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## SOCIALISTS AND THE CRISIS OF LABOURISM

British politics today no longer lags behind economics. Hitherto, the hundred-year decline of British capitalism's relative strength in the world economy, so often analysed, so rarely even temporarily checked, has been accompanied by a relative stability of the country's political system.

[1] Of the major imperialist powers, only two have experienced such basic institutional resilience over such a time-span: the United States and Britain. But they have represented not—as vulgar-liberal ideology would have it—comparable exemplars of some quintessentially Anglo-Saxon bourgeois-democratic preservative virtue, but rather opposite poles. At one extreme, after the bloody achievement of its final unification in 1861–5, already equipped during its emergence as an independent nation with relatively advanced political institutions, US political stability went together with—and was consolidated by—the country's rise to economic and political supremacy in the capitalist world—a supremacy which reached its apogee in the three decades after World War II. At the other extreme, Britain rose—through its commercial and military-colonial expansion of the eighteenth century and its industrial revolution of 1780–1850—to a pre-eminent position in the mid 19th century that was by some (economic) criteria even greater than the later US hegemony, without any major modification of what was already by then in many respects (from its monarchy to its educational hierarchy) a notably antiquated political order. Since that time, as a hundred years of living off its economic fat has progressively disclosed the scrawny frame beneath John Bull's corpulent persona, what once seemed a merely superficial archaism, with its own more-than-compensatory Burkean strengths, has been revealed as a morbid condition.

Now, as the malady has assumed a galloping momentum, some of those elements traditionally cherished as immutable principles of Britain's unwritten constitution—the 'two-party system', the first-past-the-post electoral arrangements, the hereditary second chamber [2] (with those newcomers to the British way of life so proudly added by the post-war Labour government, the welfare state and near-full male employment [3])—are suddenly turning out to be dispensable. The Thatcherite onslaught on the historic gains and the real living standards of the working class, the polarization taking place in the labour movement, and the meteoric initial success of the SDP-Liberal Alliance, can be seen as direct reflections at the political level of the multi-faceted crisis now gripping the British social formation as a whole, and whose most dramatic symptoms have been rampant de-industrialization, mass unemployment especially of youth, last summer's ghetto explosions and twelve years of perspective-less military engagement in Northern Ireland. That the British crisis is not a conjunctural one hardly needs re-emphasis for readers of *New Left Review*; Tom Nairn's cogent essay in a recent issue rests on an analysis which has been developed over almost twenty years. [4] Yet that this analysis has not become the commonsense even of British Marxists, let alone more generally on the left, was graphically shown by two recent articles in the *Review* focusing on developments in the Labour Party. Despite their conflicting standpoints, the authors, Michael Rustin [5] and David Coates, [6] share a common and in our view quite mistaken implicit premiss that the familiar landscape of British party politics is still there outside the window. Rustin, for all the valuable points he makes about the sometimes inadequately elaborated and over-narrow proposals of the Labour left for democratizing the party, entirely underestimates the dramatic impingement of the crisis upon the latter. He argues in favour of the 'broad' party as presently constituted—indeed a still broader one—just when it looks increasingly apparent that the old coalition can no longer hold together. Coates, for his part, eloquently restates the classical Marxist critique of reformism and the particular form it takes in the Labour Party, and notably on its left today, as if this settles the question of how Marxists should relate to it. [7]

### Anatomy of Britain's Political Crisis

In the present article, after a brief outline of the political coordinates of the crisis, we will concentrate on developing a counter-thesis to Coates's arguments. For although we agree entirely with most of what he has to say about labourism, the record of successive Labour governments and the weaknesses of the Alternative Economic Strategy, we profoundly disagree with the conclusion he so summarily draws, that serious socialists should riot join the Labour Party, since that would be 'to jeopardize that degree of distance from labourism whose maintenance is vital if the integrity of the socialist project is to be protected in the minds of its adherents from contamination with the retreats perpetrated in its name by Labour politicians in power', and 'to be sucked into the resolution-passing and in-fighting that dominates political activity within the Labour machine' . . . 'to lose the capacity to act as a point of reference and as a source of fraternal criticism, towards which sections of the Labour left can turn as the problems of the AES become all

too clear in practice'. What is needed, rather, Coates argues, is to build a new unity of the Left outside the Labour Party. [8] In our view, this is a standpoint which fails to grasp the real stakes involved at the present stage of the British political crisis, and specifically in the polarization now under way in the Labour Party; which does not make any adequate balance-sheet of the experience of revolutionary organizations in capitalist Western Europe since 1968, seeking to relate this to the more general problem of how one may convincingly envisage the formation of a mass socialist consciousness in an advanced capitalist country today; and which does not properly identify the key dangers for the working class or the key tasks for socialists in the present situation. We would argue that there can be no non-ephemeral capitalist resolution of the current crisis without a major defeat and subordination of the organized working class as a whole. That the polarization taking place within the Labour Party cannot—as occurred with earlier schisms—be papered over by a simple formula of uniting to defeat the Tories. That while it could presage a fatal decline, it does also open up the possibility for the first time in this country of a mass socialist party. That though this could only be a left-reformist or at best centrist [9] formation, its appearance would represent a significant advance for the working class and the Left as a whole. And that participation in this process, and fighting for left policies alongside other left or leftward-moving forces, both responds to the present needs of the working class and offers the best perspective for assisting the future development of a renewed mass socialist consciousness, a necessary prerequisite if we are ever to get rid of capitalism.

The 1979 electoral victory of the Conservatives marked a turning-point in post-war British politics (even though it would be wrong to underestimate the extent to which Thatcherite policies were able to build on and extend moves which had already been initiated in the last years of the preceding Labour government). For the first time since the 1943–8 construction of the welfare state, there was now an explicit across-the-board repudiation of the shared Keynesian premisses of successive Conservative and Labour governments, in the name of free-market principles. A revitalized ideology of unashamed capitalist entrepreneurialism championed the aspirations of the economic individual (and family) against the constraints imposed by social interests organized through the State. Public-spending cuts pioneered by Labour were to be greatly intensified; private education, health, housing, etc. privileged and their virtues extolled; the power of the unions curbed. [10] Over two million trade-unionists voted for this programme, in what was to say the least a massive indictment of the policies followed under Wilson and Callaghan. The hundreds of thousands of industrial workers who abandoned their traditional class allegiances and voted Tory did so because they were deeply disaffected by the performance of successive Labour governments. Their votes gave the new administration the confidence that it could proceed along its chosen path uninhibited by the likelihood of large-scale industrial action on an even minimally political basis. And they gave the lie to the conventional wisdom of the Labour right that the secret of electoral success is occupation of the 'middle ground'; for no one could have striven harder to do that than Callaghan, Healey and Foot in 1979, while Thatcher's appeal was frankly radical, extreme, repudiating not merely Labour's policies and record but also those of her Tory predecessors (in stark contrast to the obstinate defence of the Wilson/Callaghan years by the present Labour leadership—a defence motivated primarily by the needs of the inner-party struggle against the left, but hardly a recipe for future electoral success, as Tony Benn has frequently pointed out). [11]

There can be little doubt that the present government has in two years succeeded in inflicting a number of significant defeats on the working class. *De facto* acceptance by the trade unions of over three million unemployed (by some calculations in reality nearer four), massive cuts in social expenditure (with consequent job losses in addition to their impact on those most in need), numerous factory closures (many in the most highly unionized sectors of industry), and reduction of the work-force in the nationally-owned British Steel Corporation from 184,600 to 110,000 (with more to go) since September 1979, would have seemed inconceivable in the early seventies. Thatcher's approach differs from that adopted by Healey as Labour chancellor in 1976, not simply because she has been prepared to pursue the ruthless logic of her economic convictions and push on regardless of consequences which have become increasingly unpalatable even to large sectors of her own class and party, but above all in the respective ways in which each obtained the acquiescence, albeit passive, of major sections of the organized working class. Labour operated through the medium of the trade-union bureaucracy, doing nothing that would weaken the latter's apparatuses or their grip on their memberships. [12] Thatcher has largely abandoned this corporate approach. In her first year in office, she in effect appealed directly to workers above the heads of their union leaders, a 'rank-and-file' approach which secured some dividends in South Wales, and again among car workers. Since then, she has identified most strongly with the tactics of employers such as British Leyland under Michael Edwardes, who have repeatedly provoked trials of strength with their work-force, blackmailing them with the threat of redundancy and consistently seeking to bypass their shop stewards and union officials. [13] Unemployment and

the political passivity of most union leaderships have combined to demoralize important sectors of the organized working class even further than they had been by the Callaghan years; the victory of the right wing in the AUEW, more complete than anyone would have predicted a few years ago, has been emblematic of this process. With the massive rise in unemployment, but also perhaps in response to the intensity of anti-union propaganda in recent years, overall union membership has begun to dip significantly from its all-time high in 1980. [14] And yet, when all this has been said, the fact is that no decisive defeat has been inflicted on the organized working class as a whole, in the clear and durable manner required for a capitalist resolution of the crisis. The government has not even secured a really major demonstrative victory of the kind inflicted last year on FIAT workers in Turin. Real take-home pay for those in employment did not fall as intended in 1979–80, indeed has not fared nearly as badly under the present Conservative government as in 1975–7 under Labour. [15]

### **The Conservative Dilemma**

If Thatcher had been able to restrict her offensive to dividing the working class and weakening the unions, she might have been universally applauded by her own party. However, partly because of the presence within her cabinet of powerful forces convinced of the dangers inherent in any policy that might provoke a politicization of the unions along class lines, partly perhaps fearing a repetition of the confrontation that had brought down her Tory predecessor Heath (whose electoral defeat was preluded by his discomfiture in the 1974 Miners' Strike), she did not choose the path of direct challenge to organized labour, shrinking from a determined legislative assault and entrusting the employment portfolio for two years to the soft-line James Prior. At the same time, her application of monetarist nostrums has led not just to unemployment levels unprecedented since the thirties and in some areas surpassing even those, [16] but also to a sharp and largely unintended intensification of the process of de-industrialization which has long been under way in the erstwhile heartlands of industrial Britain. What was seen as necessary surgery to cut away dead or fatally wasted tissue has led to severe damage to the whole organism: instead of just unviable firms being eliminated there have been hard times for almost all, small or large, obsolescent or technologically innovative. The result, predictably, has been vociferous complaints from the employers' federation CBI, growing divisions within the Conservative Party and plummeting popular support. Moreover, it has not just been a question of public discontent being registered in opinion polls: the wave of urban rebellions which shook British cities in the summer of 1981 were sparked off by unemployed black youths, joined by many whites, who refused passively to accept their weekly diet of the dole queue, racist violence and institutionalized police harassment. All of these conditions had existed under Labour, but the Thatcherite offensive had reinforced and stimulated the most reactionary reflexes of revanchist elements within the state apparatus and society in general.

The riots brought home to ruling-class opinion at large, in the most forcible manner, the problems that had been created by the Thatcher government's prescription for solving the crisis. Certainly there were those—some of the more rabid press organs; Enoch Powell and the wing of the Tory Party which thinks like him on race; the National Front and its clones in the new-look Young Conservatives; many judges; most magistrates and Chief Constables—who no doubt favoured treating the riots as simply a problem of 'law and order' (just like Northern Ireland!).

Overwhelmingly, however, the majority ruling-class response was to pay new attention to voices of sanity and reason from the old post-war consensus: Heath, Jenkins, Whitelaw, Hattersley, Scarman. Media coverage of Heath at the October 1981 Conservative Conference struck an unwonted note of reverence, and even the most feeble expressions of dissent within the Tory Party were blown up out of all recognition. Unlikely challengers were even discovered to Thatcher's leadership. However, there were in fact insuperable difficulties about finding an alternative within the old party-political coordinates that carried any real convictions.

So far as the Conservative old guard was concerned, a concerted revolt would have outraged the base of the party, enjoyed very dubious prospects of success among MPS, and required some inspirational ingredient of either policy or leadership (something which was conspicuously unavailable) if it was to have any real appeal in the country at large: in sum, it would merely have torn the party asunder and destroyed any chance it might still have of re-election, if not its longer-term survival as a governmental party. At the same time, the dominant group round Thatcher herself might very well make—indeed has now made—significant concessions to the old guard; but to have gone very far in this direction would have been to destroy the whole basis of its distinctive appeal and political authority. Thus the government has appeared increasingly stranded and directionless in the face of problems it has unwittingly helped to create but for which it has no answer: a combination of economic disasters (brought on partly by its own reckless policies, partly by Washington's success in exporting American economic difficulties, which it could only have sought to counter by abandoning Thatcher's instinctive political enthusiasm for Reagan in favour of something along the lines of Heath's European protectionism) and failure, despite all its anti-union

rhetoric, to alter the balance of class forces in a decisive fashion. It is hard to see the customary pre-electoral reflation sufficing this time to save the Conservative Party from a defeat of massive proportions at the next general election.

### **The Weakness of Labour's Leadership**

Meanwhile, the Labour leadership has found itself in a position in some ways resembling that of the Conservative 'wets'. Its identification with the Wilson/Callaghan record is an overwhelming liability among not merely the party rank-and-file but also politically conscious workers up and down the country (something that is reflected at all levels of the unions, acting as at least a significant constraint even on right-wing general secretaries). Caught between the explicitly pro-capitalist, pro-NATO right based in the PLP and such unions as the AUEW, GMWU and *eeptu*, and the Bennite left based in the constituencies but with significant union support, Foot and his old Tribune-group supporters, despite an apparently greater degree of agreement on policy with the latter, have in fact more and more made common cause with and become absorbed by the former.

[17] Of course, as editor of *Tribune* in the late forties, Foot had given full-hearted support to the establishment of NATO; had gone so far in his identification with the imperialist intervention in Korea as to claim that US soldiers were dying to 'uphold a Labour party principle'; and had hailed the domestic economic policies of the Truman Administration. [18] His subsequent left credentials, acquired during the Bevan revolt and the emergence of CND, were thus always highly suspect. Among the factors which have played a part in Foot's latterly-accelerating rightward trajectory, since he joined Wilson's government as Employment Secretary in 1974, are: an eclectic intellectual formation which offers no serious resistance to the 'realities of power' logic that has led all Labour governments to abandon when in office almost every policy in any way unpalatable to the ruling class (or the United States government); a parliamentary optic which makes the views of (explicit) potential PLP defectors to the SDP count for more than those of the great majority of individual party members; a total acceptance of the right-wing—or simply pessimistic—orthodoxy which proclaims that socialism cannot, as an ideal and a programme, inspire majority support, so that to win elections (and keep MPS' and councillors' jobs) the Labour Party has to avoid offering any kind of real challenge to capitalist priorities (obviously, a self-fulfilling assumption).

The inner-party power struggle and vulgar concern for job security among Labour MPS has come to predominate almost entirely over any capacity or will to offer a convincing alternative to the present government. While a series of time-serving or frankly reactionary MPS have either defected to the SDP when faced with the threat of de-selection or used the threat of defection to extract support for their re-selection from the party leaders, the latter have concentrated all their fire on the left. The steady flow of defections is seen by them not as the most manifest legitimization of demands to make MPS and councillors accountable to those who elected them (the members of their local party organizations), but instead as a compelling argument for seeking to claw back what has been conceded to the rank-and-file in the way of democratization over recent years, in order to reassure those whose intended life-tenure of their parliamentary or council seats is at risk. The argument put forward by the right that, once in office, they are responsible only to the electorate as a whole—apart from the fact that it is a patent smokescreen, meaning nothing in practice—rests on the quite untenable premiss that voters in national elections vote for individuals not parties: a premiss conclusively disproved simply by the pattern of electoral results. One of the most outrageous extensions of this argument is the calm retention of their parliamentary seats by the twenty-odd MPS who have so far defected to the SDP, without any requirement to submit themselves to a fresh electoral test. However, this is also an indication of the fact that the right-wing argument, indefensible in either socialist or democratic terms, can find a basis in the 'conventions of the parliamentary system'. [19] At the same time, those of Labour's policies which do have potential popular appeal—unilateralism, the 35-hour week with no loss of pay, an end to private education and the House of Lords, an alternative to the EEC—are not presented with any vigour or enthusiasm, for fear of alienating the right and jeopardizing the basis for its alliance with Foot and his followers.

Almost the only distinctive asset thus left to the Labour leaders is their claimed ability (despite the fate of Callaghan's 5 per cent pay norm in the 'winter of discontent' [20] to reach understandings with the trade-union bureaucracy. But that is hardly an election-winner in the present political climate, largely as a result of the total political failure of Labour in recent years to mount an effective resistance (let alone counter-attack) to the ideological assault on unions. More fundamentally, the whole history of the Labour Party over the past decade and a half—from the attempt to impose *In Place of Strife*, via the emergence of a 'left' in the union bureaucracy (first Cousins, later Jones and Scanlon) and consequently on the party's own executive committee, to the Social Contract and ultimately the SDP split—can be viewed in terms of its inability to resolve the question of its relations with the unions, historically its creators and masters. For as the crisis deepened it became increasingly clear to the more far-sighted politicians of the Labour right that the umbilical cord tying the party to the unions would have to be severed if the party was to



continue to carry out its essential task when in government of attempting to regenerate British capitalism. It would be hard to deny that this consideration, central to the formation of the SDP, retains its force for a large proportion of the PLP. At the same time, the reduced ability of British capitalism to make economic concessions has made it increasingly hard for union leaders to make deals with successive governments, thus undercutting the traditional union-Labour relationship. It is the parallel failures of the two main parties to offer any convincing route forward out of the crisis that has opened the way for the emergence of a new force in the shape of the SDP-Liberal Alliance which, even though it has no more of a solution to put forward than the others in terms of policy, does offer a break at a different level, that of the pattern of political representation. It has been a merit of Nairn, in a whole series of articles over the past few years, [21] to have pointed perhaps more consistently than anyone else on the British left to the importance and temporal incidence of 'national' governments (1915–22, 1931–45) as a regular alternative mode of administration in this century to the 'two-party system'. But before the formation of the SDP, there were powerful factors, in our view, which rendered such a solution improbable in the short term. Now, however—whether immediately after the next election in the event of a hung parliament; or at a somewhat later stage, perhaps after a fresh election held under proportional representation, in the event of the SDP-Liberal Alliance being able first to form a government alone; or even prior to the next election, in the event of a real crisis of confidence among Tory MPS—a coalition broad enough to qualify as 'national', embracing at least a spectrum from Heath to Healey, becomes a plausible prospect. It seems certain, it should be said, that neither an SDP-Liberal nor a National government would be any more able than its Labour and Conservative predecessors to avoid the harsh choices which today inexorably confront any administration of British capitalism in decline. Moreover, there is nothing to indicate, on the part of any of its prospective components, any persuasive formula for putting the sick man back on his feet. The task of inflicting a historic defeat on the organized working class would still lie ahead—and it is here that what happens to the Labour Party becomes of central importance.

### **Labour's New Left: the Novelty of Bennism**

It goes without saying that a prospect such as we have been discussing would cause enormous upheavals in both main parties. This is not the place to examine what might happen to the Conservatives. On the face of it, the likely options would be: either to become a right-wing extra-governmental party serving to exert pressure on a 'centre' government and rally the forces of reaction for a more distant future; or—after a post-election replacement of Thatcher and resurgence of the old guard—participation as one component in a centre or centre-right quasi-national government (which would subsequently, given proportional representation, become more like a classic bourgeois coalition of the kind common in many other advanced capitalist countries, such as Sweden); or a split. But so far as the Labour Party is concerned, the struggle for the party's future course is not postponed to the aftermath of the next election, but has already been engaged. Although, as always, electoral considerations exert a powerful pressure for unity, there are good reasons for scepticism concerning the possibility of any durable 'truce' between right and left in the Labour Party, at the present stage of its crisis. The left which has emerged in the Labour Party and trade unions in recent years is a novel phenomenon, not reducible to earlier movements of the base like that associated with Bevanism in the fifties or Cripps in the thirties. Benn has become the central spokesman and leader of this left, but its appearance can be ascribed to objective realities of the present phase of the British class struggle. The prolonged experience of Labour governments (1964–70, 1974–9), culminating in the débâcle of 1979 and the mass defection of working-class votes to the most right-wing government on offer since the War, has produced a widespread scepticism among party members and supporters about the whole notion that socialism could ever be brought an inch nearer just by what Kinnock has recently described commendably as 'repeated parliamentary victories', [22] without the resulting Labour governments being in any way constrained—both by extra-parliamentary mobilization and by constitutional accountability—to carry out party policy. The result has been to produce what Nairn has rightly termed a 'crisis of labourism', and this is the context in which the movement characterized by the media as Bennism has emerged. As the contradictions of the British capitalist order have grown ever more intractable and potentially explosive, the Labour Party itself has become the arena of an intensely antagonistic struggle between labour and capital. For domination by the right has been a *structural* feature of the Labour 'coalition'. Clause Four may have been kept in the constitution, but the reality of the Labour Party since its inception has been its effective acceptance not just of capitalism as a system, but by and large of capitalist priorities, irrespective of the subjective aspirations of its membership. This is what explains the indignation of defectors to the SDP, who see themselves as being driven out of the party by its adoption of certain 'left-wing' policies. The capitalist agencies inside the Labour leadership would rather destroy the party as a governmental candidate than implement some of the policies recently endorsed by conference (unilateral disarmament, for instance, with a majority of the constituencies favouring withdrawal

from NATO)—hence the SDP, and the fight of its co-thinkers still in the Labour Party to restore the old labourist hegemony. But the measure of the degeneration, from the right's standpoint, is that while Gaitskell was able to 'fight, fight and fight again' against unilateralism, and able to win without great difficulty, the best Foot can really hope for is a dilution of the policy, to be achieved by some form of calculated ambiguity that will satisfy nobody, but keep the US bases and the British bomb for a bit longer. In sum, the internal contradictions within the party have intensified to the point where the stakes in the present struggle are quite simply, what kind of party will there be after the dust has settled?

To say that these are the stakes is not at all to say that the policies of the Labour left, or any of the versions of the Alternative Economic Strategy currently on offer, or the consciousness of most Labour Party members have decisively transcended reformism. The programme adopted by recent party conferences and defended by the Bennite left is indeed a programme of partial reforms, whose limitations have been pointed out by many critics. [23] Obviously, it does not involve the expropriation of the capitalist class or the replacement of the bourgeois state by a proletarian one! More to the point (in its own terms), it does not face up to the overwhelming democratic case for electoral reform; it does not propose adequate measures to end control of the press by an unrepresentative and reactionary handful of capitalist cartels and tycoons; it does not press with any real vigour for self-management in the nationalized industries; it does not seek to recreate a mass secular republicanism. Nevertheless, as the crisis of British capitalism has deepened, the capacity of the ruling class to concede even 'reformist' demands has dwindled, and successive Labour leaderships have accordingly ceased progressively to pose any. In this context, conference policy has met and will continue to meet fierce resistance. Moreover, this is not just because specific measures go against perceived ruling-class interests, but also and above all because of the potential broad popular impact of a political style and emphasis which, in the case of Benn and his co-thinkers, has increasingly been ready to encourage self-activity of a mass character among workers and other oppressed layers.

### **Bevan and Benn**

Here a comparison with Bevan is instructive. Bevan's early life was heavily determined by his working-class origins and the influence of Marxism. His trajectory in the decades that followed, however, was one of steady movement from the left to the centre of the labour-movement spectrum. The high tide of Bevanism in the fifties coincided with a period of near full male employment, rising living standards and growth of popular support for Labour, despite its failure to win elections. Bevan, in ideological and political terms, always remained firmly within the framework of the Attlee government of 1945, although criticizing the erosion in office of its initial impetus. [24] After the abortive attempt to expel him in 1955, he was to make his peace with Gaitskell, denounce unilateralism and emerge as a demagogic defender of the status quo at home and abroad, both in public and at Lord Beaverbrook's lavish house-parties. His death no doubt forestalled further moves to the right, enabling him to be enshrined as a hallowed symbol of labourist mythology, invoked to more effect by the right than by the left thereafter. Although during the high tide of his revolt, the economic demands with which he was associated were probably more anti-capitalist than is Benn's programme today, and although the Bevanite opposition was probably better organized on a national scale than is the Bennite left, Bevan never threatened the organizational or ideological hegemony of the right in the Labour Party as Benn does.

Benn's trajectory has been in sharp contrast to that of Bevan. His early life was dominated by the radical nonconformism associated with his father, a Labour minister in the twenties and thirties. Benn became a politician of the Labour centre, a Fabian reformer, much influenced by Crosland in the fifties. In other words, he began his political career with positions not so very different from those of Bevan in his twilight years. It was his experience as a minister in the Wilson and Callaghan governments which pushed him to the left (together with the very specific insight into the workings of the British state which he gained during his protracted fight to divest himself of the hereditary title which his father had accepted on retirement). Confronted at every key moment of decision by the power of the civil service and the IMF, Benn came to understand the structural constraints facing any Labour government that might seek to push through a programme of radical reforms—but what was unusual in his case was that, instead of making the accommodation to 'reality' customary for Labour politicians in power, Benn drew radical conclusions. He came to question the efficacy of traditional Fabian politics, and to argue for drastic changes to democratize the British state. In themselves, and in other circumstances, his prescriptions might not have represented any unacceptable challenge to the prevailing system. They coincided, however, with a worsening economic crisis to which the Callaghan government's only answer was an assault on working-class living standards—demoralizing the trade-union movement and paving the way for Thatcherism. The resulting breakdown of the traditional entente between trade unions and Labour leadership allowed far-reaching constitutional changes to take place within the structures of the

Labour Party itself. Benn came to symbolize, and to identify most strongly with, the process of transformation that was shaking the old power-system; the demand to break with what the Wilson and Callaghan governments had stood for.

But of course the role of Benn himself is only one element in the present crisis of labourism. The party itself is not the self-confident and powerful machine it was in the fifties, adept at stifling class conflict and disciplining rebels. The CLPS today reflect the changing social realities of a country whose long-established industrial base has been undergoing a series of cumulative shocks beyond its capacity to resist. The explosion of public-sector unionism, the post-1968 radicalization and the rise of an autonomous women's movement have combined to provide the party with a new layer of activists, very different from its old corporate base. [25] Committed to an anti-capitalist perspective (hence to a rejection of Labour's record in government), hostile to NATO, in favour of the unification of Ireland, determined to repeal racist immigration laws (themselves part of the Wilson/Callaghan legacy) and pressing for a full implementation of unilateral nuclear disarmament, this constituency base—with its very significant counterpart among union activists—provides a layer of support for the new Labour left headed by Benn that cannot be conjured out of existence, even by the block vote. Moreover, this left can by no means be reduced to a 'Bennite' rank-and-file. Far from homogeneous, still for the most part reformist, it is a movement in ferment, wide open to programmatic and strategic discussion and to Marxist analyses, and for the most part not hostile to common action with the revolutionary left. Not just the minority who have passed through the organizations of the revolutionary left, but the great majority of CLP members who have not, are in the main a product of the post-1968 radicalization. Not only have a large number of rank-and-file movements sprung up within the party, [26] but there is also a growing move to forge links with autonomous movements outside—black organizations, women's groups, etc—and this requires as a precondition repudiation of the heritage of past Labour governments. At the same time, this new Labour left takes very seriously both the struggle within the party itself and the battle for electoral victory against the Tories (and SDP/Liberals).

The two essential planks on which this left as a whole has strongly identified with Benn have been, first, his vigorous backing for measures of rank-and-file democracy in the labour movement—a thoroughly progressive drive, not initiated by Benn, which any Marxist should support—and secondly, his readiness to come out openly and explicitly against continuity with the right-wing policies of Wilson, Callaghan and Healey and his championing of left-wing conference decisions against PLP and cabinet opposition or emasculation. The fact that a politician of Benn's standing has adopted such a stance and won such broad support for it has had a dramatic effect on the development of the new Labour and union left as a whole. It is certainly true, at the same time, that this left is by no means united in support for Benn's specific policy proposals for tackling the capitalist crisis. However, it would be quite wrong therefore to underestimate the extent to which Benn's challenge to the traditional party leadership and structures is shaping the various currents within the party (and increasingly the unions), or the extent to which Benn's own reaction to the powerful, contradictory pressures under which he is now operating will affect the pattern of working-class politics in the coming period. Much will depend on whether he takes the crucial step of organizing a specific left current within the party, in recognition of the new situation created by the collapse of the old Tribune left, when his decision to contest the deputy leadership broke up the cosy parliamentary dance of 'left' and 'right' and made it clear that a very different type of polarization was now under way, with a prominent left MP actually encouraging the rank-and-file to use their new democratic powers to defeat the PLP right.

### **Democracy and the Labour Party**

It is important that we should be clear about the real significance of the fight to democratize the Labour Party. The domination by the PLP and the union block vote, and the enormous powers of the party leader and cabinet, have been the strongest arguments for regarding the party in the past as structurally incapable of ever being anything other than a 'bourgeois workers' party'. Only huge external pressures have begun to produce fissures in this seemingly impregnable edifice. Even the relatively modest changes already achieved have shaken the whole structure and raised fundamental questions about the relationship between unions, party and parliamentary representation. The problem of how to ensure that party representatives in parliament do in fact act as party representatives is, of course, as old as the first appearance of social-democrat deputies in bourgeois assemblies at the end of the last century (and lay at the root of the split with the ILP in 1929–31); but perhaps only in a country in which parliament is as potent an ideological totem as in Britain could one find large numbers of Labour MPS calmly arguing that they should not be accountable at all to the party, but rather to their 'consciences', or to the electorate as a whole (i.e. nobody); or a former Labour prime minister (Callaghan) canvassing the idea of a formal secession of the PLP from the party. This in effect harks back to the days of oligarchic rule, before universal suffrage and the emergence of mass political parties to articulate sectional or class interests on a national scale. The process of re-selection of MPS may be a weak

instrument, certainly a far cry from the revocability which Marxists have classically advocated, but it has already begun both to act as a factor of demystification and to pose questions of power within the Labour Party. [27] The reason for the hysterical reaction of ruling-class opinion to the whole notion of accountability of Labour MPS to the party (it seems less exercised about the SDP's adoption of reselection procedures) is that this undercuts the entire mechanism whereby the PLP and Labour governments have operated as capitalist agencies within the labour movement. Again, the institution of an electoral college to choose the party leader was in itself a reform of apparently minor import. But the events of the past year have shown how it has served to pose in the most acute form the whole relationship of the Labour Party to the trade unions, and also to highlight the enormously undemocratic structures of most unions. The right wing of the PLP and the media have raised the issue of lack of democracy in the unions as part of their battle against Benn. However, it is of course socialists who have a real interest in democratizing the unions, replacing the mechanism of the block vote by proportional voting [28] and involving the rank-and-file actively in decision-making. The block vote has historically been one of the most potent weapons in the hands of the right, and strategies based on hopes for its utilization by left bureaucrats rather than right bureaucrats have proved particularly barren. [29] The fundamental aim for socialists must be to draw the greatest possible number of trade unionists into political life. (Naturally, there would be no guarantee that, in the first instance, this would mean more support for the left. But, as with the mobilization of the masses in East Europe independently of the bureaucracy, e.g. Solidarno\*\*\*\*, it is an essential *precondition* for socialist advance.) Branch discussion and balloting on the key issues for debate at Labour Conference and before elections for the party leadership, the mandating of union delegations in line with the balance of opinion in the branch ballots, together with the establishment of workplace branches of the Labour Party, would be extremely significant steps towards the achievement of this aim. They are steps which have become realistically attainable as a consequence of recent developments in the Labour Party itself. At the same time, the prospect that an SDP/Liberal government would follow the example of the 1931 National government by introducing legislation to replace 'contracting out' of the political levy, in unions affiliated to the Labour Party, by 'contracting in', and the likelihood that this would result in an even greater drop in affiliated membership figures than the 40% registered in 1931, mean that the status quo can probably not be maintained in any case, and socialists have every reason to go on the offensive in arguing for fundamental change. Clearly, there is no acceptable existing model of relations between a mass working-class party and trade unions. The historic bond between the Labour Party and its union creators and paymasters is by no means a wholly negative one, for either party, and its simple severing would be a massively regressive move. There is a class constraint on Labour leaders, which makes it, for example, more difficult for them as we saw in 1978-9 to embrace austerity policies with impunity than for the SPD or even a party like the PCI. And even the formal socialist objectives of most British unions, even the highly bureaucratic mode of their involvement in national politics via a working-class party, are preferable to the US model. On the other hand many workers' parties are linked to unions without thereby sacrificing the determination of policy and programme by their members. So what is important for socialists is to be unequivocal in rejection of the *existing form* of the relationship—the whole anti-democratic farce whereby Labour's own House of Lords, in the shape of largely unaccountable union general secretaries often elected for life, cast millions of votes at party conferences (some 90 per cent of the total) in the name of an arbitrarily fixed number of 'members', affiliated at a fraction of the individual member's dues, who may actually vote Conservative or SDP. They must fight for a *new form* of relationship involving greater active participation of trade-unionists in the Labour Party.

To sum up, it is our view that we are entering upon a period of far-reaching transformation of the established pattern of British politics as the crisis deepens. At such a time, political organizations can undergo changes of size and structure inconceivable in 'normal' periods. Configurations of political forces can change dramatically. So far as the Labour Party is concerned, the strains are apparent, the fabric is ripping apart. The outcome is not determined, but a continuation of the splitting process already under way seems vastly more probable than the Foot/Kinnock recipe of fudging all issues in order to restore the old *status quo ante*. Compromise with the right of the PLP rules out any possibility of electorally defeating the SDP, since the right—and that means the great majority—of the PLP agrees with the SDP on all fundamental issues: vying with the latter for the political mantle of Wilson and Callaghan (or Crosland and Gaitskell) does not offer any convincing perspective for the party's future. It is conceivable that, as a result of the undemocratic nature of the British electoral system, the Labour Party could emerge against the odds as the largest party in the next parliament; but if this is achieved by maintaining a calculated ambiguity regarding its key policies, an even more bitter struggle will break out after the election, with a split as a real possibility. To those influential voices which counsel caution and restraint for fear of isolating the socialist left from the 'broader movement' necessary for a Labour government to be elected again,



[30] we would answer that the problem is a different one. It is the 'movement'—or, better, a working class which constitutes a large natural majority of the population—which has been isolated for many decades from socialist ideas and objectives, even of the left-reformist variety. This isolation has created many problems for the left inside and outside the Labour Party. In a more general sense, the paradox can be expressed as follows: the working class is much stronger (in terms of unionization) than it was in the twenties, but it is qualitatively weaker in terms of socialist ideas or culture. [31] Traditional labourist ideology has thrived on the separation between politics (the activities of the PLP) and economics (the trade-union struggle for living standards), and during its periods in office has helped to further weaken socialism as an ideal. Would another round of Labour government qualitatively no different from its predecessors aid socialist advance? The merit of Benn has lain in the fact that he has understood that it would not, and been prepared to fight to commit the Labour Party—and *bind* a future Labour government—to policies which would sharply reverse the domestic and international priorities of the ruling class, and to measures designed to democratize the oligarchic structures of the antiquated British state. He has been prepared to reject the pessimistic logic which says that socialist policies cannot win majority support. It is undoubtedly correct to point out that Bennism is still a minority current in the Labour movement. But surely the question which arises is not 'How do we conciliate the old Tribune wing of the PLP?', but rather 'How do we transform the new Labour left into a majority within the labour movement as a whole?' When the entire edifice of labourism is crumbling, the task of socialists is surely not to act as the scaffolding to shore up the old structure, but rather as masons ready to build anew.

The only way in which the Labour Party would be able to restore its electoral fortunes and become a serious candidate for governmental power once again would be if it were to turn itself into a gigantic lever of popular mobilization, championing the cause of all sectors of the oppressed, backing and leading their struggles and offering a governmental perspective of real change. [32] To say that this is not something which it is going to do in a hurry is to miss the point. The policies—or more precisely the politics—which Benn has been advocating both point in that direction and offer the only perspective, not merely of a short-term resistance to (and break with) pro-capitalist forces within the party, but of a medium-term regeneration of the party in a new form, as a mass socialist organization and a governmental candidate. This remains, it goes without saying, only a possibility. Among other things, it will involve very harsh choices for Benn himself, which it is by no means certain that he will make—the most important in the short run being the decision to organize the left throughout the party.

Thus, we come, finally, to the crux of our disagreement with Coates. To take up the points he raises in the passages we quoted at the outset, is it really impossible to 'distance oneself decisively from labourism' while fighting in the Labour Party today? Is the main problem really one of 'protecting. . . the integrity of the socialist project. . . in the minds of its adherents from contamination with the retreats perpetrated in its name by Labour politicians in power'? Is the 'socialist project', which has indeed been contaminated by social-democratic and Stalinist betrayals, not rather something which has to be both recovered and reformulated, and propagated by new means of struggle to new social layers? [33] Is what is occurring in the Labour Party really mere 'resolution-passing and in-fighting' (and are not these in any case essential parts, though not of course the sum total, of inner-party democracy in action)? Are 'sections of the Labour left, as the problems of the AES become all too clear in practice' more likely to turn towards a 'point of reference' that has stood aside while they conducted a fight to transform the major historical party of the British working class into a mass socialist party, or to link arms rather with Marxist comrades who have fought alongside them.

### **1968 and the Attempt to Build Revolutionary Parties**

It is at this point that a balance-sheet of the experience of the revolutionary left in Western Europe since the late sixties becomes relevant, a balance-sheet drawn up in terms of the basic tasks of socialists this side of the overthrow of capitalism. Of course, it is conceivable that Coates was writing from a position of pessimism about any active involvement by socialists in the present stage of the class struggle, other than through intellectual work in the narrow sense (and there are times and situations, let it be said, when such a view may indeed be warranted; and others where, even though it is not warranted, intellectual work of value to the socialist cause may still be carried out). But we take it rather that he was expressing the underlying assumption on which all the revolutionary organizations which have developed outside the mass working-class parties since the mid-sixties, and especially since the 1968 May Events in France, based their activity: the possibility *in the short term* of constructing revolutionary parties (i.e. organizations based on a section, albeit small, of the masses) outside the historic mass parties of the working class (Communist or social-democratic). We take Coates's words about a 'pole of reference' outside the Labour Party to mean that this objective either has already been achieved in this country, or at least could be *in the short term* (for that is what is relevant). Here we cannot agree.

The truth is that the revolutionary organizations outside the Labour Party find themselves in a cul de sac. The two main groups, the Socialist Workers' Party (former International Socialists) and the International Marxist Group (British section of the Fourth International) both grew in a seven-year period (1968–75) that saw stormy working-class struggles throughout a capitalist Europe that had previously experienced two decades of relative social peace; a period which stretched between two moments—the first in France, the second in Portugal—when the foundations of a bourgeois state were shaken and shown to be not invulnerable. Throughout Western Europe those years saw the emergence of a significant layer of political militants who rejected social-democracy and Stalinism. These were the product of a unique political coincidence—between a new class polarization in the West, the struggle against US imperialism in Vietnam and the escalating demands for socialist democracy in Eastern Europe. The British SWP grew from 400 to 4,000, the IMG from 50 to 800. Elsewhere on the continent the Fourth International saw a rapid growth of its forces in France and later Spain, while spontaneist or neo-Stalinist varieties of Maoism mushroomed in Scandinavia, West Germany and Italy. The euphoria and excitement which marked this development was comprehensible enough. For the first time since the twenties, a new revolutionary vanguard seemed to be emerging on a continental scale. Its class composition might not be very proletarian, its programmatic vision might be confused, its political divisions might at times be lacerating, but its instincts were for the most part sound so long as the movement was on the upswing and the working class also on the move. The unity achieved on the barricades in May, while the Communist Party did everything in its power to turn the masses back to 'normality', could not be simply dismissed out of hand, even by those most conscious of the essential incompatibility of such politically ill-assorted entities. The years after 1968 also produced a massive revitalization of Marxism throughout the capitalist world, with Marxist publishing houses and journals springing up everywhere.

The second half of the seventies, however, administered a series of brutal shocks to the entire 'new-vanguardist' perspective. The fall of Saigon to the armed battalions of Vietnamese communism did not coincide with a successful proletarian revolution in Portugal. On the contrary, not only did no Lisbon Commune emerge, but virtually the entire European revolutionary left failed the test of how to respond adequately to the tumultuous events which were to culminate in the restabilization of the bourgeois order—some groups tempted by military-adventurism, others tailing the Communist Party in its undemocratic manoeuvres with sections of the officer corps. It is true that the Fourth International subsequently produced, reflecting on the mistakes that it and others had made, what is no doubt the most important Marxist programmatic document of recent years from any source, its 'Theses on Socialist Democracy'. [34] But this could not alter the fact that no section of the left, outside or inside Portugal, had been equipped theoretically to intervene with a conception of socialist democracy capable of convincing the mass even of the industrial workers of its superiority to the bourgeois democracy offered by Soares. [35] At the same time, in a process which goes back to the beginning of the decade but was drawn out almost to its end, Maoist groups were thrown into disarray and then crisis by events in China itself (foreign policy deals with imperialism, repudiation followed by demystification of the Cultural Revolution and the Mao cult, savage purges, and so on). Expectations of a revolutionary situation in Spain following the end of decaying Francoism were not borne out, with the successful establishment of a bourgeois-democratic order. Expectations of new possibilities for revolutionary organizations in the situations that would follow accession to government of Eurocommunist-dominated coalitions were dashed with the break-up of the Union of the Left in 1978, and the failure of the Italian and Spanish Communist Parties to make it into the government, however far they might move to the right. Finally, only perhaps in Italy (apart from the special case of the Basque country) was the hold of the traditional mass parties over the overwhelming bulk of the organized working class ever really challenged in any significant areas, and that was not by the post-1968 vanguard in a direct sense, but by semi-spontaneist formations already transitional to the terrorist groups whose roots lay in despair at the failure of the perspective that had seemingly opened up after May. So it is necessary to state clearly that the attempt to construct revolutionary parties in Western Europe *in this period*, with the aid of the new vanguard radicalized since 1968, bypassing the historic mass parties of the working class, has failed. It is true that many revolutionary groups—from the US Socialist Workers Party (ever since the thirties) through some of the 'Marxist-Leninist' organizations (almost all now moribund) to the British SWP—have simply proclaimed themselves to be 'parties'. But in fact they remain groupuscules, larger than existed prior to 1968, but having achieved no qualitative breakthrough. It is true that the IMG and SWP in this country did organize and lead two massive extra-parliamentary movements of great political importance: the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign and the Anti-Nazi League. Revolutionary groups in other countries have similar achievements to their credit. Moreover, the education of a generation of political activists in Marxist ideas, and the re-creation of an alternative tradition (for at least tens of thousands of militants) to the compromised traditions of social-democracy and Stalinism, remain permanent

gains. The existence of Marxist organizations with a significant implantation and national presence in most advanced capitalist countries has been an immensely positive development since the mid sixties, and this will remain the case whether they work inside or outside the mass working-class parties. But no party has been constructed anywhere in Europe in this period. A change of perspective and orientation is thus necessary.

Here a crucial difference between the tradition of the Fourth International and other sections of the revolutionary left becomes of obvious relevance. The underlying conception in the International of how a new mass party would be formed—though it is true that this conception has not been adequately theorized or systematically acted upon and inculcated in the membership [36]—has always been based on the historical experience of the Third International, seeing the process as one of splits and fusions, affecting the existing mass working-class parties as well as forces outside. In other words, it would not be one of molecular recruitment to an initially small organization which would just grow and grow until it became a big one; nor would it be a question of merely remaining small but pure until such time as the masses see through their present 'mis'-leaders and turn to the true revolutionaries (the view classically espoused by Bordiga's followers or in Britain by the SPGB). The decision—at any given moment—to organize outside the traditional mass parties, or inside them, or both, is thus a tactical one. [37] Hence, although the Fourth International has shared the mistaken perspective and time-scale for revolution in Western Europe which was so widespread after May 1968, its theoretical tradition and historical experience should allow it to recognize the mistake and act accordingly. Although it has not yet succeeded in producing a critical balance-sheet, it will certainly have to do so. Meanwhile, the tasks facing socialists in Britain today are urgent ones.

### **Towards a New Model Labour Party**

Some of these tasks are theoretical ones, of the kind which the newly formed Socialist Society, if it succeeds in creating a united front at the cultural/ideological level between the left in the Labour Party and Marxists outside it, will be able to undertake. The theoretical tasks can be resumed under one heading: concretizing a model of socialism that can win majority support in this country, helping to stimulate a political practice commensurate with it. But there are also more directly political tasks, which can only be achieved in the first instance through a simultaneous fight to get rid of the Tory government and to defeat the right inside the labour movement. These tasks too require a united front (not just common action on single issues) between the Labour left and the Marxists. And this will only be achieved if it is forged inside the Labour Party in the coming critical period, to the extent that this is possible. The new Labour left is different from its predecessors. The tens of thousands of constituency activists not only are interested in socialism and socialist measures; they are deeply sceptical of the capacity or indeed intention of the established hegemonic forces in the Labour Party to fight for them, and conscious that their potential allies are more likely to be found on Right to Work marches, black defence committees or in women's groups, than in Southwark Town Hall or Westminster. True the AES is a limited document, which will enrage sections of the bourgeoisie but not undercut the power of the bourgeois class as a whole. Coates's criticisms are entirely valid on this score. But what conclusion should we draw? Dual power, workers' councils, factory occupations, general strikes, insurrection, seizure of power, overthrow of Capital? Very well. But between now and then? Coates derides *the Transitional Programme*, [38] but whatever its deficiencies (like the Communist Manifesto it contains predictions which have not been borne out) it does at least stress the concept of transition. Of course, Coates is right to point out that the objectives even of the existing AES let alone a more adequate and 'transitional' one, could not be achieved without overcoming very powerful resistance, i.e. without struggle and the creation of agencies for conducting such struggle (though like other critics he perhaps underestimates the greater possibilities for mobilization that would be opened up precisely by governmental moves even of a reformist nature). But it is also true that the masses will never simply turn overnight from trade-union consciousness to the maximum socialist programme, which is why Marxists will not get very far if they confine their intervention in the class struggle to, on the one hand, day-to-day rank-and-file militancy in the wage struggle and, on the other, presenting the total socialist programme in their propaganda. The real weakness of Coates's argument is that it shows no real awareness of the effect which the objective processes now reshaping British politics are having inside the labour movement (and the by-election results at Warrington, Croydon and Crosby are only early manifestations of the dangers which threaten). For the emergence of the SDP and its impact on the Labour Party may well have certain positive incidental effects; but to think that a simple devastation of the Labour Party (as opposed to the defeat of the pro-capitalist forces which have historically dominated it) would be other than a major historic defeat for the British working class is to suffer from the same kind of tunnel vision that afflicted the Italian Communist Party in the early twenties or the Comintern in its 'third period'. The emergence of the SDP threatens to shift the entire balance of social and class forces to the right, displacing Labour by a bourgeois formation as the alternative

for a section of working-class voters to the Conservatives. There are three basic ways forward being prospected by sections of the existing Labour leadership, and which of them prevails is not a matter of indifference to socialists. The first, advocated by the Manifesto Group and the trade-union right, is to fight, fight and fight again to create a Mark II SDP. This requires not merely isolating Benn, but decisively defeating his base in party and unions alike. This can now only be achieved after the next general election—perhaps by blaming the left for defeat, as a prelude to a determined purge. Once the SDP/Liberals in their turn prove unable to solve the crisis, in this Manifesto scenario, there would once again be a cleansed and purified Labour Party on offer to the ruling class, in the role of coalition partner if not of sole governmental candidate.

The second option, favoured by Foot and the bulk probably of the union leadership, is to strive to restore the Grand Old Party as before. It involves uniting with the right against the left, but at the same time restraining it at least until after the next election. It involves fudging over unwelcome conference policies and minimizing the practical effect of recent constitutional changes, rather than defeating and reversing them as the right would like. It is no doubt at present more hostile than the right to any ideas of coalition in the future, though this is unlikely to survive the harsh test of post-electoral reality. It is more wedded to the traditional relationship between party and unions—though union leaders themselves can be assumed to have a fundamentally pragmatic attitude on this question. At bottom, this option is a short-term one, unlikely to survive either Foot himself or the next general election. Its basic dilemma has been thrown into harsh light by its equivocations on the question of a purge. There has been constant and mounting pressure from the PLP right, sections of the union bureaucracy and the media for a thorough-going purge of the Labour Party, to turn it into a tame instrument of bourgeois hegemony in the working class. The scope of what is envisaged is perhaps indicated by the habitual use of the designation 'hard left', even in the so-called quality press, to denote Benn and his co-thinkers in parliament or Livingstone and his colleagues on the GLC. Foot and his supporters from the old Tribune left have shown themselves increasingly willing and indeed anxious to comply, in order to conciliate the right and please a supposedly irredeemably anti-socialist electorate. However, they have also been forced to realize that there are enormous obstacles to carrying through any such purge, without its becoming a fatal split—fatal to the whole Foot project, that is—given the overwhelming leftward orientation of the constituency parties; the degree of militant consciousness among trade-union activists who can no longer so easily be ignored by authoritarian general secretaries; and the significant left minority that exists within the union leadership and even within the PLP (as shown by the 66 votes for Benn in the shadow cabinet elections, against Foot's express recommendation). (Events in the Scottish Labour Party in 1977 stand as an awful, if tiny, warning, when an intended purge became a split and led to the disappearance of the fledgling party altogether. [39] ) The right when it says 'purge', really means 'split'. Insofar as Foot and his advisers believe the former is possible without the latter, this is part of their more general illusion that the crisis (external and internal) can be willed away and the old status quo conjured back into existence. This illusion is fated to be dispelled sooner rather than later.

The third option, adumbrated at least tendentially by Benn, is to create a New Model Labour Party. Unable to restore bourgeois confidence in it as a reliable pillar of the governmental system, under constant attack from the media, Labour would seek to restore its links with a battered working-class base, offering a programme which would outrage—even if not challenge fundamentally—the capitalist class. Such a perspective would necessitate building Labour as a mass, socialist party by drawing rank-and-file union activists into effective political participation, changing the existing style of political work and consolidating the electoral reforms by transforming the intrinsically anti-democratic block vote and devoting more time and energy to programmatic elaboration of a broadly socialist character. The launching of a popular socialist weekly to argue the positions of the left within a national political arena would then become a crucial necessity.

We would suggest to David Coates that the socialist project would receive a tremendous boost if the latter alternative (existing today only in an embryonic form) were to succeed. It would be a severe defeat if the first model were forced through. The second suits neither right nor left, and is an alliance behind a caretaker, striving desperately to prevent the mansion from crumbling when its foundations have already been damaged by a political earthquake. For us there is an overwhelming case in the present conjuncture for socialists to be in the Labour Party, fighting to reverse the situation created by Thatcherism and the Wilson and Callaghan governments, fighting alongside the Bennite left in an attempt to transform the face of working-class politics. Abstention from struggles seen as vital by politically conscious workers has never been the right policy for Marxists, and the struggle within the Labour Party today is precisely of this kind.

[1] For an excellent recent analysis, see Andrew Gamble, *Britain in Decline*, London 1981. (The author's concluding reference to Baldwin's celebration of the stability of British institutions, and to Trotsky's comments, is also very



- much to the point.)
- [2] We refer to the proposals from influential conservatives like Hailsham for 'reform' of the House of Lords (rather than to Labour Party conference decisions that it should be abolished).
  - [3] See, for instance, Ian Gough, *The Political Economy of the Welfare State*, London 1979; and Ajit Singh, "'Full Employment Capitalism" and the Labour Party', in *The Socialist Register 1981*, London 1981.
  - [4] 'The Crisis of the British State' (NLR 130).
  - [5] 'Different Conceptions of Party: Labour's Constitutional Debates' (NLR 126).
  - [6] 'Labourism and the Transition to Socialism' (NLR 129).
  - [7] High points of the postwar Marxist critique of Labour reformism include Ralph Miliband's *Parliamentary Socialism*, London 1961; Nairn, 'The Nature of the Labour Party', (NLR 27-28); and Coates's own *Labour in Power*, London 1980.
  - [8] At this point in his argument it would have been appropriate for Coates to discuss the 'Socialist Unity' initiative launched by the International Marxist Group in 1976-7 and the limited response it met with, both from other Marxist organizations and from the more established non-organized socialist intelligentsia.
  - [9] 'Centrist' in the sense current in the first years of the Third International of 'wavering between reform and revolution'.
  - [10] See Stuart Hall, 'The Great Moving Right Show', *Marxism Today*, January 1979.
  - [11] See Foot's two-part article in the *Observer* (10 and 17 January 1982) for a prime example of such bankrupt defence of policies that have been both discredited politically and defeated electorally.
  - [12] See Coates, *Labour in Power*, op. cit.
  - [13] For a revealing first-hand account, see Raghieb Ahsan, 'Solihull: Death of a Car Factory' (NLR 129). The most significant achievement of these tactics was the successful firing of Leyland convenor Derek Robinson, with the connivance of the AEUW leadership, which managed to sabotage the workforce resistance which at first threatened to block the move.
  - [14] Total membership of TUC-affiliated unions was 11,865,390 in 1978; 12,128,078 in 1979; 12,172,508 in 1980; 11,601,413 in 1981.
  - [15] If one takes January 1974 as a base, real take-home pay has changed as follows: January 1974 100, January 1975 104, January 1976 100, January 1977 94, January 1978 96, January 1979 102, January 1980 105, January 1981 111, August 1981 (latest available) 108. Of course, the huge increase in unemployment and the slashing of social benefits and services mean that the picture so far as the real living standards of the population as a whole are concerned is very different.
  - [16] See Singh, op. cit.
  - [17] One of the most striking instances of the crippling 'moderation' of Foot and his colleagues has been their failure to mount a public campaign against the decision of Denning and the Law Lords that the Labour GLC policy of cheap fares for London Transport was illegal, or to defend the London Labour leader from an unparalleled campaign of press abuse, legal harassment and Government attack. On the Labour Right, see Ken Coates's telling reflections on its history in 'The Choices Before Labour' (NLR 131)—though we are not entirely persuaded by his distinction between 'European existists' and 'Atlantic remainders'.
  - [18] For Foot's record, see Mark Jenkins, *Bevanism: Labour's High Tide*, London 1979, esp. chapter 3; and for two recent comments, Christopher Hitchens, 'Footling', *New Statesman*, 25 September 1981, and Geoff Bell, 'The Murky Past of Michael Foot', in *Socialist Challenge*, 18 November 1981. The assessment of Foot by Rustin (op. cit. p. 18) as 'in conviction and political formation a committed member of the radical and Labour left' is thus misguided to say the least.
  - [19] Rustin, op. cit., pp. 22-3.
  - [20] For a graphic account by a trade-union militant of the fightback during this period against the 5% norm, see John Suddaby, 'Public-Sector Strike in Camden' (NLR 116).
  - [21] For example, 'The Future of Britain's Crisis', (NLR 113/14); 'Enoch Powell: the New Right' (NLR 61).
  - [22] *Guardian*, 25 November 1981, in a letter arguing Tariq Ali's inadmissibility as a member of the Labour Party.
  - [23] See Andrew Glyn and John Harrison, *The British Economic Disaster*, London 1980, pp. 147-64; Gamble, op. cit., pp. 182-97.
  - [24] See Jenkins, op. cit.; and for a discussion of attitudes to the 1945 Labour government in a somewhat contrasting vein to our own, see Gareth Stedman Jones, 'Marching into History?', *New Socialist* 3.
  - [25] Stedman Jones, op. cit., offers an analysis of this changed base of the Labour Party.
  - [26] The Campaign for Labour Party Democracy has played a crucial role in advocating and carrying through the significant measures of democratization that have been achieved in recent years within the Labour Party. Its women's section scored a notable success in forcing a change of agenda on the floor at the start of the 1980 party conference, to allow debate on issues of particular concern to women which the arrangements committee had not seen fit to schedule for debate. The Rank and File Mobilizing Committee, first proposed by *Socialist Organizer*, provided something of a model of how widely different currents could be united across sectarian divisions in common action behind Benn's campaign last year for the deputy leadership. *London Labour Briefing* has pioneered a creative and open combination of campaigning journalism and rank-and-file organization that clearly meets a real need throughout the party, in the fight for conference policies and against the right.
  - [27] In assessing the effects of re-selection, it would be wrong simply to look at the small number of right-wing MPS directly de-selected in favour of left-wingers. It is necessary also to take into account the number of MPS threatened by de-selection, in the short or medium run, who have defected to the SDP and been replaced by left-wingers; and the long-term effect of a measure which must make the prospects of a career at Westminster altogether less secure for a right-wing would-be Labour candidate.
  - [28] For a valuable contribution to the discussion on how the votes of union members of the Labour Party could be more democratically expressed through a drastic reform of the block-vote system, see Michael Meacher's article in the *New Statesman*, 13 November 1981.
  - [29] The most notable casualty here, of course, has been the Communist Party of Great Britain, whose continuous decline since World War Two was qualitatively accelerated by the collapse in the mid seventies of its entire industrial strategy of alliance with left union bureaucrats, when Scanlon and Jones moved to the right and became the standard-bearers of Callaghan and Healey.
  - [30] We refer, for instance, to Hobsbawm in his title contribution to *The Forward March of Labour Halted?*, London 1981, or to Rustin, op. cit.
  - [31] See Raymond Williams, 'Ideas and the Labour Movement', in *New Socialist* (November-December 1981).

- [32] This is not the place to enter into the long-standing debate among Marxists concerning 'workers' governments' under capitalism, but see: Tariq Ali, *1968 and After*, London 1978, chapter four ('The Lessons of Chile').
- [33] That the 'socialist project' is not alive and well is quite evident. Significant sections of the erstwhile socialist intelligentsia, especially in France and Italy but not only there, have collapsed into a new cold-war accommodation to bourgeois values and interests. Meanwhile revolutionary Marxists, despite the continuing vindication of their basic analysis of the nature of bureaucratic rule in the Soviet Union, have not been able to make any real inroads into the two-bloc world-view which continues to dominate the mass parties of the working class, whether social-democratic or communist. After the imposition of martial law in Poland, in this country the Labour left has experienced real difficulty in making an adequate response; elsewhere we have had the spectacle of PCF and PCI adopting opposed alignments of a kind equally unacceptable from the point of view of any 'socialist project'.
- [34] 'Theses on Socialist Democracy and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat', adopted by the United Secretariat of the Fourth International in 1977, and printed as a separate pamphlet, London 1977.
- [35] Of course, these remarks should not be taken as denying either the objective factors (domestic and international) operating against the possibility of socialist revolution in Portugal in 1974-5, or the prime responsibility of the neo-Stalinist Communist Party in the débâcle. See Ali, *1968 and After*, chapter 5.
- [36] To a considerable extent this has been due to an inability or unwillingness to confront the alternative tradition with the Fourth International associated with the US Socialist Workers' Party. Many of the difficulties of the International in recent years stem from its avoidance of a clarification that has long been imperative in organizational, political and theoretical terms.
- [37] Activity within the existing mass political organizations of the working class has, of course, been part of the Trotskyist tradition since the mid thirties. However, after the decision taken throughout Western Europe in the late sixties to cease political work of this kind in favour of a short-term perspective of building new mass parties, great ideological confusion was caused by the failure to draw up any proper balance-sheet of the previous experience. The result was that the mass of new recruits to the Fourth International in the decade after 1967-8 tended to regard the earlier tactic as something that had been *mistaken in principle*, or at best only appropriate to an initial stage of 'primitive accumulation of cadres'. We should make it clear that our argument in this article with respect to the Labour Party depends on the specific crisis of that organization and the British political order: it cannot, therefore, be simply extended to other advanced capitalist, or even West European, countries. On the other hand, what we have said about the balance-sheet of the Fourth International's perspectives for Western Europe since the late sixties clearly implies that in each individual country a fundamental strategic reappraisal is required.
- [38] Coates refers to 'transitional programmes of the old Fourth International kind'. The tendency in the International, however, far from being that of constantly adopting new transitional programmes, has if anything been to treat the Transitional Programme adopted at its founding conference in 1938 ('The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International') as something of a timeless document, and accordingly not really to tackle the problem of elaborating transitional programmes appropriately adapted to new concrete situations.
- [39] For an account of this episode, see Henry Drucker, 'A Sad Democrat's Guide to Trot-bashing', *New Society*, 18 February 1982.