

representation to all its decision-making levels will, through black section accountability, ensure full discussion of the needs and aspirations of the black community. It will also make sure the leadership gets to grips with solid race policies which are not fudged but put into action.

Given that the leadership has never before had to justify itself to black people on the national executive committee or in the Parliamentary Labour Party, its attitude has smacked of deliberate ambivalence. Shadow Home Secretary Gerald Kaufman, deputising for Neil Kinnock who couldn't be bothered to turn up, manifested this approach to an alarming extent during an interview on Channel Four's *Black on Black*. He accused his black interviewer, Trevor Phillips, a former NUS president, of having a 'defective understanding' of how the Labour Party works. Kaufman used the very same words a fortnight later to describe a political commentator, Roy Sawh, of the *Caribbean Times* when black sections were again on the television debate agenda.

The Labour leadership's ambivalence is deliberate because they seem to believe that genuine power-sharing with black people in their midst would provoke an electoral backlash among white voters. But this insidious 'white backlash' theory, common also to the soul-searching among white liberals during the struggle for civil rights by black people in America, cannot be sustained. The argument is rarely given a fair test, so few are the black Labour Party candidates at general elections. On the face of it, the fact that 16 black candidates stood at the last election (six of them Labour), and none were elected could, to the casual observer, suggest some sort of racist backlash from voters. But, as Trevor Phillips rightly notes, 'no black candidate was selected to fight a winnable seat'.

What, then, is the Labour Party so scared of? After all, in the past it has taken a wholly unscrupulous line on the need for urgent measures to ensure increased black involvement in the party. This is because more than 80% of black voters have unwaveringly delivered at election time while demanding nothing in return. Black activists have since raised the leadership's level of awareness to the point that they are now warned: if there is no radical change it won't be too long before black people lose faith not only in the Labour Party, but in the political process itself.

The number of black people prepared to turn out for Labour is already on a slow but steady decline. Black electoral registration

continues to be less than white registration. All this implies an increasing alienation on the part of black people towards what is now viewed as Britain's totally white political structure. This is compounded by the lack of care and understanding given to the concerns of the black community like race attacks, police harassment, bad housing and double-digit youth unemployment.

Without proper political expression this frustration can turn into inner city violence as the uprisings of the summer of 1981 showed. No one would claim black sections in the Labour Party are a panacea, but they are part of a solution provided by black activists themselves.

So what are the drawbacks? The Labour leadership argues that it has no objection to informal constituency-level black sections being formed provided there are *no* GMC and EC delegates and *no* constitutional change. This is unacceptable to us. We want a copper-bottomed guarantee, enshrined in the party's constitution, that a place has been provided for an effective, organised black voice. We are too aware of the broken promises of the past to settle for anything less. Trevor Phillips portrays the problems in two ways; first, that support for black sections would lead to black members of unions calling for similar arrangements, and second, that our victory would be a 'personal defeat for Kinnock'.

When we discuss the trade unions, it is worth noting that 54% of black workers belong to them - 10% more than white workers - yet only 4% of black workers rise to elected posts in their union. Furthermore, while union membership is on the decline, it is the public sector unions like NUPE, with a heavy black membership, that are holding their ground. If, as a result of these equations, black workers decide they can best agitate for a better deal by caucusing they will do so (as the founding of the Black Trade Union Solidarity Movement in 1981 proves) whether or not black sections are given official recognition.

As far as Kinnock and a personal defeat is concerned, the Labour leader has himself to blame if he has painted himself into a corner. He still has time, though, to show true statesmanship and begin a direct dialogue with us. After decades of neglect there is lots to talk about. It is our sincere hope that progressives in the movement will rally to our clarion call. For the black sections issue at the Conference will be viewed by many people as a litmus test of how the Labour Party's new leadership responds to demands from its grassroots.

IQBAL WAHHAB and MARC WADSWORTH Black Sections



It was most timely of *Marxism Today* to take up the issue of Labour Party 'black sections' in its September issue. For, if constitutional changes paving the way for official recognition are won at the Labour Conference in Blackpool this month, black sections will have provided the biggest single political step forward for black Britons in recent history. Never before will a major political party in this country have taken its black supporters and members so seriously that it agreed to set in train a process which will result in real and credible power-sharing.

Significant numbers of black people have been in Britain since the 1940s, yet not a single MP has been elected from our ranks to represent us. But the lack of blacks MPs mentioned by Trevor Phillips is only the tip of an iceberg which stands as a monument to Labour's catalogue of failures when it comes to its one million loyal black voters. The iceberg is now being melted away by black activists themselves, not by internal 'white' forces high-up in the Labour Party hierarchy. Yet remedial action from within the party which purports to protect minority rights is a necessary precursor to such long-overdue change. A guarantee of black