leaders and party activists have agreed that a serious discussion must take place over the next few months to determine which policy the left should pursue.

The new rules and constitution present socialists like myself with a profound dilemma:

Do I — and others who feel as I do — stay in the party which has been and is being politically cleansed and is now constitutionally indistinguishable from the Tories and the Liberal Democrats?

Or do we leave and start to build a socialist Labour Party that represents the principles, values, hopes and dreams which gave birth, nearly a century ago, to what has become, sadly, today's New Labour?

Those who applauded Tony Blair's address to party conference and voted for the constitutional changes may well rue the day they gave away the party's socialist birthright.

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Keeping a sense of proportion

By Roland Tretchet

ARTHUR SCARGILL is right to be outraged at the direction in which Blair is taking the party. The left does need to discuss its strategy. Scargill's error is that he seems to have lost all sense of proportion. He has wildly exaggerated the significance of Blair's victory on Clause Four. He seems to believe that the recent change in the formal constitution of the Party actually represents a decisive change in its basic class nature. No, it does not! This new pessimism of Scargill's is based on the idea that Blair has betrayed something that has never existed: a socialist Labour Party.

Mistaking myth for reality, Scargill now seems to think that because Blair has altered the Party's mythology he has somehow fundamentally altered its reality. This is a very strange procedure for a Marxist to adopt.

Marxists — and Scargill considers himself a Marxist — base their assessments of individuals, parties and groups not on what they think about themselves, but on what they actually do; their social role, function and purpose in the unfolding class struggle.

Scargill is defining the Labour Party and its relationship to the struggle for socialism by what the party constitution says, not by analysing what the leadership actually does. This is to turn reality on its head.

To understand the Labour Party we need to analyse the dynamic and contradictory relationship between

- the parliamentary and trade union

apparatus,

- the Party rank and file,
- the wider layers of Labour's bedrock working-class supporters.

In other words, between a bourgeois political machine and its proletarian base.

The old Clause Four, part four, was never a very useful guide in this respect. The Labour Party is a highly contradictory entity. Its leaders are some of the most accomplished liars in politics. No formal definition of its aims and objectives, especially one written by its leaders, could ever really tell us much.

Unless, that is, it read something like this: **"To secure for the bourgeoisie their continued rule in the land, and the full fruits of other people's labour by channelling the first beginnings of working-class political consciousness into forms of action that prop up the existing private monopoly of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and to further discredit socialism by the unpopular bureaucratic mismanagement of each industry or service."**

The point here is that without adopting a healthy amount of scepticism about Labour's traditions and mythology, it is impossible for Marxists to keep their bearings now.

Yes, it was right to defend Clause Four. Yes, Marxists were duty bound to rally the broadest possible forces for that battle. And yes, Marxists were right to point out how that fight was in fact a dress rehearsal for

future battles between the next Labour government and the working class. *Workers' Liberty* mobilised all the forces it could muster in the Labour Party and the affiliated unions for those tasks.

But to go from that position to suggesting that the battle in the Labour Party is all over because of the loss of Clause Four is to abandon dialectics for constitutional fetishism. The Labour Party is not indistinguishable from the Lib-Dems or the US Democrats. The union link is still basically intact. Labour is not yet a "pure" bourgeois party.

The alternative to a narrow focus on the rule book is to look at the Labour Party as it has developed historically, taking in all aspects of its contradictory reality.

This is how this magazine summed up that reality during the battle for Clause Four.

"Labour is the political wing of the multi-millioned trade union movement. Despite all its many limitations it represents the first faltering steps of the working-class movement on the road to political independence.

Though all Labour governments have — fundamentally — served the interest of capital, the party remains rooted in the bedrock organisations of the working class.

It provides the only actually existing governmental alternative available to the working-class movement here and now.

If our politics are centred on the working class and the fight for its self-liberation then they, necessarily, relate to the working class, and to its organisations as they actually exist. Therefore serious socialists have to relate to the Labour Party. If Blair is successful in winning the abolition of Clause Four none of this will change.

The fact that the party had written into its constitution a formal commitment to common ownership, which is one prerequisite of socialism, did not make the Labour Party socialist. On the contrary, the party's overall contradictory nature is defined on the one side by its actions in government and by policies and on the other side by its social base.

It is thus a 'bourgeois workers' party' [the definition is Lenin's].

Labour's reformism has always been a reflection of trade unionism. Labourism is merely the extension of the trade unionist principle of bargaining within the existing capitalist system into the bourgeoisie's own parliament. Whereas unions bargain with individual employers or across particular industries, Labourism has represented 'trade unionist' bargaining at the level of society and the overall running of society.

The abolition of Clause Four in itself will do nothing to change this basic nature.

Much of Blair's 'New Labour' Labourism is still, in part, a form of trade unionism in politics — the par-

ticularly degenerate, decayed and uninspiring variant of the Christian-democratic social-market philosophy of the professional civil service opportunists who run some of Britain's bigger unions."

Nothing that has happened since Blair's special conference victory changes this assessment. In fact, the key events at this year's conference were the product of a classically Labourist backroom deal. Blair promised the union leaders that there would be no new attacks on the union link and in return he received support on the minimum wage and selective education. The end result was the most stitched-up Labour conference since Harold Wilson's early days as leader.

It is strange for Scargill to claim that campaigning for socialism is no longer possible inside the Labour Party because of changes in the rulebook.

Of course, we should not *confine* ourselves to what can be done now inside the Labour Party, but the fact of the matter is that it is still possible to win significant sup-

port for socialist ideas inside the Party and to organise around them. The Socialist Campaign Group of MPs secured a full third of all the votes cast in the recent NEC elections, to quote just one significant fact.

The difficulties facing those of us who fight for socialism come from the witch hunters and the huge powers they have given to themselves to hound and persecute socialists. All those powers predate the New Clause Four. They are rather similar to those used by previous generations of witch hunters back in the "Good old days" of the old Clause Four, particularly in the 1930s.

In reality the last thing the Blairites are likely to try right now is to expel someone for speaking up for the old Clause Four. Their priorities lie elsewhere. They are preparing to carry through a series of major attacks on what remains of the welfare state, attacks that will be so viciously anti-working class that they are certain to stir up opposition within the ranks of the Party. It is the job of Marxists to remain within the Labour Party where the major fault lines in British politics will develop.

As we were saying...

Lenin on the Labour Party

It would be possible to compile a booklet of quotations on the Labour Party from Lenin, and some would appear to contradict each other. What we need then is some indication of *how* to judge the Labour Party, concretely, as it exists now. At the Second Comintern Congress, 1920, Lenin made a speech on the question of affiliation of the British Communists to the Labour Party.

"...indeed the concepts 'political organisation of the trade union movement' or 'political expression of this movement' are wrong ones. 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."

The Labour Party must be seen dialectically — in its connections, in its actual role and significance in the relationship of the classes — *not* by what fig-leaves it adopts, what it says of itself, or what workers *think* it is.

To use the *description* of it — 'the party of the British workers' etc. — as a means of avoiding a sharp Marxist class analysis of its *role*, its actual position in the relationship of forces, is not serious. Neither is it serious to say 'well, it is, and then again it isn't.' *In its function*, whatever the contradictions, it is a bourgeois party. It is true that if we ignore the contradictions we will not be able to gauge future developments.

The Leninist position is that the Labour Party,

judged in its role and function, and *despite* its origins and special connection with the trade unions, is a capitalist, a *bourgeois workers' party*. Judged politically it is not a workers' party with deformations, inadequacies (its 'inadequacies' amount to a qualitative difference), but a bourgeois party with the special function of containing the workers — actually it is a special section of the bourgeois state political organisation. The Labour Party is the main instrument of capitalist control of the workers; the organisation formed out of an upsurge of the workers, but an upsurge in which the workers were *defeated* ideologically and thus in every other field, is now the means of integrating the drives and aspirations of the workers with the capitalist state machine. *It is not a passive reflection but an active canaliser of the class* — against itself, against the proletariat's own interest. It is against this background that Clause Four must be seen.

The approach and viewpoint is important here, and what we see will be seriously affected by how we begin. The initial statement, 'a workers' party' or 'a bourgeois workers' party', will affect everything else. For example, the bureaucracy is seen either as a crust formation, with certain *deficiencies* in relation to the needs of the class, but basically part of the class, which will respond (genuinely as opposed to treacherously) to pressures — *OR* as a much more serious opponent, a part of the political machine of the main enemy class (irrespective of how it originates); and therefore our expectations from it will be quite different. We will not be quite so 'comfortable' in the Labour Party. The most obvious thing is that we will see their shifts to the left as also a danger and not as a *triumph* for the pressure of the class, as something which increased our responsibilities, as a *party*, rather than absolves us of them, lessening our role, questioning the validity of the Fourth International. *The unqualified definition of the Labour Party as a workers' party is a snare.*

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