workers power

A CRISIS OF LEADERSHIP

This weekend's conference must face up to the fact that a golden opportunity has just been lost. Last winter there was a real chance to turn the tide, not only on Thatcher and her war drive against our every right and gain, but also against the New Realists whose answer to this war drive is the unilateral disarmament of the working class. A discussion of socialist ideas this weekend must start from why this opportunity has been lost. If it does not then those ideas will not mean much to the millions of workers whose lives are being wrecked by the bosses' offensive.

Chesterfield, 11/12 June 88

In February and March of this year working class anger exploded in a wave of strikes in the car industry, the NHS and on the ferries. Workers said enough is enough and fought back. The power to defeat Thatcher was there for all to see. Yet, three months on, these struggles have all either been defeated, sold short or treacherously sabotaged by the union leaders.

The Ford workers had victory snatched from them by so called 'lefts' like Airlie and Ron Todd. The anger that millions felt at the Tory vandalism in the NHS was squandered by Bickerstaffe, Mackenzie, Kinnock and Cook. They worked overtime to try and prevent the nurses from striking. And now the heroic seafarers have been well and truly knifed in the back by McCluskie and the TUC. Like the miners and Wapping printers their solid determination has been repaid with cowardice and treachery from leaders who are not prepared to defy the Tories' vicious anti-union laws or mobilise any solidarity action to help defend jobs, wages and conditions.

The end result of all this is that Thatcher is confidently pressing ahead. Education, local government, slave labour schemes, the poll tax, more anti-union laws, lesbian and gay rights—her battle front is wider than ever. And in the labour movement the New Realists are firmly in the saddle.

The policy review in the Labour Party is a Dutch Auction of every policy that had a whiff of 'socialism' about it. 'Market socialism' of the Kinnock and Gould variety—a pale imitation of Thatcher's popular capitalism—is all the rage with the Walworth Road whizz kids. Kinnock has even handed in his CND badge and declared his support for multilateralism in his bid to prove to Britain's bosses that he can serve as a reliable trustee on their behalf.

At the top levels of the union movement the picture is the same. The EETPU scabherders are leading the field in grovelling to the bosses. No-strike and single union deals are becoming the norm for Hammond. The AEU leaders are keen to follow suit. Todd and Edmonds will too, as soon as they can get the TUC to police the sell outs.

Instead of building the unions as fighting organisations capable of defending members' jobs and wages the New Realists are doing their bit to lend credence to the ideas of 'market socialism' by providing credit cards, cheap mortgages and package holidays. Thatcher must be laughing her head off.

Why are the New Realists in the saddle? Why didn't the strike movement in the winter topple them? The reason is simple. There was and is no alternative leadership to this bunch of traitors.

From top to bottom of the labour movement there is a crisis of direction, of tactics and of strategy. The old nostrums of the Labour left are threadbare—everyone can see through them. Labour is not and never has been a socialist party. 'Clause IV part 4' never amounted to a commitment to overthrow capitalism, only to manage it more fairly. What the left calls 'socialist policies' are merely those reforms and ideals that are now under attack from inside as well as outside the party. Those reforms that capitalism has been forced to grant—the NHS, state education, public services—are certainly worth defending. The problem is, the labour movement is proving itself incapable of doing even that.

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This is not because the working class will not fight; or because they are somehow 'backward' or have fallen under the influence of Thatcher. It is because everytime they do fight, their leaders aren't in front, leading—they're at the back, stabbing! These Judases plead the need to keep within the law, to subordinate sectional struggles to the wider movement, to sacrifice victory now for some future win at the polls. Kinnock is the lead voice in this choir, but nowadays even honest 'lefts' are to be found singing the same song.

In short, there is a crisis of leadership in our movement. It is a crisis of reformism as a strategy for the working class. It is expressed in the betrayals of workers in struggle, by the abandonment of even paper commitments to better the interests of the working class, by New Realism and the policy review. It is also expressed in the refusal of the Labour Left to challenge not just the symptoms, but the disease itself.

Benn's platform 'Aims and Objectives of the Labour Party' starts from a defence of democratic rights and 'socialist' principles. The right to life, the right to work, the right to a decent standard of living . . . rights which, when left at the level of abstract principle, no Labour Party member, of the left or right, could disagree with and still claim to be any sort of socialist. Indeed Kinnock's own policy review documents include such grand 'aims' as to 'banish want and poverty from Britain'. Without a concrete guide to how they can be achieved there is little to differentiate Benn's 'aims' and beliefs from those of Kinnock.

The 'Aims and Objectives' document says:

'These rights cannot be fully realised in any society under capitalism which has entrenched by law the power of capital over labour and subordinated human values to the demand for profit at the expense of peace and social justice.'

Benn and Heffer recognise that capitalism is 'entrenched by law'. How do they propose to overcome this obstacle? The campaign document calls for 'a major programme of democratic reform of the apparatus of the state'—abolition of the House of Lords, democratisation of the courts and local control over the police.

For all Benn's talk of building socialism 'from the bottom up' this democratic reform programme holds massive illusions in parliament and the state as the vehicle for socialism. It is a socialism which will be enacted by parliament, and assented to by the Queen (nowhere does the campaign call for abolition of the monarchy), administered by the democratised police force and cheerfully waved through by the armed forces.

It is not some theory in the heads of revolutionary socialists which makes us think this is an impossibility. It is the lesson of history. The Chilean coup of 1973, the Turkish coup of 1980, the US invasion of Grenada are just the most graphic and recent examples of the role of the 'apparatus of the state' where capitalism is threatened.

Even the most democratic bourgeois parliament could not legislate socialism because it could not control the state machine. That machine exists to protect capitalism; to destroy the profit system we first need to

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destroy its armed guards, replacing the army, police, courts and state bureaucracy with a regime of workers' democracy, exercised through workers' councils (soviets) and a workers' militia.

This too is not just a difference of 'principle' between revolutionaries and the Labour left. It is a practical difference every time workers are faced with the police on the picket line, or court seizure of union funds. The campaign document's sanctimonious phrase 'there is no moral obligation to obey unjust laws' is hardly a guide to action. Where the life or death of a union, a whole industry is at stake, it is necessary to advocate and organise breaking the law—the illegal defence of picket lines, the illegal call for solidarity action, illegal secondary pickets, illegal occupation of union offices against sequestration.

These tactics in the class struggle, and the revolutionary strategy they serve, cannot be fought for by the Labour party with its present structure, leadership and policies.

We need a political party completely different in politics and organisation to today's Labour Party. Instead of a 'broad church' of the betrayers and the betrayed we need a combat organisation that commits its members to fighting for a single strategy—socialism. Instead of a passive party, a party which leaves the industrial struggle to the relevant union leaders, we need a party of activists, taking the political struggle for revolutionary socialism into every union and workplace.

We need a party with a mass working class based press, which uses its papers and other media to inform and direct the activity of its members. We need a party that subordinates electoral tactics to the strategy of smashing the capitalist state machine.

Labour can never be transformed into such a party. It is a party whose politics are dictated by the union leaders and the parliamentary leadership. Their job is to manage capitalism, not to overthrow it.

A Revolutionary Tendency needs to be built in the Labour Party now, to fight both New Realism in all its manifestations, and reformism—no matter how left a face it wears. Such a tendency cannot not tie itself to the crippling strategy of 'transforming' the Labour Party. It must strive to ensure that when the Labour Party shatters along class lines—as it will—a new, revolutionary, party is built in its place.

For Benn, Labour is the only possible vehicle for socialism. This is what ties him to Willis, Kinnock, Hattersley and Healey. He agrees with them too about the road down which this vehicle must travel—parliament and elections to it.

Our aim cannot be a Labour government, not even a 'left' one, legislating in socialism—with royal assent! Our goal must be to overthrow the whole capitalist order, and erect a new one on its ruins.

Only then can the resistance of the bosses be broken. Only then can their property—the factories, mines, utilities, etc—and their wealth be taken from them and put to the use of the whole of society. Only then can the workers in every branch of industry and services democratically plan and co-ordinate production and distribution for need and not for profit. Only then can the market, which condemns millions to starvation every year, be swept away. That is what socialism means. That is the only way Benn's rights can be won and maintained.

The last nine years have revealed the bankruptcy of reformism in all its guises. Join us in the fight to build a revolutionary alternative.■

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

Benn stands clearly for left reformism. There are many other socialists here today—the Socialist Workers Party, the International Socialist Group and others—who claim to be revolutionary. Yet none of these groups offer a revolutionary alternative to Benn's reformism.

The SWP believe that the revolutionary party should be built, but their strategy for building it is bankrupt. Tied to the belief that revolutionaries should only ever fight for policies that are already being fought for by workers in struggle, they are reduced to the role of cheerleaders of whatever struggle happens to be going on. Thus in the NHS dispute they initially echoed the call of many militant nurses for an all out strike but refused to fight for one in the unions. Instead they sabotaged the attempt to fight for one at the Sheffield health stewards conference, arguing instead that nothing could be done because of the 'downturn' except to join the SWP. This won't take the struggle to build the party forward one step.

The SWP are centrists, incapable of breaking the hold of reformism on the mass of workers. The ISG are no better. They are little more than centrist mimics of Benn and Scargill. Their way forward is to institutionalise Chesterfield as a sort of undeclared movement—a think tank coming up with new ideas, or a resting place until better times arrive. They are deluding themselves and others. Today's battles, Thatcher's attacks, the treachery of our leaders—these are events that do not give any pause for so called socialists to rest up and consider 'new ideas'. Still less is there any reason to thing that 'history' will solve our problems by bringing along happier times. Further defeats will make things worse not better.

Either Chesterfield and its nationwide imitations become real organising centres, thrashing out a strategy for a united front of resistance with hard and fast demands and tactics, or it will turn into a 'Socialist Conference' industry providing regular platforms for windbags. To avoid the latter fate everyone must face one question squarely, what is to be done? On every front of the class struggle, in every arena, we need to answer this question if we are to defeat our enemies and start chalking up victories.

There may be agreement on aims, principles, etc, but if there is no common commitment to action by the leaders or the activists then nothing will come of it. The fight against new realism will not be won or lost in the pages of *Campaign Group News*, but on the picket lines, the demonstrations and union conferences, by fighting the misleaders at every turn.

The second Chesterfield conference will only contribute to this struggle if it commits its supporters to building such joint action. One of the key tasks it should undertake is to take the Benn/Heffer campaign into all levels of the unions and Labour Party with meetings and arguments, inviting them into workplaces and branches. Left union leaders must be called on to organise a campaign for support in their unions.

Any MP or trade union leader who refuses to support Benn/Heffer must be written off as useless in the struggle against new realism. Benn and Heffer's policies are no answer to new realism, but they must be forced to head a movement of resistance to the wholesale sell-outs of the right wing. We will support them by trying to build such a movement.

By linking the leadership campaign to a practical defence of workers' interests the limitations of their political leadership will become clearer. So will the limitations of the Socialist Conference movement. Founded on the refusal to build a revolutionary combat party, it will continue to fail the working class in the test of struggle.■

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