

Campaigning Against the Cuts - the South Yorkshire experience

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with the help of leading Sheffield Communists.

1 INTRODUCTION

The November 28th Demonstration and Lobby of Parliament against the cuts was a very considerable success— held on a working day only 7 months after the General Election, over 50,000 people took part, drawn from the main basic industries as well as from the public sector and representing all parts of Britain. The first initiative for this Lobby came from the labour movement in Sheffield and South Yorkshire, which made a major contribution to its success. This article aims to deal with some aspects of the movement in South Yorkshire, some of the lessons learned, and some of the problems of carrying the movement forward.

2 POLITICAL BACKGROUND

The General Election swing to the Tories was less evident in much of the North, including Yorkshire, than in the South and East of England. In the immediate aftermath of the election, the labour movement in Yorkshire was well aware of the attacks that it would now face and discussions started in many labour movement organisations on how to respond to this new situation. The contribution made by Communists to these wide-ranging discussions was based on the analysis of the election results made at the May meeting of the Communist Party's National Executive Committee, and on the development of that analysis made at the May and June meetings of the Party's Yorkshire District Committee.

The analysis made at these meetings included the following points:—

(i) We should not expect an automatic repeat of the 1970-74 scenario. The economic situation is different; and there are important differences in the political situation. It is a different Tory leadership, with a different approach to the problems. The labour movement is different, too. In spite of the Tory General Election victory in 1970, there was then a great deal of confidence on the Left, gained in successful struggles against the Wilson government — especially, the victory over *In Place of Strife*. But in 1979 the movement was less confident. Confusions and divisions over the 'social contract', setbacks suffered by the Left in some (not all) trade unions, the evidence in the election results of a strengthening of right wing ideas in the country, the worsening economic situation — all meant that not all sections of the movement were in as confident and combative a spirit as had been the case in 1970.

(ii) In these circumstances, it is too early to decide what particular issue, or combination of issues, might eventually become crucial in

rousing a movement strong enough to force a General Election and a Tory defeat. It is therefore necessary to develop the fight back against the Tories on every possible issue, and at all levels — economic, political, ideological.

(iii) While seeking to develop movements on every possible issue, we should attach special significance to those issues that provide a basis for united action involving both the organised working class and wider sections of the community. The District Committee took the view that the scurrilous campaign against militant trade unionism conducted by the mass media, the Tories, and by Labour's right wing, had had some effects, and that persistent efforts were needed to overcome that situation. It might be possible for militant trade union action to obstruct Tory policies, even up to the point of forcing a General Election; but unless serious efforts were made to build unity between those militants and wider sections of public opinion, such a General Election would not necessarily end Tory rule.

(iv) The District Committee therefore considered that such issues as the fight against the Corrie Bill, and the campaign against Tory racist immigration legislation, were extremely important — around such issues unity could be built between the trade union movement and other streams of democratic struggle. But we saw the fight against the social service cuts as being particularly important, for a number of reasons.

First, of course, because the cuts affect practically every family in the country. Here, above all, the idea could be put into practice of using militant trade union action to defend the interests of the whole community, including the many thousands of families heavily dependent on the social services but lacking the 'muscle' of the organised industrial working class. Secondly, the 'cuts' issue has a dual character. The cuts are a very real and serious attack on material living standards — to deprive a working class family of decent education for their kids is as serious an attack on living standards as a wage cut or a rent increase. But the cuts are also an ideological attack. For over half a century the labour movement has fought for the idea that some aspects of life are so important that they should be matters of social concern, not left to each individual family to sink or swim — health, education, etc. It is this idea that is under attack with the cuts; and the fight back against the cuts therefore has a deeply political, ideological character. Thirdly, a great deal of social service administration is the responsibility of local government, working within legal and financial limits laid down by central government. Much of

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Labour's traditional support stems from its record in local government, and many Labour councillors who on matters of national and international politics are not generally thought of as being on the left have nevertheless a real pride in their record of social service achievement. The 'cuts' issue therefore raised the possibility of a clash between Tory central government and Labour local authorities, and posed interesting problems and possibilities in the field of Communist-Labour relations.

Our Party Area leadership in Sheffield sought to apply this general approach in a special situation which did not apply elsewhere in Yorkshire. South Yorkshire, which includes Sheffield, is an important industrial region — steel, coal, engineering. The labour movement has a very long and rich tradition of struggle. The local

authorities (South Yorkshire Metropolitan County Council, Sheffield District Council) are under strong Labour control and in some respects have a good record in the social services field — public transport in South Yorkshire as a whole, and housing in Sheffield, for example. On the industrial side, the Left is strong both in Sheffield engineering and in the Yorkshire coalfield and the Communist Party has deep roots in Sheffield's engineering factories and trade union movement.

The approach worked out by the Sheffield Area leadership of the Party started with four main points:

First: In the early stages, there should be no attempt to base the movement on a demand that the Councils should not implement the cuts.

After the Clay Cross experience, to make such a demand without first showing that there was in existence a movement with sufficient 'muscle' to back the Council up was a pointless exercise. Whether, at any stage, the demand for non-implementation is correct, and what it means and how it should be pursued — that is another matter dealt with later in this article. But we took the view that, in the initial stages, it would be a mistake to try to build a campaign around a demand that the Labour Council should not implement the cuts — the whole drive in the first place must be to build a united movement against the Tory government that was introducing the cuts. Without that approach, it would have been impossible to involve the broad spectrum of the labour movement that in fact *was* involved in this campaign.

Second: The main drive at the start should be to the key engineering factories in Sheffield and the miners of South Yorkshire, to win them for the idea of action — including industrial action at some stage — to defend their social services, and their Labour Councils, against Tory attacks.

We considered it a mistake to base the campaign on the public service unions whose members' jobs were threatened by the cuts. Clearly, they had a most important part to play in the struggle; but they lacked the 'muscle' that the industrial workers could deploy. Also, their main concern was — rightly and properly — the jobs of their members; but if broad public support was to be won, it had to be won primarily around the importance of the services to the public, not around the jobs of those employed in them. The general conception was, to bring a whole community into action against the cuts, with its best organised and most militant workers as the spearhead. This was not easy. Even militant Sheffield engineers and Yorkshire miners do not commit themselves to possible strike action for a clearly political objective without a struggle. In the past decade important inroads have been made into the traditional labour movement attitude that 'you don't use industrial action for political purposes', but this attitude remains strong. The realistic approach taken by the Sheffield comrades rules out the 'short cut' of depending on resolutions passed in leading trade union committees, and insisted that the battle had to be waged at the 'bottom', to win the mass of rank and file workers.

Third: The emphasis throughout should be to build the greatest possible degree of Labour-Communist unity.

The factory gate meetings with which the campaign opened were, at first, jointly addressed by Gordon Ashberry, Sheffield Area Secretary of the Communist Party, and Bill Moore, Labour candidate for West Derbyshire. Later, Labour councillors and leaders of public service unions took part in factory gate and shop floor meetings. Workplace branches of the Communist Party co-operated with Labour Party members in the factories in carrying the campaign forward. There were, of course, problems. Some Communists still have a sectarian resistance to this kind of united activity. There is also a kind of

'Labour Party sectarianism' which becomes increasingly evident the 'higher' one goes in the Labour Party's organisation. At no time was the Labour Party prepared to accept or admit to any official or formal unity with the Communist Party. Informal discussions were the rule, and when Communists attended meetings and conferences they did so as trade union representatives rather than as representatives of the Party — though the real role the Party played, and the tremendous work it did, were well understood by many who were not prepared to publicly acknowledge it.

Fourth: The aim should be to spark off a national movement, not just a Yorkshire movement.

The General Election results had shown that the Tories had made serious inroads into the working class vote in the South and East, but the North had shown a level of anti-Tory class feeling that made it evident that it was here in the North that the labour movement, and Communists especially, must undertake the responsibility of starting the fight back. The Sheffield Party leadership therefore maintained close contact with the national Party leadership and the *Morning Star*. In the early stages, some Sheffield comrades were critical of what was felt to be inadequate coverage in the *Star*, but as the campaign developed the paper did a tremendous job without which the Lobby could not have succeeded as it did. It was also evident that the call for the Lobby was being taken up very widely outside Yorkshire and it became a major issue at the Party's National Congress.

THE COURSE OF EVENTS

June and July were largely devoted to laying the basis for the campaign in the main industries.

The general pattern in engineering was: First, a factory gate meeting at which the case for action against the cuts was argued, with particular and careful attention to explaining the case for industrial action (see *Comment*, Aug 4th 1979, for more detail on this). Then, after discussions with the stewards, the key step was a shop-floor meeting at which workers were asked to pledge themselves, if called upon, to take industrial action to defend their Council and their social services from Tory attacks. Decisions to this effect were taken in several of the main engineering factories in Sheffield which then led on naturally to similar resolutions from trade union branches, district committees, trades councils, etc.

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In mining, the first major step was a decision by the July 16th meeting of the Yorkshire Area Council of the NUM to throw their industrial muscle behind any Labour Council in the area that opposed the cuts. This policy was then campaigned for throughout the coalfield, with the major role being played by the Union's journal, the *Yorkshire Miner*, which did an extremely effective job of putting the issues to the miners and mobilising support for the campaign.

At the same time, in this early period, based on this 'ground-swell' of activity, informal discussions were going on between many leading figures in the Labour Party and trade union movement on where the campaign should go next. Unity was an important consideration in everyone's mind, and in this period it became necessary to deal with what could have been a divisive diversion. Labour councillor George Wilson, leader of Sheffield Council, had made a statement supporting a proposal from another Labour councillor, Peter Price, to the effect that, if Sheffield Council had to cut anywhere, it would make its cuts

in the one part of Sheffield that had registered a Tory majority in the election. The local media set out to exploit this to the full. Gordon Ashberry, Sheffield Area Secretary of the Communist Party, wrote to the local paper defending George Wilson — not defending the actual proposition, which was neither possible nor desirable, but arguing that it was simply a natural and understandable class reaction against what the Tories were doing. Most local workers took the same view and the attempted diversion was thereafter quietly dropped by the media.

Towards the end of this first period, the Sheffield Area Committee of the Party began also to take the battle out into the wider local community with a widespread distribution of local leaflets on the cuts.

In September, after the inevitable holiday lapse, the campaign moved on to a new stage. On the basis of the work already done, a meeting was held on September 12th that was subsequently described by Bill Owen, President of the South Yorkshire Association of Trades Councils, as 'unique — history in the making'. It was in effect a political-industrial conference, bringing together Labour Council leaders, representatives of Labour Parties and Trades Councils, and key leading figures in the trade union movement in South Yorkshire. It did not include, but was lobbied by, several leading convenors, who were allowed into the meeting without speaking rights. But their presence underlined the continuing involvement of the shop floor in the struggle.

The Mass Rally

This meeting decided to call a mass rally in Sheffield City Hall on October 14th, as the key step in mobilising for a mass lobby of Parliament in November. All interested bodies were invited to a preparatory meeting on September 23rd, to plan the campaign — this meeting was more widely representative in some respects than the meeting on the 12th had been, with a number of shop stewards present.

By this time, the annual Trades Union Congress had met (in the first week of September) and had decided in principle on a Day of Action against the cuts. It was clear that the success of the plans for a mass lobby of Parliament could be crucial in deciding both the timing of the TUC's Day of Action, and its character — whether it would be just a Sunday demonstration, or a working day involving industrial action.

The campaign for the October 14th City Hall Rally was on a scale Sheffield has not seen for a long time. 150,000 leaflets, published by the South Yorkshire Association of Trades Councils, were distributed by Labour and Communist Party members and by non-party trade unionists. Intensive loud-speaker meetings with Labour and Communist speakers was carried on round the main shopping centres.

In the event, the October 14th Rally was an historic event. Over 2,500 people attended and the atmosphere was electric. Speeches at the rally stressed the unity that was being built between the trade union movement and the Labour Councils, and the audience rose to Arthur Scargill's call for full support to any local authority that refused to implement the cuts. George Caborn, AUEW District Secretary (and well-known long-standing member of the Communist Party) took a collection of nearly £2,000 for the campaign funds. From the floor — not yet accepted as a 'platform speaker'! — Gordon Ashberry spoke on behalf of the Communist Party Area Committee, the first Communist to speak officially for the Party at a Sheffield labour movement rally for over 20 years.

From this high point, the message was taken back into the factories and pits, to the local authority employees, to the local communities, and into the colleges and universities, to win support for the November 28th Lobby.

During the whole period intensive activity against the cuts was going on all over the country, with frequent reports in the *Morning Star* of meetings, demonstrations and lobbies of Council meetings in other areas — notably, the campaign and lobby organised by the Lambeth labour movement. All this helped to give further impetus and encouragement to the campaign in Yorkshire.

The November Lobby

In this general climate, the public announcement of the South Yorkshire call for a November Lobby (reported in the *Morning Star* on September 24th) became the focus for widespread support from other parts of the country. Within a few days declarations of support were coming from many quarters, notably from the secretary of the North West Regional Council of the TUC. By the end of September the Labour Party's national local government sub-committee had decided to ask the Labour Party National Executive to put its weight behind the November 28th Lobby. At the Labour Party Annual Conference in the first week of October, Joan Maynard (MP for Sheffield Brightside), speaking for the Labour Party NEC, urged delegates to mobilise for the Lobby. What had been a South Yorkshire initiative had now become a national event.

This was undoubtedly an important victory, though it would be a mistake not to recognise that it also revealed some problems and negative features. Some unions in the public sector gave the Lobby strong support, but there were others — the NUT, for instance — which might have supported an event organised by the TUC, but would not participate officially in an event sponsored by the Labour Party. And, of course, there was the usual attempt to establish a Labour Party 'monopoly' over the conduct of the event. There were no speakers at the rally other than Labour Party members, these included some like Callaghan whose own record in the 'cutting' field caused an anger at their presence that was entirely understandable, however badly expressed. There was the usual attempt to relegate the banners of 'other political bodies' to an inconspicuous ghetto at the tail end of the demonstration — our Sheffield comrades rightly refused to accept this and carried their banner in the South Yorkshire contingent, along with Labour Party and trade union banners from the region. (The Welsh Committee of the Communist Party acted similarly). Labour's right wing 'supports' such events as these only with the aim of making electoral capital out of them, not with any intention of carrying the movement forward to higher levels of mass action.

But while these problems should not be ignored, the most important thing about the demonstration and Lobby was the tremendous support it received. South Yorkshire's contingent alone numbered at 4,000, including miners and engineers as well as public service workers.

It is important to recognise that, while all this was going on, the fight against the Tories was also being waged on other fronts, which were not seen as 'diversionary' but as all contributing to the same central aim.

For example, a decisive period in winning factory support for the cuts campaign coincided with the engineers' wage struggle, which was waged with considerable militancy and determination in Sheffield (when the GEC management tried a lock-out, the workers occupied the factory and barricaded the gates with an articulated lorry with its tyres let down!). It should surprise no one that the first section of the working class to be won for action in the cuts campaign was the section that was at that very time engaged in fighting for its own 'sectional' interests. It is in the daily struggle to defend and improve their own 'sectional' interests that industrial workers develop the organisation, class feeling and combativity without which they could not lead a broader alliance. The converse is also true. The general 'anti-Tory'

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climate developed in the cuts campaign undoubtedly contributed to the exceptionally high vote of 74% in the Yorkshire coalfield for industrial action on the miners' wage claim.

Another issue on which continuous activity was maintained through this period was the fight against Tory racist legislation. The Sheffield Campaign Against Racism (based on the labour movement, immigrant and black organisations, and a broad spectrum of anti-racist opinion) was continually active, publishing excellent material on the threat of the new Tory legislation. Here, too, it was possible to see how one issue 'rubs off onto another. Indian, Bengali, West Indian and Yemeni workers, brought together in the first place by SCAR, played an active part in the engineers' strikes. SCAR officially supported the 'cuts' campaign on the grounds that the cuts threatened a number of projects they were directly involved in and that ethnic minorities would be especially hard-hit by the cuts. Sabran Quassim, their spokesman at the October 14th Rally, brought the house down when he declared 'A capitalist is a capitalist whether he is white or black, and a worker is a worker whether he is white or black. We must not let Thatcher's racist policies divide us!'

And, of course, Sheffield engineering workers responded as one would expect them to respond to the victimisation of Derek Robinson, which they see as a 'trial run' for a more widespread attack on militant convenors in general — Communists in particular! This too links up with the cuts campaign, for Tory plans to weaken militant trade union organisation are not aimed only at holding back the wages

struggle — they are aimed at making it more difficult for organised workers to exercise their strength in support of progressive policies generally.

4 WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

This, of course, is not just a question for Yorkshire, but for the whole Party and labour movement. Before suggesting some possible answers, I want to outline a general approach to the situation.

Our aim is to get the Tories out — but, it is *not just* to get the Tories out. We do not want a simple return to the 'square one' of 1974; we want a Tory defeat that opens up real possibilities of advance for the Left.

The answer to that problem does not lie wholly — nor even at the present time mainly — in the current struggle to 'democratise' the Labour Party. That is a very important struggle which must receive our full support. But, to be realistic about the speed with which changes take place in the British labour movement, if the next General Election produces a Labour government, it is more likely to be of the 'Callaghan-Healey' type than of the 'Benn-Heffer' type. The prospects of post-electoral advance for the Left depend on the strength and political clarity of the Communist Party, the Left, and the mass movement, *outside* Parliament. (This would of course also be the case though in different circumstances even if the next Labour government were more 'left' than the last one.)

This raises the question of our attitude to the position of Labour's right wing as the movements against the Tories develop. It is bound to participate in phases of the anti-Tory movement, and it would be sectarian indeed not to recognise the positive aspect when movements starting from the grass roots compel official recognition. But there is a negative side. Unless already, now, in the period of anti-Tory struggle, a distinct line is drawn between the position of the right wing and the position of the Left; unless, already, in this period, mass support is won for the position of the Left; then there will be illusions and confusions of an all-too-familiar kind in the aftermath of a Labour election victory.

At the risk of greatly over-simplifying a complex reality, I want to suggest that in the 1970-74 period the Left was more successful in defeating the right wing around the question of how to fight the Tories (industrial action versus parliamentarianism, Council defiance versus constitutionalism) than it was in winning mass support for its left alternative policies. In the present period, the fight to win mass support for the Left against the position of Labour's right wing has to be conducted on both fronts — how to fight the Tories, and what policies are needed after the Tories. On that general background I want to conclude by looking at three aspects of the fight back.

(i) Mass action against the Cuts

Following the Lobby of Parliament the next step must be to raise the movement to the level of industrial action against the cuts, implementing in that form the TUC decision for a Day of Action.

On Saturday, December 8th, the co-ordinating committee of trade union and Labour representatives that had been at the heart of the drive for the Rally and the Lobby met together with a number of shop stewards and decided to press the South Yorkshire Association of Trades Councils to organise a 24 hour strike on Monday, February 18th. It was clearly hoped that this initiative from South Yorkshire might lead to national action on that date, just as the Lobby had become a national event.

While there have been some positive responses from outside Yorkshire to this proposal, the TUC General Council has decided to go for a Day of Action on May 14th. While labour movement activists in South Yorkshire welcomed the fact that the General Council had settled on a working day for the Day of Action, it was widely felt that

May 14th was too late to carry forward the impetus and inspiration of the November 28th Lobby. It was also felt that the Day of Action should be before, not after, polling day in the local elections, so that it could be part of a great national campaign to sweep the Tories off the Councils on May 1st.

This thinking no doubt influenced the South Yorkshire Association of Trades Councils at its meeting on Saturday, January 5th to decide unanimously to work for a 24 hour strike on February 18th. This article having been written in December and marginally updated on January 6th, obviously cannot forecast how events will work out between now and publication in February. But whatever the detailed working out of events in the next few weeks, it will remain the case that the key to defeating Tory policies is determined action by the organised industrial working class, backed up by the broader community. There are two things here we need to bear in mind:

First — we cannot take it for granted that the pledges won for industrial action some months ago are good for ever. The workers who made those pledges are faced with the corrosive effects of press propaganda, weaknesses of leadership, and mounting redundancies. We therefore cannot take anything for granted but need continually to go back to the factory floor to maintain the positions won last summer.

Second — the aim is to get broad community involvement in the struggle; but we have found problems in bringing 'community organisations' outside the traditional labour movement into the struggle. Indeed, there has been some resistance from some Labour and trade union leaders to involving the widest possible range of community organisations in the movement. In part this stems from the self-confidence of a powerful labour movement so sure of its own strength that it under-rates the importance of allies; in part it stems from a kind of 'Labour Party sectarianism' — an anxiety to assert Labour Party hegemony over the movement.

(ii) The Role of Labour Councils

I have already explained why we did not from the start demand a commitment from Labour Councils not to implement the cuts. We took the view that, before 'non-implementation' could become a real issue, Councils had to see visible evidence of a real movement, with real power, outside the council chamber, that could back them up.

As the movement develops; as Tory policies begin to bite; and as the local elections approach — it now becomes more urgent to consider this question in concrete terms. There are many real and serious difficulties, and a substantial body of labour movement opinion does not see 'non-implementation' as practical politics, given the array of financial and other weapons at the disposal of the Government. This attitude cannot be written off as simply 'right-wing treachery'. True, there *are* right-wing Labour councillors with no stomach for any kind of struggle. But there are also many sincere Labour councillors, with a genuine pride in their social service record and a real willingness to defend it, who find difficulty in seeing how to deal with the situation they are now in. As they see it, the alternatives are: refuse to implement the cuts and face crushing burdens on the rates; resign rather than implement the cuts; or do what they can to protect their local services short of actual defiance of the Government, and try to 'weather the storm' until a General Election leads to a change of government.

If we are serious as a Party about the policy of 'non-implementation', it is now urgent for us to consider what, exactly, concretely, we are asking Labour Councils to do; what exactly, concretely, our Communist candidates will advocate in their campaigns for the local elections; what will be the likely consequences of that course of action and how we would cope with them.

If and when local authorities — including Labour Councils, however well meaning — begin to implement the cuts, there will be

opposition and resistance, both from families affected by the cuts and from workers employed in those services. We could not possibly do anything other than participate in such struggles— indeed, we should encourage them. But if we are to do so with any credibility, we must have some better advice to offer Labour Councils than just that 'if only' all local authorities stood together the Tories would have to retreat.

(iii) The Cuts Campaign and Broader Political Issues.

At the present time there is not *one* 'anti-Tory movement'; there are a number of separate anti-Tory movements going on, on different issues, and this is likely to continue to be the case for some time. It would be premature at this time to try to bring all these movements under one umbrella. Not all the people who oppose cuts are equally opposed to legislation to limit picketing; not all who oppose racist immigration laws are equally opposed to the Corrie Bill; not all who oppose the Corrie Bill support the wages struggle.

Nevertheless, we have to look ahead and consider how to gradually build one united movement out of these streams of struggle. The character of the present separate movements is that each is primarily a defensive response to one or another aspect of the Tory attack; the character of a united movement must surely be that it is primarily an offensive movement built around a positive alternative to Tory policies, a positive alternative for which people in each of the separate movements have been won. Even more than arguments over 'how' to fight the Tories, it is this fight for a positive alternative that will also draw the line clearly between right and left in the labour movement.

This does not mean that we should try to impose on the various present movements demands which the participants are not yet prepared to accept; that is the divisive tactic of the ultra-left. It does mean, however, a much greater effort to combine our participation in the anti-Tory movements with the fight to win understanding of the support for our alternative economic policy. This is necessary even for the advance of the present cuts campaign. People who accept the Tory version of Britain's economic problems may not like the cuts, but they will accept them as unpleasant necessities. Both from the point of view of developing the movement *now*, and from the longer-term view of creating conditions for one broad united stream of struggle against the Tories and for a left alternative policy, it is now more than ever necessary to argue more vigorously for our alternative analysis of Britain's economic problems and our alternative policy to deal with them. Nothing could more forcefully underline that necessity than the accelerating pace of de-industrialisation, an issue that is now right at the centre of British politics.

5 CONCLUSION

Most of the lessons I would want to draw from the experiences of the past few months are clearly enough stated in the course of the article. Only one would I want to re-emphasise in conclusion — the essential role of the Communist Party.

Many different labour movement individuals and organisations contributed to the development of the struggle against the cuts, and no single one of them could claim the sole credit. At no time in these struggles has the Communist Party sought or expected 'an exclusive position of leadership', and if we had the movement could not possibly have developed as it did. But Communists did give leadership and did exercise initiative, and that did play a vital role in the struggle. Above all, what our experiences underline is the supreme importance of the Party's organised roots in industry and in the labour movement. Without them, the strategy of the *British Road to Socialism* would be an academic exercise of no more value than any of the other rival left-wing strategies toted around by a variety of left groupings. But with those roots, the strategy can come to life. •