

## THE LABOUR PARTY AND THE POLITICS OF TRANSITION

by Peter Jenkins

In the article entitled 'Moving On', Ralph Miliband presents a forceful and persuasive case for the creation of a new socialist formation in this country.<sup>1</sup> It is relatively easy to contrast this ideal model of a socialist party with the gritty reality of existing groups, throwing their worst features, warts, economism, and all, into sharp relief. This Ralph Miliband does with customary skill. However, this particular approach raises more questions than it answers, since a distinct problem of political *method* is involved here. This is the question of what is the *key* criterion to be adopted for assessing the performance of existing socialist groups and parties? A list of good and bad points can be made for any socialist group, without necessarily adding a great deal to our understanding of the causes of the current crisis of the left in this country, and how best to overcome it.

The basis of one's assessment of the British left will obviously depend on a certain level of agreement on the nature of the main problems which confront the left in the current period. These can be outlined in a number of different ways, depending on one's precise political standpoint; problems can be variously described in terms of the continuing hold of reformism over the working class, the treacherous role of social democracy, the weakness of the revolutionary left, the absence of a strong marxist tradition amongst the working class and so forth. Centrally placed in any consideration of these political phenomena is the nature and role of the Labour Party (though this is not to argue that these, and other important problems, are reducible simply to the question of the Labour Party alone). My argument will be that it is on the question of their relationship to the Labour Party that existing groups can best be assessed, and their inadequacies put into perspective. Furthermore, any new socialist current will only be able to establish itself firmly on the basis of overcoming the pitfalls described below.

### *The Labour Party*

There are several reasons for asserting that it is the role of the Labour Party which presents the most serious problems facing British socialists. The most cautious estimates put the paper membership of the Labour

Party at **300,000**, a figure which includes a sizeable minority of activists at constituency level. The Party's peculiar relationship with the trade unions means that, as the political expression of the organised working class, it maintains a position as the alternative party of government which has never been seriously challenged by any other working class party in this century. Class loyalties, once won, are not lightly cast aside, unless an alternative political party can offer an *improved* chance of political representation for the working class.

Ralph Miliband has argued that 'the belief in the effective transformation of the Labour Party into an instrument of socialist policies is the most crippling of all illusions to which socialists in Britain have been prone.'<sup>12</sup> The point about the deepgoing reformism of the Labour Party holds true, but does not answer the question on what basis an alternative socialist party is to be constructed. Ken Coates is correct to pose the debate in the following terms: 'If the Labour Party cannot be turned into a socialist party, then the question which confronts us all is, how can we form a socialist party? If we are not ready to answer this question, then we are not ready to dismiss the party that *exists*.'<sup>13</sup> This really is the nub of the question. The very dominance of the Labour Party in current class politics means that would-be competitors for working class allegiance are placed at a permanent disadvantage.

The institutional structures of bourgeois democracies are not going to be remoulded by a voluntarist effort of will. The problem of 'how to form a new socialist party' is bound up, not with the assertion of political ideas or programmes, but with the relationship of such ideas to *institutions*, mediated via political practice. Given the structured form of political allegiances which exist in this country, political ideas gain their resonance by being taken up by the mass organisations of the working class—the theme of workers' participation is a case in point. This is not a technical question of the greater resources for propagating ideas which these mass organisations enjoy, but rather of the legitimacy which they possess as accredited institutions of civil society, and with which they can colour those political and social policies they adopt. Analysis of political history from this perspective implies that a theory of 'betrayal' by labour bureaucracies is less than adequate for understanding the dynamics of class politics, and how to change them.

The dominant position of the Labour Party within the structures of capitalist society has survived intact the challenge presented in the past by such alternative political forces as the Independent Labour Party and the Communist Party. The fate of the ILP on leaving the Labour Party indicates that overcoming the problems of constructing an alternative socialist party requires more than a committed and experienced cadre. The ILP split from the Labour Party in **1932** with **16,700** members, and a creditable, if rather chequered legacy of socialist agitation and parliament-

ary activity behind it. The rapid decline of the ILP in the stormy decade of the Thirties must pose a large question mark over the ability of other socialist parties to fare much more favourably in the seventies.

The eclipse of the ILP left the Communist Party as the main political alternative to the Labour Party in the post-war period. The failure of the CP to pose itself as a realistic political and electoral alternative to the Labour Party is a further sobering factor to be considered in assessing the prospects for a new socialist party in the current period. The CP's declining electoral fortunes are vividly illustrated by the following figures, which indicate the average total vote per candidate.<sup>4</sup>

1945	1950	1951	1955	1959	1964	1970	1974 (Feb.)	1974 (Oct.)
4894	917	2164	1950	1716	1236	654	744	600

This period also saw the fall in party membership from 45,000 in 1945 to its current level of 28,500.<sup>5</sup>

Any attempt in the next decade to build a socialist alternative to the Labour Party will probably enjoy fewer of the advantages of these examples, the ILP and CP, even if it is also conceded that perhaps they will be burdened by less of their more obvious shortcomings.

The analysis of the Labour Party as a doggedly reformist party cannot be taken to mean automatic rejection of the prospect of working within the Labour Party—probably the most serious political weakness of Ralph Miliband's argument. His analysis correctly covers the degree of flexibility, and of democratic internal life within existing socialist groups, since any new socialist formation will have to attract members of existing parties in appreciable numbers if it is to have any political future. Thus the restricted internal democracy of the Communist Party and Socialist Workers Party, to name two, must have certain implications as to their capacity to contribute towards 'breaking the logjam' on the British left. Yet Ralph Miliband's analysis of the Labour Party, in rather formal terms, appears to throw out the baby with the bath water. Thus his dismissal of 'entrism' as not constituting 'serious left-wing politics' is not argued with reference to any of the actual political struggles going on inside the Labour Party at the moment—over the issue of reselection of sitting MPs, of the resistance of the NEC and constituencies to the rightward course of the Labour Government, and of the growing defence of the *Militant* tendency in the constituencies and Young Socialist branches. This dismissal of entrism, along with other varieties of work in the Labour Party, is not based on a concrete appraisal of the relationship of class forces inside the Labour Party, and does not adequately deal with one of the issues central to the problems faced by the left.

Again, if the potential base of this new socialist formation is not to be found inside the existing organisations of the left, from where will it come?

The alternative source can only be amongst uncommitted socialists, or the politically homeless. Such people, having left or refused to join political groups in the past, will only be attracted to a new group on the basis of its proven ability to deliver the goods, as opposed to promising to deliver them on condition that payment is made in advance.

From any number of perspectives, the Labour Party occupies a space of crucial importance in any discussion of political strategy. It is along this axis that existing socialist groups need to be assessed, and the case for a new socialist formation put in perspective. The analyses of the Labour Party by the various socialist groups each encapsulate in shorthand their specific orientation towards the nature of revolution in advanced capitalist societies, i.e. the politics of the transition to socialism. The assessments of the role of the Labour Party made by the Communist Party, Socialist Workers Party, and International Marxist Group each reveal serious weaknesses of theory and practice.

### *The Communist Party*

Thus the Labour Party is correctly situated as a key agency for socialist transformation in Britain in the draft CP programme, *The British Road to Socialism*.<sup>6</sup> The election of a left Labour Government is seen as an essential first step to the development of a 'popular democratic alliance', including the Communist Party, which will transform society through a combination of Parliamentary and directly political struggle. Yet the draft *British Road (BRS)* seems to be more appropriate for a mass Communist Party anticipating a French-style Union of the Left, rather than an organisation of less than one tenth the size of the Labour Party, with a record of declining electoral success since the war. The CP claims for itself, rather grandly, an irreplaceable role in this process, along the line of the Eurocommunist alliances:

**'Socialism can only be won and built on the basis of Labour-Communist unity. In this political process, both before and after a socialist government, the Labour Party and the whole labour movement would increasingly turn to the left and socialism. The Communist Party would grow in numbers, influence and in Parliament and local representation and increasingly play a leading, though not exclusive, role. Still closer bonds of unity would develop between the two parties.'**<sup>7</sup>

The Labour dog, it appears, is to be wagged by its Communist tail, despite the absence of the most elementary mechanisms for establishing this united political front at local or national level.<sup>8</sup> The CP realistically acknowledges the place of the Labour Party in the forefront of any strategy for socialist transformation, while detailing the problems involved, such as that of control over the Parliamentary Labour Party, and on the relationship between parliamentary and industrial struggle. The CP plays a necessary role in all this, because 'the Labour Left lacks a clear political

perspective, is not centrally organised, and is not sufficiently related to the extra-parliamentary movements and *struggles*.<sup>9</sup>

Yet the draft *British Road* (and official party programmes before it) fails to confront the crucial question of *how* the CP will be able to gain recognition of itself as a viable political partner—which can only be done on Labour Party terms, i.e. of a convincing electoral record, rather than on the basis of the CP's admittedly significant role in industrial struggles. The *British Road* confronts this pressing problem of political and electoral alliance in the future tense, resolving it only by the stratagem of assuming that it will shortly become a *fait accompli*. In this respect, it reads as an abstract and rather utopian document. The CP's orientation towards the Labour Party, as the mass party of the British working class, is to act as a pressure group from the outside. This strategy is clearly not rooted in a realistic appraisal of the relationship of forces between these two organisations. It leads to consideration of the question of whether this strategy can only be implemented in practice by the actual *affiliation* of the CP to the Labour Party, with certain necessary changes to conform to the latter's constitution, and the removal of existing bans and proscriptions within the Labour Party.<sup>10</sup> Certainly, the logic of the draft *BRS* places a question mark over the necessity of the continued existence of the CP as a separate political party. The progress of the internal debate within the CP about the draft programme, and on socialist democracy, will increasingly reveal whether members of the CP feel themselves that this is a realistic alternative.

### *Socialist Workers Party*

The largest organisation to the left of the Communist Party is the Socialist Workers Party (formerly International Socialists). Since its turn to serious industrial work, and the adoption of Leninist norms of **organisation**, in the late 1960s, it has increasingly presented itself as an alternative to the CP in industrial work, and, much more recently, to the Labour Party in terms of Parliamentary elections. David Coates has provided a detailed indictment of the Labour Party, given the record of Labour Governments, and the structural weaknesses of the Labour Left. In the face of a declining and bankrupt reformism, building an independent revolutionary organisation is the only answer. He argues that:

‘... as Labour hegemony begins to disintegrate, there is a real possibility of breaking the hold of Labourism on the political perspectives of the working class; and that requires activity outside the Labour Party by socialist groupings able to explain the limitations of Labour politics to workers who are themselves exposed to Labour Party irrelevance in Opposition and to its managerialism when in power.’<sup>11</sup>

The correct tactic, therefore, is sharply to counterpose political

initiatives to advanced workers, for example on the Right to Work, against racism, incomes policy, etc, in opposition to the class collaborationist schemes of the Labour Government in office. Given the constraints of state power on a Labour Government, however radical, and the reduction of the Labour Left to a role of permanent, impotent opposition, his conclusion is clear and emphatic: 'activity within the Labour Party is pointless.'

However, the fact remains that independent political activity by groups like the SWP is still thoroughly marginalised by the weight of the Labour Party in national and local politics. Furthermore, the decline in membership and activity within the Labour Party itself has not produced a corresponding decline in the hold of reformist ideas over the mass of the working class. Thus the industrial militancy of the period 1969 to 1974 was enveloped and firmly channelled by the traditional leaderships of the trade unions and the Labour Party into the Social Contract. Wage militancy has its limits, and represents no threat to social democracy, since labourism 'is still the undisputed language in which the fears and aspirations of the overwhelming majority of the working class are couched.'<sup>17</sup> Reformism will not be significantly undermined by the arithmetical growth of the SWP, however rapid.

### *International Marxist Group*

In strictly Leninist terms, it is the International Marxist Group which has a more 'correct' orientation towards the Labour Party than the SWP's attempt to reject and bypass it. This is the tactic of the united front, culled from the legacy of the early Comintern. Despite the obvious and grotesque disparity of social weight between the Labour Party and the IMG, it is felt that a particular application of the united front principle (the 'dialectic of unity and outflanking') could compensate for this. The united front could be turned to the advantage of revolutionaries, through 'outflanking' organisations in temporary alliance with it, such as the Labour Party, or Communist Party. While gaining some successes in using this tactic in the student field, where the IMG has some implantation, it has floundered on the strong support for the established workers' parties which exists in industry.

The limitations of the united front tactic are bound up with the inaccurate assessment of the strength of support for social democratic and communist parties in Europe, made by the Fourth International in the post-1968 period. The balance sheet of the period up to May 1968 tersely recorded an 'over specialisation in applying the entry tactic', and marked a turn 'towards independent activity aimed at winning political hegemony in the new vanguard.' The perspective outlined was one of 'rather rapid progressive growth of the revolutionary Marxist organisations', in a period where intense social struggles would lead to the creation of organs of dual

power.<sup>13</sup>

This analysis was premised on the social democratic organisations like the Labour Party falling into a 'no-win' situation. The Labour Party, for example, if it came into office with a programme objectively against the interests of the capitalist class, would be damned if it implemented it, and doubly damned if it didn't, according to this scheme. If the Labour Party reneged on such as the 1973 Programme, then

**'... the effects of this experience would be qualitatively greater than 1964-70 in terms of working class resistance. The attacks the Government would have to carry out on the working class would be much greater, and the expectations dashed much greater. The ties between the Labour Party and large sections of the working class would be threatened and an entirely new period in British political history would be opened up. The growth of the revolutionary left under such circumstances would be extraordinarily rapid.'**<sup>14</sup>

The above passage, written prior to the election of the Labour Government in early 1974, illustrates more than the dangers of predictive politics—since it clearly bears little relationship to the passivity with which the working class, overall, has received the degeneration of the Social Contract. What is much more seriously at fault is a completely false estimate of the hold of traditional and established loyalties of the Labour Party and the trade unions over the working class. This faulty analysis notwithstanding, the IMG has lately de facto reconsidered its rejection of working inside the Labour Party, though these efforts are vitiated by its standing candidates against the Labour Party in elections. Its adoption of mutually contradictory orientations towards the Labour Party—entrism and independent electoral work—probably means that neither approach will prove very fruitful.

### *Which Strategy?*

The stance of each of these three organisations, the CP, SWP, and IMG, towards the Labour Party have been demonstrated to be inadequate in differing, but vitally important respects. None appears to recognise that the dominance of the Labour Party renders marginal their independent political activity, particularly as demonstrated by the imperfect index of election results, which, after all, count for a good deal in parliamentary democracies.

What orientation, therefore, should a new socialist grouping adopt in order to avoid these errors? The answer to such a question will obviously hinge very closely on one's conception of the strategy necessary to achieve the transition to socialism.

Such a transitional strategy will have to take due recognition of the continuing strength of reformist parties in Britain and Western Europe. Even situations 'objectively' favourable to the growth of political

consciousness amongst the working class, and arguably conducive, therefore, to the rapid growth of revolutionary groupings have repeatedly served to reinforce the existing hegemony of reformist parties such as the Labour Party. This has been demonstrated by the experience of Western Europe from 1943 to 1946, France in 1968, Portugal 1974 to 1976, and Spain in the current period. The enduring strength of reformist parties is surely no accidental deviation from the laws of history, but has to be taken as a base line in constructing future strategy. That Ralph Miliband takes account of the institutional weight of reformism is clear from his earlier, very balanced assessment of the Chilean experience. In this he observed that the existing reformist parties, 'which command the support of the bulk of the organised working class, and which will go on commanding it for a very long time to come, are utterly committed to the achievement of power—or of office—by electoral and constitutional means.' This means, in short, that there will be no repeat of October 1917: the left needs to be able to offer a programme for fundamental social change which can be effectively implemented at governmental level by the existing political parties, reformist as they are, before socialism can be put on the agenda in this country. In other words, socialist strategy for Britain will have to place the Labour Party in the forefront of its programme for social change.

Thus socialist transformation, based on the mass institutions of the working class, initiated and sustained by mass pressure will have to register its successes and failures on the hostile terrain of bourgeois democracy. Electoral legitimation will be a pre-requisite for gaining the active support of a majority of the working population for social change, as in the case of the Union of the Left in France. There is, unfortunately, no alternative arena available to socialists, studded with soviets and people's assemblies, where Parliaments move smartly along the trail to historical oblivion, in acknowledgement of a higher, *proletarian* form of democracy. The exact role that Parliament will play in socialist transformation is obviously uncertain, but it will be undeniably important. Thus Ken Coates had suggested, very credibly, that 'if soviets were ever to emerge in Britain, it would be in defence of the right of Parliament to assert its alleged prerogatives, rather than abstractly desirable bodies.'<sup>16</sup> This claim seems convincing, given that most working class political advances overwhelmingly possess the initial character of *defensive thrusts*, and are couched in terms of responding to events rather than initiating them. Examples could include the appearance of the *cordones industriales* in Chile, in 1972 and 1973, responding to the bosses' truckers' strikes; the General Strike in France, in May 1968, against police repression of student militants; the 1972 Miners' Strike against wage restraint. These examples speak volumes to the necessarily entrenched, defensive and corporate character of working class consciousness under bourgeois democratic regimes.<sup>17</sup>

### *New Forms of Organisation*

However, a Labour programme for fundamental social change can only result in a partial restructuring of capitalist society, as occurred for example, under the Labour Government of **1945** to **1951**, without the support of mass organisations and activity at the 'base'. For, without a parallel infra-structure, such as emerged too late in Chile, there can be no mass involvement in political struggle and change, and no upsurge in class consciousness. Again, to quote Ralph Miliband:

**'... a new regime bent on fundamental changes in the economic, social and political structures must from the start begin to build and encourage the building of a network of organs of power, parallel to and complementing the state power, constituting a solid infra-structure for the timely "mobilisation of the masses" and the effective direction of its actions.'**

New forms of popular power must become a crucial component of any strategy for change, though their precise forms can not be specified with any certainty in advance. In some situations, government-sponsored bodies can provide a springboard to mass activity, as in the case of the food distribution committees (JAPs) set up by Popular Unity in Chile. It would be a serious error, however, to conceive of such organs of the base as necessarily being *counterposed* to a government of socialist parties. Rather they provide an essential component of change. In a similar way, the Unified Socialist Party (PSU) in France sees its own role in very clear terms as stimulating organs of popular power and of workers' self-management, to complement the *governmental* strategy of the Union of the Left. No analogous socialist formation yet exists in Britain, where the Left is caught up in the false polarity of 'insurrectionary' versus 'parliamentary' strategies for change.<sup>19</sup>

Socialist strategy requires a programme based on the reality of the Labour Party's existing hegemony over the working class, and an orientation towards building popular power as an essential component of social change. Such a perspective will lead to a process of dismantling sections of the state machinery, where the level of class struggle and the balance of class forces permits. No socialist grouping currently has, in practice, this orientation towards the Labour Party. If there is a need for a new socialist formation, then I would argue that it is on this axis that it will need to define itself. Realistically, in the current period, it will not be able to achieve this *outside* the Labour Party, as the PSU is currently able to do in relation to the parties of the Union of the Left.

Obviously, a case for working in the Labour Party, as the mass political organisation of the working class, **cannot simply** be based on appeals to higher authority, such as Lenin and Trotsky,<sup>20</sup> to quote two, nor is the current situation analogous to that of **1920**, or **1936**. Such a case only makes sense in relation to a particular orientation towards the politics of

transition within an advanced capitalist society, with a strongly developed tradition of bourgeois democracy. None of the existing socialist groups considered previously has either the social weight, or the political approach towards the Labour Party necessary to further socialist advance in this country.

### *Political Practice*

What are the main issues that such a current in the Labour Party would need to address itself towards? Such a current would offer a critique, *in practice*, of the parliamentarist bias of the *Tribune* group.<sup>21</sup> The weaknesses of the traditional Labour Left, largely grouped around the journal *Tribune*, have been evident in the period since mid-1975, in its policy of waiting for Benn to lead resistance to the rightward course of the Labour Government, and its reluctance to organise its supporters at the grassroots. Parliament is undoubtedly important, but it is far from being the exclusive concern of socialists, even within the Labour Party. A socialist current within the Labour Party is required which will combine parliamentary and extra-parliamentary politics, while recognising that bourgeois democracy 'is itself the principal ideological lynchpin of Western capitalism,'<sup>22</sup> as Perry Anderson has described it, and presents formidable problems to the achievement of working class power.

The Labour Party, as it is presently structured, will mean that the thrust of any future radical programme, such as that of 1973, will inevitably be defused by an autonomous Cabinet and Parliamentary Labour Party, which are more subject to the concerted class pressures of the Treasury and the International Monetary Fund, than to ordinary party members or the electorate. Thus any struggle for radical policies within the Labour Party is bound up with a more difficult, but nonetheless absolutely crucial struggle to change the structure and functioning of the Party itself. This points to the potentially explosive significance of the issue of reselection of sitting MPs by their Constituency General Management Committees. The events at Newham North East sent seismic ripples of alarm through the Labour Party machine, and rightly so. GMC control over MPs represents the crucial nexus between constituency politics local struggles, strikes, community action, etc, and Parliament. The reselection issue, referred back to the 1977 Labour Party Annual Conference, could mean, if it is won by the left, that Parliament is more directly and immediately responsive to the pressures of the class struggle.

This first issue is integrally bound up with a second, which is the need to transform the Labour Party into a *campaigning* organisation. Purely electoral politics have led to the demoralisation of Labour supporters, and resulted in an increased vote for the nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales, and for the neo-fascist parties of the far right. Any struggle for a radical programme within the Labour Party needs to be tied in with

ongoing campaigns to popularise these policies, and gain wide support for them. At present, a mass basis of support for socialism does not exist in this country: it needs to be *created*. Any attempt, as for example by Tony Benn, to wage an electoral campaign on the model of 1945, will founder on this account. That there will be strains and tensions within the Labour Party, primarily an *electoral* organisation, in making such a change, is inevitable. Hence the need, increasingly accepted by Labour militants, for a programme of political education within the party. The limited example of the Labour Party's 1976 campaign against racism provides, at the very least, a starting point for such a turn towards political campaigns.

An orientation towards an active political role for the Labour Party was sketched out by Perry Anderson, over a decade ago, when he argued that:

**'In Western Europe today, any true socialist party must present itself unambiguously as a hegemonic force. That is to say, it must propose a coherent global alternative to the existing social order and represent a permanent drive towards it.'**<sup>23</sup>

An extension of these ideas, more solidly grounded than the above in an analysis of the current period, was presented by Robin Blackburn, writing in the *New Statesman*, where he argued a convincing case for political forces such as the Women's Movement to support the Labour Party, in return for recognition by the latter of their political platform on certain issues.<sup>24</sup> Unless this happens, the Labour Party will remain little affected by the politics of such currents as the Women's Movement; the Labour Party, in return, can provide the Women's Movement with a point of entry into national politics, with a powerful leverage on wide sectors of the working population.

A fourth area will need to be an orientation towards developing initiatives for workers' control, to counter the corporatist tendencies which have coloured much of Labour's legislative proposals in the past. Thus the aspects of the Industry Bill, and the recent Bullock Report on workers' participation, which 'open doors' to self-organisation by workers on the shop floor, need to be strengthened and incorporated as a central plank of Labour legislation. There has occurred a steady interpenetration of political and industrial struggle over the last decade, evidenced by the struggle of the trade unions against 'In Place of Strife', and then the Industrial Relations Act, and periodic incomes policy. The need is for a 'new' Labour Left which will be committed to the Labour Party, but not hamstrung by the previous rigid demarcation between industrial and political struggle. Legislation is clearly not a pre-requisite for workers' initiatives in industry, but it can have a galvanising effect on large numbers of workers, as in the case of the National Industrial Recovery Act, in the USA in the thirties, where the 'right to belong to a union' sanctioned by

the Federal Government, legitimated the CIO's massive industrial unionisation drive, despite bitter and violent opposition from the employers.<sup>25</sup>

*Legitimation and the Class Struggle*

The concept of 'legitimation' has previously been analysed mainly in relation to reinforcing the *stability* of institutions in capitalist society.<sup>26</sup> What is required is the conscious application of the concept of legitimacy via Parliament to strengthen and generalise sectional advances in working class power. The powerful dynamic which can be released by the interplay of governmental direction and workers' initiative on the shopfloor (perhaps best epitomised by the Lucas Aerospace proposals) was only briefly and partially glimpsed during the time when Benn was in the Department of Industry. Thus the importance of what the latter described as the 'permissive element' contained in some of the legislation of the time, 'capable of being triggered by the trade union movement and not solely at the whim and purpose of the Minister.'<sup>27</sup> Such possibilities were latent in the original conception of the Industry Bill, which 'whatever its limitations. . . present(ed) opportunities for sustained workers' organisation beyond reaction to immediate issues like redundancies and closures.'<sup>28</sup> These possibilities have not been completely submerged by the reverses which followed the left's dual defeats over the question of wage inflation, and the result of the EEC referendum in mid-1975.

It is inside the Labour Party, fighting on the afore-mentioned issues that a new socialist formation is required, if one is required anywhere. Socialist change in Britain must be premised on structural and ideological change within the Labour Party, and in its exercise of power when in office, or else there is no medium-term prospect of socialism for the British working class. Perhaps one of the most important factors in this scenario is that the elements of a 'new' Labour Left are already beginning to appear. There is an objective convergence between the social democratic 'revisionism' of theorists such as Stuart Holland,<sup>29</sup> and those 'revisionist' sectors of the CP, which are arguing for a socialist incomes policy along the lines suggested by Bill Warren and Mike Prior.<sup>30</sup> This means that the possibility of their carrying out joint theoretical and practical work on the problems of transition is increasingly becoming a reality. An infusion of socialist theory into the ranks of the Labour Left would itself not be unwelcome, given the overwhelming problems entailed in this strategy. The influx of militants into the Labour Party in the early 1970s, following the course of the Wilson governments of 1964 to 1970, provides a further source of support for a strategy of reform in the Party. The return of the Independent Labour Party to the ranks of the Labour Party in 1975 perhaps illustrates in a symbolic manner the potential for change within the Labour Party which is felt to exist by a broad layer of

socialists and activists.

An additional factor, correctly stressed by Stuart Holland, concerns the European scope and implications of change in the Labour Party. The impending success of the Socialist and Communist Parties of the Union of the Left in the 1978 elections in France will accelerate pressures in this country to develop a similar bid by Labour for governmental office. The increasing support for the Italian Communist Party can be considered in a similar light, though its mistaken project of an 'historic compromise' with the senescent and corrupt Christian Democrat administration makes a poor political alternative to a joint programme with the Socialist Party.

### *Problems of Socialist Advance*

The success of this strategy is conditional upon a number of factors. Without a transformation of the Labour Party into a campaigning organisation, where MPs are more directly responsive to the organisations of the working class, via the nexus of the GMC, the Labour Left, new or traditional, will reproduce its historic role of a muted opposition.

There remains the danger that a Labour programme will represent no more than a succession of corporatist measures tying the working class and its institutions into collaboration with the ruling class and its Euro-partners. Ernest Mandel has pointed this out as one of the chief dangers of pursuing a strategy of structural reform, without at the same time developing counter-vailing institutions of working class power.<sup>31</sup>

A further problem is that posed by the nature of the state in capitalist society. The very practice of the Labour Party, and of successive Labour governments in office, has, historically, *precluded* an adequate understanding of the state's repressive role. At its crudest, the limits to progressive social change within any society are set by the tolerance of the military, as events in Chile, Portugal, and Northern Ireland clearly illustrate; that is, unless social change *involves* military organisations, and produces necessary changes in military hierarchy and discipline, as happened for a period with the Portuguese army, up to the right's pre-emptive coup of November 26th 1975, this will not be an easy problem to solve, least of all with calls to 'smash the state'. Lucio Colletti's cautious but telling remarks are worth recounting in this respect:

**'... the problem of revolution for Marxism is not that of a choice between peaceful road and violent road. . . The alternative legality/violence is an old blind alley. The "violence" which matters is the transformation of real structures; the "legality" which counts is the consent of the majority.'**<sup>32</sup>

Clearly, major problems will face any attempt at a social transformation of Britain. Yet, to return to the arguments outlined at the beginning, the point is that programmes for political change can not be effectively

asserted from the sidelines. Political parties with a voice in mass politics are not constructed from scratch. The problem confronting British socialists is to develop a serious challenge to class rule in this country, starting from the existing institutional structure of working class politics, which is hegemonised by the Labour Party. The Labour Party currently offers the only real perspective of initiating a process of social transformation, whose momentum would be cumulative, and would throw up the need for new political formations in the future. To achieve this first step, the political practice of the Labour Party needs to be changed in the process. The opportunities available are limited, but real, and need to be seized as a matter of urgency. Either the British left overcomes its traditional conservatism where political change is concerned, or it will continue to remain isolated from the mainstream of British politics. More than its own fate hangs in the balance.

## NOTES

1. Ralph Miliband, 'Moving On', in *The Socialist Register*, 1976.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 128. See also the argument contained in the postscript to the second edition of his book, *Parliamentary Socialism*, Merlin, 1973, pp. 372-7, and in the article 'The Smiles on the Face of Labour's Right', *Guardian*, 29/6/1975. Ken Coates, *Socialists and the Labour Party*, Spokesman pamphlet No. 52, p. 1. This is a critique of Miliband's position which first appeared in *Socialist Register* 1973, and is currently reprinted in Ken Coates, *Beyond Wage Slavery*, Spokesman, 1977.
- Ian Birchall, 'The British Communist Party 1945-64', *International Socialism*, No. 50, January/March 1972, p. 25. Reprinted in *The British Communist Party*, Socialist Worker Training Series, No. 3. 1974 figures derived from *British Political Facts*, MacMillan, 1975, p. 186.
- Though a lower membership total is suggested by documents reprinted in *The British Communist Party*, op. cit., Appendix: Communist Party Membership 1975-76; p. 23.
- The British Road to Socialism (Draft)*, Communist Party, 1977. This is discussed rather than the existing official Party programme, because it represents an advance on previous versions in its analysis of the role of the Labour Party, however provisional the draft programme's status might be until discussion and ratification at the November 1977 Conference of the CP.
7. *Ibid.*, lines 1883-9.
8. Exceptions to this would have to include the Broad Left in certain unions, e.g. the AUEW and NUS, and the limited degree of joint activity carried out by the Labour Party end Communist Party against EEC membership.
9. *The British Road to Socialism (Draft)*, lines 773-6.
10. One of the most detailed and comprehensive recorded discussions on the question of CP affiliation to the Labour Party took place at the Communist Unity Convention in 1920. cf. J.F. Hodgson: 'Inside the Labour Party we can influence working class opinion. Inside the Labour Party we can use a lever by which we can ultimately destroy the influence of the treacherous leaders of the trade union movement on the political field. Now this matter. . . is the acid test of the new Party'. See the *Official Report: Communist Unity Convention*,

- Communist Party, London, 1921, (reprinted 1968), p. 34.
11. David Coates, *The Labour Party and the Struggle for Socialism*, Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 227.
  12. Gareth Stedman Jones, 'The Road to Revolution', *7 Days*, 8/3/1972.
  13. 'The Building of Revolutionary Parties in Capitalist Europe', *International*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Spring 1973, p. 55.
  14. Alan Jones, 'Social Democracy and Capitalist Crisis: Between Two Stools', *Red Weekly*, p. 6, 7/9/1973.
  15. Ralph Miliband's, 'The Coup in Chile', in *Socialist Register*, 1973, p. 466.
  16. Ken Coates, op. cit., p. 24.
  17. Hence the importance of defensive slogans: 'This experience of the masses proceeds in the main along the lines of defensive actions. That is why defensive formulations are most easily comprehensible and represent the best approach of the revolutionary Marxists to the masses. Finally, it is a tactical and legal consideration of no small importance in a bourgeois-democratic country that defensive formulas partially disarm the class enemy.' From Grandizo Munis and James P. Cannon, *What Policy for Revolutionists—Marxism or Ultra-Leftism?* Merit, 1969, p. 59.
  18. Ralph Miliband, 'The Coup in Chile', op. cit., p. 472.
  19. Perry Anderson, 'Problems of Socialist Strategy', in Perry Anderson and Robin Blackburn, (eds), *Towards Socialism*, Fontana, 1966, p. 223.
  20. Lenin, of course, argued strongly for the infant CPGB to seek affiliation to the Labour Party, i.e. for 'adhesion to the Labour Party on condition of free and independent communist activity.' From *Lenin on Britain*, Lawrence and Wishart, 1941, p. 261. Trotsky similarly stated very firmly that 'while it is necessary for the revolutionary party to maintain its independence at all times, a revolutionary grouping of a few hundred comrades is not a revolutionary party and can work most effectively at present by opposition to the social patriots within the mass parties,' *Trotsky's Writings on Britain*, Vol. 3, New Park, 1974, p. 141.
  21. For a critique of the Tribune group, see Chris Harman, 'Tribune of the People', *International Socialism*, Nos. 21 and 24.
  22. Perry Anderson, 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', *New Left Review*, No. 100, p. 28.
  23. Perry Anderson, 'Problems of Socialist Strategy', op. cit., p. 240. This essay, published over a decade ago, is long overdue for republication, as an important contribution to the debate about the Labour Party. It should be noted, however, that the author has recently expressed reservations about its main argument. See his remarks in the recent article on Gramsci, in the section entitled 'The Illusions of Left Social Democracy', *New Left Review*, No. 100, p. 27, footnotes 47-8.
  24. Robin Blackburn, 'Labour and the Marxist Left', *New Statesman*, pp. 339-46, 14/9/1973.
  25. See Art Preis, *Labour's Giant Step: Twenty Years of the CIO*, Pioneer, New York, 1963, pp. 12-4.
  26. Ralph Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society*, Quartet, 1973, chs 7-8. On the crucial importance of legitimation, see James P. Cannon's discussion of the soviets in the October Revolution, (reference 17). Comrades who see legitimation as irrelevant in the context of revolutionary change would do well to ponder the lessons of 26th November 1975, in Portugal, where the revolution was blocked precisely because it permitted itself to be out-maneuvred by the Right on the terrain of legitimation and legality.
  27. Tony Benn, 'The Industrial Context', in Ken Coates (ed), *The New Worker*

- Co-operatives*, Spokesman, 1976, p. 86.
28. CDP Political Economy Collective, *Workers and the Industry Bill: Time for a Rank and File Response*, Community Development Project, 1975, p. 29.
  29. Stuart Holland, *The Socialist Challenge*, Quartet, 1975, and *Strategy for Socialism*, Spokesman, 1975.
  30. Bill Warren and Mike Prior, *Advanced Capitalism and Backward Socialism*, Spokesman pamphlet.
  31. Ernest Mandel, *A Socialist Strategy for Western Europe*, IWC pamphlet.
  32. Lucio Colletti, 'Which Road?', *International*, Vol. 2, No. 3, p. 5.