

Eric Heffer's socialism

After a quarter century in what Lenin pointedly referred to as "their parliament", Eric Heffer is still a man who knows himself to represent the dispossessed and exploited class, still the foremost voice putting a broadly Marxist point of view in the House of Commons.

Before entering Parliament in 1964, he had been a socialist and trade union activist for almost 30 years. He discussed his ideas and experiences with John Bloxam and John O'Mahony.



I think I still believed in God when I left the church.

So you made a sort of radical Protestant criticism of the Anglican church?

No, there was nothing Protestant about it! I wouldn't go as far as that. I just didn't go to church, and I got mixed up in the labour movement, and I read Marx. I also began to read the rationalist press.

I went right through the war, incidentally, as one of the few servicemen with "atheist" on my tags.

I remember being asked by the sergeant when I was first called up what religion was I? And I said that I had not got a religion. He said "You've got to have a religion." "What do you mean I've got to have a religion? I haven't got a religion". So he said "are you an atheist?" I said "that's right".

"Oh my god, how were you brought up?" "I'm not telling you how I was brought up. I'm an atheist". He sent for the Church of England padre, and he said to me: "Supposing you're in battle and you are wounded and lying there on the field. If people come along and find 'atheist' on your tag they might just leave you there..."

And I said, "right, atheist! That's it, atheist." So I went through the war as an atheist.

You got a lot of prejudice for being an atheist. When I was selected for Parliament, I was still an atheist, and it was raised at my selection meeting. So I told a story.

When I was in the forces I had atheist on my tags. At the bottom of your bed there was a card with your name, rank and religion. I always put atheist.

In the bed next to mine was a Salvation Army man, and he used to go down on his knees to pray before going to bed. We had Church of England, Roman Catholic, Methodist and Baptist there, and they used to snigger at him, and sometimes throw boots at him.

I used to take them on. I told them to

leave him alone, that he should be respected. "You don't do that to someone who has got a belief — respect him". Then I said: "If I am selected here today, you respect me for my views." And they tell me that that was the final thing that carried the vote.

But I have to say I always had a sort of sneaking thing about religion. I never really got rid of it. I would sometimes go to church on my own. And sometimes I would go to mass. It was just something that I did, inexplicable to me because my head said that it was not on, but my heart said something else.

And then one day something happened to me and I have never disbelieved in god since.

A long time ago?

1967 or 1968...I never made anything of it...but I think my wife was quite happy because she had never been other than a Methodist all her life, even when she was in the CP. But we got married in church only to please both her parents and mine. Naturally I wanted to get married in a registry office.

Can we ask what exactly it is you believe?

I believe that there is a sort of presence, I think there is a God — I just think there is, that's all, it's as simple as that. I suppose it's a part of my childhood, when you've been brought up to believe from the time you were born. I suppose there was always a great conflict in myself over this matter, because sometimes when I listen to what some of them have to say — I can't possibly believe in some of the things they say, it's just not true. But it's a very personal thing, and that is why I don't proselytise about it. If I'm asked do I believe in God, I have to be honest and say, "yes, I do".

What I do argue is that Jesus was a revolutionary. He was a carpenter, he was from the working class of his time, he fought to change society. He was crucified, not because he was the Son of God, but because he challenged the establishment of the day — that's why. And when you read the things he said — you only have to read Matthew, the Magnificat, the Sermon on the Mount — it's a revolutionary document.

But it's not against slavery!

No, but I don't think he ever said that slavery was acceptable. Christ never once mentioned slavery — he didn't have much to do with slavery. His class weren't owning anybody.

There is a tradition in Christianity, as there is in the Old Testament, of the pro-

The Christianity of the poor

One area we wish to discuss is personal philosophy, religion and so on. Being an active Christian, an Anglican, marks you as very unusual on the hard left. Would you explain your outlook? You come from a Church of England background — did you cease to be a Christian, or was it dormant? Did you break with it, and later come back to it?

It's a very difficult thing for me to ever explain because it's a very personal matter. I don't proselytise. I don't think I have the right. I have always refused to go on television to talk about it. It's just a personal thing.

As a boy I served on the altar. The church was not as high as some I went to later, but reasonably High Church. I went to church three or four times on a Sunday! You were always there. I seemed to spend more times on my knees than anything else!

Suddenly one day, after I had begun to read a great deal — I must have been 14 at the time — I just said to my poor mother, who was greatly upset by it, that I was not going to church... it no longer had any meaning.

What issues, concerns, doubts, made you break?

The old and much disputed question of the Real Presence of Christ. I didn't think the words a priest said over the Host transformed it into the actual body of Christ. I was very sceptical about it all. I used to listen very carefully to what the parson was saying, and he seemed to be talking nonsense. I didn't believe it.

Did you believe in God still?



"The struggle goes on... in the so-called socialist countries". Stalinist militia in Gdansk, 1981.

phets in the Old Testament being revolutionaries. They called upon God to help them fight their class enemies.

It's the same thing here in this country — John Ball, the 'hedge priest' during the Peasants Revolt against the poll tax and other things back in 1381. They hung him at Hertford, the town I was born in.

In my own church, there were priests who were very, very anti-Tory, very anti-establishment, very much on the side of working people. I did hear one of them preach once, Father Conrad Noel from Thaxted — had had the Sinn Fein tricolour and the Red Flag in his church. There was a battle of the flags, when students from Cambridge went down there and tried to remove them. People turned out to support him and they had a battle in the streets, over his right to have the flags. There was that part of it — that part I think affected me.

Isn't that very much the exception? You know the adage about the Church of England being the Tory Party at prayer...

It was, absolutely no doubt about it.

Is your belief intellectual or emotional? It's primarily emotional, isn't it?

Yes, I think so.

What would you say now to the Marxist criticism of Christianity, and the historical materialist analysis of Christianity's own development and evolution as part of human history? You will have read Kautsky's 'Foundations of Christianity',

presumably...

Yes, I have...

What would you say to that whole school of thought?

Most of the criticism of the church throughout history is absolutely right — I don't have any argument with that. It comes down to the question of strict personal belief — you believe or you don't believe. The interesting thing now is that, within the church, and particularly within the Roman Catholic church, they have "liberation theology" — a whole group of Christian people who have taken the side of the oppressed and are even prepared to die in the struggle.

But they in turn are being suppressed by the Pope.

Yes, they are fighting the hierarchy of the church. My Christianity is their Christianity, not the Christianity of the Vatican nor the Christianity of the church hierarchy. It is the Christianity of the poor.

Can I ask a linked question? Are you a royalist?

No, no, not at all.

I didn't mean to be insulting, but the Queen is head of your church.

I don't think we as a movement have to make a great fuss and dance over whether we should abolish royalty. What we have to do is what Tony Benn has suggested — take all their powers away.

A struggle throughout the ages

The struggle for the rights of ordinary people has gone on throughout the whole history of society. Those at the bottom end of the ladder have had to fight for their rights — in slave society, in feudal society, or in early capitalism, and now in both late capitalist society and in the so-called socialist societies. Always.

There's always been this need for working people to fight and it is no good just saying it is just a matter of the transformation of society according to scientific concepts. The class struggle does lead to a transformation of society from one system to the other. But within that, throughout the whole history of society — and latterly in the so-called socialist societies of the East — there has always been this ethical problem of transforming society. We want to transform society because it is right to do so, so long as there are people who suffer in society.

It is wrong that they should suffer. It is wrong that they shouldn't have freedom. It is wrong that they shouldn't have basic human rights.

Although Marx talked in scientific



"In the House of Commons it's easy to move away from your roots. You must remain part and parcel of the working class".

terms, in terms of "scientific socialism", in fact he never totally threw off his ethical utopianism. They say he did, but he didn't. He had ideas which were very much moral ideas, moral concepts. He did believe that certain things were absolutely ageless. So that's how I see it.

I think we have to use all that is good in anybody's philosophy, and use it effectively if it contributes to the struggle for mankind to live better, end oppression, democratise society, end poverty, and create a better ordered society. That is how I see socialism.

The continuing thing is not just that socialism develops in capitalism. Modern socialist ideas couldn't develop until you had capitalism, until society had reached a certain stage of development. But even when things were organised and structured differently in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, you still got oppression. So you can see why I think there is a whole continuous struggle throughout the ages, all ages.

Is it possible to spell out your ethical principles? Like, for instance, that it is morally wrong to have wage slavery, and so on.

Well, I think it is. But again, you can't always be totally hard and fast, because you gain something, and then you discover, having gained that, that you actually created something else which is the opposite of what you really want to create. But plainly it is quite wrong that one person, or a group of persons, should oppress others.

Nobody should be oppressed in society. People should be free at all times to think what they wish, to say what they want to say, and to have the right to form an organisation which can work to put their ideas into effect. People also have a right to hold any religious concepts, or non-religious concepts, as long as they do not oppress anybody else. But if you use those concepts to oppress others, then that is wrong and unacceptable.

In relation to the economic system,

plainly it is quite wrong to have a society where some people monopolise all the wealth in society, or most of it, while the mass of those who create that society's wealth don't get the full fruits of their labour. All this is basic socialism, and that's how I see it.

Do you think there is a lack of ethical firmness in the labour movement now? I'm thinking, for example, about leaders who talk publicly about what is good for their careers, even when what is good for them is not what is good for the labour movement — open, obviously unashamed careerists, who scarcely bother even to fake.

If you look at the early stages of the labour movement you'll see that even people we might consider to be on the right were generally much more principled. They had ethical concepts which meant something to them. They weren't necessarily looking for careers. They were in the movement because they believed that the movement was essential to building a better society. But now, increasingly, you get naked and shameless careerists.

To come down to concrete things, the House of Commons pays an enormous wage now.

When I came to the House of Commons in 1964 I got £1,250 per year. Out of that you paid your London lodgings, you had to supply your own secretary and every stamp you put on an envelope. You paid for every phone call outside of London, and so on. The fact is, you didn't really live much better than you lived in your own area as a worker. You did it mainly because you thought it right to fight for the ideas you believed in.

Of course, Tories — and some others — earned money outside politics and the money from the House of Commons was just a useful additional income. But to us it didn't really mean that much. We struggled, but we didn't really complain about it. That's the interesting thing, we didn't really complain much.

It's like in the old days when I became a councillor, all you got was loss of pay. If I had a full day off I'd lose £2-£3, a lot of money in those days. You didn't complain about it because you were in the movement and you were doing it because you thought it was right to do it. You weren't looking out for yourself.

Now people in the movement seem to accept capitalist concepts. They believe in looking after yourself and making money out of it. That inevitably leads to a measure of corruption — I don't mean corruption in the sense of people going after money and nothing else. I mean the corruption that is burnt into people seeing what they do and say in politics in terms of a career structure, of what it will mean for their own careers, instead of being in politics to change society. Such people — when the chips are down — turn out to be in politics to bring about beneficial changes in their own lives, or to avert the unpleasant changes that sometimes goes with standing by your principles. That is very bad; it has a bad effect on the movement and it is very dangerous for it.

It's like the bureaucratised trade unions. I remember that when I became a shop steward of a huge construction site, the firm gave me an office and somebody to do the typing, and a spare room where the shop stewards could meet. Well, it was very nice for me. It rained out there but I wasn't out there. One day a chap came over to me from about half a mile away to get me to go to a meeting to talk about a strike they felt they needed. It was pouring with rain. I looked out the door and I said to him: "Do you want me now?"

And as I said it I thought, "hang on, this is disgraceful! I am now at one remove from these workers that I represent, and used to be working with. And if I'm at one remove, the District Office is twice removed, the Regional Office is three times removed, and the National Office is so far away from what goes on amongst the workers on a construction site or in a factory that they begin to regard those workers out there as a nuisance."

Next day I said to the management, "I want to go back. I'm still senior steward, but I'm back on the line at work, and working in a gang and that's it. I'm working outside with everybody else." And that's what I did. I could see that otherwise I'd become as much a bureaucrat as the others.

It's very important. You should never allow yourself to get into that position. In the House of Commons you do tend to get more and more remote. That's why it is important to go home to your family at weekends, important that you live in a council flat and that you go to the local Labour Club and to the pub and to the lads on the football terraces. You must remain part and parcel of them. You're never going to be quite the same again, of course, because you do spend most of

your time in the House of Commons. Nevertheless, you've got to watch that. Do your best. It's so easy to move away from your roots, almost without noticing it. To go back to Jesus, he didn't move away, he remained with them all the time, and he ended up on the cross because he clearly was identifying himself with the ordinary people and they didn't want that.

Why has there been this growth of corruption? Is it just to do with the greatly increased perks of local government? Or is it to do with the role played by MPs and local government councillors? There is now a great wave of the type of careerist corruption you describe, isn't there?

I think there is. There was always corruption, of course. Some people became corrupt because there weren't any perks! They made deals, planning deals, and so on. The old corruption was clear and straightforward and it could be dealt with for what it was. But in this case...

When I was a councillor in Liverpool we used to have two interviews or "surgeries" a week. You sat in the Labour Party rooms and people came about their housing and so on, masses of people. You didn't even think of claiming for that. Nowadays, they tell you you actually have money for that!

Corruption took many forms in the past. I do say that in the last few years it has got far worse. We've become increasingly integrated into the capitalist system. The leadership of the movement now say openly that capitalism is acceptable. In the old days even the right wingers didn't say openly that they thought capitalism an acceptable system.

What you might call the process of rot and disintegration that began almost at the commencement of the labour movement has just got worse as time has gone on.

Another thing that strikes me is that recently certain key people (I won't name names) have buckled under pressure and then explained their behaviour in terms of the needs of their careers! Done it openly and publicly, taking it for granted that nobody would hold it against them. And not a lot of people seem to have, either! The notion that you're in it for what you get rather than for what you can give seems increasingly to dominate even on the so-called Left. You know John F Kennedy's speechwriter's dictum — ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country? Well, that used to be the old socialist approach — and in any case it is the irreplaceable and necessary approach within any fighting movement of the exploited and oppressed. Now there seems to be a general acceptance of the approach of "me, me, me", "me and my career within the established political structures".

Yes. For example, a lot of people supported the fight for the leadership around Tony Benn without accepting what Tony

In Memoriam: Hal Draper

Hal Draper, world-renowned Marxist scholar and socialist activist, died at his home in Berkeley, California on 26 January 1990. He was 75 years old.

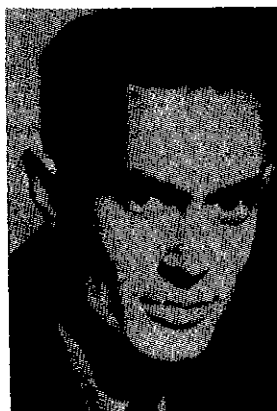
He began his socialist career in 1932 when he joined the Student League for Industrial Democracy and then the Young People's Socialist League, youth section of the American Socialist Party. He later helped found the American Youth Congress and assisted it in organising the largest anti-war strike in the country.

When the Trotskyist movement entered the Socialist Party in 1936, Draper, by then the national secretary of the YPSL, was recruited to it, along with the majority of the SP's left-wing. Later, aligned with Max Shachtman, he became dissatisfied with Trotsky's theory that Russia remained a degenerated workers' state despite its imperialist encroachments on Finland and Poland.

After the split from the Socialist Workers' Party, Draper continued to play a leading role in the Workers' Party and its successor, the Independent Socialist League. For years he was an organiser in the Boston, Philadelphia, New York and Los Angeles branches, and later the editor of the organisation's journal, *New International* and its weekly newspaper, *Labor Action*.

Labor Action, as one commentator put it, was written for intellectuals and intellectually minded workers. No doubt this was in part attributable to the low ebb of socialist popularity that isolated the movement during the McCarthyite years. Nevertheless, *Labor Action* set a standard for depth and originality under Draper's stewardship which, many believe, has yet to be surpassed.

The ISL decided to scuttle its apparatus and merge with the Socialist Party in the late 1950s. This — in theory at least — was to prepare a neutral turf needed to attract disillusioned CPers to a multi-tendency Debsian vehicle and thus realign the American socialist movement. In fact, it created a rather hardened, narrow social-democratic sect which was insensitive to the stirrings of



the leftward moving student movement of the early 1960s.

Draper, whose base at this point was in Berkeley, became one of the two leading adult participants in the Free Speech Movement. As one of the student leaders remarked, Draper "ha(d) always been ready with encouragement, but ha(d) consistently refrained from giving inappropriate and unsolicited 'vintage 1930s' advice. This is far from common..." And it stood in marked contrast to the SP's rather heavy handed dealings with the Students for a Democratic Society.

Eventually, in response to the war in Vietnam and the emerging student revolt, Draper led a leftist group out of the SP, the core of which were to become the International Socialists.

Draper fortified his co-thinkers with what might be considered the seminal formulation of "Third Camp" socialism — "The Two Souls of Socialism". Whereas different kinds of "socialism" had customarily been divided into revolutionary or reformist, peaceful or violent, democratic or authoritarian, Draper held that the fundamental divide is between Socialism-from-Above and Socialism-from-Below.

The unifying theme of all forms of socialism-from-above — and this includes both Stalinism and social democracy — is its realisation through the beneficence of a governing elite rather than through the self-activity of the masses. "It is the conception of Socialism-from-Above which accounts for the acceptance of Communist dictatorships as a form of 'socialism'. It is the conception of Socialism-from-Above which concentrates social-democratic attention on the parliamentary superstructure of society and on the

manipulation of the 'commanding heights' of the economy, and which makes them hostile to mass action from below."

The great contribution of Marx was to synthesise the socialist idea with revolutionary democracy thereby exorcising the stamess twin spirits of utopianism and elitism. Marx, as Draper propounded it, argued that socialism-from-below was possible "on the basis of a theory which sees the revolutionary potentialities in the broad masses, even if they seem backward at a given time and place". This is a lesson well worth remembering especially now that some 'socialist' faint-hearts begin to recoil from the Eastern European masses because of their free-market illusions.

During this period, Draper also turned out a remarkable "political guide" entitled "The ABC of National Liberation Movements". Here he outlined a framework through a set of theses wherein the issues associated with national liberation movements could be analysed. The point, as Draper reflected, was to combine the "most militant opposition to the American government in the war together with a refusal to glorify the NLF and its leader Ho Chi Minh." Here Draper reminded socialists that a "distinctive feature of the Marxist approach is the distinction between military support of a given armed struggle and political support to a given organisation (including a government) which may be officially 'in charge' of that armed struggle."

Draper, along with a number of comrades, ultimately left the International Socialists in 1970 over the "American Question", specifically over what was felt to be a sectarian approach to the trade union movement. Much of his subsequent years were devoted to his monumental four volume work "Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution", an indispensable study guide to socialist politics.

In 1981 he co-founded and directed The Center for Socialist History. The Center has the aim of rearming the socialist movement in the US by re-examining the historical (pre-1914) roots of American socialism. The Center houses

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was saying or the socialist ideas Tony had moved towards. It was a bandwagon. They thought the left was going to win and thought they ought to have a share of it. When Tony didn't win, the same people very rapidly switched their allegiance to the new leadership. Now you find people who were so-called Bennites have become staunch Kinnockites, mouthing the Kinnockites' arguments, talking about the need to drop unilateralism, learn from Thatcher, and so on.

They've backtracked on just about every issue. Yes, because they put their career in front of everything else. Their career is what they're in it for. It saddens, but it doesn't totally surprise, me. People I would have thought a few years ago were really staunch, now won't even talk to me about it, about the Party. I'm an embarrassment.

Is there any connection between this careerism and the question of financial self-interest and the nature of the parliamentary and even local government systems? I mean that system as compared with the workers' council ("soviet") system Lenin advocated — "every cook shall govern", the easy recallability of representatives at every level, every representative getting a worker's wage, and thus no possible structure of protected career building. Isn't the whole careerist blight a necessary part of the parliamentary system?

I suppose we're so used to the parliamentary system as it has developed, and the local government system as it has developed, that it is quite difficult for us to think in terms of new concepts. You get involved, become part of something for such a long time. But we have got to think differently, and work for something different. The present parliamentary system is not necessarily the way that society will be governed in the future.

The American Marxist Hal Draper wrote a pamphlet redeveloping the concept of the two souls of socialism. Look at the early days of the movement and you'll find that there was always a big argument

between those who believed in what we called state socialism and those who believed in non-state socialism, or socialism from above as against socialism from below.

In Britain, during the early development of socialism, people like William Paul and the Socialist Labour Party used to argue for non-state socialism as against the state socialist Social Democratic Federation. Even the best Labour Party socialists have been state-socialists. There has always been a fundamental conflict between the two approaches.

I think we've got to re-examine this dispute, and go over it again, thinking about it and updating it. Society is now in a state where the ideas of socialism from below equate best with what we require if we are to refine, renew and move forward our socialist concepts. This is the thing which is important. We must get away from the concept of socialism as a great vast bureaucratic centralisation of both the economy and society. We have to get away from that.

The non-state concepts have to be allowed to grow. Probably non-state socialism has always been the only real type of socialism. It cannot lead to bureaucratic distortions. Stalinism has put back socialism for decades and lent credibility to those who argue that socialism is not possible after what happened in the Soviet Union. This is why I think education is so important. Because Marx was right: "the emancipation of the working class must be self-emancipation". Workers have to learn from books as well as experience that they can actually do it, that they have the ability to build a new society.

One thing impressed me when I first went to an Israeli socialist kibbutz. I met a bloke who was sweeping up the canteen. I enquired about him because he looked as if he was getting on a bit for the job.

They said, "He's last year's manager. We don't allow people more than a year in different jobs. He's got the ability to be the manager, a great manager, but we

take different jobs each year, so that you're never tied totally into one thing. You don't become the one who runs everything. Next year you'll be sweeping up, and the next year you might be helping them cook." That to me was socialism.

I also witnessed great arguments about whether they should build factories linked to the kibbutzes. And should the factories have non-kibbutz workers, say Arab workers? The old socialists said: "No, we musn't do that. If the state, or the Arabs, want to build factories, that's for them. But we can't exploit these people."

I don't suggest we can do exactly the same, but we can do something very similar. This is how we have got to look at it, and why I think that public ownership could take many forms. You could have local authority, public ownership, individual companies publicly owned, co-operative public ownership. The essential thing is that in each of them the workers have got to have not just the final say, but the say right through, involved in running and controlling the enterprise from beginning to end.

You agree with the idea of some sort of real soviet system, democracy such as Lenin expounds in 'The State and Revolution'?

Yes, if we're going to build this new society we've got to have new concepts. This is essential, to have a further look at such people as the "Council Communists", Gorter and Pannekoek. Why did they argue this, why were they at the Workers' Opposition in the Soviet Union, and so on. Why were they discounted? Let's face it, Trotsky was also very much part of the narrow bureaucratic concept, just as much as Lenin. Lenin was alright originally, stating the case for socialism from below, but after a bit he moved away from it, even Lenin.

Didn't they move under the pressure of material conditions — without changing their goals?

Of course. This is what happens. We are not always masters in our own house.

They didn't say, "this is good"; they said "this is what we have to do, for now".

That's right. But then, after a bit, what you have to do becomes the accepted norm, the accepted view. It's then you need to be a brave soul to say "hang on, that's not what we believe". They're the ones who stand up and fight, the ones who argue for workers' councils, the ones who argue for the old concepts again, but in a new situation.

This is what we have to do. We cannot say, as Neil Kinnock and others do, "well, history is dead". History is not dead. History is something you learn from, and if you don't then you are dead. You just accept society as it is; you become part of it; you just stick your nose in the gravy trough and that's it.

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one of the largest socialist libraries in the US.

Most recently Draper was involved with the Independent Socialist Press, which is engaged in propagating the "Third Camp" perspective. The first volume of the latter, "America as Overlord", was issued in 1989 and contains a collection of Draper's essays outlining the role of the US as arbiter and overlord of the capitalist bloc. Several other volumes are planned,

including "Free Speech and Political Struggle", "American Student Movements", "Israel and the Arabs" and "Political Warfare". (The Independent Socialist Press can be contacted at 11 Eton Ct., Berkeley, California USA 94705).

Unfortunately, some of Draper's most provocative articles on the political-economy of bureaucratic collectivism and on the prospects of other (non-Stalinist) forms of bureaucratic collectivism are relatively-inaccessible. This is all the more lamentable since Draper was one of the few socialists who, by identifying

the overriding similarities between social-democratic and Stalinist conceptions of socialism-from-above, could have been said to anticipate recent events.

As Stalinist reformers in Hungary, East Germany and elsewhere "transform" their parties by donning social-democratic mantles, an intriguing question presents itself. Can bureaucratic-collectivism, like capitalism, assume a multiplicity of state forms, democratic as well as authoritarian?

As the revolutionary events in the Eastern bloc unfold, surely Draper's penetrating analyses will be sorely missed.

Barry Finger



Eric Heffer walks out of Labour Party conference 1985 in protest against platform attacks on Liverpool council.

Democracy and workers' councils

If the corruption which blights the labour movement is linked to the nature of the parliamentary political system, then the question arises: can we gain from a campaign to improve the existing system by making it more democratic?

I was reading a file of the 'Workers Dreadnought' the other day, the paper published by Sylvia Pankhurst. After 1917, they tried to apply soviet concepts to the British parliament. They went back to the Chartist demand for yearly parliaments, and advocated a whole series of other reforms to make MPs more accountable. Essentially they tried to translate the democracy of workers' councils as experienced in Russia after 1917 into British parliamentary terms and advocated a programme of changes. Is there any re-educational value in a campaign for annual parliaments and similar things? Wouldn't it maybe cut against the domi-

nant careerists in the movement?

If we had annual parliaments, it would be right to say that you shouldn't elect the same people. If you always elect the same people then they're going to have a real in-built belief that they must always be there.

So you think we might help cleanse the movement of corruption through a campaign for the reform of the whole parliamentary and local government systems?

In time, yes, not immediately. Immediately what we're concerned with is winning the next election.

For socialists, long term?

Long term, yes. We have to re-discuss and work out how the campaign should go. What we would be arguing for would have to come out of discussions. In the trade unions I've always believed that all officials should be elected, always. We used to have that in my union. We even elected all officials every year in Merseyside ASW, including the full-time officials, so that we were all involved.

We were discussing corruption... in the obvious sense, and also in the sense of the corruption of ideas and standards, a world where people can say they trim what they do to fit their career needs, yet

don't lose standing with our people. We seemed to agree that this is connected with the state of parliamentary democracy and that, maybe, then, something can be gained by a campaign to improve democracy — such things as the Chartist demands for annual parliaments. Can something be done to cleanse the movement, and regenerate it by way of a campaign to develop deeper, real democracy? Something perhaps like Trotsky advocated in France in 1934 — defend, deepen democracy. Is that worth pursuing?

It's not the democratic instrument it should be, and therefore we should have a highly critical attitude towards parliamentary institutions. But if you're going to have — for example, annual parliaments — then you can't have the same people elected all the time. Even if they are elected annually, they will develop ways of doing things and keeping control and it will undermine the whole idea. I think you've got to have a far wider representative democracy, therefore people should perhaps only be able to stand for one or two terms.

That is something that we must look at. If people go in for being representatives in the House of Commons it should not be a well paid well-heeled job forever. This is

very important. And we've got to abolish the House of Lords!

Also I think the 'representatives' should be representative. The Labour Party started off as a working class organisation and in the main its representatives in the House of Commons were working class, but nowadays there are hardly any industrial or working class people in the House of Commons! I mean people who worked on the shopfloor to earn a living, who know what it's like to get sacked on a Friday night. Most people in the House of Commons today simply have no idea what it's like to live under those circumstances, to be a worker who must submit to exploitation and at the same time fight it — in order to live.

I would say there is nothing wrong in having a campaign for a different type of representation, a different type of parliament. After all, we musn't be tied to these institutions forever. If they are not doing the job, then you change them and create new ones. The old syndicalists always used to argue for a different type of representation altogether. They would say that the new state, the new form of social organisation, was being built up through working class organisation in industry. Workers' councils? We don't have to slavishly follow anybody's blueprints but we do need to look very closely at existing

institutions and get down to developing new ideas and new ways of doing it.

How about soviets?

Soviets were workers' committees. It may not be the method that we need here. Maybe we need part workers' councils and part representation on the basis of where you live, and districts, and so on.

You seem to favour a mixture of parliament and workers' councils. After World War I in Austria and Germany for a while you had a mixture of parliament and workers' councils — and in Austria, at least, the partial institutionalisation of workers' councils. Yet in practice, the bourgeois parliament dominated and eventually sapped and destroyed the workers' councils. Isn't there a choice that has to be made between workers' councils and parliament?

Well, when you have dual control anywhere in the end one has to dominate, no question, unless there was acceptance by everybody that they were working for the same end, part of a new way of developing democracy.

The name 'soviets' is unfortunate now. And now it's pretty meaningless, or rather, like communism and even socialism, it has acquired a different meaning. But workers' councils — which were 'soviets' in revolutionary Russia —

came into existence in a whole range of countries, Bavaria, Hungary, Germany, Hungary 1956, partly Poland in 1956 and 1980. The experience is that where you have a lack of real democracy they are the natural form of self-organisation of the workers. Gdansk is the latest example. The workers' committee there in August 1980 was a 'soviet', a workers' parliament in every sense of the word. That being so, doesn't history tell us that the soviet is the natural easy form of workers' self-organisation at a high level of out-and-out class conflict?

It certainly is a form of workers' organisation and every time there's been a great struggle in Eastern Europe, the workers have thrown up workers' councils. They did it in Hungary, in Poland, to a lesser extent in Czechoslovakia. They do appear in every great struggle. The workers instinctively establish workers' councils to carry through their struggle. The only point — whether we like it or not — is that a minority of the people are involved, and therefore it doesn't involve the majority. So it does tend to become a dictatorship. And that does carry the seeds within it if you're not careful of the dictatorship of the party, and then the dictatorship of individuals within the party. That is the problem. We have to look at that very carefully if we are going to have genuine democracy — and socialism does mean that.

In the Wilson government

Can we go back to the '70s, and your experience of being a government minister? Do you think you were right to take the job? What about your resignation?

The job I was offered was building up the National Enterprise Board, getting work directed into underdeveloped areas, setting up development areas. I think I was right to take the job. It is far better that somebody who believes in socialist policies should do it than a careerist who does it for the perks.

But almost the first day I got into the job I was in conflict with the government. The first issue was Britain building warships for Chile. We had said before Labour was elected that we would not send the warships. But we did.

I made a speech, and was threatened with being sacked. I told Wilson: "If you're going to throw me out, then throw me out".

He didn't. He backed away.

I was then given the job of working out the industry policy. My White Paper was based on Labour Party

policy. It called for taking over a number of companies. Wilson got hold of it, and decided to change it all.

I was going to resign there and then. But we were just coming up to the general election, so I didn't. I think I should have resigned. It was the time to resign.

After we won the election with a big majority I was given a job working the policy through. What was embarrassing to me was that comrades moved amendments with which I totally agreed but I couldn't support them. It was very embarrassing.

Then the Common Market came up, and I was able to say: "This is Party policy. The leadership is against Party policy. I'm going to speak out in the House of Commons" — knowing that Wilson would sack me.

The experience was worthwhile. I learned about the tremendous power of the civil service, far greater power than you would think. They would undermine ministers, and use other ministers to speak in Cabinet against them. Richard Crossman revealed that in his diaries.

There are civil service meetings, with all the top civil servants, parallel to the ministerial meetings, and they really have an effect. The idea of the civil service being a neutral force is ridiculous.

Having been a minister also meant that you could speak with a certain authority on some issues which you wouldn't have if you had never been a minister.

One view at the time was that Wilson appointed you and Tony Benn as ministers to co-opt the left, and to try and butter up the working class. There was tremendous working-class militancy in 1974-5. Later, when Wilson felt more secure, he could spew you out. In other words, you were used by the right wing.

Well, I went very early, after 15 months. I don't think it was part of their plan that I should resign the way I did.

I was always clear about what I wanted to do. When I realised that it was not possible, I was clear that I couldn't stay. No doubt it was quite useful for Harold to put us in jobs.



Trotsky at the Soviet of People's Commissars, 1918



Eric Heffer speaks at the Constituency Labour Parties Conference, 1988

Socialists and the EC

As I understand it, you've had different attitudes to the Common Market. Could you summarise?

Originally I said that whether we liked it or not, the capitalist forces were going to get together in Europe and create a Common Market. Capitals were overflowing the national boundaries. There was nothing we could do about that, as long as the capitalist system was there; the only answer to the power of capital was the power of the working class, working together to offset the internationalism of the capitalists by the genuine internationalism of the workers.

I wasn't necessarily opposed to Britain joining the Common Market, because I knew you couldn't stop it anyway.

But the Treaty of Rome was a treaty which consolidated the capitalist system. I always thought we could get changes in the Treaty of Rome. Then I realised we weren't going to get any changes, and that the effect of Britain's entry into the Common Market on the British working class was going to be horrific. Areas like Liverpool were going to become almost derelict once we joined the Common Market.

All that turned me against joining the Common Market.

That was the dominant left-wing view. I don't want to sound rude, but much of the left's position was very nationalist,

and even chauvinist.

Well, I don't think that's true.

The Communist Party?

I don't think anybody took much notice of the Communist Party.

They set much of the tone in the 1960s.

Yes, of course they were influential. But sovereignty matters if you want to carry out socialist policies and everybody else in the Common Market wants to stop you.

They said we couldn't have policies to help our development areas. We couldn't put certain money in because it was against the Treaty of Rome. And their agricultural policy was mad.

I believe in a United States of Europe, but I don't believe in the Common Market.

How do we get from where we are to a socialist Europe?

We work with other parties, with workers in Europe, with the trade union movement in the Common Market.

But you've got nothing like genuine socialist forces in government in Europe, and unfortunately you're not likely to. If you did get genuine socialist forces in various governments in Europe, then you could begin to get together and make agreements, perhaps even set up a federated Socialist Europe. But that's going to be even more difficult that it was in the past.

Since the creation of the Iron and Steel Community in 1950, there has been a tremendous economic knitting-together of the core European Community countries.

George Orwell

"I have always opposed Stalinism". So every time-serving Labour politician will tell you these days, proudly displaying some mild comment they once made about the Kremlin's methods being a bit bureaucratic while anxiously shoving their praise for "the socialist countries" to the back of the filing cabinet.

George Orwell, who died 40 years ago this year, really did oppose Stalinism — and at a time when it took strong nerves and a clear head for anyone on the left to do that.

While more "sophisticated" intellectuals blinded themselves to what was really going on in Russia in the '30s, and Fabians like Shaw and the Webbs wrote paeans of praise to Stalinist totalitarianism, Orwell cut through the then-fashionable crap.

In 1937 he put his life on the line as a POUM militia volunteer in the Spanish Civil War. The POUM was politically vague and unstable, but it retained enough socialist principles to find itself (along with the anarchists) on the receiving end of the Stalinists' murderous onslaught. Orwell's account of his Spanish experience, *Homage to Catalonia*, exposed the Stalinists' lies.

Orwell became a patriot in World War 2. And his attacks on "earnest ladies in sandals" and his obsessive dislike of birth control would certainly have placed him on the wrong side in modern debates on feminism.

But his famous later novels, *Animal Farm* and *1984*, are not the anti-communist diatribes they are made out to be. Orwell's objective was not to denigrate revolution, but to expose the betrayal of revolutionary ideas by bureaucrats.

Underpinning *1984* is a world view very close to that developed in the early '40s by the ex-Trotskyist James Burnham, who quickly went over to the right wing, and by Max Shachtman, who remained a revolutionary socialist into the '50s. Orwell summarised Burnham's theses as follows:

"Capitalism is disappearing, but socialism is not replacing it. What is now arising is a new kind of planned, centralised society... The rulers of this new society will be the people who effectively control the means of production: that is, business executives, technicians, bureaucrats and soldiers, lumped together by Burnham under the name of 'managers'.

"These people will eliminate the old capitalist class, crush the working class, and so organise society that all power and economic privilege remain in their own hands..."

Orwell did not accept the "Managerial Revolution" and the world of *1984* as inevitable. He criticised Burnham for "trying to build up a picture of terrifying, irresistible power". Orwell detected an element of "power worship" in Burnham; and that, he commented, "blurs political judgment because it leads, almost unavoidably, to the belief that present trends will continue".

Despite the undoubted pessimism in his later writings, Orwell remained committed to socialist change. And the force he believed could bring about that change was the working class.

Jim Denham

It's now something like an international confederation, but not even bourgeois-democratic. It is run by bureaucrats. So isn't there a strong case that the European workers should demand democratic accountability to a proper sovereign European parliament?

No.

Why not?

Because we'd be kidding them.

How?

It's dominated by the Treaty, isn't it?

Which can be revised. A sovereign European parliament could overrule it.

I thought it could be revised. Now I don't think it can. I think we should just argue for working together with socialists in Europe. We should have a basic programme that we can argue for throughout the whole of Europe, not just in the Common Market countries.

Should we raise the call for a Socialist United States of Europe?

I think so. We don't have to be confined to the Common Market. Even in Western Europe, what about Sweden? They're not in the Common Market.

But the Common Market is a fact we must reckon with, an integrated community.

Yes, dominated by the Germans!

Isn't it in our interests to try to democratise it? It's not going to break apart.

It's a red herring.

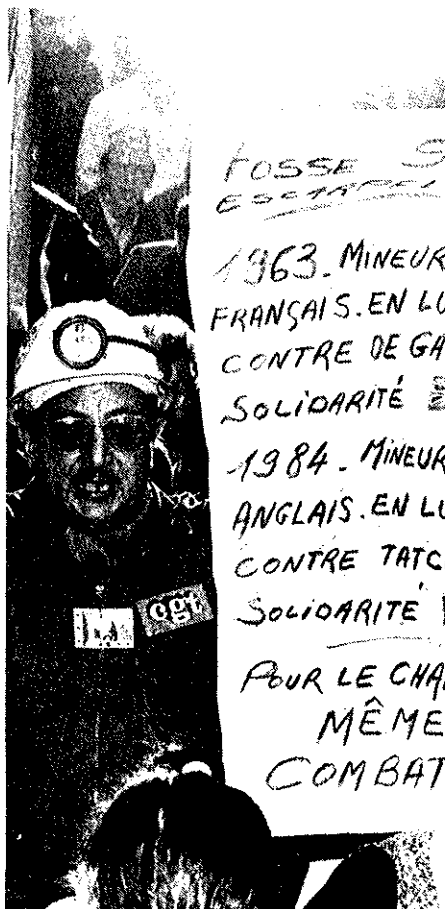
Wouldn't working-class cooperation in a drive for democracy in the European Community be a real step towards socialism and internationalism in practice?

Internationalism in practice could start if, for example, when the British seamen were on strike, seamen and dockers in other parts of Europe acted to support them.

We wouldn't choose the Common Market. It is often as irrational as capitalism as a whole. But it's there. It's there because we, the socialists, failed over the last six decades to create a Socialist United States of Europe, and we've got to take account of that.

In the middle of the First World War, Trotsky asked: "What do we do supposing that Germany unites Europe? Do we then demand it is taken apart again?" He answers no; he argues instead for a European working-class struggle for the democratisation of the German European empire — a republic, sovereign parliament, and so on.

That's the same argument as was used by the Austrian Marxists in relation to the Austro-Hungarian empire. It didn't work because people didn't want it.



French miner gives solidarity during 1984-5 strike

It was very logical to say that we shouldn't get rid of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but instead make it a democratic socialist federation. But people didn't want it. And they aren't going to want it now, are they?

From a socialist point of view, what was wrong with the Austro-Hungarian Empire was that it didn't allow for self-determination and secession. It wasn't democratic. States have the right to secede from the Common Market.

The socialists created a socialist party with national sections throughout the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In my opinion, that was a sensible and legitimate Marxist view. But it didn't work, because the Hungarians wanted their own state, the Austrians wanted their own, the other nationalities wanted their own, and so it all broke up.

But if the Austro-Hungarian Marxists had been genuine revolutionaries and had created a revolution in the centre, it might have held the whole thing together on a new basis.

Anyway, national oppression and subjugation of peoples doesn't exist in the Common Market. The Common Market is not an empire. It is a federation of democratic bourgeois states. It is in many ways foul and filthy, but it's not an em-

pire.

Well, they've got a chance now. They've got a majority of socialists in the European Parliament. Why don't they put forward a series of proposals to change the character of the EC?

Because they're not socialists!

Some of the Labour Group in the European Parliament are on the Left of the Labour Party.

The Left doesn't do it because the Left focuses on getting out.

The reality is that it's not going to happen. If it's not going to happen, then why should we waste our time and energy? Why not build up genuine working-class solidarity through the trade unions and so on?

But we need a working-class programme for the Socialist United States of Europe, and also a democratic programme — because it's not a democratic system. The bureaucrats rule, and the Parliament is feeble!

The capitalist European Community has existed now for nearly 40 years. We wouldn't choose that road to European unity. It has come like this because we were defeated in all the revolutionary upsurges. But it's there. It's the bourgeoisie's version of our old programme of uniting Europe. They've done it in their own way.

They haven't. I don't agree. I don't think the unity is very real.

Isn't there a parallel with the unification of Germany in the 1860s?

No. It was a different matter of the unification of Germany. It was different with Italy. You had a people with the same language, the same cultural background, the same roots. It's different.

But the the economy of the core European Community states is in some ways more integrated than the USA.

I don't think that's true.

So we should still call for withdrawal?

I don't know whether we should call for withdrawal. There seems to be no question of withdrawal at the moment. I just don't think we should pay too much attention to the whole damn thing.

We should either do our best to break it up, or fight for a democratic European Community.

I think we should talk about a wider Europe which brings EFTA, the Common Market, and East European countries together. We should use the Council of Europe as the basis. That's far more important than the Common Market. The Common Market is going to stand in our way if we have a real socialist government in this country.