

# Labour's Lost Millions 4

We conclude the debate with...

## DAVE COOK: Open to the outside world

Eric Heffer expresses the commonly held view that within the Labour Party 'to a large extent the renewal process (particularly the constitutional reforms — DC) has been completed, and now the time has come to consolidate the changes, to translate them into campaigns throughout the country and win support for the party.' The job now is to pose Labour's programme as the alternative to Thatcherism and to campaign powerfully for it.

Apparently the only other choice on offer for Heffer is what he alleges to be the thesis of Hobsbawm and Rowthorn, namely that Labour must reach some accommodation with the SDP/Liberal Alliance in order to unite the anti-Tory forces (although Rowthorn is certainly opposed to any call now for a coalition government). However it is not defence of Hobsbawm and Rowthorn that concerns me here, but an element in the discussion which I think Heffer and others have missed, that of *stages* of political change.

The labour movement has to rebuild a majority around it; on that almost every one on the Left is agreed. Incidentally, Eric, the labour movement — by which term most people mean the Labour Party, the trade unions, the Co-operative and other left political forces like the Communists — is a much broader conception than the Labour Party. This has enabled non Labour Party socialists to use the 'royal We' long before 'your' party was formed.

At some stage this majority has to be expressed at the polls for a Labour government to be established. More than this, to have any chance of implementing the advanced programme on which Labour now stands, it will have to be a political majority of a new type, informed, active and vigilant — something which on the working class side we have not yet seen in British politics. At present a major part of this potential majority have rejected Labour.

Fortunately many of these predominantly working class people can be, and indeed in the case of CND are being,

attracted by broad campaigns on the great issues of peace, jobs and democracy. When the forces of the labour movement get it together to provide imaginative leads on all these questions, millions, including in some areas, a majority of non Labour voters and non union members, will be influenced. This process, and the ferment of politicisation it can give rise to, are absolutely vital in helping to 'destabilise' the grip of right wing attitudes.

The Labour Party can and does make a very important contribution to such broad campaigning activity. For example the appeal and impact of the great October CND National Demonstration was greatly enhanced by the work of many local Labour Parties and the participation of Neil Kinnock in its rally. Nonetheless any attempt to narrow down the breadth of campaigns like CND, and those which we hope will develop on other issues, into political vehicles for the Labour Party, will greatly weaken their ability to attract precisely those millions of non Labour voters who must be won. Eric Heffer's approach represents this danger.

Involving people in anti-Tory activity is not an alternative to 'winning support for the party'. It is the precondition for it. That is why the recent Communist Party Congress described the immediate priority as 'building an anti-Tory majority,' a task which should not be seen primarily in electoral terms.

The Communist Party does not advocate this as some sort of subterfuge to give itself legitimacy, as Heffer is suggesting; although it is worth making the point that it is within the Communist Party that the need for this new approach has been most debated. The very fact that its theoretical journal is hosting this vital strategic discussion would suggest that the party is not an 'anachronism'. Communists hope that their work will help create the conditions for a *later* stage when the election of a Labour government (*not* a coalition government) becomes the priority.

If Heffer is right that the main task now is to pose a clear socialist alternative to Thatcherism, then many of the problems of Labour's politics highlighted recently in *Marxism Today* and elsewhere, become less significant. However if the Communist

Party is right to insist on the creation of an anti-Tory majority then criticisms of some aspects of the Labour Left, and CP, politics assume much greater importance.

For example Heffer's statement that Labour 'must update and refine its policies but must do so as an independent party, not getting itself enmeshed in alliances with others' contains within it a glaring contradiction. If Labour's renewal is not complete, from where except outside the Labour Party is the impulse for 'updating' going to come? One has only to think of the militancy around the Pentonville dockers, the Industrial Relations Act and the miners' strikes; the impact of feminism and the black people's movements; the pressure for devolution; the Anti Nazi League, the Peoples March for Jobs and the revitalisation of CND. These impulses were mainly from the Left but Labour can also learn from political forces usually described as to its 'right'. For example on immigration, racism and issues of personal liberty, such as pressure for a Freedom of Information Act, the Liberals have been more consistently radical than Labour. On electoral reform they still are.

Heffer's approach would mean that his 'renewed' Labour Party was well fenced off from any such future political inputs, no matter whence they came. The party would be the poorer for it, and so therefore would be weakened the changes for a speedy defeat of Thatcherism and what could follow from this.

## ROGER POOLE: Trade unions matter

Whilst not agreeing with Eric Hobsbawm on the need for the Labour Party and its supporters to consider the possibility of coalition politics, he raises issues of major importance to the movement if we are to strike out afresh after the appalling defeat of 1983. It is refreshing to read an analysis of the election defeat that does not rely upon a simplistic abandonment of socialist policies to bring back the lost voters of Labour's fold.

Having said that some policies were put over in such a way as to make them unattractive to the electorate and were in

part responsible for the defeat. An example of that was Labour's 'housing policy'. By saying that we would not force local authorities to sell houses (a perfectly reasonable position) the electorate believed and they were right in some cases, that we were against council tenants becoming owner occupiers. The sight of well-heeled owner-occupying MPs and trade union leaders telling relatively poor council tenants paying extortionate rents that they could not enjoy the benefits of owner occupancy purely because they couldn't afford to buy in the private market smacked not only of elitism, but hypocrisy as well.

Whilst there is always a need in a socialist party to reconsider policies and direction as circumstances change, it is my view that with one or two exceptions, our policies were broadly right. What was wrong was the electorate's perception of the movement we allowed and were responsible for. Eric Hobsbawm mentioned the divisions inside the Party, and the image of a divided leadership which went from bad to worse during the campaign but which had its roots in the arguments that had been conducted in the Party over many years. The campaign to extend democracy in the Party after the 1979 defeat was essential to the rebuilding of the Party but it left us nevertheless, in the timescale available, unfit to fight the 1983 election. With a new leadership, however, and providing there is an understanding that the Party does and has every right to make policy, and that the job of the leadership is to support and put that policy into action, the Labour Party should be able now to put its organisation together so that it is in a fit state to fight and win the next election.

### The trade union connection

All of that power will however elude the Party unless the trade unions, too, give a very different perspective to the public of their activities. Millions of trade unionists did not vote Labour. One of the main reasons for this is that rightly the unions and the Labour Party are seen to be very close, but outside the very narrow area of wages and conditions the unions have lost the moral support of millions of their members.

No longer do trade unionists look upon their unions as being on the side of the angels whilst everything and everyone opposed to them is in the camp of the devil. The actions, attitudes and activities of many trade union leaders and others in positions of leadership have been the

antithesis of democratic behaviour. That does for people on the Left as well as the Right of the trade union movement. Whilst the labour movement was seen for years as fighting to extend people's rights in all facets of their lives, in recent years we have allowed our enemies every opportunity to portray us as undemocratic, self-seeking supporters of those who have the industrial clout to secure improvements, with no thought for those who do not possess that clout.

The truth of the matter has not, of course, been as bad as the perception, but the perception has been the determining factor in people's attitudes not just to the unions but because of the close relationship to the Labour Party as well.

An example is the way in which the unions conducted themselves in the leadership elections. The reason we wanted to extend the franchise was to give more people a say in who our leaders were and in so doing to give millions of people a real and a practical stake in the Labour Party. Transferring the vote from the PLP to union executives is not in my view a very large step towards mass politics. When those executives then compound that error by casting millions of votes for their preferred candidate the manna starts falling from heaven on the leader writers desk at the *Daily Mail*.

Even some of those unions that did go out to ballot their members must ask themselves what real efforts they made to ensure that as many of their members as possible had the opportunity and participated? Our politics and our trade unionism has to come out of the smoke-filled rooms. Closed and elitist politics are no longer good enough for our people.

Whereas in the past trade unionists have been prepared to stand by and follow their

leaders and then more lately their shop stewards, they are now demanding much greater control of their unions and their activities. Indeed, because the Left has preached much greater democracy in our unions over the years, we are to some extent the very cause of the discontent felt by many trade union members. The Left should not be supporting the past practices of the undemocratic Right much of which has now deserted to a place where they can continue their autocratic practices. The block vote which continues to sweep the CLPs to one side must be looked at.

The people will not elect a Labour government which has close ties with what they perceive to be an undemocratic trade union movement.

One of the Labour Party's main planks in its economic strategy was the extension of the public sector. Without major public sector investment programmes, it will be impossible to roll back the frontiers of mass unemployment and manufacturing industry will stay in decline. The problem with the strategy that the Labour Party had however was not, as some have said, that the policy was wrong, but that the public's view of the public sector is very low indeed.

The reason is very simple. The trade unions neglected through years of consensus politics in this country to protect and maintain pride in the provision of our public services and nationalised industries. Questions of industrial democracy and consumer protection and satisfaction have been low on the list of collective bargaining issues and sometimes have not even been considered. The exception to the rule has been the NHS and to the extent that we have defended it, there is overwhelming public support for it, and it is the one area that the Thatcher government, despite the appalling cuts it has made, finds itself continually on the defensive.

If only the same could be said about local government, the railways, the steel industry etc. When the electorate is faced with a programme of expansion for the public sector it must be something they are prepared to support because they have personal experience of its superior quality. We must never forget that with a hostile media we have as trade unionists to ensure that the public sector gives a public demonstration of its worth.

In conclusion, therefore, the revival of the Labour Party is not in Labour's hands alone, the trade union movement by its actions and through its assessment by the public will have a major effect on Labour's fortunes.

