

The Labour youth movement of the early 1960s was the seedbed of the modern British Trotskyist movement. The history of the struggles of the Trotskyist groups with each other within that youth movement and with the Labour Party leaders has a great deal to teach us today.

Many of the dramatic events of that time are closely paralleled by events now — *Militant's* lurch into sectarianism parallels that of the Healy organisation then, for example.

The political atmosphere in Britain then, as the Young Socialists got going after 1959, has much in common with conditions now. Then too, the Labour Party was tightly controlled by a right-wing political sect, socialism was declared dead, the bourgeoisie was very confident.

Then too socialists had to resist the pressures around them and at the same time redefine themselves in relation to the seemingly new world of prolonged prosperity.

In fact, without knowing it, the socialists in the LPYS were close to the eve of a tremendous upsurge in working-class industrial militancy.

This pamphlet consists of a series of articles published in *Socialist Organiser* in late 1991, and based on articles first published in 1979.

The author, Sean Matgamna, was a participant in the youth movement he describes; a member of the Socialist Labour League [SLL]. He broke publicly with that organisation over the events around the Engineering Apprentices' strike in November 1964 [see text].

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# The Labour left in the early 1960s

AT ITS SCARBOROUGH conference in 1960, the Labour Party voted in favour of unilateral nuclear disarmament by Britain.

This decision had tremendous implications for British politics for it opened a fundamental breach in Labour-Tory foreign and 'defence' policy bipartisanship, one of the pillars on which class collaboration rests and on which depends the possibility of orderly changes in party government at Westminster.

British unilateral nuclear disarmament implied the disruption of NATO and probably British withdrawal from the western military alliances all of which relied on nuclear weapons. In 1960 Britain still had an empire of sorts, claimed a 'special relationship' with the USA, and in general still had some weight in the affairs of the world.

The Scarborough decision committed the Labour Party to challenge policies and commitments which the British ruling class considered fundamental to its interests.

The story of how the ruling class fought back, relying on its supporters in the Labour Party led by Parliamentary Labour Party leader Hugh Gaitskell, and how in a matter of months they whipped the Labour Party back into line with the ruling class's political needs, is a tale that sheds much light on the problem of bringing about change in the Labour Party.

The struggle around the Scarborough decision was one of the most important and decisive political experiences for the post-war Labour left and for the revolutionary left too.

Much of the feebleness, demoralisation and ineptness which the *Tribune* left played in the '60s and '70s can be traced to the events of 1960-61.

So can the lurch by the Marxist left away from work in the Labour Party and into 'build-an-independent-revolutionary-party' sectarianism. As a result of their bitter disappointment with the outcome of the 1960-1 struggle between left and right in the Labour Party, the major Trotskyist organisation of that time — the Socialist Labour League — turned away from the Labour Party, pioneering the sort of politics today expressed by the Socialist Workers' Party.

In the late '50s a great wave of alarm at the prospect of nuclear war ran through Britain and many other countries. People had not got used to living in a long-term nuclear stalemate, and the idea that it could continue for two or more decades would have been considered improbable.

The eruption of the cold war into nuclear holocaust seemed an imminent threat in every conflict involving the USA and the USSR.

Of 443 resolutions at the 1957 Labour Party conference, no less than 127 were concerned with nuclear weapons or general disarmament. A resolution from Norwood Labour Party, inspired by Trotskyists, advocating unilateral nuclear disarmament was defeated at the 1957 conference — but only after Aneurin Bevan, the personality around whom the Labour Left had crystallised since 1951 had marked his reconciliation with the right wing with a notorious speech explaining that he, as a future British Foreign Secretary, could not "go naked into the conference chamber" denuded of British nuclear weapons.

But Bevan failed to carry the *Tribune* left with him Even Jennie Lee, his close political associate and wife, explained in *Tribune* that she had abstained on the question.

The movement against nuclear weapons continued to grow despite the opposition of the Labour Party (and of the then 35,000-strong Communist Party, which initially denounced CND for 'splitting the peace movement').

At Easter 1958, '59, and '60, there were enormous CND marches from the Nuclear Research Establishment at Aldermaston to London. Each year the march got bigger and bigger, reaching 100,000 at Easter 1960 and 150,000 in 1961.

Support for unilateralism became so powerful in the trade unions, partly through the work of TGWU general secretary Frank Cousins, that by 1960 victory at the upcoming Labour Party Scarborough conference was in sight.

Even the Communist Party felt obliged to abandon opposition to CND. That gave unilateralism a big boost in unions like the AUEW, and threw the ETU, then led by the CP, behind unilateralism.

At the Scarborough conference the National Executive Committee (NEC) resolution of support for the western military alliances and their nuclear weapons was defeated by 300,000 votes. A resolution from the TGWU committing the Labour Party to unilateral renunciation of nuclear weapons was carried by a majority of 43,000.

Moving the NEC resolution, Sam Watson struck the two keynotes of the campaign the right wing was to wage.

Witch-hunting: unilateralists should not be in the Labour Party, "we have no right to accept in our movement communists, Trotskyists, and fellow-travellers".

And the demand that unilateralists draw the logical conclusions from unilateralism: he asked them if they actually wanted to leave NATO. Did they understand the implications of what they were saying?

In fact, all the leading Labour Party proponents of unilateralism wanted to stay in NATO!

The political level of the unilateralists tended to be pacifistic and utopian. Generally they did not grasp how funda-

mental a challenge to the ruling class their proposal and its ramifications were. From opposite standpoints both the right and the Marxists in the Labour Party pointed out to them what those implications were. Labour's right wing understood what was at stake. They mobilised for a fight to the finish.

Under Hugh Gaitskell, the Labour Party was then led by a hard right-wing sect grouped around the magazine *Socialist Commentary* which persecuted even the soft left. Many of them went on 20 years later to found the SDP.

They were not used to the 'fudge and mudge' techniques of a Harold Wilson, the techniques Neil Kinnock is using now and will almost certainly use if he leads a Labour government to avoid having to carry out the Labour Party commitment to scrap nuclear weapons.

Before the vote at Scarborough, Hugh Gaitskell boldly told the delegates what the right would do if they lost.

The Parliamentary Labour Party would, he said, not be bound by a decision it did not agree with.

The MPs supported the NEC policy. "So what", he asked, "do you expect them to do: Go back on the pledges they gave the people who elected them from their constituencies?... Do you think that we can become overnight the pacifists, unilateralists and fellow-travellers that other people are?"

Even if they lost the vote, they would "fight, fight and fight again to save the Party we love".

He told conference in the same speech that the leadership of the Labour Party was none of its business. "The place to decide the leadership is not here but in the Parliamentary Labour Party".

On November 3, the majority of the Parliamentary Labour Party endorsed Gaitskell's revolt against Labour Party conference when it re-elected him as Party leader by 166 votes to 81 (for Harold Wilson) and seven abstentions.

The majority of the Parliamentary Labour Party would pursue Gaitskell's policy, not that of the Party.

But what would the left MPs do? Would they too mobilise and organise and behave like people engaged in a serious political struggle? That was the key question.

Immediately the right began to organise its supporters. The Campaign for Democratic Socialism was set up as a semi-secret right-wing combat organisation which sent circulars marked 'Private and Confidential' to key activists, coordinating their fight to reverse the Scarborough decision. Its secretary was William Rodgers, later an MP and a founder of the SDP.

Gaitskell's campaign benefited from the unanimous backing of the bourgeois press. It was adequately supplied with funds whose origins were, understandably, the subject of many rumours.

The Labour Party machine swung squarely behind Gaitskell and against the Party conference, organising meetings for Gaitskell and his supporters. Polite left-wing 'requests' that these meetings should also feature supporters of Labour Party policy were turned down.

Naturally some of these meetings became rowdy and were accompanied by demonstrations against Gaitskell.

Thus unilateralism was shown to have wide and deep implications not only for British politics but for the Labour Party too. Victory at Scarborough brought the left smack up against the unyielding Gaitskellites, fighting to 'save' the Labour Party for class collaboration, entrenched in the Parliamentary Labour Party, using the Party machine against Conference decisions, and quite prepared to split the Party in order to "save it".

Before the Scarborough conference, Anthony Crosland, one of Gaitskell's lieutenants, had written in the *New Leader* (an American publication associated with the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which was financed by the CIA) that a conference defeat for the right wing might be to their advantage. It could give the Parliamentary Labour Party the chance to dramatically assert its independence by defying Party confer-

ence, and thus the balance of power in the Party would be shifted in favour of the PLP.

After Scarborough the Gaitskellites carried out this policy. They hi-jacked the machinery of the Party and their mixture of intransigence and aggressive action paralysed the Labour left.

The NEC decided to back Gaitskell and the PLP against Party conference. (Tony Benn MP, who was not them, so far as I know, a unilateralist, resigned from the NEC in protest at its attitude to party democracy).

Using its majority on the NEC, the right went on the offensive immediately after the conference. On November 23 the NEC launched a witch-hunt against the youth paper *Keep Left*.

The job was to split the left and intimidate the feebler spirits — so they picked on an easily identifiable target, the largest organised Marxist tendency in the Labour Party. (*Keep Left* was the youth paper of the Socialist Labour League, which eventually mutated into the WRP).

The parallel with the way the witch-hunt against Militant has recently been used to split and intimidate the left is very striking.

So is the parallel between *Tribune's* attitude to the witch-hunt then and its attitude under the editorship of Nigel Williamson to the witch-hunt now.

Faced with the vigorous assault of the right, the Tribunes feebly struck out at their left. *Tribune* took up the rallying cry that the Marxists had no place in the unilateralist movement because they were not prepared to advocate unilateral nuclear disarmament by the USSR.

The AGM of the broad left organisation Victory For Socialism in January 1961 appointed one Roy Shaw to review its membership book to see if any known Trotskyists had joined.

By contrast with the right, the official left dawdled and looked for a way to avoid a full-scale clash.

To consolidate its Scarborough victory the left needed to face up to the implica-

tions of unilateralism, and to organise.

*Tribune*, the organ of the 'official left', at that time still had some serious influence on the rank and file. The organised left was quite weak. Only 100 people attended the annual meeting of the Tribune organisation *Victory For Socialism* in 1961. 50 attended the Scarborough fringe meeting of the Trotskyist influenced Clause Four Campaign Committee. But the many thousands of CND supporters and activists formed a reservoir from which a mass left wing could have developed, as part of a fight for the Scarborough decisions.

Unilateralism then implied a sharp break with the capitalist establishment and with its Labour supporters. Such a radical break could not be confined to one issue if it was to be sustained.

Its natural complement was a break with the root cause of war and of the threat of nuclear war — capitalism.

In principle all the leaders of Labour's unilateralist left were long-time opponents of capitalism. But there was for all of them a great gap between being 'socialists' in principle and mobilising for a serious anti-capitalist struggle. From that flowed the tragedy that engulfed the Labour left.

If Labour's left had faced up to the fact that unilateral nuclear disarmament could only be carried in society or sustained as Labour Party policy as part of a general anti-capitalist mobilisation of the working class against both Labour's right wing and the capitalists they served, then such a mobilisation could have given real life to a struggle for socialism in the Labour Party. It could have linked up the unilateralists, especially the youth, with activists in the trade unions, to transform the Labour Party.

For that to be possible the left would have had to take their own ideas seriously. But they didn't.

In fact the left responded to the Gaitskellites by an ignominious self-disavowal. The left's Scarborough victory on unilateral nuclear disarmament was

soon transmuted into a unilateral political disarmament by the Tribunites.

Immediately after Scarborough Michael Foot, soon to be returned to Parliament for Nye Bevan's old seat of Ebbw Vale (Bevan had died in July 1960), declared his support for the right of MPs who disagreed with the Scarborough decisions to vote in Parliament according to their conscience. The Gaitskellites had a right to defy conference and hijack the Labour Party!

The necessary response to the revolt of the MPs, a fight to kick them out and replace them, was not even aired for discussion by *Tribune*. The executive of Victory For Socialism rejected out of hand a proposal by Hugh Jenkins that they should advocate the selection of new candidates where Labour MPs refused to abide by conference decisions. (So Jenkins told a VFS meeting in 1961, as reported in *The Newsletter* on June 3 1961).

Rejecting such action, *Tribune* had nothing else to do but surrender to the unyielding PLP.

*Tribune's* leaders thought they had an alternative to both surrender and a fight. They looked for a compromise. Prominent left-winger Anthony Greenwood MP said at the end of October: "I believe it would be a disaster for anybody to split the Labour Party on an issue which changes from day today. Neither side can be too dogmatic or demanding". Which only meant that he wouldn't be "dogmatic or demanding".

The Gaitskellites stood their ground. Talk like Greenwood's couldn't mollify them; it could, however, not fail to dampen down the fighting spirits of those who took Greenwood seriously, and many Labour Party activists did.

Greenwood resigned from the shadow cabinet and told Gaitskell publicly that his behaviour was "quite incompatible with the democratic constitution and spirit of the labour movement". Just so — but what to do about it if you rejected the only serious course, a fight to deprive the PLP oligarchs of their position?

Certainly *Tribune* didn't know. "No doubt also there must be consequential changes in the Labour Party itself. It is too early to discern their exact nature", wrote *Tribune* after Gaitskell announced that the PLP would defy conference!

Since no bilateral compromise was possible with the Gaitskellites, *Tribune* now opted for what might be called a 'unilateral' compromise, by way of unilateral political disarmament.

In December, a few weeks after the Scarborough victory, *Tribune* simply began to shift its political focus away from unilateralism. In that month *Tribune* carried this astonishing piece of front-page advice to Gaitskell on how to fake.

"And here was a proposition [*the Tory government proposal, debated in Parliament, to set up a Polaris missile base in the west of Scotland*] which could be frontally opposed: not only by those who support the Scarborough decision of the Labour Party but also by the parliamentary leaders of the Labour Party who have criticised NATO's strategy on the technical grounds that it is too reliant on nuclear weapons.

"But Gaitskell put down a motion which could not possibly be voted for by supporters of Scarborough... implicitly accepting the nuclear strategy and specifically approving in principle the government's plan accepting Polaris." If only Gaitskell had been Wilson!

In the following weeks *Tribune* and the left leaders like Foot shifted their ground decisively. While they remained nominally unilateralist, their specific focus became a criticism of NATO (within which they wished Britain to remain) for being *too reliant* on nuclear weapons.

Their 'proposal' changed to the demand for a British *declaration* never to use nuclear weapons *first*.

Should Prime Minister Macmillan and President J F Kennedy be "pressed" to "declare" that they would never use nuclear weapons first? That question, Michael Foot wrote in *Tribune* on March 3 1961, "goes to the root of the recent

controversies about defence in the Labour Party".

Foot was looking for a compromise, or rather a ladder to climb down.

But the Gaitskellites gave the left MPs no points for their willingness to 'compromise' and to climb down from unilateralism. They insisted that they toe the line of the PLP or get out.

They gave them no credit, either for their docile unwillingness to organise to deprive Gaitskell and the PLP of the right to speak for the Labour Party.

A few days after Foot's *Tribune* article, in March 1961, he and four other MPs were expelled from the PLP for daring to defy the PLP whip and vote against the Tory government's air estimates.

Konni Zilliacus, a prominent left-winger, was suspended from the Labour Party for publishing an article in an international Stalinist magazine. In these ways the Gaitskellites gave notice of their willingness to split the party if they didn't get their way.

They kept up the pressure on Foot and company to 'compromise' away their victory at Scarborough.

Now a dramatic opportunity to endorse something that could be passed off as a 'compromise' presented itself to Foot and his friends — the lyingly misnamed 'Crossman-Padley compromise'.

In February a drafting committee from the TUC and the NEC agreed by 8 votes to 4 to accept a new right-wing 'defence' statement (drafted by Denis Healey) for the next Labour Party conference. The dissident minority — Walter Padley, Tom Driberg, Frank Cousins, and the cynical operator Dick Crossman — produced their own defence statement. Though three of them at least were prominent unilateralists, they came out with a 'compromise' based on the idea of a pledge not to strike first.

"While we recognise that the Americans will retain nuclear weapons so long as the Russians possess them, we reject absolutely a NATO strategy based on the threat to use them first and a defence policy which compels NATO

forces to rely on these weapons in the field”.

*Tribune* jumped at the chance to advocate the ‘Crossman compromise’. Thus it undercut and in effect abandoned the official Labour Party unilateralist position. Foot wrote that it would be a major step forward if the Crossman document (or a less cynical variant on similar lines worked out by Frank Cousins) could “secure the general backing of the Labour Party”.

In fact there was never any chance that it would get the backing of the Pentagon and Whitehall-linked Gaitskellites. What was happening was that the left leaders were selling ‘compromise’ to the unilateralist rank and file.

The ‘compromise’ now became the left’s alternative to the Healey draft of the rightwing position, and it was touted as a basis for unity.

Gaitskell referred contemptuously to the wriggling of the Tribunites and justly scorned them for their “lack of principle”. The right would concede nothing.

The Crossman-Padley compromise was a transparently cynical device to get the left off the hook. Padley’s union, USDAW, adopted the ‘compromise’ but did not even move it at the Blackpool party conference of 1961. Once it had done its work of demobilising and undercutting unilateralism, USDAW abandoned the ‘compromise’.

The unilateralist victory at the 1960 conference had been something of a windfall for which the left was unprepared.

Almost by accident they had begun to pull down the structures and political prerequisites of class collaboration and thus provoked a backlash for the ruling-class agents in the labour movement that they couldn’t handle. Intimidated by the right’s threat of a split, the official left ran away in confusion.

The Gaitskellites had the interests of the ruling class and its state system to relate to and preserve. They knew where they stood and were in no doubt where

the base line was beyond which they could not move without betraying their own cause.

By contrast the official left was utterly confused, only half-understanding the meaning and implications of the policy they had won the Labour Party to at Scarborough. When the right wing brutally spelled it out for them and told them it wasn’t on, they crumbled. Against the hard bourgeois right wing — the future SDP — the left had no serious programme.

The programme of class struggle and working-class socialism was not adhered to by the mainstream unilateralists, who were at best utopians and frequently conscious left-fakers like Crossman.

Hence it was more than a question of the personal character of the lefts. Foot’s record before 1960 was not contemptible. It was fundamentally a question of their left reformist politics and their characteristic failure to think things through to the end and to draw the necessary conclusions in practice from political positions like unilateralism.

Before Scarborough Foot wrote in *Tribune* (in a front page article revealingly entitled “Don’t be afraid of victory”), “Scarborough will be momentous. No one can doubt that.

Either it will mark the rebirth of the party or the name will become the symbol for tragic and dismal confusion”. In fact it became a symbol for the inconsequentiality of the Labour left and of its dismal incapacity to do other than make ‘oppositionist’ noises.

As early as December 1960 *Tribune* had tried to give Gaitskell lessons in how to fake if he wanted to lead them gently by the nose; he didn’t. He wanted to smash and humiliate them. But soon enough they got Wilson as leader, and he didn’t need any lessons on the arts of faking and bamboozle.

Gaitskell followed up his victory at Blackpool in October 1961 with an anti-EEC campaign that largely disarmed the left. Wilson, succeeding Gaitskell at the beginning of 1963, pro-

ceeded to disarm them completely. A former ‘career leftist’, he knew how to throw them inconsequential sops.

The Labour left counted for nothing throughout the 1960s, and until well into the seventies.

No defeat is so demoralising as a

craven capitulation without struggle. The tendency that suffers it must inevitably have its belief in itself sapped and undermined.

The Bevanite/*Tribune* left never recovered. It was a new left that grew in the ’70s.

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# Seedbed of the left

**I**N 1959 THE revolutionary Marxist movement consisted of one major organisation, possessing a continuous tradition, a cadre, a serious structure, and an implantation in the labour movement — the SLL, numbering a few hundred members — and a number of tiny groupings, without a cadre except for one or two leading figures and with little organisation or implantation in the labour movement.

The *Socialist Review* group (later IS and then the SWP) had a few dozen members. It was a mainly middle class group, organised loosely as a series of discussion circles. It did not then consider itself Trotskyist or Leninist. [It became "Leninist" in 1968 and after.]

The Grant tendency, the prehistoric ancestors of what mutated into the present Militant tendency, also numbered a few dozen people and was probably in a worse state than *Socialist Review*, unable to keep even a four page printed paper — nominally monthly — going except sporadically, and unable even to find the energy to contribute to a joint paper which they started with *Socialist Review* in 1961.

The seeds of the IMG, predecessor of the present day Socialist Outlook, Socialist Action and Communist League, had just separated from the Grant tendency. (They would unite again in 1964 and split completely in 1965.)

The SLL was launched as an open organisation in February 1959 — and immediately proscribed by Transport House, together with its small weekly paper, *The Newsletter*. To sell the *Newsletter* was to risk expulsion from the Labour Party.

The SLL had been formed from the merger of that Trotskyist group, led by Gerry Healy, which began working in the Labour Party in 1948, and a large number of workers and intellectuals who broke with Stalinism after the USSR dic-

tator Nikita Khrushchev publicly denounced Stalin's tyranny at the 20th Congress of the CPSU in 1956 and then Russia brutally suppressed the Hungarian uprising at the end of that year.

The Healy tendency won over some hundreds from the ten or fifteen thousand who broke with the CPGB in 1956 and '57, and made the greatest step forward any Trotskyist group in the world had made for well over a decade. It was strong enough to call five hundred workers, many shop stewards, to its industrial rank and file conference in 1958.

The setting up of the SLL marked a new departure from the previous practice of Labour Party work by the Healy tendency, in which there had been no public presence for the Marxists. In 1954 their paper *Socialist Outlook* was banned. For three years they did not even have a paper of their own, though they did very important work in industry, especially in the ports and in engineering, despite this.

Their experience after 1956 convinced them that to build an organisation capable of combining the tasks of Marxists as regards the trade unions, the Labour Party, and open recruitment, it was necessary to combine having a public face — even if the Labour Party bureaucracy disapproved — with continued work in the mass party of the trade unions, the Labour Party.

Thus, in the newly re-established youth movement, three of the tendencies that had survived from the collapse of the Revolutionary Communist Party at the end of the 1940s found themselves working and competing in the same organisation again.

All were factional. Whenever there was talk of unity (for example, from the Cliff tendency) it was a *factional* posture by the most uninhibited and unscrupulous of factionalists. The Grant tendency was so venomously hostile to the Healy ten-

dency that it refused to specifically oppose the proscription of the SLL in February 1959.

On the Liverpool Trades Council they supported a resolution which evaded the concrete issue on the banning of the SLL by opposing bans and proscriptions in *general* but not specially the one just enacted. Earlier, in 1954, when the editor of *Socialist Outlook* and one of his comrades (Bill and Ray Hunter) were being expelled from the Labour Party in Islington, Ted Grant *abstained*.

The personal and factional animosities ran very deep and came sharply alive again in the YS. The smaller groups combined among themselves and with Tribunites and others against the Healy tendency, often cutting across the grain of their nominal politics.

To round this picture out it needs to be added that it would not have been possible, because of the bureaucratic and authoritarian character of the Healy regime in the SLL, for the smaller tendencies to be in the main Trotskyist organisation. (Though, again, to explain the divisions entirely by the Healy regime is to be apolitical. Massive and urgent political questions were the first cause of the divisions; and Healy was right as against Cliff on support for Korea's right to self-determination in 1950, and as against Grant on the need to try to organise the Labour Party left.)

The history of the YS after 1959 can be divided into the periods of domination of different segments of the revolutionary left, first by the SLL, then by the Cliff group (which grew in the early '60s), and finally by Militant (which began to grow in the mid to late '60s). The history of the Labour Party youth movement in the '60s is also the history of the early shaping and development of British Trotskyism.

## 1960:

### Clause IV and the bomb

The Labour Party then was much closer to what it is now than to the open, say-

what-you-like party it became over the 20 years that ended in the mid-1980s.

In the late '50s, as now, it was a tightly controlled social-democratic party. Then it was armed with a long list of banning orders ("proscriptions") against left-wing pressure groups. It was a party run by an ideological sect around Hugh Gaitskell; almost all the surviving members of that sect were to leave the Labour Party and help found the SDP in 1981 (Dennis Healey is the exception). In 1960 they were witch-hunting members of CND!

When the October 1959 General Election defeat led the Labour leaders to the decision to restart a youth movement with a national structure, what they wanted was a tame, apolitical election machine to serve them. But the youth who began to join the YS were far from apolitical.

A sizeable number of youth sections of Constituency Labour Parties already existed which had survived as isolated branches after the disbanding of the League of Youth in 1955. There were 262 in 1959. Something of a national link between these youth sections had been kept up through the paper *Keep Left*, which, of course, also influenced them politically.

*Keep Left* was started by the Wembley Leagues of Youth at the end of 1950, and became associated with the Healy tendency in the early 1950s. It became a four-page printed monthly (more or less) at the beginning of 1958.

The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, which began its famous Easter Marches from Aldermaston in 1958, had as many as 50,000 on the march by Easter 1959. In Easter 1960 and 1961 there were 100,000 people at the final rally in Trafalgar Square. Many CNDers were young people — often middle class, but there was a lot of support among left wing trade unionists too.

CNDers flocked into the YS, bringing with them the same politics which shook the Labour Party at the Scarborough Conference of 1960, when victory for unilateral nuclear disarmament split the

party wide open.

Right at the beginning of the new youth movement, the leadership of the Party, around Hugh Gaitskell, attempted to amputate even the general aspiration towards a socialist society from the Constitution of the Labour Party; in the wake of the election defeat they tried to make the Labour Party respectable to "middle of the road" and middle class voters by removing Clause IV (which commits the party to public ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange). This caused a big reaction against Gaitskell, which ultimately forced him to abandon the attempt. It put the youth on its mettle. too.

From the beginning of the YS and throughout 1960 the controversy over Clause IV raged, and it became clear as the year advanced that there was a serious chance that the Labour conference would commit the Party to a policy of unilateral British renunciation of the H-bomb.

Enormous support had built up for unilateral disarmament since the Norwood resolution, inspired and moved by the Healy tendency, had been defeated at the Brighton conference three years earlier. Unilateralism as Party policy would mean a break with foreign policy bipartisanship and pit the Labour Party against the vital interests of the ruling class.

Thus, tension rose through late 1960 as trade union conference after trade union conference fell into line in support of unilateralism in the build-up to the October Party conference at Scarborough.

At Scarborough, unilateralism became Labour Party policy. Hugh Gaitskell flatly refused to be bound by it, and declared in a passionate speech that he would "fight, fight, and fight again, to save the party we love" — i.e. to save it for capitalist politics.

The turmoil until the right wing did win at Blackpool the following year pitched the YS into the thick of battle. The YS was heavily unilateralist and known to be so. 200 Young Socialists, organised by *Keep Left*, had demonstrated outside the

Scarborough conference with slogans like "Quit NATO", "Close Rocket Bases", "Stop Making H-Bombs", and "Bring Down the Tory H-Bomb Government".

## 1960-61: Keep Left campaigns against Gaitskell

After the victory for the left at Scarborough, the control of the Labour Party machinery remained in the hands of the right wing and of Hugh Gaitskell. *Keep Left* reacted to the Scarborough decisions with a demand that the left fight to consolidate its victory, as yet a paper victory. It called a conference of its supporters, trade unionists, and young CNDers for November 6th, in Manchester's Free Trade Hall, under the slogan, "Implement Scarborough Policy".

*Keep Left* for October-November 1960 argued that the Scarborough policy — official Labour policy — was the way to win youth to the YS and to build a mass youth movement. 150 youth, from 47 YS branches, attended the November 6th conference, and pledged themselves to fight for the Scarborough policies.

"We have come to bury Gaitskell, not to praise him", said Gavin Kennedy, organiser of *Keep Left* and secretary of Hendon North YS, which sponsored *KL* together with Wembley North. The conference also pledged that if the Labour Party did not call the promised YS conference at Easter 1961, then *Keep Left* would call a YS conference at Whitsun 1961. It was in tune with the atmosphere and the battles of 1960, and the open defiance of Labour conference by the PLP and its leader; it expressed the need to fight for the Scarborough decisions. Yet already here the characteristic Healyite note of braggadocio makes its appearance.

The NEC's reaction was swift and sharp.

At its meeting of 23 November 1960 it decided to destroy *Keep Left*. "It is not the function of a branch, or branches, of

the YS to issue a journal for national circulation", its representative wrote to Wembley North and Hendon North. They were ordered to cease publication. The keynote for the next four years had been struck.

The right of the party was beginning its assault on the unilateralist left with a seemingly easy target. Shortly afterwards, Michael Foot and four other MPs had the Labour whip withdrawn for voting against the Tory government's Air Estimates. Ernie Roberts, an elected Assistant General Secretary of the AEU, had Transport House approval withdrawn as Labour candidate for Horsham, and was called to account for 400 speeches he had made! As late as 1962, there were attempts to exclude Bertrand Russell and Canon Collins from the Labour Party.

*Keep Left's* response was as decisive as the NEC's. The December 1960 issue had a banner headline: "Our reply to the disrupters and witch-hunters on the NEC: we shall not shut down this paper". And just under the masthead was a list of 16 YS branches sponsoring *KL* where there had been two!

By January 1961 there were 27 sponsoring branches; by February 32; and eventually the sponsors hovered around the 45 mark until *Keep Left* was proscribed in May 1962. This was the strongest argument against the right wing! Many labour movement bodies supported *Keep Left* and protected it. For example, 250 delegates to Liverpool Trades Council unanimously defended *Keep Left's* right to publish.

While frantically organising to defend their paper, and their existence within the Labour Party, *Keep Left* supporters also turned outwards to build mass working class YS branches.

A turn was made away from inward-looking small discussion-circle type branches, towards organising branches which combined social activities for working class youth with some often elementary politics.

Wigan YS, existing in a small and dull

town richly endowed with Labour Clubs and their facilities, was the pioneer here. Organising dances, the original nucleus of half a dozen politicians soon recruited 300 youth to the YS.

*Keep Left* had previously opposed attempting to 'compete with the social facilities available under capitalism'. Like the other tendencies, it had a sectarian-propagandist bias towards comparing and discussing 'line' and fine points of theory and analysis, rather than taking its political line into the working class youth to fight for it there.

The 'mass YS' policy provoked the hostility and jeers of other YS leftists, more concerned with having exclusive circles of friends and congenial fellow 'thinkers' than with organising working class youth. In fact, it did prove possible in many areas to 'refine' from mass YSs a hard core of working class boys and girls who developed politically and got involved in campaigns and struggles. The policy meant that the hard-core *Keep Left* supporters had to transform themselves from smug, bookish contemplators and 'thinkers' into people who could talk on all the varied levels required to the real raw material of a YS movement — working class youth; take up their concerns; draw them into activity. It was often very difficult — for some people it proved impossible — but it was an antidote to the sort of frozen impotence that gripped the Labour Party youth sections in the later '60s and, under *Militant* control, all through the '70s and early '80s.

A spokesperson for the *Keep Left* tendency put the policy like this: "Building large YS branches, initially from socials, is not easy... Anyone who thinks because he can quote from volume 2 of the Selected Works of Lenin that he is better than the young working class boys and girls who come to rock and roll, is not just on the wrong foot — he is on the wrong planet. We must realise that these young people are potentially the future leaders of the labour movement".

The policy allowed *Keep Left* to mobilise working class youth, and, ulti-

mately, it explains how they came to dominate the YS. In the context of a bitter three-way fight in the YS, the 'raw youth' were, it is true, often counterposed to the sort of discussions of issues and political perspectives which were essential to the development of a realistic as well as a militant youth movement.

And, in the exigencies of the faction fight, *Keep Left* cadres may too often have been manipulative with the "raw youth". But that was caused by the intense factional warfare and Transport House harassment; it was not something intrinsic to the drive to turn out to working class youth. It was that drive which marked *Keep Left* out as a serious revolutionary tendency.

If in the end nothing good came of this policy, and little was consolidated, it was because of the weak side of the *Keep Left/SLL* tendency, which led ultimately to a grotesque degeneration: that is, to its politics.

The first YS conference did take place at Easter 1961, and was relatively free of restraints.

Through 1960 Labour Party youth groups had multiplied almost threefold, and by Easter 1961 721 YS branches were registered. 381 delegates attended the conference. Free political discussion was allowed, contrary to the initial Labour leadership blueprint for the YS.

A National Committee was elected by conference on the basis of regional blocks of delegates simultaneously electing a representative from each of 11 regions.

The conference was a prolonged battle between the Labour leaders and *Keep Left* for influence over the non-committed delegates.

The conference voted 222 to 97 against NATO and for unilateral disarmament. A vote of no confidence in Hugh Gaitskell was carried by 189 to 113. Roger Protz, the editor of the official YS paper, *New Advance*, circulated a personal statement against the bureaucratic running of the paper.

The witch-hunt of *Keep Left* continued.

Right-winger Ray Gunter denounced *Keep Left* for once criticising Aneurin Bevan, recently dead and already a labour movement saint. In Bevan's lifetime, Gunter had tried to have him expelled. Demagoguery won, and by 172 to 148 a motion deploring the attack on *Keep Left* was lost. Only one *Keep Left* representative was elected onto the National Committee, Liz Thompson.

In the heat of the conference, a number of the left currents disagreeing with *Keep Left* decided to pool resources and publish a new journal. *Young Guard* began to appear six months later, in September 1961.

This split in the left had big consequences. Most of the supporters of *Young Guard* considered themselves Marxists. In *Young Guard, Rebel*, the paper of the Cliff tendency, amalgamated with *Rally*, the duplicated publication put out by the Labour Party supporters of Ted Grant's group through Walton Young Socialists. The 'Nottingham Tendency', forerunner of *Socialist Outlook*, which had recently separated from Grant was involved. Left reformists from *New Left Review* and the *Voice of the Unions* also enlisted.

*New Left Review* was then a journal of those such as EP Thompson, Stuart Hall (now a guru of *Marxism Today*) and Doris Lessing who had split from the CP after Hungary and, essentially, moved to the right of the CP's nominal revolutionary politics.

The war between *Keep Left* and *Young Guard* was from now on to be often as bitter as *Keep Left's* war with the bureaucrats.

Despite its coalition character, politically *Young Guard* was in fact heavily a Cliff group paper. In 1962-3 it was perhaps the main paper of that tendency, together with *International Socialism* journal. *Labour Worker* (it became *Socialist Worker* in 1967), which they also published, was narrowly syndicalist by comparison.

All the successive editors of *Young Guard* were Cliffites. One of them, Gus

Macdonald, is now head of Scottish TV. The Grant tendency did not withdraw from *Young Guard* until September 1963, but was little in evidence politically (though one of its people, Keith Dickinson, was business manager).

## 1961-62: *Keep Left* versus *Young Guard*

What divided the two groups, *Keep Left* and *Young Guard*? *Keep Left* believed in building a serious Marxist organisation within the labour movement, and that the time to work at it was at hand.

So, in theory, did the Grantites, but *Young Guard's* majority rejected this idea. Many *Young Guarders* considered Stalinism to be the product of Bolshevism, and a 'Leninist Party' to be a Stalinist abomination. (Some of the features of the Healy organisation reinforced them in such ideas).

The Cliff group's propaganda centred around such ideas. For example, in 1960 Tony Cliff published a big pamphlet on Rosa Luxemburg in which he declared that Luxemburg was right against Lenin in being suspicious of sharply-defined, centralised organisation. When he reissued the pamphlet in 1968, he was again a "Leninist". The discussion and argument on the issue was reprinted unchanged from the first edition; only the concluding sentence was changed, and now it said that Lenin was right against Luxemburg on organisation!

The Healyites and the Grantites belonged to mutually hostile international associations — the Healyites adhered to the "International Committee of the Fourth International" set up by J P Cannon in 1953, though they began a process of splitting with Cannon in 1961; the Grantites were the official section of the Pablo-Mandel "Fourth International" until 1965.

The Grantites and the Healyites had a position on Stalinism of "critical support" and "make a political revolution"; the Cliffites considered the Stalinist states

to be "state capitalist", at the very end of capitalist historical development, as distinct from the others, who saw them as "post-capitalist".

The Cliff group had started in 1950 as a Leninist, Fourth-Internationalist group (70 strong at the beginning, though by 1958 it was 20), disagreeing with the others on "state capitalism". It circulated the magazine of the American Shachtman group (the Independent Socialist League) in the '50s. By 1960 it was politically very decayed, organised as a loose federation, recruiting youth on opposition to the Healyites' "toy-town Bolshevism", by which they meant the self proclamation and posturing that today's SWP lives off. At the centre of the loose federation, as it grew in the 1960s, was a "state-capitalist" sect around Tony Cliff and Michael Kidron, but there were other strands too: as late as 1968, some prominent AEU militants in Manchester resigned from the organisation because it opposed the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the USSR and the Warsaw Pact in August 1968!

The Cliffites explained war as being tied to capitalism because arms production kept capitalism going. This was the "permanent arms economy" theory, a shibboleth for the group then hardly less central than "state capitalism", but long ago abandoned. They took it from the Shachtmanites.

From it they developed a bland, pacifist, socialist conclusion that socialism was necessary and that CNDers should come into the workers' movement, i.e. the Labour Party and YS.

They produced New Year greeting cards in 1963 with the same slogan as the CP: 'For Peace and Socialism'. Both Russia and the USA, they argued, were equally capitalist. Third World struggles might perhaps be supported, but were not centrally important. They would redefine themselves during the Vietnam War: but if someone had proved then to Tony Cliff that he would support Iran in the Iran-Iraq war, and then laud the revolutionary significance of Iraq's conquest of Kuwait, he would probably have

hanged himself!

*Keep Left* explained the drive to war in the traditional terms of Leninism: *Imperialism* produced war. They considered support for the colonial struggles of decisive importance. Moreover, states like the Soviet Union and China were, they said, not capitalist, but degenerated and deformed workers' states. Socialists should take sides with them against imperialism.

Obviously the *Young Guard* tendency was best suited to coexist with the CND and Committee of 100 which, led by Bertrand Russell, organised mass sit-down protests against nuclear weapons. They could recruit from that milieu and from those generally "socialist" but not committed to building a fighting organisation here and now.

The defence of the Soviet Union was a major issue in the YS. The Cliffites, pacifists and Tribunites said to the Trotskyists: You have no right to oppose British capitalism's H-bomb unless you oppose Russia's. The Grant tendency agreed with *Keep Left* on the question, but threw their weight behind the Cliff group. *Young Guard* carried the Cliff line while the Grant group kept their mouths shut.

In the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, when President Kennedy was threatening to drop H-bombs on Cuba if the USSR did not remove rockets *which the Cuban government wanted in Cuba*, (there had been an American-backed invasion 18 months earlier at the "Bay of Pigs"), the *Newsletter* came out with headlines: 'Say No to Yankee War', 'Hands off Cuba!', 'Defend the USSR'.

*Young Guard* shouted: "Our demand is 'All hands off Cuba'". But without the Russians' 'hands', (serving the USSR's interests), the USA would have squashed the Cuban revolution!

In *Young Guard*, a certain Paul Foot explained the Cliffite pacifist view during the controversy that followed with Dave Ablitt of the Nottingham group (the Grantites were, as usual, silent) as follows: "Better 'all hands off Cuba' than

'more rockets for the Cuban workers'". This meant surrender of the rights of the Cuban people to control their own island to the power of imperialism, if imperialism upped the stakes enough. It was a good explicit expression of the crass pacifism in which the Cliff tendency dabbled at this period.

Paradoxically, the pacifist/CND period prepared the way for its own inversion and for the overthrow of one of the dogmas on which the Cliffites founded their tendency. When the Vietnam War flared up with the giant American war power trying to pulverise the Vietnamese, there was a great revulsion in CND circles, and many swung behind the slogans 'For the NLF'. The Cliffites did too, effortlessly, in 1965.

In principle it is impossible to separate Vietnam from Korea, opposition to support for which led to Cliff's separation from the "orthodox Trotskyists" in 1950. And Vietnam, like Cuba in 1962, could have led to nuclear war.

Finally, *Young Guard* disagreed with *Keep Left* on the need to fight the bureaucracy in head-on conflict.

On the contrary, John Palmer, a leader of the Cliff tendency, put it like this in 1963: "The onus is on the YS to find a relationship with our Party which will radically reduce those frictions and clashes which are leaving such a bitter heritage in the ranks of young people joining the YS. *One thing must be made clear above all*. There is no future for the YS outside the Labour Party; our only hope is to find a relationship even more close to it than at present, but one which will allow us essential freedom as a youth movement".

Which is quite a tall order given the right wing policies of the Labour leaders, then soon to be in government carrying out vicious attacks on the working class. A tall order — if what is meant is a fighting socialist youth movement. The point is that *Young Guard* had a rather cosy view of the future.

The Cliffites did not believe much could be done (until they developed a perspec-

tive of industrial work, in the mid '60s). Capitalism was stable, and would remain so for many years. This view is now sometimes presented in mythology as the *Young Guard* coalition being realistic, as against *Keep Left*, which foolishly tended to consider a major crisis of capitalism as more or less always imminent (or in progress). In fact, *Young Guard* were no more realistic in their assessment than *Keep Left*.

Believing that capitalism was indefinitely expanding and stable, they were bitterly disappointed after 1964 that the Labour government did not deliver reforms to the working class.

The *Young Guard* tendency did have more of the character of a real youth movement than *Keep Left*, because of its looseness, lack of a driving purpose and lack of discipline.

*Keep Left* youth were *driven*; and essentially they were a hard faction, led by a highly disciplined and centralised (indeed bureaucratic) organisation, vigorously warring with the Labour Party leadership and the general softer left while at the same time striving to build the organisation in the raw youth.

The assessments of immediate reality made by the Healyite SLL were often wrong. Yet their urgency about building an organisation was not wrong; on that, they were entirely right. The 1960s would soon produce a resonating series of major class struggles, which would reach a tremendous level in the '70s. A serious, democratic, realistic and responsible Marxist organisation could have shaped those struggles and ensured more stable working-class gains from the series of victories we won.

The Marxist organisation, working in the trade unions and Labour Party, could at *least* have become tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands strong. The SLL was geared to such developments, the others were not. The tragedy for the YS youth and for the rank and file members of the SLL was that the SLL leaders, who had an unbreakable stranglehold on the organisation, were not up to the job

politically, and not up to it personally or morally either. Drunk with limited success, they turned themselves into a destructive sect and then into something worse. But that was still a while in the future, after the SLL had won the majority in the YS.

Throughout 1961 the YS continued to grow, but slowly. At the Blackpool Labour Party conference, the right wing reversed the policy on unilateral nuclear disarmament, overthrowing the pro-unilateral resolution of the 1960 Brighton conference.

The experience of an important left victory then, which the left (like Michael Foot and Frank Cousins) did nothing to consolidate, and thus lost, was a decisive one for the Healy tendency. Not to emulate the 'fake left' — Foot and the *Tribune*-ites — but to fight the battle against the right wing through to the end, became their driving goal in the youth movement.

They began to talk and act as if all that was necessary to defeat the right was the will to do it — as if the relationship of forces between the Marxists on one side and the right and soft left on the other, could be magically transformed by shouting the right slogans and "demands". In practice, they ignored such questions, and denounced those who said they were impatient as "faint-hearts", "sell-outs", "fake lefts", "scabs" and "right wing finks".

At the second YS conference, in 1962, there were 356 delegates from 772 registered branches. It reiterated unilateralism, opposed the Tory immigration control Bill then being pushed through Parliament, and demanded that Britain withdraw all troops from overseas and quit all military alliances.

Only three *Keep Left* supporters were elected to the National Committee, with one supporter of *Young Guard*. But there was a left, unilateralist majority, which was maybe what spurred Transport House to act.

The right wing got a resolution through conference condemning *Keep Left* and

asking for an investigation into allegations that some of its supporters had used violence against opponents. David Todd, who made the allegations, later retracted them and said that the whole business had been a plot hatched by Gaitskellite MP, George Brown.

In fact violent clashes did occur in London and Glasgow on May Day, when Young Socialists rushed the platforms: those involved were *Young Guard* (IS), not *Keep Left*.

In May 1962, following the conference vote and the May Day clashes, *Keep Left* (which claimed a circulation of 10,500) was proscribed. An investigation was started into *Young Guard* (which claimed 3,000). *Keep Left* editor Roger Protz was expelled by St Pancras North Labour Party. In June, four members of the National Committee were suspended: Liz Thompson, Mike Ginsberg and Dave Davis (*KL*) were eventually expelled, while Malcolm Tallantire (*YG*) was reinstated. The remaining seven NC members were told to either accept the NEC action or have the YS disbanded.

*Keep Left* was banned. *Young Guard* was not. In July 1962 the NEC interviewed *YG* representatives (among them Keith Dickinson of the Grant tendency) and threatened to ban the paper unless:

- *YG*'s 'tone' improved,
- *YG* included in its aims a statement of unconditional support for the return of a Labour government (this was *Keep Left* policy) and a declaration that the YS was part of the Labour Party,
- *YG* was made open to all YS opinion,
- *YG* ceased to have speakers at readers' meetings, as that gave the impression that *YG* was a faction.

The National Editorial Board of *Young Guard*, meeting in September, accepted these conditions, stating, "We have always rejected the arguments of those who say that we should be building a faction within the YS. The YS, in its federations etc., has all the necessary organisations which we can utilise for the spreading of socialist ideas".

This was hypocrisy, of course, and just a little obscene in the face of the triumphant Gaitskellite faction. Though it might have been necessary tactical bowing to superior forces, in fact it was also a very pointed differentiation and separation from *Keep Left*, which fought without hypocrisy for the right of factions, and was moreover, the faction being targeted by the right wing just then.

But it was not only just hypocrisy! They meant it about the Labour Party. The Grantites had a long, long-term entry project. The Cliffites — today's quasi-syndicalist sectarians — were explicitly anti-Leninist and recruiting libertarian-minded youth on that basis. They had an even longer one, more vague and even indeterminate.

The subsequent editorial in *Young Guard* explained that at their meeting with the NEC representatives, they "laid great stress on the democratic organisation of the paper and denied being a faction within the YS, pointing to the large disparities in the view between *YG* supporters". Read: 'unlike the Trotskyists'. In fact, *Keep Left* too had a general meeting open to its supporters, though operating under tight control. When all is said and done, what *Young Guard* said about the differences between the two factions was true.

The Cliffites would remain an open, democratic organisation until the special conference of December 1971, which barred factions which had basic differences with the group around Tony Cliff.

They had a right to point this out, if it was to their political advantage. To do it at the moment *Keep Left* was being banned was to repudiate all left solidarity against the right wing and to greatly embitter the already very bad relations within the YS Left.

After this relations between *Keep Left* and *Young Guard* were extremely poisoned and rancorous. It did not require malicious invention to put the story in circulation that *YG* had done a deal with Transport House as the price of tolerance, or for it to be widely believed.

Despite *Young Guard*'s statements in defence of the rights of *Keep Left*, their acceptance by Transport House as the 'good', 'nice' left-wingers, after they had made big efforts to present themselves as such, seemed to many YSers the decisive thing in characterising them. This reduced the credibility of *Young Guard*'s subsequent criticisms of *Keep Left* — many of which gained point as the *Keep Left* leadership made serious errors, and spun off into the outer space of ultra-left unrealism and sectarianism. In their own way, they helped Gerry Healy lead the youth off into the wilderness.

### 1962-63: *Keep Left* steers towards building its own YS

Though banned by the Labour Party, *Keep Left* continued publication. This, as we shall see, had massive implications.

In July 1962 the first issue of *Keep Left* since proscription appeared, announcing that the paper would continue despite the ban. *Keep Left* supporters made tremendous efforts to maintain circulation: it was sold in "safe" YSs and by people who travelled out of their own areas to sell where they were unknown to potential witch-burners.

In the following six to nine months big advances were made in building YS branches, as *Keep Left* turned to a big campaign around youth unemployment, which reached a freak level at the end of 1962. (So did general unemployment, because of an exceptionally cold winter). In those campaigns, and despite the ban, the basis was laid for *Keep Left* to become the majority at the 1963 conference. Operating with a paper the selling of which merited expulsion from the Labour Party increased the tension, the rancour and the — justified — feelings of persecution of the *Keep Left* youth.

They were at the mercy of Gerry Healy's bureaucratically enforced fantasies and delusions of grandeur.

In retrospect it can be seen that the decision to defy the ban and continue

*Keep Left* was a decisive turning point for *Keep Left* and the YS. It succeeded spectacularly in maintaining the forces of *Keep Left* and even in building up the YS in defiance of the witch-hunters and bureaucrats. But it implied a YS separated from the Labour Party, and in the next two years, step by step, the logic spelled itself out.

*Keep Left* put forward policies for the YS that more and more implied casting off the links with the Labour Party and having the YS act as an open outright revolutionary party. This in turn meant that, to maintain the organisation's momentum, all sorts of pretexts for agitation and action had to be sought or invented. It pushed the forces of *Keep Left* more and more into a self-sustained mental ghetto and encouraged unrealism in assessing the state of the labour movement. Ultimately it led the SLL into counterposing its own small "party", and a small segment of youth whose radicalisation went quite a way ahead of the working class and even of the militants of the working class, who were looking hopefully towards a Labour government after a dozen years of Toryism in power, to the actual development of the real labour movement.

When there was a very big radicalisation of youth in the late 1960s, the SLL cut itself off from that that, mistaking its own wishes for reality and going over into a style of politics reminiscent of third period (ultra-left) Stalinism.

Ultimately this was to lead to the more or less complete self-destruction of the entire cadre of the old Trotskyist movement, for the second time in 15 years, and to Trotskyism not being capable of capitalising on the great opportunities for the growth of a revolutionary party that emerged in the late '60s and early '70s.

*Keep Left*'s policy in the YS only reflected the political crisis of the Trotskyist movement. We can only deal briefly with that crisis here. The SLL had been the British representative of the tendency led by James P Cannon, the

founder of American Trotskyism.

In the early '60s the SLL was in the course of breaking with Cannon, who, with remarkable perception, diagnosed as early as mid-1961 that the SLL was off on an "Oehlerite (i.e. sectarian) binge". Disappointed by the reversal which Gaitskell inflicted on the Labour left and the Tribune Left's failure to fight seriously, the SLL began more and more to counterpose itself artificially to the labour movement, expressing itself more and more in a formalistic leftism and a destructive organisational sectarianism.

The discovery that a YS movement could be maintained and built against Transport House after the proscription of *Keep Left* led them to forget how limited were the forces involved in the YS, compared to the task for Marxists of transforming the labour movement. The SLL's break with its international mentors gave free play to the SLL leaders' characteristic wishful thinking and tendency to mistake their own desires and assertions for reality. Responding to both the impatience of the ex-CPers with Labour Party work, and the patience and experience of Cannon, Healy had added the experience of a valuable innovation to the arsenal of the movement, by forming an open organisation without abandoning entryism. In the early '60s he cut loose from Cannon.

Healy's make-believe and irresponsibility was to dominate the YS, especially in 1963-64.

More than any mistakes in assessment and analysis, more even than their political subjectivism, it was the bureaucratic nature of the SLL which led them and a section of the YS to destruction. A democratic organisation allows the correction of mistakes, reassessment, the removal of leading people who persist in costly errors or pernicious practices. The SLL had a savagely repressive internal regime which excluded all but a very small group of the top leaders, or maybe all but one person, from effective policy-making and initiatives. This situation had been generated by the long

drawn out factional struggles in the Trotskyist movement of the '40s. At the end of the '40s, most of the cadres deserted the movement, leaving the Healy faction, which had fought a five year struggle for an orientation to the Labour Party, in control. It was a period of massive defeat for the Trotskyists throughout the world, which took its toll everywhere. It threw the British Trotskyists back to a sectarian and authoritarian form of organisation of the sort often to be found in the workers' movement in period of immaturity, weakness or defeat.

In the early 1960s, the influx of raw young people freed the Healy leadership from the limited restraints imposed by the relatively educated and experienced cadre of the earlier period, those who had been formed politically in the battle against sectarianism. The dictatorial Healy regime, vigorously asserting its prerogatives at every point, linking its subjectivism and wishful thinking with the politically healthy impatience of the youth, and at the same time building its organisation with considerable ability, locked itself more and more away from reality and from any consideration about reality it did not want to face: everything in the structure of the organisation was designed to do this as completely as the leadership should want to. There could be no feedback from the membership other than what the leadership wanted to take into account.

As time went by, Gerry Healy would want to take less and less into account except his own fantasies and appetites, locking himself into an infantile solipsism, and the organisation first into grotesque sectarianism towards the labour movement and then, in the '70s, into lucrative mercenary political odd job work for Libya, Iraq and some of the sheikhs.

### 1963-64: The YS under *Keep Left* leadership

In January 1963, a 1200 strong rally for jobs assembled in Smith Square (where

Labour Party headquarters was situated) as the rump YS NC was meeting. Under this pressure, four of the remaining eight members resigned (three of them were *Young Guard* supporters). They had showed no signs of resigning before the rally! Two others walked out, without resigning. Of the 1962 NC three had now been expelled, four had resigned, and two had walked out of the meeting, leaving an NC of two.

Outside the Scarborough YS conference in Easter 1963 there was a fairly big *Keep Left* demonstration. The YS registered a small advance: there were 365 delegates present, and 769 registered branches.

The drift of the Healy tendency is illustrated by the fact that at the beginning of 1963 Roger Protz took out a writ in the High Court seeking to have made null and void the NEC decision making anyone associated with *Keep Left* ineligible for Labour Party membership! He also sought a High Court declaration restoring him to membership of St Pancras North Labour Party. Psychologically, this would be rationalised by *Keep Left* supporters then — and by *Militant* supporters in the early 1980s when *Militant* attempted to rely on the courts to save them from the right wing of the Labour Party — as using the right wing's friends in the bourgeois law courts against them. But it was a breach of the principle of keeping the bourgeois state out of the affairs of the labour movement. Any policy for maintaining an integration of revolutionaries in the labour movement which depends on the help of the law courts is fantastic — as *Militant* found out in the 1980s.

But something of decisive importance now occurred: *Keep Left* won a majority on the NC. *Keep Left* supporters took seven of the 11 NC seats. *Young Guard* took one. It was the opening of a new phase of YS history, though much confusion reigned. Political confusion was manifested still. The conference which gave the Healyites the leadership of the YS came close to voting through the offi-

cial Labour Party document, *Signposts for the Sixties*. Conference passed a *Young Guard* resolution from Hackney against all H-bombs and all military alliances. This was voting for *Young Guard* policy, while giving control to those who denounced such policies as treason to the "workers' state" and political scabbery!

The new YS NC immediately launched a big official YS campaign on youth unemployment. The Tory government was heavily discredited by now, and tottering towards defeat in 1964.

Harold Wilson, a former Labour left had succeeded Gaitskell as Labour leader early in 1963 and the Tribune left was conciliated. The Labour Party regime would now swing slowly towards internal tolerance and liberalism. The rule of the stone-age right wingers, of the Gaitskell sect — the future SDPers of 1981 — was over. It would be 25 years before a purging intolerant regime like the Gaitskell regime returned to the Labour Party.

The YS NC organised another big rally and lobby of Parliament for 11 February 1964. But the YS was not exactly thriving. The Brighton conference, at Easter 1964, had 347 delegates claiming to represent 25,000 members organised in 722 branches (this would include "social" elements in *Keep Left* branches). It was small enough after four years.

Again conference rejected support for *Signposts for the Sixties*, opposed immigration controls, and called for nationalisation of the basic industries under workers' control. Again a *Keep Left* majority of 7 out of 11 was returned for the National Committee.

Chairman John Robertson announced at conference that he would shortly be expelled for he had been caught red-handed selling *Keep Left* in a rural area of Scotland... Brighton was to be the last official YS conference for 18 months. By the time of the next conference, the YS had split and the Labour Party had reorganised its remaining youth with a new constitution and even a new name.

## 1964-65: The Labour Party goes for a purge, Keep Left goes for a split

In 1964, for the second year running *Keep Left* had the majority on the YS NC. But the Labour Party bureaucracy stood in the way of developing the YS on left politics, and the imminent General Election spurred on the bureaucracy to settle with *Keep Left*.

They began to pick off the leaders of *Keep Left*. John Robertson was duly expelled. Dave Ashby, his replacement as chairman of the YS, quickly followed. And now *Keep Left* gave increasing signs of being willing for a break with the Labour Party.

At the time of the Easter 1964 YS conference there were already whispers about plans for a "Young Marxist Alliance" which could throw off the Labour Party shackles and go on to build a real mass youth movement. Initially *Keep Left* denied such a perspective. Events, however, had their logic. Transport House attacked relentlessly: an election was looming and the YS with its militant and distinct policies could not be allowed to "embarrass" the leaders of the Labour Party. *Keep Left* was more and more isolated, and more and more the hard core looked for salvation to recruiting raw youth.

The parallel with *Militant* in Scotland at the height of the poll tax campaign is striking.

"Social" branches had originally been a valuable technique for starting to draw working class youth to a political YS. Increasingly, under pressure of the witch-hunt, they became a substitute for and an alternative to any politics other than the current, often arbitrarily selected, "campaign" (fight the Tories, defend John Robertson) or the current demonstration. The turnover of youth, always a feature of *Keep Left*, increased dramatically.

The hysterical atmosphere inside the left burst out at the *Keep Left* meeting at

the 1964 conference in a violent harangue by John Robertson in which he said *Young Guard* were nothing but "scabs" and that those who were not 100% with *Keep Left* were 100% against them. "Get out of our way or we'll go over your bodies", he warned, and repeated the warning. Scuffles between *YG* and *KL* supporters followed.

Roger Protz, *Keep Left's* editor, resigned after that meeting. Earlier (in 1962), the main organiser of *Keep Left's* YS faction, Gavin Kennedy, had left the tendency. Now a left buffer began to form between *Keep Left* and *Young Guard* and Transport House, as *Keep Left* generated a left wing opposition to its course towards split, independent of the extremely factional and factionally motivated Grant and Cliff tendencies (though IS eventually absorbed most of it).

Outside the YS a movement of engineering apprentices began to be built, and *Keep Left* saw the possibility of the YS fusing with this movement. Also in the summer of 1964 gangs of youths, rivals in dress and lifestyles, the "Mods" (early Beatles style) and old-fashioned "Rockers" rioted and fought each other in various places. *Keep Left* hailed this as the "revolt of the youth", a revolt unfortunately in advance of the capacity of the YS to give it leadership... But with an effort they would catch up...

The attractions of an independent YS under *Keep Left's* exclusive control could only be enhanced by such events, and the leadership of the Healy tendency made good use of them. *Keep Left* organised a lobby of the Labour Party NEC in June against the expulsion of John Robertson and the closing down of Streatham YS. The *Keep Left* NC majority organised a "Fight the Tories" campaign culminating in a demonstration on 27 September which numbered 1,500 people: critics pointed to the rawness of most participants.

In the late summer of 1964 branches of the YS began to be shut down. *Keep Left* did not retreat: instead, it stepped up the

hostilities. The National Committee issued a YS manifesto, "Forward with the Young Socialists", with a foreword by Dave Ashby, who had been removed as YS chairman by simply being told that he was no longer on the books of the Labour Party in Leeds. At a meeting of the YS NC in August this manifesto was passed, 7 for (all *Keep Left*) and one abstention (Roger Rosewell, a supporter of *Young Guard*; he later became IS/SWP industrial organiser, and is now a witch-hunter).

September's *Keep Left* carried a stirring and defiant clarion call by John Robertson which expressed the "go it alone" perspective of *KL*. "The time to fight is now", he insisted. "At Brighton at Easter we passed a policy for a real fight and an end to the shadow-boxing of Wilson and his cronies..."

"Conference decided policies and elected an NC to carry them out. 7 out of 11 are faithful to conference policies. 'Forward with the YS' expresses those policies, and those who call themselves YS must stand by the manifesto.

"We will unite with anyone who is prepared to fight for the policies of the manifesto.

"At Brighton we told the bureaucrats we would not tolerate witch-hunts and expulsions. We meant exactly that.

"We will not tolerate them. We will fight on irrespective of the actions of the bureaucracy and the right wing. As far as we are concerned, they can go to hell, with a well-placed boot from us in the rear to help them on their way.

"Forward to the September 27 'Fight the Tories' demonstration.

"For a Labour government with socialist policies".

The style of this piece of raving unrealism suggests that Gerry Healy wrote it. It inverts the real relationship of forces in the world outside Gerry Healy's head. The tragedy now was that the leadership of the Young Socialists was in the hands of people capable of hypnotising themselves with senseless bombast like this. The Labour Party leaders were all too

eager to help them on their way.

As *Young Guard* put it in September: there was now a sulphurous smell of witch-hunting in the air. According to later SLL-WRP myth, what happened next is that the Labour Party leaders expelled the YS, which refused to be snuffed out, choosing independence instead. In fact there were expulsions and purges, there were closures, sometimes the police were called to remove recalcitrant YSers, but there was no suppression of the YS as such. The leaders of the *Keep Left* tendency decided on an organised break with the Labour Party in the face of the witch-hunting and limited expulsions, and thereafter they set out, by being awkward and provocative in local Labour Parties and elsewhere, to have as many people as possible expelled and branches closed down. The bureaucracy did not need much provocation!

Finally, the *Keep Left* NC majority announced that it was calling a conference of the YS independent of the bureaucracy for February 27-28 1965, and invited every YS member to attend.

To stop the split a rather feeble "Save the YS campaign" was started, capable of attracting only 200 to a meeting in London in October 1964, despite having the support of *Tribune*, the ex-*Keep Lefters* such as Kennedy and Protz, *Young Guard*, *Militant* (which published its first issue in October 1964) and the "Nottingham Group" (forerunner of *Socialist Outlook* and *Socialist Action*). The Labour Party leaders contributed to "saving the YS" by issuing a circular telling people not to attend the meeting. They were entirely for the secession of *Keep Left!*

## 1965: A revolutionary youth movement?

Was there not a case to be made for the policy of taking the youth outside the Labour Party straitjacket and continuing to build?

It must depend on an assessment of the

situation. For all the bluster, *Keep Left* was a very small force: so was the entire YS. It was ludicrous to pretend that YS conference decisions could be counterposed to the official policies of the Labour Party without a complete break. This break could only lead to the hiving-off of a small youth group with some ideas to make propaganda for. Was that desirable *then*, was it responsible revolutionary politics in the situation?

The SLL reprinted articles by Trotsky dealing with the situation in France in 1935. The French Socialist Party bureaucracy had started to move against the revolutionary leaders of the Socialist youth. Trotsky argued for a bold orientation to building an independent party: the situation was fast becoming revolutionary, war and fascism threatened, their leaders wanted to "make docile cannon fodder of the youth" for French imperialism and to beat down opposition to the SP's alliance with the bourgeois Radicals in the Popular Front.

But for the Healy tendency to hive themselves off in 1964, on the eve of a Labour government, after they had been working in the Labour Party for 16 years, was political nonsense. The "brave" talk was toytown politics, rightly seen by Wilson and Co. as aiding them. And the leaders of *Keep Left* had a big element of choice — a *free* choice on whether to take all their forces out.

A policy of setting up an independent revolutionary YS might logically not have prevented a section of the youth from also being individual members of the Labour Party. In 1965 the SLL leaders occasionally talked of things like this for the future.

But if the SLL leaders had been capable of such a balanced policy and strategy then they would never have allowed themselves to be pushed into a break with the Labour Party on the eve of the formation of the first Labour government in 13 years, an event which would (and did) allow millions of workers to learn about political reformism from experience. The point is that the break

was unbalanced and hysterical.

The parallel with *Militant* now is striking here too. Whatever "good" reasons can be cited for what *Militant* is doing, the people who ran the ridiculous Walton by-election campaign, and, among other things, thereby allowed the right wing to remove Dave Nellist and Terry Fields from parliament, are politically unbalanced and irrational.

The SLL developed ludicrous theories about the possibility of a short cut to a mass revolutionary organisation via "the youth", as if it were possible artificially and at will to separate a generation of youth from the general experience of the class and the labour movement.

In reality they went marching out with a few thousand mainly raw youth, organised by a few hundred revolutionaries, foolishly proclaiming that they had defeated the Labour bureaucracy. They went chasing their will-of-the-wisp on the eve of one of the most important experiences of the working class with reformism in government, removing their section of the revolutionary youth from the struggle in the political labour movement.

One consequence of this was that after 1966, when the Labour Government secured a majority in the March election (thus losing its excuses) and then went on a witch-hunting binge against striking seamen and introduced a statutory wage freeze in July, the sincere reformist activists simply began to drop away from the Labour Party. Had the earlier sectarian bloodletting in the YS not occurred, probably they could have been organised to give the Wilson government a difficult passage.

Servicing the YS as an independent organisation demanded more and more of the efforts and attention of the entire SLL cadre, a few hundred strong. By 1965, for example, building worker militants in Manchester were being harangued and browbeaten into accepting that their industrial work was unimportant compared with organising "revolutionary" youth clubs. (Some of them

eventually joined IS).

The same youth-centred concern meant that shrill denunciation (occasionally justified, often not) of the CP in industries such as the ports, for the propagandist enlightenment of youth on the "essential" nature of Stalinism, replaced responsible concern with unity in the class struggle. In the dock strike of 1967, for instance, the SLL pursued a vicious propaganda war against the Communist Party, some of whose members were fighting the port reorganisation in alliance with revolutionaries, with *Workers' Fight*, for example. This replacement of the real struggle with newspaper commentaries was part of the process of losing touch with reality and with the *real* working class and the real labour movement.

## 1964-65: From splitting to strike-breaking

The 1964 turn was a turn away from the labour movement and from the work of transforming it, and it was to prove irreversible for the Healy tendency. Impatience with the tempo of development in the working class movement and wishful thinking about what could be done outside the labour movement with a small section of youth (and a good printing press!) led the Healy tendency to what became — for all their bluster — a sectarian-abstentionist surrender to the dominant reformist bureaucracy in the labour movement.

That the break with the Labour Party was the product of a qualitative political degeneration and of hysteria was demonstrated to anyone still capable of learning (or still needing to learn) by the events of November 1964, when the seceding "revolutionary" YS engaged in strikebreaking!

Apprentice engineers, mainly in Manchester and Liverpool, had begun to organise an unofficial movement around wages and conditions. A big unofficial national apprentices' strike had come

from similar beginnings in 1960 and in 1951. In September 1964, 1500 apprentices took part in a one-day strike. A committee was elected. *Keep Left*, the Young Communist League, *Militant*, and others were represented. Bending to the untutored militancy of angry apprentices, it set the date for a strike. The *Keep Left* minority on the committee opposed this action as premature. Almost certainly this judgement was correct. Did they accept the decision of the strike committee majority? Not the "majority of the YS"! They now considered themselves the anointed leaders, by right, of the youth — of all youth. They broke away from the committee and denounced the YCLers and *Militant* for deliberately betraying the apprentices. Then they announced a date (9 March 1965) on which they would call *their own* apprentices' strike! On 2 November they toured engineering factories with leaflets telling apprentices not to strike. In Manchester they even physically attacked ("counter-revolutionary") YCLers trying to bring apprentices out.

The strike was a failure. It is difficult to assess what degree or responsibility for this rested with the sectarian strike breakers. When the date came in March for the YS-decreed strike, nothing at all happened. They vaguely announced a new date in May, which was eventually abandoned. *Keep Left* blustered and justified itself.

Though the actual strike-breakers were politically immature lads, the sectarian ultra-leftism here was not of the sort that was widely seen after 1968 — anarchic, schematic, youthful ardour, impatience, unrealism and lack of tempering. Essentially what happened was that the SLL leaders attempted to submit sections of struggling youth to their own bureaucratic ukase — and ordered their youth to behave with typical bureaucratic brutality when they were "disobeyed".

Trotsky once pointed to the bureaucratic commandism at the heart of the ultra-leftism of the Stalinists' "Third Period" (1928-34), which separated it

from "naive" ultra-leftism: the attempted extension outwards to the general labour movement and even to the working class as a whole of the bureaucratic internal regime in Stalin's Comintern. (Because of its bureaucratic inner structure, it was also — like the Healyites — capable of negating itself to the right, "effortlessly"). In the apprentices' strike the bureaucratic and commandist leadership of the SLL attempted to extend the methods of their internal life to a section of the movement. It was a qualitative step in a self-cutting-off process which led to the deep isolation of the SLL. It signalled a further loss of awareness of reality for the closed-in leaders of the SLL.

### Keep Left after the 1965 split

In February 1965 the Morecambe conference called by the *Keep Left YS* NC majority was attended by 1,000 people. It declared itself to be the YS from then on, with *Keep Left* as its official paper: effectively it became the youth wing of the SLL which now went off on an "Oehlerite binge" to end all Oehlerite binges, and whose central slogan became "Join the SLL, build the revolutionary party". For them, the party became an entity separate from history, from society, and even from politics (their politics were wildly unstable), when the needs of its onanistic development required it. It was concerned essentially only with its own growth and survival, by almost any means and on any conditions, and irrespective of its relationship to the labour movement and the working class; irrespective too of what damage techniques such as systematic lying would do to that movement.

To "maintain" his party — and his own princely bureaucratic lifestyle — Healy would in the 1970s, after much political zigzagging, sell it as a spying agency (on Arab dissidents and Jews) to various Arab governments, bourgeois or worse.

It should be noted that it was now — from Healyites, in the mid-'60s — that the notion first made its appearance in

Britain of raising the call "Build the Revolutionary Party!" as a central slogan. (It had, I believe, been used in France by the Frank-Bleibtreu faction in 1946-8, and by the Lambertists in 1952-58). Today, it is commonplace in Britain. The people who mocked the Healyites for it, and called it "toytown Bolshevism", in the mid '60s — the *Young Guard*/IS-SWP group — picked it up in the '70s, and now they, too, use "Build the Revolutionary Party!" as the answer to most current political problems.

In the 1960s it did the Healyites no good! The youth were organised always on the perspective of imminent revolutionary crisis, and sent on one campaign after another. Certainly by the mid-'60s (probably earlier) the SLL leadership was using this as a cynical technique. The fact that the perspectives of the SLL were always quickly falsified led to a rapid turnover in membership. Many of the cadres dropped away in the mid-'60s, Ashby and Robertson for example. Robertson, who ate state-capitalist "scabs" for breakfast in 1964, was knocking around with Leeds IS in 1968-9, and later went to the CP.

The Healy regime destroyed real political life. From about 1956 systematic lying about political opponents and their positions became a prominent feature of the SLL. Surviving cadres suddenly had to accept the line that Ernest Mandel and Michel Pablo had supported the Russian invasion of Hungary in 1966 — something none of them had ever heard about until a decade after it allegedly happened! Nevertheless, many of them — all those who "survived" this period — swallowed it. Then when the great mass movement against the Vietnam war erupted in 1967, and a vast new ultra-left youth radicalisation started, the sectarian SLL, finding "its" territory encroached upon, could only *denounce it*, isolating itself from the post-1968 radicalisation. It is a grim and tragic story, but we will not follow it beyond this point.

The secession of *Keep Left* marked the

end of a definite period for the YS. In the early '60s it had been politically centre stage, with a more or less clear field for development as a socialist youth organisation. The 1964-65 split marked a defeat for socialist youth, a defeat centrally the responsibility of the Labour bureaucracy, but which happened also because the leaders of the old Trotskyist movement failed the revolutionary youth. A mass YS had not been built. The character of the Wilson government, especially after 1966, made the YS far from attractive to militant and socialist youth in the late '60s. The great youth mobilisation after 1967 was to pass the *rump* LPYS by (while the *Keep Left YS* hid from it). Prospects of real development did not open again until after 1970, and by then the LPYS had other problems. Now *Militant* was in control.

### How Militant gained control of the YS

After the *Keep Left* breakaway in February 1965, many thought it possible that the YS would be scrapped entirely. The NEC reorganised it instead.

The Blackpool conference of the Labour Party, meeting in October 1965, accepted proposals from Labour's NEC to change the constitution of the LPYS so that:

- YS NC members would be appointed by the regional Labour Parties, not elected by conference;
- There should be no discussion of politics, no general political resolutions for conference, only motions dealing with special youth problems;
- Delegates to YS conference would have to be ratified by their local parties.

The first conference under the new constitution was set for November 1965, at Malvern. 234 branches sent delegates (there had been 347 delegates at the last YS conference, at Brighton, Easter 1964). In the course of the conference the delegates went a long way towards ripping up

the new constitution, thus preserving the YS as something of a political youth movement.

At a private session the delegates, by a very large majority, rejected the new constitution — on all points.

The platform had to respond to the determination of delegates to deal with politics either by closing down their conference or by bending. It bent, for the most part. On the second day the platform successfully blocked resolutions being taken on Vietnam, Rhodesia, and anti-union laws (which the government was threatening) — but the LPYS had survived.

The Malvern conference registered 605 YS branches in existence, 117 less than the 1964 conference. Since in many areas rump branches survived despite severe losses in the split, and a number of dead branches would still be on the books, it would be misleading to judge the effects of the split only from the absolute fall in the number of branches. Actual numbers of individual members are difficult to get hold of. In 1970, the official report said that the average membership of YS branches was 12; in 1972 it was said to be 18, in 1973, 8. An average of 12 in 1965 (perhaps on the high side) would give a figure of about 7,500 left out of a claimed 25,000 at the Easter 1964 conference (which was also probably an inflated figure, in terms of real membership).

The Cliff tendency (the future SWP) began to focus more and more on work directed to industrial militants.

By 1967-68 *Young Guard* had drifted out of the YS (without the IS/SWP ever formally deciding to leave).

The YS now was left to Wilsonites, Tribunites and to the *Militant*.

In 1967 there were 532 registered YS branches, but only 216 delegates at conference. In 1969, there were 386 branches, dead branches having been removed from the lists: since there were only 150 delegates to conference, perhaps the pruning was not ruthless enough. *Militant* became a majority on the NC in the regional elections between the 1969

and '70 conference. In 1970, at the first conference in which *Militant* had the NC majority, there were only 126 delegates (457 branches registered). The YS had declined and shrivelled — and *Militant* had come into its own.

## The YS under *Militant*

Between 1969 and 1987, *Militant* had full political control of the LPYS, colluding incongruously with the bureaucracy for a decade and a half.

Previously, leftists had been at daggers drawn with the bureaucracy (*Keep Left*) or shared an edgy mutual contempt with it (*Young Guard*). *Militant* worked out a *modus vivendi* with the bureaucracy. Through years of responsible work, it won their tolerance to put its own resolutions, and their confidence that nothing much would come of it.

Before *Militant* took control, John Ewers, an (appointed) NC member wrote in *Militant* (September 1967): "The YS should aim to recruit youth to its ranks on a mass basis. It can only do this effectively with a national, regional and local organisation, elected by and responsible to the YS themselves... The NC must be elected by the members themselves, at YS conference, at which there should be no restriction on the topics discussed..."

In 1968 the curbs were eased and regional elections were introduced for NC members. John Ewers hailed this as "half a step forward" (*Militant*, April 1968). But once *Militant* got control in 1969, it agreed, hand in hand with Labour Party HQ, to exploit the bureaucratic structure whereby a National Committee not elected at conference dominated it completely.

Until about 1974, a sizeable Tribune group still existed in the LPYS, debating with *Militant*. After that, it declined sharply. After 1970, Labour was out of office and no longer a millstone around the YS's neck. The class struggle intensified until it blew Heath out of Downing Street in 1974. This was still an industrial struggle, in its methods and in its focus.

Nevertheless, the Labour Party, far from opposing it, was often in support, mending its fences with the unions. A trickle of militants and socialists began to enter the Labour Party.

The LPYS's incapacity to relate to the radicalised youth in 1967-8 and after meant that it was less strong than it might have been for the struggle against the Tories. But the 1970s were very favourable times for the YS to grow. It did grow a bit.

But the *Militant* YS did nothing remotely like what should have been possible for a Marxist-led national youth organisation affiliated to a mass labour movement which was engaging in sometimes semi-revolutionary struggles against the Tory government.

The YS was a propagandist extension of *Militant*, not a fighting youth movement concerned with the struggles and the interests (social, intellectual, sexual, cultural, as well as political) of the working class youth around it.

The YS was a strangely backward political backwater. Conferences in the '70s rejected resolutions in favour of gay rights that would have got through a Young Liberal conference with ease.

In 1974, the YS, following *Militant* arguments about 'working class unity', failed to give support to black strikers at Imperial Typewriters, Leicester, locked in conflict with racist white workers (though in 1977, the YS did turn to attempting to organise black youth, in the very peculiar form of the British youth branch of the Jamaican People's National Party).

When the Anti-Nazi League mobilised youth in 1978 on a bigger scale than anything since the Vietnam movement or CND (and *working class* youth particularly), only the left-wing minority in the YS showed any interest in intervening. The *Militant* majority were content to reassure themselves that only the mass labour movement, armed with a socialist programme, could finally deal with racism and fascism.

Even when *Militant* supporter, Andy

Bevan, was made official Labour Party Youth Officer, it made little difference to the dullness and passivity of the YS.

*Militant* stood on the opposite pole to the positive qualities of youth in socialist and working class politics — ardour, combativity, willingness to take risks and shake up old structures, the impatient belief that they themselves, here and now, can accomplish something in the class struggle and for socialism. With *Militant*, it was "all talk and resolutionary activity".

Year after year, *Militant* boasted about "the best YS conference ever". It was all hollow and feeble, and collapsed very fast in the mid '80s, when *Militant* fell victim to the defeat of the left and the rightward lurch of the Labour Party.

In 1987, the YS had its structures shattered, and the maximum age limit for membership reduced, breaking *Militant's* control. *Militant* put up no fight against this destruction of the YS, tamely accepting it. Today, the LPYS is a small, shaky, shadow organisation.

## *Militant* and the class struggle

The *Militant* period of the LPYS was shaped by the politics of *Militant* in the formative years of the late 1960s.

In the middle and late '60s, the role of giving a political lead to the working class (in so far as one was given), against 'its own' party in power, fell to the shop stewards' movement and then to the TUC, who were forced into a head-on clash with the Labour Government over its attempted anti-union legislation, 'In Place of Strife' (1969). The YS made oppositional sounds about the Government's policies, but played little role in the decisive struggle.

*Militant's* reaction to the Donovan Commission, which provided the Government with guidelines for anti-trade union action, for example, was a lead article saying 'No to Legislation', but explaining that there was no point organising any campaign. "The hollowness of the employers' threats is evi-

dent... They dare not lift a finger at the present time" (*Militant*, December 1965/January 1966). *Militant* supporters who tried to start organising a campaign were quickly rebuked. Some of them (who later founded *Socialist Organiser*) produced a comprehensive critique of *Militant's* theory and practice: "What we are and what we must become". (They were refused the right to circulate it inside the *Militant* group).

In its April 1967 editorial, commenting on the YS conference, *Militant* wrote: "...although a syndicalist interpretation could be given to the last paragraph of the Hornsey resolution, which used the formula of 'rank and file committees at the point of production', both at the *Tribune* meeting and the *Militant* meeting, supporters of this journal explained that this was an incorrect course to recommend to a YS conference. [It is of course very important for revolutionary socialists to warn the Parliament-oriented Tribunites against syndicalism.]

"While it is obvious that all independent action by the working class, including the formation of rank and file committees, deserves the support of every YS member, it is incorrect to hold out the prospect of activity 'at the point of production' as an alternative to the struggle for a political, socialist programme within the broad labour movement. Indeed, the industrial struggle of the working class will inevitably spill over into the trade union branches and the wards, CLPs and Trades Councils..."

"Despite the numerical weakness", *Militant* continued, "this conference can assist the regeneration of the YS. If the political issues are clarified, a clear programme (particularly on youth demands, etc.) is worked out, and the YS refrain from indulging in the infantile 'leftism' characteristic of previous years, it can help to invigorate the TU branches and the CLPs. It can disseminate the ideas outlined at the Llandudno conference to the active layers of the movement". The YS — the entire body of an allegedly mass youth movement — was only to

make abstract socialist propaganda.

Activity in the CLPs and so on was *counterposed* to the real class struggle of that time, and used as an excuse to keep the YS distant and aloof from it. *Militant* counterposed (propaganda for) 'the socialist programme' to the class struggle at the point of production (or, as it was to be in the following years, in the streets).

True, the great industrial victories were unable to change society even after bringing down Heath, because *the political labour movement* was in the hands of the Lib-Lab reformists. The militant workers who defeated the Tories had no political alternative to them, except the right-wing Labour leaders.

But those who, like *Militant*, had counterposed passive propagandist politics to the direct action struggle, contributed in their own small way to that great defeat. In an active and explosive labour movement crying out for an organisation capable of providing an all-sided integration of the class struggle — of the political, economic and ideological dimensions — *Militant's* passive propagandist version of 'politics' was the mirror image of 'pure' direct-action trade unionism.

*Militant's* approach would cripple the YS as a youth movement — it would help ensure that the great youth revolt of the late '60s was too often channelled into pseudo-anarchism and petit-bourgeois "leftism".

In 1967, a mass opposition to the Vietnam war took to the streets, hundreds of thousands strong. It had the dimensions of the CND movement which had aided the growth of the early YS — but it was a great deal more militant.

In the course of 1967-8 these rebel youth came out solidly for the Vietnamese against US imperialism. Then, in May 1968, the general strike in France demonstrated once more the power and potential of the working class. In August, the invasion of Czechoslovakia brought home to the radical youth the nature of Russian Stalinism. It was a concentrated sequence

of dramatic world events that might have been designed as an effective crash course in revolutionary politics (all that was 'missing' was an experience showing up Mao-Stalinism and populism). And the youth learned...

But the YS could make nothing of the opportunities. The spontaneously revolutionary youth were raw and 'ultra-left'. A serious socialist youth movement would have dealt with this by immersing itself in their struggles, for example on Vietnam. The LPYS, shrivelled and afflicted increasingly by *Militant's* passivity, could do nothing of the sort. It did not participate in the Vietnam movement (unless you count a few sellers of *Militant* on demonstrations). The years of the upsurge were the years of the organisational nadir of the YS. *They were also the years when Militant gained the NC majority.* The *Militant* 'Marxist' YS was born away from the struggles and storms of that period.

### "The perspective"

The specific and distinguishing political idea of *Militant* was the view — they called it a "perspective" — that in its future evolution, the broad labour movement, and the Labour Party, too, would become a mass revolutionary movement. They would sometimes point to the many toothless "socialist" resolutions passed by trade union conferences to show that the movement was well on its way. It would become *effectively* socialist with time, and *Militant's* propaganda.

Their model of socialism was that of 1940s-style bureaucratic "nationalisation", summed up in slogans about "nationalising" "the 200" or "250 monopolies". In YS branches in the mid-'60s there would be passionate debates between *Militant* and supporters of the future SWP about which was central: "nationalisation" or "workers' control". Dogmatically "Trotskyist", *Militant* ignored such passages in the 1938 programme as this:

"The socialist programme of expropria-

tion, i.e. of political overthrow of the bourgeoisie and liquidation of its economic domination, should in no case during the present transitional period hinder us from advancing, when the occasion warrants, the demand for the expropriation of several key branches of industry vital for national existence or of the most parasitic group of the bourgeoisie. The difference between these demands and the muddle-headed reformist slogan of 'nationalisation' lies in the following: (1) we reject indemnification; (2) we warn the masses against demagogues of the People's Front who, giving lip service to nationalisation, remain in reality agents of capital; (3) we call upon the masses to rely only upon their own revolutionary strength; (4) we link up the question of expropriation with that of seizure of power by the workers and farmers."

*Militant* required centrally of its supporters that they accept a view of the future. This "perspective" would inspire them while they made general socialist propaganda, integrated themselves as citizens of the labour movement, and waited for it to "evolve".

The *Militant* saw themselves as waiting for "the perspective" to *grow, develop, mature, ripen.* In this process the class struggle could be at best the excuse for a sermon about socialism.

"The perspective" said that as the labour movement ripened, the "next stage", which was inevitable and could not be bypassed (the big crime of the Healyite SLL was seen to be that it tried to bypass it) was the development of a "mass left wing" probably around *Tribune.* The *Militant* could only *wait,* doing routine work and making propaganda for this development. "Premature" struggle, conflict with the bureaucracy, or even attempts to go out and organise the Labour left would be more harmful than useful. The "Perspective" would be its own midwife.

This was their big difference with the proto-IMG, who tried to organise this expected Labour broad left.

Essentially the Grantites believed themselves to exist before their proper historical time. (Their "perspective" was like the sort of view of the world, and their own place in it, which the most pedantic of the Russian Marxists drew from the conviction that the Russian Revolution could only be bourgeois, and that the preordained protagonists in it were the bourgeoisie. The *Tribune* left was *Militant's* "bourgeois"!)

*Militant* really did not think there was much they could *do* in the Labour Party. In the '40s, their tendency had refused to join the Labour Party; they eventually gave up and joined only on the basis that nothing much could be done *outside* either. They had a strange combination of dull passivity in the present, and bland optimism about the day after tomorrow. Witness the headlines in *Militant*: "Rhodesia: White settlers forced to come to terms" [Julian Silverman, May 1966]. June 1966 editorial: "a Tito solution" for Vietnam, i.e. a neutral, independent Vietnam "as predicted in *Militant* and then later by De Gaulle and [Robert] Kennedy". February 1967 editorial: "Imperialism trapped in Vietnam", etc, etc, ad nauseam.

This combination was the basis for the incredible "patience" *Militant* prided themselves on in the late '60s.

*Militant* believed itself to be embedded in an unfolding "deformed world revolution". "Workers' states" were multiplying fast — Syria in 1963, Burma in 1965, and subsequently many others, in Africa and elsewhere.

*Militant* placed a very high value then and later on their accurate powers of prediction!

Ted Grant could be heard describing Marxism as "the science of perspective and prediction". Passive propaganda and a labour movement routinism, combining propaganda for "socialism" with passionate belief in Ted Grant's picture of the evolution of large parts of the world towards socialism, and of the British labour movement towards active commitment to socialism: that was *Militant.*

## The débacle

*Militant's* growth from the LPYS in the 1970s and early 1980s was limited, but it was enough to make it one of the bigger groups on the left.

*Militant's* political ideas served it as rationalisations rather than cutting tools. Abstract and essentially preposterous general propaganda — like “Labour to power with socialist policies” demanding nothing less than the full socialist programme from gentlemen like Wilson and Callaghan! — was often counterposed to the day-to-day nitty-gritty details of the necessary struggle against these people.

Its abstract propaganda notion of the socialist struggle — calling for nothing less than the “nationalisation” of everything, while doing nothing about it — could appear very radical and Marxist to young people in the YS and also, paradoxically, avoid conflict with the Labour Party leadership.

*Militant* thus turned irreplaceable ideas into harmful caricatures — for example the idea that socialists must relate strategically to existing mass labour movements, with the long term perspective of transforming them, was rendered by *Militant* into absurd, precise, detailed

timetables and scenarios and *Old Moore's Almanac*-type predictions for the future. And *Militant's* practical conclusions from these scenarios and “perspectives” was to settle into waiting in the Labour Party and YS as one waits for a train to a desired destination. But politics does not run on pre-laid tracks!

*Militant* solaced its youth, and reconciled them to its dull routines, with the myths of an ever-expanding *working class revolution* spreading slowly across the globe, albeit “for now” led by the Stalinists and others.

It was all myth and nonsense. But the network of Labour Party YS branches connected to the constituency Labour Parties gave *Militant* a large base for its propaganda and a trelliswork — subsidised by the Labour Party! — on which to thread its own growing organisation, together with a stable routine of meetings and national affairs.

Its manner of growth, its links with the Labour bureaucracy while it grew, must be unique in the history of self-proclaimed revolutionary organisations. Made unstable since 1987, it is now jettisoning its past, and its long-time prophet, and striking out into political — and organisational — terra incognita.

## Labour's misspent youth, 1959-87

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