

Independent Labour Party: Lessons of the split pt1

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The Labour party has not been the only mass working class party in the history of the British Labour movement. But what are the lessons of the shortlived Independent Labour Party?

The Independent Labour Party (ILP) was one of the founding constituent organisations of the British Labour Party from its inception as the Labour Representation Committee in 1900. At a specially convened delegate conference in Bradford in July 1932 the ILP disaffiliated from the Labour Party. Its aim was to build a socialist alternative to the Labour Party, replacing it as the majority party within the working class and within parliament.

The new ILP had 3 MPs and 653 branches with a membership of almost 17,000. It had a working class base in the north and on the Clyde.

By 1935 the ILP was down to just over 4,300 members. It had lost the majority of its branches, including the whole Lancashire area. Not surprisingly the demise of the ILP has been used time and again to prove the 'futility' of trying to build a socialist alternative outside of the Labour Party. Not only dyed-in-the-wool reformists have used this argument, but so too have many on the left who claim to be in favour of the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism

Militant denounced Gerry Healy's followers for leaving the Labour party in the mid-1960s on just this basis. Peter Taaffe declared; 'the history of the British Labour movement is rich in examples of costly hysterical walk outs and 'childish' left turns by sects with claims to divine leadership. Marxists criticised the ILP in 1933 for breaking from the Labour Party at the wrong time and on the wrong issue.'

Even today Militant, despite its intention to launch Scottish Labour Militant, continues to lambast Liverpool Independent Labour party for its 'sectarianism' and for prematurely splitting from the Labour party.

Socialist Organiser, on the other hand, thinks it is a question of principle to remain within the Labour party at all costs in order to transform it. Week-in, week-out, it inveighs against those who are outside, or will consider leaving 'the mass party of the working class'.

Workers Power believes that the lessons of the ILP split are very different to those that today's centrists would have us draw. In a series of two articles John McKee and Keith Lawry argue that the decline of the ILP did not result from the 'impossibility' of building a mass revolutionary party outside of the Labour Party. Rather it resulted from the failure of the ILP to complete its leftward evolution from left reformism through centrism into a genuine communist organisation.

By failing to break from centrism it was incapable from developing a revolutionary programme and strategy which would have allowed it to combat both Labourism and Stalinism. In other words its failure lay in its

politics. It did not result automatically, from its decision to leave the Labour party. Only if it had armed itself with a revolutionary strategy could the ILP have built real roots in the British working class and at the same time played its part in building the revolutionary international - the Fourth International of Leon Trotsky.

Lessons of the split

From the earliest days of the Labour Party the ILP was regarded as the "socialist conscience" of a party dominated by the trade Unions. Strongly influenced by pacifism and Christian socialism, the ILP held an apparently strong position within the Labour Party. Two thirds of the Labour MPs elected in 1924, the year of the first (minority) Labour government, belonged to the ILP. Even the Prime Minister, Ramsey MacDonald, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Phillip Snowden, came from the ranks of the ILP.

By the mid-1920s the ILP was starting to move leftwards. The experience of the short-lived minority Labour government was still fresh in the minds of working class militants. This government had quickly abandoned the programme on which it was elected as a sop to the Liberals. In return for this treachery the Liberals' votes kept MacDonald in office.

Loyalty

Emergency powers were used against striking transport workers, with the responsible cabinet minister, J R Clynes, declaring proudly that the Labour government had played the "part of a national government not a class government" in dealing with the strikers. The government also proved its loyalty to the British Empire, authorising the continued repression of nationalist revolts in the colonies.

These actions provoked unrest within the entire labour movement. A militant national rank and file organisation, the Minority Movement, led by the Communist Party drew in tens of thousands of ILP and Labour Party affiliated trade unionists. A group of ILP members, many of them elected as MPs from Clydeside, began to challenge the right-wing reformism of MacDonald, who held sway both in the ILP and the Labour Party. This group included James Maxton, John Wheatley; David Kirkwood, George Buchanan and Fenner Brockway.

By October 1925 the Maxton group had ousted MacDonald from the editorship of the ILPs monthly journal, The Socialist Review. At the 1926 annual conference James Maxton was elected chairman by an overwhelming majority.

Maxton's initial criticisms of the Labour leadership were mild. He accused them of a tendency to lose sight of the ultimate goal - socialism. In his acceptance speech in 1926 he showed that in no way had the left broken with the belief that socialism would come through parliamentary methods, but the MPs had to be "Pressured" from outside so that they did not lose their way.

He declared:

"Political success for the Labour party is a certainty, but political success is itself a poor end unless behind the Parliamentary majority there is a determined revolutionary socialist opinion."

Battle was joined with the Labour Party leadership over the question of programme. A series of policy documents were adopted by the ILP under the title "Socialism in our Time" and then pressed for at the Labour Party Conferences. The "Living Wage Plan" called for a minimum wage for every citizen to be a priority. This was to be combined with expanded social services and a national system of family allowances, to be paid for by heavier taxation on high incomes. Other documents called for the nationalisation of banking and credit, including the City and the Bank of England, a call for the removal of the Ministry of Health ban on giving advice on birth control at maternity clinics and a proposal that Labour

should vote against all military estimates.

There was little that was revolutionary about these documents. And apart from the military question, they were all in line with the Labour Party's programme adopted in 1918, which included the famous Clause IV. But they were opposed root and branch by MacDonald and the Labour leadership.

MacDonald castigated these policies as "flashy utilities" which would frighten off the electorate and defeated them one by one at the 1927 and 1928 Labour Party conferences. The real "electorate" that the Labour leadership was fearful of frightening was the powerful bankers and manufacturers. The leadership knew only too well that any such reforms would have faced fierce resistance from major sections of British capitalism and therefore fought to keep them out of the party's programme.

With the election of the 1929 minority Labour Government the differences between the ILP and the Labour Party leadership came to a head. The economic crisis that hit Britain in 1930 led to a dramatic rise in unemployment. By June 1930 unemployment reached 1.9 million, in December it had risen to 2.5 million, 20 per cent of the workforce. The ILP demanded that the minimum measures approved at Labour Party conference, calling for scales of benefit for the unemployed, should be introduced as legislation. MacDonald refused and the ILP leadership declared it would vote against all measures which did not include them.

Attacks

Worse was to follow. Under threats from the Tories and the Liberals to bring down the government MacDonald set up the "May Committee" to report on means of cutting expenditure. The commission issued an interim report proposing a series of attacks on the unemployed. Benefits were to be reduced, limited to 26 weeks a year. In addition a series of measures, aimed at depriving married women and part time workers of the dole; were proposed. The Labour government dutifully put these proposals forward to Parliament.

Maxton led the opposition to these measures.

By now the ILPers in Parliament had effectively split, with the vast majority supporting MacDonald and denouncing the 17 strong Maxton group for threatening the government's survival. Day after day, and sometimes all night, the tiny Maxton group in the House of Commons fought the measures against the unemployed. In so doing they daily exposed the treachery of the Labour government and were accordingly vilified by the leadership and the Parliamentary party.

Criticism

A hundred members of the ILP parliamentary group protested Maxton's leadership and, led by Emanuel Shinwell, launched a campaign against him in the ILP. Maxton himself, while critical of ILP MPs who voted against party policy, had previously headed off party criticism of these MPs and even prevented the issue coming to a vote at the 1928 ILP conference. Now he was paying for his compromises.

The ILP, although divided on the question, endorsed Maxton's policy. The 1930 conference of the ILP held in Birmingham declared that it was "unreasonable" to ask ILP MPs to vote for proposals from the government which had not been "subject to discussions of the Parliamentary party, and in many instances did not comply with the programme authorised by the Labour Party conference". It went on to declare that the ILP was "an independent socialist organisation, making its distinctive contribution to Labour Party policy and having its distinctive position within the party". This question of to whom MPs were responsible, the party or the Parliamentary group, was to become the crucial issue in the split.

For the Labour leadership this was a matter of principle on which they would not budge. This was because it struck at the heart of the fraud of Parliamentary democracy, at the "right" of the elected representatives to ignore their party and their electors in favour of doing the bidding of the capitalist class.

Endorsed

The Parliamentary Labour Party immediately tightened up its standing orders. A member was allowed to abstain but under no circumstances could they vote against a decision agreed by the PLP. Instructions were issued that before candidates could be officially endorsed by Labour they had to sign a pledge to abide by these standing orders. Shortly afterwards an ILP candidate standing in East Renfrew had his endorsement refused. Announced on the eve of nomination day to do maximum damage, the ILP candidate went down to defeat.

In July 1931 the May Committee, issued its final report calling for more attacks on the unemployed and massive reductions in public sector employees' salaries, including teachers, the armed forces and the police. The Cabinet was split. There was a financial crisis and a run on the pound. MacDonald announced to his Cabinet that he was dissolving the government and reappeared from his visit to the King at the head of a National Government made up of Tories and Liberals. Snowden and two other cabinet ministers joined him in the new government.

In the October election fought against the new National Government Labour went down to a crushing defeat, losing two million votes and being reduced from 289 MPs to 46! The ILP was also dragged down, reduced to a separate group of five MPs who had refused to take the "pledge" to PLP standing orders and therefore were not endorsed Labour candidates. The inevitable split was looming.

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