



**THE WORKING CLASS AND THE
LABOUR PARTY by STAN LOMAX**

THE WORKING CLASS AND THE LABOUR PARTY: A REVIEW ARTICLE BY STAN LOMAX.

The exodus of members from the Labour Party from 1964 and, after 1967/8, the growth of radicalised circles outside the Labour Party, at the same time as the Wilson government provoked a wave of militant rank and file industrial activity against it and its policies, misled many on the left to the belief that the Labour Party could be written off. If it was natural that the youth, newly drawn into political consciousness in solidarity with the Vietnamese and in the student struggles of that period, should view things like that, it was not 'natural' for the old guard of the revolutionary groups to adopt the shallow approach they did. Or if it was natural, it was a strong desire to escape the harness of Labour Party entryism, amidst stagnation of the previous decade and a half (1).

Barry Hindess's book, written from a general left standpoint, mirrored the turning away of the working class from the Labour Party wards at that time. At the same time, it tries to provide some explanation for what it takes to be a fundamental change in the nature of the Labour Party, "since the 1964 election", a change which is supposed to be summed up in the notion of the "Decline and Fall of Social Democracy" (p. 170).

Briefly, the thesis can be summed up by the following points:

1. In the 1950s and most especially in the post-1964 period, there has been a progressive decline in working class political activism through the ward parties, and a parallel rise of middle class elements.
2. This has been reflected in:
 - (a) larger memberships in middle class wards than in working class wards;
 - (b) stagnation or decline in membership participation in working class/lower middle class wards, as opposed to slow, steady growth in the middle class wards;
 - (c) a preponderance of professional and managerial elements in both official ward parties and as councillors;
 - (d) Even in the "lower middle/skilled working class" areas, middle class professionals are very over-represented in terms of activists and officials.
3. "The Labour Party now appears to be less of a (working) class party than at any time in its history" (p. 10). And thus - "if Labour does not appear to be a class party, the inter-party dispute cannot be presented in class terms."
4. The Labour and Tory parties have now converged in structure and policies and are both "middle class" parties in the sense that Labour can no longer be seen as "the political arm of some working class movement" and the Tories can't be seen to represent "militant capitalism". In fact, according to Hindess, "Class has been taken, or rather forced, out of politics. This is clear, for example, in the case of the problem of housing..." (p. 148).

Hence, we are given a class characterisation of the Labour Party in terms of whether or not its active members are overwhelmingly working class. Since they are not, we are told that the Labour Party is not a working class party. Secondly, since neither Labour nor the Tories appeal to the electorate in direct class terms, they cannot be parties representing definite class interests. This contention is buttressed by one of the Mark Abrams surveys in which, in 1969, 47% of his respondents who had vot-

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ed Labour in 1966, said that they didn't intend to do so again - a protest response if ever there was one, but not one that was remotely born out by the constant Labour vote registered in 1970.

CONFUSED TERMS

In fact the whole debate about the "decline of working class politics" has largely been, at root, a matter of confused terms.

What, after all, is "working class politics" ? Is it merely those politics (or those organisations) in which large numbers of workers are involved; or is it qualitatively more than that - those politics which express the historical interests of the working class and link those interests with the drive towards self-emancipation which the working class undoubtedly possesses ?

The former is nothing but the "sociology of politics" - which in practice substitutes crude sociological data, of a sub-political kind - no more than the prerequisite, in this case, of working class politics as a mass force in history - for real political criteria. The sociology and ideology of working class politics fuse and are co-extensive only on the broad scale of history. Working class politics, scientific socialist theory, can exist apart from the sociological working class, and in fact came into existence entirely separate from its activity, though partly on the basis of the observation of the experience of the working class by members of another class.

Conversely, groups of an overwhelming working class social composition can exist and have existed in total political/ideological subordination to the bourgeoisie. A party is a political party of the workers - or not - irrespective of its sociological base, according to its ideology; its politics; its structure; its relationship to the working class and to the bourgeois state. Lenin expressed it like this:

"... 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 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."

This quotation is taken from a speech made at the 2nd Congress of the Communist International (1920) in fact, it was part of a speech advocating that the small British Communist Party should affiliate to the Labour Party. Why ? The "sociology", of course, is not a mere detail, and the Communists had to find a way to merge the politics which represented the historic interests of the proletariat with the actual working class, on pain of sterility.

THE EVIDENCE

It will be useful to look at the actual decline in working class participation in the Labour Party, the evidence for it, and its significance. It is here that Hindess's explanations appear most plausible.

The first bit of evidence revolves around the

decline in the percentage of MPs with working class backgrounds between 1951 and 1966 - the respective figures being 37% and 30%. Furthermore, although about half the people in Attlee's Cabinet had strongly working class backgrounds, in the 1964 Cabinet the figure was 26%. Following the 1966 election and subsequent cabinet reshuffles, by 1969 there was not one Cabinet minister who had a remotely proletarian background. In addition, the dominance of the middle class elements in positions of office in the wards and on the council in Liverpool (where Hindess's statistical evidence comes from) and (so Hindess seems to assume) elsewhere, further illustrates the demise of Labour as a working class party.

What are we to make of this evidence?

Firstly, why 37%, or 35%, or 32% of the Parliamentary Labour Party being of working class origin gives the Labour Party a working class pedigree, but 30% doesn't, can only be described as mystifying. The decline in formal working class background for Labour MPs has continued almost uninterrupted since 1918, when the figure was nearer 90%. But such "working class backgrounds" have been found predominantly among trade union bureaucrats turned MPs, people whose whole life style and outlook was and is petty bourgeois.

The Labour members of 1906 were all working class in origin, but only two even claimed to be remotely influenced by Marxist literature and ideas, most espousing sermons, the bible as their literary inspiration, and most not even calling themselves socialist. Thus, by themselves, the class origins of its representatives tell one nothing about the base or the politics of a party or movement.

Similarly with the leadership. Wilson's Cabinet reshuffles, kicking out Lord George-Brown and other wonders of socialist achievement such as Ray Gunter, so that formally no members of working class background remained, does not at all reflect a mass decline in working class base or a turn from class to non-class politics.

As far as the class composition of the activists and officials at ward and council level goes, the same phenomenon as recorded by Hindess has been part of Labour Party politics for many years. Blondel, in his book, "Votes, Parties, and Leaders", quotes a random survey of a number of towns which found, in 1959, that about 60% of the Labour councillors were of middle class origin. No-one, least of all Hindess, would have said that the Labour Party was not a party with a sociological base in the working class: i.e. a "working class party" in the only sense in which it ever has been a "working class party".

However, it is true that ward membership did fall off during Labour's term in office (as it did towards the end of 1945-51) and that, as far as can be judged, workers turned away from the Labour Party wards. Hindess attempts to give this a lasting, irreversible significance, tying it in with his notions of non-class party politics via Michels' Iron Law of Oligarchy.

This law - based on the German and French Social Democracies of the late 19th century - states that bureaucratisation is inevitable in working class organisations. The leaders have superior knowledge of the workings of the political system, greater skill in organising and making speeches. Their control of the means of communication within the party leads to a reinforcement of this situation, given (a) that the masses are supposed to be more or less incompetent, less educated, less sophisticated, with very few attending meetings and participating generally; (b) that

the organisational environment¹ of large scale bureaucratic enterprises and agencies gives rise to a need for enterprise, quick decisions (therefore, especially, anti-democratic practices). Thus one gets a layer of leaders, party officials, specialists, academics, etc., who develop interests of their own, opposed to the masses, interests more in common with their supposed adversaries. Hence all is bureaucracy, everything leads to the maintenance of the status quo, with the exclusion of the masses from political participation.

BUREAUCRATISATION

That bureaucratisation has been the overwhelming pattern of social democratic and socialist organisations there can be no doubt. But to state the existence of such bureaucratisation and even to describe it in specific instances does not explain it, much less make it a universal law. Hindess sees that much.

But his 'explanation' remains just as much a non-explanation. He sees the Labour Party bureaucratisation process, like that of other Social-Democratic parties, as coming about "partly in response to environmental pressures (and only because they follow the dominant norms and procedures of that environment)". Thus they "change their power structure through the routinisation and bureaucratisation of their decision-making procedures." (pp. 41-42). This is supposed to provide a framework for analysis of the "interdependence of party power structure, the pattern of party membership and support, and party activity" (p. 45).

This explanation is basically circular. Social democratic parties become bureaucratic because they accept bureaucratic ways of conducting their affairs. Adaptation leads to apathy leads to bureaucratisation leads to adaptation leads to bureaucratisation.....

If the Labour Party were purely and simply an organisation based on the wards, then the turn away from it by large numbers of workers during Labour's term in office might have indicated the beginnings of a transformation into a straightforward bourgeois party. But, precisely because the Labour Party grew from the trade unions and still has organic links with them, this turning away from the Labour Party wards is not all there is to it. It has happened on several occasions, and so has renewed working class growth in the wards.

The Labour Party is an attempt to reproduce at the level of the general administration of society what the trade unions represent at the point of production - the betterment of the working class's position within the capitalist framework. Given the trade union base of the Labour Party, anti-capitalist drives are, from time to time, expressed through the Labour Party. The Labour Party represents the parliamentary (i.e. in the definition of the social democratic consciousness dominant in the working class, political) complement to the trade union struggle. The focus of the class's drive tends to shift to and fro from Labour Party to trade union and back.

NEW ANSWERS

But the decline of the direct participation of workers in their party is significant. Significant of what? A decline in active self-help directed at, relying on, the Labour Party. A decline of social participation. Not the slow grind towards polling day to get the needed and looked for improvements; but the quick direct action on the factory floor. The lessening of the proportional value of the social services in the overall budget of the worker leads to an increased stress on the size of wages and stress on industrial

collective action, with a tendency towards after hours 'individualism'. This can lead, and has led, in that sense, to an apparent decline in working class politics.

Our assessment must depend on what we see as having replaced the old reliance as a means of securing the same end, self-betterment. Clearly the replacement has been direct industrial action. Throughout the 'fifties and 'sixties the trend has been growing. In July 1972 the militant vanguard didn't organise a petition to parliament to free the five. They acted, and set about involving others in action.

That is a step forward, not backward (as long as we understand that the way "forward" to revolutionary, le genuine working class politics, is not a simple linear succession of steps). It has failed to relate to the general administration of society - except implicitly, through the tendencies towards a general strike. But Labour reformism only relates to it in a muted way; it relates to people, who, it is hoped, will so relate to the interests of the working class - politics by proxy.

The working class has partly retreated out of a cul-de-sac, to consider, and perhaps to find another road.

BUREAUCRACY

The Labour Party has always been bureaucratic. Historically this has arisen with narrow craft, petty-bourgeois ideology within the working class, with its superstitious reverence for 'experts' and 'educated men'; an ideology constantly reproduced by the capitalist class on the basis of their real control of society and the workers' apparent lack of expertise, education, and capacity to rule.

The bureaucracy arises as a definite social stratum, which acts as a broker between workers and bosses. Its life and work situation is quite different from that of the working class. It has no fundamental historical interests of its own, nor any direct, necessary allegiance to working-class interests. Fundamentally it serves the interests of the ruling class. However, within the overall limits of capitalist hegemony, the bureaucracy can and must, from time to time, if it is to preserve its position on the backs of the rank and file, engage in radical rhetoric and even limited action.

Because of the historic link, still alive, between the trade unions and the Labour Party, when trade union channels of advance are blocked workers tend to look to the 'political' arena, and revive the generally stagnant Labour Party. (There are also occasions when both 'channels' are used).

Ebbs and flows in workers' involvement in the wards are nothing new, and it would need further argument to show that the latest ebb means that the Labour Party has become a bourgeois party pure and simple.

END OF LABOUR ?

How can a party like the Labour Party lose its working class character (to the extent that and in the sense that it has ever had a working class character)? This "decline" could take place:

A) Through transcending Labourism politically, organisationally, and ideologically, and going on to a higher plane. We fight for this.

B) Through a cutting of roots, like the German Social Democracy (or the French) The reactionary role of the party in crucial periods, massive working class defeats, fascism led to atrophy. Actually the German Social Democracy is closer to the US Democratic

Party than the British Labour Party now.

In Britain, there was some evidence of a tendency to draw away from the trade unions in the period of "In Place of Strife". The prospect of an organisational split with at least a part of the trade unions certainly seemed to exist - not only a political disagreement but a severing of the organic link between party and trade unions. Through that link the trade unions not only provide the Labour Party with its inflated membership figures - they also have the right to the representation of every trade union branch at every ward and constituency level in the party. Thus there is a connection between trade unions and party which is a valve. The potentiality thus exists of mass influx from the trade unions into the party (and this is the rational kernel of the Labour Party fetishism of many revolutionary groups in the past). This mass influx is likely today only after major industrial defeat.

C) There is another theoretically possible picture for the "decline of Labour" - the conversion of big sections of previously Labourite workers to conscious Syndicalism, self-reliant, committed to direct action, attempting to boycott the 'political structure' of the system, effectively deciding that the extension of trade union bargaining into parliamentary politics has been proved worthless by experience with the Labour Party.

A tendency towards this has always erupted with Labour in power. The full development, however, presupposes the serious atrophy of the Labour Party, so that it cannot respond in opposition by a change of colouration.

INDUSTRIAL

In spite of the out and out "militant capitalist policies" of the present Tory government, the accumulated trade union strength of the class has resulted in the greatest opposition to the bosses on the industrial front for decades, an opposition which has been tending to spill over into a society-wide confrontation with the capitalist class through a general strike. This means that the Labour revival in the wards has been very slow, so far.

WILL LABOUR REVIVE ?

This has not prevented a tremendous hatred building up in the working class for "the Tories" an elemental class feeling, powerful even though containing a fatal alloy of illusions in Labourism. The 'left' face offered by the Labour Party is still far from the degree of 'redness' it reached in the 1930s; but remarkable, nonetheless, given its so recent record in office. 'Tory-bashing' helps them of course, as each act of the government becomes a specifically 'Tory' act. Above all, what is helping the Labour Party to 'live down' its period in office, and indicates that the masses of workers will turn towards it again, is that politics (as well as sectional industrial struggle) does exist - objectively and in the minds of millions of workers. And, so long as the working class does not create its own political institutions, politics is defined by ruling class institutions.

The failure of the growing industrial combativity of the working class to link up with an adequate political expression, relating to the general administration of society, is the best survival kit the Labour Party could have. Our duty is to make the link.

If much of the electoralist turn away from the Labour Party was a fatalistic resignation rather than an option for a new method of fighting, at the same time the very 'abrasiveness' of the Tories has made Labour a lesser evil for the working class; it

is more their party than is the Tory Party, because more dependent on their organisations. Revolutionary socialists do not use the measuring rod of 'lesser evils' for the bourgeois Labour Party. But we do relate to our class, and to the militants of our class - their perceptions are a major factor we must take account of. The 'dialectical' relationship of the Labour Party and the working class does continue: the party of the workers, but not a workers' party; a bourgeois party but with a mass working class, trade union base. We must prise the workers from the bourgeois mis-expression of their interests.

The inability of direct industrial action short of general strike to come to grips with the whole of 'Tory'-dominated society imposes the need to consider governmental alternatives on workers. But revolutionaries must be guided by the proviso that such calls for governmental alternatives must never be allowed to cut across the direct action of the working class itself; "...action by the masses, a big strike for instance, is more important than parliamentary activity at all times, and not only during a revolution or revolutionary situation" (Lenin: c.w. vol 31 p 61).

We need to walk on two legs, direct industrial action, and maintaining a relation to society-wide questions. Using two legs clumsily we trip ourselves up; the solution is to learn to walk.

The slogan to kick the Tories out - used with these provisos in mind - can have real meaning for the working class, except where there is a possibility of raising the call for a general strike - implicitly opening out a whole political programme - as the appropriate response to impositions like the Industrial Relations Act. Inevitably, Tories out means Labour in, given the reality of the situation (even though, just at present, Labour has no desire to be in).

How do revolutionaries raise the call 'Tories out' without cutting away at our efforts to explain the bourgeois nature of the Labour Party? The slogan 'Labour to power with socialist policies' is the most crass fantasy mongering. Even for those inside the Labour Party, it is an intolerable miseducation for anyone who takes it seriously, ascribing to a party organically tied to capitalism the task of overthrowing capitalism. It is not possible to raise the demand without totally bowdlerising the meaning of socialism, the self-emancipation of the workers and the smashing of the bourgeois state. It is possible to call for 'Tories out', linking it with specific demands (Smash the Industrial Relations Act; no incomes policy under capitalism; smash the Housing Finance Act) in such a way that it serves to focus the activity of workers, and that the raising of the call becomes a tool in the hands of militants to mobilise workers against the Labour leadership and their habitual relationship to the bourgeois state.

It is premature to order a shroud for the Labour Party as a major - bourgeois - force in the politics of the working class. It will not die away of itself, or by the effect of its recent exposure. It will not atrophy and change its whole character like the German social democracy, unless we have ahead a whole new period of capitalist expansion, and perhaps not even then. The action of revolutionary socialists, striving to link up with the elemental revolt of the working class, which has pounded in wave after wave for the last year against all the established institutions of Britain, including the Labour Party - that activity, when it succeeds in fusing with the drive of our class, will be the death knell of Labour. Any premature tolling of the bell will hinder, not help us, in that work.

NOTE

(1) In fact this was partly a product of the relationship of all the revolutionary groups to the Labour Party for the previous decade and a half. All of them were in the Labour Party, in various degrees of depth of entry, degree of passivity or activity. In fact they had roots in it. Not only were all of them in it, but, beginning with the pioneering entrists of the post-war period, the future Socialist Labour League, they had crass illusions in it, commodated themselves to it, politically; and regarded it as an expression of the British working class, reflecting a given level of consciousness.

This was the common SLL, 'Militant', and proto-IMG view. They differed on what this meant in practice. The SLL went through the phase of crassest reformism, 'its' 'Trotskyist programme' well pressed in the seat of Gerry Healy's pants. The 'Militant' was primarily concerned to put out a somewhat crude but at least phraseologically 'Trotskyist' propaganda presence in the Labour Party - but a blunted, bowdlerised propaganda, consisting of calls to leaders of the party, not for any vulgar half measures such as some other entrists used agitationaly, but for the full programme - Labour to power with socialist policies! In fact, they were a right wing sectarian Trotskyist group who had chosen the Labour Party as their domicile and were willing to pay the price of tolerance. They saw the Labour Party as the vehicle of the organically growing, maturing working class consciousness, and wanted to stay there. The proto-IMG attempted to aid, and even to substitute for, the broad left wing, 'centrist', left reformist current that they saw as the next stage in the maturation of the Labour Party. Thus they denounced the 'Militant' as sectarians who kept some vestige of a Trotskyist programme, instead of pushing the programme of the broad left wing! This identical policy had led the SLL, in frustration, to attempt to rape "the process", unable to desist, hung up on its obsessions; it has since caused the IMG to flip flop over to a purely propagandist invocation of the revolution, abandoning the attempt to aid "the process". The International Socialism group proclaimed that only when the working class was on the streets and the revolution on could there be talk of revolutionaries pulling out of the Labour Party. They justified it by reference to the position of Rosa Luxemburg (in our view mistaken) in not pulling out of the German Social Democracy throughout world war I.

The communist conception of the Labour Party as a machine of the bourgeoisie which dominates the working class in the interests of the bourgeoisie, with the working class composition and the trade union link as a subsidiary part, even though one which allowed the potential of shattering the Labourite hold on the working class, this was not found in the picture of the left groups: the bold and banal description "the workers' party", their normal designation, indeed contradicted it.

We believe that it is a fact that the first tendency to attempt to disinter this conception of the Labour party and some of the implications for Trotskyism was the initial Workers' Fight group, in 1966.