

EDUCATION FOR SOCIALISTS

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UNION LEADERS AND THE RANK AND FILE

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WORKERS HAVE only one strength—their collective ability to withdraw their labour and so bring the capitalist system to a halt. The great attraction of trade union power and the reason why millions of workers join unions is that they provide the organisation that can make this power effective.

But the unions also have two fundamental limitations. In the first place they are not usually organisations of the whole class but of only a part of the class. They are *trade* unions and therefore mirror the divisions imposed on workers by the capitalist system—divisions between white and blue collar workers, between engineers and miners, between the unemployed and the employed. Secondly, the unions devote themselves to improving workers' conditions within the existing framework of the capitalist system, not to fighting for workers to take control of the system. To adapt a formulation of Karl Marx's, they combat the effects of capitalist exploitation, rather than striving to do away with the exploitation itself.

These two weaknesses lead to a third. Trade unionism, trade union leaders and, for most of the time, the majority of trade union members accept that there is a sharp division between politics and economics. Put most crudely, this leads to an attitude which sees unions concerned with the economic struggle over wages, conditions and the like, while the Labour Party concerns itself with politics in parliament on workers' behalf. Going along with this idea often means

the challenge of the organised working class is blunted. It encourages the belief that the class struggle between labour and capital is a non-political, economic and social issue and that workers' interests are best served through negotiation and reform rather than through the revolutionary transformation of society. It helps stop workers moving on from demanding a better return from capitalism to challenging the very existence of capitalism as a social and economic system.

When struggles take place on a large scale it's easy to see how important these limitations can become in determining whether workers or the government and the bosses win out. For example, the threat of the Solidarity union in Poland in the early 1980s was such an explosive, potentially revolutionary challenge to the Stalinist regime there that no such distinction between economics and politics could easily be drawn. The regime not only denied the mass of the population the effective rights of citizenship but controlled the bulk of the economy. Fighting for a wage increase was a challenge to the state. Where, however, the state is kept at arm's length from the direct struggle between workers and bosses, workers' struggles to improve their situation at work don't necessarily threaten the structure of society, so the division between politics and economics seems to have more basis in reality.

The separation of economics and politics finds its clearest expression where capitalist democracy prevails—in what are called the liberal democracies of Western Europe and North America. These involve institutions such as universal suffrage, regular elections, a multiparty system and the liberal freedoms (of speech, assembly, organisation and so on). Liberal democracy extends to voting for a government but not to having any say in the running of the company that employs you. You can vote for who you like at election times, but the same people are still there in the boardrooms of Shell, Unilever, BP, British Gas and every other company in the country.

Liberal democracy treats everyone as politically equal citizens. So, media mogul Rupert Murdoch has only one vote, the same as the print workers he employs in his non-union print works. But this formal equality hides the huge inequality in their wealth, power and political influence. Murdoch has power because he has

capital, his workers have no capital and, consequently, virtually no political influence.

Workers have always had to fight to win the right to vote, the right to free speech, the right to join trade unions and so on. These struggles are an important step in the development of the workers' movement. The other side to this relationship is that, while capitalist democracy permits the development of working class organisation, it also seeks to contain and to incorporate that organisation. Many things determine whether such attempts at incorporation will succeed. A weak union movement and a right-wing Labour Party will be more easily contained than a powerful, left-wing labour movement. A union movement that has just scored a series of victories will be harder to blunt than one that has suffered a series of defeats. But more than any other single factor capitalist democracy's ability to contain the organised working class depends on economic prosperity. A rich and expanding economy is likely to have the capacity to grant improvements in working class living standards. If the trade union struggle is unable to deliver increases in real wages, then workers are less willing to confine themselves within a capitalist framework.

The great waves of economic expansion which the capitalist system enjoyed in the mid and late 19th century and more recently during the Long Boom of the 1950s and 1960s, provided the prosperity which saw both Labour and Tory governments granting reforms. In times of economic boom it is possible, thanks to rises in labour productivity and expanding demand for goods and services, simultaneously to increase both profits and real wages, temporarily escaping the bind which, Marx argued, drives bosses and workers into conflict with each other. But equally, periods of sustained and severe economic slump limit capitalists' room for manoeuvre and force them to attack jobs, wages and conditions. These assaults often unleash class struggles which can no longer be so easily contained.

The union bureaucracy

There is one other crucial condition for the kind of trade unionism typical of the capitalist democracies—the existence of the trade union bureaucracy, that is, of a social layer made up of full-time

officials with a material interest in confining the class struggle to the search for reforms within a capitalist framework. At the end of the 19th century Sidney and Beatrice Webb were admiring the formation of a bureaucracy of full-time trade union officials:

During these years we watch a shifting of the leadership in the trade union world from the casual enthusiast and irresponsible agitator to a class of salaried officers expressly chosen out of the rank and file of trade unionists for their superior business capacity.

The 1920s saw the consolidation of the trade union bureaucracy in Britain. This process was promoted by the rapid expansion of union membership during and after the First World War (2.6 million in 1914, 8.3 million in 1920), a series of amalgamations which led to the formation of such giant general unions as the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) and the growth of national collective bargaining to replace the district settlements which had set wage rates before 1914. The commitment of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) General Council to class collaboration was also fully demonstrated early on when it hastily called off the General Strike of May 1926.

After the strike the negotiations it pursued with top industrialists ensured an official strike call was not issued again until into the 1950s. In June 1940, with the appointment of the TGWU general secretary, Ernest Bevin, as Minister of Labour and National Service in Winston Churchill's coalition government the union bureaucracy's incorporation into the state machine was formalised.

The formation of a conservative labour bureaucracy is inherent in the nature of trade unionism. The union struggle is concerned with improving the terms on which workers are exploited, not with ending that exploitation. Confining the class struggle within the limits of capitalism presumes that the interests of labour and capital can be reconciled—that higher wages can be won without undermining profitability. The compromises that are forced on workers when the balance of class forces is against them are inevitable so long as the union struggle is kept within the limits of capitalist society.

Someone has to negotiate these compromises. Therefore, there is a pressure which encourages a division of labour between the mass of workers and their union representatives. The latter's time is increasingly spent in bargaining with employers. Some of these representatives sooner or later become full-time workers for the union, paid out of members' subscriptions. The effect, whatever the beliefs of the officials, is to isolate them from those they represent.

Full-time officials are removed from the discipline of the shop-floor, from the dirt and dangers often found there, from the immediate conflicts with supervisor and manager, from the fellowship of their workmates, to the very different environment of an office. Even if they are not paid more than their members (and they usually are), their earnings no longer depend on the ups and downs of capitalist production—they no longer involve working overtime, nor are they vulnerable to short-time working. If a plant is closed the official who negotiates the redundancies will not get the sack. Constantly closeted with management, full-timers come to see negotiation, compromise, the reconciliation of capital and labour as the very stuff of trade unionism. Struggle appears as a disruption of the bargaining process, a nuisance and inconvenience, which may threaten the accumulated funds of the union. The efficient running of the union machine becomes an end in itself, threatening even the limited goal of improving the terms on which the worker is exploited.

The conservatism of the union bureaucracy has material, economic roots. Full-time union officials are an economically privileged group compared to the workers they represent. A recent study of trade union officials in Britain showed that 61 percent of general secretaries earned more than £30,000 per year in 1991.¹ Sometimes lay officials and representatives are drawn into the same network of material privileges. Members of the executive council of the railworkers' RMT union are seconded to work full-time for the union during their three-year term, and are paid an annual "allowance", usually worth £28,000.

1: The gulf between the wages of union leaders and those of their members has grown considerably since this was written—*editor's note*.

These material privileges give the union bureaucracy a stake in maintaining the capitalist society which grants them a role negotiating the terms on which workers are exploited. This in turn creates a conflict of interests between the full-time officials and rank and file workers who have an interest in reducing, and ultimately abolishing their exploitation by the bosses.

Left and right officials

The conflict between bureaucracy and rank and file is the fundamental division inside the union movement. However, many of the British left would dispute this claim. The Communist Party (CP), the key political influence among left-wing trade unionists in Britain until it began to fall apart in the 1980s, argued from the mid-1920s onwards that the main division within the unions was the political one between left and right. Therefore, socialists should concentrate on getting left-wing officials elected. It was on this basis that the CP developed a strategy of building Broad Lefts. These operated essentially as electoral coalitions grouping left wingers together in order to support a left-wing candidate in union elections. The Broad Left strategy is still attractive to many union activists.

The analysis behind this strategy is, on the face of it, quite plausible. Plainly there are deep political divisions between different union leaders.² The real question, however, isn't whether these divisions exist, but whether they are more important than the interests binding all union officials together as a distinct social group.

The divisions among union officials are a consequence of the fact that unions are democratic mass organisations. Debates within unions reflect a variety of pressures, including that exerted by the rank and file. The battle to win unions for the left is often an echo of great class struggles. Arthur Scargill's election as president of the mine workers' union in 1981 would have been inconceivable

2: To give contemporary examples, the RMT's Bob Crow or civil service workers' leader Mark Serwotka are clearly to the left of, say, Unison leader Dave Prentis—*editor's note*.

without the series of miners' strikes, official and unofficial, between 1969 and 1974 and his own role within them.³

It is understandable enough that rank and file activists, impatient with betrayals by right-wing officials, should believe that by replacing the latter with left wingers drawn from their own ranks they can transform the unions into real fighting organisations. But this belief reflects a lack of self-confidence on the rank and file's part, since it invites them to rely on putting the right people at the top of the union rather than on using their own strength and organisation. After all, the miners won their greatest victories, in the national strikes of 1972 and 1974, under the leadership of a right-wing president, Joe Gormley.

In any case, the differences between the left and right officials are less important than what unites them. Even the most radical left-wing leader is still part of the same social group as his or her right-wing counterparts—the union bureaucracy. This means that he or she is likely, at crucial junctures, to hold back the struggle, and to strike rotten compromises with the employers. At the end of the 1926 General Strike, the left wing of the TUC General Council agreed with the right in calling off the strike and leaving the miners to fight on alone and suffer bitter defeat after a six-month lockout. It was the two great leaders of the union left, Jack Jones and Hugh Scanlon, who played the key role in implementing a Social Contract with the 1974-9 Labour government that led to the biggest cut in real wages for a century.

Two factors weigh particularly heavily with all union officials, whatever their political beliefs. One is the union machine itself—its organisation, finances, etc—which, as the German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg put it, they tend to see as “an end in itself, a precious thing, to which the interests of the struggles should be subordinated”. The succession of anti-union laws introduced by Tory governments after 1979 struck a shrewd blow by bringing the weight of the laws to bear chiefly onto union assets. It is an extremely rare

3: Scargill was an avowedly socialist miners' leader during the Great Miners' Strike of 1984-5, a long and bitter struggle that ultimately ended in defeat for the miners—*editor's note*.

union leader who is prepared to risk the union's funds in order to prosecute a strike. Indeed, the main thrust of anti-union legislation has been less to dismantle the trade unions than to strengthen the power of the full-time officials and give them an added incentive to intervene to prevent strikes by threatening their funds.

Union officials are also strongly influenced by a sense of collective responsibility which makes them reluctant to rock the boat. For instance, after the Tory government announced plans to close 31 pits in October 1992, there was an enormous explosion of popular anger. The pit closures programme provided a focus for all the resentments that had been building up against an economy in recession and the mean and incompetent government presiding over it. Had a general strike been called then, the Tories would probably have fallen. Predictably enough the then TUC general secretary, Norman Willis, marched firmly in the opposite direction, calling for a "cooling-off period". The TUC's policy was for protests—held jointly with the employers, then busy making tens of thousands of workers redundant. Yet Scargill did nothing to challenge this approach in deed or even in word. When groups of miners proposed to occupy pits threatened with closure, he intervened to stop this happening.

None of this means that the divisions within the union bureaucracy are somehow irrelevant. Left officials are more likely to support better policies than right-wing ones. Their election is indicative of some willingness to fight on the part of the rank and file. Therefore socialists should support the left in its struggles with the right. This is different, however, from relying on any official, whatever his or her politics. Rank and file workers must look to themselves, and the organisation and solidarity they are able to build, not to anyone at the top of the unions.

The union bureaucracy and the state

The union bureaucracy provides the social base of reformist political parties. The Labour Party and its counterparts elsewhere, like the German SPD, seek to reform capitalism, to make it a more democratic and humane system, while leaving its basis in the exploitation of the working class untouched. This corresponds closely to the

pursuit of compromise between labour and capital that is the union leaders' reason for existence.

Sometimes the link between union officialdom and reformist political organisation takes a formal, institutional shape, as in the case of the block vote wielded by affiliated unions at Labour Party conferences. More usually, the connection is an informal one, but the alliance between union bureaucrats and reformist parties is no less real in countries like Germany than it is in Britain.

Union leaders are committed to the reform of capitalism, not its overthrow. If forced to choose between preserving the existing system and a revolutionary struggle against it, they will always choose the former. Tony Cliff provides a classic description of how union leaders—left and right alike—vacillate as a consequence of their social position and of their ultimate loyalties in times of crisis and class confrontation:

The union bureaucracy is both reformist and cowardly... It dreams of reforms but fears to settle accounts in real earnest with the state...and it also fears the rank and file struggle which alone can deliver reforms. The union bureaucrats are afraid of losing their own privileges vis-à-vis the rank and file. Their fear of the mass struggle is much greater than their abhorrence of state control of the unions. At all decisive moments the union bureaucracy is bound to side with the state, but in the meantime it vacillates.

A particularly clear example of the way in which the bureaucracy always comes down on the side of the existing state in times of crisis is provided by Britain in 1919. Some historians regard this year as the most dangerous year ever faced by British capitalism. Revolution in Europe, widespread industrial unrest, army mutinies, even a police strike: all of these seemed to threaten a ruling class gravely weakened by the First World War. This class, under the skilful leadership of the prime minister, David Lloyd George, nevertheless benefited from the unwillingness of the union bureaucracy to confront the state. The “Triple Alliance” of mine workers, rail workers, and transport workers threatened to strike in support of the

miners' demand for the nationalisation of the their industry. The left-wing Labour leader Aneurin Bevan describes the crucial meeting between the government and the leaders of the Triple Alliance, based on what Robert Smillie, secretary of the Miners' Federation and himself a prominent left-winger, had told him:

Lloyd George sent for the labour leaders, and they went, so Robert told me, "truculently determined they would not be talked over by the seductive and eloquent Welshman... He was quite frank with us from the outset," Bob went on. "He said to us, 'Gentlemen, you have fashioned the Triple Alliance of the unions represented by you, a most formidable instrument. I feel bound to tell you that in our opinion we are at your mercy. The Army is disaffected and cannot be relied on... We have just emerged from a great war and the people are eager for the reward of their sacrifices, and we are in no position to satisfy them. In these circumstances if you carry out your threat and strike, then you will defeat us.

"'But if you do so,' went on Mr Lloyd George, 'have you weighed the consequences? The strike will be in defiance of the government of the country and by its very success will precipitate a constitutional crisis of the first importance. For if a force arises in the state that is stronger than the state itself, then it must be ready to take on the functions of the state, or withdraw and accept the authority of the state. Gentlemen,' asked the Prime Minister quietly, 'have you considered, and if you have, are you ready?' From that moment on," said Robert Smillie, "we were beaten and we knew we were."

Lloyd George had the union leaders' measure. Opting for the state is not a peculiarly British disease. One of the greatest upheavals in an advanced capitalist country came in France in May-June 1968, when a student revolt sparked off a massive general strike directed at the government of General Charles de Gaulle. It took the concerted efforts of the leaders of the CGT, the main union federation, and

members of the Communist Party to persuade the workers to end their strike in exchange for wage increases and a general election.

The union bureaucracy's loyalty to the state is the clearest sign of the limitations of trade unionism—of its tendency to confine workers' struggles within the framework of the existing system by accepting a sharp separation between economics and politics. It underlines the need for a political organisation which, rather than seeking reforms from the existing state, supports workers' struggles against that state. What is wanted is a political party of workers that seeks to replace the old system with a new form of state based on the democratic mass organisations of the working class. Building such a party is inseparable from the struggles that develop within the unions between bureaucracy and rank and file. Let's take a look at these struggles.

Rank and file movements

Rank and file organisations are bodies of workplace delegates subject to direct election and recall by the workers they represent. Both their workplace basis and the direct control of non full-time representatives by the rank and file distinguish these forms of organisation from official union structures. Official structures are usually organised on geographical rather than workplace lines and the full-time officials, even when they are elected rather than appointed, often hold office for life. Rank and file organisations, even though they usually exist within the official structures (and are sometimes closely integrated in them), arise directly from the daily struggle on the shopfloor and often in conflict with the union bureaucracy. Usually no one plans their formation in advance.

The distance of union officials from their members and their commitment to class compromise inevitably brings them into conflict with the mass of trade unionists. The bureaucrats' betrayals of specific struggles make the rank and file aware of the clash of interests between themselves and their "representatives" and therefore of the need for forms of organisation more responsive to their own needs and wishes. Moreover the centralised structure of union officialdom and its isolation from the shopfloor can promote the

growth of structures in the workplace able to react immediately to the everyday conflicts which arise.

The shop stewards in Britain are a classic example of rank and file organisations. They first emerged in the engineering industry in 1892 as agents of the district committees of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE), doing jobs like dues-collecting and signing up new members. However, “shop stewards did not confine themselves to supplying information and undertaking organisational work on behalf of the district committees. The tradition of workshop delegates serving on deputations to their employers continued, and the workshop deputation was a recognised part of the collective bargaining procedures.”

But if rank and file organisations tend to start from wage bargaining in the workplace they can in certain circumstances become organs of workers’ power, challenging the authority of the capitalist state. The experience of the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917 showed how workers’ councils—what Russian workers called soviets—can develop out of the struggle in workplaces over partial economic demands. The first soviet was formed in St Petersburg in 1905 out of a strike by typesetters who wanted to be paid for setting punctuation marks. It developed into a rival government to the Tsar’s, organising an insurrectionary general strike.

However, there is nothing inevitable about this kind of development. Indeed rank and file organisations may not develop at all when union organisation is weak or when the control of the full-time officials is tight. In Britain the strength and militancy of shop stewards’ organisation have varied considerably depending on the shifting balance of power between labour and capital.

Equally, it is only in certain very specific conditions that rank and file organisation and revolutionary socialist politics converge. The politics of rank and file organisations are usually far from revolutionary. This is inevitable since these workplace organisations, just like unions generally, start by seeking to win material improvements for particular groups of workers within the framework of capitalism. It is only in periods of economic and social crisis, when the employers and the state are forced to attack rank and file

organisations, that the workers involved in them are led to think in class, rather than sectional, terms.

In such circumstances rank and file movements can emerge which are concerned to fight on the more general class front and to link together workers in different localities and industries. Such movements are usually led by revolutionary socialists, since it is only they who can give rank and file organisations the necessary political independence of both the bosses and the bureaucracy.

The Great Unrest

The years between 1910 and 1921 saw a sharp escalation in the industrial struggle in Britain. Out of this came the first real rank and file movement. Before the First World War British capitalism was under severe pressure from rising industrial powers such as Germany and the US. In response to this pressure employers sought to restructure production, attacking wages and conditions. In industries such as mining and engineering this involved a formidable offensive against the workers. It was in these conditions that shop stewards' organisation began to develop into a real force. The employers' offensive provoked, a huge explosion of workers' struggles, the Labour Unrest of 1910-14.

The two most immediate characteristics of the unrest were mass strikes and rapid union recruitment. From 1910 until the outbreak of war, working days lost rose to an annual total of ten million, while union membership increased from 2.1 million to 4.1 million over the same period. The union movement grew as a result of intense industrial struggles. First came bitter, largely unofficial strikes in the South Wales coalfield in 1910-11. The summer of 1911 saw fierce seafarers' and dockers' strikes in a number of cities and the first national railway strike. These were followed by a national miners' strike in the winter of 1911-12 and a strike by London transport workers the next summer.

The most notable feature of the Great Unrest was the high degree of aggressive, sometimes violent and often unofficial industrial militancy. The strikers again and again clashed with both their own union officials and with the forces of the state. Thus during

the general transport strike on Merseyside in August 1911 the city authorities formed a committee of public safety and brought 3,000 troops and several hundred police into the city. Gunboats patrolled the Mersey to intimidate the strikers. The strike united the working class of Liverpool. The sectarian division between Protestants and Catholics, whipped up at that time by the pro-Tory Orange Order, was temporarily forgotten. One striker remembered that on the great demonstration of 13 August, when 80,000 workers took to the streets. On that day police and troops brutally broke up the march. But the working class fought back. The *Times* described “guerrilla warfare” raging during the days that followed. In one neighbourhood “the crowd erected barbed wire entanglements on a scientific scale and entrenched themselves behind barricades and dustbins and other domestic appliances”.

Workers were thus being driven into conflict with the state itself. Moreover, a minority were so embittered by the failure of the union leaders to support their struggles that they began to look for ways of using workers’ growing industrial power directly to challenge the very existence of capitalism. Syndicalism grew in influence during the Labour Unrest. The syndicalists sought to transform the existing, still mainly craft unions into industrial unions each organising all the workers in a particular industry as the basis of a workers’ state.

The outbreak of the First World War caused a temporary abatement in industrial militancy and indeed there was a sharp fall in strikes during the war. Like their counterparts in the rest of Europe, the leaders of the Labour Party and the TUC supported their own state’s war effort. In March 1915, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers and other unions concluded the Treasury Agreement with Lloyd George, the Liberal chancellor of the exchequer. Under this union leaders accepted “dilution”—the introduction of unskilled workers to do jobs previously done by craftsmen—in order to increase war production. Pressure brought on by this agreement and by wartime wages and conditions radicalised many engineering workers. A number of major industrial centres, most notably Glasgow and Sheffield, saw bitter struggles in the engineering industry. These gave birth to the Shop Stewards’ and Workers’ Committee

Movement. This first rank and file movement was based on the workers' committees formed on the Clyde, in Sheffield and elsewhere and brought together shopfloor representatives from many different unions and industries to coordinate their struggles.

The shop stewards' leaders were, in the main, revolutionary socialists of one variety or another—men like J T Murphy and Willie Gallacher who were later to play a leading role in the Communist Party. Their supporters, however, were mostly skilled engineering workers concerned to resist the erosion of craft privilege. The largest of the strikes called by the movement, in May 1917, involving 200,000 engineering workers in 48 towns, succeeded in stopping the extension of dilution to work on private contracts. But the attempt by the leaders of the movement to focus on political issues by calling a national anti-war strike was an ignominious failure.

Nevertheless, the wartime shop stewards' movement represented an extremely important political step forward in two respects. First, the revolutionary stewards developed the theory of independent rank and file organisation within the unions. Previously, revolutionary socialists had either refused to involve themselves in the unions at all or had sought, like the syndicalists, to replace them or transform them into revolutionary industrial unions that would grow to become a socialist state. The practical experience of building the wartime shop stewards' movement led its leaders to concentrate on developing within the official structures, rank and file organisations capable of acting independently of the union bureaucracy.

The shop stewards' movement's attitude to the bureaucracy is summed up in the Clyde Workers' Committee's first leaflet. It remains the best summary of the nature of rank and file organisation:

We will support the officials just so long as they rightly represent the workers, but we will act independently immediately they misrepresent them. Being composed of delegates from every shop and untrammelled by obsolete rule or law, we claim to represent the true feeling of the workers. We can act immediately according to the merits of the case and the desire of the rank and file.

Second, after the Russian Revolution of October 1917 the leaders of the shop stewards' movement began to see the workers' committees as soviets in embryo. The movement's paper argued in February 1919 that "the Soviet Government of has sprung from the workers' committees, from the unofficial rank and file movement of the Russian people. The shop stewards are the first stage in the Soviet development." But if the revolutionary stewards came to see the political potential of rank and file organisation, they were not so quick to draw another lesson of the Russian Revolution. The soviets had come to power under the leadership of the Bolshevik party. The stewards were slow to see how a revolutionary socialist party acted to overcome the divisions inside the working class, linking together different struggles and focusing them on the battle, not simply with individual employers, but with the capitalist state itself.

The Minority Movement

In 1919 the Bolsheviks launched the Communist International (or Comintern) to advise and assist revolutionaries worldwide. The Comintern was instrumental in bringing together the various fractions of the British revolutionary left and the leaders of the shop stewards' movement to form the Communist Party in 1920. But the party was formed against a background that was in many ways unfavourable to revolutionary hopes. The First World War ended in a sharp rise in the level of economic class struggle. But by the time the CP was formed in 1920 the initiative had passed to the employers. Union membership tumbled as the bosses went on the offensive. Numbers slipped from 8.3 million in 1920 to 5.6 million two years later, and by 1933 reached a low of 3.3 million. The struggles of this period saw workers in retreat. Miners were locked out and defeated after six months in 1926. Engineers had already been locked out and beaten in 1922 while strikes by textile workers between 1929 and 1933 were beaten. The impact of these defeats was drastic. J T Murphy told the Fourth Congress of the Comintern in 1922:

In England we have had a powerful shop stewards' movement.
But it can and only does exist in given objective conditions.

The necessary conditions at the moment in England do not exist. How can you build factory organisations when you have 1,750,000 workers walking the streets? You cannot build factory organisations in empty and depleted workshops, while you have a great reservoir of unemployed workers.

It was in this unpromising situation that the National Minority Movement (NMM) was launched in 1924 based on previous Minority Movements in specific industries such as mining and engineering. The NMM's aim was to rally the "opposition elements" inside the unions. But where were these elements to be found—at the top of the movement or among the rank and file? CP leaders did warn against trusting too much in left-wing trade union leaders: "It would be a suicidal policy", wrote J R Campbell in October 1924, "for the Communist Party and the Minority Movement to place too much reliance on what we have called the official left wing." But the main thrust of NMM strategy was indeed to look to the top of the movement and elect and support left-wing union officials. Willie Gallacher wrote in September 1923:

The movement that is springing up all over the country...is not a rank and file movement, but rather it is one that reaches through every strata of the trade unions. The driving force must necessarily come from the rank and file, but we should never forget that local officials, district officials, and national officials (a few of them at any rate) have never been led away by the desire to settle the troubles of capitalism!

The best cure for the betrayals by right-wing leaders was to replace them with left-wingers. The fruits of this policy became clear in the General Strike of 1926. A revival in workers' combativity after the post-war slump was marked by the miners' success in winning a 10 percent wage rise in 1924. The NMM led a "Back to the Unions" campaign to revive union membership. Economic recovery in 1923-4 and the consequent fall in unemployment gave workers greater confidence to take on the employers. On "Red Friday",

31 July 1925, the government and the mine owners withdrew an attempt to cut miners' wages in face of a threatened general strike.

Meanwhile, the revival in workers' militancy was reflected in the emergence on the TUC General Council of an articulate and verbally very militant left wing—notably Swales, Purcell and Hicks—whose revolutionary rhetoric dominated the Trade Union Congresses of 1924 and 1925. The influence of the NMM grew rapidly during this period, especially in engineering and mining. But when Stanley Baldwin's government finally manoeuvred the General Council into calling a general strike on 3 May 1926, the strike was tightly controlled from the top, with no scope given to rank and file initiative. It was called off on the flimsiest of pretexts after nine days, leaving the miners in the lurch.

The CP and the NMM played a minor role, in part because their strategy was simply to call for support for the TUC left. One of the slogans raised by the CP during the strike was "All Power to the General Council". Two days before the outbreak of the General Strike J T Murphy of the CP described Swales and company as "good trade union leaders who have sufficient character to stand firm on the demands of the miners". But if this were true, why should workers bother to look to the CP rather than the much bigger forces of the TUC?

Within two weeks events proved Murphy's assessment of the TUC disastrously wrong. The "good trade union leaders" sold the miners down the river as readily as Ernest Bevin, J H Thomas or any other right winger on the General Council.

The British CP's theoretical and political inadequacies were brutally exposed by the General Strike. But these weaknesses were underpinned by the effects of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution. By the mid-1920s Stalin and the bureaucracy he had built around him had displaced the soviets as the effective leadership in the Soviet Union. This bureaucracy placed its own interests and that of the state it controlled ahead of those of the world working class. An Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee created in spring 1925 was diplomatically useful to Stalin and the other Comintern leaders. They were therefore reluctant to antagonise their allies in the TUC and so did nothing to correct the British CP's errors.

THE RANK AND FILE LAST TIME

DAVE SHERRY

From *Socialist Worker* (2006)

SINCE THE start of the new millennium, a new generation of activists has risen to challenge capitalism. In Britain the growing resistance to war and neoliberalism has had a big impact on the unions. Yet there is a gap between the political anger and the level of class struggle. Socialists look enviously to continental Europe or Latin America, but the British working class has a fine tradition of struggle.

Thirty years ago the bosses bemoaned British unions for their militancy and in Europe strikes were referred to as “the British disease”. Trade unionism grew steadily during the long boom after the Second World War. Full employment created the conditions in which shop stewards’ organisation flourished. The gains workers made came through their own self-activity. It was a “do it yourself reformism”.

By the end of the 1960s, under increasing pressure from foreign competitors, British capitalism could no longer afford increases in real wages. When the world economy was hit by a series of crises the bosses’ scope for concessions was further reduced.

The first assault came during the 1964-70 Labour government. It imposed wage controls, framed laws against “wildcat strikes” and promoted large-scale rationalisation and productivity deals, which created unemployment. The Labour government fell under a wave of strikes in 1969-70 and it was left to Edward Heath’s Tory

government to resume the offensive. The Tories provoked the biggest and most political strikes since the General Strike of 1926.

The rising wave of mass working class struggle lasted until 1975. According to labour historian Royden Harrison, the early 1970s represented “the most extraordinary triumph of trade unionism... Over 200 occupations of factories, offices and shipyards occurred between 1972 and 1974 alone and many of them won.”

Referring to the two victorious miners’ strikes, Harrison writes, “First they blew the government off course, then they landed it on the rocks. In 1972 they compelled the prime minister...to concede more in 24 hours than had been conceded in the last 24 years. Two years on, their next strike led him to introduce the three-day week—a novel system of government by catastrophe—for which he was rewarded with defeat in the general election. Nothing like this had ever been heard of before.”

The dramatic success of the workers’ struggles was reflected in the huge jump in strike days—rising from less than five million in 1968 to 24 million in 1972—and the dramatic growth in union membership from nine million in 1967 to a peak of 13 million in the late 1970s. The upturn of the early 1970s was part of an international revolt inspired by the events of 1968. As in all extraordinary periods of class struggle, the whole of society was affected.

The big disputes of 1972 inspired protests by others that year. A school students’ strike in London led to the formation of the National Union of School Students. August saw a prison strike for prisoners’ rights. In October rent strikes were launched in over 80 towns and cities. In November steel workers in Scunthorpe struck for higher pensions.

Rise of the rank and file

Rank and file militancy spread like wildfire to groups previously seen as “middle class” such as teachers and civil servants, and drew in previously unorganised groups such as firefighters, hospital workers and office cleaners.

In 1971, shipyard workers at the Upper Clyde, Glasgow, were the first group to defy the Tory government’s Industrial Relations

Act, introduced to curb the power of the unions. The cabinet was reluctant to use the law when the workers took control of the yards. The chief constable of Glasgow was quick to telephone Downing Street and warn that if the police or the army were used to end the occupation and “work in”, he could not guarantee order in the city.

In 1972 miners won a historic victory through mass picketing of the steelworks, the power stations and the coal depots—initiated not by national union leaders, but by rank and file miners. The turning point in the strike, the battle between miners and police at the Saltley coke depot, involved 100,000 Birmingham trade unionists striking in solidarity with the pickets and 20,000 marching onto the picket line to close the depot. A young car worker recalled, “For the first time in my life I had a practical demonstration of what workers’ solidarity meant. We all felt so powerful. We felt we could rule the world.”

Later that year the Industrial Relations Act was defeated by an unofficial general strike. Five dockers jailed in Pentonville prison for defying the laws against picketing were freed, despite union officials saying that the dockers should comply with the courts. The government climbdown was a victory for the rank and file—it flowed from a rising tide of struggle and fed back into it.

The climax of the rank and file movement came in the winter of 1973-4. War in the Middle East and the ensuing oil crisis triggered an economic slump, the worst since the 1930s. In November 1973, the miners imposed an overtime ban and raised wage demands. The ruling class was in a state of panic. Industry minister John Davies told his family, “We must enjoy this Christmas. It may be our last.”

The prime minister, Edward Heath, tried to scare the miners into accepting wage controls by calling a state of emergency. Rumours spread that the government was setting up internment camps for left-wing militants. Heath’s strategy was to frighten the union leaders into isolating the miners and it very nearly worked. At their secret meeting, Hugh Scanlon, leader of the engineering union, begged Heath, “Is there anything we can say or do that will satisfy you?”

Heath gambled on a general election on the theme of “Who runs the country?” In February 1974, against the wishes of their right-wing union leader, the miners voted for an all-out strike, which put the lights out across the country.

The union executive kept a tight hold on picketing in order to appear respectable and, as they saw it, not ruin Labour’s election chances. Yet the movement of coal was halted because other trade unionists, especially rail workers, were solidly behind the miners.

The general election saw Labour back in government, but with only 37 percent of the vote. The ruling class was worried. Their state had been defeated by the collective power of the working class. Expectations were now running high. Tom Jackson, the right-wing leader of the postal workers’ union, described the incoming Labour cabinet as “being like the owner of a giant Las Vegas slot machine that has suddenly got stuck in favour of the customers”.

Political lessons for the rank and file

Although the number of people voting Labour had declined, the minority to the left of Labour numbered hundreds of thousands and on the issue of wages they could move millions.

The Communist Party (CP) was still the biggest organisation to the left of Labour, but it concentrated on replacing right-wing union leaders with left-wing leaders. This strategy made it increasingly reluctant to clash with the officials of the two biggest unions—Jack Jones of the T&G and Hugh Scanlon of AUEW.

The contradiction between trying to lead rank and file militancy and courting left union officials reached breaking point during the early 1970s, when the CP subordinated militancy to wooing officials. This created a space for groups such as the International Socialists (IS), forerunners of the SWP. The revolutionary left had remained marginal since the 1930s. But by 1974, it had roots inside the major factories and was the opposition in key white collar unions.

The IS had argued that a revolutionary party of 50,000 could organise most of the 300,000 union shop stewards and through them set in motion many of Britain’s 11 million union members.

The problem was that when workers toppled the Tory government in 1974, the IS had 4,000 members, not 50,000. Union leaders had a much greater influence over the shop stewards' movement than the revolutionary left did.

This didn't mean that in 1974 the new government could bring the turmoil to an immediate end. Labour could only contain working class militancy by first running ahead of it. Anti-union laws and wage controls were dumped. The striking miners' demands were met in full. As a gesture to the left on the TUC, Labour's prime minister, Harold Wilson, made Michael Foot his employment secretary and brought other socialists such as Eric Heffer and Tony Benn into his cabinet. Still there was a wave of struggle involving teachers, local government workers and health workers. Victory over a weak government signalled the arrival of shopfloor trade unionism into these white collar sectors.

But as the *Economist* noted, "Labour may well turn out to be the least bad government for business." As Wilson moved to placate the City, the Bank of England engineered a run on sterling. It didn't take long for the government to call for wage controls. Soon the bosses' CBI organisation and the TUC were agreed on one thing—strikes had to be curbed.

In 1974, the IS initiated a national rank and file movement to link together militants in different industries and unions. Its aim was to force the leaders to act, and to operate independently of them when necessary. This fledgling movement failed, in part because the industrial base of the IS was too narrow compared to the influence of the CP and the Labour left. But the main reason was Labour's "Social Contract" and the way it weakened workplace organisation.

The architects of the "Social Contract" were the left-wing union leaders who had been loud critics of wage controls under Heath. The union leaders were able to impose "voluntary" wage restraint and cut real wages for the first time in a generation. What the Tories failed to do by force, Labour achieved with the collaboration of the union bureaucracy. The shop stewards' movement, still dominated by the Labour left and the CP, shied away from a fight. When, in

1978, Labour tried to impose a fourth round of wage controls, the dam finally broke. The “Winter of Discontent” was not a new rising tide of political militancy but a series of sectional battles—an explosion of bitterness and subsequent demoralisation that was followed by Tory leader Margaret Thatcher’s election in 1979.

LABOUR AND THE PARLIAMENTARY ROAD

CHARLIE KIMBER

From *Arguments for Revolution* (2011)

THERE ARE two great trends in the socialist tradition. The American Marxist Hal Draper called them the “two souls of socialism”—a democratic, bottom-up “socialism from below” and an authoritarian, top-down “socialism from above”. The central idea of socialism from below is that, as Marx put it, “The emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class.” Nobody can bring change for the working class or on behalf of the working class or behind the backs of the working class. Workers have to do it for themselves. They must direct and take part in their own revolutionary transformation of society. In the process of changing the world they change themselves. Marx wrote, “Revolution is necessary not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.”

Freedom cannot come from a parliamentary majority delivering change, a terrorist group terrifying the ruling class, a section of left union leaders making sound choices or an army unleashing its tanks and smashing the ruling class. Workers have to do it themselves. Socialism is about workers’ power and a crucial element of that is workers’ own action in changing society.

This is a powerful tradition. But it has formidable opponents who do believe that it is entirely right to deliver change for and on behalf

of workers. One variant is Stalinism, the belief that change must be delivered over the head of and, if necessary, against the wishes of workers. A much stronger variant in Britain is Labourism.

Labourism is based on the idea that electing good MPs—socialists preferably, but at least decent supporters of the working class and progress—can lead to a government that will then fundamentally change society. It is a tempting prospect, seeming far easier than trying to achieve revolution. But it has failed.

The creation of the Labour Party at the start of the 20th century was a step forward for workers because it represented a break with the thoroughly ruling class Liberal Party and it asserted a basic working class politics. It was a declaration that bosses' parties cannot be relied on to act in workers' interests. But the creation of Labour was also a move away from revolutionary politics. It accepted an idea that now that workers (or at least some male workers) could vote, there was no need for revolutionary struggle outside of parliament. The record of the Labour Party has been one of radical noises in opposition, pro-capitalist and anti-worker policies in office.

The first Labour governments of 1924 and 1929 disappointed supporters by acting exactly like previous Liberal governments. Then came the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and a howling recession and, as unemployment soared, Labour prime minister Ramsay MacDonald attacked wages and benefits. The majority of the cabinet accepted this. But even the token opposition aggrieved MacDonald and the bankers. So MacDonald dissolved the Labour government and made an alliance with the Tories. It went down in history as the "great betrayal". Reflecting on the experience of Labour's attempts to reform capitalism, R H Tawney, who was on the moderate wing of the party, wrote, "Onions can be eaten leaf by leaf, but you cannot skin a live tiger paw by paw—vivisection is its trade and it does the skinning first."

The 1964-70 government saw Labour prime minister Harold Wilson assault seafarers who were striking to improve wages and reduce working hours. Wilson denounced this as "a strike against the state" and followed it up by claiming the strike leaders were "a tight-knit group of politically motivated men"—unashamed witch-hunting to

divide workers. His government pushed through welfare cuts and deflationary policies that raised unemployment to a level not known for a quarter of a century, and it slashed living standards for most workers. It also took the first steps towards creating anti-union laws. Wilson's foreign policy was no better. He heaped praises on the "peace efforts" of a US president who was dropping more bombs on Vietnam than had been used in the whole of the Second World War.

The 1974-9 Labour government moved even further in its attacks on those who elected it. It imposed the greatest reduction in working class living standards since the hungry years of the 1930s. Not only did it preside over rocketing unemployment and price rises, it also introduced vile racist measures such as "virginity tests" on Asian women and new anti-immigrant laws. Their repeated concessions to racism boosted the Nazis of the National Front.

Then came Tony Blair's government in 1997. Blair drove Labour much further to the right, consciously cuddling up to business, savaging the unions and sweeping away staples of Labour policy such as comprehensive education, council housing and public ownership. The Iraq War and the alliance with the then US president George Bush showed New Labour's readiness to join with imperialist slaughter.

A golden age?

"Ah," says a wise Labour supporter, "all those governments were indeed rotten, but what about the Labour government of 1945-51? That was Labour's golden age and it is to that we should seek to return." No doubt the 1945 government does look wonderful compared to those led by Blair and Gordon Brown. But it emerged from very specific circumstances and its radicalism was very limited. At the end of the Second World War the armed forces were discontented to the point of mutiny. This terrified the establishment, who remembered the wave of revolutionary struggles after the First World War. The Tory MP Quintin Hogg, later to become Lord Hailsham, warned parliament in 1943, "If you don't give the people social reform, they will give you social revolution." All the major parties were agreed that there had to be change.

Labour nationalised about a fifth of the economy. It created the National Health Service, the flagship of Clement Attlee's government, guaranteeing free healthcare for everyone in Britain. For a couple of years after the Second World War it seemed great strides towards equality and improving workers' lives could go hand in hand with a Labour government running a capitalist economy. Then in 1947 a crisis hit the economy. This signalled a turning point, where capitalists began clawing back the concessions they had made. Attlee's government responded by ending the radical programme. No serious reforms followed—but attacks on workers did. Between 1945 and 1951 the cabinet ordered troops across picket lines 18 times. It retained Order 1305, wartime legislation that could be used to make strikes illegal.

British foreign secretary Ernest Bevin helped create Nato, an anti-Communist organisation of Western states designed to back up the US. When the Korean War broke out in 1950 Britain immediately sent troops to support the US intervention. To help pay for this Labour imposed prescription, dental and spectacle charges. Labour helped crush popular risings in Greece, Malaya and Vietnam. A massive movement for independence forced the Labour government to relinquish India, the "jewel in the crown" of the British Empire. But it did so in a way that guaranteed partition into two states. The resulting transfer of population and communal bloodbath led to the deaths of up to a million people. Attlee ordered the building of a British atomic bomb without even telling most of the cabinet.

This was the record of the best Labour government. Why is it like that?

Why Labour fails

Contrary to the ideas of Labourism, power does not lie in parliament. The day after an election the same people own the factories and the offices, the same people give the orders in the army and police force, and the same people dominate the media. These unelected bosses and bankers will always attempt to destroy any government that does not act in their interests. These forces will demand the government bends to their will, especially at a time of crisis. Think of how

in the latest crisis the bankers have blackmailed governments across Europe by threatening to put up the price of borrowing or choke off funds altogether, unless there are harsh cuts. Every government did their bidding—those led by right-wingers such as David Cameron in Britain and Nicolas Sarkozy in France, but also governments led by parties similar to Labour in Greece, Spain and Portugal. Only by tackling the system at its roots can such blackmail be defeated.

The history of Labour is a history of betrayed hope because the party seeks to achieve change without challenging the system or the state. When push comes to shove, it defends the “national interest” over the class interest of its supporters—and this invariably means defending the interests of the ruling class who exercise real power in society. A break with the existing way of doing things would mean Labour looking to a force than can challenge the rule of capital, in other words, unleashing the full power of workers against the system. But this is precisely the path that Labour rejects.

Labour cannot be “reclaimed” for workers. It has never been a vehicle for socialism. But that does not mean it is the same as the Tories. Labour still retains a link with the organised working class through its union affiliations and workers still vote more heavily for Labour than any other party. The party’s actions since 1997 strained such loyalty. Labour lost five million votes between 1997 and 2010 and Labour’s membership slumped from 407,000 to around 160,000. The proportion of workers in the party has also fallen. But that has not entirely transformed its nature.

The Labour Party came into being to represent trade union leaders in parliament. The unions are still important to the party, although the union leaders are remarkably reluctant to use their power inside it in any meaningful way. Lenin pointed out in the 1920s that “the Labour Party is a thoroughly bourgeois party, because although it consists of workers it is led by reactionaries, and the worst reactionaries at that, who act fully in the spirit of the bourgeoisie”. It was, he said, a “bourgeois workers’ party”. That remains the character of Labour today, even if Blair and Brown tilted it hard in the bourgeois direction. Even today, Labour’s leaders can exercise influence only by making at least some verbal concessions to working class sentiment.

Serious revolutionary socialists must unite with Labour supporters against the attacks from the bosses and the ruling class, against war, against racism and in all the various struggles that arise. But it is also important to recognise that Labour will betray those who look to it and will support capitalist policies at every key point. That is why the battle is to build a socialist alternative to Labour and to spread the tradition of “socialism from below”.

THE LABOUR DEBATE

JUDITH ORR

From *Socialist Review* 345 (2010)

THE DEBATE we are having on the pages of *Socialist Review* about whether socialists should call for a vote for Labour where there isn't a left alternative reflects a very real debate happening across the wider working class movement.¹ After 13 years of Labour in government the bitterness against it among workers is intense.

Last month an episode of the BBC's *Question Time* was filmed in Middlesbrough. The largely working class audience were up in arms about jobs and layoffs and the closure of the local Corus plant. The feeling of class anger in the studio was visceral. These are people who hate the Tories but feel they have been betrayed by the Labour Party of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.

From its earliest days in government Tony Blair's rebranded "New" Labour has shown itself willing to take the side of the rich and powerful over the needs of the most vulnerable in society. Just months after the 1997 landslide Labour attacked single parent benefits, and during its time in office has led us into more wars than the Tories did in 18 years. Inequality is greater today than it was when Labour came to power.

Across Europe social democratic parties are generally suffering decline. The main reason for this is their failure to deliver real reforms or implement the sort of policies their supporters expected of them.

1: The context for this article was the run-up to the general election of spring 2010 that resulted in the Tory-Lib Dem coalition—*editor's note*.

This is true of Labour. There has been a historic slide in the Labour vote. As many as 13.5 million people voted Labour in the 1997 general election. This was down to 9.6 million in 2005. Its support has shrunk as it has deserted the needs of its traditional base. As a result thousands of loyal Labour Party members have long since ripped up their membership cards and many who have voted Labour their whole lives feel so betrayed that they won't vote at all.

Alongside disillusioned ex-Labour supporters is a generation of young people who have known nothing but resistance to the neoliberal and imperialist policies of Blair and Brown.

Socialists have grappled with the question of what kind of party the Labour Party is since its inception. After the Russian Revolution of 1917 there was much debate among revolutionary socialists internationally about the nature of the Labour Party. Lenin's analysis then was that Labour was a "capitalist workers' party". What he meant was that it was made up of working class people but once in office carried out policies which defended capitalism.

The question many socialists are asking today is, does Lenin's analysis still hold? Blair boasted that he had fundamentally changed the Labour Party. Was he successful? Is Labour just another plain old "capitalist" party now?

Labour's history

The Labour Party was born in 1901 "out of the bowels of the TUC", as Tony Cliff and Donny Gluckstein say in their history of the Labour Party. It came after a series of defeats for the working class movement and the desire for the trade union bureaucracy to have a voice in parliament. It was a step forward to have workers' organisations taking part in political structures but it also represented a move away from collective struggles by rank and file workers.

Because of its roots in the bureaucracy its history is one of, at best, negotiating and compromising with the ruling class, at worst, openly collaborating and facilitating ruling class attacks on workers' living standards. This has been true throughout the history of the party. Even in what is regarded as the golden era of Labour, the

1945 government, Labour backed imperialist war in Korea, sent the army in to break strikes and secretly introduced Britain's first nuclear arms programme.

So does that mean that the last decade and a half have just been more of the same? No—it is undeniable that over the past 20 years the Labour Party has seen significant changes to its makeup, policies and support. Socialists have been expelled, grassroots activists have been neutered and local roots in the working class have withered. The impact of Blairism has eroded some of Labour's core ideas—but only so far.

The ceremonial removal of Clause Four from the party's constitution in 1995 was a symbol of what was to come in Blair's New Labour project. No longer was Labour committed to anything resembling egalitarian aspirations. Instead Peter Mandelson was happily boasting, "We are intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich."

The links with the trade unions still exist but have been weakened. Labour's national conference has no pretence to be a forum for real debates and is merely a showcase for the leadership's agenda.

But just as it would be foolish to ignore these changes, it would be dangerous to overplay them. There are some myths that need to be debunked. One is that people don't vote Labour any more because of its record in power. But the fact is that 9.6 million people still did vote Labour at the last general election. Another myth is that Labour only really finds support among the middle class. This leads to the view that Labour has become so cut off from its working class base that it is now the equivalent of the Democrats in the US, where you effectively have two parties of the ruling class battling for votes.

The reality is that over the past 50 years the majority of working class voters, between 50 and 60 percent, consistently vote Labour. Just over four million trade unionists are affiliated to Labour—the unions remain the biggest source of funds for the party. Between 2004 and 2008 trade unions donated between £8 million and £12 million annually.

The nature of the voter base is the key to making a judgement on whether to call for a Labour vote. Working class people will vote for Labour in their millions because they still see it as a class vote.

They have expectations that Labour still will, or at least ought to, represent their interest in a way that the Tories don't even pretend to do. It's not even about the policies Labour is promising; it is about the perception of its class allegiance. What is important is the sense of entitlement that workers have from a Labour government.

So when Labour MPs fiddle expenses, close nurseries and cut hospital wards, workers cry out, "How could they do this? A Labour government!" They talk of betrayal. When the Tories do it, there is no contradiction—no one has any illusions about the Tories having any commitment to challenging inequality or standing up for the vulnerable. There is no sense of betrayal because they are seen as representing the class enemy.

Karl Marx said that "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas". If that was simply the case, socialism would be impossible. But under capitalism workers' own experiences force them to challenge some of those ideas. Reformism is a product of this contradiction.

Workers who feel they haven't got the power to challenge the system themselves look to the possibility of change through reforms. For most people revolution does not seem possible, or even desirable, most of the time and therefore the fact that you can vote for someone who will work to ameliorate your situation makes perfect sense.

In Britain the Labour Party is the organised expression of these ideas. It has existed for over a century ensuring the ideas of reformism have become deeply entrenched. Even at the height of struggles reformism has a grip and even when there is not an established party like Labour in existence reformist parties can emerge as the natural political home for workers, something that happened in Portugal after their revolution in 1974.

The left and elections

Are we conning people by engaging with elections if we think that the only way to win socialism is through making a revolution? Elections are a huge political arena that dominate the media, popular culture and everyday debates at work across society. The next general

election is already shaping debates on everything from the crisis to immigration. It is a myth that people are so disillusioned with official politics that most won't vote. In fact the majority of the population do vote in general elections. The turnout for the 2005 general election at 61.1 percent was up on the turnout in 2001 of 59.4 percent.

Elections are not simply a bourgeois conspiracy to hoodwink workers. The right to vote and elect representatives was only won after bitter struggles by workers. The ruling class fought hard to limit the vote, only conceding it first to rich men, then all men, through to limited numbers of women until full suffrage was finally won in 1928.

Socialists will have to engage in electoral fights right up to and through a revolution. The Bolsheviks stood in the Duma elections in the run-up to the October Revolution in 1917. Why? Because the consciousness of workers is uneven.

Even during a revolution, which is not an isolated event but a process of social upheaval over a period of months or years, not every worker will be won to transforming society through a new government of workers' councils, for example. Many will be wary and look to established political leaders. So revolutionaries must contest and challenge those leaders and their ideas on every front, including electorally.

This is not an argument to campaign or canvass for Labour. Socialists are not in the business of attempting to dampen people's anger and bitterness against Labour. Instead we have been central to building resistance to Labour's warmongering, its assault on the basic tenets of the welfare state, its attacks on migrant workers and encouragement of Islamophobia. We believe we have to be part of building a left alternative to Labour.

If it was possible we'd like to be standing in hundreds of seats, but unfortunately the reality is we are not in a position to do that right now. There are up to 600 seats where there will be no challenge to from the left of Labour.² We would effectively be abstaining from these debates if we didn't take sides. Instead by supporting a vote

2: During the 2010 general election, the SWP was part of the Trade Union and Socialist Coalition which mounted a limited left challenge to Labour—*editor's note*.

for Labour where there is no left alternative we want to relate to the huge section of the working class who, despite everything, will see voting Labour as a class vote.

To sit in a canteen, staff room or office and say there's no difference between the Tories and Labour cuts you off from some of the best people around you. You will look like you are some sect on the fringe.

In our everyday work we acknowledge that Labour voters are different to those who vote Tory. Who are the people who will be most likely to sign petitions to support strikes or anti-racist campaigns? Or who might buy *Socialist Worker* or *Socialist Review*? Would you go to the Tory voters first?

This goes to the heart of the argument. Arguing for a Labour vote when there's no left alternative is not about winning more votes for Labour or selling Labour to workers. It is about recognising that despite the sell-outs, attacks and reality of Labour in power there is still a significant difference in terms of who votes Labour.

The nearer the election, the more the pressure to side with Labour will grow. Many workers who now say they will never vote Labour again may shift to a grudging vote when the prospect of a Tory victory looms. We want to relate to these people alongside those who resolutely abstain. They are both our audiences.

The morning after

The day after the election, if the Tories win, the right will feel emboldened to go on the offensive. The critical point in this debate is about what increases workers' confidence about the possibility of change and resistance, and that means supporting a vote for Labour rather than standing aloof from the debate which will be raging right up to the election.

One effect of the prospect of a Tory victory is that more possibilities of working with Labour supporters to organise resistance are opening up. Having a sectarian attitude towards such Labour activists will weaken our side.

We want Labour MPs to work with us and speak on platforms, whether in Unite Against Fascism or defending a local hospital.

We should take every opportunity to unite with the widest possible layer of activists to resist the onslaught of attacks which are certain to intensify, whichever government is in power. The only debate between the Tories and Labour at the moment is whether there will be cuts now or cuts later.

So alongside slogans about the election we will have to make one message loud and clear—whoever wins will be committed to attacking working class living standards, so whoever wins we'll have to organise to fight.

Sample questions for discussion

- › How would you respond to the widespread argument that trade unions are dead as a force within British society?
- › Under what circumstances should a revolutionary socialist stand in an election for the leader of a trade union? What about standing for a position on the national executive?
- › “The Labour Party isn’t a vehicle for change today, but if there were serious workers’ struggles, those workers would look to Labour to represent them. Socialists should, therefore, be in the Labour Party.” How would you answer this argument?

Further reading

There has been extensive discussion of the trade unions and their role in the class struggle in *International Socialism* (www.isj.org.uk). See, in particular the articles by Martin Smith in issues 113 and 131, and by Charlie Kimber in issue 122.

Tony Cliff and Donny Gluckstein’s *Marxism and the Trade Union Struggle: The General Strike of 1926* (Bookmarks) is sometimes available second-hand and provides a useful introduction.

Another major work by the same two authors, *Labour: A Marxist History*, is the best starting point on the subject of Labourism. An earlier article by Tony Cliff, “The Labour Party in Perspective” is on the Marxist Internet Archive (www.marxists.org). This archive also contains two important works by Rosa Luxemburg relevant to this pamphlet: *Reform and Revolution* and *The Mass Strike*.

Available from the same source is Lenin’s *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder* which presents the classic case for revolutionaries contesting elections.