

Should we call for a workers' government?

IF THE Blairites succeed in what they are trying to do to the Labour Party, they will drive the organised working class out of politics. For now the Labour Party still has its trade-union links, but a Labour election victory may launch the Blairites into cutting those links.

What does this prospect mean for socialists who have long regarded a vote for Labour as a vote for the labour movement in politics? The editorial in the October *Workers' Liberty* (no.35) argued:

"The root cause of the progressive degeneration of the Labour Party, that is, the labour movement in politics, is *political*... What is the purpose of labour movement participation in politics? To serve working-class goals. If it does not do that, then the politics become a means by which the labour movement ties itself to the political machinery of its exploiters and enemies. That is what it is with the Blairites.

"The old aim of the labour movement in politics must be proclaimed anew: to achieve a workers' government, a government prepared to serve the working class. Right now such a government would, minimally, work to ensure trade union rights, an adequate minimum wage, free education, a rebuilt Health Service and a restored welfare system. From that to the seizure of state power and the suppression of the bourgeoisie, a range of possible 'workers' governments' are possible — from 1945 Labour to the Russian Soviet government of October 1917.

"Socialists agitate and organise for the trade unions to rouse themselves, to make political demands, to table, for example, an emergency plan for rebuilding the welfare state and a workers' charter of trade union rights. We argue for

them to judge all politicians by those demands, to insist that their political representatives pursue those demands, to remove and replace any representatives who obstruct those demands... Apart from daft illusions... there is no other alternative to Blairism, that is, to the extinction of labour politics which Blair and his gang now openly prepare..."

Calling for the continuation of the fight in the Labour Party against the Blairites, the editorial advocated a Labour vote in the next election, but argued that it is also necessary to insist as forcefully as possible on class as the measuring rod against which to gauge all things in politics, *including the Labour Party*. Even if the Blairite project is carried no further than it has already gone, Labour — "New Labour" — no longer signifies working class even to the minimal extent it used to.

Advocacy of a workers' government and a campaign in the trade unions for the immediate, minimal measures such a government would carry out, combined with propaganda for the socialist transformation of society, best answer the needs of this situation, not least because they will help the bedrock labour movement resist Blair.

These ideas have proved to be controversial among supporters of *Workers' Liberty*, and therefore in this issue we open a discussion on the question. It will continue in the next issue. We invite contributions from readers and supporters.

The three contributors in this issue are George Macaulay, Tom Willis and Richard Kinnell. Macaulay was centrally involved in the Bennite campaign of the 1980s and Willis of the recent campaign in defence of Clause Four. Kinnell has written about Labour politics for over 20 years.

Sean Matgamna, Editor *Workers' Liberty*

The Blairites have not won the decisive battle

THE Blairites have *not* won the decisive battle over the link between the trade unions and the Labour Party. Certainly, with the past defeats of the left they are in a strong position, which they are continuing to consolidate; their intentions are clear; but we shouldn't be mesmerised by their strength. They have not felt strong enough to launch a full assault and are unlikely to do so until after the election. An election victory will put them in a position to introduce state funding for political parties, but will also remove the deadening pressure of subordinating everything to kicking out the Tories. Even at this stage, the indications are that a broad and powerful campaign can be organised to stop Blair and keep the link. To fight after a whole series of defeats is certainly difficult, but not impossible: we can still win.

The Labour Party *is* the political party of the British labour movement, a bourgeois workers' party with the Blairites the political leadership. It will only be transformed into something like the American Democratic Party *if* the Blairites carry the day. I think both these points are central in deciding how we relate to the present political situation.

This is accepted at the end of the editorial in *WL35*, 'Stop Blair, stay with the unions, fight for a workers' government!'

"The socialists must organise. For ourselves we believe that unless socialists organise and direct their work, in the first place but not exclusively, at the existing labour movement, then they are building sects, and not an organisation that is fused with the labour movement, working to transform the broad movement and bring the working class towards socialism. We will stay in the Labour Party.

The Labour Party remains the bourgeois workers' party it always was, but now with a radical shift towards the bourgeois pole of the dialectical, contradictory, formation. Concretely, now, a Blair-Labour government will be anti-working-class according to even the most minimal criteria.

The reason for nevertheless wanting a Labour government is calculation that the roadblock can be broken and the working class begin to raise itself. The Labour leaders, whose party is still based on the working class, may not have things entirely their own way in power. The act of taking office will break, or begin to break, their hold on the labour movement. Much will depend on the socialists organising the labour movement to fight for its own needs against a Labour government pursuing Tory policies. For example, tremendous scope exists for self-renovating trade-union and working-class

Blair freezes out activists

Labour Whistle

Fran Abrams
Political Correspondent

Labour preparing to cast trade unionists and other activists out of policy-making by disbanding the constitutional party which are their party-line. In a fundamental reform which will remove the main holding blocks of the party's grassroots organisation, the party leadership in planning

The scheme is likely to be published in May or June and will involve a major restructuring of the party's internal organisation. It will allow Labour Party members to vote on matters of national and international policy which they would not have been able to do previously. Labour Party members

through OMTV, he said. This group would draw up shortlists of candidates from an approved list of names and other party members to vote on matters of national and international policy which they would not have been able to do previously. Labour Party members

The reform groups are also likely to recommend sweeping changes to Labour's annual conference and its National Executive Committee (NEC), which would be able to elect its own members.

The plan originates from the National Executive Committee (NEC), which would be able to elect its own members. The committee, whose members include Labour's former general secretary, Jack Jones, and the Labour Party's former general secretary, Peter Cook, will be able to make decisions on policy to make through its general and national forums on specific issues. It is not clear how the reform groups should vote on it, it says.

The document states that the National Executive Committee should no longer make decisions on policy to make through its general and national forums on specific issues. It is not clear how the reform groups should vote on it, it says.



action in defence of the welfare state, and especially the National Health Service...

...Today we can only beat the Tory enemy without if, in the Labour Party and trade unions alike, we simultaneously fight the Tory enemy within".

But the editorial goes further. Now, in response to the Blairites, it says we should call for a fight for a workers' government and by implication change the approach to the Labour leadership in the election and afterwards that we have developed over the last 30 years — vote Labour and organise/fight the leadership. I think this would be wrong, and that it is *pre-mature* to raise the call for a workers' government now.

Firstly, a comment about slogans, propaganda and agitation. We make propaganda — we argue the case for socialism; we point to the stark choices that face the working class movement and the need to put class to the fore; we try and break down our ideas into more readily understood forms. Here the idea of 'a government that fights for our class like the Tories fight for theirs' (Workers' Government) is and always has been useful.

But propaganda is not the same as agitation. For example, we regularly make propaganda for the need for generalised working class action (a general strike) — it's part of our agenda — but whether we raise a call for such action depends on the state and development of the class struggle. The question of slogans is concrete — how do we take forward the existing struggle in the most militant, class-conscious way possible; what are the next links in the chain?

One of the aspects of the 1922 Comintern discussions on the workers' government slogan that is relevant today is their approach. They distinguished making propaganda for the slogan ("...to be applied almost everywhere") and raising it as a call, a "topical political watchword", and were then concrete about the latter. For example, although the slogan had wide applicability in the early 1920's, Zinoviev believed the call for a workers' government in France had been premature. "...the slogan was understood as a pure parliamentary combination. ...It was a possibility, it contained revolutionary prospects, but in France, under the circumstances, it was premature. If we had based our united action on the eight-hour day, we might have had better results." The issue in the discussion here is about the applicability of the slogan now, not about its precise content. The content is important in the following sense only. "A government prepared to serve the working class", even on the minimum programme outlined in WL35 ("...minimally, work to ensure trade union rights, an adequate minimum wage, free education, a rebuilt Health Service and a restored welfare system..."), would be radically different from past Labour governments (with

the possible exception of 1945 Labour) which have administered capitalism according to capitalism's own laws. To implement even this programme in the present situation a government would have to fight against resistance by the bourgeoisie/state machine and would therefore have to base itself in part directly on working-class organisations. So the slogan for us cannot be a clever way of calling for 'old' Labour or an easily understood way of describing the labour movement in politics (which today is the Labour Party!).

16 years ago we were able to point out the possibility of such a government arising out of the existing political situation and development of the struggle to renew the labour movement after the 1974-79 Labour governments.

"...this Left must set itself the goal of winning the labour movement to fight immediately to drive the Tories out and install a Workers' Government. This will differ from the Labour Governments so far in being based directly on the organisations of the labour movement, being under the labour movement's direct control (at least to a serious extent),

and fighting to serve the working class interest against the bourgeoisie.

The fight to democratise the labour movement — the Labour Party, and the trade unions too — is the fight to make such a Workers' Government a possibility. If we drive through the Brighton and Blackpool decisions on reselection, if we subordinate the Parliamentary Labour Party to the labour movement, and if we get a serious proportion of the votes for electing the Labour leader (i.e. if Labour has a Parliamentary majority, the Prime Minister), and if we succeed in politically re-arming the labour movement with radical working-class socialist policies, then such a government is attainable."

(Introduction to *Labour democracy and the fight for a Workers' Government*, December 1980. Emphasis in original)

Today the situation is very different. In 1980 the left was on the offensive, and under the slogan 'Never Again' was fighting to democratise the Labour Party; the labour movement was industrially much stronger. Today the left is much weaker; its immediate aim is to organise a defensive struggle to stop Blair and retain the existing links between Labour and the unions. Unlike in 1980, there is no direct or clear line between where we are now and a government of a radically different sort. Then the fight for labour democracy was the beginning of a fight to transform the labour movement, a necessary condition for a 'workers' government'; now the fight will be organised around defending the existing structures.

I think an understanding of our own history, of the approaches and methods we have used in the past, is a necessary part of today's discussion.

In 1979, after five years of a Labour government increasingly implementing and refiguring Thatcher's policies, our slogan was not 'Vote Labour and fight for a workers' government', although such a workers' government would have been a clear class alternative to the Tories — unlike Callaghan's Labour Party! It was 'Vote Labour and organise for specific working class politics; Vote Labour and prepare to fight the leadership'.

Why this, apparently more minimal, slogan? Because it summed up, in election times, our basic approach to the Labour Party and labour movement. We did not abstain; we sided with the political party of our basic class organisations against the Tory enemy; we explained that a Labour victory would be a gain for the working class because of the link, because it would create better conditions for the working class to fight for its interests. But we retained our independence, insisting that only working-class action against that government would ensure improvements. We didn't pretend that a Labour government with the existing leadership, structures, etc, would be anything but a bosses' government — we didn't fantasise about it becoming a workers' government, or 'Labour to power with socialist policies'.

We called for a Labour vote *only* because of the link — it had nothing to do with Labour's stability or otherwise as a political formation, with whether it was better politically or not than the Tories, or with whether Labour leadership were 'pale pink Tories' (Kinnock) or 'quasi-Tories' (Blair).

To steer to the right and call for critical support for existing Labour leaderships was *never* an 'adequate' political response

— if we had been strong enough we would have stood our own candidates! — but it enabled us to relate to the existing labour movement, its immediate concerns, and allowed us to point the need to organise a fight against the Labour leadership that was the necessary next stage in taking the struggle forward.

It was *after* Labour's 1979 election defeat and the development of the fight for democracy in the Labour Party that the workers' government slogan became relevant. When that struggle was defeated the call was dropped, although we continued to make propaganda for the idea.

12 years further on, following a substantial shift to the right inside the Labour Party (the 'pale pink Tories' around Kinnock were firmly in charge), our approach in the last General Election (1992) is worth repeating at length. The editorial 'Turn the tide' appeared in *Socialist Organiser* 518 (26.3.92):

"Socialist Organiser is bitterly critical of the leaders of the Labour Party. Wherever we have influence ... we fight to defeat Kinnockite policies and those who promote them. In response the Kinnockites have banned Socialist Organiser in the Labour Party and tried to expel Socialist Organiser supporters.

What the working class needs is a workers' government — a socialist government that is accountable to the labour movement, which puts the interests of the working class above everything else and which cuts down capitalism. That is what Socialist Organiser wants. We want socialism.

Nevertheless we are doing everything we can to help Labour win the election. Why?

Because the working class would benefit greatly and directly from the replacement of the Tories by even the present Labour Party. The working class will be better able to defend itself against a Labour government linked to the trade unions.

More than that: the defeat of Major and the Tories will help revive the self-confidence of millions of workers who are now too disheartened to fight directly for their own interests.

Millions now overawed by the brutal determination of the Tories to beat them down will begin to stir again. Millions who know that mass unemployment and a relentlessly hostile government are a difficult combination for a few hundred, or a few thousand, workers to beat in direct struggle, will begin to feel that struggle is not hopeless.

If we beat the Tories in the election, strikes and industrial militancy will revive. Open class struggle will revive.

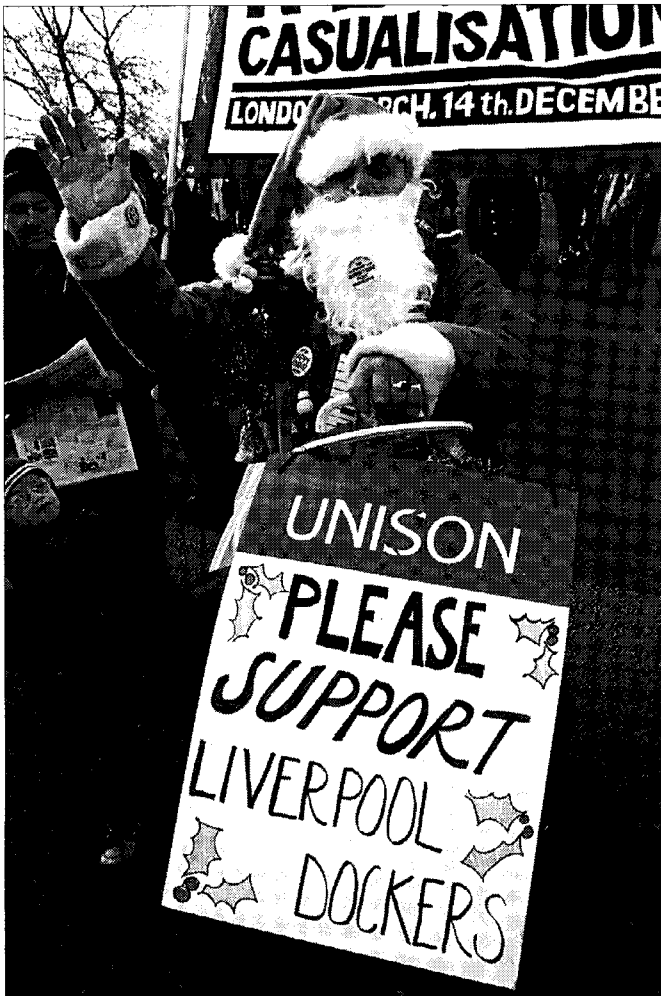
At a later stage, the newly militant workers will find the Kinnock government trying to subdue them. But that is the next stage after this.

Now a vote is the most potent weapon millions of workers are likely to get or want to use. Right now, a Labour election victory will change the political climate to the advantage of the working class ... the labour movement has to start from where it is now.

Kinnock's purged and ideologically policed Labour Party is a long long way from socialism. But it is still the party of the trade unions. The serious left therefore has no alternative but to 'steer to the right' in the election campaign — to throw everything we have into securing a Labour victory.

We know Labour's and Neil Kinnock's limitations. We know, too, that the working class movement will have to fight

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for its own interests under a Labour government. But Neil Kinnock's Labour Party is the best governmental option the working class has right now.

That is why the serious left is backing the Labour Party in the General Election. If Labour wins the election, it will be of great benefit to the working class. If not then it will not be the fault of the serious left.

This is the only honest approach for socialists who want to avoid kidding themselves about what Labour stands for and to avoid the irresponsible political sectarian fantasies which grip some socialists now.

Any act of the left, or any refusal of the left to act which helps the Tories or weakens Labour in this election will be a crime against the working class.

We say: vote Labour in every constituency. Organise like-minded socialists to go out and win votes for Labour. The organisations of the labour movement — the Labour Party included — must demand of a Labour government that it should, on taking office, immediately implement the following working class demands:

- Free trade unions;
- Restore Health Service cuts;
- Poll Tax amnesty;
- A minimum wage."

Two points arise for the purpose of the discussion now.

We made *propaganda* for a workers' government but our slogans were broken down into specific working-class demands around which workers could be mobilised. I think that this was the right way to approach it.

Secondly, has the further shift to the right by first Smith and then, more substantially, by Blair, meant that the basic approach

adopted in 1992 is no longer applicable now? Given that a Blair election victory will put the Blairites in a position where they can introduce state funding/sever the link with the unions (one of the basic points made in the *WL35* editorial), does that mean we have to change the basic position that a Labour victory would be a *gain* for the working class? Clearly our propaganda and agitation have to take these points into account — we start from where we are — but I do not think our position is basically changed. Our call for a Labour vote is determined not by the particular politics of the Labour leadership at any stage, by whether Clause IV is there or not, by whether they are puffed up shits or not, but by the link, by the fact it is the political party of the British labour movement. A Labour victory will be a *step forward* for the working class in the terms expressed in 1992 and in the *WL35* editorial; that is why that editorial is right to call for a Labour vote, and say "we will stay in the Labour Party". It is a call for critical support for Blair and to 'steer to the right'.

To clarify the question it is useful to pose it in reverse. Should we not favour the Blairites *losing* the election? This would, after all, discredit their 'project' and prevent them gaining a position from which they can tighten the rope "murderously". But an election defeat would not just affect the Blairites, it would also be seen as a defeat by the working class — and the effect of another Tory victory would be further demoralisation and apathy, benefiting only the right wing. The possibility of defeating the Blairites depends on moving forward, on working class confidence and activity developing, and the minimum condition for that in the next period is a Labour victory.

What do we say in the election, particularly to the best working class militants and ordinary workers who will rightly hate both the Tories and the Blairites, who may well say they won't vote Labour because they're 'just a bunch of Tories'? We say don't give into those bastards, fight! The situation can be changed, and the first step is to get rid of the actual Tories; that we are going to have to fight the Labour government on the basic issues affecting the working class, but that government is a better government for the working class than the Tories because it is still the Party of the trade unions and therefore more open to pressure from our class.

Following the election and assuming a Labour victory, the key to changing the situation will be the development of working class activity. We cannot predict the tempo, but the first phase will be workers "cutting up rough", directing their anger against a 'Labour' government running capitalism with pleasure. It will involve activity and action on specific issues (trade union rights; health service, etc.); it will aim to force concessions out of a hostile government. Its aim will *not* be to turn that government into something that won't happen — i.e. become a "a government prepared to serve the working class". From its actual starting point we argue for the most militant approach — pointing out, for example, that a demand to rebuild the Health Service would, in order to win, require the kind of mobilisation that existed in France in November/December 1995; we would argue that the link — assuming it was still there — should be used as one of the avenues to put maximum pressure on the government, and that it would be wrong to walk away from it.

The slogan 'Vote Labour and fight' is as 'adequate' in this situation as it has been in the past. It doesn't stop us saying anything that needs to be said about the Blairites and their 'project'. It is the *best* tool for relating directly to the next phase in the struggle — in the run-up to the election and the period afterwards — focusing on the need for the "labour movement to organise for its own needs against a Labour government pursuing Tory policies". It understands that our ability to go beyond

that phase will depend on the extent, character etc. of the struggle we can organise after the election.

The slogan 'vote Labour and fight for a workers' government' might sound more militant and 'advanced', but it has much less grip on the situation. 'Vote Labour and fight for a different government' is not a very useful slogan to mobilise activity against a new 'Labour' government. We can say dogmatically that such activity will be initially mobilised on specific issues like the minimum wage, health service, and our approach needs to relate to that fact. If such activity develops there will be sharp clashes with the government, that will spill over into the Labour Party; working class organisations and the left will revive. It is in such a situation that the call for a workers' government could again become a realistic perspective in the struggle. But that's later. Here and now, before the election, it is premature.

Similarly with the question of the Blairites' programme to cut the link — we have to analyse what stage of the struggle we are at. Here and now the fight is not about transforming the existing structures of the labour movement but defending what we have got. 'Stop Blair, Keep the Link'. After the election it will be posed as a battle to maintain the link with the existing Labour Party/government. This will have to be the focus of the struggle if we want to organise the all-out fight that is necessary, involving both left and right-wingers, militants and trade union leaders like Edmonds, and sections of the PLP.

Obviously, a defensive struggle can also be very militant, and e.g. we should argue that trade unions should wage a campaign for their members to join the Party as individual members to stop the Blairites using the CLPs against the unions. A fight to 'Keep the Link' — however defensive — also needs to say how the link can be used. Here and now we tie the link to the fight for trade union rights, a rebuilt Health Service, a decent minimum wage, and understand that in the first stages of a Labour government that it could be used as a means to pressurise that government.

We can put the argument in the following terms. The Blairites don't want a decent minimum wage and don't want

the pressure — that's why they want to cut the link. They want the labour movement pushed back 100 years, to when it went cap in hand to the Liberals. We must stop them and use the link for our specific demands. It is around such arguments that the campaign will be fought — not around the idea that a split and alternative government (workers' government) is the aim of the struggle. Again, the more militant sounding slogan ('Keep the Link and fight for a workers' government') has less grip on the actual development of the struggle, and therefore less effect.

The starting point for the discussion is a concrete assessment of the situation we face, the balance of forces, likely development of the struggle, etc. This affects and shapes the slogans we use.

It would be nice to believe in a different assessment. For example, that the fight over the link could be approached in the same manner as the fight to transform the movement in the early 1980's, or that the left was strong enough to organise a sizeable section of the labour movement around a programme of sloughing off the Blairite traitors and convening a conference within months of an incoming 'Labour' government that would sever links with the renegades and group its political representatives around a programme of "a government prepared to serve the working class". Here and now such scenarios are wishful thinking.

There is another possible assessment. That the Blairites have already won; that they have cut loose from the labour movement; that the structures of the labour movement, and particularly the Labour Party, are so neutered as to be worthless. In this situation 'old' ways of relating to Labour are simply irrelevant, and by extension the case for voting Labour gone. In this situation the immediate perspective for socialists should be to maximise the *de facto* split in the labour movement, to regroup and refound the Labour Representation Committee on the basis of a working class programme and the 'fight for a workers' government'. Such a perspective would make the SLP right now.

I think they are wrong.

George Macaulay

"Vote Labour and Fight" is now not enough

FOR many decades, the word from Marxists in Britain about what government we want immediately has been "For a Labour Government but..." or "Vote Labour and..." There have been many, and sometimes important, arguments about the qualifications ("... but..." or "... and..."), yet "Labour" has been a relatively stable framework: the parliamentary representation of the organised working class. Within that framework we have fought against the Labour leaders' subservience to capitalism, for working-class demands, and for a democratic and socialist transformation of the labour movement.

The framework is no longer stable. The current Labour leadership has made it clear that, if elected, it will use the authority and resources of government to destroy Labour politics — to abolish working-class political representation. It will introduce state funding for political parties, and break Labour's dependence on the trade unions.

Today, therefore, to state our basic case for a government of working-class political representation, we need a broader, more basic formula: a "workers' government".

The Blair faction repeat again and again that they offer no "favours" to the organised working class. At the same time they are lavish with promises to be "the party of business". Gordon

Brown, for example, reassures the Confederation of British Industry that he will veto any attempt by the European Union to impose on Britain a levelling-up of social security provision; he makes no promise to the TUC that he will resist a levelling-down.

All Labour leaderships have stood for accommodation to capitalism. Previous leaderships, however, have always offered within that framework some promise of "a shift in the balance of wealth and power in favour of working people and their families". Blair's hard-faced, one-sided pro-business stance and his unmistakable hints about breaking Labour's union link are new.

Mesmerised by the desire to oust the Tories "at all costs", the labour movement has so far been deferential to Blair. Blair's extravagant efforts to reduce working-class expectations of improvements from a Labour government, his urgent moves against Labour democracy, and his plans to break the union link, signal that he knows that the deference will not last long once Labour is in office. (Nor can it last much longer if Blair manages to lose the 1997 general election). To opt out of Labour politics now, as Militant Labour and Arthur Scargill's Socialist Labour Party have done, and retreat to the sidelines, is to admit defeat in advance and weaken the working-class forces for the show-

down. *Workers' Liberty*, in contrast, has rightly stressed the need to build campaigns like "Keep the Link".

We vote Labour despite Blair because Labour is still based on the trade unions, and putting Blair's Labour into office will create the best conditions for rousing the labour movement to reclaim Labour from the Blair faction (which includes rallying those Labour MPs who will remain loyal to the trade unions). The paradox is that putting Blair's Labour into office will also open the way for Blair to destroy Labour politics. It will add vigour to the struggle on both sides, Blair's and ours. Blair has an agenda beyond "vote Labour and carry out this or that measure"; so do we. We should state it now, not reserve it to be revealed after we are defeated! It makes no sense to say the "workers' government" slogan is too advanced now, but will be appropriate when we have been further set back, i.e. if and when Blair has broken Labour's trade union link.

Another way of putting it would be: "For a government that will implement the emergency plan for rebuilding the welfare state" — with the addition that we indicate how that government could be created, that is, by the workers' movement. Or another: "Keep the Link — and use it in workers' interests" — with the addition that we indicate something of what we believe workers' interests require (emergency plan for the welfare state). Advocacy of a workers' government can link together piecemeal demands on the welfare state, on the link, and for the self-renewal of the labour movement, into a purposeful whole.

If the unions rouse themselves, it is unlikely that Blair will step back into line as, for example, Harold Wilson did when the unions rebelled over "In Place of Strife" in 1969. It is more likely that he will go the way of Ramsay MacDonald in 1931. He has already built a sizeable political machine independent of the labour movement. In *Workers' Liberty* no.22 we showed that "the parliamentary elite [of the Labour Party now] has a bureaucracy at least ten times the size of the party's political full-time staff", all paid for by state funds or big-business donations. The Blair faction's perspectives are not limited to tilting the balance within a more-or-less stable structure of Labour politics. Neither should ours be. We should not be purely defensive. We should state our alternative positively: a workers' government. This means a government of a Labour Party reclaimed by the mass labour movement and purged of the Blair faction, or, if Blair manages to take the "Labour" name for his desired new Christian-Democratic sect, of a new workers' party based on the trade unions.

The battle over Labour's union link may well be much more messy than we have portrayed it, less clear-cut than suggested by Stephen Byers' comments at the TUC in September. We will have to tack and turn tactically as the battle develops. We must do much more than state the bare general slogan "workers' government"; we should not renounce that general slogan altogether.

"Workers' government" is not a slogan which stands on its own, for use in chants on demonstrations, on placards, or in a few words introducing ourselves when canvassing on the doorsteps. It does not mean an immediate drive to bring down a Blair government, or exclude campaigning for limited demands on that government, any more than, say, our advocacy of a democratic federal Europe means going onto the streets for the immediate destruction of the European Commission and overthrow of all European Union governments. It is a "propagandist" formula, used in articles and speeches to sum up a whole line of argument about reviving the labour movement. If we are not to be beaten down into routinism and minimalism, Marxists need such formulas as well as our more "practical" slogans.

In "What Is To Be Done?", Lenin took to task some Russian

socialists who argued that their agitation should be about calls for "definite, concrete actions" promising "palpable results", backed up with propaganda in the form of general "revolutionary explanation of the present social system".

Lenin argued that propaganda, agitation, and action must tie together: "the 'call' [to specific action]... either naturally and inevitably supplements the theoretical treatise, propagandist pamphlet, and agitational speech, or represents a purely executive function... The revolutionary worker... will indignantly reject all this talk about struggle for demands 'promising palpable results', etc. because he will understand that this is only a variation of the old song about adding a kopek to the ruble. Such a worker will say to [the more timid socialists]... we are not children to be fed on the thin gruel of 'economic' politics..."

There is great pressure on us today to sink into day-to-day work on minimal immediate issues, or even into absorption in individual trade-union or student-union concerns, supplemented only by arid, abstract, and perfunctory socialist theorising. To campaign for a workers' government is to cut against that pressure.

To create a workers' government, even on the most minimal interpretation, will require a great self-mobilisation by the trade unions. This self-mobilisation is urgent, and the strikes of November-December 1995 in France show that it is possible. If we do not believe this, then we should give up agitation for rebuilding the welfare state — for, in present conditions, nothing less than a highly mobilised labour movement which creates a government responsive to the movement can enforce that rebuilding.

For most of this century, the slogan "workers' government" would have been unusable in Britain because it would have seemed just an eccentric way of saying "Labour government". Today Blair has put "clear blue water" between New Labour and "workers". On the other hand, the term "workers" is broad enough that the slogan does not have the sectarian and fantastic quality that something like "revolutionary government" (or "Socialist Labour government") has. So long as Labour does remain, though with increasingly heavy qualifications, the party based on the organised working class, "workers' government" cannot reasonably be interpreted as "give up on the Labour Party".

We should have no superstition or pedantry about the words "workers' government". They cannot explain our whole perspective by themselves, but then neither can any two words on their own. They serve as a summary, in the most ordinary and straightforward language available, of the central argument that used to be expressed by slogans like "For a Labour government but....", and which now can longer be expressed by such slogans alone.

The slogan "workers' government" was advanced by the then-revolutionary Communist International in 1922, and used previously by us around 1980, in a rather different way from that we are advocating now. The circumstances were different: I think our *method* is the same as then, and, indeed, the 1922 discussions are very instructive now. But the significance of slogans is what they mean to the average worker or student within earshot of us, not the specialised references they have for us. We should certainly not use the slogan "workers' government" to evoke revolutionary perspectives in the way that a fetishist might beat a drum to bring rain by mimicking the sound of a thunderstorm; nor should we renounce it on the grounds that these are sacred revolutionary words, to be brought out and displayed to the faithful only on great holy days.

Richard Kinnell

Positive aim for a defensive battle

IT is impossible to discuss slogans for the British class struggle without an analysis of the stage through which that struggle is now passing, the possibilities inherent in the current situation and balance of forces in the labour movement.

Put schematically, Blair's control of the Labour Party is incompatible with its continued existence as a democratic, trade union-based party of the labour movement.

Therefore, the following outcomes of the Blair "project" are on the agenda. In the first case Blair wins, the trade union link is gutted, neutered or destroyed, party democracy is abolished and the *de facto* transformation of New Labour into a party modelled on the U.S. Democrats is completed.

In the other, more optimistic case, opposition to Blair really develops, the trade unions, a broad section of activists and a significant number of MPs refuse to see Labour's connection with the working class movement broken, and a new political force based on the trade unions or a section of the trade unions emerges.

If Blair is defeated on the link and party democracy at this year's conference it will not mean the end of the matter. It is likely he will come back again and again with similar proposals. The two stark alternatives will assert themselves.

Poem

Between rebellion as a private study and the public
Defiance, is simple action only on which will flickers
Catlike, for spring. Whether at nerve-roots is secret
Iron, there's no diviner can tell, only the moment can show.
Simple and unclear moment, on a morning utterly different
And under circumstances different from what you'd expected.

Your flag is public over granite. Gulls fly above it.
Whatever the issue of the battle is, your memory
Is public, for them to pull awry with crooked hands,
Moist eyes. And village reputations will be built on
Inaccurate accounts of your campaign. You're name for orators,
Figure stone-struck beneath damp Dublin sky.

In a delaying action, perhaps, on hillside in remote parish,
Outposts correctly placed, retreat secured to wood, bridge mined
Against pursuit, sniper may sight you carelessly contoured.
Or death may follow years in strait confinement, where diet
Is uniform as ceremony, lacking only fruit.
Or on the barrack square before the sun casts shadow.

Name, subject of all-considered words, praise and blame
Irrelevant, the public talk which sounds the same on hollow
Tongue as true, you'll be with Parnell and with Pearse.
Name aldermen will raise a cheer with, teachers make reference
Oblique in class, and boys and women spin gum of sentiment
On qualities attributed in error.

Man, dweller in mountain huts, possessor of coloured mice,
Skilful in minor manual turns, patron of obscure subjects, of
Gaelic swordsmanship and mediaeval armoury.
The technique of the public man, the masked servilities are
Not for you. Master of military trade, you give
Like Raleigh, Lawrence, Childers, your services but not yourself.

Charles Donnelly

Charles Donnelly was in his early twenties when he lost his life in the Spanish Civil War. He was a member of the CP when he died; the Stalinist historian Desmond Greaves says in his history of the Connolly Association that Donnelly was essentially a Trotskyist.

It is of course theoretically possible that Blair would be prepared to remain leader of a party which rejected his proposals on the trade union link and for the abolition of local parties and which as a result of pressure from below, in government implemented measures that were strongly pro-trade union, but in practice such a possibility is highly unlikely given Blair's previous record and his alternative base of support outside the labour movement.

The call for a workers' government, based on the trade unions, accountable to the labour movement and committed to an emergency plan for jobs, schools and hospitals, fits with the dynamics of the current situation. It provides a dramatic way of counterposing the programme of the working-class socialists to that of the Blairites and allows us to spell out in easily understandable terms our revolutionary Marxist analysis of just what is at stake in the struggle against Blair and "the project". The very words "workers' government" encapsulates the class issue of working-class representation versus a collapse back into liberalism raised by the current battles in the Labour Party.

We say to workers and youth: "Yes, vote Labour to kick out the Tories, and to break the logjam in the working class movement and politics generally; but a Blair government will be a bosses' government, supported by the billionaires' media, committed to capitalism and dedicated to keeping the unions in chains and driving them out of politics. We need something different, a workers' government, based on the trade unions, accountable to the labour movement and committed to an emergency plan for jobs, schools, and hospitals.

"We will fight for this workers' government by all means available, through the Labour Party where possible but outside and against it where necessary — but at all times relying on the direct action of workers and youth and the strength of our mass organisations."

That, I think, is a reasonable summary of our current political perspective. In explaining what we mean by "a workers' government" we can explain this basic position. The same is not true of "Vote Labour and fight."

To simply say "Vote Labour and fight for X, Y or Z socialist policy in the Labour Party", or "Vote Labour and prepare to fight" is to ignore the fact that the rules of the game are being changed, and that Blair wants to abolish the Labour Party and replace it with a new "party of the radical one-nation centre" [Blair's own words]. The old struggle between left and right in the labour movement is changing and new battle lines are being drawn.

The issue is this: are the trade unions — which are to all intents and purposes the organised class-conscious proletariat (to the extent that it so far exists as a class-conscious entity) — going to stand up to Blair and break from him to assert their own independent demands, or are we about to witness the end of Labour — which was trade unionism in politics?

To argue along the lines that "the Labour Party remains the trade union based party" is of no help whatsoever in analysing the dynamics of the period we have now entered, or in orientating to the task at hand.* Consider an analogy. A man is about to be executed, his neck is in the guillotine! The seconds are ticking away. To simply ask "Is he alive or dead?" when he may die before we can even answer is pointless. The questions are can he be saved? and why should he be saved?

It is a similar situation with the Labour Party. The question is, can the Labour Party be saved as a trade union based party? and why? Our answer is that Labour can be saved as any kind of

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workers' party only by the trade unions asserting their independence and declaring war on Blair. But what would a war with Blair be for? Answer: A workers' government. The slogan sums up the political purpose of resisting Blair. It tells us what is at stake. If the trade unions are silenced and driven out of politics then any immediate pathway, based on existing working class institutions and realities, for fighting for a workers' government is closed. The working class will have to begin again at the very beginning with a struggle to build a new workers' party. The struggle would be set back massively, possibly for decades.

We say that it is better to break the trade unions from Blair than wait for them to be sidelined and silenced. Put bluntly, a split in the Labour Party — one that takes a significant number of MPs who will remain loyal to the trade unions — is better than the trade unions passively accepting a Blair victory on the trade union link or party democracy, even if the Tories would end up the main beneficiaries, as they did after the MacDonald split in 1931.

Responsibility for any split that should occur would lie entirely with Blair and his Christian Democrat entrant sect. His project is to destroy the Labour Party. The need of the working-class movement for political representation and to resist its abolition stands on a higher moral and political plane than anti-Tory electoral unity with Blair and the other ideological Thatcherites of New Labour.

The Labour Party eventually recovered from the MacDonald split and pushed through the progressive reforms of the '45 government. In the next period a trade-union-based party in competition with Blair's New Labour as well as with the Tories could gain ground very quickly if it focused on key class issues. If we are to have a chance of reconstituting the political labour movement in the process of the struggle against Blair then the idea of fighting for a workers' government could play a pivotal, defining role in making sense of what could start off as a piecemeal, isolated and defensive battle. It is a unifying, integrating, generalising slogan that makes the link between separate struggles and between those struggles and the socialist revolution we need.

Obviously, no slogan on its own can lead a struggle — but its intelligent development can give meaning and direction to otherwise fractured responses. To say that the slogan is "too advanced" is a serious mistake. We need to think big, to give people a broader picture of what is at stake in current struggles and to provide a line of march for militant workers and youth. The Blairites have a clear conception of what they want. If the Marxists are to have any hope of rallying broad working-class resistance to them, then we too need a bold, clear conception of the aim of our resistance.

To limit ourselves to narrowly conceived and isolated defensive slogans like "Keep the Link" and fight for this or that particular policy i.e. minimum wage, trade union rights etc. is not adequate. We need such slogans — and the battle on the



link must be organised on the slogans of keeping the link and defending labour representation; to do otherwise would be sectarian — but we also need an overall slogan that generalises the different isolated slogans and spells out what the trade union link is for — a workers' government.

By adopting such an approach we can hope to raise ourselves above the general climate of demoralisation around us and perform the job Marx indicated for serious working class socialists: "To represent the future in the present."

Marxists base our understanding of how a revolutionary party is to be built on the material evolution and development of the mass labour movement, through the class struggle. For us "perspectives" are neither a matter of mechanical and vulgar evolutionism (passive predictions), or of pure voluntarism (calls to action

sucked out of our thumbs). We intervene in the class struggle in order to shape the future.

Gramsci put this issue well:

"It is certain that to foresee means only to see well the present and the past as movement, i.e. to identify with exactness the fundamental and permanent elements of the process. But it is absurd to think of a purely objective foresight. The person who has foresight in reality has a "programme" that he wants to see triumph, and foresight is precisely an element of this triumph. Only to the extent that the objective aspect of foresight is connected with a programme does this aspect acquire objectivity. 1) Because only passion sharpens the intellect and co-operates in making the intuition clearer; 2) because reality is the result of the application of wills to the society of things... to put aside every voluntary effort and calculate only the intervention of other wills as an objective element in the general game is to mutilate reality itself. Only those who strongly want to do it identify the necessary elements for the realisation of their will."

The workers' government slogan puts the "realisation of the will" of the revolutionaries into the reality of Blair's attempt to remake the British political party system.

Staying with the old framework of "Vote Labour and fight for this or that demand" leaves us in a situation of only being able to react to events dictated by others. It rules out a bold perspective for the struggle to remake the labour movement.

Tom Willis

* Footnote: This doesn't mean that the constitutional link is unimportant. In discussing the formation of the SLP it was necessary to stress that the abolition of Clause Four didn't alter the Labour Party's basic character or the trade union link. Scargill's split was ridiculously premature. Think of the way the NUM could lead a campaign to defend the link and maintain labour representation, and how Scargill has wasted that immense moral authority by creating his own little Stalinist sect. But the continued existence of the trade union link is only one aspect of what is going on in New Labour. It is important to stress it in arguments with sectarians who wish to run away from the battle with Blair, but we need an overall integrated analysis with some sense of movement, not just a fixed, static, one-sided picture.