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Can Labour Succeed ?

The Left has won great victories: but there is a long way to go and the electoral situation is ominous.

At a time when media attention is focused on events inside the Labour Party, I want to attempt some kind of assessment of how those changes in the Labour Party relate to the broad political problem that all on the Left must face today; a problem which I would define as follows:

In conditions of capitalist crisis and disillusionment with right wing Labour rule, a shift to the right in British politics returned an extremely right wing Tory Government, which is now engaged in an all-round attack — economic, political and ideological — on the living standards, democratic rights and prospects for national survival of the British people. Can Labour defeat this Government at the next general election? — and can it do so in circumstances that will prevent a repetition of the 1974-1979 debacle and instead open up the possibility of taking a different, democratic, anti-monopoly road forward?

Most sections of the Left rightly see the current changes taking place inside the Labour Party as being of great significance in finding a solution to that problem.¹ I write from a standpoint that very much welcomes the advances of the Left in the Labour Party. Indeed, I would claim that the Communist Party has made an essential contribution to those advances.

What I want to do is to argue that, however important and significant the changes in the Labour Party may be, neither the policy victories won by the Left nor the democratic assertion of the authority of the party as a whole over the parliamentarians are at this time, on their own, a sufficient guarantee of a solution to the problem as I posed it in opening this article. I want to examine what more is needed.

WHAT THE LEFT HAS WON

First let us consider (in general, not in detail; space and time forbid) what are the main advances made by the Left in the Labour Party in recent years. The list is quite impressive.

In the first place, the Labour left that has

developed in recent years is, in some important respects, more advanced in its political thinking than has been the case with many earlier left trends and groupings. Not all of the Left, of course. It is in fact somewhat misleading to speak of the 'Labour Left' — in reality there are several different left groupings and organisations with quite serious divisions between them. But within what one might consider the mainstream of Left Labour opinion there is now broad agreement on a fairly coherent alternative economic and political programme. (There are still weaknesses — on the important question of the attitude to the wages struggle, for example, there is still lack of clarity amongst some on the Left). Sections of the Left are also moving towards a position of recognising the importance of extra-parliamentary action, and the need to come closer to democratic movements that have developed outside the traditional framework of the labour movement.

Many key organisations of the labour movement have now been won to support

much, if not yet all, of the Left's political and economic programme. The whole movement has not yet been won for left policies, but important advances have been made.

No less significant are the advances being made by the Left in the field of democratising the Labour Party in order to ensure that the party as a whole controls the parliamentarians. Compulsory re-selection of candidates, NEC involvement in the election manifesto, election of the leader by a process involving the trade unions and constituency parties as well as the Parliamentary Labour Party — the hysterical reaction of the right wing and the press to these changes is evidence enough of their potential importance.

THE PROBLEMS THAT REMAIN

The picture of left advance is an impressive one and those who seek to discount its importance and possible future consequences are seriously mistaken. And yet, without underrating what has been achieved or pouring cold water on the continuing efforts of the Labour Left, it is necessary to ask certain questions about how those changes relate to the initial problem that I posed in opening this article. The questions in my mind are these:

1. Just how far to the left is Labour's alternative to the Tories likely to be at the next general election (probably within the

¹ The SWP is virtually alone in arguing that '... whatever left wing policies are adopted by the Labour Party in opposition and whatever advances are made by left wingers within the Party hierarchy, it is *out of the question* for the Labour Party even to attempt to transform society when in office ... In no case do we give any credence to the repeatedly disproved fantasy that the Labour Party leopard can change its spots. A new party has to be built on a different basis.' (Duncan Hallas, *The Labour Party: Myth and Reality*). One wonders why they bothered to attend in some force the recent Labour Co-ordinating Committee Conference — which was devoted entirely to an objective the SWP considers impossible of achievement!



next two years)? — and, what can we do to ensure that it is well to the left of anything seen in the past?

2. Even with substantial left victories within the Labour Party, can Labour win the next general election? — and, what is needed to ensure that it does?
3. If the next general election is won by Labour, on a platform expressing those left policies that are at present widely accepted in the movement, would it carry through its programme in face of inevitable concerted opposition from the monopolies, the media, and reactionary opposition in the state apparatus itself? — and, what is needed to ensure that it does?

I now want to examine these questions and suggest some answers.

Taking the first question, I think a bit of sobriety is needed. The Left has not won all its battles yet by a long way; and even those that have been won are not secure for ever against right wing attempts to recover lost ground.

I think, too, that we should recognise that, even with compulsory re-selection, it may well take more than a couple of years to decisively change the political complexion of the Parliamentary Labour Party. The safest Labour seats do not always have the most left-wing CLPs!

So while the Labour Parliamentary leadership at the next general election may very well be better than anything we have had in the past, it seems at the moment unlikely that it will be what might be described as a 'Benn government'.

A false assumption

But perhaps I am over-cautious. Let us suppose that Labour enters the next general election led by a splendid team of consistent left wingers. Does that mean that Labour is bound to win the election? Let us consider Warrington. Labour had a candidate who was, I think, well to the left of previous candidates in that constituency. The Labour vote dropped by over 5,000. Some people have argued that Hoyle did not campaign vigorously enough for left policies; others say that he did; I was not in the constituency and cannot judge. But what is certain is that the media assiduously presented the image of Hoyle as a 'man of the left' — and it didn't bring home the voting bacon.

One thing that I think can be said with reasonable certainty about the current political climate in Britain is this: there is growing evidence of mounting concern and anger at some of the consequences of Thatcher government policies — but little evidence that most people even understand, let alone support, the Left's alternative

policies. In these circumstances numbers of people, still disillusioned by their experiences under the last Labour government, can be misled by such phoney alternatives as the SDP/Liberal alliance. We need also to consider that it is by no means certain that the Tories will be campaigning under Thatcher at the next general election. They are quite capable of ditching her in favour of some more 'progressive' Tory if they think it serves their interests.

The undoubted fact that right-wing policies have proved electorally disastrous for Labour does not mean that the adoption of left policies will *automatically* bring the lost voters flocking back.

Nevertheless, throwing caution totally to the winds, let us assume the best of all possible circumstances — left advance in the Labour Party and a Labour general election victory. My third question still remains: is this sufficient to ensure that there is no repetition of anything like the 1974-1979 debacle? Inherent in the Communist view and clearly expressed in our programme is the attitude that it is not. Powerful forces will seek to prevent the carrying out of a left programme. They cannot be defeated by parliamentary majorities alone, but only by even more powerful forces *outside* Parliament — a working class movement, allied to wide sections of the people, that is prepared to strike, demonstrate, occupy etc, in order to ensure that the programme is carried through.

WINNING THE LABOUR MOVEMENT FOR THE LEFT

How can we help to ensure far-reaching left victories that cannot be reversed within the

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main forums of the labour movement?

All past and present experience shows that the Left in the CLPs and the PLP, no matter how sincere and eloquent, always take a hammering in Labour Party Conferences if major trade unions vote against them. You cannot solve that problem by wishing that the Labour Party had a different structure to that given it by history. And to suggest that the problem should be tackled by a left campaign to reduce the voting strength of trade unions at Conference, relative to the voting strength of the CLPs, means to open

up damaging antagonisms between the Left and the trade union movement, just at a time when the most important task for the Left is to strengthen its links with the trade unions.

What we have to do is start with the realities of our labour movement, and analyse them carefully in order to understand the real dynamics of change in the trade unions and Labour Party.

In attempting to do this, I will start with actual experience. I want to argue that the *essential starting point* for the impressive left advances of the past decade was that major clash that took place between 1966 and 1969 between the trade union movement and the Labour Government — over incomes policy, and over trade union legislation. Without those traumatic mass struggles in which organised workers clashed with a Labour government, and defeated it, the left advances that followed would not have been possible.

I am not, of course, arguing that all those workers, or all their trade union leaders, had been won for the policies of the Left. But those struggles created a new climate — of breakdown of traditional loyalties, of rupture of traditional relationships, of questioning of traditional attitudes. In that new climate it became both more urgent for the Left to formulate alternative policies, and more possible for it to win support for them. Thousands of mostly anonymous left-inclined trade union activists at all levels (including many Communists), who had battled in the movement for their policies with little success prior to 1966, began — as a result of the 1966-69 struggles — to make advances. It is in no sense a denial of Benn's important contribution to point out that *they* laid the base on which *he* has been able to build — not the other way round!

Starting from that actual experience, I want to suggest an analysis of our labour movement on the following lines: given the structure of the Labour Party, its main internal contradiction is the conflict between the basic class interests of the millions of workers in the trade union movement and the anti-working class policies of Labour's right wing and of all previous Labour governments. That contradiction is often latent, unexpressed; but at times it can become a tremendous force for change, as in the example quoted.

These 'basic class interests' have to find expression through a dense network of ideological and institutional obstacles (most workers, most of the time, are not fully conscious of what their 'basic class interests' are!). Trade unions need to organise *all* workers in a given occupation or industry, regardless of their politics, regardless of

ideology. There is therefore always great ideological diversity in the trade union movement, which is inevitably to some degree also projected into the Labour Party to which many trade unions are affiliated.

Trade unions and politics

However, because of the nature of trade unions as *class* organisations, within that ideological diversity there is scope for left, socialist, Marxist ideas to gain ground. There is an important relationship between trade unionism and the development of working class political consciousness. Because trade unions are formed on a class basis; because they struggle against individual employers and on occasion against the employing class as a whole — then, even though they have to organise *all* workers, including those at the lowest political level, they are at the same time an arena within which working class political attitudes develop, take shape, find expression. When individual workers, or groups of workers, are influenced by socialist ideas, they generally express that political understanding within the trade union movement as, to them, the 'natural' arena within which to fight for such ideas. Consequently, as Hobsbawm points out in 'Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement'², '... Marxist organisations formed and still form by far the most important school for the militants and activists of the labour movement . . . taking account of their relatively modest size, the Marxist organisations . . . have had a disproportionately large influence among the union activists'.

Activists and the membership

Given all these factors, a recurring problem in the movement is the difference between the political positions of the activists and the level of understanding of the mass of the membership.

In considering this problem, the simplistic 'model' which proposes that the movement consists of a leadership (invariably treacherous) and a rank and file (invariably militant) is so remote from reality as to be positively misleading. It would be nearer the truth, though still an over-simplification, to suggest that the movement could be considered as consisting of the activists at all levels, and a membership (to which the activists are more or less closely related depending on circumstances) which is relatively inactive. Capable of great determination and indeed heroism when once involved in action, nevertheless the great majority of trade union members (and Labour Party members) play little part in the *regular* life of the organisation of which they are members, in terms of attendance at

meetings etc. Conference decisions therefore tend to reflect the political balance amongst the activists; and that does not always correspond to the political balance amongst the mass of the membership.

This is why any approach on the Left that tends to over-emphasise work within the 'apparatus' of the movement at the expense of mass political work is wrong. It opens up the danger that the right wing, defeated amongst the activists, may yet make a comeback by appealing 'over the heads' of the activists so to speak, to the 'rank and file' — an appeal usually well supported by the media. Surely this is the lesson of recent events in the AUEW. Why has its top leadership moved from left to right? To say that it is due to the postal ballot is begging the question. The postal ballot did not produce a shift to the right in the thinking of AUEW members; it simply permitted the more effective mobilisation and expression of right wing ideas that were already there.

The conclusion I would draw from all this is that the trade union movement can only realise its full potential as a driving force for left changes in the Labour Party if the Left recognises that it is not enough to organise to get resolutions through conferences and to get Lefts elected to positions — it is also necessary to *organise to change the political thinking of masses of people*.

The Communist Party is organised with that purpose in view, and has consistently rejected tendencies that have sought to reduce it to a mere 'ginger group' functioning within the apparatus of the movement. Some of the various left groups are very much more inward looking in their approach and seem to see the main battlefield as lying 'within the apparatus'. It is encouraging therefore to see

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the Labour Co-ordinating Committee arguing, in their pamphlet on *Trade Unions and Socialism*, a case very similar to that which I argue here:

'. . . left policies and leaders will only be sustained if there is a mass base of left wing support in the unions involved, and even in some "left" unions this is not the case at present'.

To sum up my argument so far: given a situation of struggle involving masses of organised workers; given a Communist Party and Left that not only participate in those



struggles, that not only work to shift 'official' policy to the left, but which also work effectively to change political thinking amongst the working class as a whole — in these circumstances, the trade union movement can be the most important driving force for left change within the Labour Party.

HOW CAN LABOUR WIN THE COUNTRY?

So far I have considered how we can strengthen the leftward trend within the Labour Party. My second question asked: if the Left wins the Labour Party, can the Labour Party win the country in a general election?

I have argued that groups and factions within the Labour Party apparatus (Tribune Group, Militant Group, ILP, etc) cannot even depend on winning a secure victory *inside* the Labour Party by a style of work that looks primarily inwards, into the apparatus, as its main field of work. Still less can this style of work win the masses — many of them not even members of trade unions — whose support is essential for an election victory. Nothing could be more fatal than to assume that if the Left won the Labour Party the lost voters would come floating back. Unless the labour movement turns outwards to champion the interests of the widest sections of the British people — not just by speeches in parliament but by action in the workplaces and on the streets — it will not win the support of those people. What the Left has to work to achieve is a change in political thinking, not just amongst trade unionists, but even wider; on a mass scale.

When did we last see, in Britain, a really profound change in political thinking on a mass scale, a widespread readiness for radical social change, including elements of a really *socialist* political consciousness amongst sections of the working class?

In my personal life and recollection, the most dramatic such change in mass political attitudes was that shown at the time of the

² E J Hobsbawm, *The Revolutionaries*.

1945 general election. It is worth recalling how leading Communists estimated the situation following that election. Palme Dutt described the results as a 'glorious political leap forward . . . the counterpart of the sweep to the left throughout Europe' (*Labour Monthly*, August 1945); while Pollitt attributed the victory to 'a basic political mental change in the outlook of millions'.³

What they were talking about was not simply Labour's landslide election victory in 1945. They were also talking about a widespread readiness for, and expectation of, radical social changes — not only amongst the working class but amongst professional people and in middle class circles.

Attempts to compare the 'political level' of the people at two such widely different periods as 1945 and 1981 are inevitably difficult — and contentious. In some respects, things have undoubtedly moved forward since 1945. The trade union movement is bigger, better organised, and has learnt from its struggles. The Left in the labour movement is more clearly defined, is clearer about its objectives, and is growing in strength. New streams of democratic struggle have entered political life — the women's movement, for example.

1945: a high point

And yet — there was a readiness for radical social change expressed at the time of the 1945 general election that has not, I think, been so clearly and strongly expressed since; and that mood in 1945 did include some elements of a *socialist* political consciousness amongst sections of the working class which, I think, have not been so clearly seen in more recent years.

I do not think this is mere personal subjective impressionism; there are some objective yardsticks. For instance, in 1945 Labour won a landslide victory; in 1979 it got the lowest percentage of the total poll since 1931. In 1945 the Communist Party had more than double its present membership, won two seats in parliament, got very respectable votes in a number of other constituencies, and enjoyed a great deal of support for its proposals for unity. Then, there was widespread support, amounting amongst some sections of the working class to real enthusiasm, for the Atlee government's initial nationalisation measures — today, nationalisation is the subject of a great deal of apathy and cynicism amongst many people. Then, friendship for the Soviet Union was widespread; not so today.

It is of course a complicated, mixed picture. I would put it this way. The undoubted advances that the movement has made since 1945 mean that, if we could once

again get that 'political mental change in the attitude of millions', if we could once again rekindle an enthusiasm for radical social change, if we could once again stir amongst considerable sectors of the working class a real *socialist* consciousness — then, I believe, we could avoid the pitfalls and setbacks that turned the 1945 victory sour and set the whole movement back for many years. We could, in fact, start off on the road to socialism.

So, what caused that 'basic political mental change in the outlook of millions' that Pollitt was talking about? It was certainly not the product of the 1945 general election campaign. General elections *register* changes that have taken place in political attitudes; in themselves they do little to *cause* the changes. General election campaigns usually have but a marginal effect on mass political attitudes. That margin can be decisive when the two main parties are finely balanced; but what really changes political attitudes, on a mass scale, is not the election campaign — it is the experiences people have had in the years

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leading up to the election, and the conclusions they have drawn from those experiences.

In assessing the period leading up to 1945, two things in particular stand out.

The first is that masses of British people underwent deep and prolonged experiences — experiences of struggle. Before the war much of this experience was of the struggle against mass unemployment, and this deeply influenced the political thinking of millions. Then there was the great democratic struggle to defeat fascism — a truly national struggle involving the whole of the British people excepting only a minority of fascist sympathisers, many of them in high places in British society.

But there is a second important feature of those years. They were years of struggle against unemployment, war and fascism; they were also years of vigorous ideological offensives by the Left. The propaganda work of the Communist Party itself reached higher levels in that period than it has generally done since; but it was not the Communist Party alone. The Left Book Club, for instance, helped to shape the political thinking of a whole generation.

The broad approach

Surely it was this combination — struggle on issues that transcended 'narrow' class issues,

issues that took in the whole question of national survival, *plus* what can truly be described as mass ideological work, that brought about the deep changes in political thinking that were expressed in 1945.

The conditions of an earlier historical period can never be recreated; but if we cannot learn lessons from them it is meaningless to speak of Marxism as a science.

So I consider that there are two priorities for the Left in Britain today. Neither of them can be accomplished without a battle for left policies *within the labour movement*, and Communists will always play a full part in that battle. But equally, neither of them can be accomplished if the battle is confined within the machinery of the movement; it has to be *taken outwards to the masses*; and Communists will be deeply involved in that, too. In the end the key battlefield is the workplace, the street, the community; it is there that the Left must focus its attention.

One of the two priorities is to bring people into struggle — especially around the two linked issues of peace and jobs. Between them, these issues spell more than just 'living standards' — they spell 'national survival'. The Left, the labour movement, must take on the role of leaders of a great national revolt against those who are destroying Britain's industrial base and threatening its very survival through their acceptance of American nuclear bases. Mass struggle around these issues is the key to defeating the Tories in the next general election.

The other priority — equal in importance — is for the Left as a whole to conduct far more effective, outward-looking, ideological work. The Communist Party, with branches organised for campaigning work in localities and workplaces, has a key role to play — as has also the *Morning Star*, which editorially expresses Communist policy while providing a platform for the Left as a whole. But the task of reaching out to masses of people in language they can understand, related to issues they feel deeply about, is one for the Left as a whole to grapple with. It is this that is the key, not just to a Tory election defeat, but to real possibilities of left advance for Britain.

If we can move forward on these lines we should have no worries about the third of the questions I posed earlier on — could a left Labour Government survive the pressures of the monopolies, the media and the state? A truly politically conscious working class will not only vote for a left government — it will be prepared to struggle to ensure it does the job for which it was elected!

³ Reply to Discussion, 18th Congress of Communist Party, November 1945.