

The halting march of Labour forwards? - Labour's liberal years

Jon Lewis and Dave Stocking Mon, 01/10/1984 - 23:00

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Part two of a History of the Labour Party by Jon Lewis and Dave Stocking

The formation OF the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) in February 1900 was an important step forward for the British working class. Yet in no sense whatsoever was the LRC socialist. The groups which came together to form the LRC the trade unions, the Independent Labour Party, the Fabian Society and the Social Democratic Federation, were agreed only on the need for independent labour representation In Parliament.

This first step raised a whole series of questions about the nature of the LRC's activities. What sort of organisation was needed at local level to fight elections? Was this organisation to be limited to electioneering? What was to be the LRC's policies on a multitude of political questions? What goal did it have which distinguished it from the Liberal Party? Were LRC candidates to be non-socialist or were the affiliated organisations free to put up some socialist and some non-socialist LRC candidates? In short what was to be the LRC's programme, tactics and organisation?

The Independent Labour Party led by Keir Hardie and Ramsay MacDonald gave answers in line with their thoroughly reformist notion of ?socialism?. For them socialism was a series of reforms in the interests of the working class - the introduction of unemployment benefit, the the eight hour day, free secondary schooling etc.

All of these were important measures to meet the crying needs of working class people. None of them however struck at the roots of the power, economic and political, of the British capitalist class. Indeed, given the latter?s world-wide dominance, both bosses parties, the Liberals and the Tories, from time to time offered to include watered down versions of these reforms in their programmes. They did so to attract the votes of the skilled and semi-skilled male workers who now had the vote. They also aimed to impede the formation of a Marxist socialist party on the continental model which might lead the working class to an assault on capitalism.

Fabianism

Both Tories and Liberals, in the 1890s developed "social reforming" wings. The Fabian Society intellectuals fell for this in a big way. Their strategy for socialism was to "permeate" both parties with reformist, state interventionist ideas. Thus at precisely the point when the LRC was formed they were ardently wooing a group of the leaders of the Liberal Party the so-called Liberal Imperialists ? to form a new parr party based on "National Efficiency".

Whilst Haldane and MacDonald were building up the LRC the Webbs had little time for the new organisation which they saw as a bunch of agitators and dreamers playing with class envy. They preferred

experienced politicians. The Webbs alternative to the LRC was ... a dining club! Named the Co-Efficients Club its purpose was to discuss "The Aims, Policy and Methods of Imperial Efficiency at Home and Abroad." Luminaries included Sir Edward Grey, later Liberal foreign minister and overtures were made to Joseph Chamberlain and the "social-imperialist" Tories.

Hardie and MacDonald's idea of socialism was fundamentally the same as that of the Webb's, but their methods differed. Hardie retained throughout his life an emotional hatred of the rich and what they did to working people and their families. He deeply distrusted the Liberal and Tory manufacturers. He had an instinctive relationship to ordinary workers that the snobbish Webbs and the social climber MacDonald lacked completely. But his semi-religious soft heartedness and soft-headedness made him a natural opportunist. He blithely sacrificed fundamental working class interests for temporary, particularly parliamentary, advantages. Thus when the LRC was founded he wrote to John Morley, the leading Liberal opponent of the Boer War offering him the leadership of the LRC.

Herein lay his fundamental difference with the Webbs. Their sympathies lay with the Imperialist wing of the Liberals (and the Tories). Hardie was drawn, by the Boer War towards the pacifist wing of liberalism. Yet capitulation to, or collusion with either threatened "Labour Independence" with an early demise.

Hardie and MacDonald unlike the Webbs, sincerely wanted independent Labour Representation. They saw that MPs, even working class and trade union ones, who were tied to the Liberal Party repeatedly sold out to the latter. The problem was that their gradualist view of piecemeal social reforms some how piling up till Britain was socialist had immediate tactical and organisational consequences. If practical reforms in the here and now were all that mattered then these could be achieved by a pressure group of Labour MPs. A "socialist government" was not really practical or even necessary, Socialist propaganda. preaching socialism was a task for the ILP anyway. Since many radical liberals like Lloyd George, also advocated similar reforms why not form an alliance with them and get their help to elect a few more Labour members of Parliament. Too much talk about socialism and any identification of this with class war and class struggle might scare them off.

Moral Socialism

Ramsay MacDonald was the most consistent in following through this line, both in the practical opportunism of his deals with the Liberals and his attempt to keep the LRC and then the Labour Party "socialistic but not socialist". He also popularised and theorised this line in a series of tracts and books. His hostility to the actual existing class struggle and his attack on Marxism as its theoretical end programmatic expression was lifelong, He wrote: "The best expression of class war is Trade Unionism. It concerns itself with no opposition except that between capital and Labour no union of interests except the interests of wage earning, no field of activity wider than the factory. It leads nowhere because it has no ideal goal; its only results can be the bondage of one side or the other?".

Against this MacDonald posed the "ideals of morel citizenship" and "conscience" as the real motive force for social change.

Thus according to MacDonald the working class is faced not with the task of winning political power, nor is this power essential to building socialism. Socialism is with us now and just has to be helped to completion: "When we think systematically of the scattered fragments of reform promised by the political parties, we see that they are but the foreshadowing of Socialism; when the tendencies begun by scores of experiments - factory laws, public health laws, municipalisation - are allowed out, joined together and systematised, Socialism is the result. And the political movement which is to express and ultimately satisfy, this need for the organic unity of Society, must be a movement of the whole of society and not one of its sections - the working class." (All quotes from Socialism and Society. 1906),

The very need for independent Labour representation was seen by MacDonald as an unfortunate necessity caused by the hard-heartedness and class bias of the Liberals. They had rejected people like himself and labour in general in contradiction to their own ideals. Thus labour had to organise to press its claims. But as soon as the ruling classes realised the force and potential danger to themselves of this workers' movement, their attitude to the Ramsay MacDonald at its head changed. And when the disdain and snobbery towards him ceased, or rather was carefully hidden, Ramsay was mightily impressed.

Liberal Pressure

The LRC faced another obstacle in the grossly undemocratic constitution and electoral system. Even after the 1884 electoral reforms only 28% of all adults had the vote. Women were without the vote altogether but 44% of males over 21 were also disenfranchised. The spread of constituencies was grossly unfair to the industrial cities. It cost a large sum of money to fight an election and MPs received no salary. Millions upon millions of the most exploited and oppressed working class people had no vote. The LRC, the unions and the socialist parties had two alternatives. They could rouse the working classes to struggle for democratic rights, utilising their trade union organisation. Or they could seek to win a few constituencies by striking sweetheart deals with the Liberals. The latter would give their votes in certain agreed constituencies to the Labour candidate and in return the unions would use their influence to back Liberals in all the rest.

The union leaders and the opportunist ILP chose the latter alternative. For this reason the great trade union movements of the pre-war period and the great Suffragette movement took place entirely aside from the political party of the working class. The price of the electoral deals with the Liberals was a constant pressure against socialist LRC and Labour candidates since Liberals would be unlikely to vote for them. Moreover the deal tied workers to the Liberals in all but a handful of constituencies.

The new party started life inauspiciously. No sooner had the LRC been formed than it had to fight the 1900 "Khaki Election" held at the height of the Boer War jingoistic hysteria. The LRC won only two seats. Keir Hardie at Merthyr and Richard Bell at Derby. On entering the Commons, Bell rapidly rejoined the liberals leaving Hardie as the sole Labour representative. If the trade union leaders and the ILP had prevailed Labour might have collapsed into Liberalism almost in its infancy. But the class struggle itself took a hand. The vicious anti-working class judges we all know so well gave the LRC a new lease of life.

The railwaymen's union was, in the Taff Vale Case (1901) made liable for damages to the employer's business resulting from the actions of their members. Their funds were opened up to judicial plunder. Led by the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants unions previously hostile to the LRC flocked to join it. Whereas at formation there were only some 250,000 trade unionists affiliated to the LAC, by 1903 this had risen to nearly 1 million. In the words of the Labour historian GDH Cole "The Taff Vale Case created the Labour Party."

Paradoxically though, this influx of trade unionists threatened to exacerbate the internal weaknesses of the LRC. The LRC was not a centralised organisation with a well defined policy. It was no more than the sum of its affiliated societies. The characteristic local organ of the LRC was the trades council. Individual membership was only possible through membership of an affiliated body such as the ILP. In effect the LRC was a group of loosely related and competing bodies. An added problem was that the trade union leaders wished to promote electoral candidates which represented their own sectional interests, rather than the interests of Labour as a whole. Necessarily this threatened to wreck the whole basis of the LRC. Moreover the trade union leaders, in most instances Liberal Party members, found even the milk and water "socialism" of the ILP unpalatable and wished to reduce to a minimum its influence within the LRC.

They need hardly have worried. The ILP leaders repeatedly boycotted their own "socialism" when it came to elections. The ILP's willingness to do this to its programme in the pursuit of parliamentary office showed

the accuracy of Lenin's characterisation of the ILP as "the opportunists of the so-called Independent (of Socialism but dependent on the Liberal) Labour Party". In effect this meant that the LRC itself was virtually indistinguishable from the Liberal Party in its policies. Electorally this class collaborationism paid certain dividends. With the great Liberal landslide of 1906, the newly named Labour Party took 5.9% of the vote and 29 seats.

The Labour Party had one real success in the new parliament, the Trades Disputes Act of 1906. The Liberals tried a much weaker bill reversing in part the Taft Vale Judgement. The unions stood their ground demanding full legal immunity of unions from civil prosecution during an industrial dispute. The liberals caved in and thus the fundamental basis for trade union rights was established until Thatcher's anti-union laws abolished them. After this the Labour Party tamely followed in the wake of Liberals own reforms. These were at first substantial. Measures like the introduction of non-contributory old-age pensions took the wind out of Labour's sails. Their own perspectives did not go beyond those of the social Liberals.

For the Liberals the purpose of the reforms was quite clear. As Churchill told the Daily Mail in 1909: "With a 'stake in the country' in the form of insurance against evil days the workers will pay no attention to the vague promises of revolutionary socialism. The Labour Party neither warned the working class of the reasons for the Liberal reforms nor pressed on to more radical demands. On the contrary, the Labour Party served as a tame adjunct to the Liberal administration, voting with it on all major policy issues. With the Osbourne Case of 1909 (which ruled that it was illegal for unions to use their funds to support and maintain Labour MPs) the Parliamentary Labour Party was drawn to an even greater degree of dependence on the Liberal Party. The threat of no salaries was enough to make sure that the PLP did nothing to antagonise its Liberal masters.

Closely related to the opportunism of the Labour Party's tactics was its undemocratic constitution particularly on the issue of the MP's accountability to the Party as a whole.

As early as the 1907 Congress issues which are still central today erupted. A resolution attempted to put the parliamentary party under the discipline and control of the conference. Hardie and Arthur Henderson rejected this totally. Conference decisions were "opinions only". The method and time for implementing them, in fact whether to implement them, was the task of the MPs alone. The constitutional attempt at democratic control of the House of Commons heroes was lost by 642,000 to 252,000. Worse on the issue of whether the PLP should go all out for the total enfranchisement of women or support a restricted suffrage Liberal bill, Hardie was defeated. Hardie rushed to the rostrum to declare, "if the motion they had carried was intended to limit the action of the Party in the House of Commons, he should have seriously to consider whether he could remain a Member of the Parliamentary Party." (Keir Hardie KO Morgan) Conference caved in. Thus from the outset the MPs faced down democracy within the Party setting a precedent that has never been decisively reversed.

Although the two elections in 1910 saw the Labour Party increase its seats to 42, it was at the expense of further strengthening explicit Liberal ideas inside the Labour Party. The increase in seats was mainly due to the transfer of the miners' MPs who had previously sat as Lib-Labs and who continued to think and act as Lib-Labs.

Sectarianism

While the leaders of the ILP and Labour Party were increasingly to be found in the pockets of the Liberal Party, socialism was making more headway amongst the working class. Symptomatic of this was the success of Victor Grayson at the Colne Valley by-election in 1907. Grayson who was refused the backing of his party, the ILP, as too socialist, fought the seat as an independent socialist and won a resounding victory over a Liberal and a Tariff reformer.

Both the SDF and ILP underwent significant spurts of growth. The SDF claimed 86 new branches in the years 1905-6. The growth of socialism manifested itself in other ways too. Working class students at Ruskin College, Oxford, dissatisfied with the bourgeois economics taught there, wanted to be taught Marxism instead. This led to an open break with the authorities, and the students left to form the Plebs League in 1909. Marxist educational efforts were also being made by the Socialist Labour Party, an offshoot from the SDF which had left the latter party because of its indifference to trade union struggle.

Unfortunately, when it came to the Labour Party, the SLP, despite its willingness to be involved in industrial action, proved to be as sectarian as the SDF itself. Consequently the two major Marxist organisations in Britain were unable to give a direction to the socialist upsurge in the first decade of the Twentieth Century. The SDF opposed the affiliation of the Labour Party to the International Socialist Bureau in 1908 because the Labour Party did not recognise the principle of class war. Lenin himself recognised that the Labour Party was not a "Socialist Labour Party" but to disqualify the Labour Party from the International would put the rank and file of the Labour Party outside the influence of the International. Lenin held that affiliation would compel hundreds of thousands of English workers, who undoubtedly respect the decisions of the International, but who have not yet quite become socialists, once again to think over the question as to why they are regarded as having taken only the first step, and to think over what should be the next step along this road.?

This tactic was quite beyond the reach of the SDF. Despite the growth of socialist and indeed Marxist ideas on a wide scale the great upsurge of working class militancy in the years 1909-14 did not lead to the creation of a mass revolutionary party.

Labour roadblock

The Labour Party and its leaders condemned and polemicised against the syndicalist trade union fighters like Tom Mann who were in the forefront of the mass strikes, from a purely parliamentary and reformist perspective. The SDF, at least as a party, stood aside. Philip Snowden, the ILP opportunist and H.M. Hyndman the "orthodox Marxist" both condemned the industrial militancy as a diversion from "politics". Arthur Henderson of the PLP put forward a motion in the Commons which proposed that strikes were to be declared illegal unless 30 days advance notice was given.

Yet it was because of the very class collaborationist policies of the Labour Party and the trade union leaders that the Great Unrest took the form it did: Politics, construed by the militants as parliamentary politics, were rejected but no alternative political strategy was fully developed. Above all the "Great Unrest" was an explosion of militancy at the rank and file level. Many workers were becoming clearer about whose interests the Labour Party really upheld. Signalling this disenchantment, prominent trade union militant Ben Tillett had written a pamphlet entitled *Is the Parliamentary Labour Party a Failure?*

Labour's attitude to the strikes of 1906-14 was a prelude to an even greater betrayal of the working class. In 1914, along with most other parties of the Second International, the party dutifully placed itself at the service of the warmongers. In place of international solidarity came shameful chauvinism. Labour gave its blessing to the worst slaughter the world had hitherto witnessed - slaughter in the pursuit of profit. In the next article in the series we will deal with the role of Labour in the First World War.