

## NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE LRC'S WORK IN THE LABOUR PARTY

**Introduction:** It is important for us in the Labour Representation Committee to see 2010 as a major turning point in the struggle between right and left within the Labour Party. The possibility of a big revival in the fortunes of the Labour Left has at last arrived and we should be in the forefront of this movement. This is an important opportunity that the LRC should welcome and respond to with intelligence and enthusiasm.

The following are some ideas that I hope will help in the discussion of a new strategy for building the left inside Labour and establishing the LRC's role within that.

**Background:** The Labour Left has suffered a long decline lasting nearly 30 years. It began with the narrow failure of Tony Benn to win the Deputy Leadership of the Party in 1981 and reached its peak with the bankrupt response of the Labour government to the recent world economic crisis.

In response to the adoption by Labour of the neo-liberal agenda and the removal of party members' rights, large numbers of socialists quite understandably abandoned the Party. And many socialists and socialist left groups wrote off the Labour Party as a progressive force. They felt that it had gone so far to the right that it was beyond redemption, many declaring it to be a capitalist party like the Liberal Democrats or the Democratic Party in the United States.

Not all socialists took this view. A significant number of us remained in the Party to continue the fight for radical policies and democratic control. In doing so we believed that the characterisation of Labour as a bourgeois party was based on a short-term and superficial analysis of the Party and the world it operated in. It didn't take account of the wider developments in society in which the move towards the right in the British Labour Party was part of a global trend not only in social democracy but in political and intellectual debate.

The collapse of the Soviet Bloc and the distorted version of socialism that it offered seemed to confirm that there was no alternative to capitalism. At the same time, the rise of capitalist globalisation deeply undermined the old nation state based social democratic agenda of partial public ownership and welfare benefits. Apparently we had now entered the era of the open world market in which the key was to make a country attractive to foreign investors and competitive against the rising economies of the East. We were told that this meant that we could no longer afford inefficient publicly-owned industries or well-protected labour forces.

We were sold the idea of the 'magic of the market'. That capitalism freed of bureaucratic restraints would put the old days of boom and bust behind us. That the free movement of capital coupled with a global level playing field would indefinitely expand world trade and lift all boats.

It was this material and ideological background that explains why the Labour leadership completely abandoned the programmes of old. Not the malicious intentions of this or that leader. Meanwhile, there was no raging ferment of militant thinking outside the Labour Party. The same process that caused Labour's degeneration was at work in society as a whole. Confusion, demoralisation and resignation became the predominant moods among working people as they could see no alternative to capitalism and the logic of its measures. That is why there has been so little support for a party to the left of Labour.

**A New Situation:** All these illusions of a new capitalist era of plenty came down with a thundering crash with the Great Recession in 2008. The continuing consequences of this and the election of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government represent a decisive turning point in British politics.

The changing mood was quickly reflected in the recruitment of 45,000 members to the Labour Party during and since the General Election in May.

It was also in evidence at this autumn's Labour Party Conference. While Ed Miliband as the new Leader does not represent a significant change in ideology in the Labour leadership, his election was certainly achieved directly against the Party and Blairite machine. As such, this was the first time in nearly 30 years that the march to the right of the party had been brought to an abrupt halt. The media were right when they immediately announced after his election that New Labour was dead and we have entered a new era in the Labour Party.

In the teeth of the new ConDem's vicious onslaught on jobs, benefit payments and public services, it is inevitable that workers will turn back to the Labour Party. And that Labour will move to the Left. Labour has always become radicalised in opposition. It happened in 1925, in 1931, in 1951, in 1970 and in 1979. This reflects the natural inclination of British workers to turn to their traditional organisations in times of crisis. Of course, there have been significant changes in Britain over the last 30 years not least in the massive decline of industry and the weakening of the trade union movement. But the fundamental tendencies of the British labour movement still remain in force.

**Historical Parallels:** The current situation is strangely reminiscent of 1970 when the Conservative Heath government was elected. Beforehand, the Labour Party had emptied out in disillusion with Vietnam, anti-union legislation, minor public spending cuts and so on. Just as before this last election, the late 1960s saw the development of a non-political and cynical attitude towards politics with racism against immigrants gaining a hold in some sections of working people in the wake of Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech. Again, with the notable exception of the Militant Tendency and a few smaller socialist groups, much of the socialist left abandoned the Labour Party claiming it was a bourgeois party, and using familiar arguments to the ones we hear from many socialists today.

The 1970 Conservative Government launched a massive attack on the trade unions and radicalised them. Within a period of three years the Labour Party went from a quiescent leadership-loyalist body run by a witch-hunting bureaucracy to an increasingly restive movement in which the left made rapid gains.

Today we have a Conservative-Liberal Democrat government launching a massive onslaught on the welfare state. It is quite possible that with the vast majority of the population being affected by the cuts in services and jobs, it will radicalise much wider circles than the 1970 anti-union policies ever did.

The fact that the Labour leadership starts out being selective in their opposition to the cuts is not the important issue. As the public grows angrier at the effects of the cuts, strikes break out and mass mobilisations increase, the labour leadership will be forced to respond to the changing mood. And a new layer of left leaders will emerge in the Party to give voice to the protests at demonstrations and in struggles across the country. This has always happened in the past and there are many signs that it will happen again.

**More Indications of a change of mood:** The struggle to reclaim the Labour Party has already begun. In recent years the Left has been winning a majority of the individual ballot elections for the constituency

seats on Labour's National Executive. This is a reflection of the growing mood among many party members that we need a new leadership and new policies. This mood is even stronger among trade union activists.

Another indication of the leftward direction of the Party was the passing this year of a constitutional amendment which puts the right of submitting and voting on resolutions back on the Conference Agenda. This is a significant advance in the struggle to restore party democracy. It had immediate results at this year's Annual Conference in the passage of a fairly radical resolution on the economy that had been put forward by the builders and miners unions.

2010 also saw the first annual membership election of the National Policy Forum which decides on Party policy and the Party's election manifestos. This was a change won by the Left last year in the teeth of massive opposition from the Party leadership. In the elections, the left secured 16 out of 55 seats which will give it a solid group that can join with the union reps to challenge the neo-liberal agenda of the right. It should also allow the production of minority reports which can then be voted on at Conference.

**Now is the Time For Socialists To Join the Fight:** The long dark winter of reaction has finally come to an end. A new generation is emerging who will be looking for a lead in this struggle against the cuts and for a political way forward. Socialists can make a decisive difference in these struggles and for their expression in a revitalised labour movement. There are tens of thousands of left-wing people around Britain who if they are not active today have been active in the past. They can bring their experience to bear, not in a repeat performance of the 1970s and 80s, but in a more conscious and effective way. The key is for us is to learn from the mistakes that we made in the 1970s.

**Building a United Labour Left:** In the 1970s, the Left in the Labour Party was disunited and disorganised and despite having overwhelming support in the ranks failed to take hold of the leadership when the chance came along. This time around we must build a united Labour Left in every segment of the movement, thoroughly democratise the Party and win a decisive majority at all levels.

**To this end, the LRC should organise a Conference as soon as possible specifically dedicated to discussion on how best to build a united and democratic Labour Left throughout the Party. We should invite to this conference all progressive groups within the Party but we should see ourselves as taking on the decisive responsibility of building such a Labour Left.**

**The Union-Labour Link:** Another drawback of the 1970s was that there was an element of industrial syndicalism in the thinking of many trade union members. They thought that industrial action alone was enough. Thus the radicalisation among union activists did not immediately translate into radicalisation in the Labour Party. This was exacerbated by the failure of the Labour Left to directly organise in the unions and make the union-labour link a democratic and live conduit between the two wings of the movement. We must not make this mistake again.

We need to take every step to ensure that the winds of industrial action and union campaigns blow through the local labour parties with individual recruitment of workers and union branch affiliations to the CLPs back on the agenda. We need to go further and take the political debates into the unions. Let's end the cosy back-room relationship between the union General Secretaries and the Labour leaders. We want an open and accountable link between the unions and the Labour Party with union conferences

determining their policy to be supported in the Labour Party; which MPs to sponsor; who to elect as their representatives on delegations and on Labour's National Executive.

**To this end, the LRC should organise a long-term campaign to 'Democratise the Union-Labour Link'. This to include the bringing together of Labour Left activists in each affiliated union, the organisation of fringe meetings at union conferences, and the drawing up of appropriate motions and constitutional amendments.**

**Linking Up With The Community:** The need to create local links with the unions is also true of the thousands of community organisations. As community activists join forces with us in the struggle to defend jobs and services, we should encourage them to bring their voices into local Labour Parties in order to transform them. There is no reason why this can't happen in every area of Britain if socialists who are outside the Party or inactive get back into the fight. For this purpose, we should take full advantage of Ed Miliband's recent call at the National Policy Forum for local Labour Parties to link up with the community

**A Democratic Socialist Programme:** In the 1970s too many of the left argued for state ownership when we should have been arguing for a more democratic form of public ownership under the control of its workers and consumers. Similarly, we defended public services without demanding their democratisation. This left us open to the charge that we favoured a state socialist solution when we could have been campaigning for the transfer of democracy from the state and big business into the hands of working people.

In the coming battles over public services we need not just to defend what we already have but to come forward with a way of making them answerable to those who work in them and use their facilities. In the struggle against the economic crisis we need a new vision of socialism that is democratic and transformational. And to fight for a democratic, campaigning Labour Party that puts this forward.

**To this end the LRC should discuss over the coming year the formulation of a new/strengthened Clause Four that reflects the above principles.**

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