



Labour's Lost Millions 3

The debate continues . . .

BERT MUNRO AND DES WALSHE: Alliances are critical

We have read with interest the recent contributions by Rowthorn, Hobsbawm and Priscott on Labour's Lost Millions and are impressed the most by the lucidity and simplicity of their arguments. (If this were not the case then we would be the first to claim being unable to follow them). Indeed we would not be wasting your time and space were we not mystified at the inability to understand, or wilful distortion, by Michael Meacher, Eric Heffer and others (for example, the debate in the *Guardian*) of what we understand them to have said.

Without wishing to be accused of slavish support for their position, (as we are quite sure they will answer for themselves), but from our experience as both Communists and trade unionists with many years of working in the construction industry, we should like to endorse the validity and strength of their arguments and try to correct some of the false assertions made by Eric Heffer in December's *Marxism Today*.

As we understand the discussion so far, it has centred round an examination of the reasons for Labour's electoral defeat, and a look at the particular types of alliance that might be considered to defeat aspects of Thatcherism, or, Thatcherism itself. To this end we feel Priscott is wholly correct when he says that 'socialism now' is not a rallying cry that will build a political majority against Thatcher. Heffer replies to this by accusing the CP of being obsessed with alliances and questions the correctness of this policy, now and in the past. He goes on — totally ignoring the significance of Priscott's statement — 'What Labour has to do, in the William Morris sense, is to go out and make socialists. . . it must update and refine its policies, but it must do so as an independent party, not getting enmeshed in alliances.'

We have reread the contributions so far, and nowhere is it remotely suggested that

any party should surrender its independence or autonomy. What Priscott did go on to say, and it answers the bland rhetoric of Heffer and co, was that 'it is vital to project the vision of socialism — in ways that are relevant to modern times and to show the policies that are needed to win socialism. But (and this we feel is the kernel of the debate — *authors*) the majority of British people will not be won for socialism without experience of struggle on such issues as they can now be made to struggle for.' The deeper implications of the point are again either overlooked or ignored and Heffer ploughs on 'the party (Labour) must build up its membership until it becomes a mass party. . . and must particularly build up its strength in factories and workplaces'. This is not a new call and it does no harm to restate it but the question being posed by the discussion is not so much what should be done but how it is best achieved.

Facing reality

Heffer and others might do well to remember these discussions-, for, unless we do attempt to understand the nature and difference of broad alliances and the winning of people to concepts of socialism and political awareness; unless we can open the minds of those who refuse to face reality but would resort to name calling — (Heffer again) 'some Eurocommunists have moved into a right wing social democratic position' (whatever this is supposed to mean) — we will at the next election be contemplating a situation where, as Hobsbawm so clearly put it in his letter to the *Guardian* (we quote from memory): 'the second worst thing for the people of this country and the labour movement would be a SDP-Lib-Lab alliance — but even worse would be the return of a Thatcher government for a third term.'

Whilst not contradicting Priscott it is well to remember that the CP developed the concept of alliances long before 1977. The question of alliances and their practical implications were therefore uppermost in our minds when, in 1971, in our own union, the EEPTU, a number of candidates proffered themselves for support against Chappie for the position of

General Secretary, among them Eric Hammond. At the time Hammond (an EC member) stood openly for an end to the ban on communists holding office in the union, for the election (as opposed to appointment) of all full time officials and a whole range of democratic changes. In conjunction with national officers, full time officials, branch secretaries, stewards and communists, a campaign was initiated on behalf of Hammond, as it seemed to represent and amalgamate the broadest alliance against the right wing of the union and the best chance of Chappie's removal. After a long and sometimes acrimonious debate in the union, the fight to get Hammond accepted as the main broad left candidate was lost. We, as communists, fought for that broad alliance and in retrospect would still say we were absolutely correct.

We didn't see any alternative then and we see none now. Neither Heffer nor all the attendant CP critics have offered any alternative. The priorities of whole new sections of society are not necessarily those of our own. However, we will never win a mood for change unless we rid ourselves of some of the old concepts and ideas and embrace new methods of struggle called for by the constantly changing developments in our society. It is no longer sufficient to be just 'militant' or 'socialist' and make regular pleas for 'unity'. We believe that there is much to be learned from people's experiences but fear that in promoting our own 'brand' of socialism we fail to hear and listen to 'the masses' we would wish to represent. The sooner we stop claiming to have the 'the answer' to everyone's ills, and assuming we always know what their priorities are, the sooner we will change the fortunes of our labour movement and the working people of this country and win them for progressive change.

Far from being pessimistic we are optimistic for the future. The outcome of the CP Congress, the success of *Marxism Today* and the contributions of Hobsbawm, Rowthorn, Priscott and indeed Heffer all point to the real possibility of achieving some of the objectives looked forward to in *The British Road to Socialism*.

ANNA COOTE: The wrong debate

The first thing that strikes me about this debate we are having around Eric Hobsbawm's 'Labour's Lost Millions' is the way it has happened. The original article was published in October's *Marxism Today*. While it was still in proof form, certain people were sent copies and asked to respond. Replies from Michael Meacher and Robin Cook were duly published in November, and here is mine for December (January! - *ed*).

It is a useful way of stimulating discussion. Looking back at the October issue, though, I find myself wishing the same treatment had been given to the other major article it carried. This was by Tricia Davis and it explored the current relationships between feminism, the Left and Tory ideology. I really want to know how Michael Meacher and Robin Cook would have responded to it, and what Eric Hobsbawm might have said. Their thoughts on the issues raised in 'Labour's Lost Millions' were relatively predictable (the territory was familiar), but I cannot guess what they would have written if they had been sent proof copies of Tricia Davis's article and encouraged by the editor of *Marxism Today* to consider it as a matter of importance, meriting a detailed reply. An unpredictable debate on so crucial a subject might have been productive. Why was the five-star treatment reserved for Eric Hobsbawm?

Hobsbawm does have the edge on Davis in some respects: he's more famous, he's older, he's a professor and (yes, indeed!) he's a man. But does he therefore have more interesting things to say? Judge for yourself, if you can locate the back number. I only raise the question - and before you write it off as special pleading, consider how ideas are nourished and spread, how minds are changed, how manifestoes are written, how strategies are devised, how policies are translated into practice.

It takes more than an individual writing an article. Ideas need to be taken up and repeated by others; they need to be explored and developed and widely discussed. Let's suppose, for the sake of argument, that the ideas in Tricia Davis's

article were better than those in Eric Hobsbawm's - more original, more perceptive, dealing with more fundamental questions. If fewer people remember them now, it is through no fault of the author. No debate was orchestrated around her article; it was not sent out in proof form, or advertised on the cover of *Marxism Today*, or reprinted in the Guardian, or quoted by political columnists, or responded to by members of parliament and trade union leaders. This sort of thing rarely happens to articles written by women about feminist politics.

It's an example of the strategy of passive resistance which men have used so effectively against the women's movement. They appear to agree with us, and then do nothing about it. They publish our articles and go on publishing their own - alongside ours, but back-to-back, without reference or acknowledgement, as though ours were not part of the real world. This way, they avoid embarrassing disputes and help to ensure that the *status quo*, incorporating male privilege, is left undisturbed.

Unhealthy consequences

Eric Hobsbawm's analysis of Labour's defeat reveals the unhealthy consequences of this strategy. Like so many influential male writers, he provides no evidence that he has registered anything the women's movement has been saying in the last decade and a half. His observations are sadly impoverished.

When he addresses the question of how Labour should appeal to the working class - and to a 'coalition of forces' beyond it - he stresses that labour 'can and should

appeal to *all* women'. But is he aware that there may be a problem involved in appealing to the interests of women and men at the same time? We cannot tell. Is he aware that there is a conflict of interest between women and men? Is he aware that it is impossible to remove the social and economic disadvantages suffered by women without depriving men of the relative advantages they now enjoy? Does he think men will willingly relinquish their advantages? How does he imagine the Labour Party can make a genuine appeal to women? Should it sit tight and hope that half the population will not notice that it is selling a brand of half-baked socialism, built on female powerlessness and poverty? None of this is clear from 'Labour's Lost Millions'.

Replying to Hobsbawm in November, Robin Cook pointed to the 'resoundingly negative' character of Labour's appeal. He adroitly identified the problem, but what is to be done about it? He did not say. It seems that the Labour Party has forgotten how to ask itself some basic questions. What sort of society do we want to live in? What kind of a future should we be planning for our children? These are not questions about material conditions alone, but about social relations, and they are questions which the women's movement has been trying to answer. Who will have power and privilege? It won't do any longer to answer: 'the working class', or 'we shall all be equal under socialism'. Within the working class, men have power over women; and socialism, as envisaged by the established male Left, fails to tackle inequality between women and men - especially where it is most deeply rooted, within the family.

Eric Hobsbawm calls upon the Labour Party to strive for broad support. An excellent idea. But this can only be achieved if the party understands the interests and aspirations of all the different groups it seeks to represent, and how they stand in relation to each other. At the heart of the coalition of support, on which Hobsbawm sets such store for Labour's future, there is a profound and unresolved conflict. The party can try to understand and resolve it. But, if it is interested in building solid support in the 80s and 90s, it will overlook that conflict at its peril.

