



ON THE BRINK

A Special Supplement

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LABOUR'S COMING SPLIT

by Roger Silverman

Was Labour ever a Socialist Party?

Can the left ever again win the leadership?

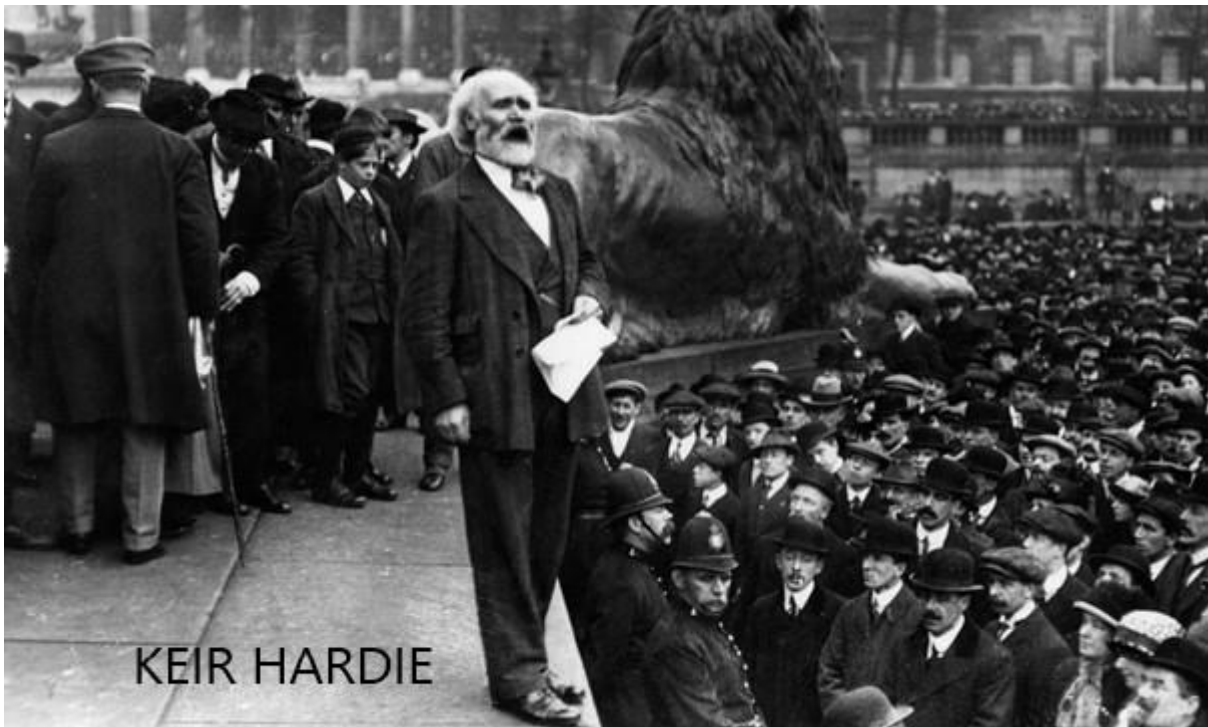
How can a new mass workers' party be built?



LABOUR'S COMING SPLIT

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Whether or not Labour wins the next election (and according to one grossly inflated projection it is online to win 491 seats to the Tories' 68), it will probably be on a spectacularly low poll, and with a record number of protest votes for third parties. There is general revulsion at an inept Tory government on its fifth prime minister in six years, but little enthusiasm for Starmer's Tory-lite alternative. It will be an unpopularity contest, in which the Tories look likely to lose even more votes than Labour.

But what then? The historian George Dangerfield commented on the Liberal Party's election victory in 1910: ***"from that victory it never recovered"***. So too with Starmer's rump Blairite party: the bigger its mandate, the more conspicuous its failure.

What is today's Labour Party for? It originally defined itself simply as the party of labour – the party representing the working class. Some left groups have always dismissed it as ***"a capitalist party"***. From 1918 to 1994 it stood for ***"the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange"***. It was once called by Lenin, in a widely misunderstood comment, ***"a bourgeois workers' party"***, and even ***"a thoroughly bourgeois party"***. Up until the Blair years it was often referred to as ***"the socialists"***. Tony Benn once joked that it was just ***"a party with socialists in it"***. Under the New Labour label, Blair branded it ***"a majority mainstream party advancing the interests of the broad majority of people"***, committed to ***"the enterprise of the market and the rigour of competition"***. Yet even today, no doubt by an oversight, its membership card still defines it as ***"a democratic socialist party"***. So which description is right?

The party of labour?

Labour was originally founded as the political voice of the trade unions. The clue is in the name; it proclaimed itself the party of Labour rather than Capital. Implicit in the name is a recognition that workers have their own distinct interests and need their own party to promote them. The founding meeting of the Labour Representation Committee in 1900

brought together trade unions representing more than half a million members with an assortment of socialist groups: the 13,000-strong Independent Labour Party, which had recruited such giants as James Connolly and Sylvia Pankhurst; the Fabian Society, a tamer propaganda circle with around 800 members; and the Social-Democratic Federation, led by the flamboyant self-styled Marxist Hyndman, which claimed 9,000. Even when it constituted itself a party, there was no facility for individual membership; it was a federation of trade unions and other affiliated organisations. That being so, right from its inception Labour was actually more explicitly a workers' party than any of the parties of the Socialist International, which had been formed in 1889.

Unlike them, though, the Labour Party did not yet define itself as socialist. When Hyndman's ultimatum demanding that the LRC instantly "**recognise the class war**" was, predictably, rejected, he stormed out of the meeting into oblivion. Most of the existing socialist groups remained affiliated to it, though. For all its conservative prejudices, as the creation of the trade unions it remained the authentic political voice of the working class.

The Labour anthem was ***The Red Flag***. Its resounding chorus was mumbled at party conferences over the decades with embarrassingly obvious distaste by its leaders: "***Though cowards flinch and traitors sneer, We'll keep the red flag flying here.***" Never have hymns contained such appropriate words: Labour was always crippled by the treachery of the right and the cowardice of the left; but the song's message was a lasting inspiration to its rank and file.

That's why, even before it had adopted a socialist programme, the same Lenin who in another context denounced it as "bourgeois" recommended that the Labour Party be accepted for affiliation to the Socialist International. "***The Labour Party may not recognise the class struggle,***" he said, "***but the class struggle will inevitably recognise the Labour Party.***"

A socialist party?

And so it proved. By 1918, as waves of revolution swept through Europe and beyond, Britain too was ablaze with strikes, army mutinies and uprisings; and sure enough, the Labour Party "recognised the class struggle". It pledged to "***play no role in reconstituting or defending capitalism***" and resolved to enact "***fundamental redistribution of power from the bosses to the working class***". It adopted the document "***Labour and the New Social Order***", which committed it to the nationalisation of industry, taxing the rich, and guaranteed minimum living standards for all. Inspired by the Russian revolution, the ILP also called for the "***establishment in every town, urban and rural district of Councils of Workmen and Soldiers' Delegates***".

Above all, Labour adopted the socialist Clause Four, which pledged *“to secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry... upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control”*. Flowery language, maybe; but the meaning was unmistakable: it was now a fully-fledged socialist party – no less so than its European counterparts in the Socialist International. The *Manchester Guardian* had no hesitation in recognising the significance of the 1918 conference, calling it *“the birth of a socialist party”*.



Those were the years of the Triple Alliance of militant trade unions; the Councils of Action; the Hands Off Russia campaign; the blockade of the Jolly George warship loaded with arms for the Russian counter-revolution; the jailing of George Lansbury, Mayor of Poplar and a future Labour leader, for defying the government; and the demonstration

LONDON TRAM AND BUS WORKERS ON STRIKE.



One of the few remaining buses. A crowd besieging a Shepherd's Bush bus in Piccadilly-circus yesterday afternoon.



An informal conference at Putney. A wounded "Tommy" wants to know why he has to walk.



by 90,000 Glasgow workers greeting the election of the famous Red Clydeside MPs. There was little doubt then as to Labour's class character. It remained a reformist party resting on the allegiance of the working class for more than three quarters of a century –

from 1918, when it adopted Clause Four, through 1959 when it resisted an attempt to remove it, to 1994 when it finally succumbed to its capture by New Labour. It had always been weighed down by a right-wing millstone; but its leadership had always had to justify its retreats and betrayals on the pretext of prudence, caution, “gradualism”; in Aneurin Bevan’s ambiguous formula: *“The language of priorities is the religion of Socialism”*.

A “bourgeois workers’ party”?



Lenin is often quoted as having called the Labour Party a “bourgeois workers’ party”. But did he? He defined it as *“a capitalist workers’ party made up of trade union members, but with a leadership consisting of the worst kinds of bourgeois elements”* and continued: *“Of course the bulk of the members of the Labour Party are workers. However... the Labour Party is a thoroughly bourgeois party, because although it consists of workers it is led by reactionaries, and the worst sort of reactionaries at that, who act fully in the spirit of the bourgeoisie.”*

Few would dispute Lenin’s estimation of Labour’s bureaucrats. However, a mangled contraction of his description of the party as a “bourgeois workers’ party” is sometimes glibly repeated as a self-evident truism, as if its source gave it technical precision. But, Lenin or no, as a scientific classification it is meaningless – as Lenin knew better than anyone. As Trotsky once commented: *“Lenin cannot be chopped up into quotations suited for every possible case, because for Lenin the formula never stands higher than the reality; it is always the tool that makes it possible to grasp the reality and to dominate it.”*

Lenin often adapted his formulations; he even abandoned his initial historic designation of the nature of the coming Russian revolution. Another notable example is his controversy with the so-called “Economist” group, when he argued that *“the working class exclusively by its own efforts is able to develop only trade-union consciousness... Socialist consciousness is introduced into the proletarian struggle from without.”* Ever since then, like Moliere’s “bourgeois gentilhomme” who proudly discovered that he had been speaking prose all his life, sectarians have swooped down and flown away with this little nugget, jubilant that it seemed to justify their preconceptions. But Lenin almost immediately recognised the harm that this formula might do when taken out of context, explaining that it only *“straightens out what has been twisted by the ‘Economists’... (It) is a controversial correction of ‘Economist’ distortions and it would be wrong to regard the pamphlet in any other light.”*



So what was the context in which Lenin was speaking this time? It was in the heat of one exchange at the Second Congress of the Communist International in July 1920. Far from writing off the Labour Party as a potential field of work, his objective was precisely the opposite: to exhort young recruits to the fledgling British Communist Party not to shun the Labour Party but on the contrary to seek immediate **affiliation** to it! He was acknowledging in characteristically robust language the reactionary bias of the Labour leaders as a tactical concession, a polemical riposte, to warn them against the dangers of ultraleftism. At the same time he wrote the pamphlet **Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder**, in which he urged them to **“support the Labour leaders like a rope supports a hanged man”**: give them enough rope to hang themselves.

Let us remember that this was the same Lenin who had previously – even **before** its adoption of a socialist programme – had recommended Labour’s admission to the Socialist International.

A “red plot”?

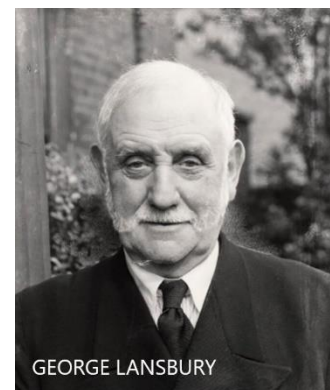
For all the cowardice and treachery of its leadership, up to 1994 the ruling class had no doubts about the potential threat posed by Labour, despite its reactionary leadership. Let’s take a glance at some highlights of its history...

Four days before a snap election in 1924, the **Daily Mail** splashed a red-scare headline across its front page: **“CIVIL WAR PLOT BY SOCIALISTS’ MASTERS. MOSCOW ORDERS TO OUR REDS. GREAT PLOT DISCLOSED”**, publishing a fake letter ostensibly written by Zinoviev on behalf of the Communist International. Labour’s short-lived minority government went on to lose the election by a landslide.

Soon afterwards came the 1926 General Strike, in which Councils of Action and even virtual workers’ defence forces sprang up around the country. Labour’s leader Ramsay MacDonald wrung his hands, horrified but helpless: **“I don’t like it. Honestly, I don’t like it. But honestly, what can be done?”**

At the head of a new minority Labour government in 1931, MacDonald met such fierce resistance to his imposition of savage spending cuts that he was forced to break from Labour and head a coalition of ex-Labour renegades with Tories and Liberals. MacDonald was summarily expelled from the Labour Party, and its future leader Attlee called his action **“the greatest betrayal in the political history of this country”**. The King flouted protocol to announce: **“If a socialist government came into power and carried out their extravagant promises to the electorate, this country would be finished.”**

In 1933, under the leadership of George Lansbury, who had a decade earlier campaigned under the slogan **“rather break the law than break the poor”**, Labour’s conference pledged a general strike in the event of war, and adopted a programme of wholesale nationalisation – a manifesto which MacDonald’s ally Snowden called **“Bolshevism run mad”**.



Radical reform



The two pre-war minority Labour governments had been barely tolerated, in emergency conditions and under relentless pressure, for just three years between them. When it came to the general election of 1945, Churchill ranted that Labour would impose a “Gestapo” state, Attlee countered that the Tories stood for **“freedom for the rich and slavery for the poor”**, and Bevan retorted that he considered them **“lower than vermin”**. Labour’s conference had voted overwhelmingly for wholesale nationalisation and workers’ control, and it now had a 2:1 majority in parliament. The economy was in a state of collapse. Three million armed soldiers were returning home intent on building a new world. Revolution was in the

air worldwide. Power could have fallen into the hands of the working class with hardly a shot fired.

In the event, the Attlee government dutifully restored British capitalism, slavishly complied with US foreign policy, and averted the threat of revolution. Nevertheless, the lingering loyalty of succeeding generations towards Labour is a legacy of the substantial reforms that it introduced: nationalisation of the Bank of England, coal, steel, railways, telecoms, gas and electricity, and above all the foundation of the National Health Service. No matter how cautiously these measures were enacted, however unwarranted the lavish compensation offered to the previous owners, and however unwieldy the monolithic corporations established in their place, it took successive governments decades to dismantle them.

It has been claimed that **“the Attlee government ruled with the consent of the British ruling class”**, and that **“the Tories fundamentally agreed with Labour’s essentially state corporatist policy”**. The fact is that, for all their alarm at the insurgent mood sweeping through society, what option did the ruling class have but to “consent”? It resisted nationalisation despite the lifeline offered by state investment into those ruined basic industries, tolerating it only in the prevailing conditions of economic devastation and its own political weakness. Once back in power, it lost no time in bringing back into private ownership the more profitable steel and road haulage sectors, before the Thatcher and New Labour regimes later handed back virtually every remaining scrap of the economy.

How do those repudiating Labour’s lip-service in those days to socialist tradition explain why in 1948 its National Executive Committee marked the centenary of the **Communist Manifesto** by publishing a new edition, together with an introduction by its general secretary Harold Laski, who called it **“one of the outstanding political documents of all time... a philosophy of history, a critical analysis of socialist doctrines and a passionate call to revolutionary action”**?

A “party with socialists in it”?

We have already quoted from a recent book on Labour history, one based not on the memoirs of authentic sources but a copy-and-paste job culled from bourgeois commentaries. The author was so taken with one witty throwaway remark by Tony Benn (“***the Labour Party has never been a socialist party, although there have always been socialists in it***”) that he borrowed it for its title. As we have seen, though, in those days that is not how its members saw it.

The same book casually dismisses “***the social democratic Clause Four***” as “***largely a symbolic commitment... [which] entailed nothing practical...***” Yet when in 1959 an abortive attempt was made to renounce it by the right-wing Labour leader Gaitskell, an early forerunner of Blair, he was thwarted by a furious revolt.

While to their shame the parliamentary left, led by Bevan, were willing to capitulate on the issue, dismissing Clause Four as a mere token bauble, the proposal aroused outrage and a storm of protest from the constituency parties and affiliated trade union branches. Gaitskell was forced into a hasty retreat and abandoned his attempt. Even he did not dare oppose the principle of further nationalisation. He limited himself to demagogic sneers against the idea of nationalising “***the whole of light industry, the whole of agriculture, all the shops, every little pub and garage***” – something that no one had been suggesting in any case. Clause Four remained intact, and Labour’s 1959 election manifesto declared: “***It will be necessary to extend the area of public ownership... Where an industry is shown... to be failing the nation we reserve the right to take all or any part of it into public ownership...***”

The traitors at the party’s head had sneered, and the cowards of the parliamentary left had flinched... but the rank and file really had “kept the red flag flying”. And to prove it, having repelled Gaitskell’s attempt to remove it, they ensured that from then on Clause Four was actually printed on every party membership card.

A “danger to Britain”?

Only when the Tories had become too tarnished by scandal, as in 1964, or too weak to curb labour unrest, as in 1974, did the ruling class warily consent to limited periods of Labour government.

Both the 1964-70 and 1974-79 governments began by granting reforms – in 1974 conceding in full the claim of the striking coal miners and repealing a swathe of anti-union laws – but under pressure they quickly switched to counter-reforms: abortive curbs on trade-union rights in 1969, and swingeing spending cuts at the dictates of the IMF in 1976. In both cases, Labour governments had capitulated.

Shaken by the uprising in France in May 1968, when ten million striking workers occupied their workplaces, one fringe element within the state machine, taking its cue from the Greek colonels’ successful coup the previous year, toyed with the idea of a military takeover. The prime movers in this plot were the newspaper magnate Cecil Harmsworth King (the Rupert Murdoch of his day and himself an MI5 agent) and Earl Mountbatten, who was both Prince

Philip's uncle and a second cousin of the Queen. *The Times*, edited by Jacob's father William Rees-Mogg, endorsed the project in an editorial under the heading "***The Danger to Britain***".

At this stage only a lunatic fringe seriously contemplated such a move. The threat became more serious a decade later. After two miners' strikes which had resulted in the three-day week – a virtual lock-out – and at one point the threat of a one-day general strike, the Tories had called a snap general election on the slogan: "***who runs Britain: the government or the trade unions?***". And lost!



The incoming Labour government was rocked by economic crisis, runaway inflation, industrial unrest and terrorist bombings, and swung from concessions to the trade unions, to surrender to the IMF, to collapse in the so-called "winter of discontent" – a wave of strikes by workers in car plants, the railways, road haulage, oil delivery, firemen, even gravediggers, refuse collectors and hospital porters.

Once again, shadowy elements in the military and security services were plotting. In 1975, one faction of MI5 was buzzing with paranoid suspicions of Wilson's supposed links with the Soviet KGB. Contingency plans were under active consideration to overthrow the government and establish a dictatorship, with Mountbatten once

again serving as a royal figurehead. This cabal had drawn inspiration from yet another recent model, this time the 1973 Pinochet coup in Chile – a precedent welcomed in another notorious *Times* editorial. A former Deputy Director of MI6 and some retired generals and serving officers recruited a secret army. The shipping company Cunard was approached with a request to requisition the liner QE2 for use as a detention centre for the Cabinet. In 1974 the Army staged surprise military manoeuvres at Heathrow Airport, without permission or even prior notice to the government.

In the event, such dramatic measures were not needed; by a combination of threats, forced resignations, and parliamentary defections the Labour government collapsed.

The widening gulf

Under the very different Tory government which was to hold office for the following eighteen years, huge swathes of industry were demolished, the public sector privatised, and trade union power crippled. In this situation, the tensions within the Labour Party erupted in recriminations, breakaways, witch-hunts, lawsuits and wholesale expulsions. In a leadership election the leftish MP Michael Foot narrowly defeated the right wing's favourite Denis Healey; the so-called "Gang of Four" right-wingers defected to found the short-lived Social-Democratic Party; and a revolt from below forced through constitutional reforms, including a "trigger ballot" procedure enabling the deselection of sitting MPs and a widening of the

franchise for future leadership elections. When Tony Benn stood for the left against Healey for deputy leader, he was bombarded with poisonous media abuse matched only by the later campaign against Corbyn. Benn toured the country tirelessly addressing enthusiastic crowds, and eventually lost the vote in the electoral college (a process still heavily tilted to the right) by less than one per cent. (At the time the normally robust Benn was afflicted with a mysterious health problem; he seriously suspected that his beloved flask of tea had been



poisoned with arsenic.)

Labour activists throughout the country opened their homes to miners' pickets throughout their year-long strike. Liverpool's Labour council, led by *Militant* supporters, waged a five-year struggle against the Thatcher government on a mandate of regeneration and a rents and rates freeze. Labour's vote there soared within two years from 54,000 to over 90,000, and in the 1983 general election the firefighter Terry Fields won Broadgreen – the only Tory seat captured by Labour. When the government threatened to send in the troops, tens of thousands of local workers staged a one-day general strike; when the courts threw out of office Liverpool's democratically elected councillors, they were promptly replaced at by-elections by a "second eleven" of reserve substitutes; and when vindictive surcharges of thousands of pounds were levied on them, these were amply covered by a city-wide whip-round.

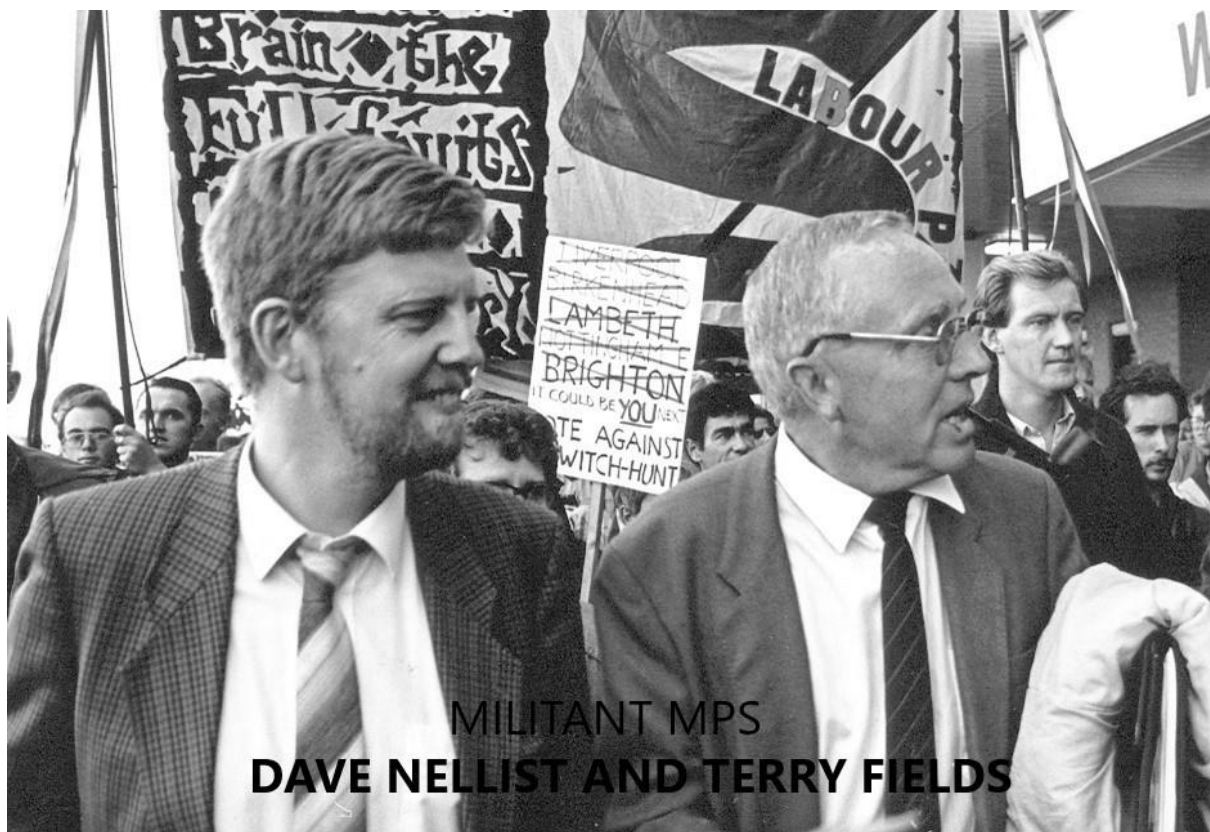
Liverpool's stand was followed by the struggle against the hated poll tax – a mass movement of civil disobedience. At the 1989 party conference, one delegate tore up her poll tax bill at the rostrum, declaring: "***Without the Tolpuddle trade unionists and the suffragettes breaking the law, we wouldn't be here at this conference... I'm ripping up my poll tax book not as an individual but as part of a mass campaign of non-payment***". Fourteen million people refused payment and a quarter of a million people mobilised for one of the biggest demonstrations in British history. The campaign achieved total victory, with the scrapping of

the tax and the overthrow of Mrs Thatcher personally – the world's most enduring symbol of reaction.

Yes, the Labour leadership had betrayed the miners; the people of Liverpool; and the millions of poll tax payers. Why then should the Labour Party not have been written off as a mere alternative instrument of the ruling class? Because the leadership and the rank and file were very different. It was Labour activists who had fought the Tories: the Labour-affiliated National Union of Miners which had staged the biggest strike in decades; Liverpool's elected Labour councillors who had defied the government; poll tax campaigners who were overwhelmingly Labour supporters who had overthrown the prime minister... The cracks in Labour's foundations were splitting wide open.

A militant opposition

A spectacular role was played by *Militant* during this period, achieving miracles in terms of its political influence, apparatus, structure, full timers, headquarters, international interventions, youth agitation, trade union penetration, etc. The very name became a household word, figuring in popular parlance, in crosswords and game shows.



Under its influence thousands of young activists were recruited to the Labour Party Young Socialists. Three *Militant* supporters were elected as Labour MPs on the slogan "**a workers' MP on a workers' wage**". The establishment was shaken when the future MP Pat Wall warned that retreats by the Labour leadership risked paving the way for civil war; when the anti-poll tax campaigner Tommy Sheridan won an election in Glasgow from a prison cell; when Terry Fields MP was jailed for non-payment of the poll tax. A police operation involving 280 officers

was staged against Derek Hatton, deputy leader of Liverpool Council, following which he was exonerated. The High Court intervened to disqualify elected councillors and overturn the election of trade union leaders.

Michael Foot called *Militant* “**a pestilential nuisance**”, and his successor, the renegade former left Kinnock publicly denounced its supporters as “**maggots**”, launching a classic witch-hunt to drive its supporters out of the party, with hundreds expelled in the first mass purge of the Labour Party in decades. Thatcher denounced *Militant* in Parliament. Tragically, *Militant*’s exemplary tradition was later to be fragmented in multiple splits.

The party of the “filthy rich”?

It took four successive election defeats, the crushing of the miners and print workers, the dismantling of industrial working-class communities, the privatisation of the nationalised industries, the worldwide collapse of the dying Stalinist states, and a carnival of capitalist triumphalism expressed in Francis Fukuyama’s somewhat premature celebration of “**the end of history**”, before Labour succumbed to an openly hostile takeover under the label New Labour.

Formally speaking, Labour Party had traditionally had a nominally socialist constitution, an elected national executive, a policy-making conference, a trade union block vote, a working-class base, party officials and a parliamentary party largely composed of former workers and trade-union officials. It had delivered significant reforms including nationalisations, the national health service and comprehensive education. The leadership had had to balance and wobble in deference to the membership’s aspirations.

The capitalist class had grudgingly tolerated previous Labour governments for brief periods of confrontation with a highly organised working class. “New Labour” was different; it was the product of a period of defeats. This metamorphosis did not happen overnight; it was the culmination of a historical process. But it represented the transformation of quantity into quality: a decisive change.

Now it explicitly renounced socialism, weakened the trade-union link, undermined party democracy, bad-mouthed its heritage, and carried forward Thatcherite policies. The New Labour MPs were a new breed from the old-style reformists – tainted individuals perhaps, but with labour roots. The openly pro-capitalist grouping which had now taken over even adopted a new name to differentiate itself. On the steps of 10 Downing Street Blair spelt it out: “***I know well what this country has voted for today. It is a mandate for New Labour, and I say to the people of this country: we ran for office as New Labour, we will govern as New Labour. This is not a mandate for dogma or for doctrine, or for a return to the past.***” He even dismissed the historic turning-point when organised labour first tore itself loose from liberalism to create the Labour Party “**a tragic split**”. New Labour politicians showed brazen disregard for even the mildest of old Fabian aspirations. Mandelson boasted that he was “**intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich**”.

Blair successfully imposed changes on the Labour Party that were so fundamental as to represent a qualitative transformation. The fact that Clause Four was dropped with hardly a

murmur of protest was a significant fact: the "**curious behaviour of the dog in the night**", as Sherlock Holmes might have put it. The absence of any significant protest against this act of political vivisection itself marked a significant change in the party's character.

The takeover

Can Clause Four really be shrugged off as "after all, just a scrap of paper"? Yes, its deletion was just a "symbolic change"; but symbols are sometimes crucial. Tony Blair certainly didn't think it was just a scrap of paper; his very first act on becoming leader was to convene a special conference to remove it. Why? Precisely as a ritual guarantee to the ruling class that New Labour could henceforth be trusted; that it no longer aspired to change society. He spelt out in so many words that this was a new party: "New Labour". This was nothing less than an explicit abandonment of Labour's socialist roots.



New Labour was a creature of the billionaires; the cuckoo in Labour's nest. The capitalists certainly understood the difference – and proved it in the most eloquent language they knew: with their money. Big Business poured lavish donations into its coffers. For the first time in its history, the Tory party found itself starved of funds. The media mogul Rupert Murdoch, who had rightly boasted after the 1992 general election that "**it woz the Sun wot won it**" for the Tories, enthusiastically promoted New Labour in 1997.

For New Labour's capitalist sponsors, this was a calculated strategy. With Thatcher defenestrated and Major discredited, they had needed Blairism to carry forward neoliberal policies under a new brand name. For more than a decade "New Labour" was actually the favoured party of the ruling class, while the discredited Tory Party found itself for the first time in its history starved of funding and of media support.

Even the old right wing were uneasy. As Lord Kinnock put it, in a comment that reveals the distinction between Old and New Labour more clearly perhaps than he might have wished: "**He's sold out even before he's got there**".

Those who deny the qualitative difference between the Labour Party pre- and post- 1994 have difficult questions to answer. Can they imagine Blair complaining, as Wilson did in 1964, of a "**strike of capital**"? Or Gordon Brown denouncing the "**gnomes of Zurich**", as his namesake George Brown had? Can they visualise Starmer promising, as even Gaitskell did, to take over "**the commanding heights of the economy**"? Can they envisage a future Starmer government facing the threat of a military coup – as Wilson did, twice?

“The many not the few”



How did the left briefly capture the leadership, and why did it lose it so soon?

The New Labour era came to an abrupt end with the financial crisis in 2008. Blair had left just in time, leaving Brown to cope with the damage. New Labour lost the patronage of its former business sponsors and an era of harsh austerity began. Labour MPs now found themselves once again dependent on membership dues, trade-union affiliation fees, and their constituency canvassing teams.

So how was it that in 2015 the left won the leadership? Only due to a monumental blunder on the part of the old guard. Traditionally, the leader had been elected solely by MPs. After Labour's defeat in 1979, the membership demanded some measure of democratic accountability, and an unwieldy electoral college system was adopted, composed of MPs, trade unions and CLPs. When this resulted in the election of the ineffectual Ed Miliband rather than his smoother Blairite brother in 2010, the right wing blamed it on the trade union leaders' preference for a more pliable alternative.

So they moved the goal posts yet again, imagining that by flinging open the franchise to any self-declared “supporters” susceptible to media propaganda and willing to fork out £3 for a vote, they could secure victory for their chosen nominee. Then they further compounded their mistake by grudgingly lending Jeremy Corbyn enough nominations to stand, calculating that he could only scabble together a humiliating handful of votes.

It was a colossal misjudgment. Hundreds of thousands of people registered as supporters, exercised their voting rights as affiliated trade unionists, or joined the party outright. Much

to his own surprise, Corbyn won a crushing majority with 60% of the vote and a popular mandate from 250,000 people.

In panic, the MPs staged a no-confidence vote and forced a new election, raising the price of a vote to £25, and imposing vindictive suspensions and arbitrary restrictions on the franchise... only for Corbyn to win again, with an increased majority. The reinvigorated party grew to half a million members: the biggest party in Europe, alongside new left parties springing up throughout the continent: SYRIZA in Greece, PODEMOS in Spain, France Insoumise in France, Die Linke in Germany, etc..

The big lie

The ruling class was shocked. Jeremy Corbyn had been elected Labour leader twice, overwhelmingly, on the votes of hundreds of thousands, and come within a whisker of becoming prime minister. This was the signal for an unremitting bombardment of sneers, smears and poison from the establishment. At one point during a Prime Minister's Question Time, Theresa May leaned over the despatch box and hissed at Corbyn: ***"You will never be Prime Minister. We won't***



let you." Just as in the 1970s, contingency preparations were being made behind the scenes. This time it was not a mere strike of capital as in the 1960s, or even the fantasy war games of the 1970s. The odious Ian Duncan Smith announced that ***"Corbyn's sole purpose in life is to do damage to the country"***; a general openly threatened mutiny against a Corbyn government; and paratroopers were videoed using a photo of Corbyn for target practice. One Labour MP had already been murdered by a Nazi assassin, and another escaped the same fate only in the nick of time. This was no game.

Corbyn was branded as somehow simultaneously both a pacifist and a terrorist, an allotment crank and at the same time a Stalinist spy... and, most outrageously of all, a racist. Margaret Hodge MP cursed Corbyn personally as ***"an anti-semitic racist"***. The monstrous smear that this foremost anti-racist of his time was, of all things, anti-semitic was a "big lie" worthy of Goebbels.

It is of course the Tory party that has always been riddled with anti-semitism, from the 1905 Aliens Act that blocked Jewish immigration from the East European pogroms, to the Right Club, founded by a Tory MP in the 1930s to ***"expose the activities of organised Jewry"***, to the Tory icon Churchill himself, who had blamed the Russian revolution on ***"these international and for the most part atheistic Jews"*** and their ***"worldwide conspiracy for the overthrow of civilization"***, adding: ***"The majority of the leading figures are Jews... The principal inspiration***

and driving power comes from Jewish leaders ... The same evil prominence was obtained by Jews in Hungary and Germany, especially Bavaria...

It was the Daily Express which carried the infamous headline in the 1930s ***"JEWS DECLARE WAR ON GERMANY"***, and the Daily Mail which screamed ***"HURRAH FOR THE BLACKSHIRTS!"***. And more recently, it was the Sun which published an unflattering picture of Ed Miliband eating a bacon sandwich, and the Mail which called his father ***"the man who hated Britain... a refugee... a Marxist..."***. No one could miss the anti-semitic innuendoes.

But it was especially breathtaking barefaced audacity for the right wing of the Labour Party to accuse the left of anti-semitism. One MP even said that to be anti-capitalist was by definition to be anti-semitic – thus at a single stroke defending capitalism, defaming socialists, and reinforcing vile anti-semitic stereotypes.

According to the book ***Whitehall And The Jews, 1933-1948***, British immigration policy throughout that entire period ***"was designed to keep out large numbers of European Jews – perhaps ten times as many as it let in"***. It was Peter Mandelson's own grandfather Herbert Morrison, the Labour Home Secretary in the wartime coalition government, who blocked entry to Britain by all but a token handful of Jews desperately seeking refuge from the holocaust. And it was another Labour right-winger Ernest Bevin, Foreign Secretary in the postwar Labour government, who ordered the sinking of ships carrying concentration camp survivors fleeing the misery of displaced persons' internment camps, drowning them in the Mediterranean. They were yearning for sanctuary in Palestine, not to establish a Zionist state but simply to find somewhere to live.

But the main forces behind the destruction of the "Corbyn project" were not the "Zionist lobby"; these were just useful attack dogs, enabling the establishment to conceal their hostility under a seemingly innocuous disguise. Obviously, the Israeli state was determined to stop a major power being led by a champion of Palestinian rights; but their vilification only gained currency when the British establishment seized on this ingenious device to soil Corbyn's reputation from an ostensibly liberal angle, and avoid the election of a socialist prime minister.

Ruling classes had always used the poison of anti-semitism against Jews; now, in a peculiar inversion, they were using the same foul tactics in reverse to discredit the left, in the process breathing new life into anti-semitism. The perpetrators of this smear were primarily agents not of the Israeli but of the British state; their main concern was the defence of capitalism.

Sabotage

Winning the leadership was one thing; winning the party something else. The MPs plotted to undermine it, the bureaucracy tightened its grip, the party machine sabotaged it. A leaked report on the wilful sabotage of officials at the party headquarters during the 2017 election campaign exposed which side they were working for. Labour's head of political strategy called Corbyn ***"a lying little toe rag"***. Some joked about ***"hanging and burning"*** him. Another official said of a young left Labour activist that he hoped he would ***"die in a fire"***; another commented ***"I wouldn't piss on him to put it out"***; and a third added ***"wish there was a petrol can"***. They were counting on a Labour defeat which would show ***"how disgusting they truly are"***. When

the news came through that the Tories had lost their majority, they were “*silent and grey-faced*”, calling the result “*awful... the opposite to what I had been working towards for the last couple of years*”. With just 2,227 extra votes in key marginal constituencies, Labour would have won the election. These and other equally shocking revelations confirming the malice of the party’s paid officialdom have been subsequently exposed in the Forde report (<https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/The-Forde-Report.pdf>) and Al-Jazeera’s programme “*The Labour Files*” (<https://www.ajunit.com/investigation/the-labour-files/>).

The media still to this day peddle the lie that Corbyn’s policies were unpopular. On the contrary! In 2005 Labour had won the election on a vote of just nine and a half million; in 2010, this had shrunk to eight and a half million, and in 2015 it was still only nine and a quarter million. In 2017, under Corbyn’s leadership, its vote shot up to ***almost thirteen million!*** Even in 2019, when Labour suffered a serious setback due to its confused Brexit policy, Labour under Corbyn still won substantially more votes than under Miliband in 2015, or Brown in 2010 – or even Blair in 2005, when Labour won! And opinion polls show that Corbyn’s policies of renationalisation of the energy companies, railways, water, postage and telecoms are still overwhelmingly popular.



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However, without socialist MPs and a socialist apparatus, electing a socialist leader proved a pyrrhic victory. Corbyn found himself a helpless hostage. In the face of all the treachery, smears and backstabbing, the response of Corbyn and his allies was one of constant concessions and appeasement. In particular, unions like UNITE, and Corbyn and McDonnell themselves, fatally refused to endorse automatic mandatory reselection of MPs. Yet without the elementary democratic right of party members to be represented at elections by a candidate of their choice, parliamentary democracy is just a charade. (Those MPs rejected by their CLPs who claim that they are accountable to their constituents and not to the party activists are welcome to stand as independents against an official party candidate, and see

how far they get.) Let's suppose a Corbyn government had been elected: how long could it have lasted? At the first signal the parliamentary party would have staged a mass defection and deprived it of its majority.

The failure to mobilise the membership led to disaster. If it had been just a question of personal modesty and self-sacrifice, that would already have been a mistake; in the event it amounted to a betrayal of loyal allies such as Ken Livingstone, Jackie Walker, Marc Wadsworth, Chris Williamson and literally thousands of abandoned supporters.

A "broad church"?

Why has the traditional left been so reluctant to fight back? The explanation for its otherwise inexplicable forbearance is its traditional pursuit of an elusive "party unity" at all costs – and invariably on the right wing's terms. In Corbyn's case, it was certainly not a question of personal cowardice. Unfortunately he clung to the misconception of another sincere and honourable socialist, the late Tony Benn, who described the Labour Party as ***"a very broad party, reflecting a wide variety of opinions from left to right. This diversity of view is a great source of strength and we must vigorously resist any attempt that is made to drive the left or the right out of the party... We are not interested in a narrow, sectarian, purist party all taking one view... We must be a broad church."***

The truth is that the left's naïve trust was never reciprocated by the right, which has always treated it with contempt. Again and again throughout the party's history the right-wing leadership has carried out ruthless purges of the left. And since New Labour's explicit repudiation of even the trappings of class loyalty or socialist aspirations, the gulf between the two wings of the party has become unbridgeable.

Here by contrast is the brutally honest assessment of former MP Tom Harris, who as a prominent figure in the Scottish Labour Party bears some responsibility for the annihilation of Labour's once rock-solid base there: ***"The conclusion to be drawn is not that the Labour Party is, as it has always claimed, a broad church of diverse opinions and priorities, but that it is an uneasy alliance of two separate parties, each with separate, diverging and even opposing aims and principles. And each side sees the defeat of the other as a necessary prerequisite to its own success."***

Can anyone today honestly doubt that the crushing of the left is the top priority of the right? It makes no sense today to say that Labour is a ***"broad church"*** and that ***"every bird has two wings"***. No church is broad enough to include the devil, and if a bird's two wings are flying in opposite directions, that means a split!

"Our time will come"?

There is still widespread confusion. Even surviving fragments of the previously exemplary Marxist tradition have found themselves blown off course. One wing still recites outworn formulae in a political bubble or a time capsule, acting as if nothing had changed since 1964, and repeating verbatim obsolete predictions that with the growing crisis Labour will eject its reformist leadership and adopt a socialist programme. ***"Marxists will continue to argue patiently for socialist ideas and a socialist programme as Labour Party members... Labour***

will be transformed and retransformed, possibly under a Marxist leadership, within five to ten years.”

Another, inebriated with the achievements of the 1980s, had followed the golden rule: once your membership drops below a certain point, declare yourself a party! The tragic consequence was that when a real mass left wing did arise in 2015, its dwindling supporters found themselves missing in action, having dismissed the Labour Party as a bourgeois party. It tied itself in multiple knots over the Corbyn phenomenon, adopting several incompatible positions in succession: Corbyn could never win; he should leave the Labour Party; he **had** won, but only due to its own influence; Labour was a bourgeois party, but it should nevertheless allow it to affiliate; etc.

Others still cling to the fading hope that “our time will come”. The truth is, our time **did** come... and went. It’s gone! The right wing will never make the same mistake again. As in every consecutive leadership election, they will change the rules to suit themselves. But even if by some oversight they were ever again to lose the leadership, their control of the parliamentary clique and the party bureaucracy would remain intact.

The witch hunt



Having captured the leadership in 2020 with the lie that he would continue Corbyn’s radical tradition, Starmer has systematically crushed the democratic rights of the membership. Literally thousands of members have been excluded without a hearing, and many more have simply dropped out in disgust. This is not just another swing of the pendulum; it’s a systematic purge.

True, there have been witch-hunts in every generation; but they were targeted specifically at dissident minorities or individual mavericks; and they complied with at least the trappings of due process: statutory hearings, formal representation, the right of appeal, etc. Each one of the Liverpool councillors, for instance, had had the right before their expulsion to put their case in person before the NEC; and when the **Militant** editorial board were expelled, Ted Grant himself was given the right to appeal directly in a five-minute speech to the entire Labour Party conference.

And now? Thousands of party activists have been expelled by a mere click on a keyboard: an email notifying them that their membership is “terminated”. It’s a procedure that makes **Alice In Wonderland** justice look almost civilised; there you got the sentence first, but at least you got some kind of trial afterwards. Even Stalin felt it necessary to stage at least a show trial. The nearest parallel to justice in Starmer’s Labour Party is Kafka’s novel **The Trial**.

Starmer has unconstitutionally “terminated” the membership of thousands of party members; unilaterally vetoed Corbyn’s right to stand as his CLP’s chosen parliamentary candidate; and defined Labour as “**no longer a party of protest**” but “**a party of patriotism**”.

He has goaded any remaining left members to walk out *en masse*: “**The Labour Party I lead is unrecognisable from 2019 and it will never go back... If you don’t like the changes we have made... the door is open and you can leave... Nobody is forcing you to stay.**”

One of Starmer’s henchmen has inadvertently blurted out his real motives: “**If... you don’t agree with support for business... then this party isn’t for you.**” Anxious to reassure potential business donors, Starmer insists: “**I have turned the Labour Party inside out... We are a centre party**”. He is too modest: under his leadership he has turned it into an alternative party of the right.

And how has the official left taken up the challenge? Yet again, with a feeble plea for mercy. Corbyn’s main ally John McDonnell commented: “**I think it’s a mistake for Keir to try and bar Jeremy Corbyn from standing... We were created as a coalition of a whole range of different political views, a broad church...**” And, like the Russian village idiot who sang wedding songs at funerals, **Momentum** – the group formed ostensibly to support the left but in practice utterly compliant with the right – says: “**It’s vital we stay in Labour... the left is still claiming victories**”!

Follow the money!

In 2015 under Miliband, Labour had been easily outspent by the Tories. But individual subscriptions and donations poured in under Corbyn’s leadership, and party membership actually quadrupled in a single year, from 150,000 in 2015 to 600,000 in 2016. By 2017 Labour had raised a record £55.8 million – a full ten million more than the Tories. Large private donations had dried up, but the party’s swelling membership and union support put it in a robust financial position without funding from wealthy backers.

Now membership has slumped by at least 200,000; party finances dropped from a record £13 million surplus to near-bankruptcy; and voting figures in even those bye-elections won by Labour plunged to a half or a third of those scored in the same constituencies during the Corbyn era.

While they still contribute a little over half of Labour’s income, union donations too are drying up, almost bankrupting the party. UNITE has slashed its contributions from £5.31 million in 2015 to just £1 million; the CWU and others, likewise; the Bakers’ Union has disaffiliated completely; the RMT broke away years ago. Under a Starmer government, more unions are likely to follow.

Starmer's apparatchiks are still pushing their war against the left to the brink of bankruptcy. They have paid out £600,000 to right-wingers following a court case which Labour had a good chance of winning on appeal; and, rather than take action against those proven enemy agents within party headquarters who had sabotaged Labour's 2017 election campaign (see above), they have risked losing £3-4 million in costs by bringing a lawsuit against those it accused on the flimsiest evidence of leaking this information.

And yet, with Labour once again hawking its services to capitalism, business donations have started trickling back, though at first only cautiously. Michael Levy, Labour's leading fundraiser under Tony Blair, announced: ***"It's very early days, but whereas I would say major donors would have had no interest over this last period, I think there is a real possibility now that they will return to the fold."*** Another former business contributor said: ***"Keir's doing all the right things, but it'll still take time."***

The trickle has now become a steady stream, given the Tories' manifest incompetence and Starmer's demonstrative purge of the left. One donor said: ***"I would not give Labour money under Corbyn, but I would now be happy to give money to Labour,"***; another: ***"I voted for Keir and am delighted he has won... I trust him completely on the issues that matter, and I will, and have, encouraged others to come back to Labour."***

Direct capitalist investment is flowing back into Labour coffers. Just as in the New Labour years, Labour is now receiving more money in business donations than the Tories. It is becoming once again an alternative party of big business. Even the right-wing ***Telegraph*** has published an article calling for the Tory party ***"to be permanently destroyed through the ballot box"***.

The death of reformism

A government led by Starmer will be no more stable than those of the string of openly Tory prime ministers of the last decade. The Blair government was able in more affluent times to introduce some reforms: a minimum wage, devolution, a peace deal in Northern Ireland, and a programme of structural investment, albeit under the fraudulent and astronomically costly Private Finance Initiative. But what can a Starmer government offer, in today's conditions? Like the Liberals in the early 1900s, and MacDonald in the 1930s, it may survive a few years in office... but like them, with a rapidly diminishing mass base it can only end up suspended in mid-air. It could prepare the way later for a far-right Tory or Faragist government.

Similar parties worldwide are collapsing. The French Socialist Party – which was in power only five years ago – won just 1.7% in the recent presidential and parliamentary elections. The Social-Democrats' vote in Sweden – formerly the reformist Mecca – shrank from 45% in 1994 to 28.5% in 2018, their lowest vote for a century. Votes in elections for the Danish Social-Democrats and the Norwegian Labour Party too have halved compared to their heyday half a century ago. PASOK in Greece has been almost wiped out. Support for the German SPD (while in power again, in coalition) has plunged from around 50% to 25%. The "eurocommunist" Italian PCI, once the world's biggest communist party outside the Stalinist bloc, is completely liquidated.

By designating Labour a centre party, Starmer has exposed the gaping vacuum to the left of British politics; and history, like nature, abhors a vacuum. It is up to the trade unions, as Britain's biggest mass organisations, to fill the gap and create a party of the left.

Two parties

So what is the Labour Party today? It is **two parties**; a workers' party at its affiliated trade-union base, with a second-division reserve bourgeois parliamentary party forcibly grafted on top; not a "bourgeois workers' party" but **both** a workers' **and** a bourgeois party, in incompatible symbiosis and finally breaking apart. It's entirely honourable to accept that where a party straddles two incompatible outlooks, then they should each go their separate ways.



A full-scale one-sided split is being imposed from above. Trade union leaders are being expelled. Starmer has banned shadow ministers from joining picket lines. Nothing new, you say? In 1976, serving Labour cabinet ministers stood on the Grunwicks picket line – including even Shirley Williams, who soon afterwards defected to help form the Social-Democratic Party.

If the Socialist Campaign group had risen to the challenge, it could already have mobilised a left party of hundreds of thousands. As it is, the split is taking place in a slow, messy, protracted, one-sided and uncoordinated way; yet on the ground it's happening right now. **[For one example, see the article on Page 34 Newham Socialist Labour.]**



The contradictions gnawing away at Labour's foundations between its parliamentary leadership and its trade-union base can no longer be reconciled. Just as in 1900 and again in 1931, it is necessary to prise them apart. In 1900 the trade unions severed their link with the Liberal Party and established the Labour Representation Committee.

The only difference today is that David Lloyd George was incomparably more radical than Sir Keir Starmer. If there was ever a need for a genuine party of labour, it is now.

We are constantly told that the chances of any new party are doomed by the two-party electoral system. But proportional representation is a false panacea. Every electoral system has its flaws, but there is nothing intrinsically undemocratic about the idea that every area should be represented equally in parliament – and who by, if not the candidate who wins the most votes there? Proportional representation would permanently deprive any party

(especially a left party) of an overall majority and give unrepresentative minor fringe parties a disproportionate veto.

So how do we overcome the duopoly of the twin-headed Tory/Starmerite dictatorship? In just the same way that Labour displaced the Tory/Liberal regime over a century ago! Socialist societies played their part, but the key factor was the assertion by the trade unions of their right to independent representation in parliament. The trade unions move only clumsily and ponderously; the brilliant pre-war cartoonist David Low always portrayed the TUC as a lumbering carthorse. But seismic tremors are shaking the ground.

One key factor in the replacement of the Liberal Party by Labour was the widening of the franchise in 1918. It found its electoral base among the millions of newly enfranchised workers previously deprived of a vote. But today too millions are **politically** disenfranchised. How else can we explain the return of those voters who flocked back to the Labour banner under Corbyn's leadership in 2017? These weren't former Tory converts; they came from among those five million former Labour voters who had deserted in the three previous elections and abstained because they saw no difference between the Blairites and the Tories. (Their counterparts in Scotland had found an alternative home in the SNP.) The colossal surge in Labour's vote in 2017 not only exposes the lie that Corbyn's policies were "unpopular"; it also refutes the idea that Labour can only win by moderating its policies to appeal to "floating voters". Millions of people consciously abstain; only once they find a party worth voting for do they rally to the cause.

For a mass workers' party



"Public sector strike march leaves Chapelfield Gardens to march through Norwich City Centre, by Roger Blackwell licensed CC by 2.0

We have confirmation from no less an authority than Penny Mordaunt – who only three months ago came close to becoming prime minister – that **"the very continuation and success of capitalism... hangs in the balance"**.

We don't have the luxury of hesitation. The government is in direct confrontation with a newly radicalised labour movement. Every bit as repressive as the new far-right governments in Sweden or Italy, it is provoking struggles hardly seen for a century. And, robbed of a future under capitalism, young people are especially impatient for a radical lead. In successive opinion polls, 70% of under-40s now support "socialism".

Why have alternative left parties failed so far? Because a mass socialist party can't be conjured up by a snap of the fingers. No individual, no matter how charismatic, can create one out of thin air. New bourgeois parties can easily spring up like that – all they need is a few billionaires and a couple of media conglomerates; that's how Farage did it. But the stage is littered with the political corpses of socialist hara-kiri martyrs: James Maxton, the charismatic ILP leader who in 1932 led its exodus from the Labour Party into oblivion; Arthur Scargill, leader of Britain's greatest strike since 1926; George Galloway, who had won a stunning by-election victory; *Militant*, which had led the Liverpool council revolt and the victorious poll tax campaign; the Socialist Workers' Party and so many other now impotent fringe groups. Today too, a rash of little improvised alternative left parties is springing up. But what is needed is not just yet another pop-up party under a self-appointed leader hawking a ready-made programme and shopping around for a rank and file. It will take a political earthquake to redraw the political landscape.

The Labour movement will create its own party; it will formulate its own programme; it will appoint its own leaders. Within that party socialists will be patiently explaining the need for a decisive break with capitalism and a clear socialist programme.

Two antagonistic classes can't share one party forever. The Labour Party currently straddles two diametrically opposite interests. The tensions compressed within it can no longer be reconciled. It's time for a clean break.

Roger Silverman March 2023

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LET'S BRING TOGETHER THE FORCES FOR A NEW MASS WORKING CLASS PARTY



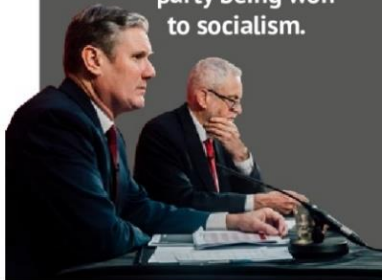
Add your name to our appeal and help us set up a political alternative to Labour

The Sunak government has declared war on the working class. But Labour won't defend us. We need a new party to fight for a working class government and a complete change in Britain.

Labour, which was set up to defend working class people, and is funded by our trade unions, is now back under the leadership of the establishment.

Starmer refuses to back strikes. He bans his MPs from visiting picket lines. He backs NATO, the war in Ukraine and nuclear weapons. He opposes renationalising rail, mail and energy.

After the defeat of Jeremy Corbyn, Labour's right wing have moved to exclude socialists and have shut off any possibility of the party being won to socialism.



Credit: www.flickr.com/photos/JeremyCorbyn

It is time for a new party

Just as the trade unions severed their link to the Liberal Party in 1900 and established the Labour Representation Committee to acquire a direct political voice, so today they need to cut their links to Starmer's party to create a genuine party of labour.

There is an alternative

There are hundreds of thousands of working-class people already organising to fight the government.

- 700,000 signed up to enough is enough.
- More than 100,000 signed up to don't pay.
- Hundreds of thousands are joining a wave of strikes which is still growing every day
- 200,000 left Labour in disgust and are desperate for an alternative

Every one of those people deserves a party that is 100 percent run by, controlled by, and in the service of the working class.

Sign our appeal now

We do not want to declare the party ourselves, but to create it together with working-class people and groups all over Britain.

With the Tories slumping in the polls, but with no real political alternative, the time is right to start preparing a new party, one that fights the Tories and their system, not just at the ballot box, but in the workplaces and on the streets.



Sign up at the website to help convene a nationwide meeting to discuss what this new party might look like: <https://appealforanewworkingclassparty.uk>



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