WHY SOCIALISTS SHOULD STAY IN THE LABOUR PARTY

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A LABOUR BRIEFING PAMPHLET

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Introduction

by Mike Marqusee, Editor, *Labour Briefing*

THE LABOUR PARTY enters the general election campaign of 1992 in poor shape. The rightward shifts in policy have disarmed it before what remains a hugely unpopular Tory government. The centralisation of authority and the purge of left-wingers has undermined its always fragile activist base. In local government, Labour Town Halls have capitulated to the Tory onslaught and become mere administrators of central government edicts, making enemies of many of their natural allies in the process.

All this, of course, mirrors the defeats suffered by the working class as a whole in the 1980s, above all the retreat of trades unionism.

Furthermore, the collapse of Stalinism has, for the moment, reinforced the ideological supremacy which the Tories gained following the abysmal failure of the last Labour government.

Not surprisingly, in this context, there is now a steady haemorrhage of socialists from the Party. For many of those, and indeed for many more who have stayed in, the ascendancy of Kinnock and his supporters has been all the more painful because their triumph came as part of a backlash against the dramatic advances of the left in the Party in the late 70s and early 80s. Many of the contributors to this pamphlet were intimately involved in the movement known as Bennism, and shared the hopes it ignited of a transformed labour movement, controlled by the rank-and-file and ready, willing and able to confront its historic enemies, the ruling class and the Tory party.

The bitter defeats inflicted on the left since then have profoundly affected all of our contributors, as they have tens of thousands others, many of whom have left the Party in recent years. But the lessons drawn from the experience by our contributors are radically different from those drawn by the comrades who have left.

The contributions which follow approach the question of why socialists should be in the Labour Party from diverse personal experiences, political perspectives and historical traditions. They are all individual views and none of them (including this introduction) have been put to the *Labour Briefing* Editorial Board for political endorsement. That's not our style. We make no claim that the articles which follow are representative or exhaustive. Rather, we hope they can stimulate a debate that will grow in importance and intensity after the general election, whatever the result. In their diversity and downright contrariness the views contained in this pamphlet are in keeping with *Labour Briefing*'s commitment to pluralism and open-ended debate - within *Briefing* itself as well as throughout the wider movement.

Shining through this heterogeneity, however, are a number of powerful common themes. The contributors to this pamphlet are united in believing that we must not only remain members of the Labour Party but take consistent, concerted action to build a strong left within it. None of the contributors can be accused of harbouring illusions about the state of the Labour Party or the politics of its leadership. It's no good comrades in the SWP or others reciting their familiar litany of Labour betrayals to us - we know it better than they do.

Our contributors speak not as foreign elements in the labour movement - transients waiting for something better to come along - but as an intrinsic, rooted component of it. The labour movement - and above all the Labour Party - is our home, and we will insist

on our right to live in it, however much some of our brothers and sisters may want to kick us out.

A number of contributors emphasise the crucial importance of the Labour Party's structural link with the trades unions. Do those who wish to depart the Party also advocate a rupture of this link? Would they support such a move within their own unions? Most would not. The reality is that for trades unionists the alternative to the link with Labour would be a break with politics itself. It would be abandoning the political arena to forces sponsored by the employers - a devastating historical retreat.

Several contributors argue that the working class looks to Labour as its representative and expects Labour to act in its interests. It does not do this because it is composed of millions of deluded fools, but out of a genuine, if often contradictory, class consciousness. In that context, abandoning Labour is just as much a betrayal of class interests as manipulating it in the interests of the bosses.

With a general election looming, it ought to be clear that leaving the Labour Party is also to leave the electoral battleground to all the forces socialists seek to displace in public consciousness. Some on the far left too lightly dismiss electoral politics as mere "electoralism" and crudely counterpose it to mass action. Any scrutiny of history will show that the two are closely linked. As democrats, we can hardly afford to abstain from an exercise in democracy which, whatever its limitations, is recognised by the great mass of the people as legitimate and far preferable to any of the historic alternatives. Abstract calls for a Labour vote are not a sufficient response to this reality. Playing an active part in the electoral battle means fighting within the Labour Party over the content of manifestos, the selection of candidates, the strategy and tactics for elections. This activity is not a substitute for mass organisation or direct action or an extension of democracy into new spheres, but complementary with them, part of an effort to give democracy in this country some class content.

Finally, the alternatives to the Labour Party have little to offer. Indeed, those who give up on Labour because they want open debate, participatory politics and some control over those who act in their name will find life even more unrewarding in the sects outside the party.

The chimera of an "independent" socialist party, to the left of Labour but somehow different from the democratic centralist sects, is resurrected every few years only to die an obscure death after a few more. Without a mass base in the working class, which in this society can only mean a base in the organised workforce, such an "independent" left party can only be a propaganda party - a talking shop which, in the absence of the discipline imposed by a mass base, will rapidly be torn apart by sectarianism, egotism and triviality.

And those who abandon all party politics for single-issue campaigns or syndicalism or the "social movements" or anarchism may do wonderful work of real value to the struggle for socialism, but will have nothing to say to the working class at the most crucial historical moments. In any case, they will find their aspirations constantly stymied by a labour movement leadership which will not simply wither away. It will have to be directly challenged on its own patch and ultimately replaced.

No one in this pamphlet and no one on the *Labour Briefing* Editorial Board is advocating a heads down, passive "preserve our membership at all costs" approach, not least because we know we cannot preserve our membership if we are silent as policies we support and people we work with are attacked.

Since our relaunch as a monthly magazine in February 1991, *Labour Briefing* has demonstrated with vigour that you can be an active member of the Labour Party without keeping silent, without apologising for being a socialist. In our columns we have attacked

the Labour leadership again and again not for the delight of those watching the battle from the sidelines but as a service to the movement of which we are a part. We hope through the magazine to give the rank and file the information, arguments and encouragement they need if they are to hold their misleaders to account.

That cannot be done from a safe distance.

What the papers say...about *Briefing*

"The defiant organ of the unreconstituted hard left" -
The Evening Standard

"Provides a bridge from the far left in the Labour Party to those outside"-
The Economic League

"Still more poisonous features than those printed in the old [Briefing]"-
Ian Aitken, *The Guardian*

"Its fanatical aim is to hijack the working class movement to its extremist policies"-
The Sun

"Promoting hate, peddling lies and patronising the working class"
David Blunkett, MP

Only through struggle...

by Leonora Lloyd

ATTACKS ON the left in the Party are nothing new. Nine months after I joined the Labour League of Youth in 1954, it was closed down. Some eighteen months later, the Young Socialists was set up. Whilst the LLY was for people aged 14 to 30; the YS was for those aged 16 to 25. Obviously, the Party felt that the older ones were giving us ideas and setting a bad example.

At that time - 1956 - hundreds of young people rushed to join the Party. Feelings against the Tory government of the day were running high. I was secretary of Hammersmith North YS, which by the late 50s was the largest in the country, with 100 members. This did not stop us being attacked by the parent Party.

Our sins included openly discussing racism (including racism in the Party) at the time of Notting Hill Gate race riots, criticising a neighbouring MP for his support for the atom bomb and testing, and poking fun at our own right-wing MP, Frank Tomney. As the editor of the branch magazine, I was put in front of the firing line and suspended for six months. Even after my suspension, I was not allowed to hold office.

After having my first baby, I started going to the Women's Section, which met during the day. This was quite a culture shock after the YS. No one there was under 65. They really did discuss jumble sales and making tea.

When my daughter was two, I stood as conference delegate for Southall Labour Party. One of the GC delegates challenged my nomination on the grounds that I would be neglecting my child if I went to conference. I am afraid to say that I was merely cross that he assumed that I had not made suitable arrangements. These did not include booking a place in the conference creche -there was no such thing, of course.

I mention these things to underline that progress in some areas has taken place, and that there has always been a state of war between left and right in the Party. Women's rights were not really mentioned, gays and lesbians did not exist, and black people were noticeable by their absence. There had been a big battle in Kensington Labour Party, for example, over membership applications from "West Indians" (as they were then called).

The changes have not come about by accident. Black people and their allies on the left put up a battle and they started to join. The next stage was for them to start getting office within the Party and to represent it at public levels. No one would claim that racism does not exist within the Labour Party, but we are a long way from the Party I remember in the 50s and early 60s.

Women have certainly made great strides as a result of the many campaigns we have waged over policies, representation and such things as language, creches, attendance allowance and so on.

Being in the Party over many years can lead to disillusion, to a sense of deja vu, to an ability to put things into perspective, or a mixture of all these things. At my very first conference, as a visitor, I heard Gaitskell promise to "save the Party I love" from the policy of nuclear disarmament. There is nothing new in Party leaders misusing their power, nothing new in attacks on the left (although the current level of witch-hunting is exceptional), nothing new in the youth movement being disbanded and started again.

There is also, alas, nothing new in disillusioned lefties leaving the Party, often to become depoliticised or to join ever more strident and irrelevant sects. When this

happens, it does make life harder for the rest of us left to fight on but there really is no alternative for one very simple reason.

Our main enemy is still the capitalist class and its party, the Conservatives. The Labour Party remains the party of the working class and its organisations, the trade unions. As long as that is the case, those of us who call ourselves socialists and who therefore have seen the future of humanity as being bound up with the fate of the working class must continue to fight for the policies we believe in from the place where our views can reach the widest audience - inside the Labour Party. The Party does not belong to the leadership; it belongs to the members. The left must find ways of uniting around common demands and campaigns. Only through struggle can we reclaim our birthright.

● **Leonora Lloyd is secretary of the National Abortion Campaign, an activist in MSF and Labour's Prospective Parliamentary Candidate in Hendon South.**

The question of government

by Sue Hamilton and Lachie Stuart

"I'M GOING to the AGM of the GMC of my local CLP".

So runs a song written by a Scottish member of the Labour Co-ordinating Committee in the early 1980s. The song continues to bemoan comrades who identify politics with committee meetings and revel in the membership of an exclusive club which communicates by acronym. These comrades continue to wonder why friends and colleagues do not join the Party. There is, of course, a certain irony in that the song was written by the Red Review - the chief protagonists of Kinnock's clampdown. But the sentiments apply almost as much to the left of the party as they do to the LCC itself.

The fact that the Labour Party is now in such a bad state is not solely a result of the leadership's charge to the social democratic right in order to suffocate activism. The left of the Party must also carry some of the blame. We manifestly failed to build an outgoing, campaigning organisation that was strong enough to withstand a protracted lull in the class struggle and ideologically strong enough to withstand the demands of the leadership for conformity. Many Party members are attracted by the arguments for conformity: "Don't rock the boat; there must be no dissent; we need to be monolithic to win the election; the election victory is all". These comrades have been alienated by the left with its acronym talk, a left that has channelled its energies into internal and inward-looking fights. Now we are paying the price for that.

It is a sorry state of affairs that the explosive democracy battles of the 1980s have come to this. These days any hint of dissent in your Party can threaten its autonomy. Many wards do not even have the life in them to articulate dissent or oppose the leadership's strategies - even assuming that the remaining rump of membership that attends Party meetings disagrees with Kinnock and his team.

We have not found ourselves in a new situation - there have been purges and shifts to the right before this one. As yet, notwithstanding how unpalatable the Party's electoral strategy is, there has been no fundamental change in the Party itself. It remains the only organic political expression of the working class. There is still no alternative!

In the coming general election, the Labour Party manifesto will not promise to change the world - but a defeat for Major and the end of Conservative rule after thirteen years, finally burying the ghost of Thatcher's administrations, will be a tremendous boost to working class people and the labour movement.

The activities of left activists now will influence the course of events after the election. A Labour victory will rejuvenate and re-energise the movement. The leadership will come under increasing pressure from the rank-and-file, who will expect the right to demand concessions from a government that purports to represent them - a government that will be expected to act for the working class. After an inevitable honeymoon period there will be conflicts between workers and employers in both the private and the public sector. This conflict will result in struggles that break the Tory anti-union laws, which Labour is now pledged to retain. Small scale disputes could escalate into a high-profile, cross-sector fight where the ability of the Labour government to control the working class will be at stake. The historic vulnerability of a Labour government to the labour movement will again be demonstrated.

This vulnerability provides reasons for socialists to remain in the Party and ignore the various siren calls of the SWP and Militant. The links between working class expectations

and the Labour Party have not yet been broken. Part of Thatcher's legacy may be to have individualised expectations and thus to scale down immediate apparent demands and Kinnock's agenda is a reflection of Thatcher's success - but it must be ephemeral.

Similarly, the link between the unions and the Party remains despite attempts to change the relationship. This link is the factor which makes a Labour government "weak", which prevents it from effectively managing a decaying capitalism. It is the same factor which makes Labour a central focus in any project aiming at the transformation of society.

The rise of the Labour left came on the back of Heath's defeat at the hands of the unions. The incoming Wilson/Callaghan government failed the class; it refused to match the needs of those who created it. Socialists who were looking for answers to the questions of government after victorious industrial struggle discovered that the government was good enough. So the government fell into conflict with its own class - and in conflict it lost to Thatcher. The left response to the betrayal was to organise inside the Labour Party. Democracy and accountability of MP's became the issues in the new battleground. Constitutional matters were seen to go hand-in-hand with winning left policies. After the disappointments of government the Labour rank-and-file wanted representatives prepared to enact socialist policies.

There is a debate to be had about why the left eventually lost these battles - over and above stating the obvious, that the odds were always stacked against us. From our point of view there was a problem with the constitutional model that the left adopted - i.e. delegatory democracy. This, we believe, helped to point activists inward. A participatory democracy would have put the emphasis on recruiting new members through campaigning. It would have had the added bonus of keeping the left in check by constantly having to go to the membership to win the arguments. That participatory model might have produced a more solid and ideologically committed left-wing within the Party.

There is a sense of fatalism in our expectations of the incoming Labour government. Once again people will be making demands and asking questions of government. The current state of Party unity will break under pressure from external events. It will be up to the Labour left to provide the answers to these questions and to channel the politics of people who drift into the Party. Workers in conflict will look to their Party. Their anger and militancy will not in itself be enough to change it, let alone change the world. The left faces a challenge of moulding that anger into a coherent force which takes on the right and builds for the future.

The task will be made harder by the Militant and the SWP who will effectively block the route into the Party for many socialist comrades. But we know that they are wrong to organise outside the party and thus leave a vacuum where militants will be looking for answers. In Britain we are fortunate to have a Party tied to the unions, a party which is, in effect, controlled by them. Consequently, industrial struggle always floods over into the Party - there is no wall between the unions and the Party and no wall between the class and the unions. It would be a nonsense for socialists to forfeit this peculiar relationship just because, at the moment, the Party is leaning towards the bourgeoisie. It is this trade union link, so peculiar to the Labour Party, that makes the Party unstable. Temporarily this instability is veering to the right; at other times it has (and will again) veer to the left.

Our goal should be to create a government which relies on the power of the working class, which builds upon class action, which organises and legislates in the demonstrated interests of the class. This cannot be achieved by being outside the political expression of the working class movement.

The beginning of the break will come with the general election. In 1987 Kinnock spoke with excellent rhetoric for millions as he denounced the Tories and offered a vision of

society where basic needs are met and where dog did not eat dog. The manifesto even then did not match Kinnock's professed vision and after year's of tinkering and trimming we are unlikely to see Kinnock back at his rousing best in this year's election. But the election will still be the time when people are politically reawakened. The Labour election campaign is the only one on offer. The left needs to make the best of it. There are no alternative strategies that will attract people - the focus of working class attention will be on Labour's campaign. The left's best chance of changing the state of British politics will be to go out canvassing for dull grey - and in so doing using its resources to offer a vision of a society where it is not acceptable to have millions of people living in poverty and where homelessness is not merely a small detail.

Our immediate task is to plead with comrades thinking of running from the challenge: "Don't go! Knock up all those other comrades who used to attend meetings. Put it to them that the election is on its way and ask them to trust their brains - and not their gut reaction to the state of the Party. But at the same time make it clear that the next battle begins when we win the election."

Comrades should not expect miracles. The left has taken such a hammering that groups of half-a-dozen people per constituency are all that we can now expect. But six people talking now, assessing our collective errors and sorting out better ways of working on the political questions that the left has ducked will be the base from which the forthcoming industrial militancy can be channelled into a constructive political movement. If we are not prepared, then the soon-to-be-released political anger will be left to find its own political focus or remain as mere trade unionism, militant and sincere but unable to give answers to the vital questions of government.

● **Sue Hamilton is a Labour Party member in the north east. Lachie Stuart is a member of Hackney North CLP.**

Power for our Party...power for our class

by Graham Bash

A SOCIALIST approach to the Labour Party cannot be determined by a surface impression of the balance of forces within the Party at any given moment. It should be rooted in an historical analysis of the Party's development.

The characteristics of the British Labour Party are rooted in the history of the British working class - whose failure to develop any lasting revolutionary traditions was no historical accident but a product of the material and intellectual development of bourgeois society.

The earliness of the bourgeois revolution in Britain and its deformed heritage, the slow gradual development of capitalism, the compromise between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie all helped isolate the rising trade union movement of the first half of the 19th century from revolutionary traditions or consciousness, a tendency that was substantially enhanced by the influence of British imperialism in the second half of the century. Already at this stage there was that separation of the trade unions from politics which was to be at the heart of British Labourism.

Despite the violent struggles of the emerging working class in the first quarter of the 19th century or the historic interlude of the 'physical force' Chartists in the 1840s, despite the period of riots and demonstrations in the 1880s and the activities of the Marxist groups in this period, the dominant legacy from 19th century working class politics was constitutional, parliamentary, gradualist and reformist. And the organisational expression of this tradition was not the embryo of a revolutionary party that developed in Russia, nor even an ossified 'Marxist Party' like the German SDP but the trade unions, trades councils, the TUC and the co-ops.

From its foundation as the Labour Representation Committee in 1900, the Labour Party was thereby to embody fundamental contradictions.

Born of an alliance between the trade unions and the socialist organisations - the Independent Labour Party, the Fabians, and the Social Democratic Federation - to give political, explicitly parliamentary expression to the aims of the trade unions, the Labour Party had by 1918, through the affiliation of every major trade union, become the mass political party of the labour movement.

Yet from its creation, it was in its ideas and practice based on the separation of trade unionism and politics and above all on a refusal to countenance the use of the industrial power of the trade unions to advance its political aims. The entire political existence of the British working class was determined by the prior existence of trade unionism and was a product of the contradiction between the early growth of the trade unions and the late arrival of the Labour Party. Unlike in Germany where the workers' party preceded the unions or in Russia where it built them, in Britain the trade unions created the Labour Party and this was to endow it with both organisational stability and political backwardness.

Created in part by explicitly socialist organisations, the Labour Party inscribed on its banner not the ideology of any brand of socialism (unlike its Second International counterparts) but the specifically 'non-political' ideology of trade unionism. The 1900

Conference rejected the SDF resolution to base the Labour Party on "the recognition of class war". Though created as an independent political organisation of labour, quite distinct from the radical wing of the Liberal Party, the early Labour Party was nonetheless very much part of and an outgrowth from the Liberal-radical tradition.

The Party's political, programmatic deformity was complemented by its organisational relationship to the working class - which was always indirect and passive. From its creation in 1900 membership of the Party was totally (and even after 1918 primarily) an affiliated membership, a by-product of membership of an affiliated trade union or socialist society. The Labour Party was and remains linked to the working-class not at the point of production but via geographical limits corresponding to parliamentary boundaries and via the trade union bureaucracy and the block vote.

The Party's domination by the trade union block vote - the domination of the largely inactive, affiliated union membership over the active constituency Party membership has always been an organisational factor of prime importance. It has helped to produce an inherently bureaucratic structure which has complemented and reinforced the division between trade unionism and politics.

The creation of the Labour Party was an historic conquest - a recognition by the trade union movement that it had to enter the political arena - but it was a conquest deformed from its outset.

That was the Labour Party at the moment of its birth and so it remains today. Despite movements to the left (after the First World War and in the early 70s) and to the right (in the 50s and today), despite the ebb and flow of constituency parties' membership and activity, despite the trampling on Party democracy and the attempts to take the Party away from its trade union roots, that historic conquest, that link with the trade unions, has not been broken.

Today, with much of the left in despair over prospects within the Party and even the Militant throwing away forty years of Party work, it is useful to codify the basis for a socialist approach to the Labour Party:

* Our approach to the Labour Party should be seen as a specific national application of an international struggle for the achievement of workers' governments via the fight for the united front of the working class against the bourgeoisie;

* Our approach to the Labour Party is based on a recognition of its almost unique nature i.e., its link with the trade unions and the fact that the Party is the sole political organisation based on the trade unions;

* We reject a 'perspective of split' in both senses of the phrase. In view of the Party's historic organisational stability, based on its link with the trade unions, it is most unlikely that it will split or be destroyed short of either a revolutionary situation (and perhaps not even then) on the one hand or a historic defeat for the working class on the other. The right wing may split off as it did in 1931 and in the early 80s.

But this would leave the Party's trade union base intact. Even a 'left' split such as that of the ILP in the 30s would have scant effect unless the major trade unions themselves disaffiliated. There may be split-offs from the Labour Party; but there can be no fundamental split within the Party unless the trade unions break away, and this seems unlikely in the extreme.

* We should have no perspective of ourselves splitting from the Party. We should reject the strategy of tendencies such as the Militant minority who see themselves splitting from the Party at a certain stage and then applying the united front to it from outside. On the contrary, our aim, so far as conditions permit, is to speak and act in the name of the Party itself against its reformist leaders.

* Specifically, we should reject the whole concept of 'entrism' - which is based on the view that the Labour Party is an alien body which small socialist groups enter to grow bigger and then leave to form an independent socialist party. We are no more 'entrists' into the Labour Party than we are 'entrists' into the trade unions. The outcome of 'entrism' can be seen in the fate of Militant whose Labour Party work was always based on an entrist perspective. There are major differences between the ultra-left and sectarian triumphalism of the majority tendency in Militant and the sober analysis of the minority, but both embrace entrism and ultimately the difference is one of timing - between the majority who want to leave the Party in a period of downturn (madness!) and the minority who want to leave in a period of upturn (pointless - why quit when we're winning?).

* We must recognise that the struggle in the Labour Party cannot be just an internal Party matter but, on the contrary, ultimately depends on the struggle within the trade unions and broader movement.

The historic failure of the Labour left has been the failure to root itself within the trade unions, challenge the trade union bureaucracy and democratise the trade union movement. But the trade unions can be the primary focus for socialists only on condition that the trade union struggle is given political expression within the Labour Party. Our task is not to rupture the link between the Party and the unions; on the contrary, it is to make that unity a higher reality by giving conscious expression to the need to break down the barrier between politics and trade unionism that is at the core of British Labourism - and thereby to transform the indirect relationship between the Party and the working class into a new, direct and vital one.

Our task is not to transform the Labour Party into a 'revolutionary party' any more than it is to transform the trade unions into a revolutionary party. This is to confuse the mass united front bodies of the working class with the political tendencies within them. It is not our aim to compete with or replace either the Labour Party or trade unions. Our task is to destroy and replace not the Labour Party but the bureaucracy and leadership of the Party. The interconnected networks of the labour movement are not rivals which socialists ultimately seek to destroy, but potential organs of working class power.

It flows from this that the task of building a revolutionary party in Britain means nothing other than building a revolutionary leadership within the Labour Party and trade unions and the broader working class. The building of a strong Labour Party is not in conflict with the building of a revolutionary leadership; it is the precondition for it.

We are not a hidden secret group but an open conspiracy fighting for power - power for our Party (i.e. the Labour Party!), power for our movement and power for our class.

● **Graham Bash has been a member of the Labour Party for over twenty years, was one of the founders of *Labour Briefing* in 1980 and is currently a member of Hackney North CLP.**

Don't let the bastards grind you down

by Karl Statten

OVER THE past few years many people have left the Party for reasons too numerous to recite in detail. Some drift rightwards and some to the left; others drop out of politics altogether. The drift into ultra-left groups on the surface looks a very attractive option for many frustrated socialists in the Labour Party. Take the SWP, for example. You could be fooled into thinking there are tens of thousands of them judging by the number of placards at demonstrations. But apart from their annual "Marxism" event (although no mean feat) and the sale of their paper they do nothing. Their influence on national politics is nil. The same goes for the RCP, Communist League, etc.

To stand on the sidelines attacking the Labour Party for its reformism is merely petty, self-serving sloganeering. What do they hope to achieve? The answer is simple: to build their own "mass" parties.

Despite its reformist nature, Labour remains the mass party of the organised working class. And despite the current leadership's preferences, the Party is still the only one capable of bringing about a change toward a socialist society.

As Eric Heffer said, there may come a time when we have to build a new socialist party, but while the trade unions continue their affiliation to it Labour will continue to be the natural home for socialists.

People who drop out altogether say, when asked why, that there is no point in being in it. This is nonsense. If, like me, you joined the Party to help bring about a socialist change in society, come back and rejoin the fight - because society has certainly not been transformed yet.

The case for being in the Labour Party has, arguably, never been stronger. A Labour victory is vital in the next general election regardless of the leadership. It is the job of all socialists to fight all out for that victory, for a Labour majority that doesn't have to make shady deals with bourgeois centre parties. If you share these feelings Labour is the party for you. If you're thinking of leaving the party, don't let the bastards grind you down. If you are a socialist and really want to make your voice, your efforts count for something in the working class, don't look any further: join (or re-join) the Labour Party.

● **Karl Statten is chair of Banbury CLP, a founder of the North Oxfordshire Campaign Group and a member of the GMB.**

Women must stay!

by Pauline Purnell

I HAVE PARTICIPATED in the growth of the women's movement in the Labour Party, was there at its peak in 1987 and then witnessed it shrink following Kinnock and Ruddock's backtracking over nuclear weapons and Cunningham's commitment to nuclear power.

But the Labour Party remains the place for socialist women. Only by being in the Party can we work together to ensure that future generations benefit a good national health service, a nationalised drug industry, subsidised public transport, etc. Socialism is about equality - equal pay, equal access to services, equal opportunities, equal political power. Women who are committed to these goals because of their struggle for their own liberation are needed inside the Party to ensure these ideas reach fruition in the only way they can - through a mass movement of the working class.

I canvass, leaflet, or take part in street activities every week. I know the majority of people look to the Labour Party to bring about the vital changes needed to ensure we have decent homes, schools, jobs, social services and leisure facilities; they look to the Labour Party to represent their interests.

My grandmother was a founder member of the Labour Party in Birmingham. She and her working class sisters were well aware of the manipulations and wheeling and dealing that went on amongst the upper and middle class aspiring politicians who fronted the Labour Party, but they also knew it was the working class, especially working class women, who rallied and canvassed support on the streets and in the unions for the Party.

It's the work of women who will win the election for the Labour Party this time. It's socialist women's energy, commitment and imagination that attracts women to vote Labour.

So it would not cross my mind to leave the Labour Party, the Party of Labouring people, who work for a living or would work if child rearing, disability, old age or mass unemployment did not bar them.

It's our Party. The yuppy hijackers will abandon ship when the going get tough. Then it will be up to us to ensure the politicians meet the needs of working class people.

● **Pauline Purnell is a former Chair of Birmingham District Labour Party, agent for Birmingham Edgbaston and stood for the Women's Section of the Party's National Executive in 1991.**

Here to stay - and here to fight

by John Nicholson

THE LABOUR Party leadership is moving to the right. Kinnock and Kaufman's travelling road show continues with its own twin-track strategy of ditching Party policies and witch-hunting Party members. It has dragged with it the "internalists" of Socialist Action (let's be explicit) and their cover "organisations" contributing to Labour Left Liaison.

This has unfortunately included the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy, whose secretary has been arguing since 1987 for the prioritisation of issues "which are potentially acceptable to Party members", at the same time as claiming (through LLL) a near-monopoly on positive discrimination, which would almost certainly be jettisoned as "unacceptable" by these same Party members.

This whole trend could be called "Here to Stay".

On the other hand, the Socialist Movement calls for a twin-track approach (surely too grand to call it a "strategy"). This is an appeal to people who do not want to work in the Labour Party -not just because it's boring or reactionary but also because it might mean hard work, a fear expressed at the Socialist Movement AGM that the general election would get in the way of ordinary business and that people might have to go out in the rain and knock on some doors. This is coupled with a view from some that "folks" don't associate any longer with the notion of the "working class". Its reluctance to engage in Labour politics, never mind whether critically or otherwise, is parallelled by the Socialist Workers Party and the Militant, who are now vying with each other, encouraged by sumptuous space given them in the Guardian letters' page, to become the "REAL real Labour Party".

This has problems for organisations which claim to be revolutionary socialist and, in varying degrees, not interested in electoral politics. The SWP "open letter", for example, poses only two options - drop out of effective political activity or build an independent socialist alternative to Labour. In other words another electoral party. The option of the left joining together to build a socialist Labour Party is deliberately omitted. Having said this, it is undoubtedly true that comrades in both SWP and Militant have taken up class struggles in a way which the Labour Party has totally failed to do, especially over the Poll Tax.

You might label the whole of this umbrella "Here to Fight".

But for serious Marxists a gaping hole exists in between these two trends. Many people looking into this abyss are afraid to jump, on their own, leaving behind a Labour Party even worse for their having gone, but can't see any clear way to stand on the precipice and push back the forces of reaction gathered behind. Regrettably this means many people (without a Party card because Walworth Road hasn't produced one) are simply sitting at home watching the telly. Although the SWP claim a gigantic increase in membership (when didn't they?) I suspect the Television Tendency is winning.

And what about younger people, for whom there has been a decade of stolen opportunities? No jobs after leaving what passed for education, no trade unions to become an automatic part of, no Youth Sections of the Labour Party, no addressing of radical agendas by mainstream parties, and a clear diminution of campaigns. What has happened to CND or War on What? Even the Labour campaign for Lesbian and Gay Rights appears to be taking a Kinnockite dive for cover. In this context it is to be hoped

that the newly-initiated Anti-Racist Alliance may prove a worthy reversal of the trend. But is it any wonder that Class War sells so well?

We have to address both issues - action and organisation. The call "here to stay, here to fight" has been used to challenge the racist and sexist laws under which we live. The challenge of such campaigns has always been to the Tories, the capitalists, the racists and their system - but it has also always been to the "respectable" Labourist MPs and Councils, to the trade union leaders with their credit cards and their holiday discount schemes, to the "internalist" left of the Labour Party which seeks to burrow so far inside the machine that it forgets why it was burrowing in the first place. People fighting for the basic right to remain in this country, or to rejoin their families, do not waste time on the structural niceties of this or that representative committee, nor on the politically correct line on the writings of Kautsky or Luxemburg. Such campaigns take both the necessary action outside of all political structures and pursue the necessary support from within those structures.

To be more specific about the Labour Party: this means calling for support for all socialists to be in the Party, refusing to denounce supporters of Militant and other socialist groupings, campaigning for socialist policies and socialist candidates for selection as MPs, councillors etc.

While the leadership calls for "heads down" till the next election, the "internalists" on the left are effectively calling for "heads down" with regard to anyone who is not keeping his or her own head down! Failing openly to support those who are being witch-hunted (all of them, not just those we happen to like) is tantamount to assisting the witch-hunt. That is how all witch-hunts have always worked in history - the witch-hunted end up hunting the least "acceptable" of their own in order to stop the hunters getting them first. Otherwise everyone is guilty by association.

We have to say not only that this strategy is wrong - burying your head in the sand makes you go blind, it doesn't win you elections and it doesn't win the Party for socialism - but also that it is the beginning of the end for a democratic Party and for the chances of a united democratic left within it.

Encouraging socialists to stay in the Labour Party (if they are allowed to, that is) and to fight, not just within it but also along with all those comrades in struggle outside, is essential to all of those who are serious about changing the shape of society as we now know it.

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Time to refound the left

by Andrew Coates

AT FIRST sight the prospects for British socialism look dire. An international climate of disdain for the left has swept into the United Kingdom. Ruins now stand where once Stalinist regimes confidently declared that they were building communism. Free marketeers and Western liberals and administrators scramble over the new division of wealth and power. Nationalists dream of restoring an ethnically pure past, a new Triune Kingdom in Croatia, a Holy Russia restored to Orthodoxy...

The whole of Europe is experiencing a powerful revival of the extreme-right. An endless barrage of opinion seeks to persuade the left that socialism was a passing aberration in European history. Some indeed seem only too eager to accept this. A portion of the post-68 New Left has seen in these events an excuse to drop socialism in favour of "radical democracy". The Labour leadership is confident that another barrier has been set up against full-blown socialism. They have continued their adaptation to the neo-liberal consensus set down by twelve years of Conservative government. John Major's cabinet is still extending the policies of the New Right in industry, education and the health service.

Despite a successful movement against the Poll Tax the left is in no position to push back over a decade of privatisation, anti-union laws, state racism, poverty and military adventurism.

Should the left therefore be overcome by gloom? Or should we retreat to the comforting certitudes of small revolutionary organisations? The doldrums are for those who wish to remain inactive. Wriggling out of the problem by scurrying into the ideological bunker will leave the left isolated from real politics.

Yet the fact is that the basis of socialism, no matter how we try to distance ourselves from the bureaucracies in the East, has been called into question. There is, however, an answer: the left has to refound socialism, that is, draw together the widest possible cross-section of socialists in order to lay down a programme that breaks completely with the bureaucratic past and the 'free market' present. It is useless to pretend that nothing has happened, that we can simply continue the defensive strategy of the left, hoping that at some point a feasible socialist alternative will 'turn up'. The crisis of socialism means that we must reassert ourselves as socialists.

But where? And how?

At one time, at the start of the last decade, it looked as if the left would capture the whole Labour Party. Now a generation mobilised in the campaigns for constitutional reform, the GLC and local councils, has been pushed aside. Neil Kinnock made clear after the miners' strike, during the 1985 Conference, that he distanced himself totally from mass extra-parliamentary action and poured scorn on tens of thousands of his own members. The moves against Militant have shown that the Labour leaders are prepared for diversionary and pointless purges to ensure that their credentials as respectable politicians are taken seriously. The left has not been able to stem this shift to the right. Leo Panitch was accurate, if galling, when he observed in Socialist Register 1988 that the Labour Left, "severely underestimated the sheer breadth and depth of the parliamentary leadership's commitment to the old parliamentarianism and the sheer weight of conventional wisdom and bourgeois opinion they could call to their side in defence of it."

The drive to make Labour acceptable to industry, the City and the middle-ground has

been married to an attempt to smother the socialist Left. It is not therefore surprising that so many people have simply dropped out of the Party. Even when they have not it seems a waste of time attending meetings where no politics are debated, only the best way of 'selling' electoral candidates. The combined effects of the Conservative local government legislation and Labour's acceptance of these ground rules have reduced still further the left's base - as was intended.

Labour, nevertheless, is still, at its roots, a mass party of the working class. Sydney and Beatrice Webb (whose politics look decidedly 'left' in comparison with the Policy Review) described the Party as being based on "solidarity of interest" amongst wage-earners, its structure a "combination of vocational with constituency representation". The Party remains the principal expression of these class interests.

This can be seen in attitudes at the base of the labour movement. The trade unions are by no means entirely satisfied with the leadership's stand on industrial relations legislation and its weak-kneed approach to the great private utility monopolies. Socialist thinking is still widespread amongst Party members - even if it is blurred by an understandable wish to win the next election. The Campaign Group in Parliament was able to speak for hundreds of thousands with their courageous opposition to the Gulf War in a way that no other political force was able to. There is an enormous reservoir of opposition to Kinnock inside the Labour Party.

What alternative venues exist? Militant's decision to operate as an independent organisation is centred around an electoral strategy. Apart from dividing the Labour vote it is hardly likely to inspire socialists, most of whom rightly resent the Tendency's bureaucratic politics. Who can seriously be mobilised by a re-edition of the maximum section of the pre-Great War Erfurt Programme? The Socialist Workers Party, which has disingenuously tried to exploit dissatisfaction with Kinnock, offers as an alternative only their own grouping. The Green Party, which at one time attracted disillusioned socialists, has veered to the centre, its ideology, of sustainable growth and human well-being, proving flexible enough to encompass a live-and-let-live approach to large corporations - when it is not completely addled by 'New Age' philosophy.

Other projects, based on a belief that the time has at last come to create a new, fully socialist party, seem oblivious to the reality that the independent left is too heterogeneous to be united into a single force separate from and opposed to the Labour Party.

Not one of these alternatives rests securely on the only basis of serious socialist politics: the labour movement.

A refoundation of the left has to start from the Labour Party. By getting involved, by using all of its spaces, the cracks in the machine, activists can help to mould the future of the left. Yet this leaves us with something of a void. The Labour left has not succeeded in the past. Its operations are still marked by an incapacity to adjust to new realities. It is not clear about what to do if Labour wins the next election or what defeat could bring. To draw people into the Party the left has to campaign outside it, beyond the reach of public relations advisors. More than that, to make this attractive a solid strategy must be worked out, one that breaks up the often irrelevant divisions on the Labour left. I would suggest that the following areas should be explored.

Labour, as Ken Livingstone points out, lacks a coherent policy for industrial regeneration. But even more dramatically, it has no intention of systematically opposing the rule of the spread-sheet, of quantifiable market criteria, that the Conservatives have extended to all social spheres. Millions of workers and the non-managerial middle-class thoroughly resent this privatisation of their own worlds. The left ought to restate its support for workers' alternative plans and non-market social development as indispensable steps to drive back the extension of capitalist rationalisation.

Thatcher may have gone but there remain thousands of 'little Thatchers' all over the country in every nook and cranny of private and public life. Labour is not going to be able to enact even the most modest reforms until this layer of society is removed. The left has to come up with a programme to dislodge these well-paid bag-men and women that is as sweeping as the Thatcherite programme which installed them in the first place.

The left has to discover a non-opportunist strategy of including feminist, anti-racist, ecological and other 'social movement' themes into its policies. Many people are fed-up with the "chasing after anything that moves" attitude of some on the left and the concomitant glorification of often shifting and nebulous campaigns. But there is no doubt that representing the interests of all those excluded from the system is an important function for any socialist organisation.

Is Labour a suitable vehicle for these policies? Co-operation with outside bodies, through the Socialist Movement, is still essential. Has the right definitively won? No socialist should start the race with a conviction that she or he is bound to lose. That is why socialists should sign up for the recreation of a powerful left.

● **Andrew Coates is a member of Ipswich CLP and the Socialist Society Steering Committee.**

Is there a socialist alternative?

by Kevin Flack

AS AN active number of the Labour Party for sixteen years, I have seen many good comrades leave the Party, most to drift off into inactivity. It is one of the most depressing sights in politics today.

It is essential that socialists still in the Labour Party - and there are tens of thousands of us - do not just sit back and watch as the Party's active base shrinks. But we have to give bloody good reasons for people remaining - and indeed joining - Kinnock's grey-suited party.

In fact, unlike probably every other contributor to this pamphlet, I can see on the horizon a time when socialists should leave the Labour Party. But if that break is to be meaningful and successful, then we must act collectively and not as individuals, pissed off when the going gets a bit tough. After all, if we believed in individual action we wouldn't have joined the Labour Party in the first place.

The first reason to stay in has to be that the organic ties between the organised working class - in the form of the trade unions - and the Labour Party remain, albeit in a reduced form. The fact is that through national and local affiliations, the unions still have their say in the Party. This differentiates Labour from many social democratic and socialist parties in other countries. While this tie remains, that alone is reason enough for remaining in it.

The second reason has to be that the Labour Party has never been a truly socialist Party - harking back to the good old days is merely romanticising a past that wasn't really there. The Party has always been a broad church, has always tried to manage capitalism better than the Tories, has always been a social-democratic party. It has swung from left to right and back again, and to leave at a time of rightward control is to negate the work of all those who stayed and fought in the past and often won significant gains at times of heightened class struggle and awareness.

The third reason is that however fierce the witch-hunt that has thrown hundreds of comrades out of the Party over the past few years, has seen constituencies closed down and candidates imposed, the degree of democracy and the right to voice our opinions is still as strong if not stronger than in most of the so-called democratic centralist organisations outside the Party, such as the SWP, RCP and whatever is formed from the splits within the Militant Tendency. There's not space here to offer a critique of the politics of the current alternatives outside the Labour Party, but suffice it to say that left activists who are currently in the Labour Party will not be flocking to join any another existing party.

There are no short cuts to the revolution. The fact is that you have to work within the mass organisations of the working class - which means the unions and, whatever its current policies, the Labour Party.

Above all, it is what happens within the working class struggle as a whole that should determine our course of action - not what happens with policy shifts in the Labour Party or splits and fusions between minute left sects. The Walton by-election fiasco, where the Militant-backed Real Labour candidate was trounced, proved there are no instant solutions.

For that reason, the 1992 general election will be a watershed. Let's be negative for a moment and suppose Labour loses. If that happens, the backlash from the right wing will be stronger than ever; Kinnock will be deposed and even the current minimal tolerance of

the left will be denied. The break with the unions will be rushed through. The left will be expelled on masse. The role of CLPs will be radically reduced to meaningless talking shops. And the last vestiges of socialist policies will be abandoned.

At that point, it would be correct to leave the Labour Party and form a socialist alternative; that party could be of a size that could bring other left groups - such as the SWP or the Broad Left in Liverpool or any others that you want to work with - under its banner without being swamped by their party lines. Above all, it would bring in the good socialist independents, the people active in the anti-Poll Tax unions and other campaigns, under one umbrella.

But what if Labour wins? Here lies the crux of the matter. The mass of people will not turn to a revolutionary socialist (or even a reformist) alternative until they have seen Labour fail. Around a quarter of the electorate don't even remember the failure of the last Labour government. And the upsurge in expectations and enthusiasm that the kicking out of the Tories will see will mean that demands for change will be put on the Kinnock government immediately.

It will be the briefest honeymoon on record when Kinnock fails to deliver an improvement in living standards and the welfare state - as fail he will, for he has no economic policies to deal with the current depression and European Community restrictions will stop any control of the outflow of capital abroad. At that juncture there is the possibility of building a significant socialist alternative. As Kinnock attacks working class people's living standards, so the break with the unions will come about; there will be an increase in the current trend towards political unionism with some like the TGWU and MSF being forced by their members to fight, and the bosses' unions like the EETPU and increasingly the AEU and GMB siding with the government. It is already on the leadership's agenda to abolish the remaining influence the unions have.

The impetus for any new socialist alternative will come from the struggle of workers against attacks by such a future Labour government. There is nothing unpopular about socialist policies - as those Labour councillors who have stood firm on the Poll Tax have found out - but people in Britain will not try a radical alternative if the moderate one has not yet been seen to fail.

A good yardstick for the potential of a socialist alternative will be the results of the SNP at the general election. It has policies of cancelling the housing debt, full employment, renationalisation of key industries, scrapping Trident and nuclear dumping and will be challenging Labour clearly from the left, as it did in Govan.

At the time that break comes with the unions, we should leave. Not in ones and twos, but in tens of thousands, forming a socialist party with affiliations at local level from trades union branches, trades councils and community organisations - tenants associations, youth groups, black community groups and so on. That new socialist alternative will be the real Labour Party, a Socialist Labour Party based on workers and communities in struggle.

So a final plea, comrades, to those who are considering leaving the Labour Party. Don't throw away the hard work of the last five or ten or twenty years of your political lives; don't give up and leave the Labour Party to Kinnock and his cronies; and don't drift off into inertia. Give one last effort; one last push. Let's get a Labour government elected and if it fails to deliver - we can move forward to a true, mass socialist party in the future.

● **Kevin Flack has been a full-time Labour Party agent and long-time activist in Lewisham East CLP.**

How to sharpen the beak

by Graham Durham

WRITING ABOUT the Labour Party in 1925 the Bolshevik Leon Trotsky expressed grudging admiration for the success of the British ruling class (borrowing an analogy from the world of racing pigeons) in producing a particular type of Labour leader bird either short or soft billed but in any event both unwilling and incapable of piercing the shell of the capitalist state.

Trotsky was referring to the then leadership of MacDonald and Snowden but his sentiments apply equally well to the present leadership of Kinnock, Smith and Hattersley. Indeed, far from wishing in any way to challenge the horrendous logic of unshackled capitalism the present leadership have devoted ten years to demonstrating that they have only timorous intentions with regard to curbing the worst excesses of Thatcherism and in most respects intend to retain the existing laws which were mainly framed as a means of attacking and dividing the working-class.

In meeting resistance to their 'programme for the ruling-class' Kinnock and co have unleashed a programme of witch-hunts and expulsions of socialists in the Labour Party and along the way have all but destroyed the rank and file base of the Labour Party itself.

On these points there is widespread agreement amongst socialists both within and outside the Labour Party. The question of how to replace these soft-billed leaders with a leadership of the working-class capable of challenging and overthrowing the rule of the capitalist class has however divided socialists in Britain for most of this century.

It is necessary to establish some basic understanding of the strategy required to defeat the agents of the ruling-class in our movement. The current period of relative setbacks for socialists at the hands of these leaders had led to some debate in which calls to abandon the Labour Party have been vocal.

Prominent in this reaction have been the overwhelming majority of the comrades who support the Militant newspaper. In several local and parliamentary elections candidates have stood for a separate 'Real Labour' party against Labour Party candidates. This error has cost the left in the Labour Party a great deal and brought joy to the witch-hunters of Walworth Road who have felt able to widen the net of expulsions. It appears that the majority of Militant supporters have now endorsed a 'Scottish turn' based on the belief that "the removal of Thatcher, the Poll Tax U-turn and the defeat of Kinnock candidates in Liverpool council elections...rank among the greatest achievements of the Trotskyist movement internationally".

In order to be able to confront Kinnock it is necessary to at least recognise the battlefield and we can only concur with the minority comrades in Militant who have regretfully pointed out that far from being a victory the Walton by-election was fiasco which played into the hands of our enemies. As the defeat suffered is likely to be replayed in the pending general election we can only hope that Militant comrades lick their self-inflicted wounds and reorient themselves to the fight inside the labour movement.

The Militant minority describe themselves as entrists and declare that they will "leave the (Labour) party when the leadership of social democracy loses control of the party". Both these positions are fundamentally wrong.

Just as it would be incorrect and wasteful to attempt to establish separate or 'red' trade unions in opposition to the existing union movement - since all this achieves is to

segregate militant trade unionists from the mass of trade unionists - so it would be incorrect to isolate our political ideas from the political party based on those same trade unions. In our work in the Labour Party we are not a hostile element seeking to destroy the Party; on the contrary, we are ceaselessly hostile to the capitalist entrists who seek to use the Labour Party for their own ends.

Should a situation develop in which the "leadership of social democracy loses control of the party" then we can assume that the leadership has fallen into our hands and therefore we would seek to rally all the working-class behind the banner of our revolutionary Labour party.

However it is neither necessary nor helpful to guess or dream up future scenarios. Suffice to say that we will abandon the struggle in the Labour Party only when it is an obstacle to the united action of the socialist movement in this country, that is, when there exist higher organisational expressions of the working-class. At this time no such organisation exists and it will develop only through a very sharp escalation of class struggle in Britain. Whilst it remains quite possible to organise campaigns, newspapers and united front action in the Labour Party then attempts to build alternative electoral parties will be diversionary and will act to strengthen our enemies battling for influence in the Labour Party.

The other objection to our struggle in the mass organisations has come from the Socialist Workers Party who have asked us to abandon the hopeless struggle in the Labour Party as we only create illusions in social democracy. It is tempting to ask why if we are so useful to Kinnock he has spent so much energy on bureaucratic measures to destroy us. We suspect that the answer is that he and his acolytes fear us most. When a future Labour or Liberal/Labour government fails to deliver its own pathetic programme then a new wave of working-class action will occur to force change and we will be best placed to formulate political demands most likely to expose Labour's leaders.

It is both politically incorrect and somewhat insulting to suggest that we create illusions in reformism. The record of *Briefing* comrades on the Gulf War, the occupation of Ireland, the need for workers' control of the economy, the struggle of women and black comrades and an endless list of issues is well known - it is a record that has involved *Briefing* supporters struggling inside the organisations which the reformists would like to think of as their own: the Parliamentary Labour Party, numerous Council Labour Groups, etc. Fighting for socialist ideas inside all labour movement organisations is more difficult but many times more rewarding and useful than working in propaganda groups or in controlled 'front' organisations.

The political error in understanding the hold which reformist ideology has is a great weakness in the comrades of the Socialist Workers Party and other groups posing as alternatives to Labour. The hold of reformist ideology is not a result of this or that organisational arrangement. It is an expression of the state of consciousness of the working-class, of its separate interest to the ruling class. Reformism seeks to demoralise, obstruct and bamboozle the working-class to prevent it feeling its real strength. In a period of relative class quiescence reformism will offer only piecemeal tinkering with capitalism. At a time of intense class struggle the reformists will seek to head off the class struggle in the interests of capitalism, often granting temporary reforms along the way. It is the task of revolutionary socialists to help to free the labour movement from the influence of reformism and promote independent working-class action and help establish the real power in the hands of our class. Along the way it is of critical importance to promote maximum united action by the working-class whilst mercilessly criticising the reformists who seek to hold back our class.

The truth is that the socialist movements in Britain have wasted far too much time in senseless sectarianism, which has prevented joint action against reformism, and in empty propaganda work which has proved diversionary for many talented class militants. It is now necessary to fight for our ideas openly within all the trade union and political organisations which constitute the British labour movement.

Without doubt the decade ahead is likely to be an intense time of unprecedented class struggle on a world scale. Far from a new world order being established the continued decreasing rate of exploitation by the main capitalist states is leading to the prospect of new wars on a global scale. The three superpowers, Japan, Europe and USA, are already far down the road of protected trade and economic warfare. Across the former Stalinist states the working-class is slowly stretching itself from a long sleep and preparing to do battle with the austerity measures of imperialism. In every country new links between socialists will need to be established and campaigns of solidarity fought. The tasks are huge and the penalty for failure seems to be the destruction of the already badly damaged planet.

These tasks are necessary in all countries and they require in many parts of the world the creation of a party of labour in which different currents can operate. It is a historical achievement of the working-class in this country to have built such a party at the beginning of the century. It is now the duty of all revolutionary socialists in Britain to fight inside this party, despite all the difficulties and temporary defeats, to expose its reformist leaders and its record in government and to give this or some future party a clear class leadership.

To return to Trotsky's analogy...this is how to ensure that a sharp beaked bird next attacks the capitalist shell.

● **Graham Durham has been active in the trade union movement and Labour Party for twenty years in Leeds, Nottingham and London. Graham was a Labour councillor in Brent from 1982-1990 and was expelled from the Labour Group in 1988 for opposing public service cuts.**

Let's not expel ourselves!

by Dorothy Macedo

WE ALL know the joke about the traveller who asks for directions only to be told "Well, if I were you, I wouldn't start from here". The problem, of course, is that in real life we have to start from where we are and not from where we would like to be.

People who imagine the working class is waiting for a left alternative to the Labour Party are living in a dream world. The sad truth is that the Labour Party mirrors the reactionary attitudes of the bulk of ordinary people.

We all know that the current leadership could easily offer much needed support to workers in struggle (eg. ambulance workers) without any loss of credibility, yet fails to do so. But that is (sadly) nothing new. Remember that Harold Wilson condemned "a tightly knit group of politically motivated men" for causing the seafarers' dispute in the 60s. Clearly the failure of the leadership to support disputes of critical importance to socialists is not a reason in itself for abandoning the party - indeed it's an incitement to stay in to ensure that these people are brought to account and forced to offer support. Union leaders also fail to support workers, even in their own unions, yet no one these days suggests setting up alternative left unions.

We have to show that we are serious about the actual struggles taking place, such as over the Poll Tax, hospital opt outs and racism, that concern large numbers of people. We have to build links between such campaigns and local Labour Parties and unions wherever possible. This will make a much greater impact in developing socialist consciousness and support for socialist ideas than perfect programmes and propaganda from a distance. We won't impress people with fanciful theories that don't connect with their concrete experiences.

People who talk about electoral reform opening up the way for a socialist party overlook the fact that such a party would not only be tiny (possibly too small to obtain any MPs, unlike the far right) but would be divorced from the organised working class. It would be worse than irrelevant, because it might take some of the best people away from the vital job of fighting for class politics in the political heart of the labour movement: the Labour Party.

We have a unique Labour Party, with its class links to the unions, unlike the social democrats in most of Europe. These links are frequently a nuisance to Kinnock & Co. It would be ironic indeed if the left sought to break up this unique entity when this is just what the right wants: an end to the organisational links to the unions, leaving an SDP Mark II.

The right are busy expelling socialists. We shouldn't make their jobs easier by expelling ourselves.

● **Dorothy Macedo is an active member of the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy and co-chair of Labour Party Socialists. She is a member of Hendon South CLP.**

Party politics and the trades unions - an answer to the SWP

by Mike Phipps

WITH ITS usual uncanny sense of timing, the SWP has issued an open letter calling on any remaining socialists in the Labour Party to give up an impossible struggle and join a really socialist party - at the very moment when socialists are fighting against a wave of expulsions by the leadership.

The SWP has always been irritated by the Labour left - particularly those in the Labour Party who consider themselves revolutionaries. For the SWP, such socialists serve only to prop up the Labour Party, keep it ticking over, and thus give it unnecessary credibility.

If only the left were so powerful! The root of this confusion on the part of the SWP lies in its failure to understand the relationship between the Labour Party and the unions - which the SWP is quite happy to work in.

The unions, argues the SWP, organise workers at the workplace, whereas the Labour Party is an alien reformist political project. Organisationally, this may be so. But politically it is not so clear.

In the long run, the unions have the capacity either to become fighting organisations of the working class or to mechanisms at the service of the employers for policing that class.

Take 'New Realism': the policy of capitulation to Tory anti-union laws and non-political trade unionism. Despite the ferocious attacks on the working class by the Tory government throughout the 80s, it was New Realism that really weakened the unions and made it possible for these attacks to succeed. Its imposition at all levels of the labour movement after the 1984-5 miners' strike has now resulted in the fewest number of strike days lost in 34 years and membership tumbling to 7.8 million.

New Realism has seen the resurrection of yellow or business unionism. Yet the SWP has no reservations about working in the unions and has even favoured continued involvement in the EETPU, regarding the alternative EPIU as a diversion.

But where did New Realism come from? It was not independently hatched in the hermetically sealed offices of the TUC. In fact it is quintessential Kinnockism. It is nothing other than the policy of the 'dented shield' applied to the trade unions.

To abandon the political sphere of struggle and deal only with its trade union manifestation will not get to the root of the problem. The lurch to the right of a number of left union bureaucrats in recent years is directly connected to the strategy of the current Labour leadership.

But, argues the SWP, the consciousness of workers can change very rapidly when they go into struggle. The Labour Party, on the other hand, is a reformist organisation which never struggles; it cannot be transformed into an instrument of socialism. To work within it is to sow the illusion that it can.

Well, not quite. First, to be in the Labour Party is not automatically to believe that it can be transformed into a revolutionary socialist party. In any event, this is not a matter for idle speculation. The extent to which the Labour Party can be radicalised or made to express working class interests is a question of practical action.

Secondly, the working class itself looks to the Labour Party to meet its demands. This is not true at all times; politicised workers are not in a constant rush to join the Labour

Party. But it is true in so far as Labour is the only party of the working class capable of forming a government.

Workers vote for Labour in their millions, often getting little in return. The ballot box, it is clear, is no mechanism of accountability. The question arises: how can those who draw an MP's salary of £30,000, thanks to the support given them by working class voters, be held responsible to those voters for the actions carried out in their name?

The answer lies in internal Party activity. The SWP was perplexed by the heat generated around the 1970s' battles for mandatory reselection of MPs, the electoral college, recorded NEC votes or PLP minutes, regarding such concerns as secondary detail compared to the big policy fights. But these are precisely the means by which parliamentary leaders could be pressurised to carry out their paper policies.

To call these people to account does not amount to transforming the Party. But the degree to which the working class's elected representatives can be made to champion the interests of their supporters is a measure of how widely socialist policies can be articulated.

When not calling on them to leave, the SWP correctly demand of left leaders that they do various socialist things. But they renounce one of the principal means of applying the necessary pressure to transform words into action, on the grounds that it would sow illusions, be unprincipled, that the real fight is elsewhere, etc. It is like building an army but eschewing an airforce on the grounds that territory cannot be captured in the air.

The last decade has seen something of a fragmentation of the working class. Now, more than ever, socialists cannot afford to be choosy about where they work. They must start where they are and go where they must. The unions do not constitute a privileged theatre of operations any more than Labour Party wards, estates, schools and campuses. And what about the dole queues, youth clubs, churches, armed forces...?

But the Labour Party is different, says the SWP. We already have a party. It's called the SWP.

This is a much-ploughed furrow on the left and many people have written elsewhere about the delusions of grandeur in the Trotskyist movement on this score. But whether or not the SWP is a party in any sense of the word, it is clearly not a party in the same sense as the Labour Party. It does not fight elections. When it did, it got a derisory vote. It is not a mass organisation and its centralist structure is unlikely to allow it to become one.

Were it really in competition with the Labour Party, it would have no hesitation in calling on trade unions to disaffiliate from this 'reformist dead-end' and affiliate to the SWP. But it doesn't.

So it tolerates and even at times encourages the paying of union money to the Labour Party - and invariably calls for a Labour vote in elections. "Grit your teeth and vote Labour" is a favourite SWP line at election times - as though politicians distinguish between votes given voluntarily and votes given with gritted teeth. So it's money and votes top the Labour Party, according to the SWP - but none of the fight to get something in return, to make these gifts accountable, using the channels of the Party to hold leaders to their promises!

The SWP has one final argument against the Labour Party. It says that people join with the best of intentions but end up getting sucked into the minutiae of fund-raising and administration to the point where they lose sight of their strategic perspective and become reformist bureaucrats themselves. And they add that they don't want this to happen to them.

Our reply: it's time to raise your political level and have the courage of your convictions, comrades! No one ever solved a problem by running away from it or pretending it doesn't exist. Of course, it does help to be well-organised inside the Labour Party to withstand

the pressure. Which is why the leadership has no other solution for the better-organised than to throw them out.

But make no mistake. The witch-hunt taking place in the Labour Party will inevitably be carried over into the unions - it already is. The SWP could be next. So, comrades, if you don't take the struggle to the Labour Party, its leaders may bring it to you.

● **Mike Phipps is a member of Brent South Labour Party and a long-standing activist in the Anti-Apartheid Movement and Central and South American solidarity campaigns.**

The Labour Party isn't its leaders...

by Terry Liddle

AFTER A decade as an intransigent ultra-left sectarian, joining the Labour Party wasn't easy. Staying in it is harder still.

I am threatened with imprisonment for non-payment of Poll Tax by a Labour Council led by a person whom I helped elect and whom I still consider both a comrade and friend. I am employed by another Labour Council which has just announced compulsory redundancies and threatens those who remain with intolerable conditions and working practices. Why then am I still in the Labour Party?

The Labour Party isn't its leaders; it isn't Kinnock or the Shadow Cabinet or the trade union bureaucrats, the NEC or the careerists and opportunists in the Town Halls. The Labour Party is the thousands of rank and file members and activists who despite all the leadership's betrayals remain loyal to the Party and who still retain an instinctive, if not fully thought out and theoretical, faith in a socialist future. It is they who carry out the campaigns and the fund-raising, who vote against witch-hunts and expulsions and for socialist policies, often to see them ignored or cast aside by leaders whose only principle is office at any price. To abandon these activists, who constitute a potential mass base for socialism in Britain, would be criminal.

It is a singular variety of idealism which imagines you can "expose" the Labour Party or make demands on its leadership from outside, in the sectarian wilderness. This idealism also manifests itself in delusions of grandeur. For an organisation of 6000 to dub itself a "mass party" (even the smallest in the world) is patent nonsense. For organizations of a few hundred or even a few dozen to call themselves parties, to cast themselves in the role of the leadership of the class, is to reduce politics to the absurd. The smaller the sect, the more bizarre and out of touch with reality it is likely to be, the more likely it is to be a vehicle for crazed demagogues (the WRP of Gerry Healy is a prime example); the more likely it is to burn out, disillusion and remove from all political activity many good militants who might otherwise have done excellent service to the labour movement and their class.

Many of the most vociferous sectarians claim to be Marxists - indeed the Marxists with everybody else being revisionists or whatever - yet they ignore the most basic views of Marx and Engels. In the Communist Manifesto they wrote: "The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working class parties. They have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole. They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement." Yet almost from the very origins of modern British socialism this is exactly what many, if not most, of those who call themselves Marxists or Communists have done. And while the "Marxists" have isolated themselves into pockets of sterile purity which decrease in size as they grow in number, the working class has paid the price of a Labour Party which has been riddled from top to bottom with bourgeois ideology.

In so far as it has an identifiable ideology, that of the leadership of the Labour Party falls into the category which Marx and Engels called bourgeois socialism: "a part of the bourgeoisie...desirous of redressing social grievances in order to secure the continued existence of bourgeois society." In short, reformism. But the "Marxists" instead of

combatting this ideology on the terrain where its roots are deepest, in the organisations workers have created for themselves, in particular the Labour Party, have like spectators at a football match shouted all manner of advice from the sidelines without ever having taken part in the game. Any wonder then that such advice falls on deaf ears.

To overcome the dead weight of bourgeois ideology, to win large numbers of workers and with them the Labour Party, is no easy task: the work of titans rather than human beings. It is particularly difficult at a time when the leadership is using the methods of Stalinism - witch-hunts, purges, expulsions - to silence dissent. But it remains true the worst workers' party is better than none and the worst workers' party in the form of the Labour Party is, if we are to face harsh reality and not fall victim to wishful thinking, right now what we have and what we have to work with.

Soon there will be a general election. On the basis of past experience from virtually every election campaign waged by the CPGB in its inglorious history to "Real Labour's" debacle in Walton attempts to stand "Independent Labour" candidates will result in derisory votes and lost deposits further isolating and marginalising the left.

If Kinnock wins he will be faced with demands from the working class - action to end unemployment, repeal of anti-union laws - which his pro-capitalist policies will be unable to meet. If he loses, a very large question mark will be placed over his abandonment of fundamental socialist principles. Either way, it will give the left, provided it can get its act together and work as a unified, coherent force, a chance to challenge this course, to wage an all out struggle against bourgeois ideology and to reaffirm and fight for the reconstruction of socialism.

This fight will not be a fight to get comrade x's bum on this or that seat but a fight for the hearts and minds of millions of workers both in and outside of the Labour Party. It will be a fight for both Parliamentary and extra-Parliamentary activity including such mass grass roots campaigns as that against the Poll Tax. It will be a fight for a properly politically educated Labour Party and labour movement (at the very least thousands of activists must be schooled in basic Marxist economics). It will be a fight for internationalism, for solidarity with "every revolutionary movement against the existing order of things". It will be a fight to make new ideas and new forces such as those of the red-greens and socialist feminists central to the thought and action of the mainstream. It will be a fight against bureaucracy and administrative methods of dealing with political differences, for democracy from the bottom up, for freedom of thought and expression. It will be a fight against the bourgeois ideology of the right and the sectarianism of the left, a fight which must include re-opening the affiliation list so that any bona fide socialist organisation can affiliate on the same basis as the Fabian Society. Above all it will be a fight to make socialism not a matter of a cross on a ballot paper or dreary meetings in dismal halls but something which is integral to the daily lives, the thoughts and actions, the hopes and dreams of our class.

On the terrain of the Labour Party this will be a long, hard slog with many setbacks, deviations down blind allies, mistakes and errors along the way. But if we are sincere about making socialism a reality it is a battle that has to be fought, a fight all socialists must join to secure the victory. There is no alternative.

● **Terry Liddle is an active trades unionist and member of the Labour Party in south east London.**

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Ken Barton, Deputy Leader, Birmingham City Council

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