

# LABOURING IN VAIN



**Widest**  
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## THE LABOUR PARTY - ROTTEN TO THE CORE

Margaret Thatcher's government is attacking our living and working conditions with a cynicism and brutality which has not been seen since the war. And they seem to be getting away with it. In the workplace there are less strikes than at any time since the war. According to the opinion polls almost half the population still intends to vote Conservative. Even amongst the unemployed, only just over one in four people blame the Thatcher government for their plight. The popularity of the main opposition party, the Labour Party, has never been lower.

### Labour's Record

Michael Foot launched Labour's new programme as "the real alternative to the economic and industrial disorder which modern conservatism has inflicted". Not many people believe him. This isn't very surprising. The record of the last Labour government speaks for itself.

The Labour Programme pledges "an offensive against low pay". During the "Social Contract" wages fell more sharply in real terms than at any time since the 19th century. The new Labour programme promises to cut unemployment to one million within five years; under the last Labour government unemployment doubled.

The Labour programme promises that "Capital Tax" will be used to reduce huge inequalities of inherited wealth. During the lifetime of the last Labour government there was the biggest redistribution of wealth in favour of the very rich seen this century.

The Labour programme promises to increase spending on the NHS and education. The last Labour government slashed public spending and reduced the hospital and school building programmes almost to zero.

The Labour programme promises to abolish prescription charges. These were first introduced by Harold Wilson's Labour government.

The Labour programme promises to take a stand against nuclear weapons.

The last Labour government made a commitment to NATO to increase defence spending by 3% each year, even though it was cutting back on other areas of public spending.

Labour governments have a long history of cutting public expenditure, lowering wages and attacking working conditions, and generally doing exactly the opposite of what they promise in their manifestos.

In 1964 Labour came to power committed to abolishing Britain's nuclear weapons. The cabinet took a secret decision to spend £1 billion on modernising the Polaris missile.

"Socialist Parties" in other countries are just as bad. In France many people thought that Mitterand's government would be more progressive and better for the working class than the old right-wing one. They were wrong. The French "socialist" government has just introduced sweeping austerity measures. Mitterand has pledged that the French nuclear force will not be reduced "by a single missile".

### Labour's Programme

When the Labour Party is in opposition it has to try to convince us that next time things won't be quite as bad. Ex-ministers admit that they made "mistakes" when they were in government. Dennis Healey now says that it was a mistake for the government to take the decision to modernise Polaris. Tony Benn says he was "wrong" to support the wage cuts enforced by the Social Contract. Left-wing groups like Militant say that rank and file pressure can force the next Labour government to carry through socialist policies. According to groups like Militant the problem is that Labour governments never have the courage to push through their socialist policies in the face of opposition from big business, the banks, and international capitalist organisations like the IMF.

Militant is trying to con people into believing that Labour's programme is -at the bottom- a socialist one. But although the Labour Party calls itself a socialist party, in reality it stands for a programme of state-capitalism. From the point of view of the working class, state capitalist measures such as nationalisation offer us no benefit at all. Nationalised industry operates as an inseparable part of the capitalist economy. Its aim is the same as that of private industry: to make as much profit as possible from the exploitation of its workforce. If profits are bad, as they are in the present recession, nationalised industries cut wages and make workers redundant just like any other business. Nationalised Industry workers have no more control than any others over how they work or what they produce.

In some countries - like Russia and Poland - the whole economy is run along state-capitalist lines. But in Britain all parties are agreed that what is needed is some form of "mixed economy". The Tories want to see more of the economy run by private business and less in the hands of the state. The Labour Party wants to see less private business and more state-run industry. But this difference between the two parties is really quite a small one. It is a difference of opinion about how to manage capitalism and how to run the capitalist state. Neither party can do anything to solve the crisis of the British economy, which is completely out of control.

### The Labour Party in Government

There are times when the whole of the ruling class is convinced of the need for more or less radical state-capitalist measures. The most extreme example of this is during war time. During World War II the whole of the economy, as well as large areas of social life, were directly controlled by the state. The interests of private business had to be sacrificed in favour of the overall needs of the nation at war. But so also, to an even greater extent, did the rights of individuals and the health and well-being of the working class. Consumption was rationed: health and safety regulations at work were suspended; workers were not allowed to change jobs without permission; they were forced to work overtime and to lend their wages back to the government; strikes were outlawed.

In a recent interview Michael Foot said that "Britain during the war" was an example of the kind of socialism he would like to see. If this is the Labour Party's "socialist paradise" they can keep it!

The ruling class as a whole also tends to be in favour of state capitalist measures in times of economic recession and radical working class struggle. If all the resources of a particular industry are bought together under the control of the state, it is usually in a better position to fight off foreign competition. It is at these times, as well as during war time, that it suits the ruling class to have the Labour Party in government. An important advantage of having Labour in office at these times is that if workers are asked to make "sacrifices" in the interests of the national economy, they are more likely to comply if told to do so by "their own" Labour Party.

Because Labour tends to come in to office in times of crisis and recession this is why from one point of view we are better off under Tory governments than Labour ones! In sixteen years of Labour government between 1945 and 1979 real wages rose by 6%. In sixteen years of Tory government during the same period they rose by 61%. In fact although the two parties seem to spend a lot of time attacking each other, they work together when it comes to attacking the working class. Labour's phoney socialism backs up the more "honest" capitalism of the Tories. When Thatcher says that workers who go on strike are pricing themselves out of their jobs, or when she says that unemployment and wage cuts are inevitable because of the world recession, she

is just repeating what Callaghan said when he was Prime Minister. And of course this is what the papers and television tell us all the time. So its not surprising that so many people believe her when Thatcher says that "there is no alternative".

### How the Labour Party Works

When the Tories are in power it gives the Labour Party a breathing space when it can try to refurbish its image as the party which represents working people. But this is very difficult because large sections of the party are involved in the administration of the state on a permanent basis.

When Labour is in government the party is controlled by the Parliamentary Labour Party, which in turn controlled by the cabinet and the prime minister. But when Labour is in opposition power lies with the National Executive Committee and to a lesser extent in Congress. These two bodies are controlled by the Trade Unions, who have 90% of congress votes. More than half of Congress votes are in the hands of the leaders of just four unions: the TGWU, AUEW, GMMU and NUPE.

The trade unions are not the wild-eyed, militant organisations the press makes them out to be. Just the opposite. The unions stand for 'responsible' class struggle, where workers show respect for their leaders, where they don't claim more money than the bosses say they can afford, and above all where they are divided into different trades and industries and never unite in a common struggle which might threaten the stability of capitalism. In times of crisis like today, even normal limited trade union struggles for modest aims like a living wage tend to threaten the stability of the economy. So the trade unions tend more and more openly to oppose genuine workers struggles. A recent AUEW circular claiming to tell its members how to fight unemployment began: "DO NOTHING to endanger the profitability of your company....."

The problem with the unions is not just that they have bad leaders. Everyone knows how quickly a left-wing union leader becomes a right-wing one once he becomes general secretary. But the unions are integrated into capitalism at every level. National officials are permanently represented on government committees and QUANGOs. District officials are involved in a constant round of meetings with representatives of different employers' and management organisations. In a typical year about 450 such meetings take place in just one district of the AUEW. At a plant level shop stewards bargain with the management, offering to keep their members under control in return for a say in running the business. If they are successful, full time stewards are often given offices next to the personnel manager.

This regular and intimate contact and - in the case of full-time officials - isolation from their membership, teaches union officials to understand the bosses' point of view, and constantly breeds new generations of "realistic" union leaders. They understand that their power in society depends on their ability to keep workers struggles under control, and preferably to crush them altogether if they become a real threat to social stability. These union leaders usually form the core of the Labour Parties' right wing. Parliamentary leaders like Tony Benn can use their time in opposition, when they are freed from responsibility of government, to make radical speeches and shout left-wing slogans. The trade unions don't have the same flexibility. They are increasingly forced to appear as what they really are: not "the power of the organised working class", but the power of the state over the working class.

In local government the Labour party faces the same contradictions as at national level. Faced with the realities of local government administration Labour councils tend to develop a right-wing perspective. As employers of thousands of local government workers they behave like any other boss. Last year council workers in Manchester and Rhondda were forced to go on strike when

their Labour Party employers tried to sack workers for taking action against staff cuts. Even employees of more 'left-wing' councils such as Sheffield and Islington have had to take industrial action to defend their interests.

It is only in the constituencies that Labour Party members are permanently free from the responsibility of government. This is why the constituencies form the heartland of Labour's left-wing. Groups like Militant, and left-wing Labour MPs rely on the constituencies for their support.

However when radicals join the Labour Party they never succeed in forcing it to change in a revolutionary direction. On the contrary the Labour Party changes them. As a first step they are taught -by left and right wingers alike- to confuse state capitalism with socialism. Then the experience of holding positions in local councils or trade unions forces them to moderate their radical views. They emerge at the end of the conveyor belt imbued with capitalist ideology and ready to take their places in the leadership of the Labour Party and of British capitalism.

The Labour Party is like a vast machine for transforming militant workers into state bureaucrats.

### "Crises" in the Labour Party

The Labour Party is <sup>in</sup> a permanent state of crisis because while it claims to represent the working class, its actions constantly prove it does no such thing. Labour leaders constantly call for unity; in fact the endless battles between left and right are necessary to maintain the illusion that the Labour Party can be changed.

Sometimes the battles between left and right can seem rather confusing. At the end of last year the papers told us that the new NEC represented a victory for the right wing. But this year, this same NEC has produced a programme which, we are told, marks a sharp turn to the left.

This confusion arises because in general the battles within the Labour Party are not about policies at all. They are power struggles between different sections of the party.

At the centre of these struggles it is usual to find the trade unions. The position of the unions is particularly precarious. They are constantly tying themselves in knots trying to prove at the same time to their members and to management how well they are defending their interests.

During the 50's and 60's, trade union opposition to strikes provoked a wave of unofficial struggles. This in turn provoked attempts by both Labour and Tory governments to control class struggle through legislation. The unions rightly saw this as a threat to their influence in society and to their power within the Labour Party in particular. For tactical reasons during this period it suited the unions to ally with Labour's left wing in its opposition to this legislation.

By giving their official support to a series of large strikes the unions were able to regain the confidence of their members to the extent that they were supported in massive demonstrations against both Wilson's and Heath's anti-strike laws.

Finally the miners strike in 1974 seemed to prove once and for all that "Britain is ungovernable without the support of the unions." With the election of the Labour government, and the resignation of Wilson in favour of Callaghan (who had supported the union's opposition to Wilson's "In Place of Strife" bill), the unions had regained their central position in the Labour Party. The unions were now free to abandon their former allies and revert to their natural position on the right of the party. The "Social Contract" marked the high point of the unions influence within British Society. They demanded, and got, full participation in the social and economic management of Callaghan and Healey's programme of massive wage cut's. No wonder Len Murray could say that "all in all trade unionists have gained more from

the (Callaghan) government in the past two and a half years than from any other government". For workers this same period was marked by declining real wages and growing unemployment. Nothing could illustrate more clearly the opposition between the interests of the unions, and those of the working class.

The long term results of the Social Contract were disastrous for the unions. In the wave of strikes between 1978 and 1981 they came closer to losing complete control of the class struggle than at any time since the 20's. This was the main factor which persuaded the Thatcher government to adopt the radical policy of excluding the unions from the process of government. Having lost the confidence of the membership the unions were in no position to respond to this challenge. The attempt to recreate the mass demonstrations of the early 70's in the "Days of Action" was a flop.

At the same time the Labour left seized this chance to try to take control of the party from the unions. Benn's attempt to wrest the deputy leadership from Healey - on the basis of new election procedures which the left had forced through the national conference giving the constituencies greater weight than ever before - marked the climax of this campaign.

When Benn failed - by a whisker - the unions quickly moved in to take their revenge. Benn, his supporters, and anyone else suspected of being unreliable supporters of the unions, were removed from a series of policy making committees.

Having regained control of the party, the unions and their supporters in parliament (notably a previously little known M.P. sponsored by the Transport and General Workers Union, John Golding) felt able to offer some consolation prizes to appease the left wing. One of these was the concession to unilateralism, which gives the programme its left wing flavour. (All the unilateralist promises are lies naturally). But the most important part of the programme is the commitment to a "national economic assessment". This amounts to a commitment that all aspects of economic policy under a future Labour government will be worked out in partnership with the unions. To the man or woman in the street this is just another name for an incomes policy. And so it is. But from the unions point of view there is a crucial difference: it means that the Labour Party has promised that next time the working class gets beaten over the head, the unions will be on the right end of the stick. Tony Benn doesn't want to miss out on the fun. He has given his support to the "national economic assessment", thereby showing that he recognises that, for the time being, the struggle for control of the Labour party is over.

#### The Labour Party: Enemy of the Working Class; Enemy of Socialism

There is an alternative to the policies of the present government, and to those of previous Labour governments. But falling living standards and rising unemployment as well as increasing coercion and boredom can only be fought successfully by rejecting the whole logic of the capitalist economy. Society must be reorganised from top to bottom so that resources are used to supply our needs and not to create profits.

To transform society in this way we will be forced to directly confront the ruling class. The repressive forces of the state can be overcome by mass struggle, democratic organisation, mutual solidarity, all strengthened by a common understanding of our aims, and of their importance. This cannot be achieved by a small number of "great socialist leaders", but only by the active participation of the entire working class - the vast majority of society.

On an international level, to transform society in this way means refusing to support the interests of "our" national economy against foreign competitors. It is this economic rivalry which provides the momentum towards world war. The threat of world war will only be removed when we

reject nationalism and patriotism in every form, and unite with workers across the world in our common war against the ruling class!

This kind of radical social change has always been opposed by the Labour Party -and always will be.

All sections of the Labour Party are patriotic to the core. During the Falklands crisis Michael Foot supported sending the task force, demanding that the government "proves by deeds what they can never prove by words alone." Even Militant was right behind Margaret Thatcher on this issue. Tony Benn opposed sending the task force - but like the rest of the Labour left he calls for nationalistic import controls. He wants to shift the effects of Britains economic crisis on to workers in other countries.

The Labour Party constantly calls on workers to respect the authority of their "leaders". When workers attempt to take control of their struggles for themselves, this is often the first step towards overcoming the artificial divisions imposed on our struggles by the trade unions. When we link up our struggles with those of other workers, over the heads of the union leaders, we experience the power which we have as a collectively organised class. On the basis of the experience of this power we can dare to struggle - not just negotiate the terms of our wage slavery - but to abolish this slavery altogether. Like the rest of the ruling class this prospect terrifies the Labour Party. Labour governments have always been quick to use the full force of state repression whenever workers dare to challenge the authority of their leaders.

In 1945, five days after the election of the Labour government, troops were sent in against London dockers on strike for a pay rise. The Labour government maintained war-time legislation which made strikes illegal. Troops were used again throughout the lifetime of the government against striking dockers, lorry drivers, power workers, gas workers and...boiler stokers at Buckingham Palace. (The same government took Britain into N.A.T.O., and took the decision to manufacture the Atom bomb).

In 1979 Callaghan's government used troops in Northern Ireland to bring an end to the tanker drivers strike there - with the full support of the trade unions, who opposed the strike. At the same time the government considered using troops on the mainland against striking lorry drivers. In the end they decided to leave the job of smashing the strike to the Transport and General Workers Union. Hostility among drivers towards the union was extreme. One driver declared that Alex Kitson, the so-called strike organiser, "should have his head blown off." Kitson was later rewarded by being made chairman of the Labour Party.

If our struggles in the future are to be successful we will have forget all about the myth that the Labour Party and the trade unions represent the working class. If we want to destroy capitalism, we'll have destroy the Labour Party along with it.

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