

**In November, the Communist Party has its biennial congress.  
It promises to be, to put it mildly, a stormy affair.**

A roundtable discussion

# The Long and Winding Road

## Britain's Communists in 1983

**The participants in the round table are: Dave Cook, member of the Communist Party's National Executive Committee and Communist parliamentary candidate for Vauxhall, London; John Hoffman, member of the Communist Party East Midlands District Committee and *Marxism Today* Editorial Board; Lou Lewis, member of the Communist Party National Executive Committee and a regional organiser for UCATT; Jane Woddis, active feminist and chairwoman of the Communist Party Birmingham City Committee.**

*We've seen a very severe setback for the labour movement since 1979. What is the nature of this crisis, how profound is it, and what do you think the Communist Party has to offer the labour movement in the way of overcoming it.*

**Jane** It is not just a crisis of the labour movement. It is important to emphasise this, particularly as the CP has a conception of other social forces besides the labour movement, for the same crisis is affecting what we would broadly call the other democratic movements, the other social forces. The only exception is CND, although even that was squeezed during the election.

**John** It's important that we don't overstate the problems, although you are absolutely right that we have suffered a setback in the labour movement. We must always remember that the real crisis in our society isn't a crisis of the labour movement, or of the working class, or of Marxism, it is fundamentally a crisis of capitalism. It is crucial to see mass unemployment, a move to authoritarianism of a dangerously populist kind, a climate of fear and intimidation as the backcloth to understanding why the labour movement has suffered this defeat and how we can move out of it. Now, with regard to the contribution of the CP, it seems to me that we have a good deal to offer in this situation. We have a classical Marxist heritage which stresses that the working class movement must be a movement of the majority. We've put an enormous amount of thought over the years into the strategy and tactics of the *British Road to Socialism*<sup>1</sup> [BRS — ed] which raises very sharply the problem of how you formulate immediate programmes which are both radical and also realistic.

**Lou** I agree with John that the main crisis is the capitalist crisis,

<sup>1</sup> The BRS is the programme of the Communist Party. It was first adopted in 1951 and revised on several occasions subsequently. In 1977 it was revised substantially and a fierce debate ensued over the new concepts contained in it including an alliance between the labour movement and other social forces and a view of revolutionary change as a process rather than a moment. Copies can be obtained from P and P, 16 St John Street, London EC1, price 60p (incl. postage).

The roundtable was chaired by Martin Jacques.

and the crisis of the labour movement is how to deal with the crisis itself and its effects, which include major structural changes in the working class. One of the problems for the labour movement is policy, not so much the nature of policy but the understanding of the policy among trade union members and the mass of working people. This failure to win the policies is because the labour movement has been unable to project a perspective in both the short and longer term. We have to reflect back to the militancy of the 60s and 70s where there were considerable gains in the short term, but the militancy lacked a political perspective. We had the defeat of Heath, the return of a Labour government, but no perspective of what we wanted from that Labour government. So we had the chapter of disasters which led to 1979 and the return of the Tories. The unique position of the Communist Party here is the fact that we have a perspective as set out in the BRS. The problem is, however, that while the labour movement hasn't won a perspective around its own policies amongst the mass of people, we as a party have not been able to win wide understanding and support for the sort of perspective outlined in the BRS in the labour movement.

**Dave** It is the depth of the capitalist crisis which throws into sharp relief the failure of the labour movement. At a time of mass unemployment and all the other problems of the crisis, you might have expected the Left to be in a much stronger position. The fact that it is not is evidence of its failure to capitalise on the disaffection which exists on a wide scale. The Left has failed to face up to the extent of the labour movement's long term decline, which is undeniable if you look at the share of the Labour vote and the impact of socialist ideas amongst large sections of the working class. There has been a tendency to attribute the recent problems of the Labour Party, and indeed the CP, to short term factors. The responsibility of the CP in this situation is to refuse to acquiesce in these glib explanations and to help the movement face up to those deep long term reasons for its difficult situation, to try and suggest ideas and initiatives, based on its own activity, its Marxist tradition and strategy, to point the way forward.

**Jane** I agree with Dave that it isn't enough to say it is all due to the crisis of capitalism. We have to put a lot of responsibility at the door of the labour and democratic movements themselves including the party. It is not just the failure to give a long term perspective, we have also failed to link that perspective with very immediate things. The Tory Party has been very good at this. It is talking to people about the immediate things that affect them, and to some extent the Left has been projecting distant things.

*Since the election there has been a big debate rumbling around the labour movement about, firstly, the scale of the crisis that the labour*

*movement faces and, secondly, what you do about it. How do you see this?*

**Dave** Those who underestimate the scale of the crisis in the labour movement sometimes end up complacently saying that the approach of the Left and the labour movement is OK, we've just got to hang on in there and wait for something to turn up. I think that, in effect, was Benn's position in the *Guardian* when he wrote that the 8.5 million Labour votes were votes for socialism, and represented a very important bridgehead. I believe the consequence of the present crisis of the labour movement is that it has got to make significant changes. I don't mean changes in policy, but primarily changes in the way it functions. Large sections of the Left in the Labour Party and, to a lesser extent, the CP, have tended to conduct their arguments within a narrow tube of the internal organisations of the labour movement. They've not reached the mass of people. This is very apparent in Lambeth, where I live, where the Labour Left conduct their politics within the town hall and the ward Labour Parties whereas the Right conduct their politics amongst the people.

One of the main contributions the CP can make in the next period is to identify what the main objective must be. In my opinion it is to build an anti-Tory majority. That can't be reduced to the question of winning support for Labour — it has got to involve a wider concept, and I am *not* talking here about an electoral agreement with the SDP, the Liberals or the Nationalists. But it is more than just a question of building support for Labour. It was recently reported from a conference of the Scottish Socialist Society that someone opposing a broad campaign for devolution had stated 'the Labour Party is the campaign for a Scottish Assembly'. What disastrous sectarianism.

**John** Winning support for an effective short term programme is I think crucial and I agree with Dave to an extent that there is a danger of the Labour Left seeing socialism simply as an abstract principle and not really getting to grips with the fact that people can be won for socialism not by an expression of propaganda or principles but through the implementation of short term programmes which then in themselves demonstrate the need for wider structural change. Where I think we have to be careful is not to take a too static view of either the electorate or the labour movement. The ideological battle is a crucial ingredient in the Tory offensive. But it isn't just about ideas, it's about using, to an unprecedented extent in the post war period, social coercion,



Lou Lewis

involving, for example, the use of unemployment. So I feel that the situation shouldn't be looked at too pessimistically.

*We are talking about the problems of the wider labour movement but the Communist Party itself has been in difficulties. In fact ever since 1963, with a brief interruption in the early 70s, Communist Party membership has gradually declined, with the rate of decline accelerating over the last few years. The decline of the Communist Party has, in fact, more or less paralleled that of the Labour Party. How do you account for this decline?*

**John** The causes are complex, and we should distinguish between objective factors over which we have virtually no control and subjective ones. In the postwar period of relative prosperity we've had the social democratic consensus, cold war pressures which tended to mean that our party's links with the socialist world took on a sinister and menacing appearance. And Lou mentioned earlier the changing structure of the working class which I think has affected us as well, with new white collar sections without the political traditions and class consciousness of older sections. The more contentious part of any analysis is the subjective problems, problems of leadership. Harry Pollitt noted as early as 1950 that the CP had a tendency to put itself into a position of what he called self-imposed isolation as a response to dominant reformist trends. There has been a tendency to stress the CP as an independent party — sometimes this has taken the form that we should be a mass party rather than a cadre party — and that has not only contributed to a falling membership but also a less effective use of existing members. And these various problems have resulted in a quite severe identity problem: what is our relationship to the Labour Party, do we or do we not want affiliation, are we a Leninist party which can demand greater commitment from our members, how much of the socialist world's experience is relevant to the BRS, how can one combine work in industry with work in the broad movement?

On all these crucial issues the party leadership has tended to respond with ambiguity and indecisiveness, and this has contributed to a degree of demoralisation, frustration and, worst of all, the tendency for inner party differences to take a really sectarian, virulent form. So, although our party leadership have introduced many new ideas, responded to new social forces and sought to turn outward in public work, all of which is positive, this has often been accompanied by a tendency to pose new ideas against old and has led to a sense of disunity, frustration and demoralisation.

**Jane** I am surprised you suggest that the stress on the independent role of the party has been part of the problem because in some ways I feel it is the failure to do that which has been a significant problem. It is difficult to think of specific campaigns that the party has played a leading role in initiating and claimed the credit for in a public way. The last completely independent one we did was the prices petition in 1978 which came from nowhere and went nowhere. We played a good independent role during the Falklands war, but the problem is there aren't many examples like this.

**Lou** If there was a ready-made answer, we would have found it by now. I believe there are definitely long term objective problems that have affected the Party. Take my own experience as a labour movement activist. I have worked in the construction industry for most of my working life and things have got better year by year until the recent period. For me the debate has been about 'could

we have got more?' It is only in the last three or four years that we have seen a decline in living standards. New questions are now coming before people, as a result of this decline, and it affects different sections in different ways. We are now moving into a new situation and if the CP can apply itself to the new conditions, I feel optimistic that the CP can begin to identify its political role.

One of our major problems is the way the party staffs other movements, particularly the labour movement. This draws massively on our resources and weakens our ability to staff our own organisation. I think this commitment is correct but it has detracted from our independent role and the work of our branches. The virtue of our electoral work is that it gives us the opportunity to project the party which is not so easy to do in the labour movement and other movements. We sink our identity for unity, for clarity around the policies of those organisations. I think the CP has still got to find the answer to this. This is a key problem and the extent to which we solve it is the extent to which we can reverse the party's decline.

**Dave** I'd like to look at the problems facing the CP in the context of the problems facing the Left because all sections of the Left have, to a greater or lesser extent, had to adapt to a new situation. The Labour Left made a total change in their approach from the late 70s and won some important victories within the Labour Party and the trade union movement as a consequence. The CP attempted to adapt to the changed situation with its adoption of the new edition of the BRS in 1977. Now one of the major problems facing the CP is that it hasn't sufficiently built the implications of the adoption of the new BRS into its practice. There are two reasons for this. First of all, a large minority within the CP are fundamentally opposed to major propositions in the BRS and the CP's international position and have consistently waged a fight against those positions ever since. Secondly, there have been failures by the leadership of the Communist Party, of which I have been a member for a long time and therefore share part of the responsibility, to battle through the implications of the changes made in the 1977 edition of the BRS. The fact is that the ground has shifted, since I joined the CP in 1960, on a number of the propositions on which being a Communist was based. There have been new developments in Marxist theory which have created big problems in the relationship between theory and practice. The CP is no longer prepared to accept a monolithic conception of democratic centralism, that's why we had a major debate and adopted a new approach on inner party democracy four years ago. There are new forces in the labour movement and other democratic movements posing quite new problems. What happened in the socialist countries is no longer an acceptable model of socialism for us in Britain. So a new basis for revolutionary optimism has got to be created. And this can only be done by following through in a much more powerful way the distinctive implications of the BRS.

*One of the problems which the CP has faced over the last four or five years is a much more powerful Labour Left. The Labour Left has undoubtedly acted as a powerful magnet on the Left. What difference do you think this rise of the Labour Left has made to the position of the CP?*

**Jane** One of the reasons people get involved in politics is because they want to influence things. And the smaller you get, the less influence you have. The Labour Party offers for some people at least the chance, perhaps, of more influence. That is an argument that people often put forward for joining the Labour Party. The



Jane Woddie

rise of the Labour Left has certainly been an attraction for people, perhaps not so much over the past year or so, but certainly a few years before that. People felt that things were really moving and there was some possibility for change. Obviously there are some exciting things going on in the Labour Party, but personally, I don't find the Labour Party appealing. It seems to me so limited in what it can do. People are so hamstrung by all that resolution passing, going from one committee to another. We had a long discussion between the Birmingham CP women's group and the Labour Party women's group. They were describing various resolutions and amendments trying to get changes in policy. At the end of it all I asked 'and what have you actually done', and there was this stunned silence. They said 'well, we haven't done anything properly at all'. They hadn't actually been out on the streets doing anything. We were able to give all these examples of campaigns that we'd taken part in and leaflets we'd distributed over the last two years. They'd been concentrating on trying to change things within the Labour Party. I don't think it was just because that was what the Labour Party was going through at that time, I'm sure it is part and parcel of the limitations of the Labour Party.

**John** I still think that our relations with the Labour Party and the labour movement needs careful thought because when Lou was talking of the independent role of the party there is a real sense in which this notion, if we're not careful, actually operates against our concept of a broad democratic alliance. The example Jane gave of the prices petition is a classic case of the party doing something all on its own almost in a self-imposed ghetto. Now the strength of the concept of the broad democratic alliance is that the party can go forward by its capacity to give leadership and stimulus to hundreds of thousands of people and this seems to me, in essence, the historic role of the party. What worries me is our electoral policy, for example, where we do seem to cut ourselves off from the rest of the labour movement precisely at a time when there is a heightened political consciousness.

*There are serious political divisions within the CP. How do you see the nature of these differences, what are they about and what is their effect?*

**Lou** There is a great diversity. There are some people, as Dave said earlier, who don't accept the BRS. There are others who want



John Hoffman



Dave Cook

to take it further than our congress was prepared to go in 1977, and dilute the position of the organised working class. The trouble with all this diversity is that many of the things that are being debated are not being tested in practice. There's no test of the policies and there is no test of comrade's positions. I believe that if many of the positions were tested then it would resolve much of that debate. There is one view, however which argues there is a leadership problem, and questions the political direction of the CP as a whole, particularly in relation to the socialist countries. I think that is a very incorrect position. It's not as simple as that.

**John** The new draft of the BRS has been a watershed in party argument and division. One of the problems which arose with the new BRS was that it tended, and it was certainly seen by some in the party, radically to break with our traditional communist perspective. This break has been exaggerated, but a tendency developed to read the BRS as though there was now to be a view of socialism totally at variance with the experience of the socialist countries, to be a strategy which represented a total break with traditional communist strategies. In this way we were confronted, and this particularly emerges in Eurocommunist theory, with a series of antitheses like the democratic road as opposed to a dictatorial one, the need for socialism based on consent rather than coercion, for a parliamentary road rather than an insurrectionist one. The effect of this kind of analysis was actually to deepen differences in the party. That had the consequence of provoking a sectarian and dogmatic backlash, which stressed the old completely at the expense of the new. So the concept of the broad democratic alliance, which is immensely important and positive,

was overshadowed by a tendency to pose this against the organised working class, as though there was an opposition between them.

**Jane** It sounds as if the people you describe as clinging to the old are the innocent victims, John. I don't know if that's what you intend, but I don't agree with it. In my opinion, it was much more deliberate than you suggest, they never wanted to accept those things however they were presented, they saw certain things that they believed in being changed in 1977 with adoption of the BRS and they were opposed to it.

But I would like to add to the context in which we are looking at this. What characterises the present present Tory government is its very authoritarian and arrogant style of politics. This has provoked, among some sections of the Left, a style which is also characterised by arrogance and authoritarianism. One way of seeing the differences in the CP is in terms of an authoritarian trend as opposed to a democratic trend. Certainly, the people associated with *Straight Left*, of whom I've got some experience in the Midlands, are of the former ilk — in the way they approach their supporters, our members, people outside the party, their view of what they are aiming for and how they are going to achieve what they're aiming for. It's a very authoritarian way of going about things.

**Dave** I used to think, when active in the Young Communist League, that the arguments I was involved in were peculiar to the CP. But I've grown a bit wiser since then, and the more people I meet, the more I come to think there is something very real in our working class movement which fuels sectarian political attitudes, be it in the Labour Party, the CP or whatever.

I think the BRS, our perspective for revolutionary change, is totally at variance with much of the historical experiences of socialist countries. With the exception of Czechoslovakia, all the socialist countries have experienced revolutionary change in conditions without a large working class and without conditions of political democracy. Our conception of revolutionary change is different from the strategy of the communist parties which were involved in revolutionary transformation in such conditions. That doesn't mean that we don't take sides in the international division of class forces and recognise the advances, but it's foolish not to face up to the differences. Some people in the CP, and in the Labour Party as well, don't take account sufficiently of the changes in the working class. There's a narrow restricted view of the working class which still sees it basically as the industrial proletariat. Obviously the industrial proletariat has a decisive role to play, to use its strength not only on its own behalf but for all who face oppression and exploitation. That's not in dispute looking around this table. But a lot of people do not take account of the vast extension of white collar membership. Another aspect is the division around pluralism. The CP is fundamentally committed by successive congresses to a view of socialism in which there is plurality of political forces in the achievement of revolutionary change and political pluralism after it.

**Lou** What worries a lot of comrades is the tone of the debate. We seem to have moved away from the communist tradition of engaging in very intense debate, having very sharp differences, and eventually arriving at a decision and all fighting for those decisions. People are not prepared to face the issues on their own merit, but characterise the people who have different positions. It's not expressed in a comradely way. And the way we conduct it now is a barrier to people being drawn to the CP.

*What emerges from this discussion is that there isn't a consensus in the party at the moment around certain issues which many people conceive as fundamental to the nature of the party. This takes us back to a point John made earlier, when he spoke of the party's identity crisis. Now what do you see as the party's appropriate identity, its role in the 80s. And how does it differ from previously?*

**Dave** I'd like to try and answer that question by itemising things which I think only the CP can provide, which isn't to say others can't make an important contribution. Because the CP attempts to apply Marxism creatively to the situations facing us, one of the first things you look for in the CP which we would not expect to find in other sections of the Left, is an ability to identify the next stage and how we are going to achieve it. It must on this basis be capable of giving leadership *in practice* — to help the working class movement unite an anti-Tory majority in the first instance and ultimately to move to a more far-reaching stage. Communists must be alive to all the new questions, feminism, anti-racism, the aspirations of the Welsh and Scottish people. In other words we must see within the CP a generosity and tolerance, a microcosm of what we want to see in society, of the broad democratic alliance of all working people. Finally, the CP's view of politics can be described as mass politics rather than resolutionary politics. It's not reliant on the leave-it-up-to-the-council type of politics. It is a particularly communist conception of democracy which is about the self-activity of the working people.

**Jane** What we're arguing is that struggle around the exploitation of a class is of vital importance, but it has to be connected with the other forms of oppression that people experience in all those different ways that they live. That is a really distinctive feature of the party, the conception of very different forms of oppression where the struggles around them can be brought together.

**Lou** I've got a clear memory of why I joined the CP. I remember the formal snap. I was in the Labour Party then, and at a management committee meeting they elected a right-wing publisher as our constituency's Labour candidate. I reached the conclusion from that decision that the CP, and I knew a lot of Communists, was the only party that had a clear perspective for ending capitalism. I had a simple view then, as an apprentice, but it's still basically true that there are those that exploit and those that are exploited. On that basis, I joined the CP. I also had a tremendous sense of affinity with the Soviet Union and what had been achieved there. Today, in the midst of the crisis of the labour movement, my conviction gets stronger because I can see the crisis of capitalism.

*To what extent do you think an electoral perspective for the party is crucial to the kind of party you are talking about?*

**John** I feel increasingly that our electoral policy does need reconsideration. If you look back to 1935, after the swing to the popular front, the party contested far more selectively than we do now and won substantial votes for its candidates. Our electoral policy as it stands is actually in contradiction to the broad democratic alliance because we put up Communist candidates in situations where they haven't already won and often aren't in a position to win the confidence and support of broad sections of the movement including sections of the Labour Party. And this is in a situation not only of the menace of Thatcherism, but where Labour is more willing and more responsive to unity with Communists than it has ever been before.

**Jane** I would like to defend our right to stand in elections. People expect political parties to contest elections and they begin to ask, if we don't stand, what's this peculiar kind of political party that's not taking part in elections. But having said that, we do have to look at the reality of what happens to us in elections. We do have to take into account the intense demoralisation Party members feel when election after election, the vote is so small. I don't know quite what we do about it, however.

**Lou** In the context of politics in Britain, to win a parliamentary majority is part of the political struggle, part of the class struggle. For the CP to abandon that part of the struggle brings into question its very independence as a political party and I believe the step beyond that is to liquidate the party on the basis that we should not contest against Labour; why not go the full hog and say what is the need for a CP? Now this question of unity. I don't believe we're going to get a meaningful unity involving Labour on the electoral front unless we build further support on which to base that unity. And I don't believe we can build that further support for our political position unless we contest. My experience has been that contests have not been divisive in our relationships with the Labour Party. My experience is that some of the closest relationships with the Labour Party have been achieved where we contest.

*Under what circumstances do you see the CP halting its long membership decline and beginning to grow?*

**Dave** The CP doesn't exist in a vacuum, it's unlikely therefore, that the conditions for our regeneration are going to be peculiar to us and not be part of a wider upsurge and revitalisation of the Left. People will join the CP in increasing numbers when they see something quite distinctive the CP has to offer. This distinctiveness must draw on the traditions and realities of our Labour movement, it can't be separatist or sectarian. But when people see that the CP adds something which they'll get from no one else then we can begin to grow. In practice this means the application, in a more decisive way than hitherto, of the ideas contained in the BRS, because the conception of the broad democratic alliance is the most significant, creative development of Marxism in Britain in recent years. But it's not been put into practice to any extent.

**John** We need much greater stress on co-ordinating all the different efforts of people in the CP so that they do feel we're making a much greater impact on events, hence my dissent earlier on the question of electoral policy. There is also the international question as well. We shouldn't understate the sense in which people join the CP because they feel some sense of pride and sympathy for the actual achievements and experience of the socialist countries. We need to respect these realities, critically evaluate them, and draw upon them in such a way as to make people feel they're part of a unified international movement, they're part of a unified working class movement in Britain. If we can put those together more effectively than we've done in the past, I think we'll have greater unity in the party, and we will begin to raise morale and membership.

**Lou** There's obviously got to be certain objective conditions. One of those is the level of activity among the mass of the people. When involved in activity, people are questioning and are reaching out for solutions. If the CP is part of that activity, then people will look to it. We also need a much greater level of unity within the party.