



Feminism is beginning to make its mark in the Labour Party.

LABOURING W O M E N

Interview with Frances Morrell
by Beatrix Campbell

This spring has brought the climax of the campaign against ratecapping. It is a campaign which has produced both unprecedented co-operation between councils, their constituents and employees, but which has also exposed the tensions and conflicts between them.

As the deadline for the imposition of rates acceptable to central government descended, the tactical unanimity of the strategic united front began to break up. One of the first authorities to face surcharge, disqualification and immediate massive cuts was the Inner London Education Authority. Although never shrinking from the strategic objective: non-compliance with ratecapping and cuts, the ILEA found itself, like many other authorities with a difficult test: could it carry enough of its councillors for an illegal challenge which involved profound personal consequences. It couldn't, but by skilful political footwork and financial management remained united and adopted a budget as near no-cuts as could have been expected.

Frances Morrell, who is the Leader of the ILEA, Britain's biggest and poorest authority, is also pushing through what is regarded as a major era of educational reform. It is a programme for girls, for ethnic minorities and for working class children, designed to break down discrimination and promote their particular needs and interests. Throughout the ratecapping campaign, Frances Morrell while supporting the strategic united front, tried to stake out a critical debate on the whole problem of cuts, counter-cuts, mobilisation and the Labour Party's apparent inability, nationally or regionally, to organise on the necessary scale.

What have you been trying to achieve politically among ratecapped authorities? You've tried to map out a distinct position, even though you've remained within an agreed collective approach.

Yes, I have stuck to the collective approach because the only test of collectivity is when you disagree. It's on a Labour Party level nationally that the whole analysis was wrong. Essentially Jenkin is

arguing that the only problem is that there's a small number, specifically 18, extravagant authorities who constitute a problem. Therefore, those 18 authorities are going to be in the firing line and what happened to them was the fundamental issue. Well actually that's not true. The tide is going out all over, right round the entire coastline and not just in a few resorts. Spending on education, health, housing, social services is being reduced everywhere. But exactly the same phenomena are taking place in Tory constituencies where we are not organising. Now if you want to stop Mrs Thatcher doing something, with her massive majority, you must first of all terrorise the MPs who are voting for her and since the self-same things are happening in their constituencies it follows that in order to save some you need to campaign everywhere. In focusing on the specific authorities and their comings and goings we endlessly reinforce Patrick Jenkins' first proposition which was of itself wrong.

There's another problem, isn't there, which is that the circumstances of the 18 are different.

The discrepancies are frightfully minor. These little tactical considerations pale into insignificance beside the major truth that non-compliance minus mass mobilisation is a hopeless strategy.

You're suggesting, of course, that there isn't mass mobilisation.

Absolutely. Specific local authorities have campaigned within their own services. There's no doubt whatever about that. But that by itself does not produce mass mobilisation.

One of the things that I think has been really impressive about your administration at County Hall is the way in which you've clarified the conditions for working class women to participate in local government. When you decided to go for the leadership of the ILEA, and to take with you as a deputy another woman, and to fight that as a feminist ticket, some of the lads around found this bewildering. And now you are involved in the Labour Party and Women's Action Committee in

fighting to extend working class women's representation in the party, and of course being accused of just being middle class and ambitious. What's their problem?

I think it's important to say first of all that Ruth Gee and I were elected primarily by men because of course the ILEA Labour group is composed of a large number of men and a small number of women. And in fairness quite a few men were our campaign managers. Other men, like Steve Bundred and Andy Harris, are really able, from working class backgrounds and who, as women, we have no difficulty working with. But those men who supported us very strongly through quite a stormy election period kept on saying why on earth are you mentioning that you are women? We're going to vote for you anyway. I, in the end, said at the caucus meeting 'look, forgive me for this eccentricity, but I'm the candidate and one of the privileges of the candidate, win or lose, is they can mention what is important to them'. Then of course there were a small number, but frightfully well known people, who opposed. I don't really know why men who claim to support women's rights find it so hard to support women exercising those rights. We've always said in the Women's Action Committee the central, defining point of the relationship between men and women, and that goes for the Labour Party too, is male power. The Women's Action Committee now say we don't just want women candidates, thank you very much, we want women in winnable seats. Suddenly this generalised support for women's rights is coming down to some rather serious practicalities. It's quite obvious in London that those who pretend to support women's rights are in fact organising to ensure that all winnable seats are held by men. They can't have it both ways.

What about the 'small' practicalities?

One of the small but important things that we've done at the ILEA is to make it possible for women members to claim their baby-sitting allowance in addition to their attendance allowance. The difference that makes to women councillors is phenomenal. In my local constituency Labour Party, there was a terrible row because the party has been trying to set up a baby-sitting rota for a year. I mean here is the party which wants in its more Utopian moments to take over the whole of the banking system and the top 250 monopolies, and we can't even seem to manage in a year to set up a baby-sitting rota because the complexities of such a thing escape us! I can remember years ago a man, who wanted to be an MP, saying to me, 'whenever I see a parliamentary seat come up, I jump into my car and I drive there on a Sunday. And I go and talk to members of the local party. And I thought, you've said it in one really, there are never going to be women candidates at that rate.

Women don't have cars to jump into, they cannot easily just leave wherever they are. They don't have the money, they don't have the time. The whole system is set up for managerial men. Occasionally the trade unions break in with a candidate, who they sponsor. The trade unions recognised that working class men need money, if they're going to get anywhere. But nobody sponsors working women, so women must sponsor themselves.

The confrontation is truly joined now, there's a collision between organised interests in the Labour Party and throughout the labour movement, between men, white men, and just about everybody else you want to think of.

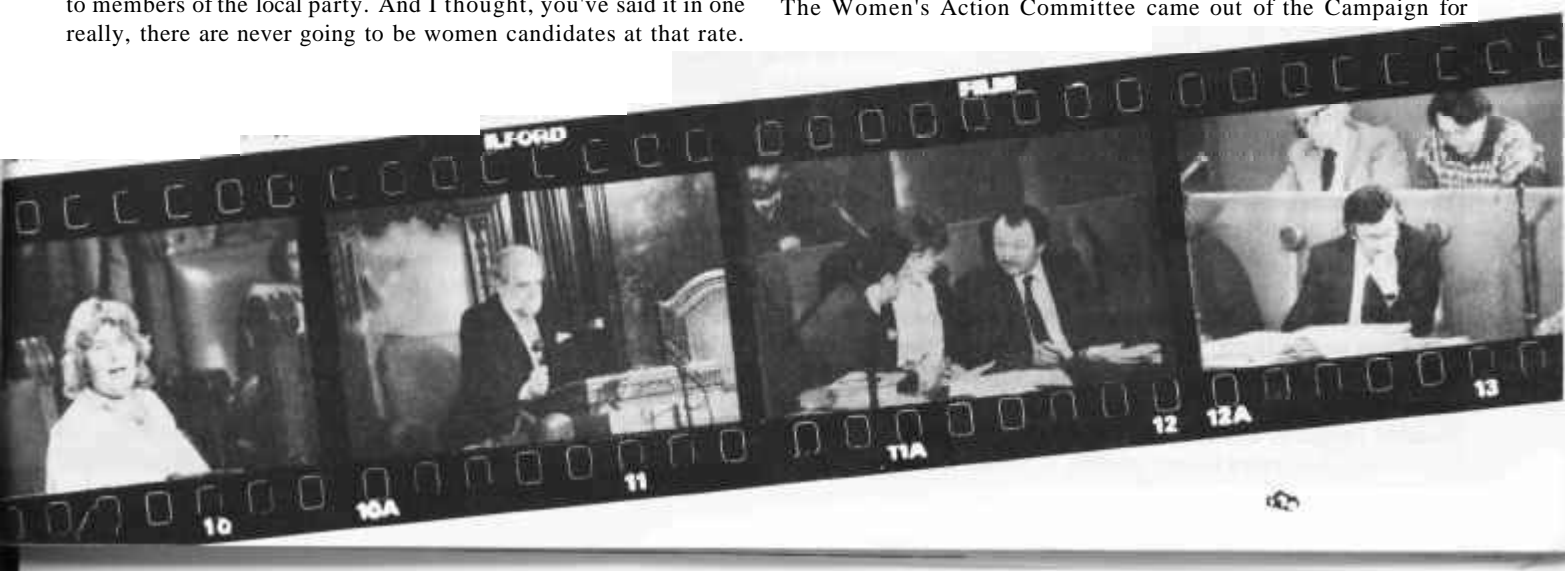
You're referring to the Hobsbawm thesis; about the supposed conflict between a class analysis and a more general analysis which includes the struggles of women and blacks?

I wouldn't call it the Hobsbawm thesis. My position comes from feminism: that the problem that we've got, as a labour movement, is that women were historically defeated in it. We're now a different moment in history and we've got to rescue the movement from their control. They've produced forms of politics that don't represent the whole of the working class, and indeed find all sorts of points of symmetry with capitalism. A patriarchal form of capitalism. The people who are opposed to, if you like, the implications of the insurgence of blacks and women claim that we're abandoning class struggle. Whereas what we're actually saying is that we're about expanding politics and reconstructing class struggle so that it represents more than one sex and one race. Now I'd have thought that would have been very close to your position.

Yes. I think it's very important that we don't all allow ourselves to be manoeuvred into arguing from a position that we do not actually hold. Making the Labour Party ensure that its representatives in parliament and on the executive accurately represent the number of women in the party and the trade unions seems to me perfectly sensible. Now I don't remotely see that as in conflict with an anti-capitalist or class analysis of society.

To return to the Women's Action Committee. Modern feminism very slowly and politely impacted on the Left, and barely impacted on the Right at all. The Labour Party was the last of the organisations on the Left to feel the pinch of feminism. But now the argument is very sharp and very clear in the Labour Party. Some of its roots were in the campaign to democratise the party. What are its feminist roots?

The Women's Action Committee came out of the Campaign for



Labour Party Democracy. It sprang from the idea that democracy ought to include women. You could democratise the party, strengthen the rank and file and still end up with an all-male parliamentary party, as indeed we have. Now, what are its feminist roots? I think that the whole phenomenon called the women's movement produced people in all parts of the political spectrum. We're just the people in the Labour Party.

What was your personal encounter with the women's movement?

Practical experience. I came from a working class family, I had a little baby and I was working for the then Secretary of State for Energy, Tony Benn, and a government department. Speak about male domination, you ought to see an industrial department of government! I'd arrive at a meeting, late, looking untidy and agitated. There would be a room full of highly polished men, beautiful clothes, frightfully organised, the conflict really between my life and the fact that they simply didn't have the responsibilities I had. They would all glare at me disapprovingly as I took my seat slightly breathless. And I realised you know that class wasn't the only issue.

How do you see the realignments taking place in the Left?

I think that the Labour Party is in a third phase and it hasn't recognised it. The Labour Party at the turn of the century was established by the trade unions, its objective was democratic socialism in one country. But the country was the metropolitan centre of an empire. So therefore it was in some sense possible. And the anti-imperialism of the Labour Party was its internationalism. So while its objective, if you like, was parochial it was parochial within an empire. What happened in 1945-51 was that the Labour government completed the first phase of what Labour set out to do. It actually achieved power by democratic means and it carried through the immediate programme that Labour had set itself in the 30s. But during that period, 1945-51, the Labour cabinet at that time realised that we were no longer that metropolitan centre of an empire. The Americans were unifying the world markets, and democratic socialism in one country was threatened, because we were to be a minor European power in the American sphere of interests. The cabinet took a strategic decision: it decided not to involve itself in the moves towards European economic collaboration, it made a big strategic decision to go for the commonwealth. That's 30 years, and it ended 10 years ago, it's over. Our manufacturing industry is collapsing. The democratic state is being dismantled. We can see that Mitterrand in France won power on almost the same programme that Labour won power in 1974, and in France they've got much greater control of banking, and the commercial centre, and he was not able to carry it through. We've got to think about this terribly seriously and say that in the first instance it is very important that the democratic socialist forces of Europe fight together.

You're suggesting taking the EEC referendum in 1975 as a starting point, which is interesting because usually the starting point is 1979 and the defeat of the Labour government.

The key defeat was the referendum. For a while people thought, and I was one of them, that there would come a time when they would win power and take us out of the Common Market. Well 10 years later we are neither forming alliances with the democratic socialist parties in Europe, nor are we able to fight multinational capitalism. Ten years is long enough to adjust to a major defeat.

It's not a soft Left position, and it's not a hard Left position, the one that you've outlined.

Unless we realise the scale of the structure we're engaged in we can't win it. One key element in the struggle is quite simply to save the welfare state. Since 1979 if you're on half average income, you'll be paying £2.09 a week more in tax and national insurance. If you're on five times average income, you'll be paying £74 a week less in tax and national insurance. The contribution that businesses and unearned incomes make has dropped from 33% to 27%. So the national pool of taxation isn't progressive any more. To halt that huge shift in the patterns of funding and provision needs the most phenomenal mobilisation. And I don't think as yet the labour movement has envisaged the scale of what has to be done.

But people's powerlessness in relation to it has fuelled discontent that actually aided the Right and not us. So is defence radical enough?

Frankly, if you're paying for your child's schooling in taxes and in jumble sales to get teachers and books, then you would be hoping that there would be some local politicians who would be interested enough in what was happening and you wouldn't really necessarily understand the question. It would seem very remote from the reality of the anxiety of the parents.

No, I think that's not fair. The record has been pretty bloody awful.

Well, plainly it is not enough to defend. I mean so far as ILEA is concerned, for example, what we have done is spent the last four years both defending the level of service provided and trying to improve it. I think the ILEA has been able to mobilise both parents and those who work in the service in its defence. The normal method of policy-making in the ILEA involves a great deal of consultation and that is something to build on. The practical anxieties that parents express about quite ordinary things like reading and mathematics, are genuine and serious and have got to be seen as such. We do have to be absolutely determined to ensure that the talents of working class children, and girls, who fail in a different way, and black children, are liberated and that means a very detailed look at what's going on in the school. There's no doubt whatever that the Right covered the pursuit of privilege with criticisms which rang true to many parents out of their experience and which I think, because of a sort of clapped-out workerism actually, somehow there was a period when the labour movement didn't feel able to recognise those parental concerns. Although the public education service has been successful in raising the average level of performance, what it has never done is varied the performance by social class. Children, in other words, are not operating as individuals. The primary predictor is gender or social class. And we haven't said it and parents know it. In some Labour circles the working class has been considered not quite good enough, and their views and aspirations are quite regularly described as inadequate. Working people have got to put up with people in management positions, in parliament and all over the place as they are and not as they would like them to be. And I think they're very decent about it, frankly. It is working people whose standards of decency and justice maintain whatever there is of the civilised society in this country. I feel very strongly about that. But the labour movement, the culture of whose upper echelons is quite philistine, quite second rate and negative, has tended to look down on the working class. •