

Blair's Bogus Bolsheviks

Labourism & the British Left

Buoyed by favorable opinion polls and salivating at the prospect of electoral victory after more than fifteen years in the wilderness, in April 1995 the British Labour Party voted to abolish the famous Clause IV of its constitution, which committed it, at least on paper, to fighting for “social ownership” of the major means of production and exchange. With this obsequious bow before the “free market,” Labour at long last joined its social-democratic counterparts on the continent in abandoning any pretense of standing for socialism.

The vote was also a milestone in the career of Tony Blair, who had risen to the post of party leader the previous year vowing to make Labour a respectable “party of government,” i.e., one that would be acceptable to a capitalist class on the attack. Dumping Clause IV was the culmination of Labour’s long retreat in the face of the Thatcherite offensive. The Labour Party betrayed the miners’ strike of 1984-85 and then purged itself of leftists—all with the “pragmatic” objective of getting back into 10 Downing Street. Now Tony Blair has taken the next logical step on the road of political “realism”: assuring the country’s capitalist rulers that, once in government, his party will do nothing very different from the Tories he aims to replace.

Although the scuttling of Clause IV is a new low, it represents no fundamental change in the character of the Labour Party. From its inception, Labour has always been a classical example of what Lenin called a “bourgeois workers’ party.” Founded on a recognition of the necessity for working-class political independence, and based upon the organizations of the working class, it has always nevertheless been dominated by bourgeois ideology, and run by people whose fundamental loyalty to the existing social order was never in doubt. Labour has always acted as a prop for capitalism, and an obstacle to the development of revolutionary consciousness in the proletariat. The abolition of Clause IV thus only makes explicit what was implicit in the Labour Party from its formation.

The Labour Party arose in response to a deep working-class radicalization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as British capitalism faced serious competition from powerful German and U.S. imperialist rivals. The resulting economic insecurity was sufficient to detach the more advanced sections of the proletariat from the bourgeois Liberal Party as recognition spread that the workers needed their own party separate from, and counterposed to, the parties of the bosses in order to defend their interests.

Yet this organizational step forward was not matched by an equivalent political advance. Even while separating from the organizations of the bourgeoisie, Labour remained firmly within the *political* tradition of British liberalism. It has always remained slavishly loyal to the parliamentary system, that “democratic” mask for the rule of capital. While formally calling for socialism, the party insisted that this goal would have to be attained by parliamentary, rather than revolutionary, methods. Labour’s leaders invariably grovelled before the monarchy and supported the British ruling class in all its imperialist adventures—from world wars to colonialist interventions in Ireland, India, Africa and elsewhere. Labour eagerly supported the UN’s coun-

terrevolutionary war against North Korea in the 1950s. Under Harold Wilson in the 1960s, it dutifully backed American imperialism’s failed attempt to crush the Vietnamese revolution.

Labour Party: Pillar of Capitalist Rule

The Labour Party, like social-democratic parties everywhere, serves as an essential pillar of “democratic” capitalist rule. While the impulse for its existence comes from the working class, the Labour Party acts as a mechanism for promoting bourgeois ideology among working people. In times of political crisis, when bourgeois parties and politicians are discredited in the eyes of the masses, the capitalists are glad to have some experienced operators with enough political authority within the workers’ movement to control outbreaks of class struggle.

Labour leaders, including the so-called trade-union lefts, played a key role in the defeat of the 1926 General Strike. In 1931, Labour Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald defected to a Tory “National Government” in order to carry out massive austerity attacks, including cuts in already near-starvation-level unemployment benefits. During the past fifteen years of Tory reaction, the latter-day MacDonalds have once again been stabbing the working-class movement in the back.

From its inception, the Labour Party has been formally committed to achieving, by parliamentary means, the piecemeal nationalization of *parts* of the British economy, and to ameliorating the worst ravages of capitalism. In order to head off the growth of communism after the Russian Revolution, the party brass thought it prudent to burnish its “radical” image. Labour became a party with individual membership (open initially to workers of all political stripes, though Communists were soon excluded), and a formal commitment to “socialism,” as embodied in Clause IV. The constituency parties provided a playground for the left, but the real balance of power lay always with the party’s two more substantial components: the trade-union bureaucracy (with a guaranteed bloc of votes), and the parliamentary caucus.

Even the gains Labour achieved—e.g., the free National Health Service, introduced after the Second World War by Clement Atlee’s government—were conceived by Labour chiefs as a way to “protect” British workers from communist influence. In fact, the National Health Service was the brainchild not of the Labour Party, but of a Liberal aristocrat, Viscount Beveridge.

In recent years we have seen a concerted drive by the ruling classes in the imperialist countries to raise profit margins through the wholesale destruction of social gains won by the workers. Margaret Thatcher’s attacks on trade-union rights and on the “welfare state” went hand in hand with a military buildup aimed at the Soviet bloc. The Labour leadership’s support for these measures led to a long string of electoral defeats, and ensured the ascendancy of Thatcher and her colorless successor, John Major. Capitalist triumphalism over the collapse of the USSR, coming after a decade of domestic defeats (most notably the 1984-85 min-

ers' strike) drove the Labourite bureaucracy to despair, and opened the door for the far right of the party under Tony Blair. The Blairites wholeheartedly embrace the Thatcherite "free market," and regard Labour's historic link with the unions as a source of embarrassment.

But Thatcherism and Blairism did not arise in a vacuum. Attempts to break the power of the trade unions can be traced to the 1964-70 Labour government of Harold Wilson, which imposed compulsory wage controls and attempted to introduce anti-union legislation outlined in a 1969 White Paper entitled "In Place of Strife." The British workers' movement was then at the peak of its post-war strength, and a storm of protest from the BLP and the unions soon led Wilson to abandon the idea. But British capital continued to lose ground to its competitors throughout this period, and the Tory government of Edward Heath, which succeeded Wilson's, re-introduced a package of anti-union legislation known as the Industrial Relations Act. This imposed compulsory cooling-off periods and ballots before strikes, outlawed effective picketing, and set up a special court empowered to fine or imprison trade unionists. The Heath government's attempts to crush the unions fueled a working-class radicalization. Faced with a powerful miners' strike, in January 1974 Heath called a general election on the issue, "Who rules the country, the government or the unions?" The government lost.

The BLP bureaucracy responded to the radicalization at its base by shifting markedly to the left. It adopted a paper program of widespread nationalization, and advocated a National Enterprise Board with the power to buy government shares in profitable industries. Originally proposed by the middle-headed parliamentary lefts, this scheme took the reformist conception of the state to its absurd logical conclusion: using the "democratic" state to buy out gradually the ruling class. The mainstream Labourite bureaucracy went along with these policies in order to ride out the working-class radicalization.

The election of February 1974 pitted the Labour Party's policy of accommodation to the miners against Tory attempts to defeat them. The workers saw the Labour Party as standing, at least in a parliamentary sense, for their interests *against* the bosses. This is why, in that election (and the subsequent election of October 1974, called by Wilson to get a working majority in parliament), Marxists should have given critical support to the Labour Party to put it to the test of office, while continuing to criticize its reformist politics and warning of its capacity for betrayal.

The betrayal was not long in coming. The 1974-79 Labour government, led by Wilson and James Callaghan, carried out attacks on the British working class more savage than any since the 1930s. Through its "Social Contract" deal with the Trades Union Congress, which agreed to police workers' strike action during a period of rampant inflation, workers' living standards dropped by 20 percent. The bitter disillusionment of the working class produced opposition on the right and the left. The fascist National Front (NF) suddenly emerged as a significant force in British politics, and began to receive some alarmingly high votes in by-elections. At the same time there were a number of explosions of working-class militancy against the Labour government, as well as growing militant anti-fascist activity. Labour's anti-working-class politics also produced a cleavage between a rightist section of the parliamentary wing and trade-union bureaucracy, on the one hand, and its working-class base on the other. As popular resentment grew, a section of the Labourite bureaucracy began to regard the

connection to the unions, which made Labour, even in government, vulnerable to pressure from the working class, as a distinct liability. When Labour lost the 1979 general election, this tension exploded into a right/left conflict within the party.

Revolt of the Labour Lefts

The revolt by the Labour lefts headed by Tony Benn in the early 1980s was a fight in which Marxists had a side. It pitted the lefts (with a probable majority of working-class Labour supporters behind them) against the most venal sections of the bureaucracy, those who regarded Labour's working-class roots as an obstacle to their political careers. The domestic questions that split the bureaucracy were exacerbated by the renewal of the Cold War in the 1980s. The rightists predictably took a hard pro-NATO line, whereas the Bennite left opposed the U.S./NATO war drive, if only from the standpoint of "Little England" pacifism.

The anti-union right actually split the party: the "Gang of Four" (Williams, Jenkins, Owen and Rogers) broke from the workers' movement altogether to form the bourgeois Social Democratic Party (SDP) in 1981, and went on to fuse with the Liberal Party after the 1987 election. In 1981 Tony Benn, representing Labour's left wing, ran for deputy leader. He lost by a margin of less than one percent. Had he won, there would undoubtedly have been much larger defections by members of the openly anti-working-class right. This was reason enough for Marxists to have given critical support to Tony Benn against the pro-NATO right winger, Denis Healey.

Despite the SDP split, the bulk of Labour's right wing remained within the party. After a few years spent fighting a rearguard action against the left in the early 1980s, they went over to the offensive under the leadership of ex-left renegade Neil Kinnock. Their object was, in words now frequently heard in the British labor movement, to transform Labour into an "SDP Mark II."

Marxists take sides in factional conflicts within the workers' movement only when one side is superior in some decisive programmatic sense to the other. The Labour left had traditionally served as a safety valve for left-wing sentiment within the party, mouthing militant platitudes at the yearly Blackpool Conference, only to turn around and urge unity behind the rightist parliamentary wing at the polls. The job of Marxists is to expose the lefts to the working class for what they are: a cover for the overtly pro-capitalist policies of the right. We do not side with the left merely on the basis of its hypocritical phrases.

The Benn/Healey fight, however, was more than the typical charade staged for the benefit of the galleries. Benn represented a faction that favored genuine, albeit reformist, opposition to Thatcher's attempts to break the unions, and counterposed a utopian social-pacifist unilateralism to NATO's Cold War drive. Healey, on the other hand, stood for utter capitulation to Thatcher's union-busting and open support for NATO. Many of Healey's supporters were toying with the idea of breaking with the workers' movement altogether. This fight involved real stakes, and Marxists were obliged to give the Benn wing critical support against Healey *et al.*

The 1981 Benn/Healey contest stands in marked contrast to the usual left/right divisions in the British workers' movement. An example of the latter was the recent campaign for the top job in the Transport and General Workers

Union (T&G). Jack Dromey, a right-wing religious bigot and Blair supporter, stood against Bill Morris, who presented himself as some sort of leftist. Virtually every left group supported Morris on the grounds that a victory for Dromey would mean a takeover of the T&G by Blairites. But Morris is *also* a Blairite—he “personally” favors the abolition of Clause IV. His left talk of repealing anti-union laws and demanding a minimum wage is so vague as to be worth nothing.

‘New Realism’ & Neo-Thatcherism

Blair and the hard right of the trade-union bureaucracy subscribe to a policy they call “new realism.” Their arguments are quite unlike those of classical reformism. The latter—first articulated 100 years ago by Eduard Bernstein of the German Social Democracy, and taken up after World War II by such figures as Hugh Gaitskell and Anthony Crosland—held that socialist revolution was obsolete because capitalism was gradually shedding class distinctions and transforming itself into an egalitarian society. All that was necessary was to nudge it along. Few make such arguments today. Rather, the “new realists” claim that the capitalist market is so mighty that all attempts to resist it are futile. Only those who accept its assumptions and prostrate themselves before it can hope to survive. Tony Blair prattles about the “rigours of competition,” and tells the workers not to concern themselves with trying to advance their distinctive class interests, but rather collaborate with their employers for the good of their firms and, ultimately, society as a whole. Blair hopes that such declarations may soften the hearts of the rulers sufficiently to allow Labour to retain a few vestiges of the old welfare state and perhaps even introduce one or two paltry reforms—the best that can be hoped for in this vale of tears.

But the reforms of the past have only been won through mass social struggles. Why then is it “realistic” to think that, in the absence of such struggle, the ruling class will suddenly respond to grovelling? Those who abandon all hope of any fundamental change, and set their sights instead on a few reforms, forget that historically most reforms have only been granted in order to undercut the growth of revolutionary sentiment in the population. As the potential revolutionary danger recedes, so too do the possibilities of reform. There is, in short, very little that is realistic about the “new realism.” It is little more than a synonym for surrender.

“New realism” has translated politically into a concerted campaign against the left and the more militant sectors of the working class. Labour’s right wing carried out a two-pronged strategy: first, brazen strikebreaking to weaken struggles led by the left (particularly the 1984-85 miners’ strike), and, second, witchhunts of leftists in the Labour Party. The muddled leftism of Benn proved politically incapable of defeating the right wingers. Anti-communist business unionists, basing themselves on the aristocracy of labor, followed Thatcher’s example and attacked militant unions on behalf of the bosses. This offensive could not be defeated with the tame parliamentarism of the Labour lefts.

A determined fight by the labor movement could have broken the self-confidence of the bosses and turned the tide in favor of the workers. But such a policy demanded a break with Labourite reformism and a political struggle inside the unions to isolate and defeat the rightists. Such a perspective was not on offer—not from Benn, nor even from Arthur Scargill, the “hard left” leader of the mine workers. For all

his trade-union militancy, Scargill’s program did not go beyond the formation of a left parliamentary reformist government.

Since the defeat of the miners’ strike, the “new realists” have become hegemonic in the unions. The quintessential expression of their dominance is Tony Blair. From a Tory family, Blair has no particular attachment to the unions or even to the labor bureaucracy. He came to prominence after Kinnock managed to lose the 1992 election despite the disarray of the Tories over economic policy, the Poll Tax and the European Union. In the eyes of the “new realists,” Kinnock lost because he had not grovelled enough to Thatcher’s social base. So after a short interregnum with the nondescript “traditionalist” John Smith, Blair succeeded to the Labour crown.

Blair’s successful drive to get rid of Clause IV capped Labour’s turn away from nationalization, the welfare state, unilateral disarmament, and all the other nostrums traditionally associated with British social democracy. For the past decade the Labour leaders have been indicating that, if elected, they would keep most of Thatcher’s anti-union laws on the books. So wretched has Labour become that the Liberal Democrats, the bourgeois third party of British politics, now often finds itself criticizing Labour from the left. The bourgeois Scottish National Party (SNP) sounds even more radical. In the Littleborough and Saddleworth by-election in July 1995, Labour campaigned against the Liberal Democrats using Tory slogans, and attacking the Liberals for being “soft on drugs” and being “the party of tax and spend.”

The politics of “New” Labour were spelled out by shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown on the eve of the conference where Clause IV was dumped. Alongside a profusion of liberal rhetoric about “fairness” and “social justice,” he stated their bottom line:

“[F]or the first time also the Labour Party has set down its commitment to a market economy, to living with the rigours of competition, and to nurturing enterprise.

“Conservatives have claimed that Labour opposes the private sector, and markets....Now, with our clear statement of aims, no one can ever again question our commitment to a healthy and successful private sector, or to competition and enterprise.

“The people know we will be tough on crime and on the causes of crime. The Labour Party is now the party of law and order in Britain.

“Our task is nothing less than equipping the British people and their industries to meet global competition in this decade and beyond.”

—*Evening Standard* (London), 28 April 1995

Labour’s current political stance is only distinguishable from that of the Tories in minor details. This open embrace of Thatcherism is a negation of *any* claim of the Labour leadership to stand for the independent interests of workers as a class. It has been a long time coming.

Labour Loyalists & Pseudo-Trotskyists

It should be an elementary reflex for anyone identifying with the tradition of revolutionary Marxism that such a party, under such a leadership, does not deserve electoral support. But the British left is organically linked by a kind of umbilical cord to social democracy. Many ostensibly Trotskyist organizations in Britain engage in some form of deep, strategic entrism into the Labour Party. Even those

tendencies that acknowledge the necessity to stand left candidates against Labour in elections generally react with horror to the very idea of not voting Labour where there is no credible leftist alternative.

On the opposite end of the spectrum are various “Third World” Stalinist types who refuse to call for a vote for the Labour Party on the grounds that it is a bourgeois party, pure and simple. While reaching a different conclusion, they share the methodology of the ostensibly Trotskyist reformist and centrist left—that one must give electoral support to a bourgeois workers’ party *no matter what it does*. To withhold support, they must deny that Labour is a workers’ party of any kind. Such notions have nothing in common with the classical Leninist tactic of critical support, which is aimed at undercutting the influence of the social-democratic betrayers over the working class. Viewed from this perspective, the question of whether or not to advocate a vote for Labour in a given election is not a matter of principle, but rather one of tactics.

The most consistent expression of the “support-Labour-no-matter-what” approach is put forward by the reformist Alliance for Workers Liberty (AWL):

“Marxists worked in the Labour Party before it adopted Clause Four. We will continue to work inside Labour if Clause IV is abandoned.

“We do so because of what Labour *is*.

“Labour is the political wing of the multi-millioned trade union movement. Despite all its many limitations it represent[s] the first faltering steps of the working class movement on the road to political independence.

“Though all Labour governments have—fundamentally—served the interest of capital the party remains rooted in the bedrock organisations of the working class. “It provides the *only* actually existing governmental alternative available to the working class movement here and now.

“If our politics are centred on the working class and the fight for its self-liberation then they, necessarily, relate to the working class, and to its organisations as they actually exist. Therefore serious socialists have to relate to the Labour Party. If Blair is successful in winning the abolition of Clause Four none of this will change.

“The fact that the party had written into its constitution a formal commitment to common ownership, which is one pre-requisite of socialism, did not make the Labour Party socialist. On the contrary, the party’s overall contradictory nature is defined on the one side by its actions in government and by policies and on the other side by its social base.”

—*Workers Liberty*, May 1995

As “the political wing” of the trade unions, the Labour Party does not express the interests of the millions at the base, but rather those of the bureaucrats at the top. When the AWL asserts that “serious socialists have to relate to the Labour Party,” they mean total immersion in the increasingly middle-class dominated constituency parties, and slavish electoral support to *proven and tested* betrayers of the working class such as Kinnock and Blair. The logic of their liquidationism was clear in the AWL’s strident denunciations of those who were driven out in the witchhunts for daring to stand against the “SDP Mark II.”

The duty of Marxists is to restate the fundamental truth that the venal, counterrevolutionary, pro-capitalist bureaucracy that dominates the labor movement is the *mortal enemy* of the working class, albeit an enemy within. Electoral endorsement of the Blairites by supposed revolutionaries does nothing to break the bureaucracy’s stranglehold

on the workers’ movement. It merely gives a left cover to people who are already widely derided by the more advanced workers as crypto-Tories. The AWL is among the most abject examples of the British left’s loyalty to Her Majesty’s Labour Party, but their perpetual electoral support to Labour is common throughout most of the British left. Tony Cliff’s Socialist Workers Party (SWP), which postures as *the* revolutionary socialist alternative, nevertheless routinely calls for voting Labour at election time.

Contradictions of ‘Militant Labour’

The Militant Labour group, which spent decades buried in the Labour Party, now regularly stands candidates against Labour in both national and local elections. They recently made the following estimate of the present political consciousness of Labour voters:

“Most politically advanced workers entertain few illusions as to what a Labour government will mean. At best they hope for a more favourable, less hostile, framework within which to struggle. But they are already conscious, or half-conscious, of the fact that it will be down to the strength and combativity of workers in action, and not the actions of a Labour government, if the Tory attacks of the past are to be reversed and new conquests made.”

—*Militant International Review*, Summer 1995

In other words, while hoping that Blair will be a bit softer than Thatcher or Major, “politically advanced workers” don’t see Labour as in any way representing them as a *class* against the bosses. Hardly surprising, as Blair has pointed out *ad nauseam* that his ambition is to “serve my country” irrespective of class. His praise for Margaret Thatcher and Rupert Murdoch should remove all ambiguity about what that means. Yet the political conclusions drawn by Militant Labour contradict its analysis:

“Militant Labour supports the coming to power of a Labour government, not because there will be a fundamental change in the policies pursued by that government compared to the Tories, but because it would lift the yoke of 16 years of Tory rule off the back of the working class. It would release the pent-up frustrations which have built up over this period. Moreover it would test out in action, and thus expose, Blair and the right wing, which in turn would prepare the ground for the acceptance of genuine socialist and Marxist ideas in a mass form.”

—*Ibid.*

There will not be a fundamental change in the government’s policies—Blair says it, Militant Labour knows it, and so do “most politically conscious workers.” So how exactly will Blair’s election “lift the yoke of 16 years of Tory rule off the back of the working class?” He promises in advance to carry out Thatcherite policies, and does not even pretend that he will fight for the interests of the working class.

Militant Labour is in a difficult predicament. Since it broke from the Labour Party a few years ago after a determined witchhunt against it, Militant has moved leftwards in posture, if not in program. Militant cadres well know the bitter disillusionment and alienation that exists in the working class about Kinnock and Blair’s crypto-Toryism. Yet Militant has not broken from its traditional reformist program—it still has as its crowning demand a call for a left Labour government to pass an enabling act and nationalize the top 200 monopolies. It proposes to introduce socialism via parliament, with mass extra-parliamentary pressure from the union movement, but without *overturning* the existing bourgeois state and creating new, proletarian, institutions of state power. This left-Labourite utopianism

prevents it from drawing the obvious conclusion: that class-conscious workers have no reason whatsoever to vote for a Thatcherite Labour Party.

Workers Power's Labourite Habit

If Militant Labour has produced one of the clearest statements of the existing consciousness in Labour's traditional working-class base, the prize for the most straightforward justification for continuing to vote for today's neo-Thatcherite Labour Party goes to the centrist Workers Power group (WP). In an article written just before the 1992 General Election, they wrote:

"Labour's 1992 manifesto is a monument to Neil Kinnock's transformation of the Labour Party into a pale pink version of the Tories. When John Major refers to Labour as the 'Socialists' Kinnock could justifiably sue him for libel. The word socialism doesn't get a mention in the 1992 manifesto. The entire set of policies outlined have nothing whatsoever to do with socialism.

"Labour's economic recovery plan is directed at the bosses. Labour will be 'a government which business can do business with'. Not one penny is promised to cut the obscene unemployment figures, but the bosses are promised—in the very first point of the plan for 'national recovery'—'enhanced capital allowances' and 'an investment tax incentive'."

—*Workers Power*, March 1992

Yet after this accurate description, WP, true to form, draws a programmatic conclusion that is completely opposed to their analysis: "Nevertheless we say: Vote Labour." This patent incongruity is rationalized as follows:

"Of course, in policy terms Labour may not differ much with the Tories, Liberals or SNP but it remains a working class-based party. Nearly ever[y] penny it is spending in the election campaign comes from the pockets of ordinary workers through the trade unions. The trade unions still have a decisive say over Labour Party policy—even though Kinnock has won the right to ignore that policy when he chooses to. The vast majority of those who vote for Labour and run the local parties are workers."

—*Ibid.*

For all its leftist criticism, WP ends up agreeing with the rest of the British fake left that Labour's political program is irrelevant, the fact that it is the party of the labor bureaucracy is reason enough. For WP, like Militant Labour, the AWL, the SWP and the rest, voting for Labour is a matter of principle rather than a tactic aimed at splitting the base from the top. As a drug addict in a lucid moment may be able to give a thousand good reasons for kicking the habit, so the reformist/centrist left can cite multiple examples of the rottenness of Blair & Co. But, just as reason is usually powerless in the end against the addict's craving, so all the betrayals of the Labour brass are never sufficient to prevent the pseudo-Trotskyists from marking their ballots for Labour on election day. The habit is just too strong.

A key reason for Marxists to give critical electoral support to a bourgeois workers' party is to draw a class line against the bosses. It is all very well to say the workers have illusions in the Kinnock/Blair Labour Party. Many of them undoubtedly do, but those workers who vote for the Liberal Democrats and even the Tories also have "illusions" in the parties *they* vote for. The purpose of the Leninist tactic of critical support is to exploit the contradiction created by the existence of a particular type of illusion—the notion that the bourgeois workers' party represents the working class *against* the bosses. As Militant Labour admits, most politi-

cally advanced workers have few illusions on *that* score. It follows, therefore, that the contradiction between Labour's working-class base and its pro-capitalist leadership cannot be exploited by a tactic of critical support. Electoral support to Labour, in the present circumstances, can serve no purpose except to provide "Tory" Blair with a left cover.

Weathervane 'Tactics'

The issue of critical support was clearly posed after Kinnock's purge of Militant supporters (including two members of parliament, Dave Nellist and Terry Fields) led to Militant Labour's decision to stand candidates against Labour. The first to run was Lesley Mahmood who stood in a Liverpool by-election in 1991 on a program that included these demands:

"An immediate end to the poll tax and writing off all poll tax debts. I support people who can't pay and will defend their homes from bailiffs.

"The restoration of the £57 billion stolen from councils since 1979. Take back into council control all services handed to private sharks.

"Not one job to be lost. A 35-hour week without loss of pay to create a million new jobs and use the skills of the unemployed to build better homes, schools and environment.

"A minimum wage of £175 a week. Labour has just cut its commitment to only half the average wage.

"A Labour government that really runs the country, not one told what to do by the overpaid big business bosses."

— *Militant*, 28 June 1991

In the general election the following year, Militant Labour stood candidates on a similar program. Dave Nellist and Terry Fields, the two Militant-supporting Labour MPs, stood as "Real Labour" candidates against the Kinnock-stooge contenders; Tommy Sheridan of Scottish Militant Labour, a leader of the anti-poll-tax campaign who was not an MP, stood against Labour in a Glasgow seat.

Theirs was not a revolutionary, but rather a left-reformist Labourite program which is *ultimately* counterposed to the historic interests of the working class. Yet, in contrast to the neo-Thatcherite Labour chiefs who had just purged them, the Militant supporters appealed to workers *as a class* and proposed to fight to defend and advance their interests. On the basis of this distinction, it was appropriate for Marxists to critically support the Militant candidates against Labour and the bourgeois parties.

The decision of Militant Labour to run against Labour posed a test for the British left. In the 1992 general election the Workers Power group called for votes to Nellist and Fields just as they had previously supported Mahmood. But they refused to give critical support to Tommy Sheridan on the grounds that he did not have enough of a base in the working class of the area:

"However the reasons for supporting Nellist, Fields and Mahmood do not apply with Tommy Sheridan, the Scottish Militant Labour candidate in Glasgow (Pollock). Like Nellist and Fields he will be standing on a left reformist programme. Unlike them he does not represent either major sections of the working class engaged in a struggle or a fight against the witch-hunt."

—*Workers Power*, March 1992

When Sheridan got a very respectable 19.3 percent of the vote, Workers Power had to eat its words, and issue an embarrassed correction entitled "We were wrong about Sheridan," admitting that the previous position:

“was clearly a false estimate of the conditions in Pollock...By any fair estimate this is a substantial proportion of the working class vote, beating the Tories into third place.

“Clearly this level of support was related to the leadership given by Tommy Sheridan to the Anti-Poll Tax struggle on Strathclyde. It may have been related as well to popular indignation at his incarceration in Saughton prison. We were unable to assess the strength of this support given our lack of implantation in the area. It would have been principled for Trotskyists to give critical support to Tommy Sheridan on the same basis as we supported Dave Nellist and Terry Fields.”

—*Workers Power*, April 1992

Workers Power’s flip-flop displayed tactical ineptitude as well as geographical distance from Glasgow. But it also illustrated their centrist methodology in which electoral support is based primarily on considerations of popularity, rather than political program. WP extended support to Militant Labour candidates on the same basis as to the official ones—an estimate of the number of votes they were likely to get.

‘Only the Spartacist League...’

The Militant Labour campaign also provided the Spartacist League/Britain (SL/B) with the opportunity to provide a vivid example of their own “uniquely correct” brand of sectarianism. The SL/B quite correctly refuses to give any electoral support to Kinnock/Blair’s Labour Party. But when Militant Labour finally emerged from the LP and stood Mahmood in Liverpool, the headline of the SL/B’s *Workers Hammer* (July/August 1991) screamed: “No vote to Kilfoyle, Mahmood!” The article explained:

“A qualitative and decisive reason for our position of non-support is that, while claiming to oppose Kinnock’s yes-man on issues such as cuts, redundancies and the poll tax, the Broad Left and Militant have made clear their advocacy of a Labour Party victory in the general election, i.e. support for a Kinnock government....Thus, while claiming to challenge Kinnock’s puppet in Liverpool, the Militant/Broad Left have not broken in any fashion from support to the puppeteer Kinnock. So much for their ‘independent’ campaign—the tooth bites down on nothing.

“Far from counterposing the need for a class-struggle workers party, Mahmood’s leaflets, in Labour’s red and yellow colours, describe her as the ‘real Labour’ candidate. This is of a piece with Militant’s insistence that it is seeking to return Labour to its ‘socialist roots’. Clearly they want to appear before the voters as loyal Labourites. But the ‘real’ Labour Party they swear fealty to is the party of class betrayal, from Labour’s support to the imperialist war in the Gulf to its scabberding on the heroic 1984-85 miners strike.”

The SL/B admitted that Mahmood claimed to oppose the Kinnockites “on issues such as cuts, redundancies and [enforcing] the poll tax.” The fact that Militant claimed to stand for the working class on these issues clearly demarcated it from Kinnock’s party, which made no such claims. Of course it is necessary to point out the illusions in the Labourite traitors and other aspects of the reformist utopianism of Militant’s program. At a different juncture the persistence of its illusions in transforming the Labour Party and inability to break decisively with it could assume great importance. But in the concrete circumstances, the Militant candidate stood in *opposition* to the right-wing

capitulations of the Labour bureaucracy, not as a stalking horse for it. The Leninist tactic of critical support for candidates of parties in the workers’ movement does not require that they first embrace a consistently revolutionary program, but rather that they represent, in some programmatic way, an expression of the interests of the working class. Mahmood’s campaign met that criterion.

The SL/B’s sterile rigidity is not *simply* a matter of formalistic thinking on the part of its leading cadres. It is primarily the result of the fact that the supreme leadership of James Robertson’s U.S.-based International Communist League (of which the SL/B is the British affiliate), operates in a manner which puts the highest priority on preventing the emergence of indigenous leaderships capable of determining tactics for intervention in the class struggle in their own countries. Such cadres could, in time, acquire authority of their own, and come to challenge the infallibility of the “center.” The SL/B’s sometimes hysterical sectarianism also has the benefit of cutting members off from serious political interaction with other tendencies, thereby minimizing the chances that they might begin to question some of the behavior or proposals of their own leadership. The Robertsonites’ indifference to intersecting leftist splits from mainstream social democracy, such as Militant Labour, is a demonstration of their incapacity to fight for revolutionary politics out in the big world.

Against Opportunism and Sectarianism— For Leninist Tactics

The future course of the Labour Party is not entirely clear at the moment. It is possible that a split may result from a clash between its working-class base and the Thatcher-style government Blair intends to lead. This could take the form of a Ramsay MacDonald-style shearing off of the topmost layers of the party, leaving the bulk behind to reconstitute the Labour Party as in the 1930s. Or, perhaps more likely, there could be a smaller split to form a more left-wing reformist party. Indeed, the news that miners’ leader Arthur Scargill is seeking to launch a breakaway “Socialist Labour Party” by next May Day points in such a direction. It is conceivable that Blair could succeed in completely severing Labour’s links with the workers’ movement, thus creating a “new” liberal bourgeois party to compete with the Tories as the party of the British bosses. This appears to be what he wants. But it will be difficult, and would in any case likely result in an attempt to re-found a labor party by the trade unions.

However it is resolved, the current situation cannot last indefinitely. A bourgeois workers’ party that renounces any pretense of seeking to reform the existing social order cannot long maintain itself atop a working class dissatisfied with its lot. The anger and alienation growing in Britain today as the result of decades of capitalist decay ensures that Blair’s “New” Labour Party is heading for a fall. The ensuing eruption of class struggle could present a Marxist organization with important opportunities to intervene and grow.

The Labour Party question is at present *the* strategic question for Marxists in Britain. Opportunism toward the Labour Party, particularly its left wing, runs deep in the ostensible Trotskyist movement, and has played a major role in derailing more than one serious attempt to forge a revolutionary party. The sterile sectarianism exemplified by the Spartacist League is a complement to this opportunist

ism—the opposite side of the same coin. The sectarian, like the opportunist, fears confrontation with the reformist misleaders in front of the working class. Reformists capitulate to the prevailing illusions; sectarians take refuge from any real fight in the safety of their own little sandbox, where all

the variables can be controlled. The comrades who have recently launched the British section of the International Bolshevik Tendency are committed to struggle against both false alternatives, and to root the program of revolutionary Marxism once more in the British workers' movement. ■

Critical Support & Marxist Tactics

In Ontario, Canada's largest province, the right-wing social-democrats of the New Democratic Party (NDP) were in power from 1990 until June 1995. During that time they worked hard to please big business at the expense of working people. They cut back health care and raised tuition, whipped up sentiment against "welfare fraud" and de-indexed payments for injured workers. Their worst betrayal however was to enact an unprecedented anti-labor law (perversely dubbed the "Social Contract") that tore up union contracts and drove down wages for public sector workers.

While most of the left, including the International Socialists and Labour Militant, called for a vote to the NDP union-bashers in the June 1995 election, our comrades in Toronto issued a statement (15 May 1995) that noted:

"In some circumstances revolutionaries could call for a vote for [the NDP]—when such a vote would advance the class struggle. But that does not include situations where the NDP is running on its record of

attacking the unions and the other constituencies it pretends to defend."

Our comrades called for a vote and actively supported two independent labor candidates running against NDP incumbents in Toronto, despite the fact that, "their programs do not go beyond reformist/utopian calls to 'tax the rich' and lower interest rates." We campaigned for them because they opposed the NDP's union bashing—the key issue in the election. We also called for support to the four NDP parliamentary deputies who had defied their leaders:

"The NDP MPPs who opposed the social contract are not Marxists. They do not represent a fundamental alternative to the NDP leadership. For them, as for [NDP leader Bob] Rae, the limits of the possible are set by the profit system. Yet their vote against the government's open class treason draws an important line between them and the rest of the NDP caucus. As a result, class-conscious workers should be prepared to vote for them in this election."