

Marxists and the Labour Party - The first fifty years

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This is the first part of a series of articles by Stuart King which will examine Marxist tactics towards the Labour Party

In Germany, Russia, Italy, France the period of the Second International 1889-1914 saw the growth of mass parties under nominally Marxist leadership. August 1914, the voting of war credits, the entry into war cabinets was clearly a rupture with the past of these parties. It led to a split of historic significance. In Britain, despite an early start in terms of trade unionism and the semi-revolutionary workers dominated Chartist Movement, the proletariat was very late in forming even a separate parliamentary Party.

Although Marx and Engels lived in Britain and had close working relations with labour leaders, Marxism did not take root until the early 1880's.

The reasons for the 'backwardness' of the workers of the world's first capitalist country lay precisely in the world dominance this pioneer role gave British capitalism. Before the epoch of Imperialism British capitalists were wealthy from exploiting not only their own workers but also millions of colonial slaves. The top 10% of skilled workers, (the Labour Aristocracy), the best organised, and therefore the spontaneous leaders of the working class were able by trade union action to win wages as much as two and a half times bigger than those of the mass of workers. Their employers tied them to their major political party - the Liberals. This experience presented them with an endless vista of reforms, with the amelioration of life within the framework of capitalism. Reformism was born as Liberal-Labour politics - what Engels described as an informal 'bourgeois labour party' hanging like a tail on the Liberals.

Imperialism

The onset of the general epoch of Imperialism in the 1880's brought an end to Britain's unchallenged world dominance and roused the masses of the working class to action. This mass pressure led to the formation of unions of unskilled workers in the late 1880's and 1890's. It led to the transformation of many of the old skilled unions. The entry into the labour movement of large numbers of unskilled workers undermined the old alliance between the leaders of the craft unions and the Liberal Party. It was these new unions that took the lead in pressing for a break with the Liberals. In these conditions the working class could no longer be tied to the bourgeois order by means of direct incorporation into the Liberal Party.

Despite the claims of the Fabians and despite Labour leaders' jibes that their party owes more to Methodism than to Marx, the conscious struggle for a working class party originated neither in the Wesleyan Chapels nor in the Webb's drawing room, but in the London house of a German political exile.

In May and June 1881 Engels wrote a series of articles in the Labour Standard urging the trade unions to take up the task of forming a working-men's party:

"At the side of, or above the unions of special trades there must spring up a general union, a political organisation of the working class.?"

The strategy Engels urged on the younger generation of socialist and working class leaders was to fight to draw the trade unions into forming an independent workers party.

But not one of the three major groupings of would-be socialists either understood or agreed with Engels' tactics. The Fabians, the Webbs & Co., consciously rejected them. They rejected the class struggle outright, arguing that 'socialism' was merely an extension of social reform. Capitalism in their view was evolving in this direction. They thus saw any government as capable of carrying out 'socialist' reforms and therefore they set out to 'permeate' the Liberals, and the Tories.

They had a particular fondness for the Liberal-Imperialists like the Chamberlains who espoused social reform as a means of incorporating the working class. They played an insignificant role in the foundation of the Labour Party, hardly surprising since they saw no need for a class party.

Tragically, the Social Democratic Federation of H.M. Hyndman played an almost equally insignificant part as an organisation. In Engels' words the SDF had "ossified Marxism into a dogma" and had become purely a sect. The SDF's members like Tom Mann, John Burns, Will Thorne had led the struggles that formed the new unions yet the SDF remained obstinately hostile to trade unionism and to direct industrial action. Hyndman considered strikes a waste of time.

The force which campaigned most actively for a break with the Liberals was the Independent Labour Party (ILP). Engels welcomed its formation in 1893 and advised non-sectarian Marxists to enter it. However, these forces hardly existed outside the Eleanor Marx circle and the ILP (although committed to "secure the collective ownership of the means of production") swiftly developed in an opportunist direction adapting not merely its tactics but also its programme to the existing level of the British workers. Though advocating a separate workers party and espousing the 'final goal' of socialism it was wedded to a piecemeal parliamentary reformist road.

"That Socialism is revolutionary is not in dispute, but that it can only be won by a violent outbreak is in no sense true. Nor do I admit that reforms are made from any such sordid motive. There is a growing social conscience which counts for much in these reforms ... I can imagine one reform after another being won until in the end Socialism itself causes no more excitement than did the extinction of landlordism in Ireland a year ago." (Keir Hardie, 1904)

ILP-ers had a contempt for 'dry theory', a fixation with the minutiae of day to day reforms and a hazy emotional preaching of the distant socialist utopia. Ideologically this left a vacuum which was to be filled by Fabianism with its 'municipal schemes', its 'gas and water' socialism, and its compromises with the Liberals.

Militancy

The growth of militancy and anti-Liberal sentiment in the unions, the increasing influence of the socialists, pressurised the 1899 TUC to summon a conference of co-operative, socialistic, trade union and other working class organisations "to devise ways of securing increased numbers of labour members in parliament".

The trade union leaders and most of their members were still politically liberals but a tremendous opportunity existed to make this the first step on the road to a socialist labour party. But from the start the principled tactical compromise advocated by Engels, the fight for a Marxist programme within this political extension of the trade unions, found no advocates. The SDF, via the London Trades Council proposed a

resolution that workers elected to Parliament should form a distinct party "based on the recognition of the class war and having as its ultimate objective the socialisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange". The ILP immediately opposed this, supporting instead a simple programme of demands "with which the main body of workers were already in agreement". Leading ILP'er Keir Hardie's resolution merely stated ? - this conference is in favour of establishing a distinct Labour Group in Parliament". The Labour Representation Committee, formed at this conference was made up of seven trade unionists and two members each from the ILP and the SDF plus one Fabian. It was formed one year before the launching of a systematic employers' offensive against the growing labour movement.

In July 1901 the Taff Vale case abolished at a stroke the immunities given by the trade union acts of 1871/6. Both Liberals and Tories colluded in this legal attack. The union bureaucracy found themselves on the receiving end of this. There was a stampede of unions to affiliate to the L.R.C.. At this crucial turning point in working class history the SDP walked out of the L.R.C. leaving the field to the ILP and the Fabians. Keir Hardie triumphantly wrote:

?The propaganda of class hatred is not one which can ever take root in this country. Mankind in the main is not moved by hatred but by love of what is right. If we could have socialism on the SDF lines nothing would be changed but for the worse."

What should revolutionary Marxists have done in this situation? Affiliation would have given enormous advantages - it would have gained Marxists the political ear of trade unionists, it would probably have allowed them to use the parliamentary tribune. It would have enabled them to struggle against the ILP and trade union opportunists, not only over principles but over their tactical application, in an arena where the rank and file could be mobilised against these leaders.

Democratic Demands

Marxists in Britain, to have stood a chance of winning the party to Marxism, would have had to take up the issues that continental leaders like Luxemburg did. Democratic demands like the suffrage issue were crucial questions in England too. The power of the House of Lords, the prohibitive expense of standing for parliament, trade union rights, the non-enfranchisement of women, the oppression of Ireland were all issues that a vigorous Marxist party could have won the masses on. As it was these issues were used by Liberals, feminists and nationalists to keep the Labour Party in humiliating dependence.

For example, to accept the first past the post electoral system rather than mobilise workers against it, meant inevitably standing candidates who would not be opposed by the Liberals. Refusing to take up these demands, the abstract propaganda of the Marxists served only to strengthen reformism. Had these issues been linked up with economic demands, with the mass action of the expanding rank and file movements, Marxism could have had a powerful influence in Britain before the first world war.

Dominated by an alliance of ILP parliamentarian opportunists, led by MacDonald and Keir Hardie, and trade union bureaucrats, the Labour Party tailed the Liberal Government after 1906, invariably supporting them. On all the issues of struggle that dominated the years before 1914 - the fight for women's suffrage, the massive strike wave, the upheavals in Ireland, the Labour leaders took an at best abstentionist and at worst reactionary line.

On the suffragettes' agitation Mac Donald said: "The violent methods are wrong and in their nature reactionary and anti-social, quite irrespective of vote or no vote." Lansburg and Hardie got no support from the PLP for their work for womens' suffrage.

At the height of the great strike wave of 1911 Arthur Henderson, one of the trade union leaders of the PLP

tabled a bill which proposed making strikes illegal unless 30 days advance notice was given.

After this record the 'betrayal' of August 1914, i.e. the entry of Henderson into the Cabinet in 1915 hardly came as a surprise to anyone. Paradoxically it was only during the war that the Marxists of the British Socialist Party (successor to the SDF) achieved affiliation to the Labour Party. Hyndman, an extreme chauvinist had been expelled from the BSP.

The Labour Party began to take final shape during the war and immediately after it. A ferocious mouthpiece of chauvinism at first, it began to respond to the war-weariness and outright anti-war sentiments of the masses as the war came to a close. At the Leeds Convention of June 1917 leaders like Snowden and MacDonald made 'left' speeches hailing the Russian (February) Revolution and calling for 'councils of workmen and soldiers delegates?in every town, urban and rural district.'" The vast expansion of the trade unions after the war, the revolution in Russia and the upheavals in Europe forced the trade union and parliamentary leaders to re-structure and re-adjust the Labour Party.

The period 1900 to 1918 sowed the seeds of modern labourism - its opposition to the class struggle and search for 'social peace', its unshakeable belief in the neutrality of the state and 'constitutionalism' and its identification with the nation state through bourgeois democracy.

Upheaval

The war produced an elemental upheaval in the life of the working class which shook it out of the old ways and habits of the past. In 1910 Labour candidates received only half a million votes. By 1918 the total stood at nearly two and a quarter million (20.8% of the total). By 1924 this figure had risen to nearly five and a half million - one third of the total votes cast. This massive increase of working class support was a reflection of the growth of the unions and the increasingly militant struggles of this period. The Russian Revolution exercised an influence far beyond the small circles of communists as the 'Hands off Russia Campaign' showed. In 1921 the TUC and Labour Party were constrained to set up a national council of action and threaten Lloyd George, with a General Strike.

The response of the trade union leaders and the parliamentarians led by Arthur Henderson, Ramsay MacDonald and J .H. Thomas was to 'social-democratise' Labourism. This meant ideologically the adoption of a formal 'socialist' goal (clause IV) drafted by Sidney Webb in evasive and ambiguous Fabian terminology.

?To secure for the producers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry, and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible, upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry and service;?

Split

Henderson, in a pamphlet written to explain the changes in the party 'The Aims of Labour' enunciates the 'classical' split between this 'distant' goal and the measures which constitute "a first step, a series of national minima to protect the peoples standard of life". Henderson under pressure from the rank and file shop stewards movement, has to include promises that "in the re-organisation of industry after the war, the Labour Party will claim for the workers an increasing share in the management and control of the factories and workshops" going on to set as the goal 'the abolition of the system of wage slavery'.

However, if the leaders had to make rhetorical concessions to the workers in struggle they also made sure they built into the party political and organisational measures aimed against any revolutionary development

of the masses. The 1918 programme and constitution were aimed by their drafters directly against 'Bolshevism'. Henderson's commentary appeals to the best traditions of English philistinism. Revolution is defined as a wanton resort to "barricades in the streets and blood in the gutters". This method is pronounced alien to the British character" and rejected in favour of "ordered social change by constitutional methods". Labour is again and again referred to as a 'national democratic party, founded upon the organised working class' but not a "class party".

The new structure was meant to reflect this project for a workers party kept strictly within the limits of bourgeois society. The provision for individual membership organised in constituency parties was essential to a modern electoral machine. This weakened the affiliated socialist groups (ILP, BSC etc) who had hitherto been the only vehicles for individual membership.

The Trade Union bloc vote was maintained with which the TU leaders could easily swamp the wishes of the constituency parties or the affiliated bodies. Yet the parliamentary party remained master in its own house - in the Commons. It was committed only to "give effect as far as may be practicable to the principles from time to time approved by the party conference".

Iron grip

This latter body was an almost toothless body. In the Labour Party real power lay in the hands of the parliamentarians with the TU leaders exercising a long stop control via the purse-strings of the main contributions. Labour thus received its peculiar structure. Its mass character was achieved largely via trade union affiliation (in 1928 it had only 214,970 individual as opposed to three and a quarter million affiliated unionists. A solid bloc of MPs and TU bureaucrats held the party in an iron grip. Only the breaking of the trade union leaders control over the unions could ultimately alter this situation.

What was the attitude of communists to such a party? Lenin and the Third International were to take up Engels' arguments again in the advice they gave to the various groupings which were to form the British Communist Party in 1920.

Lenin had to argue both against the opportunism of the British Socialist Party, which was affiliated to the Labour Party, and the "anti-parliamentarianism" of the Socialist Labour party, the Shop Stewards Movement and Sylvia Pankhurst's Workers Socialist Federation. In arguing for Communist Party affiliation to the Labour Party Lenin was absolutely clear as to the bourgeois nature of that party. At the Second Congress of the Communist International Lenin took William McLaine, a BSP member, to task for describing the Labour Party as 'the political expression of the trade union movement'. In contrast Lenin argued "The Labour Party is not a political workers party but a thoroughly bourgeois party because although it consists of workers it is led by reactionaries, and the worst reactionaries at that who lead it in the spirit of the bourgeoisie...". This analysis of the Labour Party as a bourgeois party with a working class base was fundamental in determining communists attitudes towards it. Likewise Lenin's understanding of the particular period of growth and development that the Labour Party was experiencing.

Lenin saw the Labour Party as on the verge of taking governmental office. As a bourgeois party it would inevitably fail to fulfil even the expressed and immediate needs of the workers. Hence the necessity for communists not to turn their back on the Labour Party but to attempt to vigorously exploit the contradictions at the heart of the young party between its leaders, and the aspirations of the mass of its supporters.

In these circumstances Lenin outlined a tactical compromise that the small forces of British Communists had to make if they were to win a hearing amongst the workers flocking into the Labour Party. "If I as a Communist come out and call upon the workers to vote for the Hendersons against Lloyd George, they will

certainly listen to me. And I shall be able to explain in a popular manner why the soviets are better than parliament and the dictatorship of the proletariat is better than the dictatorship of Churchill, but I shall also be able to explain that I wanted to support Henderson with my vote in the same way as a rope supports the hanged - that the establishment of a Henderson Government will prove that I am right and will accelerate the political death of the Hendersons and the Snowdens as was the case with their friends in Russia and Germany.? (Left Wing Communism 1920)

Confidence

Lenin advocated communists standing in a few constituencies where a split vote would not let the Liberals in and elsewhere "distribute leaflets advocating communism? and "urge the electors to vote for the Labour candidate against the bourgeoisie."

Lenin and the Comintern (C.I.) were clear that the communists vote should in no way be presented as a vote of confidence in the Hendersons as a 'lesser evil' than the Lloyd Georges or Churchills. The Comintern later elaborated the procedure of putting demands on the Labour leaders. These demands were not 'the communist programme', or that thoroughly passive and ambiguous formulation 'socialist policies' but important immediate demands which would be clear to thousand of workers met vital needs and which a government which claimed to represent them ought to carry out. Communists would fight alongside reformist workers to force Labour in office to carry out these measures. The C.I. explained it thus, "...we call on you to organise joint demonstrations for the old demands of the Labour Party and to establish joint committees which will force the Labour Government to fight for, 1.Full Maintenance for unemployed workers at trade union rates; 2.Nationalisation of mines and railways with workers control over production; 3. Full freedom for Ireland, India and Egypt. Revocation of the policy of armaments. Credit for Soviet Russia. Scraping of the shameful Treaty of Versailles."

In sum these attempt to mobilise Labour supporters to demand a break with the bourgeoisie and action for the workers. Exposure of the cowardly class collaborators is thus not a literary exercise but performed in action. In this way the forces mobilised in a united front manner can be rallied to the real 'alternative leadership' of the communists.

This is not a hoax or trick since the Communist Party does not cease to warn of the likely, even inevitable, vacillation and betrayal of the reformist leaders at the same time openly agitating and propagandising its own distinct Programme of Action.

In the situation where communists remained a tiny minority Lenin advocated a further method for relating revolutionary politics to the masses,

The tactical method advanced by Lenin was affiliation to the Labour Party by the CP. In the "conditions for joining the Comintern" the CI expressed its view that Communist groups should affiliate to the Labour party as long as "this party permits organisations affiliated to it to enjoy the present freedom of criticism and freedom of propagandist, agitational and organisational activity for the dictatorship of the proletariat ... as long as that party preserves its character as a federation of all trade union organisation of the working class". Certain compromises should be made to allow the communists "the opportunity of influencing the broadest masses of the workers, of exposing the opportunist leaders from a platform that is higher and more visible to the masses, and of accelerating the transition of political power from the direct agents of the bourgeoisie to the 'labour lieutenants' of the capitalist class in order that the masses may be more quickly weaned from their best illusions on this score." It was only under these conditions of complete freedom of propaganda and organisation that Lenin argued for affiliation.

Resolutely opposed by the Labour Party leadership and the Trade Union bureaucrats the requests for

affiliation were defeated at Labour Party conferences throughout the 1920's. (The best result was secured in 1923 when 3 million votes were cast against accepting CP affiliation and 200,000 cast for). On proposals from the national executive CP members were declared ineligible as Labour candidates at the 1924 conference (before this date several Communist candidates received backing from Labour constituency parties, most notably Saklatvala Communist MP for Battersea). Banned as individual members of the Labour Party in 1925, CP members were declared ineligible as delegates to all national and local conferences and meetings, even if elected by Trade Unions, in 1926.

Revolt

These measures did provoke a serious revolt among local Labour Parties. Over 100 ILP and CP influenced constituency associations refused to implement the 1925 decision. The tactic of the Communist Party in this situation was to attempt to weld an alliance together of the CP, left reformist and centrists under the banner of the "National Left Wing Movement". About 50 Labour Parties associated themselves with the movement. The attempt to build such an alliance against the Labour leaders was absolutely correct. What was wrong however was for the CP itself (as part of its right turn from 1925 to 1928) to disavow the need for transcending the Labour Party and Labourism. The National Left Wing Movement committed itself not to supersede the Labour Party, "but to 're-mould it nearer to the heart's desire' of the rank and file". The National Left Wing Movement met with systematic repression from the Party leaders, CLPs were suspended and disaffiliated by the National Executive. By 1928 this repression, and the sharp turn of the Communist Party to its "third period" line of characterising the Labour Party as "social fascists", had effectively eliminated this opposition.

The mould of the Labour Party firmly set during the 1920s. The minority Labour Government of 1924 proved to be a wretched fiasco. The cabinet was stuffed with ex-Liberal and Tory peers and politicians. Prime Minister MacDonald had two choices - to present to parliament the Labour manifesto of immediate demands, be defeated and face another election, or be 'realistic' and attempt to implement reforms the Liberals approved of. He chose the latter course and its consequences were a string of anti-working class measures.

Strikes

A railway strike was in progress and the Government assured the House of Commons that it "had no sympathy with this unofficial strike?". In the big docks strike it firmly intervened against the dockers and Bevin, their leader, was able to use the Labour Government as an excuse for giving in. "We were put in the position of having to listen to the appeal of our own people?" he said. Philip Snowden, Chancellor of the Exchequer indignantly recalled in his memoirs the strikes which "caused the Government great anxiety and diverted its attention in a large measure from the work of preparing its legislation, measures in which it should have been fully occupied." After 1924 the ILP acted increasingly as a 'left' pressure group within the party-dominated by the Clydeside MP's, Maxton, Kirkwood etc. Quite consistently Labour's role in the General Strike was minimal - its leaders being no more willing to "challenge the constitution" than were the apparently 'left' dominated TUC. For them both the betrayal of the strike w

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