

Discussion

Labour's Long Haul

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In the December issue of *Marxism Today* Jon Bloomfield's survey of the developments in the Labour Party and the prospects for Left advance raised a number of very interesting questions.

I would like to concentrate on that section of the article which discussed the issue of the role of the Left outside the Labour Party. Jon Bloomfield says there is a large space on the Left waiting to be filled. Of course there is. The question that remains to be answered, however, is: what is the perspective?

According to Bloomfield: 'A growing capacity for the Communist Party and other forces on the Left to undertake this type of work is an indispensable complement to the positive developments within the Labour Party'. What kind of perspective does that offer? Parallel developments inside and outside the Labour Party in the hope that some day . . . what?

Jon Bloomfield arrives at this, if not blind alley then at least long tunnel with no visible exit, because he dismissed what he conceded was the most appropriate and principled option, namely affiliation of the Communist Party to the Labour Party as a ' . . . political non-starter'. He reached this conclusion, he said, because no one during the constitutional debate suggested lifting the bans and proscriptions on affiliated organisations being able to send who they wished as delegates to the Labour Party Conference.

I cannot accept such reasoning. It seems to me that the issue of bans and proscriptions is a qualitatively different proposition from that of affiliation. On the face of it there is no great feeling or enthusiasm for action against the bans and proscriptions. Why? I think we should start by asking a simple question: Is there throughout the affiliated organisations any evidence that they feel they are labouring under a handicap or suffering a disability

under the present arrangements? Then we should try to find out what the more politically aware trade unionists and members of the Labour Party think about our attempt to have our cake and eat it. On the one hand we claim the right to be accepted as delegates to the Labour Party and, at the same time, put forward our own candidates against Labour Party candidates in parliamentary and municipal elections.

Is it really surprising that nobody raised the question of the bans and proscriptions when our ambivalent attitude is almost certainly raising questions about where our loyalties would lie.

Affiliation is a quite distinct proposition. Putting the issue of the removal of bans and proscriptions first and then, possibly, affiliation may seem an orderly progression. I don't think that it is necessarily an orderly progressive scheme of things for the reasons mentioned above, and because the case for affiliation is better. It is the case for political unity and what it will mean for the advancement of the labour movement. It is not a case for privileges for the Communists



in the labour movement. It is the case of the Communists as to how and what they can contribute to the building of the movement for the defeat of Thatcherism and the advancement of the socialist cause in Britain.

The fact that it won't be easy to secure affiliation to the Labour Party and that a tremendous campaign will be needed to publicise our position and to win maximum support for it, is no reason for evading the issue.

A principled position

The establishment of a principled position of seeking affiliation to the Labour Party is essential for the clarification of our perspective as a Party and for future development. That the working class needs a party with clearly defined socialist principles is beyond doubt. But we need to make clear how we relate to the major party of the working class in Britain today. We, by ourselves cannot do the job, and we cannot get around the Labour Party. If we are not

seeking to replace the Labour Party and, since it is not a continental type socialist party, but a federal party of the working class, the sooner we make clear what it is we want the better.

Some members of the Labour Party National Executive, eg, Norman Atkinson and Eric Heffer, have expressed doubts about the Communist Party being allowed to affiliate because it is a separate political party. Either they don't remember or have forgotten about the Independent Labour Party and the Socialist League, both of which were separate political parties. Both ended their relationship with the Labour Party because they wouldn't accept decisions made by the larger body. They could have re-affiliated at any time had they given assurances to accept the obligations that go with membership.

Of course it would mean being bound by the rules of the Labour Party. That is what a great deal of the argument has been about in the recent period, so it should present no problem for us.

There are, however, certain aspects of our activities that do present a problem. For example our electoral activities would need to be reviewed as contesting against Labour candidates would constitute a major obstacle to any possibility of affiliation. I don't think this need be an issue to prevent progress towards political unity. Any suggestion that not running candidates in places we've contested in the past, and against Labour candidates, would inhibit our activity as a serious political party would need to be accompanied by evidence that our electoral efforts enhanced our credibility. Unfortunately, as we know only too well the winning of votes and seats is not the brightest feature of our work.

We also know that political life embraces and involves a great deal more and we should devote ourselves to that which we are particularly fitted to do, namely formulating and presenting policies, winning understanding and support throughout the mass organisations of the labour movement, generating unity in action and raising all the time the cause of political unity and socialist advance.

With a clear perspective set against the background of the developments now in train in the labour movement, we could arouse greater efforts to increase our membership, enlarge our organisation and extend our influence for political unity and socialist progress in the specific conditions of Britain.

We welcome Discussion contributions on articles appearing in the journal