

# The Alternative to Blair: Old Labour or New Workers' Party?

Tue, 31/12/2002 - 23:00

Hatred for Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair runs deep in the British working class movement. So why is there no mass political alternative to New Labour, asks Mark Hoskisson?

Tony Blair was probably dreaming of 1982. In that year the infamously right wing and widely hated British Conservative Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, emerged victorious from her bloody colonial adventure in the South Atlantic. Her military triumph over Argentina led to her outright political triumph over her political enemies - in both the Labour Party and her own Tory Party. Thatcherism ruled the roost for the next eight years, with two sweeping general election victories and a year-long war against the British miners, her number one "enemy within", which ended with a strategic defeat for the entire working class movement.

Dream on Tony. The second Gulf War, a horrible colonial war fought not only for oil but to secure US imperialist global domination for years to come, produced the military victory that Blair and his master, Bush, longed for. But it has not produced the political results Blair expected. Instead of resembling Thatcher in her prime he looks very like the Iron Lady when she started to rust badly. In the late 1980s her allies began to resign from the cabinet and spread dissent on the backbenches. Her policies became more outlandish and provoked ever larger revolts within the ranks of her own party. Her isolation in Whitehall grew and her only true friends were to be found in the White House.

The spurious pretext for the war on Iraq, Saddam Hussein's "weapons of mass destruction", led to cabinet resignations both prior to (Robin Cook) and after (Clare Short) military action. A subsequent cabinet reshuffle, prompted by the resignation of a key Blair ally, Alan Millburn, resulted in a government that looked like a badly put together jigsaw. Opposition to Blair from within the party was massive in the vote to go to war. It grew in size as Blair came home to push through his attacks on the public sector. The government's decision to introduce foundation hospitals and a two-tier health system scraped through parliament with a majority of just 32. Serial rebels from the left wing Socialist Campaign Group of MPs were now in a bloc with heavyweight former ministers.

The scale of the government's deceit over the alleged weapons of mass destruction in Iraq was exposed to everyone in the row between Blair and the BBC and the Hutton inquiry into the death of an MOD weapons' expert, Andrew Kelly. Throughout the inquiry Tony Blair and his key allies in the cabinet like Defence Minister, Geoff Hoon, were exposed as liars and cheats.

During the early summer newspapers started to openly discuss the crisis of New Labour. The odds on Gordon Brown taking over as prime minister narrowed. Even Tony's firmest favourite, the oft disgraced but still influential Peter Mandelson, wrote of the need for New Labour to renew itself or face political ruin. Just before the last Labour conference Alan Millburn joined the chorus of Blairite critics of Blair - the party needed to project a new sense of direction or else face ruin, he said.

For six years Blair has had key allies inside the TUC. The union bureaucracy had come to his aid in a number of sticky situations, delivering block votes to impose Blair's selected candidates in both the Welsh party and in the London mayoral selection process. They had dutifully kept the lid on discontent in the unions' ranks, to the extent that to this day not a single union demonstration has been called to oppose the government's widely resented policies of privatisation in the public sector (via PFI and other backdoor methods).

By the time the 2003 annual TUC congress came around things appeared very different. A whole group of either openly left wing or at least anti-Blairite union leaders had been elected. The TUC was furious about the war and even more so about the proposal to push ahead with foundation hospitals. In the run up to the congress the more moderate of the leaders were united in the complaint that Blair wasn't listening to them, and needed to start doing so if he was to avert catastrophe.

Chancellor Brown addressed the TUC on the virtues of "modernisation" (labourspeak for privatisation). When Blair, at a private dinner with top bureaucrats, insisted that there was no way he would repeal the anti-union laws, the TUC made their displeasure public. The Iraq war and foundation hospitals were unanimously attacked by the TUC. And the complaint that Blair wasn't listening to them was turned into a warning - listen to us or else.

This dissent, with the widely anticipated use of the block vote at the Labour Party conference to give Blair a spanking, suggested that Blair faced his most difficult annual conference since he became leader. Political blood was about to be spilt.

But it didn't happen. And, far from the angry "rank and file" reclaiming the party from Pretender Blair, the leader emerged with his reputation enhanced, his control tightened and his determination to press on with a raft of reactionary policies stronger than ever.

Echoing the language of Margaret Thatcher, who famously declared that "this lady was not for turning", Tony Blair told his members and the watching public, "I can only go one way. I've not got a reverse gear."

The substance of his speech was clear enough. He was right to wage war on Iraq. He was right to press ahead with PFI and foundation hospitals. He was right to scapegoat asylum seekers. In other words, he was right on everything, will be right on everything and to hell with anyone who dares oppose him.

This Thatcherite rhetoric earned him a seven-minute ovation from the conference. But, while Blair survived the conference it remains to be seen whether he will survive the run up to the next election. Thanks to the cowardice of the Labour and trade union left - whose goal is to "reclaim the party" by waiting and hoping that Blair will simply go away - the leader won a tactical victory. His strategy, however, will provoke ever greater rounds of conflict with the working class. And the class - as opposed to its lethargic representatives in Parliament and Congress House - is likely to prove more robust in its challenge to Blair's impending offensive.

For the war did not cause Blair's crisis of leadership. It threw into sharp relief a process that was already underway. That process involved two factors: the slow but sure revival of the organised working class and the rising tide of popular political discontent with the pro-big business agenda that Labour has followed since it first took office in 1997.

We are witnessing the most serious revival of the working class movement since the miners' strike of 1984/85 and in the level of political struggle in Britain since the poll tax campaigns of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The mass anti-war movement - which brought millions onto the streets, radicalised an entire

generation of school students as well as the Muslim community, sustained mass demos throughout the war itself and helped millions more see through the lies behind the imperialist war propaganda - is the most dramatic evidence of the revival of political struggle. In addition, in the past 18 months we have seen significant strike action among teachers, journalists, lecturers, council workers, fire fighters, rail workers and postal workers.

Trade union membership has risen and a number of left leaders have been elected to the highest office. Furthermore, this revival has taken place in the context of the European Social Forum meeting in Florence, with a second planned for Paris in November 2003. This confirmed that the anti-capitalist movement has grown to mass proportions, drawn in unions and reformist parties while still retaining an overwhelming youthful radicalism in a number of countries. In the coming period the conjuncture of a Labour government which is hell-bent on supporting Bush's "endless wars" and which is determined to take on workers in order to marketise the public services- both in the teeth of overwhelming opposition-creates the possibility of a massive revolt against Blair. It could, under the right conditions, even lead to an actual break by sections of the working class from Labour. This would be an event of historic importance for the British working class and one that we should work towards.

### **Giving New Labour a chance**

In May 1997 the first stage of the revival now underway began. It was a revival of hope. That hope was a result of the Blair landslide. At last, thought millions, the eighteen years of Tory hell have ended. The hope was intensified by the fact that a Labour government had taken office at a time of economic boom. And New Labour has enacted reforms that encouraged such hope - the windfall tax on utilities, the minimum wage, the working family tax credit, limited union recognition laws. These reforms proved to those who doubted that Labour was, even under Blair, a party of moderate reform, a party distinct from the Tories, still, despite everything, a bourgeois workers' party.

But the reforms - as compared to the scale of Labour's victory and as compared to the hope invested in it by millions - were relatively minor. And they were always limited by what the bosses would accept. The minimum wage was too low. The recognition laws too stacked against the unions. The windfall tax a drop in the ocean as compared with the lowering of corporation tax and the refusal to raise income tax on the wealthy. Worse, many of the reforms were offset by New Labour's determination - openly stated and openly pursued - to govern as a party of business, to prove to the bosses that it could manage their affairs of state more effectively than the Tories.

Thus, Labour kept Tory spending limits for the public sector, set out on a ruthless privatisation drive (through backdoor methods), presided over a privatised rail network when the case for nationalisation was obvious to all, as tragic disaster followed tragic disaster. Labour adopted social authoritarian policies, targeting the youth with curfews, "anti-yob" campaigns and a law and order drive. It made a nod in the direction of anti-racism (Macpherson) only to pursue filthy racist policies in practice, especially its scapegoating of asylum seekers. Its measures against refugees grew ever more savage each time the Daily Mail printed hysterical lies about floods of asylum seekers. On top of all of this Labour repeated, ad nauseam, its determination to keep the unions in their place, with Blair boasting openly that Britain had - and would keep - the most draconian anti-union laws in Europe.

Internationally Blair allied himself with the most reactionary forces in Europe, Berlusconi in Italy and Aznar in Spain. Together with them he pushed for labour flexibility and neo-liberal economic policies inside the European Union. And after the 11 September attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York Blair made clear that in George Bush's "war on terror" Britain was the USA's junior officer acting on whatever orders the right wing Republicans in Washington issued.

All of this, combined with a classically undemocratic bourgeois style of party management which imposed candidates (in both Wales and in London) against the will of party members, began to spawn frustration and anger in the ranks. During Blair's first term of office (1997 to 2001) the anger was confined to a small vanguard of workers and youth. But it was real and did occasionally lead to struggles (the anti-PFI strikes at Dudley and University College of London Hospital in the industrial sphere, the Stop the City march in 1999 in the anti-capitalist sphere). It led to the "split" of Ken Livingstone from Labour and his victory in the mayoral election against the official Labour candidate. But throughout the first term the anger remained contained amongst a minority. The "give him a second chance" mentality prevailed amongst the masses, leading to a second landslide victory in the general election of 2001.

## **Hard Labour**

Since the 2001 election the frustration has grown. And the reasons are not hard to understand. Blair's Britain is a model of ruthless capitalist enterprise, moving closer to the "American" model of capitalism rather than towards the "social" model characteristic of (though now also under attack in) key European countries. A glance at some of the key features of Blair's Britain show just why people are getting fed up with New Labour:

? The wealth gap in Britain has widened under New Labour. The richest 1,000 people in Britain have assets totalling ?159,699 billion. The richest one per cent of the population has seen their share of wealth rise from 17 per cent to 23 per cent under New Labour. Between 1994 and 2001 the average median pay for directors grew by 107 per cent (to ?416,073 pa). The equivalent increase for workers in the same companies was 31 per cent.

? Discrimination at work - together with racist policing and attacks on asylum seekers - is part of the institutionalised racism of New Labour's Britain. The gap between women and men's earnings has grown under New Labour, with women full timers getting 82 pence for every ?1 earned by men in full time work, 61 pence for every ?1 in part time work. The percentage gap has widened under Labour with women going down from 81.6 per cent of male earnings in 2000 to 74.6 per cent to day. On average Pakistani and Bangladeshi men earn ?150 a week less than white male workers, Caribbeans ?115 less and Africans ?116 less.

? Working conditions are deteriorating. Not only are workers suffering from a derisory minimum wage (?4.20, and ?3.60 for youth covered by the legislation) but the hours they are working are getting longer in Blair's flexible Britain. The percentage of women working more than 60 hours a week has more than doubled (6 per cent to 13 per cent) since 2000. In total 16 per cent of the workforce work more than 60 hours, while 75 per cent work overtime (with only one third of these workers getting extra pay for their efforts). The average working week in the UK is 43.6 hours, compared with an EU average of 40.3. Labour's Trade and Industry minister Patricia Hewitt has rejected union demands for the UK to opt in to EU legislation limiting the working week on the grounds that Britain's attractiveness to business is its "flexible workforce". Another facet of this flexible workforce is the increase in the number of temporary workers (50 per cent of whom have no rights to leave, sick pay etc.) which has grown to 7 per cent of the workforce (1.7 million workers).

? Other aspects of life in Britain have demonstrated New Labour's contempt for the welfare of the class. The UK has the most expensive childcare in Europe, with 90 per cent of it run privately and the average cost for one child running at ?120 a week. The cost rose by 10 per cent in 2000. Pensions are now a scandal. The bosses - with Labour refusing to do anything about it - have scuppered millions of final salary pensions. There are now 1.8 million more workers without such a pension scheme than ten years ago and 1.6 million have no form of occupational pension at all.

? job insecurity and worsening conditions and services have been guaranteed under New Labour by its pursuit of PFI/PPP (London Underground, Air Traffic Control, a growing number of hospitals, schools etc.). The British Medical Journal recently revealed that PFI hospitals cost more than publicly funded ones. New Labour is determined to sell off council housing regardless of the huge votes against it by tenants (Birmingham, South London etc.).

As if these attacks weren't enough, Blair ignored the clearly expressed will of the British people over war with Iraq. Despite the two million strong demonstration against the war in February 2003 and the lack of any evidence implicating Saddam Hussein in the 11 September attacks, Blair enthusiastically took Britain to war in the service of the American empire. The subsequent failure to find weapons of mass destruction - or Saddam Hussein himself - and the establishment of old style colonial occupation and rule in Iraq have both served to intensify mass distrust of Blair and mass disaffection with New Labour.

This shameful picture of life in Britain, after six years of Labour rule cannot be concealed by New Labour spin. These facts affect the material daily lives of millions of people. Their sense of anger is growing. But it is not yet matched by a sense of power to be able to do something about it. Instead it has led to hostility towards the bourgeois election process as witnessed by the highest rates of abstention ever.

New Labour is ripe for overthrow. But is the working class ready to do it?

## **Political Discontent**

The growing frustration of the workers and youth at New Labour did not express itself initially in a revival of industrial militancy. At the beginning only the Liverpool dockers' struggle stood out - and with it the growth into sizeable proportions of a real anti-capitalist movement - as a rallying point for resistance. This quickly disappeared with the betrayal of the dockers by the TGWU bureaucracy. Instead, in alliance with the trade union bureaucracy, and with the incipient anti-capitalist movement wrong footed, the Blair honeymoon lasted through until 1999.

However, following Blair's early wars (the Balkans and the brief but vicious attack on Iraq in 1998), political frustration began to make itself felt. First and foremost this was evident amongst spontaneously anti-capitalist youth. The size and ferocity of the Stop the City march in July 1999 took many by surprise. This movement was given an enormous boost when the demonstrations at Seattle took place in November that same year. The significance of Seattle and the movement that it created cannot be underestimated. Its impact on the workers' movement in Britain was bound to come at some point.

A second focus for political opposition to Blair came around the setting up of the London assembly and mayor. The Blairites' decision, in late 1999, to veto Ken Livingstone's candidacy led to a serious revolt by Labour activists, trade unionists and the far left in London. It resulted in Livingstone winning the election for mayor against the official Labour candidate Frank Dobson. At the same time Britain's largest left-wing group, the Socialist Workers Party, tried to work out a response to the burgeoning anti-capitalist movement and the mood for unity that it had created. It opted to temporarily drop its rigid policy of institutionalised contempt for the rest of the left. It threw its lot in with the Socialist Alliance (initially in London, but later nationally) and turned to involvement in elections and the "united front of a special type" - which proved to be of the type that was controlled and run by and for the SWP. The reasonable performance of the London Socialist Alliance in the GLA elections convinced the SWP that the mood was there for organising political opposition to Blair.

The events of 9/11 and the subsequent declaration by Bush of a never-ending war on terrorism proved to tens of thousands that Blair was not only a thinly disguised Tory, he was also a faithful servant of US

imperialism. His immediate willingness to follow George Bush wherever he went, gun in hand, called forth mass political opposition to both the war on Afghanistan and the later attack on Iraq. Suddenly demonstrations were of mass proportions again - 50,000, 100,000, 400,000 for the first time since the 1980s. Indeed the multi-millioned February demonstration against the attack on Iraq was like a huge procession of generalised anger against a government that no longer listened to or cared for the people over which it governed.

Inside the working class movement the events of 9/11 and after had a different effect. In the second term discontent with Blair had begun to develop within the trade union bureaucracy. They were not being paid off for their years of "new realism". Indeed the opposite was happening. In particular their opposition to PFI/PPP was being roundly and rudely ignored by New Labour. The old monolith of new realism was breaking up, with people like John Edmonds (GMB) suddenly finding an angry and militant voice. Even Bill Morris of the TGWU, very much a Blair loyalist, started to voice angry demands on Labour, over the minimum wage, union recognition and the shabby treatment of asylum seekers. The opposition looked set to break out in the open at the September 2001 TUC congress. The events of 9/11 stopped that happening. The bureaucracy let Blair off the hook and disoriented thousands of workers who had, in the previous round of union congresses, demanded action from their leaders.

The final element of political opposition to Blair did make itself felt in the unions, however. This related to the very nature of the union/Labour link - the political fund paid by unions to the Labour Party. In the run up to the 2001 general election the use of the fund became a live issue, especially in the firefighters' union, the FBU. A resolution was passed opening up the political fund of the union - in the teeth of fierce opposition from FBU "left" leader Andy Gilchrist and the executive - to organisations other than the Labour Party. This reflected real political discontent with Labour, not just in the FBU but in the union movement as a whole. The simple question, "Why should we pay millions to a government party that is hell bent on attacking us?" struck a real chord with trade unionists (including Labour loyal ones). Militants in the FBU - with three prominent Socialist Alliance candidates in the 2001 general election - took a lead on this issue and won.

Of course the bulk of the bureaucracy were horrified at this development and, using Stalinist methods, ensured that the FBU decision was overturned at the 2002 conference. But the impact of the original decision made itself felt in other unions. The GMB, RMT and CWU all ostentatiously announced cuts in the money they were giving to Labour. After Bob Crow's victory in the RMT these cuts, totalling ?700,000 - together with the re-direction of money towards Labour MPs who supported RMT policy on the London Underground and on the renationalisation of the rail network - became an open declaration of political war on the New Labour establishment. In the CWU, Billy Hayes used the cut to outflank a push towards both disaffiliation (a substantial minority of syndicalists in the union) and democratisation. John Edmonds was more forthright. The GMB was withholding money because it was unhappy with Labour's privatisation drive and would even consider sponsoring anti-privatisation candidates.

This development was extremely important. In 2003 it resulted in the RMT deciding to open its funds to candidates other than Labour and the broadcasting union, Bectu, following suit. In the biggest union, Unison, a row over the fund rumbled on while in other unions conferences decided either to cut funding to Labour (TSSA) or review their fund. These moves reflect rank and file discontent with Labour inside the unions. Moreover it reflects a politicisation of that discontent - namely the use of the political levy. Realising the potential in this situation Workers Power members inside the Socialist Alliance pushed for that organisation to escape from the electoral straitjacket that the SWP had tied it in and organise a "democratise the fund" campaign. We won the day and it resulted in the production of a pamphlet on the political fund by FBU militant, Matt Wrack. This was used to help build a thousand strong rank and file

conference in March 2002 (the biggest and most successful event organised by the Socialist Alliance prior to its decapitation by the SWP the following year).

The anti-capitalist movement, the anti-war movement and the beginnings of a political challenge to Labour within the unions were all important signs of the revival underway. They were all giving confidence and hope to older militants, they were beginning to enthuse new ones and they have raised, as a practical possibility in the next few years, the organisation of a break with Labour. Given the mounting pace of attacks on workers in the private and public sectors, Britain seems set for a higher level of workplace industrial struggle in the years ahead.

### **The revival of the unions**

For over a decade the British working class movement was in decline. Union membership levels fell. Organisation in the workplaces was weakened. A whole layer of militants - including many with a long tradition of organising rank and file action and networks in the unions - found themselves either isolated or driven out of the workplaces. At a leadership level the unions became dominated by a coalition of "business union" leaders and a softer centre-right "service union" faction who, together, constituted an almost total brake on the organisation of any effective action by the unions, especially at a national level. Roughly from 1985/6 (after the strategic defeat of the British miners' strike) through to 1999/2000, the workers' movement underwent a genuine downturn - in activity, influence and numbers.

The negative effects of the "new realism" kept the trade unions sidelined in politics for a long time. The decline in numbers reflected this decline in effectiveness. It was not simply unemployment that cut union numbers from the 1979 highpoint of almost 12 million to just over six million by the late 1990s. It was also that to the new working class that grew up in the 1990s, principally in the service industries and in smaller manufacturing units, the unions seemed less relevant to their lives because they did so little. Moreover, the unions themselves failed to reach out to these new workers. The break up and dispersal of the layer of militants of the 1970s meant that the unions had few cadre in the 1990s with the confidence and enthusiasm to go out and actually recruit people. As a result the average age of a union member rose to 43. Youth were being left behind as far as trade unionism was concerned.

But despite all of this a residue of militant trade union consciousness survived, amongst the left and amongst older militants, particularly in the public sector that had been slightly less battered in the 1980s than the industrial unions. Their case was helped by pockets of militancy - in the post and on the rail and by building solidarity with the many isolated and long running disputes that were characteristic of the 1990s. This consciousness would be decisive when the objective situation changed. And change it did.

In 2001 trade union membership rose for the first time in 20 years (embracing 30 per cent of the workforce). TUC affiliated unions numbered almost 6.7 million, with another million in non-affiliated associations. The GMB in particular took recruitment seriously reaching out to workers as varied as casino croupiers through to sex industry workers. In ClientLogic the CWU won recognition for 4,000 call centre workers.

In 2001 the unions won three times the number of recognition deals they had secured in 2000 (a total of 470 covering 120,000 workers) in companies like Easyjet, Honda, BT Cellnet, Kwik Fit and Securicor. In the same year, for the first time in a long time there were no reported cases of derecognition. Women workers became heavily unionised (union density is 33 per cent amongst full time female workers, as compared with 31 per cent for male workers). Women are now almost half of the unions' total membership and ten TUC affiliated unions are led by women. There was still an age problem though with union density amongst workers in the 40s standing at 38 per cent as compared with 19 per cent for 20-somethings. But

even this was an improvement in the numbers of young workers being organised. Last but not least, though the unions had still not recruited anything like enough black and Asian workers, union density amongst Caribbeans stood at 32 per cent, while the equivalent for white workers was 29 per cent (Pakistani workers, however, only have a 20 per cent rate of union density).

All is far from perfect, what with 70 per cent of the workforce unorganised - and with workers in the South East and East the most unorganised of all regions. But under Labour the tide of union fortunes had turned. Membership was increasing, and, in boom conditions, so too was confidence and anger. Confidence that unions were back in business and anger at the many anti-working class policies that Labour was inflicting on them.

Once again both of these factors made themselves felt in an unexpected way. Traditionally left leaders are elected in unions on the back of mighty struggles. They are a bureaucratic reflection of such struggles and usually come about as a result of the efforts of reasonably well organised national networks of militants. But after the years of retreat there were few such struggles. And the few left networks that existed were extremely weak. Yet over the last few years the left enjoyed a number of astounding successes in the unions. The "awkward squad" - a distinct left within the TUC - emerged. The hard right is on the retreat everywhere and the centre right is much weaker. The key left leaders are:

- ? Gilchrist - FBU
- ? Rix - Aslef (now replaced by a right winger)
- ? Crow - RMT
- ? Serwotka - PCS
- ? Dear - NUJ
- ? Mackney - Natfhe
- ? Hayes - CWU

The significant thing about the rise of these new lefts is that several of them "came from nowhere", won with little or no apparatus behind them and beat either hard nosed right wingers (as did Serwotka and Hayes) or centre right Labour loyalists (as did Crow).

The trend to the left then spread to the big four unions - Amicus, the TGWU, the GMB, and Unison. In Amicus a former Communist Party member, Derek Simpson, defied all odds by unseating Blair's favourite union leader, Sir Ken "no strikes" Jackson. In the TGWU Tony Woodley, a man with a militant reputation - ill deserved when you consider that he singlehandedly outflanked all attempts by Longbridge and Dagenham car workers to strike against closure in order to pursue alternative "partnership" schemes that traded jobs and conditions for keeping the plants open - succeeded Bill Morris. Kevin Curran, actually a friend of Peter Mandelson and with the ear of Blair himself, packaged his campaign for election to the leadership of the GMB in relatively militant, traditional trade union terms, warning that the time had come for Labour to be won back to its union roots. In Unison Dave Prentis was already the leader, but faced with the arrival of Simpson, Woodley and Curran - the "not so awkward squad" - he found his voice as a critic of New Labour and declared himself to be at one with the supposedly militant "new kids on the block".

What these victories represented was typical of the period of transition that we are in. Just as the rise of the anti-capitalist movement, the anti-war movement and the challenge to Labour over the political fund preceded an upturn in industrial struggle, so too did the election of a new wave of lefts in the unions.

This much is clear from the events on the industrial scene over the last twelve months. Indeed the trend towards increased militancy began last year. In 2001 more days were lost through strike action (525,000) than in any year since 1996. While this figure is small compared with the great periods of upheaval (1920s

and 1970s) such a comparison would be the wrong one to make. We are at the beginning of a process not at the peak of one. The significant thing about the 2001 figures is that they marked the first increase in strikes under New Labour. Most of the strikes bear the marks of the past - 48 per cent of them lasted one day, 46 per cent three days and three per cent fifty days. In other words protests. Winning the argument for more effective forms of action will take a long time.

Interestingly the 2001 strikes were mainly about conditions (38 per cent) as against wages (27 per cent). Strikes over conditions are normally defensive in character. While 2002 began with a similar defensive strike (the struggle at South West Trains to defend Greg Tucker from victimisation) the last year has seen a growth in the number of offensive strikes demanding pay increases. On the rail, in further education, in the schools, in local government, at the airports and of course in the fire service, this last year has been marked by a series of pay strikes involving large numbers of workers. There have been fewer strikes in the private sector largely because of the legacy of no-strike deals and the deep recession that manufacturing has been suffering. But Simpson's tearing up of no-strike deals at key workplaces could mark the opening of a period in this sector too.

Let's summarise this snapshot of the unions in order to understand exactly what is going on, and what stage we are at. Under New Labour the unions have enjoyed a mini-revival. This has been coupled with deeply felt frustration by large numbers of workers at what New Labour has (or rather has failed to) deliver. This has mainly come in the form of political discontent rather than industrial action. But one form of that discontent has been the elevation of a layer of new left leaders. In turn their very existence has facilitated a rise in the number of strikes. Over the last period several of those strikes have been offensive in character.

All of these factors underline our key argument that we are now in a period of advance. But that advance is at a very early stage. Hence, most strikes are limited token affairs. The anti-union laws still act as a real restraint on solidarity. In other words, we must not mistake the beginning of the revival for the offensive yet to come. There is still an enormous job of work to be done.

## **Reclaim Labour?**

The mass opposition to the war created a major crisis within the Labour Party. The impact of the 15 February demonstration on Labour was enormous. The handful of relatively principled anti-war MPs suddenly grew into a full-scale backbench rebellion, renewing hope in some quarters that the Labour Party could be reclaimed. Nowhere was this more the case than in the big trade unions.

The victories for the awkward squad convinced a new layer of bureaucrats that, to win union elections, they had to distance themselves from Blair. Even Blairites like Jack Dromey of the TGWU fought his election campaign as a born-again critic of New Labour. So, a new crop of decidedly not-so-awkward bureaucrats like Tony Woodley in the TGWU and Kevin Curran in the GMB began to win elections. Both made noises about reviewing their unions' relations with Labour. Both claimed to be "awkward". Yet both are clearly of the safe and traditional centre-left.

The speed with which these bureaucrats recently moved to end the strikes by British Airways staff at Heathrow is an indication of the type of leaders they are. Strikes are problems to be solved and ended quickly not battles by their members to be won.

Together with Derek Simpson of Amicus-AEU and Dave Prentis of Unison, Curran and Woodley now constitute a powerful centre left axis in the TUC. They will move away from the craven service unionism of old. They will present themselves as "traditionalists" representing the interests of their members. As Derek Simpson announced, "we are beginning to act like a trade union."

This trade unionism is, however, strictly limited. It is not anti-capitalist, class struggle trade unionism. It is rather "bargain hunting" trade unionism: containing disputes so they do not go beyond the realms of what the bureaucracy deems "possible" and exercising bureaucratic control over disputes that do take place. To make this brand of trade unionism more effective these bureaucrats will need to extend their rights to recruit and negotiate. They will need friends in government willing to grant such extensions. And this is where their goal of "reclaiming the party" comes in.

Politically, the centre-left share the strategy of key "awkward squad" members like Billy Hayes in the postal service. They aim to "reclaim" the Labour Party by getting Gordon Brown or Robin Cook into leadership - despite both supporting privatisation and Brown bankrolling the slaughter in Iraq. In other words, the "reclaim Labour" strategy of the bureaucracy aims to reclaim the party from the neoliberal Blair and place it in the hands of the neoliberal Brown. In terms of policies, little will change. But there will be one big difference. The key union bureaucrats will be consulted on how to attack the working class, to ensure their co-operation and involvement in those attacks.

The idea of a new party is ruled out completely. Derek Simpson has been very clear on this: "Labour is the only party that will do anything for the people I represent. I don't see any point in withdrawing funding...We have to ensure that Labour beats the Conservatives in the next election. It's as simple as that."

To this end the new axis will be critical of Labour, but, as Kevin Curran put it, "a critical friend", because: "Let's never forget that we are the party, not Number 10."

Dave Prentis chimed in by spelling out what the new not-so-awkward squad's plans were: "I'll be meeting the new boys - Derek Simpson, Tony Woodley, Kevin Curran - to talk about closer links and, yes, we will be talking about how we reclaim our party and it's about time we did."

All of this talk has a clear aim - to divert rank and file discontent with Blair into a dead-end and stop it being expressed in a campaign to cut off New Labour's funding and found a new working class party instead. In this way the anger that many union members feel towards Blair will become focused on a battle within the Labour Party rather than on a campaign to establish an alternative to it.

The essence of this strategy was spelt out by Woodley in the run up to the Labour Party Conference, 2003:

"I say it is time to put Labour back into the Party. Not walk away from it as a few on the fringes would argue, but restore it to the values of working class men and women, the values of socialism."

He elaborated on this theme at a conference fringe meeting and he plans to organise a summit of union leaders to organise a campaign to promote real Labour politicians like ... Gordon Brown.

This strategy of the union leaders and left MPs was actually carried out at the 2003 Labour Conference. It failed miserably.

Gordon Brown faded back into the shadows after Tony Blair came out fighting. The great hope of the union leaders and the left rolled over without a fight. He simply cannot and will not risk challenging Blair. Blair retains control of the Parliamentary Labour Party and still has the majority of constituency activists with him - quite simply because those activists are now in the main the prosperous middle class dullards that he brought into the party after the expulsion of the left in the 1980s. And, under the current system for electing the party leadership, any candidate would be defeated if they had the support of the unions, but not a majority of either the parliamentary party or constituencies.

Brown, therefore, will now remain a leader in waiting as opposed to a challenger. And Blair's chances of

leading Labour into the next election - and emerging as a winner - have been strengthened. It will take a renewed round of struggle of massive proportions to open up the possibility of bringing Blair down. But if Brown is the only alternative, then, in George Galloway's words, "God help us".

Gordon Brown not only represents a continuation of Tony Blair in terms of his adherence to key tenets of neoliberalism such as labour flexibility, privatisation, PFI and the marketisation of public services, cutting taxes on corporation and even, it has to be said, his muted but still audible support for the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq - he also represents a break from "old" right-wing Labour. Despite redistributive measures like working families' tax credits, he has replaced the gradualist slogan of moving towards "equality of outcome" with an evasive one of creating "equality of opportunity". Foundation hospitals and specialist schools are promoted as a mean for all to receive good public services, but in reality are only means for the middle class and labour aristocracy to climb out of the sink.

Brown may be willing to talk with the union leaders. But he won't change his policies to suit them. So there is no chance of his policy "alternatives" providing the means to mobilise millions.

The fact that Brown is the one person many look to, including even a so called hard left MP like John McDonnell who compared him favourably to Blair after the leader's speech, exposes the terrible weakness, cowardice and ,ultimately, treachery of the left in both parliament and the union bureaucracy.

Take the left MPs first. On the basis of the anti-war movement they had the perfect opportunity to challenge Blair as leader. They should have done it at the height of the anti-war movement but preferred to observe the niceties of constitutional calendars rather than be dictated to by the course of the mass class struggle. But even allowing for such antiquated etiquette, why did they not challenge Blair for leadership in the run up to the conference? Their argument is that they wouldn't have won. In truth they were hoping Brown would come to their rescue.

But winning - or getting Brown in - was not the objective in challenging Blair. Saying to the millions who opposed the war, to the millions against foundation hospitals and PFI, to the countless activists who rallied to support the firefighters, "We stand with you and we openly challenge this warmongering Labour leadership." That is the point of a challenge. It could have strengthened the movement.

The left chose not to do this. They ran away from the movement, scuttling back into the fold no doubt to "wait" for another chance. With the exception of Galloway the left MPs have failed the momentous test of the last year and have revealed once and for all that they remain a useless and impotent crew of critics, incapable of taking decisive action at the decisive hour. They are as culpable as Brown in enabling Blair the war criminal to remain at his post.

Above all else this failure of the left stands as our answer to those in the unions who have been swayed by the argument of their leaders that the time has come to "reclaim Labour". Key union leaders, like Woodley from the TGWU, Prentis from Unison, Curran from the GMB and Simpson from Amicus have sponsored the idea that the Labour Party can be "won back" to its roots. In the aftermath of Blair's speech they spoke with one voice, criticising the leader for his refusal to budge on his core policies. Woodley denounced Blair's "theatrical speech", while Curran branded it as "light on substance".

These men, together with other union leaders like Billy Hayes of the Communication Workers are desperately trying to stop their own members from deserting Labour. The treachery of this can be displayed in figures.

Thanks to Blair, thousands of rank and file union members have torn up their party cards in disgust.

According to David Triesman, Labour's Chairman, quoted in a BBC interview in June 2003, party membership has now dipped below a quarter of a million - from 405,238 in 1997 and below the previous all-time low of 261,000 in 1991.

Yet, despite all the talk about cutting funding to Labour, the rail union, the RMT, is the only one to end its automatic support from Labour and open up its political fund to other parties. It cut its annual funding to Labour from ?123,993 in 2001-02 to ?26,899 in 2002-03 (Labour Research, October 2003). While the TGWU and GMB made slight cuts, Amicus AEEU, the CWU, FBU and Unison actually increased their funding to the party last year. Ironically, far from mollifying the party leadership by their continued commitment to Labour, Tony Blair has taken this as his cue to go back on the offensive, proposing that state funding for political parties be put into the next manifesto.

To contain and misdirect this pressure the leaders of the main unions are upping their criticism of Blair and even sanctioning limited struggles against aspects of his policies. But they are doing this in order to outflank the very real push from the rank and file for a break with Labour. They are doing it in order to save the party that gave us Blair not reclaim it for the working class.

The trade union bureaucracy has been content with Labour over 100 years - 100 years of Labour cutting workers' living standards, cutting the public sector to the bone, overseeing the smashing of strikes, carrying out bloody colonial wars and so on.

But under Blair they have found their influence and their power within the party dramatically reduced. They have found it more difficult to sell the lie that Labour is a real "workers' party" - namely one that fights for the interests of the workers no matter what - to their members. And they have found it irksome to have their carefully crafted class collaborationist schemes, like partnership in the workplace, laughed out of court by a Labour Party that proved it was willing to smash an entire union Thatcher style - the FBU - rather than cut a deal in the "old Labour" way.

In other words, the idea of "reclaiming the Labour party" is really reclaiming it as a political space within which the trade union bureaucrats can operate as significant others alongside the parliamentarians. After all, the bureaucrats never allowed their members to decide which way block votes were cast, who was represented on the key Labour committees, which MPs should be supported and which not.

And they are not talking about introducing any such democracy for their members now. Their goal is to reclaim Labour as a party of the trade union bureaucracy. That's why they like Brown. He may be a cutter, slasher and monetarist - but he talks to the union leaders.

And, just like the left MPs, these union leaders have failed the test of struggle. For all their huffing and puffing they didn't blow Blair down at the conference and have no intention of doing so after it.

The futility of the 'Reclaim the Party' project makes the case for breaking from Labour and building a new workers' party all the more compelling. But the fight will not be easy. Recent events show that the struggle to win the rank and file to a campaign for a new workers' party will have to be conducted not only against the policies of Blair but also against the 'left' union and parliamentary leaders.

Those leaders are promising them, in papers, journals and newsletters, that everything is changing for the better, that the defeat for Blair over foundation hospitals at the conference signals a new era of the party being responsive to the views of the masses. The fact that the conference vote won't make any difference to Blair's plans to push through such hospitals is neither here nor there. The fact that he lost the vote and the unions won it will be held up as proof that Labour is being reclaimed.

## The 'awkward squad'

The terrible weakness of the left union leaders - the awkward squad - has been on display over the last two years. On the eve of the 2001 general election there was a major postal strike. It was illegal and unofficial. It was spread by militants. It ended in victory.

For a whole period after that Billy Hayes, the left leader of the CWU, operated an informal but highly effective no strike agreement with the management, demobilising what had been previously the most militant sector of workers in Britain. The cost of this misleadership became evident in the 2003 ballot over strike action on pay. At the annual conference the Hayes leadership showed its willingness to concede on jobs and conditions - rather than defend them as part of a wider strategy of beating off the threat of privatisation - but decided to call for action on pay. Hayes didn't want an all out fight and had every intention of using a yes vote - which he complacently accepted the members would deliver with little or no campaigning by the leadership - to go into further rounds of bargaining with the bosses. In the event the vote for action was narrowly lost.

The leadership was to blame for this major setback. It was only subsequent local action, over local pay and conditions in both Oxford and London, that demonstrated that key sections of the membership were prepared to strike, strike hard and beat back the management offensive. Billy Hayes himself, thanks to his mortal terror of the anti-union laws being used against his bureaucratic machine, would not issue an official call for secondary action in support of the Oxford workers. Rank and file workers took it upon themselves to organise such action, regardless of the anti-union laws.

The picture is not one of a rank and file bursting to go on indefinite strike. But it is one of workers who are faced with serious attacks being prepared to undertake serious action to repel them. The rank and file are willing to fight, but the awkward squad is leading them to defeat after defeat. This was clear as well in the strike that did take place - the firefighters' dispute.

The willingness to take action was evident in the huge vote for a strike in pursuit of the unifying demand of 30k for firefighters. When the FBU eventually called a strike the action was rock solid. But, faced with the terrible wavering of their leaders when New Labour turned the pay battle into an assault on jobs and conditions, the left leadership collapsed in a heap.

Andy Gilchrist, having kept a tight bureaucratic grip over both the action and the negotiations, stood firm against calls for an all out strike. With the war against Iraq looming, Gilchrist proved loyal to the British capitalist state - strikes were called off. Then, when union militants won a conference vote to continue with action - Gilchrist used delaying tactics to ensure that nothing was done while the war was on. Finally, Gilchrist wore down enough members to be able to recall the conference and win a vote to surrender.

Gilchrist failed the test. He was exposed as a typical high-living expense-account bureaucrat, incapable of standing up to government threats to impose a deal - anything but awkward.

If the FBU dispute showed the folly of such a strategy of reliance on left leaders in a strike, the fate of Mick Rix, of train drivers' union Aslef, shows its folly with regard to transforming the unions. Rix was a left leader in the Stalinist mould. He used his victory in Aslef to purge the union of its right-wing dead wood. But he did this in a totally bureaucratic way. Control of the executive and union machinery by the left officials was the beginning, middle and end of the strategy. The result? Rix has just lost to a right winger and Aslef is no longer "awkward". This demonstrates the danger of relying on left officials without building a independent rank and file movement.

Of the most left-wing members of the awkward squad - Mark Serwotka of the PCS and Bob Crow of the RMT - the biggest tests have yet to come. It would be wrong to simply lump these two in with every other bureaucrat and not recognise the real differences in politics that mark them out from the rest (notably their break with the policy of reclaiming the Labour Party). But it is equally vital to recognise that they operate within the framework of the trade union bureaucracy's hallowed rules: no interference in the affairs of other unions, no actions that jeopardise the funds and resources of the union machine, do not defy the anti-union laws openly and officially, and never appeal to members of other trade unions to take action over the heads of their official leaders.

Unless they are placed under the control of the membership - recallable and accountable to the rank and file and paid the same average wage as the workers they represent - militant union members are forced to rely on these individuals standing firm. If they don't, there is nothing the militants can do except wait until the next chance they get to replace them under the terms of the unions' current constitutions. Like the firefighters today, they will have to watch their disputes being sold out by a 'left wing' leader with no comeback until - too late - they put another unaccountable individual into office.

In other words, only if Crow and Serwotka truly represent a well organised, self confident rank and file, controlling its own officials and the leadership of its struggles, will they transcend the fate of Gilchrist and Hayes.

### **The role of centrism**

Outside of Scotland the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) is the biggest organisation to the left of Labour. The organisation is, in reality, a large sect rather than a small party. Its importance is that on the left it stands as the alternative pole of attraction in England and Wales (it is eclipsed by the SSP in Scotland and has sent its members into that party as an organised platform).

In 2003 its key role in building the Stop the War Coalition pushed it to the head of one of the largest mass movements ever seen in this country. But in this critical period it played a double-edged role. On the one hand the SWP energetically helped to build the mass movement, correctly striking an agreement for common action with broad forces. On the other it adapted its politics to those forces, refusing to challenge or criticise the awkward squad union leaders, left MPs and their spearcarriers in the Communist Party of Britain who held the movement back at the critical hour.

After the 15 February demonstration failed to stop Blair's drive to war it became clear that only mass direct action, including widespread political strike action, could stop him. The day war started should have seen such strike action called for, prepared for and organised for by the anti-war union leaders, with the backing of the left MPs. But no such thing happened. Only a handful of rank and file activists managed to get their fellow workers out on strike on that fateful day.

At that point revolutionaries had a duty to stand with the activists who put their jobs on the line by challenging the left leaders to do the same and call their members out. The SWP did no such thing. Their alliance with the bureaucrats proved more important to them than their 'revolutionary' principles. They refused to put forward, as a plan of action, a strategy that could have decisively altered the outcome of the struggle.

Their role in the first People's Assembly in March 2003 demonstrated this perfectly. They called for and built this assembly of 1000 activists from local antiwar groups across Britain. But then, when it became clear that the left leaders and MPs wanted to restrict it to a talking shop or an ornamental addition to the movement, they refused to use it as a springboard for action. They did not demand of the workers' leaders

that they call action. Crucially, they opposed a motion for local democratic People's Assemblies to be built across the country which was put forward by the League for the Fifth International at the Assembly and which would have created centres for organising the struggle that the bureaucracy could not have controlled.

Instead of recognising and rectifying their errors the SWP has deepened them since the end of the war. The Socialist Alliance - which they originally viewed as the electoral means of winning over left Labour supporters - has consistently failed to make a breakthrough. Membership remained low (around 2000) and key supporters - disgusted by the SWP's crass bureaucratism - left the alliance, including former Labour NEC member, Liz Davies. All of this flowed from the SWP's schema for the Socialist Alliance. It was to remain a half-hearted coalition on a half-baked left reformist platform. Under no circumstances could it be allowed to develop in a revolutionary direction. But nor would they allow it to become a campaign to win trade unions to the project of a workers' party. Either development would have called into question the SWP's own existence as "the" party and "the real" revolutionaries.

Nevertheless the SWP leaders were acutely aware that the mass mobilisations of February opened the possibility of a new mass political force. But instead of focusing on the call for workers' organisations to break with Blair and form a new working class party, rallying the youth and Asian workers in the process, they put forward the idea of a "Peace and Justice" coalition based on hazy liberal values rather than socialist policies. Specifically they sought out a bloc with their new found friends in the Communist Party and, above all, the leadership of Muslim organisations that had opposed the war.

Justifying this turn SWP leader and architect of the "new line", John Rees, wrote that the Muslim community, "is in its majority working class" and it "has been the bedrock of Labour support in many inner cities". Now this is true - but of course no-one on the left has opposed reaching out to them, least of all the supporters of this journal. But the alliance Rees proposed - and has still refused to rule out - is with leaders of the mosques and the Islamic organisations that participated in the Stop the War Coalition. The real question is which class they represent, because what is being proposed is no longer an alliance for action, but a political party which contends for government and advances a programme for the whole of society.

Muslim religious leaders, like those of other faiths, will represent their most influential members - those who make the biggest financial contributions. Seeking an alliance with a religious community's clergy and institutions, necessarily means compromising on the platform that is to be fought for. Hence leading SWP member Lindsey German says abortion rights or gay rights must be made into "shibboleths" - they can in her view be removed from the new party's electoral platform, traded away for an alliance with religious reactionaries. It is a disgrace to regard the defence of interests of large parts of the working class and the other plebeian classes as disposable extras - but it is the unavoidable consequence of the SWP's turn to non-class based politics in Britain.

It is inconceivable for example that the Mosques could publicly agree to back a working class campaign for secular education and the separation of church/mosque from state. Nor could Muslim businessmen support a substantial rise in the minimum wage, repeal of the anti-union laws - let alone the expropriation of the whole capitalist class. This is why it is wrong in principle to establish an electoral alliance with members of the exploiting and property owning classes.

The SWP's search for "popular front" partners faltered at the first hurdle, when the Communist Party of Britain preferred to hitch its wagon to the Reclaim Labour train and the Muslim Association of Britain called for a vote for the bourgeois Liberal Democrats in the Brent East by-election. But the project has refused to die. The Guardian newspaper (13.10.03) reported that Salma Yaqoob, the Muslim chair of the Birmingham Stop the War Coalition, has linked up with bourgeois anti-globalist author George Monbiot to launch an

electoral challenge in the 2004 European and municipal elections. The SWP will surely back the call as a way of achieving its objectives - a non-class specific political formation. This has a name: populism. To encourage this transatlantic import is to advocate a huge step backwards for British workers.

Throughout this farce, the rest of the British far left has been exposed as impotent: incapable of distinguishing Marxist principles from tactical flexibility, lacking any operable tactics towards the mass reformist organisations and, finally, too insecure to break decisively from the SWP during one of their rightward lurches.

Only the League for the Fifth International's British section, Workers Power, has been able to point to the political errors of the Socialist Alliance. Repeatedly, throughout the Alliance's history, Workers Power argued for standing candidates on a revolutionary action programme of transitional demands, leading from today's struggles, through the need to expropriate the big bourgeoisie and break up the repressive apparatus of their state, to the establishment of a workers' government resting on workers' councils and a workers' defence guard.

Although all the sponsoring far left organisations and the overwhelming majority of the individual members of the Socialist Alliance agreed that socialism could only be achieved through revolutionary struggle, only Workers Power argued to use elections to win workers to a revolutionary programme. Only our candidates actually stood on revolutionary policies.

The argument of our opponents was that to appeal to left reformists breaking from New Labour, the Socialist Alliance had to be based on a reformist manifesto.

But what more abject confession of bankruptcy could be made? In all history this policy has never succeeded in building revolutionary parties - it has always strengthened reformism. It is no surprise that on those occasions when mass revolutionary parties did emerge from crises in the social democracy, it was because the left wings decisively refused to adapt to reformist policy and steadfastly advanced revolutionary goals, linking them to the daily struggles of the workers.

The approach of melding revolutionary phrases with reformist policy has a name - centrism. For the adherents of a centrist policy - including the International Socialist Group, British section of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USec) - the Marxist programme is for the Sunday contemplation of the chosen few, while warmed over reformism is the only practical means of addressing the burning needs of the millions of working class people. Wrong. Not only has this method failed to attract workers at the polls, nor mobilise them to fight against the Blair government's policies, it has also laid the Socialist Alliance wide open to workers jumping back into the Labour fold as soon as the union leaders and a layer of MPs show a left face. If left reformism is all there is on offer, then why stick with the miniscule, fake variety when the leaders of serious forces insist that Labour can be reclaimed and Blair shown the door in 18 months' time?

The passivity of the centrists' method is further exposed by their inability to understand and apply the Workers' Party tactic, as developed by Leon Trotsky in the 1930s. Where workers feel the need for a political party of their own but have not yet been convinced of the need for revolution, it is necessary to propose a form of the united front: revolutionaries fight with them for a (new) workers' party and, at the same time, while never posing it as an ultimatum, campaign openly for a consistently working class policy, which can only mean a revolutionary - not a parliamentary reformist - programme. This tactic must be formulated as a series of demands on the leaders of the workers' mass organisations - especially the unions - to force them to break with the bourgeoisie (in this case with the Blairite faction that wishes to turn Labour into an open bourgeois party) and enter into an open fight for the political leadership of the working

class.

However, the smaller centrist trends in the Socialist Alliance have a completely different concept. Their aim is to build a left reformist alternative to New Labour on the model of the Scottish Socialist Party. But this is far from the optimum outcome for the current crisis in the Labour movement.

The Scottish Socialist Party has had some small electoral success when contrasted with the wretched performance of its counterparts in England and Wales. Yet its programme is reformist - its leader Tommy Sheridan holds out the prospect of peaceful socialist transformation and recently issued assurances that retail multinational giant Tesco would not be nationalised under SSP rule.

The electoral success of the SSP - with its six representatives in the Scottish parliament, making it the third biggest party in Glasgow - has drawn a lot of praise from the British left precisely because it seems to have broken Labour's monopoly hold on the working class. However, there are many examples of such parties in Europe - Sweden's Left Party, the PDS in Germany, the French Communist Party, Italy's Rifondazione Comunista. All of them share two traits, both obstacles to working class emancipation. First, in any serious struggle, they act as a brake, diverting it into safe, electoral channels. Secondly - as their "prize" for performing such a service for the bourgeoisie - all hope to enter government alongside their senior reformist 'allies', voting for capitalist budgets and carrying out anti-working class policies.

The task of the British left is not to reproduce reformism on a petty scale, but to seek an outcome of Blair's current crisis that can deliver long-term and lasting gains for the working class - a mass revolutionary party. But how can this be done?

### **A new workers' party**

The current situation is rich in potential. Forces which have appeared as solid components of the political landscape in Britain for so long are now in flux. To make the most of it, Marxists must start - not from the short-cut machinations of electoral cretinism - but from a clear restatement of socialist principles.

The claim of parliamentary democracy to embody the rule of the people is a fraud. The real decisions affecting the lives of millions in Britain and billions around the world are taken in boardrooms and the unelected offices of the state. However, working class people are obliged to make demands not only on their individual employers, via trade unions, but on the boss class as a whole - i.e. the state. They have done this for a century in Britain by means of the Labour Party. But the Labour Party was from the outset not simply a workers' party. Its politics, programme and strategy were never a true reflection of the historic interests of the class which founded it and sustained it. It was dominated by non-socialist trade union bureaucrats and petit-bourgeois politicians (MPs and municipal councillors, etc.)

Their strategy was a gradual reforming away of the abuses of capitalism. Despite its repeated lurches to the right (and an occasional lurch to the left - i.e. in the mid-thirties, mid-forties, early-eighties) it remains in essence a bourgeois workers' party. However most organised workers continue to identify with it as their party, the party founded by their unions, the party which best serves their interests as workers. They have absorbed over several generations the belief that it is possible to achieve their social improvement if not emancipation exclusively via the route of peaceful trade union and electoral struggle (parliamentary and municipal). In short they have illusions in bourgeois democracy.

However, there is a historic crisis of bourgeois democracy in Britain today. The mass anti-war movement enabled millions to identify this as a "democratic deficit". Despite a huge majority against war in the run up to its immediate launching, this could not gain real access to debate via the popular media or in parliament.

Nor could parliament ultimately control or determine the actions of the executive. The frustration of the democratic wishes of a majority (and then, during the war, of a huge active minority) testified to this.

This crisis is closely associated, in the minds of hundreds of thousands if not millions, with the Blair leadership, leading to open struggle in the Labour Party. Working class opposition to New Labour over the war and its neo-liberal policies has cajoled and encouraged most trade union leaders and some Labour left MPs - themselves threatened by Blair's clear and recently revived campaign to break Labour's link to the unions - to voice the need to challenge Blair's leadership and policies. The lefts' aim is to divert that discontent away from the formation of a new workers' party and into a project of reforming the Labour Party or, in a few, exceptional cases, into forming a new Labour-style party.

This shows once again that Labour remains a bourgeois workers' party with the support of the mass organisations of the working class. But we also have to consider what the vanguard of the working class - the hundreds of thousands of active union, anti-war, anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist militants - is seeking to do. We wish the workers' vanguard to break from Labour on a class basis, to the left, towards a consistent expression of its interests: a revolutionary action programme.

All of this makes the fight for a rank and file movement inside the key unions even more important. But it also underscores the fact that this fight has to be just one part of a broader political campaign for a new party of the working class, if we are to succeed in preventing Labourite reformism from being given a new lease of life.

We must call on the union leaders and Labour left to break with Blair and rally anti-capitalist and anti-war forces to a new workers' party. In no way does this call depend on whether or not these leaders are already advocating the need to break from Labour (some are, most are not); the need for a new workers' party has been posed by the objective situation and the class struggle itself.

We must demand that the lefts support all moves in the unions to democratise their political funds and that the union votes in the party be used to mount a leadership challenge to Blair. They should organise local meetings - drawing in antiwar activists and youth - to discuss mobilising the forces for a new workers' party that can challenge Blairite MPs at the polls.

Revolutionaries should press for the new party and its component parts to break with the Socialist International of Schröder and Blair and participate fully in the anti-capitalist co-ordinations of the European and World Social Forums, lending their weight to the fight for a new global party. It will need to be fully democratic and based on a clear programme - and we will fight for it to be a revolutionary programme.

Opportunists will condemn this perspective as pie-in-the-sky. Yet, compared with passive reliance on the likes of Billy Hayes and Bob Crow or dreams of turning the Labour Party into an anti-capitalist vehicle, it is the only realistic goal. Furthermore, each battle in the coming months and years will convince more and more union militants and anticapitalist activists that it is a goal worth fighting for.

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