

MARXIST STUDIES

BMS Publications, 16a Holmdale Road, London, N.W.6 Tel. 01 - 794 9822

NEWSLETTER

No.2 May 1970

THE ARTICLE RED MOLE WOULD NOT PRINT

In The Red Mole No.3 there was printed an article on the Labour Party written by Robin Blackburn. At the head of the article it said -

"With this article The Red Mole opens a long-needed discussion on the Labour Party - a problem which has bedeviled the revolutionary movement since its existence. Our pages will be open to all comrades wishing to discuss the question".

The following article was submitted for publication some weeks ago, but nothing was heard from the Red Mole until the author contacted their office. He was told the first time he rang that "the article was negative". Later he was told that the article "was too long" and he agreed to make some cuts being made. He was then contacted by the Red Mole office who suggested that one third of the article should be cut, and even specified which pages (!) should be cut out altogether. The author was presented here, not with a normal editorial attempt to reduce the length of an article, but an effort to tamper with the political content. Therefore the cuts were rejected on such a basis, which enabled The Red Mole to reject the whole article. Let us be quite clear, the cuts that were attempted to be made were such as to emasculate the political content of the article. Thus we can see how sincere was the offer to open the pages of the paper.

It is for the reason that we are circulating this article to all Red Circles. Further copies can be obtained free of charge by sending a stamped addressed envelope (foolscap) to the above address.

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LABOUR AND THE GENERAL ELECTION

by Ken Tarbuck

It is quite a healthy sign that there should be a discussion on the question of the Labour Party. This is particularly so since there is now a whole new strata amongst the youth (but by no means the majority) who have rejected the whole reformist ideology of Labourism, and who opt for a revolutionary change of society. In this sense Robin Blackburn's article is to be welcomed, but not in any other sense because he betrays a confusion of fact, history and perspective. It is very noticeable that he first presents his conclusions and then attempts to produce evidence that would justify them. This is an unwarrantable method in presentation which is an indication of the faulty reasoning behind much of what he writes, and it is to this that I want to address myself now.

On The Nature of the Labour Party

Robin says -

"Since its existence the Labour Party has always been the chief instrument for organising the loyalty of the British working class to "its own" bourgeois state. The reforms promised by the Labour Party are the bait on the hook."

This is just not true, moreover it presents us with an image of the Labour Party which is undialectical, since it portrays it right from the outset as a finished product. No organism or social formation could remain static for so long; life and experience teach us otherwise. Moreover, it fails to take into account the situation that gave rise to the birth of the Labour Party. True Robin mentions later on the Taff Vale judgement, but only in passing and as an after-thought. But Taff Vale was only the culmination of a process that had been in motion for nearly a decade when the employers were on the offensive against the trade union, perhaps the most noticeable event being the lockout of the Engineers in 1897, which ended in victory for the employers. It was in such a situation that it became possible for the law to accommodate itself to this changed situation. Therefore the impulse towards the creation of the Labour Representation Committee in 1900 was not to create an instrument for fooling the workers, rather it was a defensive measure by the trade unions within the corporativist consciousness of the working class. Robin's formulation carries with it the conspiratorial theory of history, which I am sure he would agree is nonsense.

We are then presented with a quotation from Lenin's speech at the second Congress of the Communist International. But, again, this has to be set in the context of the time. Lenin set out his sharp formulation of the nature of the Labour Party at a time when he was attempting to bring about the creation of a Communist Party

here in Britain, and no doubt felt it necessary to pose matters in this way so that the path could be cleared to this end. Because of this we must treat with reserve this quotation, because it presented the truth but only part of it, i.e. it was over-emphasised for good reasons/^{at} the time, but cannot be considered as being definitive. How else can one explain Lenin urging the CPGB to apply for affiliation to the same Labour Party once it (the CP) had been formed? This can only be understood by realising the dual nature of the Labour Party, on the one hand it is a bourgeois party, yet at the same time it is the organised expression of the trade unions and the working class generally. How else could it have performed its reformist functions? Moreover, to say it is the organised expression of the working class is precisely to recognise the character of the consciousness of this class i.e. corporative. When one talks about the crisis of leadership it is the corporative situation that is most characteristic of this and not one where the working class has moved ahead of its leaders.

Robin goes on to say regarding Lenin's definition=

"After all the Labour Party had just adopted Clause Four of its constitution, it had not yet been exposed by participating in Government, the record of many of its leaders during the war ^{had} was a shade better than that of continental Social Democratic leaders, and it/endorsed at least some sort of effective campaign against British intervention in the Soviet Republic."

Precisely. But just on a note of fact, many Labour leaders had participated in the wartime Coalition Government and therefore had had the opportunity of being "exposed". Again, we creeping in the conspiratorial view of history. If all that was needed to 'expose' Social Democracy was a spell office why has it not happened upto now? In the above paragraph we have revealed the dual nature of the Labour Party, and also Robin's confusion since he cannot grasp this.

This is even more graphically demonstrated when Robin asserts that the only link the Labour Party has with the working class is the "cash nexus" via trade union affiliation fees. This could only have been written by someone who is neither a worker nor has had any intimate contact with the labour and trade union movement. No evidence is produced to back up this assertion by Robin, nor I suspect could there be.

Following on from this is an attempt to subvert history in an even more glaring manner-

"The Trade Unions also should not be idealised. They bear the birthmarks of the period in British History which produced them; a period of colossal defeat for the first political movement of the British workers (Chartism) and an unparalleled global ascendancy for the world's first fully-fledged imperialism."

Again we are presented with a linear undialectical historical methodology. Whilst it is true that after the decline of Chartism we seemed to have the development of the so-called "New Model Unions," this is merely a version foisted upon us by the Webbs. New research has tended to throw considerable doubt on the version which indicates that what happened was a more continuous development than has been previously considered the case. H.A. Turner, in his book Trade Union Growth, Structure and Policy, throws considerable light on this question in relation to the cotton unions. Hitherto it has been the accepted orthodoxy in Labour History that after the Chartist defeat the "New Model Unions" arose amongst the craftsmen, and the A.S.E. was seen as the epitome of this development. Such historiography could only be developed by largely ignoring two factors that Turner brings to light. Firstly, the cotton unions - which developed during this period - were not skilled craft unions in the sense of the A.S.E., rather they organised themselves into 'craft' unionism by virtue of their control over jobs and entry into the various trades. Turner points out that certain jobs which at one period had been considered unskilled became 'skilled' later on once a strong union had been organised. The reason why such a development could take place was that these workers were the first truly factory-industrial workers gathered together in large numbers because of the development of large-scale industry. Secondly, many of the old craft unions deliberately tried to stop the development of unions for the unskilled. The unions that arose from the 1889 period very often did so despite the established unions. The growth of general or industrial unions therefore went ahead despite tradition that Robin invokes. Moreover, the growth

of Syndicalism pre-1914 can be seen as a part of this process of overcoming tradition. The fact that after 1926 the development of the trade unions became more homogenous was because of the defeat inflicted in that year, and it is from that period one can trace the more generalised corporative enmeshment. One has only to reflect upon the role and actions of Ernest Bevin before 1926 and after to realise the big change that occurred.

Let me now turn to the question of socialist consciousness. Robin says -

"After seventy years the Labour Party cannot any longer be regarded as the first faltering signs of proletarian political consciousness. A truly socialist consciousness cannot evolve gradually or spontaneously from this Labourist consciousness: it can only come about through a sharp, sudden, break. The Labour Party represents the working class only "corporatively", that is to say within capitalism and above all within the framework of the political institutions of the bourgeoisie."

The first point to note here is that Robin is contradicting himself by saying that the Labour Party represents the workers! He had been at some pains previously to deny this. Secondly, and more importantly, is the question of how socialist consciousness can be brought about. Who, for instance, amongst the Marxist left ever thought that this would or could arise gradually and spontaneously? To pose the question thus is to create men of straw whom rhetoric will easily blow away. Those Trotskyists who have over the years worked within the Labour Party were never so naive as to think in such a manner. It was always recognised that socialist consciousness would have to be nurtured and organised. Robin slurs the whole issue by such a simplistic dichotomy. Certainly socialist consciousness can only come by a qualitative leap, but such things do not happen suddenly, without any warning, even if they give such an appearance. Such a leap can only come about at a point where quantity changes into quality, i.e. it is a dialectical process. Each such leap has been maturing under the skin of the old forms before it bursts forth.

I am glad that Robin has now come to recognise that the present Labour Government marks a turning point when he says - "...an analysis of the Labour Government of 1964-70 reveals the development of a new situation.". I put forward this point in 1966 when I wrote -

"The shackling and neutralising of this working class is the main task of the Wilson Government... This central task of the present Labour Government means that it is different from previous social democratic governments that have been experienced here in Britain in the past. The attempt to compare this government with that of Ramsay MacDonald is not only silly, but wildly wrong. Under present British conditions it is no longer possible to grant even small reforms to the working class as a whole, e.g. the National Health Service. Not only is there no room for this, but there has to be a direct assault on the living standards of the class as whole in an attempt to retrieve the declining profit rates. The Wilson Government far from caving in to the pressures of the capitalist class, as did MacDonald, carries out its plans and strategy in a clear sighted manner. This is the basic difference, from being unable and unwilling to defend the working class as in 1931, to that of leading the assault! However, at the moment this will not take the form of classical crude wage cutting. The use of the wage freeze and incomes policy coupled with a conscious policy of inflation i.e. S.E.T., taxes on consumption etc., play the same role under neo-capitalism - they reduce the real wages of the working class.

It is this new role of the Labour Government that is of decisive importance in the present period. It stands openly before the working class as the hand-maiden of monopoly-capital. In this work they have the support and complicity of the majority of the trade union bureaucracy." +

I brought in this rather long quotation to indicate that what Robin says about there being a new situation is itself not new. Indeed this idea has been around for him to pick up for the last three or four years. I personally, spent much time in attempting to persuade Robin and his fellow editors of the NLR of this point and of the need for them to act. However, it has taken France 1968 and the upsurge of student militancy to convince Robin of the new situation: in this he indicates the essentially empirical and impressionistic nature of his methodology. Because of this he now bends the stick too far in the other direction. Moreover, he indicates this impressionism when he comments on the loyalty of the working class to the Labour Government in its early days -

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+ Essentially the same ideas were put forward in the statement by the United Secretariat of the Fourth International in "Approaching A Decisive Turning Point In Great Britain" Dec. 1966. The present writer helped to write the final draft of this document, thus the close identity of views.
(This footnote was not included in the original ms. submitted to Red Mole.)

"Even so working class commitment to Labour was still strong enough in the first year of Labour Government for strikes to fall to a record low point for the '60's and of course the Labour Party was resoundingly returned to office in the General Election of 1966."

This use of strike statistics is one that cannot be supported by evidence other than in the authors own impressions. The use of strike statistics in this manner to "prove" political motives is one that has yet to be demonstrated in any meaningful manner. Such mechanical thinking is the bane of the left, and it is surprising to see Robin trotting out such cliches. He goes on to mention 1969 -

"On a more fundamental level the number of strikes began a steep climb to reach a figure higher in 1969 than in any year since the General Strike."

Obviously Robin is not very clear as to what he is talking about in the above. Is he talking about the number of strikes, the number of days lost or workers involved? Taking the number of strikes he is quite wrong, e.g. in 1926 there were 323 disputes at the beginning of the year, in 1937 there were 1,129. However, it is perhaps indicative that Robin fails to mention what was significant regarding strikes in 1969, i.e. the 1st of May strike against "In Place of Strife", which was the first political strike for decades! Also in the same year a number of previously backward sections of workers were striking, some for the first time, e.g. the teachers. Therefore one must have a qualitative approach to such matters, and not become bemused by the rather crude strike statistics. (An examination of H.A. Turner's "Is Britain Really Strike Prone?" will show how misleading some of these statistics are.)

Passing over another assertion that in many areas the Labour Party comprises 99% careerists and 1% entrists, we arrive at "The Death of Reformism". A bold man indeed who can pronounce this while the "corpse" is still very much with us. Robin would have us -

"conclude that the traditional function of Labourism has been gravely weakened. (I thought it had just died? K.T.) Labour can no longer pose so convincingly as the champions of reforms, it can no longer claim to be the defender of proletarian corporate class interests within capitalism...."

But what evidence is advanced that this is the case for the majority of workers? None at all. What we have is the projection of desires which become the deed in the head of the projectionist. The real evidence, such as it is, presented by various opinion polls suggests the opposite to what Robin would have us "conclude". The polls suggest that Labour is regaining its credibility and stands a good chance of winning the next election. If they do I hope we shall hear no more about reformism exposing itself in office, the reformists unfortunately will not do this for us in or out of office.

What Would A TORY VICTORY Mean?

We examined the implication of this in the March 1969 issue of Marxist Studies, when we wrote, -

"it is argued that Social Democracy acts as a brake on the development of the revolutionary process by containing opposition within the general framework of capitalism; therefore all that is necessary is to smash these institutional blocks to clear the way for the revolutionary party. Such simplistic thinking has resulted in the creation of more abortive groups on the left than perhaps any other single factor. Insufficient consideration has been given to analyse the ways in which reformist organisations maintain their dominance, and why the many attempts to build a revolutionary party have failed. It is quite insufficient to simply launch a frontal attack on the Labour Party and proclaim the new revolutionary party, or indeed the revolution. The truth is that the stability of capitalism depends not only on the presence of transmission belts of bourgeois hegemony such as the Labour Party, but also on the absence of correct revolutionary politics.

Let us return to the question of the next general election. If the Labour Party suffers a catastrophic defeat at the hands of the Tory Party, what are the likely consequences and implications? These rather depend on the actual situation. Let us recall a few historical facts about the 1931 debacle. Firstly, in terms of seats the Labour Party was almost wiped out, plummeting from 287 to 52. But in terms of votes it only lost two million compared with 1929, and still had more votes than in 1924 when it formed its first administration.

A similar situation could arise at the next general election i.e. Labour being reduced to a rump in the Commons without it necessarily losing an equal proportion of its votes. The vagaries of the system always over-magnify the victory of the winners in terms of seats. But should the Labour Party not only suffer a great loss of seats but also of votes, this would present a rather different situation. In the first eventuality it is true that it would mean a return of a more reactionary

government, and a more right-wing climate, but the Tories would still have to tread somewhat warily; although there can be no doubt they would extend many of the avenues opened up by Wilson, e.g. new anti-strike laws. But in the second case, one would expect to see far more draconian measures taken, and the institution of an authoritarian state, with all that that entails. This means that far from there being a danger of a Powellite cum fascist regime - which would entail extra-parliamentary organs to smash the trade unions - there would be an emasculation and shackling of the unions in a perfectly legal and 'democratic' manner, no doubt all done to the tune of 'Land of Hope and Glory'.

This result, for Marxists, would be devastating. Not as some fondly hope a situation of euphoria. Can anyone seriously think that at that stage there would automatically result a swing to the left by large sections of the working class behind one or other of the sects of the British left? (It is noteworthy that even the tremendous upsurge in the working class activity of May '68 in France proved incapable of sloughing off the dominance of the reformist parties, in spite of the clear-cut betrayal of the leadership.)

Let us re-examine the situation. It is perfectly true that there are many elements present today which make the social and political situation unstable. These elements can be enumerated. 1) a general tendency for western capitalism's secular boom to slow down, 2) the re-emergence of significant numbers of unemployed, 3) a radicalisation among large sections of youth, 4) widespread disillusionment with the present Labour Government, 5) attacks on trade unions which evoke partial responses. The French events indicated that a combination of such, and allied, factors can generate an explosive situation. But what are the crippling factors? They were (and are) the absence of an organic cadre or vanguard with a clearly defined strategy, the low level of consciousness among even the most militant sections of the working class and the lack of even a sizable section of the working class willing to accept the leadership of such Marxist revolutionaries as there are around.

This means that even now the working class is dominated by bourgeois ideology. Only at rare, split second intervals, has there been a gleam of light to suggest that this is being broken. In the large majority the working class is still wedded to seeking solutions within the given framework. Those sections of the class who today have turned away from Labour have done so to become apathetic, indifferent or downright cynical to politics. There is no evidence to suggest as yet that any appreciable section has turned towards revolutionary ideas. On the contrary workers who decide that there is no difference between the parties are likely to go even further right in their search for solutions. Thus we get vicious right-wing movements of the type of Wallace and Powell. The existence of such movements indicate a minor crisis of the system, but can only be viewed with alarm by all those except fatalists who believe that there are such things as the 'final crisis of capitalism', which then inevitably brings socialism in its wake. Such primitive apocalyptic visions miss out a whole series of mediations required to solve such crises in a socialist direction. The absence of such necessary mediations at all levels both ideological and organisational, is quite frightening.

That is why we say that a catastrophic defeat along the lines of the second variant outlined above could be devastating for Marxists. Only those who are suffering from some sort of 'third period' delirium could think otherwise. To assume that the installation of an authoritarian regime by the Tory Party would pave the way for the creation of a revolutionary party is to indulge in daydreams. The German Communist Party in 1933 thought that after Hitler came to power and 'had shot his bolt' their turn would come, and it did - in concentration camps. Moreover, the historical evidence we have points to the fact that the only Communist Parties of any significance that were built after 1919 were those that arose out of a split in the main working class parties and trade unions, i.e. they were grounded in the existing labour movements. They were led, in the main, by men who already had mass influence and following. The Communist Parties that were created by sewing together a collection of sects never got off the ground. One has only to look at the history of the CPGB. The only time it began to play a meaningful role was during the twenties with the growth of the Minority Movement and the Labour Left Movement.

When it destroyed these it destroyed its chance to emerge from its sectarian existence.

Is the situation hopeless then? Far from it! The next few years could be very fruitful if Marxists learn to grapple with the situation correctly. We said earlier that the reason why Social Democracy dominates within the working class rests partially on the absence of correct revolutionary politics. In effect this means that it is fruitless for Marxists to now indulge in an orgy of verbal denunciations of the Labour Party, from a standpoint not understood by the working class. The way forward will only be found by supplanting bourgeois ideology in a positive and meaningful manner. Ernest Mandel summed up the question very well when he wrote - "The capitalist 'rationalisation', the speed up, the advance in automation, neo-capitalist economic 'programming', and the concentration and accelerated fusion of enterprises all tend to shift the centre of gravity in the classstruggles from disputes over the division of newly created value between capital and labour towards disputes over control and organisation of work and of the process itself. This is why the spread of the campaign for workers' control among the shop stewards in Great Britain assumes a critical importance..."

It is precisely by taking the struggle into those areas which least favour capitalist ideology that we can expect to make the greatest advances. Such campaigns need not, and do not, ignore wage questions so much as re-focus them.

It is through such work that the level of consciousness can be raised for whole sections of workers, and an ideological vanguard created that has solid and enduring roots in the working class.

If out of the defeat of the Labour Government there emerges such a vanguard it will be because Marxists have engaged and convinced workers in Glasgow, Wigan, Birmingham etc., that they should direct and control, not merely their 'free time' but also that part of their lives vital to them as workers. It will not emerge from defeating Michael Foot and other weary Tribunites in debate. Revolutionary rhetoric will not serve our purpose, only a slow, patient elaboration of basic ideas and practice, (which takes into account the existing modalities of bourgeois hegemony presently structuring working class consciousness), can succeed.

....It is very dangerous to naively expect that the self induced collapse of one institutional prison of the working class will lead to the workers dropping into our laps. The bourgeoisie has more, and worse, alternatives ready at hand. The urgent task is to build a movement capable of positively supplanting the Labour Party, before the ruling class organises itself to inflict an historical defeat at the electoral moment of which could take the form of a massive defeat of Labour at the hands of the Tories, boosting ruling class self-confidence and increasing the existing (ex hypothesi) demoralisation and isolation of the militantworkers."

In sum Robin Blackburn has come out with what can only be described as an ultra-leftist policy, which if really pursued by Marxists could only lead to their complete estrangement from the working class. When he says -

"In this campaign we should certainly pull none of our punches. We should disrupt the campaign of both the bourgeois parties and their leading spokesmen..."

This is a call to adventurism pure and simple. When he talks about "the tiny little voice of the whole left" he is stating a simple fact which stands in contradiction to his prescription. If the whole of the left is so small it means that to indulge in a campaign of disruption will merely expose its impotence, nothing more. What we have then is a prescription for political suicide by adventuristic tactics. It could only be put forward by someone who has no links with workers, by someone who seems to be completely unaware of the democratic traditions of the working class such disruption violates. The working class of Robin's article is only a grey shadowy mass in the background, but this is far from the real situation. Workers are on the move, but adventurism will only alienate them. It is fitting perhaps that I should close with a quotation from a document produced by Italian trade unions. "The profound crisis which the student movement is going through, deprives us of a powerful natural ally in our struggle. From this crisis has emerged a series of "groups" which agitate outside the factories. We hope the new school and university year will see the re-launching of a mass student movement: in this way a meaningful dialogue between workers and students will be possible at least. As far as the "groups" are themselves concerned, we are always open to discussion and argument; but it is the workers themselves who must make their own decisions on the contractual struggle and these cannot be delegated to any external forces, neither political nor trade union leaders, nor anyone else claiming the title of "vanguard" of the working class."

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