

THE TASKS FOR THE LEFT IN THE LABOUR PARTY

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Editorial note to the reader:

The Labour Party led by Harold Wilson won the election of Feb 1974. In March 1974, the year of this text, Wilson set up a minority Labour government. The Labour Party Conference adopted a programme for 25 nationalisations. The new elections called in 1976 returned another Labour government, headed by James Callaghan, who continued until October 1979 (when Thatcher won).

Although the Labour governments of Wilson and Callaghan did not implement all the 25 nationalisations, they created British Aerospace, British Telecoms, British Leyland, British Steel and the British National Oil Corporation, amongst others. Throughout that time, Tony Benn played an important role in the Labour left that impelled the Labour Party leftwards.

There always was a pressure to organise the left in the Labour Party. It is very important to consider how this pressure evolved. To date, this left created no organised movement. Through the nature of the Labour Party, and through its roots in the heart of the bourgeoisie, Labour has an apparatus that controls and dominates the Party.

The Labour apparatus imposed itself mostly through the workers' aristocracy and the latter's domination of the Trade Unions. But from 15 years ago (1959) and even earlier - when Clement Attlee¹ was leader (1945-51) - the story of that apparatus is one of concessions upon concessions to the Labour left - and programmatic ones.

The British proletariat never budged from the Labour Party. There never was a time when it threatened to break its centralisation through Labour. No movement that managed to break from Labour could ever replace it. The Communist Party² is the most vivid expression of this fact, seeing how it continues as a little sect. We base all our prognoses, and make all our calculations on the basis that social transformation in Britain is going to work its way through Labour. It is not possible to think

¹ Clement Attlee, (1883-1967), leader of the Labour Party 1935-55.

² The Communist Party in 1974 was still called the CPGB. It became the CPB in 1977.

outside this.

For what regards us, ourselves³, we are sure that it is possible for us to grow and have an influence among workers' leaders and intellectuals. We know however that we will always be limited in this by the strong centralising force of Labour. The world proletarian vanguard feels the approach of the final settlement of accounts⁴. It has a feeling of it, not yet a consciousness. It has a perception of it, a historic intuition. The British proletariat expresses this by keeping centralised.

**All the new events
upset the established notions:**

The generals of the Ethiopian army are taking power⁵. They come from a most subjected people in history. They supported the Negus⁶ in the past; now they decide to put an end to the age-long monarchy. The fact that revolutionary soldiers take power in Ethiopia, Turkey and Portugal, means that the necessity of history presses forward, in need of representatives. This upsets all established notions and relations. All the political leaderships are gripped by a feeling of uncertainty, of insecurity and of inconsistency. Even those with the most stable relation with the capitalist system, like the Labour Party.

The world situation keeps destabilising the notions held in the Labour Party up to now, forcing it to yield. It yields therefore, to continue as before. Historically speaking, it is not prepared for any change or any transformation. None of these. It does not believe in them!

The Communist Party lost long ago the capacity to influence in the Labour Party. It did this by adopting the same *national road to Socialism* as Labour – the road of subtle changes meant to tweak the capitalist system on the edges. Had the Communists

³ The Trotskyist Posadist IV International.

⁴ The final confrontation between the capitalist system and the system of the Workers States.

⁵ The soldiers of the Ethiopian army called the DERG.

⁶ The Negus of Ethiopia. Royal title that lasted up to Haile Selassie, and disappeared when he was overthrown by the DERG in 1974, the year of this text. On the announcement of the DERG's victory, Somalia invaded Ethiopia to annex the Ogaden region. It was roundly defeated by Ethiopian, Soviet and Cuban forces. Imperialism then talked of 'Red Terror' in Ethiopia. Edit.

upheld the revolutionary conception, they would now be in a position to influence Labour. This applies to all the Communist parties of the world, in their own contexts. The Communist parties in Europe do not make a Marxist analysis of the capitalist system. They berate the capitalists, but their evaluations are reformist. Their conclusions and their condemnations of capitalism are not entirely reformist because they lean in a revolutionary direction; but then, the crisis of capitalism is so total and obvious that they can hardly do anything else!

Sensing the approach of social transformations, the European Communists bring their diagnoses of 'capitalist crisis' to their electoral campaigns in order to get votes. To have themselves accepted, and to weigh better in the Trade Unions, they want no more than being elected, hence numerically stronger. They want historic change, certainly, but without civil war. This is an entirely false calculation of course, even when they are right in particulars. Their historic calculation is false because it refuses that civil war *is* inevitable and that capitalism *is* going to launch the war.

Social transformation is unavoidable:

Capitalism has recently been beaten back in Ethiopia. The Watergate crisis has deepened in the United States and the masses oppose Nato in many parts of the world. What is lacking, particularly in the United States, is an organisation to represent the revolutionary progress of the world in that country. This shortcoming prolongs the existence of capitalism. It leaves ground and possibilities to capitalism, and the Labour Party's apparatus benefits from it. Labour leaderships are then able to come along with one little promise or two, safe in the knowledge that capitalism can stand it.

It is necessary to encourage the *programmatic* concern of the Labour left, which is already very deep. One must help it to develop the notions, and the force, to look social transformation in the face. Historic transformation is unavoidable in Britain. This is why left-wing currents keep forming in the Labour Party. This will continue to happen until some of them decide to organise and lead the forces of social transformation.

The stage of a republic
Is unavoidable in Britain:

Another essential point to discuss is: 'What are we going to do about the monarchy?' The Labour left keeps silent about the monarchy and the constitutional position of the country. It realises that challenges at this level can only precipitate historic change. No one in the Labour Party takes any position about monarchy or republic. The idea of a republic is rather moderate, but for Britain, it is quite a leap.

The Labour Party avoids any reference to monarchy or republic. It senses that any change at that level will trigger a rolling process of transformations. Any serious transformation in Britain is bound to pass through a republic. At its conference, the Labour left recently adopted an important programme of social change but it said nothing about monarchy or republic either. The Labour left does not tackle this question in the same way as it does not tackle the Irish question. This is not to take away anything from its serious programme of nationalisations.

As it stands, the Labour leadership is not prepared for the scale of the transformations that are coming. Yet there are signs of inevitable change, if only in the persistence and sharpness of the struggle in Ireland. Observe how the bourgeois class, for its part, is prepared! It stimulates the Labour leadership into actions aimed at containing the pressure of the proletarian vanguard, whilst it (the bourgeois class) sets up special armies within the civilian populations with clear civil war aims in mind.

In the face of this huge challenge, there is no properly organised Labour left with a programme, a policy or a leadership of its own. There are only combinations, agreements and reciprocal concessions between right, left and centrist Labour sectors. The left feels obliged to make concessions to the others through the feeling of not being strong enough, or sure enough. Even then, the Labour Party was forced to grant it important programmatic concessions. This shows that the situation is more advanced than the left believes. The struggle in Ireland shows that conditions exist for big historic changes. Our aim must be to turn our

concerns, our activity and our movement towards the Labour left, to contribute to its consistent organisation.

**The task is to organise oneself
to help the Labour left organise itself:**

We must encourage the theoretical, political and programmatic ability of the Labour left. We must base this firmly on the process unfolding in the rest of Europe. All Europe is going to the left! Our task is to operate in Britain as part of what happens in the rest of Europe and the world, and the repercussions in Britain.

Our Party⁷ must write articles for the Labour Left, and in part for the Communist Party⁸ as well, to influence sectors. Our Party must give itself the aim to stimulate the systematic organisation of the Labour left. This can only be done within the wider analysis of where Britain is going. Britain is going towards revolution, certainly, but it is essential to develop tactics for the various stages leading to it in due course. Right now, the most important stage is to prepare our Party for this task. The world crisis of capitalism is transforming Britain completely.

Britain is one of the capitalist countries most implicated in the crisis of world capitalism. Of all the large capitalist countries, it is one of the weakest. The British high-finance sector is still strong and can still dominate, but not as much as it used to. Seeing how it keeps losing ground, British imperialism prepares to use force. It builds private armies inside the civilian populations. It uses its intervention in Ireland for civil war experiments. In Ireland, British imperialism⁹ has created all the justifications and the opportunities to keep Britain on a permanent war footing. And in spite of all this however, it keeps failing.

We must prepare our own Party to intervene and influence in the Labour Party and the Labour left. There is a perspective in Britain for the development of a programmatic Labour left. Mind that

⁷ The British section of the Trotskyist-Posadist IV International, the RWP(T).

⁸ This was the CPGB in 1974. It became the CPB in 1977. Editorial.

⁹ The words 'capitalism' and 'imperialism' seem interchangeable in this text, but the reader must remember how Lenin characterised this stage of history as "imperialism, the higher stage of capitalism". Editorial.

not all the official Labour Party structures are entirely opposed to this. There is no systematic Labour left, but there is a left, and it looks up to the working class.

The resolutions passed at the various Trade Union Conferences this year (1974) confirmed the ideas of the Labour left. To keep in line with the Labour government, the Trade Union leaderships retreated a little afterwards on wages and prices, but the Labour government accepted many of the Trade Unions' calls for nationalisations. In that compromise, the Labour left found strength and imposed itself.

The world process is going to continue influencing in Britain. The European Socialist Parties have an influence in the Labour Party. The French Socialist Party¹⁰, the Italian, the Belgian and even a wing of the Dutch Socialist Party, are all to the left. This is going to weigh in the Labour Party. Roy Jenkins¹¹ and people like him have to step down from the leadership of Labour.

Monarchy and Ireland cannot stay ignored by the Labour left:

Capitalism observes closely the world process and its influence in Britain. Fearful of nationalisations, it gets itself ready with private armies. In Great Britain¹², a revolutionary movement that arms the proletariat is not yet on the cards. It is more likely that a movement will impose nationalisations first, and that armed movements will come later. Things look that way in England, Scotland and Wales - but not in Ireland. The British proletariat is inevitably looking at the example of Ireland.

At this moment, the nationalisations are the priority. The need is to deepen the programme of nationalisations. It must be at the forefront of all struggles along with its means of implementation: workers' control, workplace committees and

¹⁰ In 1972, in France, the Socialists, the Communists and the Left Radicals signed a *Common Programme* containing important measures of nationalisations. This unity frightened the European bourgeoisies even more. The alliance of the French Socialist Party with the Communists pulled the rug from under the feet of the Socialist right wing and centre. Edit.

¹¹ Roy Jenkins had been a progressive bourgeois figure in the Labour Party for many years. Edit.

¹² Great Britain is *England, Wales and Scotland*. The United Kingdom is *Great Britain and Northern Ireland*. Edit.

workers' power organisms. The left and ourselves must assist in this, without forgetting the need for workers-area's committees and organs of power in the population to get everyone involved, intervening and leading.

We must raise debates on Ireland that prepare the Labour left for the coming stages. Capitalism will try to re-establish its power, but it has lost the historic bases to succeed. Even in the next elections¹³, Labour is going to win. The sector of the Labour Party that insists on nationalisations has no reason to ignore the workers of Ireland. We must unite Ireland and Great Britain in everything that we do.

The way all Europe goes to the left is part of a world process which weakens and disintegrates the capitalist system. Once British imperialism was stopped confiscating the riches of the world, it proved itself clueless. Today, it has neither ideas nor perspectives. When Wilson must yield to a programme of the Labour left, it is because the Labour right and capitalism offer him no ideas; he must borrow ideas from the left, or throw in the towel...

Wilson borrows left ideas, but only some. It is also true that an important part of the Labour Party, and sectors directly around Wilson himself, feel a genuine need for change. They feel this need, but they opt for the changes that do not entail revolution. These leaders are sufficiently informed to know that capitalism is disintegrating. Even representatives of the bourgeois class admit this.

Help consistency, method and programme in the Labour left:

Where change can still save capitalism, the ruling class does not mind a little bit of it. This fact invites some Labour leaders to seek a kind of 'interpenetration' with bourgeois class sectors. Opportunities of this kind have proved to exist in Socialist and Communist parties elsewhere. The idea is stupid because the workers' parties are not about to dissolve into the bourgeois

¹³ This text is dated Sept 1974. In October, Wilson announced new elections. Callaghan won.

class. Due to capitalism's weakness, however, attempts of that sort continue. In today's Labour Party, some leaders do not mind those of the left's proposals that do not endanger their Party power base. If they never mention the monarchy, it is for fear of the sequels that will collapse their power base.

In all this, the left groups outside the Labour Party have less and less importance. The approach of the final settlement of accounts¹⁴ leaves them no independent space. The process concentrates, history concentrates and the necessity of history concentrates. This increases the centralisation of the British masses in the Labour Party. And it forces the Labour left to organise itself consistently, organisationally and programmatically. The groups that do not accept this are left without a role.

We do not discount the groups however. Some of them are important and we intervene towards them. The groups that disappeared are those who did not recognise the centralisation of the British masses. Today, the most important task is to combine Trade Union life with Labour Party life, on the basis of an anti-capitalist programme that unites the national process with the rest of the world. No group can respond to this need, whilst the Labour left makes constant and elevating steps in this direction. Programmes of agitation in the Labour left are less necessary than the steady elaboration of policy, programme, objectives and tactics in the Labour Party. In sharing in this activity, we are not a group. We are part of the construction of the Labour left.

The crisis of capitalism gnaws at its centrist tendencies:

What happens in Britain is only one facet of the process and capitalist crisis in the world. Capitalism is so badly shaken, worldwide, that each of its defeats anywhere resonates in Britain with accelerated and accentuated effects. In Britain, you can see this in the economic crisis, in the political crisis and in the military crisis.

¹⁴ The world war that capitalism prepares.

The capitalists cannot believe how much they are affected by the world advance of the revolution. They have no reply to it. The left-wing Labour leaders who use left-wing measures to contain the advance of the revolution, can only do this for a time. As for the capitalist class, its crisis causes it to trust such people less and less. It has already very little confidence in what Labour has become.

The situation in Britain suggests the approach of big political leaps. The nationalisations that Labour has now implemented are quite in tune with the maturity of the world. They show a great maturity in Britain too, but the present level of debate does not do justice to this maturity. Those generally known as Liberals are collapsing all over Europe. The various Radicals drift towards the Social Democrats, a little to the left. In Britain and Germany, the Liberal Youth adopts points of the Marxist programme. Whether in Britain or in Europe, there are less and less social structures capable of inspiring, let alone building, left bourgeois movements inside the workers' movement.

There is only so much that a Labour leadership can do to contain the disintegration of the capitalist system. This reality is not yet directly observable in the Labour Party, or expressed in the Labour Party at programmatic level. What is certain is that the masses have done well to get Labour where it stands now.

Over the last ten years, the British workers have challenged private property, the power of the capitalists, the power of the landlords and the power of the employers. They occupied dozens of enterprises and ran many of them under their control¹⁵. They made links with the British population, and made links the

¹⁵ Throughout the 1970's, there were workers' occupations and experiences of workers control - as in *GKN* near Stockport; *Davies & Metcalfe Ltd* in Manchester (for 35h week, equal pay, etc); *H.O. Serck & Co* in Manchester; *Bickerton Day Ltd*, Stockport (diesel engines); Gas workers in Manchester; *GKN Bradbury* Manchester (Steelworks), and other such. There was the world's famous workers' occupation under workers control of the *Shipyards on the Upper Clyde* (Scotland), shipyards originally reorganised by Tony Benn in 1968 (then Technology Minister). The shipyards' occupation took place in 1971-72 against threatened closures. Many of the main leaders like Reid, Airlie, Gilmore and Barr were Communists. They demonstrated the working class' capacity to organise production and to establish superior and dignified human relations at work. 80,000 people from all over Britain came to march in their support, and John Lennon contributed £5,000 to their cause.

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There were countless other struggles, as against the Social Contract, etc. Editorial.

Workers States. They influenced layers of the bourgeoisie, disintegrated these, won over their children, like the Youth of the Liberal Party.

In the Labour Party, this level of working class determination has not flourished sufficiently at the level of programme or organisation, but this is what is coming. We form part of all this.

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