

Future Strategy for the Left

A Discussion Paper

FOR YEARS, the Left inside the Labour Party has generally accepted that whilst the party might from time to time adopt right-wing policies, it has always been possible to fight to reverse those policies – because the party's constitution has been committed to the eradication of Capitalism, the establishment of Socialism and common ownership.

That perspective has been held by many on the Left who whilst not individual Party members belong to party-affiliated organisations and support "Left" policies.

This acceptance was based on the fact that the party constitution embodied in Clause IV a commitment to common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, a commitment not introduced (as is generally believed) by two middle-class Fabians in 1918, but which (like proportional representation) sprang from the trade union movement and Socialist groupings that were in existence before the ILP, Labour Representation Committee or the Labour Party were even founded.

It is commonly agreed that the Labour Party was born out of the trade union movement and various Socialist groups with the aim of creating a parliamentary party to give expression to a Socialist political agenda in the House of Commons.

At the time of its formation, the Labour Party had both a constitution and policies which projected a Socialist philosophy, policies and programme.

Its affiliates included the Communist Party, Cooperative Party, various Socialist societies and trade unions whose members were automatically regarded as being members of the Party. For example, candidates for Parliament and local authorities were selected at meetings where trade unions were allowed to send substantial numbers of delegates; even if they were not in individual membership of the Party, they were accepted as members as a result of belonging to affiliated unions.

The newly-formed Labour Party made clear its aim of abolishing Capitalism and establishing a Socialist society – an object which many trade unions incorporated into their own rule books.

The party was also firmly committed to proportional representation – *not* because it believed in consensus politics but because it recognised that true proportional representation is a class issue. It is significant that this constitutional demand was ditched by Ramsay MacDonald and other party leaders who not only supported the "first past the post" system but Capitalism itself.

The aim of common ownership as set out in Clause IV was introduced in two stages: in 1918 and in 1929. Rather than hint at an unspecified objective, it was designed to clearly commit the party to a strategy for achieving Socialism.

The party later became a so-called "broad church" because the "modernisers" of the time wanted to embrace sections which were not committed to a fundamental change in the nature of society. The term "broad church" was introduced to assist the right-wing, not the left.

It was the "modernisers" who were responsible for expelling the Communist Party from affiliation and introducing the bans and prescriptions which were prevalent in the '30s and later during the Cold War period of the '50s.

The party's right-wing has always sought to destroy the trade union bloc vote and, tragically, we have seen many members on the left enthusiastically supporting this aim in the mistaken belief that Constituency Labour Parties would be able to control the Party Conference and ensure that Labour became a vehicle for Socialist change.

Instead, we have seen the current party leadership systematically dismantle Labour's commitment to Socialism – a process in which the "spin doctors" merely put a media gloss on the machinations of the leadership.

The debacle over Clause IV exemplifies this point very clearly indeed. Some of us repeatedly warned prior to Labour's 1994 Annual Conference that the party leadership would attempt what Gaitskell had failed to do 30 years before, and try to ditch Clause IV.

Nobody should have been surprised when Blair, in the Leader's address to Annual Conference last year announced his intention to get rid of Labour's fundamental commitment to common ownership.

The significance of the leadership's position *and* the conference vote 48 hours later rejecting that position was not taken seriously enough by the Left, either in the party or the trade union movement. Here was a party leader blatantly acting contrary

to the constitution – an offence which has been used to expel numerous good party members. Yet many leading left figures in the Parliamentary Labour Party and in the trade unions failed to see the implications of what was taking place.

In certain ways, the response of that section of the Left which failed to act and/or campaign in defence of Clause IV is the same response we saw at this year's party conference from all those who are so desperate to remove the Tory government that they are prepared to adopt any measure and accept any proposal made by Blair and the leadership.

The significance of last month's constitutional changes including the ditching of Clause IV has not been fully appreciated by many left comrades who should know better.

They believe it is still possible to reverse the "setbacks" suffered as a result of Blair's destruction of Clause IV and abandonment of fundamental socialist policies.

IS THE LABOUR PARTY SOCIALIST?

In addressing this question it is essential to examine the party's policies together with the constitutional changes which have been systematically introduced over the past four years, including one member one vote, reduction of the trade union bloc vote and now the abandonment of Clause IV and introduction of new rules and a constitution which embrace Capitalism and adopt the "Market Philosophy".

Labour is now almost indistinguishable from the Democratic Party in the United States, Germany's Social Democrat Party or, nearer home, the Liberal Democrats.

It is interesting to note how Labour has changed its policies on all the fundamental issues which have been determined by the party conference over many years – including privatisation, national minimum wage, unemployment, pensions, health care, education, Europe, nuclear disarmament, anti-trade union legislation and the party itself.

Where does Labour now stand on these issues?

Privatisation

Labour has abandoned not only its commitment to common ownership but its policy on public ownership and privatisation. For example, the party has made clear it will not renationalise privatised industries, but will merely use the "excess" profits of those industries and utilities to help pay for a programme of work and education.

This means that Labour intends to leave our key industries including the utilities in private hands. A party committed to Socialism and common ownership would insist that Labour will renationalise water, electricity, coal, gas, British Telecom and all the public industries and services which have been sold off over the past 16 years – including our railways.

National Minimum Wage

The Labour Party, whilst undertaking to introduce a statutory minimum wage, refused to agree a formula or state a figure; even more significant, the party accepted that any minimum wage could only be introduced in consultation with "social partners", including the CBI and the Institute of Directors.

In other words, a statutory minimum wage will only be at a level acceptable to our traditional class enemies.

The pressure on this issue applied to trade union leaders at the TUC Conference in September was designed to accommodate this social "partnership" or "co-determination" policy.

Unemployment

Labour has always had a commitment to full employment – but the party now says: "No-one pretends we can solve unemployment overnight" – a clear warning that unemployment will continue under a Labour Government.

But a Labour Government *could* solve unemployment – even within a Capitalist society – overnight, provided it introduced a four-day working week with no loss of pay, banned all non-essential overtime, and introduced voluntary retirement on full pay at age 55 – measures which are fundamental to the regeneration of Britain, but which are anathema to private enterprise and Capitalism.

It is economic insanity to pay out £10,000 per year to keep a worker unemployed whilst half that amount would eliminate unemployment straight away.

Pensions

The Labour Party is already departing from the essential principle of "universal" pensions, and is looking at ways for people to "put together" income from public *and private* sources. In other words, workers are going to have to pay an additional "insurance policy" *to guarantee a minimum* standard of pension – and even then its value would be questionable.

Health

Labour's pledge that it will "establish regional centres of excellence" and retain the "beneficial freedoms" of fund-holding is typical of how vague its commitment is to restoring and rebuilding the NHS.

Britain spends less on health care than most other "advanced" Western countries, and a Labour Party which was serious about protecting our National Health Service would commit the resources necessary to enable it to provide health care on demand, providing for everyone from the cradle to the grave.

Education

Labour's pledges on nursery school places, infant school class sizes and the needs of all pupils, students and teachers are hollow without an accompanying timescale; nor do they address the demise of opportunity and aspiration for working class children over the past 16 years. Tragically, Labour continues to support privileged private education which is a vital prop to our class-ridden society.

Europe

The Labour Party which was once implacably opposed to the European Common Market is now one of the most ardent supporters of this bastion of International Capitalism, outdoing the Tories and Liberal Democrats in enthusiasm. Labour's about-turn on this issue is of major economic and political importance; it represents a betrayal of all that the Party stood for.

Unilateral Nuclear Disarmament

Possibly the most shameful about-turn, however, is that on unilateral nuclear disarmament. After years of campaigning in favour of banning all nuclear weapons, Labour has now become pro-nuclear – in a world torn by regionalised and imperialist wars from the Middle East to the Balkans, from South East Asia to Latin America.

Labour should have been seen to be campaigning for an end to all nuclear weapons and a reduction of at least 50% in defence expenditure. The vast resources which go to fund death and destruction should be used instead to rebuild our industries, public housing, health care and to end unemployment.

Anti-Trade Union Laws

Labour – although well aware that picketing, solidarity action and the right of unions to determine their own rule books without state interference are all regarded as human rights by the United Nations Charter – has declared that in government it will retain the vicious laws which have been used to boost unemployment and enforce low pay over the past 16 years. In other words, Labour is happy to pursue the Tories' aim of rendering trade unions ineffective and compliant.

The Party Constitution: Clause IV

In ditching Clause IV from the constitution, Labour has *erased* its commitment to the aim of common ownership without which social justice, economic democracy and Socialism are impossible.

Last month, New Non-Socialist Labour demonstrated its covenant with Capitalism by its disgraceful refusal to endorse a first-class Socialist, Liz Davies, as a parliamentary candidate.

It had no difficulty, however, in embracing into party membership Alan Howarth, a Tory MP who voted for the policies and philosophy of Thatcher, including the butchery of health care, education, mining and other basic industries and services.

Labour's New Rules

Labour's new rules and constitution can only be described as an unmitigated disaster that make it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, for people within the Labour Party to campaign for Socialism – *which is no longer constitutionally enshrined as a vision to fight for.*

The new rule book allows the party's NEC (among other changes) to amend the rules and constitution at any time by calling a Special Conference at which only the NEC can submit amendments to the constitution. CLPs, trade unions and affiliated organisations will have no right to do so – just as on April 29 at the Special Conference.

This means that the party leadership can submit an amendment to any Clause in the Constitution in two-and-a-half years time – i.e. in April 1998 – and irrespective of whether that amendment is carried or lost, any further amendment to that particular clause will be prevented for a further three years, right up to 2001.

This strategy could be deployed literally ad infinitum to prevent, for example, restoring the commitment to common ownership to Labour's constitution.

A DILEMMA FOR SOCIALISTS

Today we have a sanitised Labour Party which Blair has admitted should be called Social Democratic.

Socialists faced with this new situation must decide what to do.

Do we meekly accept "New Labour"? Do we passively concede that the party has abandoned Socialism and any commitment to common ownership?

If so, why were we all opposed to the policies of the Gang of Four and the now-defunct SDP – because those are the policies which New Labour (now constitutionally indistinguishable from the Tories and Liberal Democrats) has adopted.

Do we, and others who feel as we do, stay in a party which has been and is being "politically cleansed"?

Or: do we leave and start to build a *Socialist Labour Party* that represents the principles, values, hopes and dreams which gave birth nearly a century ago to what has, sadly, now become New Labour?

There are and there will be those – including highly respected comrades – who insist we should stay inside the party and "fight"; but such an attitude fails or refuses to recognise that the party's constitution now effectively prevents this.

Opposition will also come from those who say that any "rocking the boat" can only benefit the Tories.

We have been through all this before. The first Labour candidate who stood at a by-election in Barnsley in 1897 was heckled and stoned by *miners* who believed that by representing Labour he was harming the Liberal Party's chances of election to Government.

As late as 1910, there was still a large body of opinion in the Trade Union and Labour Movement which believed that the movement should support the Liberal Party – and that it was not the role of trade unions to be directly involved in politics.

Today, Socialists in the Labour Party and those who are active in affiliated organisations face the same dilemma as did our forebears who broke with the Liberals. If history was to repeat itself, nobody could be genuinely surprised.

Can we continue to exist – let alone try to be active – within such a party?

SOCIALISTS AND THE FUTURE

I believe the case for a Socialist Labour Party (SLP) is now overwhelming – but if such a party is to be born it must be on the basis of class understanding, class commitment and Socialist policies.

A Socialist Labour Party would require a simple Socialist constitution and a structure designed to fight our class enemies. This structure would demand an end to internal wranglings and sectarian arguments.

If a Socialist Labour Party is to be established, it must be done on the following basis:

1. convening a special "Discussion Conference" to which all those committed to founding such a party should be invited with the aim of formulating a constitution and structure for a Socialist Labour Party;
2. an "Inaugural Conference" to be held ideally on May 1, 1996 – May Day having great significance throughout the international labour movement;
3. the new Party and its Constitution would have to ensure that its members and affiliated organisations control the party through its national executive committee. Never again should we have a situation where the parliamentary party takes control of the apparatus, and the political tail wags the dog;

4. if a Socialist Labour Party is established it should commit itself to fight every parliamentary seat – on the principle that Parliament is but one element of democracy, a body in which expression must be given to the political philosophy and issues advanced by our class.

THE CHALLENGE FACING ALL OF US

In this situation, we do not have the luxury of time; sooner rather than later a Socialist Labour Party will be born.

Today, radical opposition in Britain is symbolised not by the Labour and Trade Union Movement but by the groupings such as those which defeated the Poll Tax, the anti-motorway and animal rights bodies, Greenpeace and other anti-nuclear campaigners, and those fighting against opencast mining.

These are now the voices of protest and direct action, reminding us that only through direct – including industrial – action and defiance of unjust laws can we achieve real advance, whilst a moribund Labour Party and trade union hierarchy pleads with citizens to accept and submit to those laws.

The environmental and community activists are doing a good job, but, inevitably, their aims are "single purpose" with no clear political perspective. It is a tragedy that the Labour Party is not at the centre of coordinating and organising such campaigns.

A Socialist Labour Party would be able to galvanise mass opposition to injustice, inequality and environmental destruction, and build the fight for a Socialist Britain.

We therefore have to decide if we are prepared to carry on supporting a Labour Party which now embraces Capitalism and the "free market", or take a decisive step towards establishing a party capable of not only resisting Capitalism's attacks but of fundamentally changing society – in other words, establish a Socialist Labour Party.

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