

# So why do we say vote Labour?

**T**ONY Blair and his friends in the so-called “Millbank Tendency” intend to radically alter or destroy the ties of the Labour Party to the trade unions and the working class. Already they represent policies that constitute a radical break with any recognisable version of old-style reformism. In the discourse of these jumped-up New Labour politicians the unemployed are to blame for unemployment and the poor for poverty.

Blair has said it openly. They want to make the Labour Party into an out-and-out bourgeois party — into a straight bosses’ party like the Democratic Party in the USA, or the British Liberal Democrats. The lesser, half-way-house, versions of the Blair project would, while keeping some formal ties, make the unions junior lobbyists rather than the decisive core of the party. The hardline version would completely cut off and jettison the trade unions.

This is the greatest threat British working-class politics has faced for decades. So we have argued in previous issues of *Workers’ Liberty*, attempting to rouse the British labour movement against the Blairites, believing that in this situation the first responsibility of socialists is to raise the alarm against all variants of the Blair project.

How, then, should socialists vote in the general election on 1 May? If, as we have argued, an election victory is likely to empower Blair’s Millbank grouping for a major push and perhaps the last push against what is left of the working-class character of the Labour Party, should we not simply refuse to vote Labour in the May general election?

No, we should not: no, we can not. There is no alternative, short of abstaining from politics and asking the working class to do the same, but to vote Labour in every constituency on 1 May. Simultaneously we must oppose Blair inside the labour movement and prepare to fight a Blair government from day one.

The “Millbank Tendency” have not yet succeeded in fully breaking the class character of the Labour Party: in this General Election, New Labour will have the organised backing of the trade unions. The Labour Party remains the working-class movement in politics — a working-class movement that has had its

horizons and perspectives brutally cramped and cropped by 18 years of naked bourgeois rule, and its self-confidence so far undermined that a middle-class nonentity like Tony Blair can rise up within it to the position of saviour and dictator and, it seems, should he chose, liquidator. Lenin long ago accurately defined the Labour Party as a “bourgeois workers party”: it is still a bourgeois workers’ party, but now with the dialectical balance massively tilted towards the bourgeois pole in an entity that was always highly contradictory.

Labour is the only conceivable governmental alternative to the Tory government, and on 1 May most members of the labour movement will act accordingly. Anti-Toryism is not enough, but getting the Tories out and breaking the icy Tory grip of 18 years is the only way to begin to open British politics up again. It is the only way to begin to open working-class politics up again. It is the only way for the labour movement to begin to move forward again.

It is true that this campaign will be a competition of media-judged political beauty, and of soundbites. Nuances at best divide the parties on policy. Much of New Labour’s concern is to com-

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pete on Tory ground with the Tory Party for last-time Tory voters. The Blair grouping is politically a mere satellite, the moon to the Thatcherite sun — its light is reflected light; its strength a reflection of the strength of the Tories and of what they have achieved for the bourgeoisie in 18 years of government. Its purpose is to realise the Thatcher-Major programme in the labour movement and continue their politics, with a change here and there, in the country as a whole. It has grown to its present dominance during the long years of working-class defeat in which the labour movement has grown stagnant, waiting passively for a change of government.

Yes, but Labour's defeat in the general election would only perpetuate those conditions of all-powerful Tory dominance that have driven the labour movement into its present political mood of self-effacement and the decrepitude which has generated that mood. Probably, that would strengthen Blair's grip. If the formation of a Labour government will empower the Millbank Tendency against the labour movement — for example, giving them a chance they do not have in opposition to provide themselves with direct state funding — it will also begin to bring the labour movement up against the reality of what Blair represents. Sooner or later it will impel the labour movement to fight back.

Large numbers of workers will vote Labour despite Blair, or out of an ingrained traditional Labour loyalty that has not deigned to take account of what the Blairites are saying and doing. Quite a few still hope that Blair is only playing a clever game to outflank the Tories with middle-class voters. Millions have expectations that Labour will serve their interests. Disappointed, they will react against New Labour. These are the elements of a future revolt. That potential can only be made real by a Labour election victory. A Tory victory will only perpetuate the conditions that have bred Blairism. The point is that a Labour victory will also *begin* — it will not happen in a week — to empower the working-class movement with the realisation of its own strength and an awareness that it can rely only on its own strength.

The essential work of socialists in the labour movement now is to help it to such a self-realisation and such a new self-empowerment.

For socialists not to advocate a Labour vote is to stand aside from mass working-class politics now: a few socialist parliamentary candidacies in a constituency here and there, hopeless candidacies in the circumstances, do not and can not offer working class voters a governmental alternative to the Tories. For socialists to stand aside is for socialists to cut themselves off from the processes of labour movement political self-renewal.

Trade union conferences this summer will debate what the unions will demand from a Labour government — at present, they are demanding almost nothing, except simply that a Labour government, any Labour government, should exist — and whether, and how, the unions should fight Blair's moves to expel them from any central role in the Labour Party.

Even if it is entirely and mechanically predetermined that Blair will come out on top — and nothing in politics is ever that cut-and-dried — we should be inside, not outside, these political processes. A serious revival of working-class politics must come from inside the unions now affiliated to the Labour Party. The campaign for a new Labour Representation Committee, endorsed by Tony Benn in the latest issue of the Welfare State Network paper *Action*, must be built *inside* the affiliated unions and, insofar as that is possible, inside the Labour Party.

But: even though it's true, as we have argued, that a Labour victory will begin to rouse the working class to a realisation of its own strength, is it not also true — and is it not decisive? — that it will give the Blair group the last element of strength (state funding) to enable it to cut or choke the unions' channels into Labour politics? On all the evidence, yes it will. And therefore? Therefore socialists should anticipate events, and break now with the organised labour movement in politics? That would make no sense.

There is nothing we — all the revolutionary socialists of all the tendencies together — can do now to rearrange the circumstances, events and trends that may come together in the general election and after to produce an outright Blairite victory over the old political labour movement. To advocate that workers abstain or vote for only a socialist candidate here or there, which is the same thing

— that is a stop-the-world-I-want-to-get-off policy. The "world" will not stop; neither will the "process" in the labour movement. Again: the place for socialists to be is within this process, within the mass politics of the working class movement. It is only there that the Blair group can be fought. To jump ahead and abstain from the general election and the ongoing struggle against Blairism in the labour movement is only another form of defeatism.

We know what the Blair group intends, we know the weakness of the presently mobilised opposition to what they intend, but it is not serious working-class politics to substitute calculations about what might happen after a Labour victory for the reality of politics now when the labour movement is raising its forces to

**"To advocate that workers abstain or vote for only a socialist candidate here or there, which is the same thing — that is a stop-the-world-I-want-to-get-off policy."**

## Song of the Elections\*

By James Connolly

Sing us of elections  
Full of fight and fun;  
All the hosts of Labour  
By capitalists outdone.  
Tell us of the Death Rate  
High in Dublin Town;  
Lanagan the funeral man  
Said he'd put it down.

Sing of workers' children  
Dying in the slums;  
Parents chance of  
vengeance  
With the voting comes.  
Tell how the slum voters  
On Election Day,  
For a pint of porter  
Sell that chance away.

Sing how Tory capitalist  
In the North Citie\*\*  
Outmanouvered socialists  
By his charitie:  
Tell how shoals of voters,  
Degraded, mean of soul  
Sold their hopes of freedom,  
For a bag of coal.

Sing how Labour candidate  
For the Lord Mayor's chair,  
Crawled to ask the capitalist  
Vote to put him there.  
Tell us how Tim  
Harrington —  
Lawyer sleek and bold —  
Dished the Labour  
Candidate,  
Left him in the cold.

Sing us how the publican,  
The landlord, the employer  
Strive to press the  
workingman  
Deeper in the mire.  
Tell how socialist voters,  
Yet, with righteous wrath,  
Will sweep those slimy  
vermin  
Out of Labour's path.

\* Written in 1903 after a bad recent experience as a candidate for municipal office in Dublin, where the Home Rule Nationalist Party was notorious for running especially dirty and corrupt election campaigns.  
\*\* Belfast

## COMMENTARY

settle overdue accounts with the Tory party.

For socialists to act in the general election as if the Millbank Tendency's threat to the working class character of the Labour Party has already destroyed the party's class character could only help the Blair group do its work after the election more smoothly and easily. It is, in a sense, to hysterically anticipate and act out what we fear and to accept in advance what must be contested for as long and as far as it is possible to contest it.

We repeat: the fight goes on — in this year's trade union conferences, at the Labour Party conference in October and beyond. Much will depend on what socialists are in a position to do after the election. The Blair group have the commanding positions in the labour movement, but they have not clinched their victory yet.

For all these reasons, we say vote Labour on 1 May, and simultaneously work to rouse the labour movement to fight the New Labour government's policies and the Blair project. Otherwise we abandon mass working-class politics. We also abandon all real perspectives for creating a new workers' party based on the unions in the event of outright victory for the Blair project.

What, given the realities of the labour movement, can socialists say to workers when they ask them to vote Labour? We tell the labour movement the whole complex truth. We tell them what Blair represents: new Blair is but old Thatcher writ large. We tell them we think they should vote Labour, but also fight, with mobilisations, protests, strikes, and by way of activity within the labour movement — in the trade unions and, so long as this remains possible, in the Labour Party.

In the election the trade unions are funding a Labour Party that promises the nothing and goes out of its way to emphasise that fact. They are mounting a poster campaign that implicitly backs Labour. And they demand from Labour... nothing! We urge workers to tell their union leaders that the unions should not be mindless milch-cows for the New Labour Party. They should insistently demand from the Labour Party and of every Labour MP specific pledges — pledges to take the legal shackles off the trade unions, restore the right of workers to take solidarity strike action, to restore the NHS on the principle of providing state-of-the-art health care on demand, free at the point of consumption, and to restore the welfare state.