SOCIALIST LABOUR
ACTION

Issue 1. November 1996.

A bulletin for Socialist Labour Party members

Contents:

1. Editorial
2. On the economic amendment
3. Should we call for a Labour vote?
4. Build the Party!

BUILD THE SOCIALIST LABOUR PARTY

ONE SOLUTION - REVOLUTION

Send articles, letters and comments on this bulletin to:
C. Boylan
36 Cecil Road
Leicester LE2 OAD

SOCIALIST LABOUR
ACTION

Why this bulletin is being produced

by Chris Boylan, Leicester SLP.

There are three reasons why *Socialist Labour Action* has been produced.

The first and main reason is to continue the debate around economic policy and the state that began at the May conference. Some comrades will remember that at the conference I proposed an amendment on economic policy that was radically different from the draft submitted by the economy working group. My amendment was defeated after a democratic debate.

I want to persuade party members that this was a mistake. As I said at the conference, this was the most important debate. It relates to the very question of what socialism is and how it can be achieved.

I hope comrades will respond to this attempt to get these issues discussed and clarified. For my own part, I want to use this debate to develop a fuller and broader revolutionary programme for the party, not just on the economy but on every aspect of political and social life. This bulletin will help do that.

The second reason is to provide party members with the opportunity to exchange ideas, experiences and tips on how they have been building the party. We need to hear from comrades in the branches about how we can best recruit new members, raise the profile of Socialist Labour and exert influence in the labour movement, among young people and in the community.

The third is to provide a forum for discussion and debate of policy questions. Now that it is clear that *Socialist News* is not going to carry articles dealing with internal debates that are going on in the party, I believe the best way to clarify ideas and enable democratic discussion to continue is to produce this bulletin.

For this reason, the pages of *Socialist Labour Action* will be open to contributions from all party members. I want to encourage comrades to write in with their opinions and criticisms of pieces in this first issue. For example, I know there is a lot of disagreement about whether we should call for a Labour vote in constituencies where we are not standing. In this issue, Bernie McAdam from Birmingham branch says we should. If you disagree, then please write telling us why. There are numerous other important areas of debate worth airing. Religious education, immigration controls and Ireland were all debated at the founding conference in May.

This will not detract from the party's work in the slightest. *Socialist Labour Action* is a bulletin for party members only. Unlike Blair's New Labour our party is committed to democratic discussion of our

programme and policies. The aim is not to be a talking shop, but to equip the party with the best possible analysis of what is happening in society and how we can respond to it.

That is why this bulletin can only strengthen the party.

On the economic amendment

Comrades will find the text of my amendment reproduced at the end of this article. What follows is a very brief explanation of why I want to continue to rally support for it. It does not deal with every issue, but focuses on some of the most important points.

The starting point of the document is that Socialist Labour should be fighting for what the working class needs, not what the bosses can afford. Some object that they are unrealistic, which is a way of saying that the present social system could not afford them, or will not grant them. But this argument could equally be applied to Socialist Labour's call for a 4-day week. These policies are necessary for the interests of working people. If those interests cannot be met within the confines of the capitalist system, then that is further proof that the system itself needs to be done away with.

This challenge to the priorities of capitalism has to be waged at every level - from the shop floor right through to the major questions of government. Workers control is therefore a central theme of the amendment.

The fight for workers' control is in reality a declaration of war on the bosses: a declaration that we reject their "right to manage", their control of hiring and firing, their right to keep the facts about a business secret from the workers. It means fighting in every workplace to go beyond the traditional confines of trade unionism and to struggle against the dictatorship of capital itself.

Our programme should commit us to workers' control of all state owned industries. This does not mean workers sitting on joint boards with capitalists and taking responsibility for their decisions - quite the opposite. It means that workers themselves should run and manage industry and production. I am confident that we can do this far better than any bourgeois manager. We are the class that can best raise production, increase efficiency, cut out waste and calculate how to match production to human need.

The second reason for this stress on workers' control is to avoid the problems both of the old nationalised industries in Britain and of command planning as it existed in the former USSR and Eastern Europe in the days of the "Peoples' Democracies".

I know that state ownership was a step forward for the working class against private ownership. But the National Coal Board was hardly a socialist institution. Nor were the former USSR and Eastern European states socialist. The masses had no genuine democratic rights - not just politically, but also to control economic life, what was produced, how and where. The quality of goods was appalling; the regime in the workplace was dictatorial. The economic plan was run by unaccountable bureaucrats who lived a life of luxury compared to the

workers themselves. That is why millions of working people grew to hate the regimes there with a vengeance.

This brings me to the question of Cuba. Many delegates at the conference was astonished and even outraged that my amendment criticised the absence of democratic control and rights for the working class in Cuba. One comrade exclaimed in response "How dare they criticise Cuba!" and won loud applause.

Let's get this straight. I as much as any other comrade wants to the see the SLP defend Cuba unconditionally against the blockade and the USA. But does this mean we have to keep silent about the fact that the workers themselves have no democratic rights? If comrades disagree we this, then don't just attack me for expressing my view: try and prove me wrong!

What about direct action? Many comrades, including Arthur Scargill, insist that we are an extra-parliamentary party. So our programme should set out what sort of action we are proposing. My amendment is quite simple on this - it does not exclude new techniques and methods that will arise in the course of the class struggle. But it does say we should be campaigning for strikes and occupations against all job losses. In the course of these struggles we should be advocating that workers elect democratic strike committees themselves, to make sure that the conduct of disputes is not left in the hands of the Bill Morrises and the Alan Johnsons.

It is these organisations - strike committees, elected and democratic bodies of delegates from workplaces and beyond - that we need to be campaigning for in the course of every struggle. They are not just the best way of workers running their own disputes and avoiding sell-outs - they also point the way to the sort of class organisations that can mount a challenge to the capitalist state and sow the seeds of a future working class democracy.

Our programme needs to be transitional - to suggest how the struggles of the present day can be linked to the struggle for the socialist transformation of society. Many comrades will be familiar with this idea: it was developed by Leon Trotsky in the 1930s, but I believe this transitional method was also used by Lenin and the Communist International. The idea is to advance a programme that can act as a bridge between the daily struggles of the class and the socialist future. Without this, socialism appears in the programme only as the music of the distant future.

Finally the main disagreement at the conference: how can we get socialism? Nobody stood up and said we can do it just through parliament. But every amendment that called for revolution was voted down. Instead comrades said we would be ill advised to explain exactly how to overthrow capitalism. We had a vague notion of combining parliamentary and extra-parliamentary action.

This is not enough in my view. The miners' strike proved that the state will use the army. police, civil service, courts, DSS and all the

unelected apparatus of oppression to defend the capitalists' profits. Breaking this up will need more than vague "extra-parliamentary action": it will mean a mass struggle to break up this state physically. That is what revolution means. If there is another way that is proved to work please can someone tell me what it is.

In the meantime I will campaign for the party to tell the plain truth to the working class: that without revolution, there will be no socialism in Britain, or anywhere else.

Should we call for a Labour vote?

by Bernie McAdam, Birmingham SLP

In my branch there is a debate over whether or not the SLP should call for a Labour vote in constituencies where we are not standing candidates. From what I can gather this is a debate going on throughout the party.

I think we should call for a Labour vote where there is no SLP candidate.

We are not yet a mass party and we will only be standing in around 100 seats at most in the coming general election. Labour is likely to win its first election since 1979. So we must get our tactics right if we are to grow.

Many comrades joined the SLP because they reject Blair's "New Labour". They regard any vote for Labour as an endorsement of Blair. Therefore, they say - don't vote Labour.

I think this is a simplistic approach.

Labour, despite Blair, still has the support of millions of workers. It still has the support of the majority of the organised working class via the affiliated trade unions. A few thousand of us may have seen through Blair's betrayals and joined the SLP - but millions haven't. And we don't want to cut ourselves off from those millions through sectarianism.

That is why I think we should give Labour critical support in the election in seats where we aren't standing. This means calling for a Labour vote without supporting Labour's programme or Blair's project. It is a way of uniting with those workers who still look to Labour, of saying to them that we will support what is progressive about their illusions in the Labour Party - the class hatred of the Tories and an active desire to get them out of government.

Calling for a Labour vote will get us more of a hearing among Labour's working class supporters. It will show them that we want to help them get rid of the Tories, while at the same time we can demand that Labour candidates commit themselves to SLP policies. In this way we can agitate for our policies in every constituency - including ones in which we are as yet unable to stand. This tactic would help to break the continued illusions that millions have in Labour, by putting them into office and testing them in practice. And make no mistake: if New Labour get in, Socialist Labour will have far more chance of growing.

While illusions and expectations in Labour are lower than in other elections they still exist. Even the best militants in the trade unions

have been going along with the "wait for Labour mood" over the last year or so. This summer's strikes rocked the boat a bit, but the union leaders made sure it stayed on course for Blair at the Labour Party conference. Even on pensions they helped Blair get his way.

At a local government level Labour's victories in elections also reveals that amongst the working class there is a widespread belief that Labour is their alternative to the Tories.

I don't think Labour is such an alternative. Unlike some Socialist Labour members, including Arthur Scargill, I don't think Labour was ever socialist, even when it had Clause Four. Clause Four was a bit like the crown jewels - though not as valuable; it was for decoration and ceremonial use only. It was never a socialist commitment, and Labour was never a socialist party. It always acted in defence of capitalism.

But I do think Labour was based on the working class and was subjected to pressure from the working class. In one sense Clause Four's commitment to public ownership reflected this pressure. And the union link is one of the major examples of the way in which Labour is based on the working class. This link remains. It means that despite Blair's capitalist policies Labour is still based on the working class.

Tony Blair wants to end the link. He has cut the union share of the vote at conference from 70% to 50%, and even this is increasinly irrelevant as most policy comes straight out of the leader's office. However, the financial support the unions give Labour is still vital. It still amounts to millions of pounds. Donations from companies - the Tories' main source of finance - is minimal in the Labour Party. In addition, 141 Labour MPs are sponsored by trade unions, millions of workers pay the political levy and the unions still retain half the vote for the election of the leader and deputy leader of the Labour Party.

The "leaked" comments by Stephen Byers at the TUC about cutting this link shows where Blair wants to take the party. But he hasn't taken it there yet. Faced with an attempt by Blair to break the link I am convinced that SLP members would vote in their unions to stop him. After all, we want to win the unions to a left wing alternative, not see them trounced by the right. We will have to unite with Labour supporters to defeat Blair.

In the election we should apply the same logic. Unite with working class supporters of Labour to put their party in office not in order to "support" Blair but in order to mobilise workers to fight him, to fight to demand Labour meets their needs.

If there was a resolution in a union branch calling on Labour to immediately implement a minimum wage of £4.26 an hour SLP members would vote for it. I know I would. If we are prepared to unite with workers to get Labour to meet this demand of the TUC - even if we doubt they will honour it - then what better means of

showing such workers how treacherous Labour is than putting them into office?

Otherwise we end up supporting demands on Labour but not supporting getting a Labour government that can either be forced to meet those demands, or one which, in not meeting them, exposes its true pro-capitalist nature to millions of workers who have supported it. The same applies to the other things workers are hoping for from the Labour Party - more money for the NHS, trade union recognition, reducing class sizes, the windfall tax on utilities etc. We fight for these demands to be met by a Labour government. But we don't fight for a Labour government?

Such inconsistency on our part would be daft and no working class militant would take us seriously.

In the first issue of "Socialist News" the editorial begins with the following statement:

"Like millions of our fellow citizens, Socialist Labour hopes that the Tories are hated to such a degree that they will not be returned to power at the next general election."

Yes, millions of workers hate the Tories and are desperate to get throw them out. Those same millions see Labour as the only immediate alternative government to the Tories. They are right. We will be standing candidates to try and build the SLP. But surely none of us are under the illusion that the SLP has already replaced Labour as the main alternative to the Tories.

Until we are the choice is simple - abstain from the actual fight to get rid of the Tories when it comes to the election or join in the fight by calling for a vote to Labour. Of course, calling for a Labour vote does not mean that we keep quiet about our criticisms. Quite the opposite. Every aspect of Labour's policy should be criticised. We should raise real socialist policies instead. We should make clear that we don't think Labour is the slightest bit socialist. But to everybody who doesn't believe it we should say let's work together to get a Labour government and we will prove who is right and who is wrong in practice.

Voting Labour will help the SLP grow, not hinder it. Abstaining and only standing our own candidates while saying nothing about Labour will risk us being turned into an irrelevance. None of us want that.

Build Socialist Labour!

by Chris Boylan, Leicester SLP

Tony Blair wants to cut Labour free from the unions altogether. This has created real opposition within the Labour Party, the unions and in the working class. It gives all of us in Socialist Labour a great chance to put the case for a new socialist party and win thousands of new members.

At the national conference in May, Arthur Scargill spoke of a recruitment campaign the like of which nobody had ever seen before. Conference greeted this with enthusiasm.

Advances have been made, like the defecting councillors in Havant, dozens of NUJ activists, the bakers' union leaders etc.But since then very little has been done to build at grass roots level. It is brilliant that we recruited so many people at the TUC congress including militants like Jimmy Nolan of the Liverpool dockers.

Concentrating on the TUC congress and occasional elections is vital work; it has shown that we can grow and are not a fringe organisation. But congress is once a year and thousands of militant trade unionists don't get delegated to it. We cannot rely on a top down way of building the party - we need to recruit to the branches on the ground.

But many members are complaining that there's not much going on and many branches are stagnant. The danger is that all the enthusiasm generated at conference will turn into a stale routine with badly attended branch meetings and little public activity becoming the norm.

I think we should devote much more thought and effort to building Socialist Labour from below, because that is where our strength lies, that is where recruits are to be found and that is where the most important struggles are.

Branches should become organising centres not monthly get togethers. We must use the branch meetings to plan activities to build the party. How about:

door to door sales of the new paper

regular public meetings

activities to publicise Socialist Labour such as protests against the Jobseekers' Allowance at Job Centres and Benefits Offices

organising solidarity with workers on strike

building support for marches and campaigns.

All of these things will turn the party outwards. If they are linked to nationally organised speaking tours with Arthur Scargill and other prominent party figures they can begin to make a real impact locally. Every meeting of this type so far has brought us new members.

Branches should produce leaflets and local bulletins to make us known in the area, like my branch has done in Leicester. We should have a national training school on writing and laying out leaflets and local propaganda. This will strengthen the initiative and professionalism of the branches.

On every march, especially if Arthur is one of the platform speakers at the end, we should have teams of members going round with membership application forms. We can sign up scores of new members like this.

I think we should put much more stress on selling Socialist News. We should sell every week, outside workplaces, Labour party meetings, on marches, on street corners on Saturdays, at colleges, in our union branches. Every new buyer is a potential member. It is all very well financing the paper through bulk orders from union branches, but to really build the party we need a large regular readership and we need to be selling to new people all the time.

I also think the paper should be run by a democratically elected editorial board and it must be open to contributions from all comrades in the party. Of course we can't fit everything in every issue, but we can build the paper in a democratic way. It can become a paper that every militant will want to read to find out what we say about the big issues of the day, about what debates we are having, about what struggles we are involved in and about how workers are fighting back. To get this every member needs to feel the paper belongs to them. A democratic paper can do just that. It will mean more sales, a bigger audience for the party and above all more people joining.

In strikes, we must not adopt the "leave it to the trade unions". Over the summer the disputes at Royal Mail and on the railways and London Underground - where we have influential members - seemed to pass the majority of the party by. It was like the bad old Labour Party. The disputes were left to the trade unions, the party kept its nose out.

Strikes produce militants and militants can be won to Socialist Labour. We need to make sure that we are at the centre of all the major disputes, not just as well-meaning individuals but with an identity as Socialist Labour.

This means that we should adopt clear policy on each dispute. The party should decide democratically how we think each dispute could be won. Our policy should reflect the interests of the workers involved in the action - and oppose the line of the Blairites and those union leaders who won't lead a fight. Then we should campaign for this policy among the striking workers. That way we will be able to recruit

from every struggle and build support for Socialist Labour policies. The party as a whole should exercise control over party trade unionists because they should carry out party policy in their unions.

It should be based on organising the rank and file of the unions against any leaders who sell out and campaigning for democratic control over all officials. With this policy our trade union comrades will be able to win thousands of rank and file supporters to the party.

The same goes for progressive campaigns. We shouldn't just court a few leaders, or publicise campaigns in the paper. We should adopt a clear policy and then fight for it in the campaigns.

Take the National Demonstration against Education Cuts on 19 October for example. Every branch should have been booking coaches down to the demo, contacting the teachers' unions, going out and building the demo. In this way we could have been out publicising both the march and our policies on education. On our coaches we could have been recruiting to the party.

Finally we must put paid to the exclusions and expulsions of socialists. If we build a party that is afraid of debate, that is afraid of having good socialists in its ranks who happen to disagree with leadership on certain points, then we are in danger of building a bureaucratic party. Surely we don't want that.

The witch hunts of dissidents must stop. Our fire should be directed at Blair and the right wing, at the Tories. Our energy must be used to build the party not purge it. The leadership have tried to use a constitution that nobody has yet voted for to keep socialists out of the party and kick socialists out of the party. Thousands of workers will want to know how this is so different to the witch hunts of Neil Kinnock's day. They will want to know why we don't embrace the chance of recruiting hundreds, even thousands of socialists, by opening our party to affiliations from socialist organisations. They will want to know what we are afraid of.

We have nothing to be afraid of. So long as people give a commitment to build the party then debate, differences over policy, a healthy democratic atmosphere will help us to grow, not hinder us.

In summary, we should:

Turn the party outwards

Sell the paper

Launch an active recruitment drive in the branches

Open the party to all socialists who give a commitment to build it

Stop the expulsions

Build Socialist Labour from below.

From Capitalism to Socialism

A 16-point economic programme for Socialist Labour

This amendment aims to replace the section of A. Scargill's discussion document on the economy entitled "Socialist Labour's Programme for Britain" with the following 16-point economic programme.

"Socialist Labour stands for:

1. **Nationalisation without compensation** of the banks, building societies and financial sector, of the major utilities, basic resources such as coal and steel, the major transport concerns, drug companies and multinationals. Any firms declaring redundancies, locking out workers or failing to pay the minimum wage should be nationalised without compensation.

2. **All nationalised companies to be under workers' control** and subject to an integrated socialist plan. This means democratic control by the workers themselves and a veto over management decisions, not "co-production" or "worker participation" schemes which involve workers collaborating with the capitalists.

3. **Full employment.** For a maximum working week of 35 hours, with no loss of pay, speed up, intensification of work or overtime. Necessary work should be divided between all those available to do it. The introduction of new labour saving technology should lead to a further reduction of working hours, not job losses.

4. **An end to business secrecy.** All company books and records should be open to inspection by trade unions and the workforce.

5. **For a tax on unearned wealth** and a steeply progressive income tax to sustain full employment and fund massive public spending projects - hospitals and healthcare, schools and colleges, housing, public transport and the renewal of the infrastructure of our towns and cities. Abolish VAT, Council Tax and all indirect taxation.

6. **For a national minimum wage** of £8 an hour, with a guaranteed increase of 1% for every 1% rise in the real cost of living, as calculated by trade union and consumers' price watch committees.

7. **A secure future for all.** All pension funds to be merged into a single state fund under the control of the trade unions, guaranteed by the state, and fixed at full rates of pay. For a right to voluntary retirement at 55.

8. **Independence for youth and students.** Full benefits for 16 and 17 year-olds. Scrap student loans and fees, abolish all private education. For a living student grant fixed at the level of the national minimum wage. Education should be free with curricula determined by teachers and students, not by the needs of the profit system.

9. **An end to discrimination.** Equal pay for work of equal value. An end to all discrimination on grounds of race, nationality, age, sex or sexual orientation. For free 24-hour nursery and care provision to enable women with dependants to work.

10. **A safe working and living environment.** A labour movement inquiry into all potentially dangerous industries and working practices. Those that cannot guarantee the health and safety of their workforce or that they are not causing irreverisble environmental damage should be closed until they can be rendered safe, with their workers being employed elsewhere in like work on similar pay and conditions.

11. **Internationalism not protectionism.** We oppose import controls, tariffs etc, which encourage support for "patriotic" capitalists, export unemployment and undermine international workers' solidarity. For the free movement of labour and an end to all immigration controls.

12. **An end to militarism.** Not a penny, not a person for the military defence of the capitalist system. We oppose all spending on arms by British capitalist governments, which have butchered and plundered the resources of the peoples of the third world and have sent worker to fight worker in fratricidal wars for profit.

13. **Direct action** against all attempts by the capitalists to make the workers pay for the crisis of their system. We campaign for industrial action, strikes and workplace occupations against privatisation, sackings, wage restraint and worsening conditions of work.

14. **Workers' Revolution.** The economy is owned and controlled by a minority class of exploiters. The state apparatus - army, police, judges, top civil servants and bureaucrats - exist to defend the property and privileges of the capitalists. Any attempt to implement Socialist Labour's programme of wealth redistribution will meet with determined and violent resistance from this ruling classs and its state. To abolish capitalism and carry out a socialist transformation of society, the working class will need to smash the bureaucratic and military apparatus of the state through revolutionary struggle, and replace it with a new state power drawing its authority from democratic workers' councils and armed workers' defence organisations.

15. **Workers' Democracy and Socialist Planning.** Capitalist democracy limits our say to placing a cross in a box every five years or so. For the rest of the time we are subject to the diktat of the manager, the boss and the government official. The Stalinist system in the former USSR, (and in China and Cuba today), had state ownership of industry but repressed all democratic rights for working people and excluded them from control over the economy. Against capitalism and Stalinism, Socialist Labour stands for a socialist society in which the working class majority have both legal ownership and democratic control over the companies and decisions that effect their lives. Only in this way - through the fullest workers' democracy - can a global socialist economy be developed and the misery of exploitation and class division be consigned to the history books."

Proposed by C. Boylan (Leicester SLP)