

THE COMMUNIST PARTY AND THE STRUGGLE FOR HEGEMONY

by George Bridges

The discussion on the future of the left is a timely one. Ralph Miliband undoubtedly speaks for many socialists who feel there is no natural or comfortable political home for them in the presently existing organisations of the left. Distaste for the negative aspects of various organisations, or lack of confidence in a left alternative, often leads to a political limbo. This is not just an 'academic' problem since it has clear echoes 'down below' and is signified by the 'decline of working class politics', a low level of socialist consciousness, a high degree of abstention—and more sinisterly the emergence of credible racialist parties into the arena of political life.

The ability of the left to project itself as a potential alternative national leadership depends in no small way on how it responds to the important questions raised in Miliband's opening article.

In joining the discussion I should make it clear that I am not in any sense representing the Communist Party, although I do write as a party member.

I want to approach the discussion on three main grounds. Firstly to argue that the central problem confronting socialists in Britain is not mainly that of organisational choice but of elaborating a strategy. The kind of intervention best fitted to pursue that strategy is an important but secondary question.

Secondly I want to suggest that the concept of 'left unity' is meaningful in terms of how the left can work for a strategy.

Thirdly I want to discuss some of Miliband's specific criticisms of the Communist Party, arguing that while many of his points strike home, his overall conclusion, that the CP cannot be transformed into a useful vehicle of left politics, is unjustified.

It is particularly unfortunate, I believe, that Miliband does not pose the problem in an historical or strategic setting. He seems to start from some notion of the ideal party and work back from that; using this as a yardstick to produce a kind of 'Which' report on the left—but with no 'Best Buy'. Hence the unreality of his scenario for a new socialist formation.

The 'reconnoitring of the social terrain' which a strategic approach would entail has been attempted in the current draft of the *British Road to Socialism*, to be proposed to the November 1977 Congress.¹ Here the

problem of the Labour Party, and labour movement is set within an implicitly Gramscian framework. This analyses power in Britain by differentiating between civil society, in which relations of consensus predominate, and the political state which embodies relations of coercion. Capitalist rule, though finally guaranteed by control of the state, primarily rests on predominance within the institutions and practices of civil society, including the ideological domain. Thus a civil society has developed in which the working class is able to participate autonomously, but within which capitalist class hegemony persists. Through a complex network of processes, consent to capitalism as 'normal', is reproduced. To confront this the working class must come to see itself, and act, as the leading force in society, i.e. to mount a hegemonic challenge.

This yields a strategy of **revolution** at variance with the 'frontal assault' associated with the Bolshevik model. It demands a 'war of position' in which the key strategic task is the winning of working class hegemony within civil society. This is fought out on the social terrain now occupied by the capitalist class, as well as by the extension of civil society. This means the intervention by the working class, and the bloc it is able to build around itself, in all areas of social life, as well as the creation of autonomous class practices.

In the conditions of Britain, for many of the reasons which Miliband draws attention to, the labour movement and the Labour Party constitute a central arena of civil society. In one sense it is a powerful vehicle by which capitalism is able to incorporate the working class into a system of consent—via the ideologies and practices of economism, reformism, electoralism and parliamentarism. But at another level it is a partly autonomous mode in which the working class enters the arena of civil society. Thus a strategic response to the location of the labour movement must be based both on **nurturing** and extending its autonomous, and hegemonic, potential, while at the same time seeking to challenge bourgeois hegemony within it. This is a multi-faceted process which is certainly not reducible to Miliband's Aunt Sally of 'helping persuade the Labour Party to adopt and carry out "left" policies' (although this is of course an important part of it).

Challenging for the hegemony of the labour movement means all on the left seriously working for a crusade to increase union density, especially in new, growing sectors of the economy, and those social groups (women, blacks, youth) traditionally neglected. It involves a democratisation, both quantitative and qualitative, to allow the full participation of not only the traditional base, but new social forces. It involves realising the 'natural' electoral majority for the movement's political expressions, undermining the hold of Toryism among sections of the working class. It involves the labour movement itself seeking to reflect within it the aspirations of new social movements, like the feminists, Scottish and Welsh nationalists,

ethnic minorities and homosexuals. It means consciously stimulating new cultural expressions; new community forms of action and new kinds of economic and political struggle.

This is a 'horizontal' extension of the battle for class hegemony. Part of this horizontality will include the presence of the political left, whose main organisational expression is the Communist Party.

The wider the political and ideological space contested by the left, the more likely the winning of predominance. Hence the importance of arenas like the family and sexuality traditionally spurned by the left and labour movement.

There is a 'vertical' dimension to this also. That is expressed in a battle for the creation, revitalising and radicalising of grass-roots structures in workplaces, organisations and communities. This is the base from which intervention at 'higher' levels must be made. This base needs to be dynamic and determining, rather than instrumental and non-autonomous. At the same time intervention at levels up to and including the leadership of the labour movement (and all other arenas of civil society open to working class participation) is crucial. This will certainly include the notion of 'pressure' and/or 'replacement' of that leadership. But this is located in our strategy in a far wider process, itself permeated by and set within a wide range of struggles against the sets of oppressions, economic, social, political, national, racial, sexual and cultural which capitalism engenders.

Miliband's approach underestimates the strengths and potential of the labour movement; in particular the relationship between the unified trade union movement and the Labour Party; the differentiation between the left and right; and the significance of the presence of the Communist Party.

No strategy which ignored the fact that the growing trade union movement is potentially dominant within an historically established political party can hope to be viable. True this is potentially a straitjacket pressing a left movement into an **economist/reformist** path. But the response should not be to abandon the potential of this relationship but to challenge these ideological responses within it. Socialists cannot be bound to accept passively a trade union consciousness which spontaneously emerges from militancy. This is why some Communists have argued that the 'Social Contract v. free collective bargaining' debate—in the terms it has been argued in the 1975-77 period—has not allowed the left to emerge as having a powerful political alternative to the Callaghan-Jones **position**.³ The left should aim to transform the dominant ideological forms of the working class movement from a primarily reformist framework to a revolutionary or hegemonic one. This is the **essence** of the CP's insistence on the fight to dislodge the right wing within the labour movement and win left predominance.

This central task will remain for a revolutionary strategy even if the Labour Party is eschewed as an arena of this struggle. This is because the

current dominance of the right, especially at PLP level, is largely a reflection of the consciousness of the class generally. Thus any kind of 'new socialist formation' (or 'old' for that matter) will face the task of transforming class consciousness. But this can only be hampered by abandoning critical power bases—the implantation of the trade unions in the Labour party, and the latter's electoral strength.

Miliband argues statically when he says that the Labour Party is innately resistant to transformation to a new politics. The *British Road to Socialism* argues that changing the politics of the Labour Party is bound up with changing the politics of the class. Though this process is reciprocal, there are no immutable, insuperable aspects of the Labour Party which make it impervious to a transformation of working class consciousness.

It is true that by its mass, federal nature (which is at one level a tremendous strength) the Labour Party cannot become a party of revolutionary leadership. The CP does not envisage this, indeed this is one of the points of our autonomous existence. It is true, in a broad sense, that we conceive of the Labour Party occupying a 'commanding position on the left' but only within the perspective of the left occupying a commanding position within the Labour Party.

Miliband rejects any strategic significance in the differentiation between the left and right, and argues that the left has historically 'covered' up for the right. It is precisely because this has been the historical outcome of a Labour Left isolated from mass struggles and trapped within the structures of a right-dominated party, that we argue for an autonomous organisation of revolutionaries, within a left unity. Without the development of mass struggles increasingly unified, increasingly challenging, the prospect of a left predominance, or even a significant articulation in the Labour Party is bleak. So any kind of leadership role for the Communist Party must include generating a wide range of popular struggles. This role needs to be seen not in 'vanguard' terms but as analysing social movements, setting tactical and strategic objectives, linking short-term and long-term aims and unifying specific struggles. We reject 'frontism' where 'broad' organisations are reduced to appendages of the 'vanguard' party; facades erected to involve those not yet willing to endorse the complete programme of the party, which are then dominated politically and organisationally. This is one feature of the effect of Stalinism on Western Communist Parties which we firmly need to put behind us.³

Nevertheless while the spontaneity and autonomy of popular movements against oppression are precious, they are by themselves inadequate faced with an overall bourgeois hegemony. Hence the 'intellectual' role for an organisation of revolutionaries who are seeking to win those in struggle for a convergence and a strategy of socialist advance.

Miliband's article ignores the option of a united left as an answer to 'political homelessness'. I feel this bears more serious investigation since it

suggests the growth of a powerful potentially hegemonic force not on the ashes of the existing left, but by its transformation and unification. In this I believe it corresponds more to the deep historic roots of the current left and the actual possibilities within current political reality.

I want to identify two kinds of left, although they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Firstly the 'political' left which comprises those groups, individuals, the Communist Party and others who see socialism as the outcome of current political struggles. While the most potent articulation of this left is the Communist Party, the political left exists within the Labour Party, the PLP and the trade union militants. It also exists in the socialist minded activists amongst wider social forces like the feminist movement.⁴

The second level is the 'broad left' and can be seen in terms of those prepared to struggle against exploitation and oppression (without necessarily consciously recognising the process). They are involved in the labour movement, social movements, community groups, pressure groups of various kinds. This is the constituency which in specific situations may be won for the actions or policies proposed by the political left, and occasionally finds organisational expression, usually on specific issues.⁵

The uniting of the political left can only come from a transformation of the existing groups. In particular it will mean that the Labour left relates more to mass struggles: becomes less electoral and parliamentary; and is more open to dialogue and joint action with Communists, Marxists and independent socialists. The Communist Party needs to shed vestiges of Stalinist sectarianism, become more open ideologically and democratic and develop its ability to root its strategy and policy in British reality. It will also demand that independent socialists reject Miliband's illusory hope for a 'new socialist formation' and work within a united left.

On the basis of such transformations, a convergence can lead to broad unity of perspective, deepening the penetration of Marxist theory and dialogue. The forms this can take could include the kind of non-sectarian events which the CP has been organising such as the Communist University of London,⁶ regional Festivals of Marxism; the growth of non-sectarian left journals like *The Leveller*, *Socialist Register*, *New Left Review*, *Red Rag*, and the further opening up of *Marxism Today*. I believe *The Morning Star* ought far more to become a real daily voice of a united left, which must include opening its columns to much more critical discussion.

A process of left unification would need to have local expression in the form of left unity groups, socialist forums, marxist discussion groups. The process can appear in areas not always associated with the traditional political left—in the women's movement, Institute of Workers Control, the Socialist Environment and Resources Association, Gay Left etc.

The basic principle of this unity must be unity in diversity with a guarantee of autonomy for its constituent parts and without attempts to

dominate or control. Internecine warfare and incestuous cross-recruitment must be avoided for an outward growth perspective which would foresee the expansion of all the constituents of a left unity.

The second line of advance is to build a broad left as the predominant force within the mass organisations and popular movements of the people. Undoubtedly this is a complex problem and many past experiences have been less than fruitful. A broad left must seek to draw towards it all who are involved in struggle for democracy and social advance. It must not confine itself to acting as an electoral machine for contesting union positions (although this is important in itself) but should be seeking to build and strengthen the autonomous rank and file organisations. It may involve many who would not define themselves as 'left', in for example campaigns against racialism in which churchgoers, liberals and even Tory-minded people may be included. It will need to challenge the political and ideological space currently occupied by the right.

It should operate in areas traditionally neglected by the left—in new cultural forms, community work, and in the 'private' sphere of sexual politics.

The relationships between the broad left and its constituents must not be seen in terms of vanguardism and domination, but as a relationship guaranteeing the specificity and autonomy of particular sections. Nor should this relationship be mechanical, but dynamic and reciprocal. Thus the feminist movement not only articulates the attack on the oppression of women, but challenges sexist ideology and practices within the labour movement. At the same time the extent to which the labour movement itself becomes a champion of movements like feminism, will determine its central role in a broad popular alliance.

The question arises—would it not be more effective to work for this strategy within the Labour Party rather than in a separately organised Communist Party?

The Communist Party certainly values those in the Labour Party who are working for similar perspectives. Nor does it rule out in advance the possibility at some future date of a re-unification of the CP and the LP in a new federal relationship, nor various forms of co-operation, such as electoral agreements. However the political conditions for this do not yet exist, and the immediate demands of the strategy necessitate the existence of an autonomous revolutionary party.

We do argue for the right of all trade unionists, including Communists, who pay the political levy, to be entitled to full rights as representatives of trade union bodies within the Labour Party. This is part of the necessary task of further democratising the labour movement. We are for the ending of all formal and informal bans on co-operation by the Labour Party with other left or democratic organisations.

With Miliband, we reject entrust tactics whereby Communists secretly,

individually become LP members while owing allegiance to an independent CP. This involves a deception of the working class, and a fatal self-deception. Also, it by-passes the necessary political changes in class consciousness which would allow for the recognition of revolutionaries, and the CP, as an essential element within a federal working class party. It would rob the CP of much of its effectiveness in intervening nationally in political life. We see no advantage to the left in a split within the Labour Party (as opposed to the shedding off of the Prentices and Tavernes) and we reject any entrism scenario based on either the hope or expectation of one.

The specific role of the CP is a vital element within its whole strategy. It is certainly not a leading role 'guaranteed by history' nor does the CP seek any special privileges within a united left. Furthermore the CP will not become a decisive factor on the left without a qualitative and quantitative transformation.

My disagreement with Miliband is about whether this transformation is taking place now and is capable of being carried through. Incidentally I feel it is a process which devolves not only on CP members but on the left generally. In this Miliband's criticisms can be taken seriously and are shared by many Party members.

However his method is not always helpful here. If we work from some notion of the ideal party, then all contenders will fall short. Hence the facile conclusion that the ideal party must be built from scratch. There is no guarantee however that the negative features found by Miliband in existing left groups would not be reproduced in his new one.

For instance he holds against the CP that it contains old and young 'hacks' or timeservers. But this can hardly be said to be unique to the CP; such an organisational species can be found in all stable left organisations. What is true is that a struggle against routinism and bureaucratic inertia is a necessary component of ensuring a revolutionary organisation is dynamic and responsive. But it is by no means logically consequent that this cannot be done within the CP (and other left groups), but will be possible in a new group.

The same applies to the notion of the CP as an oligarchic 'managed' party. This tendency, graphically described in Michel's study of the German labour movement in 1911,⁷ has certainly affected Communist Parties as well as other socialist groups.⁸ But experience tends to indicate that this is a phenomenon of organisation in general and socialists have yet to discover an organisational form which guarantees in advance its non-appearance.

Miliband's central criticism however is not that the CP has hacks and is managed but that this as a defining characteristic is immutable.

But here he seems to contradict himself because he also holds against the CP that it is deeply divided and that 'this is not a good **siguation** for a

socialist party.' The CP is in the historic process of grappling with and overcoming its Stalinist heritage and it would be naive to believe this could be accomplished without deep divisions.⁹ I agree that no organisation can live for long with the kind of schisms which have emerged in the 1976-77 period. 'The issue won't go away' as he says, but my guess is that it will be resolved by the tendency of the Stalinist wing to shed off.¹⁰ But this just emphasises that the trend in the recent period of the CP is decisively away from monolithicity.

What kind of organisational forms will emerge from this period is up for debate, an important discussion not yet resolved by any existing left group. The notion that a formula like 'democratic centralism' by itself guarantees both effectiveness or democracy is part of the Stalinist ideological hangover. Equally illusory is the idea that wanting democracy is sufficient to guarantee it. It is still the case that any organisation to be effective demands some element of centralism and even 'management'. The impulse to democratise the CP comes from its strategic perspective. In the first place it needs to locate its democratic procedures nearer to the best traditions of the British labour movement. If the CP seeks a 'catalyst' role in stimulating the various movements against oppression and bringing them together within a broad democratic alliance then its ability to be seen to function democratically will assume a strategic character.

This demands the maximum possibility for debate, dissent, visible presence of specific new forces and elements of horizontality¹¹ which can be reconciled with effective leadership.

Some of Miliband's hardest strictures refer to the discussion in the CP of the Soviet Union and the effects of Stalinism. However he is here less than fair, and his view that nothing has significantly changed is misleading. To an extent history has overtaken him, and now important 'signs' do exist that a serious attempt to develop a theoretically grounded critique of socialism in practice is being developed.

The 1976 discussion in *Marxism Today* drew 93 contributions, many hard-hitting and discussing the effects of Stalinism in the CP in Britain. At the last three Communist Universities there have been week-long courses on Soviet Studies at which CP and non-party specialists have openly discussed problems of analysing 'existing socialism'. There now exists a specialist committee of the CP for the study of European socialist countries, which published the first issue of 'Socialist Europe' in early 1977 including highly critical analyses. Lawrence and Wishart have published French Communist historian Jean Elleinstein's study 'The Stalin Phenomenon', which may have weaknesses but is hardly uncritical. The CP pamphlet written by Dave Purdy 'State Capitalism or Socialism' is a serious attempt to discuss the problem.¹² Indeed much of the recent debate on the Left on this has been a *response* to the CP's discussions.

Searching discussions have gone on throughout the party in branches

social democratic parties; forms of left unity; and a de-stalinised communist party. True these processes are individually more developed in some countries than others, but nowhere has a 'new' socialist formation provided **Miliband** with a living example of significance.

The history of our own labour movement serves him little better—the ILP in the 20s and 30s failed to fill the bill, and the Radical Alliance of the 1960s was a dismal failure. Perhaps the closest analogy to the party he is seeking is the Chilean Socialist Party of Allende. Leaving aside the criticisms the left may have of this party, which did indeed play a positive role in the Chilean struggle, it was born out of circumstances applicable in the world movement over 50 years which can hardly be re-enacted today.

The unfortunate reality is that Miliband's scepticism and cynicism are rarely inspirers of positive action and therein lies the danger in his position. In practice it is likely to lead to pessimism and passivity. Clearly there is a huge job to do on the left—to transform its existing expressions into a force capable of mounting a hegemonic challenge to capitalism. With the threatening 'noises off' of the racialists challenging for the political space being lost by the middle ground **Labourist/Tory** politics, no socialist can afford the luxury of staying on the sidelines.

The CP has a vital role within a hegemonic left, especially in view of its relative strength, organisation and labour movement implantation. It remains the major presence of Marxism and the only important left element internationally located. It is capable of elaborating the only viable strategic perspective for socialism. It has active within it sections of new movements like the feminists. It has the only daily paper of the Left. Above all it is becoming a more open and dynamic party.

As such it presents a far more fruitful arena for politically homeless socialists to 'squat' in than Ralph Miliband's quixotic notion of a new socialist formation.

NOTES

1. *The British Road to Socialism—Draft CPGB 1977*. Much of this article is predicated on the draft, hopefully with improvements, being accepted by the November 1977 Party Congress, at least in broad outline.
2. 'Viewpoint', David Purdy, *Comment*, 20 June 1976.
3. This is, ironically, precisely the current practice of the Socialist Workers Party in relation, for example, to the Right to Work Campaign.
4. I see no a priori reason why the groups to the left of the Communist Party cannot be drawn into this political left, Robin Blackburn's suggestive article on 'Unity of the Left' (*New Statesman*, 15 September, 1973) laid a possible basis for this between those on left who accept extra parliamentary struggle and those on the far left who are prepared to take part in electoral struggle. Perhaps the recently acquired 'electoralism' in the IMG and SWP may lead them in this direction. Current searches for 'unity of the revolutionary left'

(cf *Socialist Challenge*, 19 May 1977) and the SWP thrust to become the new vanguard are of course entirely different from the perspective I hold.

The criticism that 'broad lefts' in trade unions have mainly been somewhat opportunistic electoral machines has some substance. However other experiences such as the NUS Broad Left, the Building Workers Charter, are more fruitful. For a discussion of the effects of the absence of a broad left perspective in the NUT see 'Viewpoint', Phil Bennett, *Comment*, 30 April 1977.

The CUL in July 1976 had over 1,000 participants, the majority of whom were not CP members.

7. 'Political Parties', R. Michels (Collier Books Edition), New York, 1962.
8. An interesting comment on how the SWP, with its semi-libertarian origins, has become organised on a stalinist model is found in Martin Shaw's letter in *The Leveller*, April 1977, p. 14.
9. These have affected other parties in Europe such as those in Spain, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Greece.
10. The first important step in this process was the announcement of a 'new Communist Party' led by **ex-Surrey** district secretary of the CPGB, Sid French (see *Morning Star*, 18 July, 1977).
This is expressed in the burgeoning of specialist groups and journals such as *Red Letters* (CP literature group), *Euro-Red* (Western Europe sub-committee); the activities of the sociology group (such as the conference on class in November 1976 with 400 participants); the Gay Rights Committee; local women's groups; and local journals such as Lewisham CP's *Themes*, Essex University CP's *Red Lead*.
11. It is worth noting the pioneering contribution of the YCL theoretical magazine *Cogito* which has produced Monty Johnstone's work on Trotskyism, breaking new ground in rejecting a Stalinist position while laying bare the inadequacies of Trotsky's political views. The latest issue promises future pieces on Hungary 1956 by Geoff Roberts, and Czechoslovakia 1968 by Jan Sling.
12. 'Euro-Communism' as a term is somewhat confusing since it is a political tendency, which appears in the Japanese and Australian CP's for example, rather than a geographic concept.