

The Left is faced with a new and dangerous enemy... or perhaps it isn't. The Left has to seek the broadest alliances... or perhaps it doesn't. The issues are crucial to the Left's future.

THE Retreat into Extremism

Eric Hobsbawm

FOR SOME YEARS *Marxism Today* has been associated with a particular immediate political strategy for the Left in Britain: a united labour movement in broad alliance with all who can be mobilised against Thatcherite Toryism, which can be seen as, for the moment, the main enemy, and isolated as such. This does not represent a single coherent ideological doctrine or 'school' of 'Marxism-Today-ism' or 'the Newer Left', as is sometimes argued. Many of those who have put forward such views in this journal are Marxists in the Communist Party, but that does not mean that they agree among themselves on all important points. In any case, to suppose that the articles in *Marxism Today* represent some sort of concerted factional doctrine is to misunderstand what 'a theoretical and discussion journal' is. It discusses.

Basically, the 'broad anti-Thatcherite' strategy represents the practical consensus of a lot of people on the Left, that this sort of line *can* set Labour back on its forward march, whereas the strategies pursued on the hard and sectarian Left have led to far more defeats and retreats than victories over the past few years. Such a view is compatible with a variety of ideological and theoretical positions. One does not have to agree on all points with Ken Livingstone to hold that the campaign in defence of the Greater London Council is a model of exactly the sort of broad anti-Thatcherite mobilisation that we have in mind. And one certainly doesn't have to be a communist to see that the strategy put forward in *Marxism Today* makes sense, and that there is a shortage of other strategies on the Left which take much account of political realities. That is why the *Marxism Today* articles have been so widely discussed and influential on the Left, far beyond the usual range of Communist Party literature today.

Four major lines of argument have been put forward against this strategy. (I leave aside simple name-calling.) First, it is

claimed that the situation of the labour movement isn't really as bad as all that. The movement hasn't really had serious setbacks, mainly because the unions are in excellent shape.¹ This is baloney. Anybody who actually believes this in April 1985 - anybody who believed it even at the peak of the miners' strike - is living in a time-warp. Britain has a uniquely strong, militant, and an extraordinarily heroic trade union movement. I don't think it is national chauvinism to say that the miners' strike of 1984-85 would have been inconceivable today in any other country in the world. The British working class and its

class politics is not necessarily *good* class politics

movement are the rock which will be the foundation of any broader movement or alliance. But it is an insult to the intelligence as well as to the devotion, loyalty and heroism of British union militants to pretend that they haven't taken a good few beatings over the past six years. By now even the Socialist Workers Party has got around to noticing that the unions on the whole aren't exactly on the offensive. We need not bother further with this argument.

Is it really different?

The second argument is equally surprising. It denies that there is any special reason to regard Thatcherism as a particularly acute danger to the working class. That the Thatcher government is just a bourgeois government like all the others, except that 'the weakness of the British economy limits the potential manoeuvres available to bourgeois social democracy'. It is certainly not 'the focus of an unambiguous shift to the right in British society'.²

Two distinguished and rather ancient members of the Communist Party have cited, as 'typical of the incessant counter-propaganda of *Marxism Today*' against what they regard as communist principles, the thesis that 'Thatcherism is committed to a radical and revolutionary *change* in British capitalism' (Rothstein and Page Arnot in *Morning Star* 4 Jan 1985).³

Are comrades Rothstein and Arnot, Fine, Harris, Mayo, Weir, Wilson and the rest who appear to believe this, living in the same country - even on the same planet - as most of us? Of course in one sense capitalism is always capitalism, and we are opposed to it whether it sails under the flag of Butskellism or Thatcher or the late William Ewart Gladstone. The Tories are always the Tories, and the Left is against them, whether their leaders are Thatcher, Heath, Macmillan, Baldwin, or the late Benjamin Disraeli. And of course it is always possible to find an even more radical and reactionary change which capitalism could go in for, and which Thatcherism does *not* represent. For instance, she is not Adolf Hitler. In fact, a familiar conjuring trick in the arguments against *Marxism Today* is to suggest that we say that Thatcherism is like fascism, and because it obviously isn't, this means that there is no qualitative difference between

¹ 'We recognise a considerable strengthening, unity and militancy in the workforce as organised in trade unions at the point of production. This has not been reflected electorally in the fortunes of the Labour Party, with the renewal of the Tory government and the rise of the SDP. It has revealed the extent to which the Labour Party is out of touch with and has failed to respond to developments in the trade union movement.' Fine, Harris, Mayo, Weir, Wilson. *Class Politics: an answer to its critics* pp62-3.

² *ibid* p63.

³ The emphasis is Rothstein and Arnot's. The quotation from my article 'Labour's Lost Millions' (*MT* Oct 1983) is wrong. What I wrote was that 'Thatcherism is committed to a radical and reactionary change in British capitalism, and indeed in the British political system.' (My emphasis).

Mrs T and Harold Macmillan (sorry, Lord Stockton), who is now so hostile to her that he is calling for the defeat of this Conservative government.⁴ Actually, I cannot think of any *MT* article which says that Thatcherism is fascism or the preparation of fascism, and several, such as Dave Priscott's and my own,⁵ which have quite specifically said it wasn't. Actually, the broad alliance strategy in Britain in the 1930s was not directed against British fascism, but against the National government, which was a great deal less reactionary than Thatcher. And those who formed the popular front certainly didn't abandon the traditional objects of socialism. However, the point is not to decide whether Thatcherism is or isn't like something in the 1930s, but whether it is committed to radical changes qualitatively different, more dangerous and disastrous - within the limits of a continuing monopoly-capitalism - than other bourgeois and conservative regimes in Britain in this century.

No room for doubt

It seems amazing that after six years of Thatcherite government, there can even be serious argument about such a proposition. In the first place, the Thatcherites have loudly, clearly and persistently declared their *intention* to change British capitalism radically, that is to say, among other things, to break with the traditional British ruling class policy of avoiding open class confrontation. Of course, we do not have to believe that politicians mean what they say, but the difference between all other Tory governments and this one is that the others all claimed that they were against any radical change, or any change except what was unavoidable, and this one wants a radical break with the past.

In the second place, Thatcherism clearly has done a lot of transforming of Britain since 1979, incidentally leaving much of the British economy, the social infrastructure and welfare state, and the traditional system by which the British ruling class ruled, in ruins as a result. What other government since 1875 has seriously wanted to eliminate unions from the economic scene, and actually shackled them legally more than any other government for over a century? (Certainly more than after the General Strike.) What other government has set out to sell off the public parts of the economy wholesale, on principle, including not only what Labour and Keynesians have nationalised, but what had been nationalised by the public demand of those Victorian and Edwardian

businessmen whom Mrs Thatcher claims as her inspiration, eg the telephone system? What other government this century has been as persistent an enemy of the welfare state and health service, of public education at all levels, of scientific re-

Ken Livingstone and the House of Lords have clearly not committed themselves to a lifelong alliance

search, of *any* public service (other than police and military) and independent local government? As a government of the Right, Thatcher has no parallel, at least in twentieth-century Britain. Every historian will confirm this.

In the third place, Thatcherite policies clearly represent a style of politics, of ideology, and right-wing demagoguery, which is new in British governments, though it has long been found in some press lords. It represents, with unprecedented frankness, the will to wage the class struggle against the workers ('the enemy within'), and a contempt for those who need help, for human and social considerations in policy, combined with flag-waving: one might call it 'I'm all right, Union Jack'. It represents the feelings of social climbers and hardfaced people who have done, or hope to do, well out of free enterprise ('get on your brike'). Insincere though Tory breastbeating about the unemployed may sometimes have been in the 1930s, it would have been inconceivable for a government of that era to have gone on for five years of mass unemployment

before even beginning to wonder whether four millions out of work may not be a worse problem than whether inflation was 5% or 6%. Not this lot.



Finally, the unprecedented nature of Thatcherism is indicated by the unprecedented revolt against it of the traditional 'establishment', the very people and institutions the British ruling class used to rely on to keep the system running smoothly. This is the first Tory government which can expect the House of Lords to vote it down every so often; the first whose senior civil servants leak to the press; the first since the early nineteenth century which has seen a jury of the 'respectable' middle class (and vetted to ensure its 'respectability') acquit against the government in a political case; the first to have its prime minister publicly humiliated by the most ancient and Tory university, Oxford.

Coming from where they do, these are, by god, not gestures of social revolution. Almost certainly only a minority of the 1000-odd Oxford dons who voted, by a majority of some 700 to 300 to refuse Margaret Thatcher an honorary degree, had ever been Labour supporters. Quite possibly most of them had been Tory voters. But whatever we read into such demonstrations, they clearly show that many pillars of Britain's traditional ruling structure themselves regard Thatcherism not as a continuation of the old ways by other means, but as a striking and worrying innovation.

There can't really be any doubt about this. The only question is whether Thatcherism is in a position to construct the Britain of which it dreams - and which would, quite surely, *not* be a Britain any previous Tory administration would have wanted, if only because the results of Thatcherism are so disastrous, even from a ruling-class point of view. Fortunately it does not look as though she will be able to, though she will have reduced much of Britain to a scrapyard in the process of trying. Thatcher will fail, partly because her aims (eg in economics) cannot objectively be achieved at all - at any rate by

Thatcherite policy - but partly also because the force of resistance against Thatcherism, active and passive, will prove too great. But what is the nature of the forces which can be, and which are being mobilised against it?

Class politics and all that

This brings us to the third argument against the broad alliance strategy, namely that it does not represent 'class politics', being 'a shift away from, or even an abandonment of, the central role of class and class conflict in the analysis and formation of political strategy' (Fine, Harris etc, p5). In the literal sense, this is nonsense. Anyone who reads at least this writer's articles in *Marxism Today*, any and all of them, can see with one eye that they try to do what Marxists were told to do, no doubt more than once, namely 'to use Marxist-Leninist analysis effectively, by carefully studying the concrete situation and the grouping of class forces, and making their plans for action and struggle accordingly.'⁶

But the accusation is not supposed to be literally true. 'Class politics' is just a label to stick on one kind of politics (the good one) to distinguish it from brand X (the bad one). In the sense in which it has been used in this debate, it is not a term of Marxist analysis, but a swear-word.

But 'class', 'class analysis' and 'class politics' are too important for Marxists to be devalued into rhetorical labels. So it must be said clearly and firmly that the issue is not whether politics is 'class politics' but *what* particular kind of class politics best serves the interests of the class. It is about *this* that there can be and are different opinions. In case this is not clear, let me give some illustrations.

First, from the other side. 'Wet' and 'dry' Tories today, Chamberlain's appeasers of Hitler in the 1930s and Churchill's resisters, are or were equally committed to a bourgeois and capitalist Britain. None of us would be fool enough to argue that one lot did not represent the politics of their class, eg, that Churchill's alliance with the USSR or a House of Lords vote in favour of the GLC were class betrayals. (There are of course Tory sectarians who might ac-

cuse Heath or Macmillan of class treason, but they are to be taken no more seriously than their left-wing sectarian opposite numbers.)

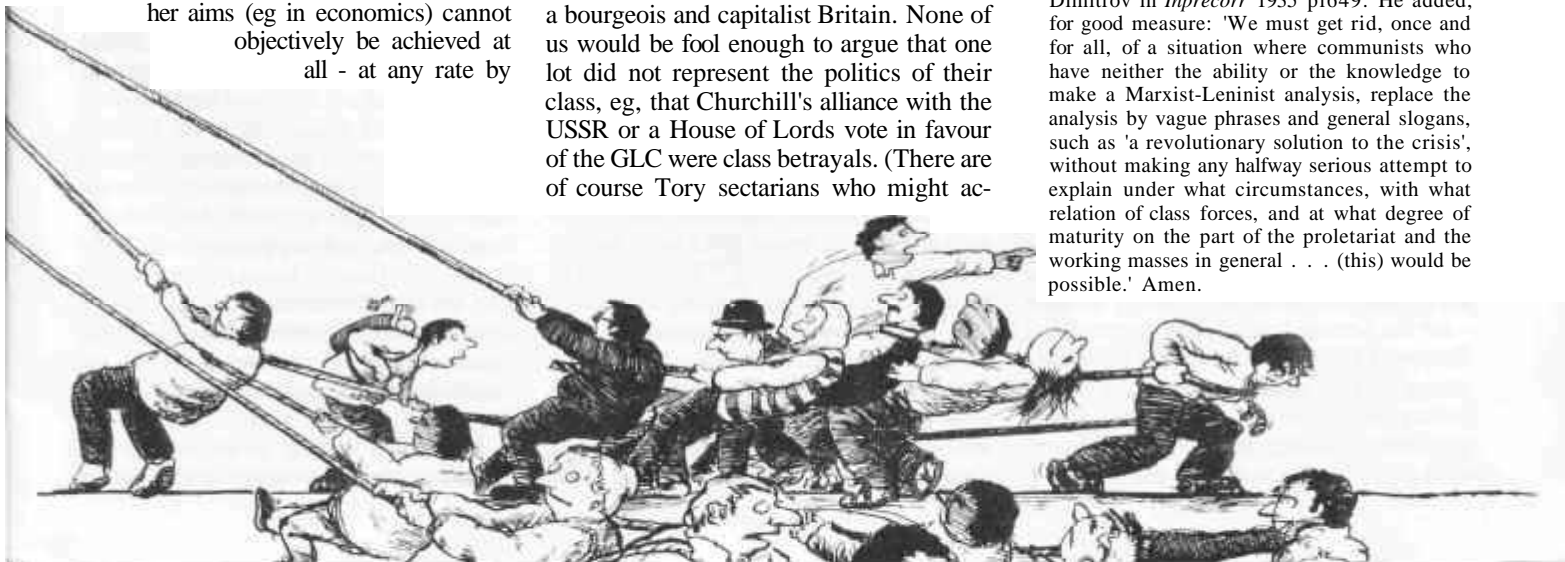
To come nearer home. The ultimate in 'class against class' line of the Communist International in the late 1920s and early 1930s. It was class politics all right, only unfortunately the wrong kind, for it led the international communist movement to disaster at the very time when the International expected that the world slump of 1929, which it had correctly predicted, would put the preparation of socialist revolution on the immediate agenda. It didn't. It brought Hitler. By early 1934 the movement (outside the USSR) was almost certainly weaker than at any time before or since.

Looking back, this is not very surprising. The 'class against class' line demanded 'an end to constructing a contradiction between fascism and bourgeois democracy, or between the parliamentary forms of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie and the openly fascist forms.' It established the thesis that social-democratic parties were 'social-fascist', seeing the *entire* development of social democracy as 'an uninterrupted process of evolution towards fascism'. It further observed that this process of fasciation extended to the very lowest rungs of the reformist organisation. Thus - to quote the outline history of the Communist International prepared by the Institute of Marxism-Leninism of the Cen-

⁴ 'The idea of Thatcherism mistakes it with such a sharp break with the past that it opens up the spectre of fascism'. They disagree 'that a defensive alliance must be built against the dangers of fascism in which the traditional objects of socialism are abandoned.' Fine, Harris etc, pp2, 63.

⁵ Eric Hobsbawm's 'Labour's Lost Millions' and Dave Priscott's 'Popular Front Revisited', *Marxism Today* Oct 1983.

⁶ Dimitrov in *Inprecorr* 1935 pl649. He added, for good measure: 'We must get rid, once and for all, of a situation where communists who have neither the ability or the knowledge to make a Marxist-Leninist analysis, replace the analysis by vague phrases and general slogans, such as 'a revolutionary solution to the crisis', without making any halfway serious attempt to explain under what circumstances, with what relation of class forces, and at what degree of maturity on the part of the proletariat and the working masses in general . . . (this) would be possible.' Amen.



tral Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union⁷, 'the tactics of "class against class" were in practice directed not only against the right-wing socialist leaders, but also against the rank-and-file functionaries of the reformist organisations. Such a sharpening of the "class against class" tactics led to anything but the winning of influence on the rank-and-file of reformist workers. On the contrary, it led to increasing tension between them and the communists' (pp377-8). All this, as the Soviet history of the Comintern puts it, with restraint, meant that 'the communist movement did not immediately take account of the changed situation, and the consequent necessity to concentrate all forces, in the first instance, on the solution of the tasks of strengthening democracy in general and opposing fascism' (p376). In fact, the radical slogan 'was as yet a long way from having won the support of the majority of the working class and others engaged in labour.' In short, class politics is not necessarily *good* class politics.

The popular front experience

Did the line of broad anti-fascist unity which replaced 'class against class' mean the abandonment of class politics? The Communist International did not think so, and neither did those of us who got our political education and experience in the communist parties during the 1930s and 1940s. What we read in Dimitrov was not a goodbye to class politics, but a goodbye to: 'sectarianism, satisfied with its doctrinaire narrowness, its divorcement from the real life of the masses; satisfied with its simplified methods of solving the most complex problems of the working-class movement on the basis of stereotyped schemes.'

What we thought we were learning to do was to conduct successful as distinct from unsuccessful class politics. And who will say that we were wrong? The broad alliance strategy led not only, and almost immediately, to the recovery and growth of the communist parties in many countries. During and after the victory over fascism many of them reached the point of their greatest strength and influence. It undoubtedly produced a political radicalisation of the workers and other strata, thus giving British Labour its greatest triumph. And, let us not forget, that in many places it raised the political struggle - for the first and only time in some West European countries - to the level of armed struggle, and produced ten new states setting out to construct socialism. Name any other strategy with comparable results.

The broad alliance line of those years can certainly be criticised, not least for being excessively skewed to serve the state interests of the USSR as seen by Stalin, sometimes at the expense of working class interests in particular countries: for instance, by favouring the maintenance of the Conservative-Labour coalition in Britain after the end of the war in Europe.⁸ But what it cannot be criticised for is an inability to serve class politics. To judge by results, it was by a long way the most effective strategy communists have ever discovered in countries such as ours.

building the New Jerusalem like a 1960s tower block

The historical legacy

But why should anyone suppose that the 'broad alliance' strategy is incompatible with class politics? Practically all socialist movements from Marx on, in practically all countries, including *all* where successful revolutions were made, had to think in terms of alliance politics all the time, because in *none* of them (with the major exception of Britain) did the proletariat by itself form a majority of the people. In some the organised working class was a larger minority than in others, but in none of them could it hope to get very far without, in the words of that well-known revisionist the late Palme Dutt 'win(ning) to its side the intermediate strata, the petty-bourgeoisie, the peasantry, and also the backward workers'.⁹ Today Britain is also in the same position as other countries, since we can no longer rely on an absolute majority of proletarian Britain to sweep a Labour government in single-handed. Actually, we never could, because British socialists, relying on the solid proletarian preponderance, overlooked the fact that *even at the peak of its forward march* (1951) they had failed to convert one third of the British workers, and since then Labour's working class support has plummeted. As has lately been pointed out continental working-class parties, polling 70-80% of their class even today, did much better than British Labour, which failed to build itself either as the mass party of *all* workers, or as a broad front built on and around a class movement.¹⁰ Britain used to be so overwhelmingly a proletarian nation that Labour could sometimes win in spite of its weaknesses. But now, when it no longer can, its problems and the strategies of socialists, revolutionary or otherwise, are no different from what they have always been.

Marx and Lenin themselves worked out their strategies on the assumption that the workers acted as leaders of a broad class front, being 'acknowledged as the only class capable of social initiative', even though in the minority.¹¹ In fact, when Marx thought what the strategy of a successful Paris Commune should be - the nearest thing to a proletarian revolution in his lifetime - he saw it in terms of what we would today call a 'popular front', and what he called 'the revolution of the Commune as representative of all classes of society which do not live off others' labour'.¹² And Lenin, between February and October 1917, convinced that it was essential to detach 'the broad masses of the petty-bourgeois population' from the provisional government, insisted that the Bolshevik programme should state that 'the immediate duty of the party of the proletariat is to fight for a system of state organisation which will best guarantee the economic progress and rights of the people in general'.¹³ 'All classes of society'? 'economic progress and rights of the people in general'? What kind of language is this? Hands up, those who think Marx and Lenin betrayed class politics! Broad alliances are the necessary complement to class politics, not an alternative to it.

The immediacy of socialism

The *fourth* argument is that the *Marxism Today* strategy abandons socialism. This is in the minds of the ancient monuments of our movement who mutter 'Bernstein', and those who accuse the supporters of the broad alliance of forgetting 'the immediacy of socialism itself'.¹⁴ In a way, this accusation lies behind all the other arguments against the broad anti-Thatcherite strategy.

Let us first get rid of the argument that anything except unconditional loyalty to the USSR means the abandonment of socialism. This is obviously an issue in discussions within the CP but (a) it has nothing to do with the broad alliance - in the 1930s communists were both for such an alliance and totally loyal to the USSR - and (b) it is not of major concern outside the CP. There are opponents of the broad alliance who also opposed the tanks in Prague 1968, and supporters who sympathise with General Jaruzelski and can see why the USSR went into Afghanistan. So let us keep the issue of loyalty to the Soviet Union out of the argument. All of us, including non-communists, can agree that systematic anti-Sovietism, ie, 'the notion of the Soviet Union as enemy' (Fine, Harris etc, p47), weakens the cause of

peace and the Left. This has been recently demonstrated in France. We can also all, or most of us, agree 'that this does not preclude criticism of the Soviet Union' (*ibid* p62). One would hope that most of us would see the USSR as a socialist country, though we wouldn't necessarily want our socialism to be like theirs; that we appreciate the support it has given to liberation movements in the Third World; that we recognise the October Revolution as the monumental historical event it is. No communists can be indifferent to the USSR, but the present state of the international communist movement is polycentric. Let us leave it at that.

But there is another, less specialised but fuzzier, meaning of abandoning socialism. Some are for its 'immediacy,' others allegedly not. But what does 'the immediacy of socialism itself mean? In practice nobody believes that socialism is on the immediate agenda of the movement, if only because all we can do right now is to argue whether it should be there or not. Even the infant school theory, which sees a radical socialist labour government coming to power, dissolving the House of Lords, smashing the state apparatus and media power in six weeks or so, and then building the New Jerusalem like a 1960s tower-block, does not actually suppose that this can be done until there is such a Labour government. This is not on the immediate horizon.

Others, a bit less unsophisticated but opposed to the 'broad alliance', don't actually disagree that socialism in Britain at present, alas, looks rather a long way off. 'Socialism is not. . . a "long-term perspective"' says Roger Hallam, who tries manfully to wrestle with words in the *Morning Star*, because 'like all perspectives it is immediate': ie, it allows us to see *now* that 'the alliances of today lead towards the distant but real possibility of - if one may be excused for saying it - a revolutionary transformation of our ailing society.' Of course we'll excuse him. He's saying exactly what we are, even if he doesn't like it. Neither do we. The truth is that nobody disagrees about the comparative remoteness of a socialist Britain in March 1985. All socialists agree that the object of our strategies, whatever they are, is to bring it closer.

Nevertheless, let us not dismiss the fears that socialism is being flushed down the drain, however easy it is to dismiss simple-minded expressions of it. These fears are real. All socialists, including the supporters of the 'broad alliance', ought to be worried that at a time when the contradic-



Georgi Dimitrov with his son Mitko, 1939

tions of capitalism are more visible and potentially catastrophic than ever, in Britain and the world, there is no agreement on the Left about what ought to be done or could be done. That our movements are weak and tearing themselves to pieces. That even governments of the Left which came in with large majorities and high hopes, are on the defensive. It is also worrying that we do not have a clear idea of just what the future socialist economy is to be like and how it should be structured. For even if we survey the countries of 'really existing socialism' from the USSR to Yugoslavia, from the GDR to China, we see a variety of models and policies undergoing change. As for the other institutions of a future socialist society, who can discern their shape in the fog of argument about them?

It is understandable, in such circumstances, that many socialists should take refuge in ideological sermons. To tell ourselves, and to testify to the world, that we are for the class struggle, revolution and socialism and will have no truck with anyone who isn't, is at least some comfort and encouragement, and some protection against doubt and uncertainty. And it unquestionably helps to inspire militants to wage the long, arduous and frustrating struggle for a goal which does not seem to come any nearer. It always has been so. As Brecht put it in the greatest poem ever written about communist revolutionaries:

Our forces were slight. Our goal
Lay far in the distance
It was clearly visible, though I myself
Was unlikely to reach it.
So passed my time
Which had been given to me on earth.

The broad alliance

Unfortunately, morale-building is not enough. Our problem is, in the first instance, to get to the point where we can do



something effective about our conviction that only socialism can solve the problems of humanity. This is not achieved by arguing which of us wants socialism most and soonest. We need to work out what to do next, *and how this can advance us on the road to socialism*. This is what writers in *Marxism Today* have done and are trying to do. We have at least some claim to attention as Marxists, since we diagnosed, before others did, the halting and reversal of Labour's forward march. Some of us, criticising the political illusions arising out of the union militancy in the 1970s, and the policies which led to civil war within the Labour Party, predicted that they would lead to serious setbacks and defeats for the

⁷ Berlin 1970. The above quotations are from the Eleventh Plenum of the ECCI (April 1931) as cited in this work, pp377-378. My translations from the German text.

⁸ Everyone, and especially old and experienced comrades, knows quite well where the pressure to do this came from. That is why the accusation by Rothstein and Page Arnot, that the *Marxism Today* line amounts to 'Browderism' (*Morning Star* Jan 4 85) is so odd. It is true that Earl Browder, then leader of the CPUSA, proposed that it should dissolve itself in 1944, a step followed by some Latin American parties at the time. Most of us could not understand this and thought it was mistaken. The dissolution was revoked in 1945. But the idea that in 1944 any Communist Party leader would propose, let alone carry out, the dissolution of a Communist Party without die approval, or indeed the instruction, of Moscow, is absurd. 'Browderism' reflected too much and not too little loyalty to what is at present called 'proletarian internationalism'.

⁹ *Inprecorr* 1935 p1476.

¹⁰ See two excellent articles by Gareth Stedman Jones and G Therborn in J Curran ed, *The Future of the Left* London 1984.

¹¹ Marx 'Civil War in France' draft I (*Werke* vol 17 p544-6).

¹² *loc cit* p553.

¹³ *Selected Works* VI pi 16.

¹⁴ Roger Hallam, 'Seeing what divides the Communist Party itself' *Morning Star* 7 March 1985.

movement. Unfortunately we were right. We are proposing concrete strategies. Let these be discussed on their merits.

The merits of the 'broad alliance' line are so obvious that it is embarrassing even to have to argue them. To put it, once again, in the words of the celebrated revisionist Palme Dutt: 'Finance capital seeks to isolate and crush the working class vanguard. . . . And the answer of the working class to this is and must be . . . to isolate finance capital.'¹⁵ The front of people and groups who for one reason or another, would wish to see Thatcherism defeated, is extraordinarily wide, and getting wider by the month. It is no more necessary to agree with our potential allies on anything except opposition to Thatcher, than it was necessary for Britain and the USSR in 1941-45 to agree on anything except opposition to Hitler. After the war, as we know, both resumed their disagreements, just as Ken Livingstone and the House of Lords have clearly not committed themselves to a lifelong alliance.

Ought we to hesitate making such alliances for fear that in the end our allies will benefit more than we? Well, unless Thatcherism is defeated, none of us will benefit at all. But anyway, why the nervousness? The chances of the labour movement benefiting from a broad alliance are excellent, for two good reasons. First, because, in spite of what SDP journalists say, Labour remains the main force of opposition, and is likely to remain so - unless the sectarians have their way and reduce it to yet another rump sect, which is - luckily - no longer very probable. The most plausible form of a broad anti-Thatcherite mobilisation is therefore one which has Labour as its base and central component. And the Labour Party, thanks to developments since the late 1970s, is, after all, a party which has moved considerably to the left from the Gaitskell, Wilson and Callaghan days. And second,

experience shows - certainly it did in the 1930s - that the broad front line increases the strength of the labour movement and the Left within it.

the ready-made set of slogans chanted by photo-fit hard-liners

The CP's future

As there is, in practice, no alternative line which has any practical chances of success, or is based on anything except declarations of faith and condemnations of sin and apostasy, it is difficult to consider the merits of the competition. Nor is arguing against sectarianism to the point. It is understandable that old comrades, in times when the cause to which they have devoted their lives is not doing so well, should resist anything that looks as though it might undermine their old, and justified, convictions. Alas, the world is no longer what it was when we and the Great October Revolution were young, and it is not right for Marxists to behave as though it was. Again, it is natural that young comrades, mobilised for the first time in the great struggle against capitalism, should express, above all, their detestation of this awful society, their determination not to have any truck at all with its compromises and corruptions. They are right. Lenin tore Willie Gallacher's 'infantile leftism' to shreds in the famous pamphlet on Radicalism (who reads it nowadays?), but not before he had paid tribute to the *spirit* behind the militants' left sectarianism.

The tragedy of the present situation is that these young or relatively young revolutionary socialists no longer find anywhere a school in which they can learn to combine conviction and non-sectarian political action adequately. Such a school the Communist Party provided for genera-

tions of workers and intellectuals, men and women. It has long lost its position as the unique centre of such political education, but it had, until now, maintained at least some presence as a political educator.

The strangest thing about the present debates within the Communist Party is that (apart from the issue of loyalty to the USSR) there is nothing specifically communist about them. The arguments of the CP hard left are substantially like the arguments of the various Trotskyist, and non-ideological or non-Marxist Labour hard lefts. Tony Benn gives his blessing equally and generously to the Stalinists in the CP (who don't seem to know who first used their anti-popular front arguments) and the Militant Tendency. I suppose it could also be argued that there is no substantial difference between the arguments of *Marxism Today* and others who stand for a 'broad' line outside the CP, but at least we can claim that, by general agreement, it was *Marxism Today* that launched these arguments. In fact, today the only contribution to theory and practice in Britain which is specifically identifiable with the Communist Party is the policy of the *British Road to Socialism*, which the 'broad alliance' strategy is based on.

The Communist Party is a small party - always has been - and has served the British labour movement well. It could still do so, as is shown by its contribution to the rethinking of the movement's strategy and struggles in the past few years. The British labour movement, any labour movement, needs Marxist analysis, by which I don't mean the ready-made set of slogans chanted by photo-fit hard-liners who would fit as readily into one left-wing sect as into another. The next few months will decide whether the Communist Party in this country has any future. It ought to have one.

¹⁵ *Inprecorr* 1935 p1476.



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