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Extremism and the Left

by

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EXTREMISM AND DEMOCRACY

Britain is renowned among nations for its high degree of constitutional stability and the absence of violent political conflict. Since the upheavals of the seventeenth century, when Parliament triumphed over absolutism and anarchy, established institutions have shown a remarkable resilience. By constantly adapting to new circumstances while upholding the rule of law, they have survived periods of unrest and crisis to enable social change to take place peacefully.

This institutional continuity has been underlined by the repeated refusal of the British people to embrace programmes or movements based on ideologies of revolution and violence. British radicalism, of which there is a long and fruitful history, has generally sought to extend and improve the workings of democracy rather than to overthrow it. The general election of May 1979 amply confirmed the popular tradition. The election marked one of the largest interventions in modern times of anti-democratic parties and it saw them all roundly rejected: the 303 candidates of the much-publicised National Front collected a mere 191,706 votes and they all lost their deposits. So, too, did over 100 candidates of the Marxist Left – 38 from the Communist Party, 60 Trotskyists of the Workers' Revolutionary Party and 11 under the banner of the Socialist Unity Campaign, which was inspired by another Trotskyist body, the International Marxist Group.

For most people that is the end of the matter; but not for the Marxist Left. If the prospect of power through the ballot box eludes that small but intensely dedicated minority which seeks to replace parliamentary democracy by some other, largely undefined, system, it does not mean it admits graceful defeat and retires. It adopts other means, utilising all the other freedoms that democracy offers, through institutions and all the channels of influence and pressure that exist in a highly developed, open society.

This paper sets out to examine the challenge to democracy in this country that is posed by the extreme Left, to describe its main features and to assess the significance and extent of its influence.

The Nature of Extremism. Extremism is clearly a relative and subjective term. Its meaning depends on the circumstances and on the viewpoint of the user. In a primitive society or in certain dictatorships, where power is exercised by force and fear, and the only means of opposition is the violent overthrow of the régime, then it can be said that all political behaviour is extreme. The term loses its value in such a situation.

In a democracy, however, where the political system is open to everyone, it is possible to speak of extremism as any organised movement that threatens the functioning of the democratic institutions and the freedom of the individual within the rule of law. Extremism, as the antithesis of constitutional government, can be identified in a number of ways: first, by its ends, which are the destruction of parliamentary democracy; secondly, by its means, which may entail violent or illegal acts; and, thirdly, by its style of behaviour including the personal qualities which distinguish the attitude of the extremist from the constitutionalist, such as his fanaticism, dogmatism and intolerance, which express themselves in obsessive hyper-activity at the expense of social habits and relationships that would be regarded as normal by the rest of society.

A number of comments can be made on these characteristics. First, where there is open access to existing political institutions, the pursuit of the ends of extremism do not always involve extremist methods: to try to destroy democracy from within or by stealth, is one very effective way of setting about the task. Secondly, where violent deeds such as terrorism are carried out, they can for the perpetrators become ends in themselves, so that extremism does not always need a coherent policy to become a real danger to internal stability. Thirdly, these qualities do not have any specific ideological content – they can be applied to threats from either the 'Right' or the 'Left', and indeed, Left and Right-wing extremisms do share certain features, just as totalitarian tyranny has common aspects, which apply both to Communist and Fascist régimes.[1] And fourthly, it is as well to remember that it is possible for constitutional governments to destroy the very freedoms they are supposedly defending by over-reaction to a perceived extremist threat.

The Extremist Challenge. Today, Britain faces more varied and extensive threats to its freedom than at almost any time since the war. The dangers are both external and internal. Renewed international tensions, instability in key strategic areas of the globe, and world recession create a universal sense of unease, and place added strains on the domestic scene at a time of considerable economic and social difficulty.

One symptom of these underlying crises is heightened activity by extremist groups. They seek to test democracy's weaknesses, to exploit existing tensions in society and try to win support for their sweeping, simplistic solutions from elements dissatisfied with traditional parties and policies. Such activity may be displayed in a variety of forms: in terrorist violence, in militant campaigns of protest on the streets, in the attempts of racialists to fuel tensions in inner cities or capitalise upon the frustrations of the young, and in the tireless efforts of the revolutionary Left to win

support in the Labour Party, the unions and among minority groups.

This paper concentrates on the extremism of the Left because of the range of its activities and the potential for their future extension. At present the Left pursues its aims in three main ways:

(1) By attempting to push the Labour Party further to the Left. The barriers which used to exist in the Labour Party and trade unions between the legitimate and extreme Left have all but broken down as Communist and Labour Party members lend open support to each other, and Communists and Trotskyists join in the campaigns for 'constitutional reform' of the Labour Party and support the attempt by Mr Tony Benn to become Labour's Deputy Leader.

(2) By influencing public attitudes through numerous political organisations, broadly-based pressure groups and single-issue campaigns; and by carrying out propaganda work among various sections of society, especially trade unionists, young people, ethnic minorities and women.

(3) By encouraging socially discontented groups to give militant expression to their feelings in ways which can lead to violence and disruption.

Clear lines of division between the various strands of activity cannot always be drawn. The organisations of the extreme Left always try to keep as many avenues as possible open to them. Thus, a Trotskyist group which exists as a separate political organisation officially opposed to the policies of the Labour Party will encourage its followers to join Labour's ranks as individual members. The Trotskyist group then obtains the best of two worlds: it is able, through processes such as the reselection of MPs or the electoral college for leadership elections, to exert some influence on the mainstream of party politics, while retaining its freedom of action to participate in a more militant style on the streets, advocating physical resistance to the forces of law. It is one of the ironies of the present circumstances that some of the most determined revolutionary enemies of the "venal and rotten parliamentarianism of bourgeois society"[2] are becoming increasingly involved in the affairs of a political party whose whole existence has been devoted to gradual change through the parliamentary process.

THE ANATOMY OF THE FAR LEFT

The most striking feature about the extreme Left is its diversity, both in the breadth of its activities and its ideological variety. There are today at least twenty-five distinct Marxist-based organisations in Britain, the majority of which owe allegiance to Trotskyism. Many of them operate in addition to the main 'party' a battery of 'front' and subsidiary organisations such as young people's and women's sections, and rank and file trade union campaigns. All of them publish at least one newspaper or journal.

A few anarchist and syndicalist groups exist as well, though their significance is declining. Besides these, without any particular ideological label, there are scores of pressure groups in which the Left plays an important part, such as the Troops Out Movement, the Anti-Nazi League, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the autonomous feminist movement,

and various independent journals and specialist agencies, such as the theoretical *New Left Review,* the *Leveller* magazine, *State Research,* which publishes information on police and security matters, and the radical, pacifist, *Peace News*.

The large majority of these organisations have come into existence since the late 1960s. Exceptions include the anarchist newspaper *Freedom,* founded in 1886, the Socialist Party of Great Britain (1906) and the Communist Party (1920). Some Trotskyist groups can trace their origins back to the 1930s and 1940s. The recent burgeoning of the far Left began with the student movement and anti-Vietnam war protests that reached their peak in 1968, and has developed since as endemic economic crisis and increasing social tensions have provided radical socialists and Marxists in particular with unprecedented opportunities for reaching a generation that is both better educated and more restless than previous ones.

In some ways however, it is surprising that this late flowering of Marxism has taken place at all. The reformist traditions of the Labour Party and the trade unions have prevented the emergence of a mass Communist Party on the French or Italian model; the electorate, as we have noted, displays a marked antipathy to alien ideologies; and the social conditions have scarcely been favourable to revolutionary action for most of the post-war period.

To these disadvantages must be added the fact that Marxism has been discredited by the failure of many of its key predictions – such as the inevitable collapse of capitalism and the impoverishment of the proletariat – to come true, and by the grinding misery Communism has brought wherever it has been applied.

But the attraction of Marxism has been as much a theoretical as a practical one. Many of its younger adherents, for whom Marxist ideology retains its moral and intellectual appeal, have dismissed the excesses of Stalinism, and argue like the Socialist Workers' Party that the Soviet Union is not socialist at all. The defenders of the Soviet system are to be found among an older generation of socialists, at their most fanatical in the New Communist Party, but conspicuous also in the Labour Party and trade unions.

Whatever school of thought they represent, Stalinist, Maoist, Trotskyist or Eurocommunist, all Marxists believe in a central core of revolutionary ideas that are hostile to liberal democracy: that class struggle is inevitable under capitalism; that the so-called freedoms of the press and Parliament are bourgeois deceptions without real substance; that the present legal system, the police and armed forces are instruments of capitalist oppression; and that the working class will overcome these adversaries to emerge victorious in a world-wide revolution which will lead to the establishment of socialism and the ending of class oppression.

Beyond that there is little agreement on how it is all to be realised in practice, given the prevailing circumstances. The ensuing arguments within Marxism have only reinforced the introspective theorising to which it is prone and which have turned variety to fragmentation, into a kaleidescopic array of warring factions, sects and 'tendencies'. But what the Marxist movement

has lacked in coherence, mass support and revolutionary potential, has been more than made up for in ceaseless activity and an almost religious fervour. And only now is some of this effort reaping its unexpected reward.

The Communist Party. Against the background of the expansion of the New Left and the Trotskyists, it is fashionable to decry the Communist Party of Great Britain. Certainly it has problems, whether it is considered as a mainstream political party or as a Leninist vanguard. The fact is that it has never really decided what it wanted to be and, consequently, has not been outstandingly successful in either role.

Its membership at present stands at 20,590,[3] compared with 34,281 in 1964, 24,900 in 1958 after the post-Hungary exodus, and 56,000 in 1942, its highest ever level. The party has lost ten thousand members in the last ten years and this decline has been paralleled in other ways. The Young Communist League, of which Mr Arthur Scargill was once a member, has fallen from around 5,500 members in 1967 to under a thousand today.

In the 1979 general election its 38 candidates polled a total of 15,958 votes, an average of 419 each. In the four general elections in the 1970s the average number of votes per Communist candidate was 612. In the previous four general elections, from 1955-1966, a much less favourable period for the extreme Left, the average Communist vote was 1,348. None of this is very impressive and the last elected Communist MP lost his seat in 1950. It does, however, give a measure of the CP's relative decline.

Equally, the party's daily newspaper, the *Morning Star,* is in difficulties. Its predecessor, the *Daily Worker,* sold 122,788 copies a day in 1947. The *Morning Star* sells approximately 32,000 copies today, a decline of 6,000 a day over the last four years alone. The survival of the paper is ensured thanks to the bulk purchase of 14,000 a day made by the Soviet Union and distributed in Eastern European countries.

Yet despite these indications of weakness, the British Communist Party remains the largest single Marxist organisation in Britain. And although the ratio of Communists to Trotskyists is now only 5:4 (compared with 2:1 five years ago and 33:1 in the mid 1950s), the CP is five times larger than any other rival group. The Communist Party's influence also reaches more widely than that of most Trotskyists in certain key areas.

Communists and the Trade Unions. The trade unions have always been an important area of activity for the Communist Party. This has been so for a number of fairly obvious reasons: it is in the trade unions that the industrial power of the working class is harnessed, and through the trade unions the CP has been able to exert some influence on the policies of the TUC and the Labour Party. Although Communists cannot attend Labour Party Conferences, there is in most unions nothing to prevent them using their influence on the national executive committees of individual unions to determine which way their block votes are used at the TUC or Labour Conferences. Nor is there anything to stop CP members attending and speaking at the Trades Union Congress. Indeed, over the last four years the party has claimed that of the 1,100 delegates to successive TUCs, a hundred have been Communists. In 1977 alone, 17 CP members proposed or seconded resolutions debated at the TUC.

That same year also saw the election to the general council of the TUC of two Communists, Mr Ken Gill of AUEW/TASS, the white collar section of the engineering union, and Mr George Guy of the sheetmetal workers. They may soon be joined by Mr Mick McGahey of the NUM.

Although Communist power in individual unions is slightly reduced from the level of ten years ago, it still has members on the national executives of a number of important unions: these include the NUM, TGWU, AUEW, ASLEF (traindrivers), Fire Brigades Union, UCATT (building workers), and the CPSA (clerical civil servants). In a number of unions Communists and Labour Left-wingers join together in what is usually termed the 'Broad Left' to defeat moderate policies. At the middle and lower levels of the union hierarchy the CP is especially active, among full-time officials (one-third of AUEW/TASS's are believed to be Communists), shop stewards and branch officers.

In addition, the Communist Party created in 1966 a body called the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions, for use as a propaganda vehicle in protest campaigns. Its heyday was in the early 1970s in opposition to the Industrial Relations Act and in support of the Shrewsbury Pickets. The LCDTU has served as a model for a number of rival Trotskyist sponsored campaigns, such as the All Trade Union Alliance set up by the Workers' Revolutionary Party and the Campaign for Democracy in the Labour Movement run by the Workers' Socialist League.

Whereas the Trotskyists favour rank and file activity and are contemptuous of almost all union leaders, the CP sets out to use the present trade union structure as part of a broader strategy.

CP Strategy. The programme of the Communist Party, *The British Road to Socialism,* which was last revised in 1977, begins from the assumption that it will not in the forseeable future be strong enough to act as a revolutionary party on its own. It envisages a broad democratic alliance, consisting of the Labour Left and the Communist Party, supported by the trade unions and the representatives of women's, black people's and youth organisations, and the 'peace movement'. The object of the alliance will be to elect a Labour government under Left-wing leadership which will proceed to carry out the 'socialist transformation' of Britain, securing control of the state apparatus (embracing the armed forces, police, civil service and judiciary) and handing over political and economic power to the working class. Outside Parliament, the trade unions and other groups would complement the process with whatever "mass struggle" was required to overcome Right-wing resistance. The CP does not, therefore, wish to wreck the TUC or the Labour Party, as the Socialist Workers' Party might desire, but rather wants to help capture them for the Left.

The CP and the Labour Party. Besides its work in the trade unions, the Communist Party has attempted to influence the Labour Party in a variety of ways. Firstly, it has tried to cultivate the sympathies of certain Labour

Members of Parliament. Certainly there are a number of Labour Left-wingers who are happy to support Communist policies. As Mr Sydney Bidwell, MP, said in 1977: "I find my differences with the Communist Party nowadays are negligible".[4] During the life of the last Parliament (1974-9) some seven Labour Members addressed rallies or conferences organised by the *Morning Star* newspaper, while thirteen (including two of the seven) contributed to the paper's columns. More recently in a sales drive the *Morning Star* has published messages of support from several MPs.[5]

The Communist Party and Labour Left share many similar policies. The so-called 'Alternative Economic Policy' originally developed in the mid-1970s along parallel lines by the CP and the Tribune Group has now been adopted by the TUC and Labour Party Conferences and by moderate leaders such as David Basnett. The key elements of the strategy include reflation of the economy, import controls, price controls, more nationalisation and greater public spending redistribution of income and wealth, withdrawal from the EEC and reduction in military expenditure to help finance expanded social services.[6] However, as one Communist writer pointed out, the strategy is "a limited programme for dealing with the immediate problems of British capitalism ... It is not a programme for long-term economic and social transformation ..."[7]

The CP and Labour Left also hold numerous other views in common – such as the desire to withdraw Britain totally from NATO and the army from Northern Ireland.

Against this background of shared policies it is perhaps logical that the Communist Party should extend its interest to the internal affairs of the Labour Party. The desire for a formal organisational link is not a new one, as on numerous occasions between 1920 and 1946 the CP applied to affiliate to the Labour Party in the same way as, for example, the Fabian Society does, but all the applications were rejected. In the past three or four years the issue has been raised again, and it is clear that the CP ultimately seeks the formal unity of the two parties.[8]

In the short-term, however, it will be campaigning for the right of Communists to attend Labour Conferences as union delegates. The CP has also openly supported the Labour Left in their campaigns for constitutional changes such as the reselection of MPs and the creation of an electoral college for leadership contests. Now that these are established it is becoming involved in the decision making. As the present CP Chairman and a member of the AUEW National Committee, Mr Ron Halverson, said: "Many would say I'm bloody cheeky to want a say in the Labour Party, but the Party is not put in power by the Party members but by the Labour movement."[9]

The 'Labour Movement', in Communist usage, is taken to mean the Communist Party as well as the unions and the Labour Party. More recently Communist members in the unions have helped win support for Mr Benn in his campaign for the Deputy leadership.[10] And as we shall see, leading Communists are now openly involved in the activities of the Labour Co-ordinating Committee, which had hitherto existed as a ginger group inside the Labour Party, closely identified with Mr Benn, and made up only of members of the Labour Party.

Thus, for an apparently declining force with membership and financial problems, the Communist Party continues to play a significant role on the Left.

The Trotskyist Hydra. Trotskyism has proved a prolific species in Britain, to an extent unmatched in most other Western countries. Its more militant approach, with its promise of instant revolution, has proved more successful than the long-term approach of the orthodox Communist Party in attracting young people.

The distinguishing feature of Trotskyist doctrine is the notion of 'permanent revolution': that the revolutionary process must proceed through all its phases continuously, and that it will only succeed if carried out world-wide. The Trotskyists mercilessly attack social democrats and Stalinists alike, although the modern movement is prepared to engage in joint activities with other varieties of Marxist, and their attitude to the Soviet Union ranges from the apologetic to the hostile. They believe in the inevitability of violent confrontation with the capitalist State, and that the workers should organise their own organisations, including an armed militia.

From its origins as an exiled, dissident movement in the 1930s Trotskyism survived long years of obscurity to emerge, after 1968, into its present shape. Today there are some sixteen main Trotskyist organisations in Britain, with around 15,000 followers. Turnover is high, however, and factionalism endemic, with constant splits and realignments.

Trotskyist support in the trade unions falls well below that of the Communist Party. Its followers are found in white collar unions, such as the NUJ, NUT, NALGO, probation officers, and the CPSA, or among low-paid workers in unions such as NUPE. A Trotskyist presence is also found occasionally in unions such as the Fire Brigades' and the Bakers'.

The movement's main feature, however, has been its disruptive influence – interventions in industrial disputes from without, on picket lines and street demonstrations, and its activity inside the Labour Party through the tactic known as 'entryism'.

The full range of Trotskyist methods can be seen in the largest four organisations to which the majority of adherents belong, and from which many of the smaller factions have originated.

Workers' Revolutionary Party. A fanatical and highly secretive body, the WRP represents the fundamentalist wing of Trotskyism. It predicts the imminent collapse of capitalism, a crisis for which the workers should prepare as it believes the capitalist State is making itself ready for civil war. The WRP rarely co-operates with any other group.

Any estimate of membership must only be guesswork, but it probably has around 2,500 in the WRP itself, with a further 3,500 in the Young Socialists. For a body of that size its range of activities is enormous: it publishes a daily newspaper, *Newsline,* runs a College of Marxist Education in Derbyshire, and this year has established in several large cities Youth Training Centres for young unemployed. It has set up one centre in Brixton, in south London, where it has also given enthusiastic backing to the Labour leader of

Lambeth Council, Mr Ted Knight, a member of the WRP in the 1960s, when it was known as the Socialist Labour League. One possible explanation of how the WRP is able to undertake all that it does is contained in the *Newsline's* unwavering adulation of the Libyan leader, Colonel Gadaffi.

In 1975 a small group of WRP members led by Mr Alan Thornett, a one-time shop steward at British Leyland's Cowley plant, broke away to form the Workers' Socialist League. The WSL said that it wanted to return to a more traditional form of Trotskyism, which it maintained the WRP had betrayed. To this end it founded in 1979 the Trotskyist International Liaison Committee with small sections from the USA, Chile, Denmark, Italy and Egypt; and, presumably with the same aim in mind, it has gravitated towards the Labour Party. Some of its members are also members of Constituency Labour Parties. But more significantly, it is working increasingly with the Socialist Campaign for Labour Victory, another Trotskyist-run group in the Labour Party (see below). With the SCLV it has recently launched a National Left-wing Youth Movement with the aim of "transforming" the Labour Party Young Socialists into a "real fighting youth movement".[11] The WSL is not, however, the only Trotskyist group which maintains a dual existence; a political organisation in its own right and a pressure group directed towards the Labour Party.

International Marxist Group. After spending its early years inside the Labour Party the IMG emerged into the open in 1968 when the level of student protest was at its height. Although it is the British section of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International, with affiliates in some 30 countries, the IMG's membership is just under one thousand. It has been trying to find ways of securing a more solid foundation for its activities. Prior to the last general election it sponsored the Socialist Unity Campaign, and then made an unsuccessful approach to the Socialist Workers' Party for closer relations. Latterly its supporters have moved back to work in and around the Labour Party. The IMG's newspaper, *Socialist Challenge* (edited by Tariq Ali), recently published an extensive interview with Mr Tony Benn and is giving strong support to his candidature for the deputy leadership.[12]

Socialist Workers' Party. Perhaps the most well known of all the ultra-Leftist groups, the SWP, formerly the International Socialists, is only partially Trotskyist. It has rejected some elements of Trotskyist teaching, such as the nature of the Soviet Union or the need for a Fourth International movement, but its methods owe much to Trotskyist doctrines.

Although there are only some 4,000 members in the SWP itself, it runs a host of subsidiary activities which enable it to reach a wider audience. Its weekly newspaper, the *Socialist Worker,* has a circulation approaching 30,000; in the unions there is a Rank and File Movement with small sections in approximately fifteen trade unions; the Right to Work Campaign, formed in the mid 1970s and well known for its lobbies of TUC and Conservative Party conferences, now has a Labour MP as its treasurer and wide sponsorship from the Labour Party and unions; and the Socialist Workers' Youth Movement and the SW Student Organisation strive to maintain the flow of young people into its ranks. The SWP was also instrumental in the formation of the Anti-Nazi League and Rock Against Racism which, for a time at least, reached the 'punk' as well as the middle class student stratum. There is also an SWP Gay Group and a women's section around the journal, *Women's Voice.*

The SWP argues that the present system cannot be reformed as the Labour and trade union leaders believe. "It has to be overthrown ... Only the mass action of the workers themselves can destroy the system." Instead, "the working class needs an entirely different kind of state – a workers' state based upon councils of workers' delegates and workers' militia. At most parliamentary activity can be used to make propaganda against the present system."[13]

This attitude does not, however, prevent the SWP from declaring that "we are fully behind Benn's campaign for the Deputy leadership",[14] and for supporting the July conference of the Labour Co-ordinating Committee.

Splits from the Socialist Workers. Over the years, numerous new groups have emerged as a result of purges and in-fighting within the SWP, and the International Socialists before it. One of the first was Workers' Fight, a faction with strong Irish connections which broke away in 1971. Three years later came the Revolutionary Communist Group, which also expressed unqualified support for the IRA. Within the next two years the RCG was itself split and the Revolutionary Communist Tendency was born.

The RCT has concentrated on two main issues – Ireland and race. It has been involved in a Smash the Prevention of Terrorism Act Campaign and has set up a number of Workers' Against Racism Groups. The first, the East London Workers Against Racism, organised vigilante patrols to protect the local Asian community from racialist attacks. New groups have followed in Brixton, called South London Workers Against Racism, and in Coventry, Manchester and Leeds. Their purpose is clear: "Organised class violence is the only answer to the violence of the fascists and the state."[15]

As a result of the success of these initiatives, the RCT announced after its third annual conference held at the end of May 1981 that it was changing its name to the Revolutionary Communist Party.[16]

Other groups that can trace their origins to recent splits in the SWP include the Workers' League, Workers' Power and the International-Communist League, which all came into being in the period 1975-6. The course taken by the most important of these, the I-CL has led it into a classic 'entryist' venture in the Labour Party.

Trotskyist 'Entryism'. All the main Trotskyist groups, the WRP, IMG, and WSL, have been involved in 'entryism' at some stage in their history. In the 1950s and early 1960s, both the forerunners of the Workers' Revolutionary and Socialist Workers' Parties, existed as tiny cells, within constituency associations or the Young Socialists.

Entryism is therefore an old Trotskyist tactic which involves the infiltration of small revolutionary groups into larger non-revolutionary parties. Up to the mid 1960s it was undertaken because the social climate offered few opportunities for Marxist agitation. The Labour Party afforded a refuge

which, so long as the entryist group could avoid attracting the attention of a strict anti-Marxist Transport House, might find the revolutionaries a few recruits. In earlier days the Labour Party leadership removed objectionable elements, and in 1964 purged the Young Socialists wholesale.

Today the situation is totally different in that the activities of Trotskyist groups are tolerated and indeed encouraged. When the National Executive Committee was presented in 1975 with a detailed account of entryist activities compiled by the Labour Party National Agent, Mr Reg (now Lord) Underhill, it took no action. Any Trotskyists who wish to join the Labour Party now, do so because weak party discipline and a leftward lurch presents them with enormous openings to gain real influence.

The most important entryist group is the Militant Tendency, which takes its name from the weekly newspaper, *Militant*. Its controversial activities have attracted wide publicity but its advance in the Labour Party organisation is undeniable.

Its origins go back to the mid 1950s when a small body called the Revolutionary Socialist League entered the Labour Party. In 1964 the leaders of the RSL began publishing *Militant* and the name of the old organisation disappeared. Initially it concentrated on the reconstituted Labour Young Socialists, and by 1970 it had gained control of the LPYS National Committee which it has retained against other Left-wing opposition ever since. Militant Tendency domination of the LPYS has had one major consequence: a change of party rules in 1972 provided for the creation of one place on the party's National Executive Committee for a representative of the Young Socialists, and this has ensured that the Militant Tendency now has a voice at the highest levels of the Labour Party.

In the last decade, Militant supporters have become increasingly active in constituency Labour Parties. They were involved in the campaign against Mr Reg Prentice in Newham North East in 1975. The Militant Tendency currently has virtual control of between 60 and 70 constituency organisations, with supporters in a further 80 to a hundred local parties. It will be using this base of support to utilise to the full the new procedures for the reselection of MPs in operation in the Labour Party. Militant Tendency-inspired attacks on moderate Labour Members will be paralleled by the adoption of its own supporters as prospective parliamentary candidates – so far three have been adopted.

Militant Tendency influence also extends into the trade unions. It is particularly conspicuous in the CPSA, and one of its supporters is the General Secretary of the Bakers' Union. Elsewhere it has also been concerned with campaigns on youth unemployment, Northern Ireland and the Anti-Nazi League. After the recent riots in Brixton, the Militant Tendency inspired the formation of the Labour Committee for the Defence of Brixton. This body is campaigning for the withdrawal of the "massive police presence", the dropping of all charges arising from the riots, and a reversal of government cuts in public spending. Describing the events of 11th-12th April in Brixton an article in *Militant* said "there was a magnificent unity between black and white workers".[17] Both bodies have since been active in Liverpool.

The economic policies of the Militant Tendency include the nationalisation of the 'top 250 monopolies' under workers' control, a massive increase in public spending and the restoration of cuts in social services, and a reduction in the working week without loss of pay. Recently it has called for a one-day general strike as part of its programme to remove the Government from office.

The Militant Tendency advances these policies openly as any ginger group might. It also avoids having a formal membership – it describes its followers as "supporters" or holds "readers' meetings", ostensibly linked only to a newspaper. But it has a full-time staff of some 60 workers among its 2,000 or so "supporters", and considerable funds at its disposal. Like most ultra-Left groups it runs a permanently open appeal fund. Last year donations topped £90,000. (During 1980 the Workers' Revolutionary Party claims to have raised over £100,000 by various appeals.) This year's Militant target is £120,000.

But the Militant Tendency appears to have additional sources. In the period 1973-9 the Cambridge Heath Press, which prints *Militant,* received from an organisation called WIR publications loans and donations totalling £321,218.[18] *Militant's* explanation is that it is funded exclusively by contributions from supporters in the Labour movement, but it refuses to elucidate further. Whatever the source of the money from WIR publications, it helps the Militant Tendency keep one step ahead of its rivals.

The Socialist Campaign for a Labour Victory was formed in July 1978 on the initiative of two Trotskyist groups, the Chartists and the Workers' Action Group. *Workers' Action* was the name of the newspaper started by members of the International-Communist League following its separation from the Socialist Workers' Party. The policies of the SCLV set out in its newspaper, *Socialist Organiser,* include the nationalisation under workers' control of any firm threatening redundancies, the abolition of the police Special Patrol Group, the Special Branch and MI5, on the grounds that the "capitalist police are an enemy of the working class", and the withdrawal of troops from Northern Ireland. Among the supporters of SCLV are Mr Ken Livingstone, leader of the Greater London Council, and Miss Joan Maynard, Labour MP for Sheffield, Brightside.

The SCLV has been one of the prime movers in the Rank and File Mobilising Committee, the alliance of groups in the Labour Party campaigning for constitutional changes (see below). The consolidation of its position in the Labour Party is further indicated by the recent establishment of a Socialist Organiser Alliance, which will include the International-Communist League under all its guises, the Chartists, and probably the Workers' Socialist League. *Socialist Organiser's* aim is to "help build a class-struggle left wing in the trade unions and Labour Party based on a revolutionary socialist platform".[19] There is no reason to suppose that the Labour Party will not be able to accommodate it.

LABOUR'S NEW LEFT

The increased level of interest shown in the Labour Party by the revolutionary Left raises a number of questions: how it has happened and what the relationship is between these small groups of extremists and the broader changes that are affecting the Labour Party.

Conflict in the Labour movement is of itself nothing new. Throughout its history the Labour Party has been afflicted with internal differences – between the parliamentary party and the party in the unions and constituencies outside, between middle class socialists and practical working men, and between leaders and led. Battles between Left and Right, the radical socialists on one side and the social democratic reformers on the other, have been unending.

But the present disputes amount to something more than a simple continuation, or even intensification, of past struggles. An amorphous concept at the best of times, the Labour Left has always embraced a number of traditions – pacifist, syndicalist, Fabian, co-operative, Christian radical and, to a small extent, Marxist. But a clear parliamentarianism predominated: the Labour Left of old imposed constraints on its own methods and its demands. It believed in change brought about gradually by legal, constitutional means, through government by consent and in the notion of the Labour movement as a 'broad Church'.

Today's Labour Left subordinates Parliament to the will of the party machine outside, sets no bounds to its action, and seeks the "irreversible transformation" of society, enforced by mass extra-parliamentary action if necessary. Instead of the broad Church we have the "democracy of the committed", in which the activist dictates the terms and policies on which membership of the party is conditional.

Changes of this magnitude could not be carried out by obscure Trotskyist groups alone, no matter how determined. They have been made possible by a more fundamental crisis which has affected the whole character of the party. This crisis has occurred on three levels:

(1) The failure of the Labour governments of 1964-70 and 1974-9 to solve deep-seated economic problems and to carry through radical but creative policies. Disenchantment with the performance of Labour governments is central to the rise of the Left: the disillusion is with the substance of the failed policies, essentially those of the social democratic Right, as well as the manner of their execution – the charge that Labour Cabinets pay more heed to the International Monetary Fund than they do to Party Conferences.

(2) The collapse of Croslandite social democracy which was the dominant strain in Labour thinking from the mid 1950s to the end of the 1970s. Inflation and recession have destroyed the Right's intellectual foundations in the Labour Party and its isolation culminated in the departure of some social democrats to form a new party. As more radical and untried policies have been demanded, the Left has stepped into the ideological vacuum.

(3) The decline in popular support for the Labour Party as measured by general election results, and in active support measured by individual membership. In 1951 the Labour Party lost the election but won 13,949,000 votes (48.8% of the votes cast). Its vote has declined at every subsequent election except that of 1966, falling to 11,510,000 in 1979 (36.9%, or 28.1% of the electorate as a whole). Individual membership reached a peak in 1952 of 1,014,524; by the end of the 1970s it had dropped by a third on paper. Party officials concede, however, that in reality individual membership is somewhere between 250,000 and 300,000; and it is clear in electoral terms and in membership that Labour has been losing the working class support which it had regarded as its natural foundation.

Leftward Drift. As the Right has retreated there has been a general shifting of ground to the Left. It began seriously in 1970, with a protracted process of self-examination in the wake of a general election defeat. This move to the Left has affected all sections of the party.

In Parliament, for example, the broadly Left-wing Tribune Group has grown from some 35 members in 1971 (12% of the parliamentary party) to 68 in March 1974, and 80 in October 1974 (a quarter of all Labour MPs). Today the Tribune Group has 70 members (a record 29% of MPs), including Mr Foot and four other members of the Shadow Cabinet, among whom is Mr Benn, who remained aloof from the group until this year.

In the constituencies, run-down organisations have found themselves taken over by a new species of middle-class activist steeped in socialist theory. And, as we have seen, they have become increasingly vulnerable to incursion by organised Trotskyist elements.

In the unions the picture is more complex. Control of the trade unions is crucial to the outcome of the Party Conference, since with nearly 6,500,000 affiliated members the unions account for 90% of the total membership and they provide a similar proportion of its funds. Up to the mid 1960s, the unions provided solid Right-wing support for party leaders. Since then the Right has lost ground, and today the political balance of the unions is finely poised. But there is constant fluctuation. The AUEW, for example, one of the bulwarks of the Left ten years ago is now firmly in the Right-wing camp, while others have moved steadily Left. At present, in simple 'Left' v 'Right' terms, each camp can rely on 2,500,000 votes for most issues. The rest can go either way.

Even if they have not moved as drastically as other sections of the party, the unions are today much less reliable. Their leaders have great difficulty in controlling members' behaviour, and their loss of authority applies both in the industrial and political spheres. To his cost, Mr. Callaghan discovered the former in the 'winter of discontent' in 1978-9, and Mr. Foot, the latter, at the special Wembley conference in January 1981, which set up an electoral college to elect the leader and his deputy.

National Executive Committee. Where the Left have gained is in the much more effective way they have organised their forces, and the way they have seized initiatives when the Centre and Right have dithered. Nowhere is this clearer than on the party's NEC, which has successfully turned drift and disenchantment into a concerted drive to the Left. Before 1970 the Right

was in control, but as its majority was progressively whittled down following each Party Conference, the Left had secured its position on all the key policy and sub-committees before it finally captured an overall majority in 1975.

The Left's influence on the NEC was felt in 1973 when it abolished the list of proscribed organisations. This had existed since 1947 and contained the names of nearly 50 bodies, most of them Communist and Communist 'front' organisations, such as the World Peace Council. Membership of any of these bodies or any joint activity with them was considered incompatible with membership of the Labour Party. Under Mr Attlee and Mr Gaitskell the rules were strictly enforced, with expulsion for offenders.

The NEC's decision, in what it regarded as the more relaxed circumstances of the 1970s, was simply seen by the extreme Left as a signal of encouragement. Its effect has been the demolition of the old barriers between the democratic and the totalitarian Left with the result already described. It set the tone for a series of reversals of traditional Labour attitudes.

The National Executive began to develop friendly relations with foreign Communist Parties. Delegations carried the fraternal greetings of the British Labour Party to the Communist Parties of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Communist officials like Mr Boris Ponomarev, Secretary of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party, were welcomed to the country by the Labour Party in 1976. In 1977, Mr Alex Kitson, present Chairman of the Labour Party, lavished fulsome praise on the Soviet system on Radio Moscow, during an official visit to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. And at Labour Party Conferences Communist observers from Western and Eastern Europe and the Third World have become a regular feature.

More significantly, beginning in 1972, the NEC's network of sub-committees set to work to produce a whole range of new policies for the party. Since the publication of *Labour's Programme 1973,* a string of documents has appeared, each more sweeping than the last; they include *Labour's Programme 1976, Peace, Jobs and Freedom* (1980) and the *Draft Manifesto* (1980). These extreme programmes of massive nationalisation, "irreversible" change and neutralist foreign policy, have been accepted by the whole party, Left-wingers and moderates, MPs and trade union leaders alike.

The driving force behind these and other NEC initiatives has been a section of the party's Left wing, found on the House of Commons back benches, in the unions and among party workers, that is both old and extreme. They are not intellectual Marxists or Trotskyists of the 'new' Left. If they have any example or ideology at all it is modelled on the Communism of Eastern Europe for which some of them have expressed their admiration. If this older generation of Left-wingers started the process, it is the new and yet more radical one that looks set to complete it.

Constitutional Reform. What the extreme Left wants to ensure in the short-term is that the Labour Party enters the next general election committed to the policies set out by the NEC and approved by Conference, and that

Labour MPs, if and when they ever form a government, are made to carry them out.

In the longer-term, the far Left is attempting to deprive the parliamentary party of its independence, which it must have if it is to play its proper constitutional part, and subjugate it to the will of the extra-parliamentary party expressed through Conference. In this campaign it lis the Marxists and Trotskyists, who take their principles of organisation from Lenin, who have been in the forefront.

They have achieved some of their demands – the compulsory reselection of MPs by constituency parties, and the establishment of an electoral college to decide the leadership. The former is particularly favourable to the extreme Left, since in many constituencies as few as 40 or 50 people will determine the choice of MP. As the process gets under way, so far two sitting Members have been ousted by Left-wingers.

But that is not all. The Rank and File Mobilising Committee (RFMC) formed in May 1980 to work for constitutional reform is pressing ahead with more demands: it wants the NEC to take sole responsibility for writing the election manifesto, taking it out of joint Shadow Cabinet-NEC hands (this change was defeated at last year's Conference); it wants the Shadow Cabinet to be elected by an electoral college; and it wants to extend the principle of 'accountability' to local government.

The Committee is supported by one trade union, NUPE, and nine pressure groups in the party. These are the Trotskyist Socialist Campaign for Labour Victory and the Militant Tendency, discussed above; the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy, which was set up in 1973 to concentrate on the reselection issue; the Institute for Workers' Control, a body much admired by Mr Benn; the Labour Co-ordinating Committee, which consists of some of Mr Benn's closest supporters, including Mr Michael Meacher, MP, Mr Stuart Holland, MP, and Mrs Frances Morrell, one of his former advisers; Labour Action for Peace, a disarmament campaign; Clause 4, a Tribunite group in the Young Socialists; and the party's two NEC-funded youth organisations, the National Organisation of Labour Students and the Labour Party Young Socialists.

At present the RFMC is occupied on two fronts: preparing to defend the decisions of the special Wembley conference on the composition of the electoral college against counter-attack from the Centre/Right in the Labour Solidarity Campaign, and working for Mr Benn's election as deputy leader.

The supporters of the RFMC realise that their gains will be insecure until they have a stronger base in the trade unions. The Labour Co-ordinating Committee announced its intention to carry its campaigning into the unions at last year's Party Conference. Following a small meeting last November it held a major conference this month. Its sponsors included prominent Communist trade unionists, Mr Ken Gill, Mr Mick McGahey and Mr Kevin Halpin, chairman of the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions.[20]

This event gave further significant confirmation of the convergence between Labour Party members and the revolutionary Left.

PROTEST AND PRESSURE

During the last fifteen years a remarkable growth has taken place in the number of organisations which exist to press governments or influence public opinion in the interests of some particular section of society or in pursuit of a topical cause. The Left, in all its shades, is very much at home in the campaigning style of protest politics; and pressure groups have proved another forum in which the Labour and the revolutionary Left have been able to develop common concerns.

In relation to Left-wing influence four main types of pressure group can be defined: the 'front' organisation, such as the All Trade Union Alliance or the Rank and File Movement, which is the creation of a superior body under whose control it remains whatever the external pretence; the declared subsidiary, such as the Young Communist League; the alliance of wholly Left-wing organisations, usually for some limited purpose, like the Troops Out Movement, the Chile Solidarity Campaign or the Anti-Nazi League; and finally, the more broadly based organisation in which the far Left may be one of a number of competing influences, such as the Anti-Apartheid Movement of the National Council for Civil Liberties.

Very often one campaign absorbs the energies of virtually the whole far Left for a short time, until it is broken by divisions or the immediate sense of urgency dies. This was the case with the CND twenty years ago, and the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign in 1968. Between 1977 and 1979 the Anti-Nazi League held the stage.

Anti-Nazi League and the Police. The ANL was formed in 1977 at a time when it seemed that the National Front might become an electoral force and shortly after rioting by anti-NF demonstrators in Lewisham. The initiative for its creation came from the Socialist Workers' Party which approached Labour activists Mr Ernie Roberts (now an MP) and Mr Peter Hain. Although the SWP and International Marxist Group mobilised large numbers of young people on street demonstrations and at pop concerts, the ANL's steering committee included more representatives of the Labour Left as well as Communist Party members and trade unionists.

Whatever the contribution of the ANL's militant campaign towards bringing about the National Front's election debacle, it had one significant effect on the Left. Events such as Lewisham and the Southall riot of April 1979, in which an SWP member, Blair Peach, died, greatly intensified Left-wing hostility towards the police. Other incidents such as the Red Lion Square demonstration in 1974 and the mass picketing at the Grunwick factory in 1977 also contributed to Left-wing hatred of the Special Patrol Group in particular.

Calls for the disbandment of the SPG began with the far Left groups who had clashed with it. But they were soon taken up by the Labour Left and now represent both TUC and Labour Conference policy. The new Labour-controlled GLC also wants to make the Metropolitan Police "accountable" to the Council. Its leader, Mr Ken Livingstone, told the WRP paper *Newsline* that: "We have developed a police and army who are perfectly prepared now for, say a Chile-style situation, and ... if we elected a left government, the army and police could be turned into the arms of the Tory party and capital".[21] Mr Livingstone linked the role of the police in Britain with that of the army in Northern Ireland; he also made clear his support for the IRA hunger strikers there.

Other Left-wingers argue that what the army has learnt in Northern Ireland will be applied in Britain, against trade unionists or in the event of widespread disorders like those in Brixton. Organisations such as State Research maintain that the police have in effect created a covert Third Force of riot squads to deal with unrest.[22]

Disarmament. Besides this development, the major issue to occupy Left-wing campaigners at present is the disarmament question. Since the beginning of last year the unilateralist Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament has undergone a dramatic revival. Its national membership has increased from 4,000 to 22,000, including many young people. New support has come from the Labour Party, trade unions, religious and pacifist groups, the Socialist Workers' Party, the International Marxist Group and the Communist Party, which has supplied CND with a number of national officers in recent years.

The disarmament movement has, however, become a very diffuse one. Several new organisations have emerged, such as European Nuclear Disarmament and the World Disarmament Campaign. The WDC was set up by two Labour peers at the end of 1979 and is compiling a petition for the 1982 UN Special Session on Disarmament calling for multilateral disarmament.

Another new group is the British Peace Assembly. This was set up in April 1980 and is supported by the Fire Brigades Union, ASLEF (the train drivers) and the British Soviet Friendship Society. Its president is Mr James Lamond, MP, who is a vice-president of the Soviet-run World Peace Council. The new body is "pledged to promote and support initiatives from the World Peace Council".[23] The BPA's meetings receive sympathetic coverage in the publication of the New Communist Party, a group which broke away from the main British Communist Party because it thought the CP's policies were too moderate and Eurocommunist in style. The NCP supports the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

What emerges from the whole picture is an intricate web of organisations, campaigns and individuals. Much of their activity is directed towards the Labour Party and the trade unions. Some is aimed at changing public attitudes. The most militant are preparing themselves for confrontation on the streets with the power of the State. The far Left exhibits many facets and approaches. There are deep and genuine differences between them. But they agree on a number of basic objectives, whether they are Labour Marxists, overt Trotskyists or Communists: that capitalism is unjust and that its whole system, together with Parliament and the police and armed forces, must be dismantled. At this stage it is as well that the rest of society should be aware of the potential threat.

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