

Discussion

Can Labour Succeed? Robin Blackburn

In the October issue of *Marxism Today*, Dave Priscott contributed a very interesting, but also deeply conservative article entitled: 'Can Labour Succeed?'. The heart of the conservatism in this article was summed up in the following sentences: 'All past and present experience shows that the Left in the CLPs and the PLP, no matter how sincere and eloquent, always takes a hammering in Labour Party Conferences if major trade unions vote against them. *You cannot solve that problem by wishing that our 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. . . ' (my emphasis).

Let's start off with a small point. In this quote, and elsewhere in the article, Dave Priscott refers to 'our' Labour Party. Is this not a very misleading way of writing about a party from which most of the Marxist Left has always been excluded, and which does not even belong in any real sense to its own members? The active members of the Labour Party have little more than a one tenth say in its affairs. Labour Party Conferences are dominated by the trade union block vote, effectively wielded by a tiny group of trade union officials, while the Parliamentary Labour Party remains largely a law unto itself, with its own policies and leadership separate from those of the rest of the Party. Recent attempts to democratise Labour, and to make the MPs more accountable, are very welcome but they have only begun to change Labour's essential workings. It is much too early to write as if the official structures of the Labour party were an authentic expression of the socialist movement, or 'belonged' to working people.

The advice I have quoted from Dave Priscott encourages a passive and fatalistic attitude to the undemocratic and unsocialist features of the Labour Party's structure and history. The recent reforms show that these structures can be changed. Indeed, everything in British politics, not excluding the Labour Party given us 'by history', is now subject to an imperative law of change. It would be more accurate to invert Priscott's fatalism and concede that, whatever the Left does, the structure of the Labour Party is extremely unlikely to survive the next five years. It is, for example, quite possible that the next government will introduce 'con-

tracting in' as the basis for trade union contributions to the Labour party and will also adopt a system of proportional representation in national elections. Even if such changes are not imposed from outside they are still likely to emerge from within. Neither the Left, the Centre nor the Right are now happy with the way the trade union block vote operates and even trade union leaders do not welcome the spotlight which the present system shines on their internal workings. So, for a mixture of good and bad reasons, the Labour Party itself will continue to change and the least likely hypothesis is that we will simply have to put up with the way things have always been done.

The structure of the Labour Party is not a sort of family heirloom which we should look forward to handing on to our children. It is, as it has always been, a massive obstacle to the development of socialist politics in this country. The many and diverse faults of the Labour Party's structure have been criticised in a variety of compelling ways by socialists and I do not here intend to rehearse all of them: see for example, Tom Nairn's essay 'Anatomy of the Labour Party', or Ralph Miliband's *Parliamentary Socialism*. Invariably they have stressed the conservative implications of the block vote system.

It is true that the main failing of the Labour Party — the fact that it is mortgaged to trade union officialdom — has also been a source of a certain historic strength. The Labour Party, because of the nature of its institutional links, never drifted quite so far to the right as some other social democratic parties. Yet even this guarantee is being eroded by changes in the class structure and in the structure of the trade unions themselves. The traditional corporate class consciousness embodied by the trade unions, and so heavily relied upon by the Labour Party in the past, is now being rapidly eroded by changes in the labour process and the composition of the working class, by de-industrialisation and unemployment, by consumerist propaganda and the new 'consciousness industry'. These forces are contradictory, and their reactionary aspect can be resisted, but not by retreating into the crumbling edifice of Labourism.

Party and trade unions

Dave Priscott rightly says that the Left must be concerned 'to organise to change the thinking of masses of people' (my emphasis). But does he believe that the Labour Party is now so organised? Priscott concedes that trade unions should represent *all* workers, whatever their political outlook. Priscott would agree that trade unions should democratically reflect the wishes of their members.



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Does he therefore suggest that the policies pursued by a socialist party should be determined by 'all workers . . . regardless of their politics, regardless of ideology? Such a view would be close to the populist theory of democracy embodied by the primary system in the United States. If a political party simply reflects all the confusion already present in the electorate, paradoxically, this denies the possibility of popular choice. If active party members do not work to devise coherent party programmes, between which voters can choose, there can be no effective democracy. The creative task of forging popular anti-capitalist programmes and policies cannot be sub-contracted out to organisations with a quite different function. If this is attempted, the real choices will be determined by the media and by full-time officials.

There is, of course, every reason for trade unions to seek to organise in unions even the most backward workers, but it is then scarcely appropriate to make them the masters of a party which claims to be working for distinctively socialist aims.

Dave Priscott should ask himself why no other European workers' party, whether Communist or Socialist, gives trade unions a decisive say in its internal affairs. Until recently Labour was the only such party in which MPs alone chose the Leader. The truth is that the constitution of the Labour Party, like that of the British bourgeois state itself, is designed to represent corporate interests, to stave off change until the last possible moment and to stifle every radical impulse.

Dave Priscott argues that because trade unions are class organisations they furnish the ideal terrain upon which to advance socialist politics. They do, of course, furnish a crucial arena for socialist politics but it is quite wrong to imply that there are not very many other arenas: the community, the family, the workplace considered in wider terms, the media, the claimants queue, places of entertainment or recreation and so forth. Thus Priscott writes: '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.' This has distinct echoes of syndicalism and economism. Traditionally trade unions have been mainly concerned with quite narrow objectives, even in the workplace. A socialist should encourage a wider range of objectives but, even in the best of cases, there should be much more to socialist culture, and to an authentically anti-capitalist popular movement, than can

possibly be furnished by good trade unionism.

The syndicalist implications in Dave Priscott's article were probably unintended and were in any case qualified by his references to the tasks of the Communist Party. One could almost say that Dave Priscott does not think that the Labour Party need become a socialist party because the Communist Party already exists to carry out all the functions of such a party. In this view the Labour Party could remain a sort of hybrid mass organisation, leaving the more ambitious tasks of political agitation, education and illumination to the organised Marxists outside it. I do not deny that historically this is the way things have been. Quite apart from the fact that, as indicated above, things are changing, there is a powerful objection to remaining content with the present state of affairs. The Labour Party still commands a far wider authority, and much greater resources, than all the groups of the Marxist Left put together. If Labour leaders and MPs continue to frustrate or muffle socialist politics then our chances of changing 'the political thinking of masses of people' are seriously cut down. As things are at present the Left has few means of presenting a comprehensive and coherent socialist alternative to large numbers of people. We would certainly be in a better position if the Labour Party gave genuine expression to the views of its membership.

A socialist party

Watching this year's Labour Party Conference I was reminded of the saying that inside every fat man there's a thin man struggling to get out. Inside the curious hulk of the Labour Party there is a socialist party struggling to get out. On every important vote taken there was the most striking ocular proof of the structural frustration of the party's living members by its 'dead souls'. This was most evident in the vote on the deputy leadership, in the vote on NATO and in the vote for the NEC. Moreover one of the quaint customs of the Labour Party is to give trade union officialdom not only its own seats on the NEC but also to allow it to select which woman shall be elected to the women's section!

One of the worst arguments used to defend the trade union block vote is that as they pay the piper they should call the tune. Even bourgeois parties do not give their financial backers votes at the party conference, while other workers' parties attract finance from the trade unions without sacrificing their own democratic deliberative procedures. It is interesting to note that the trade union contribution to Labour's

finances has been declining; if the expenditure of the constituency parties is taken into account, and not simply those of the national office, then soon trade union affiliation fees will account for less than half of the total. Thus even the argument from cash cannot justify the present allocation of votes.

It would not be appropriate in this comment to spell out alternatives to the block vote system. Obviously Labour women will have to elect their own representatives. Possibly the Labour Party's new workplace branches could provide the best way of giving socialist trade unionists the important say they should have in the Party's affairs. The precise alternatives and practicalities implied by the changes now forced upon Labour must be the subject of a wide-ranging discussion. But of one thing we may be sure. The tens of thousands of socialists active in the Labour Party are not going to tolerate the present set-up simply because it is familiar and convenient to some socialists outside the Labour Party.

In conclusion I would like to agree with some of the points made by Dave Priscott in his concluding paragraphs. Changes at the level of the 'machinery of the movement' will by no means be adequate to kindling a popular commitment to socialism. The democratisation of the structures of the Labour movement would represent a gain partly because the present regime infantilises the Left and imposes narrow preoccupations upon it. But, as Raymond Williams argued in the November issue of *New Socialist*, the Left must give much more importance to educational work, to strengthening the links between policy, popular struggle and socialist culture. Dave Priscott reminds us of the role played by the Left Book Club in preparing the way for the radicalisation registered at the 1945 election. As he points out it 'helped to shape the political thinking of a whole generation'; with its active local groups it was, of course, much more than a book club. Regaining the initiative for socialist ideas today will, as Raymond Williams suggests, require an organisation of a similar type, and would itself be a vital precondition for the building of a popular socialist movement. And as part of this educational process we are bound to have a continuing debate on the forms of organisation which best express the creative power of working people, and which are most conducive to general human emancipation. •

¹ First published in *Critical Marxism* in 1964 this essay may now be read in *Revolution and Class Struggle: a reader in Marxist politics*, edited by R. Blackburn.