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The third Thatcher term

Chris Black

THE RED FRONT ALTERNATIVE

In this **tns** *post-election special,* ***Mike Freeman*** *and* ***Frank Richards*** *take an in-depth look at the prospects for the working class under Thatcher's third government. They examine*

- ★ *HOW the Tories have stayed on top for eight years*
- ★ *WHY the Labour Party has retreated and been defeated again*
- ★ *WHAT we need to do to turn things around, by building a* ***Red Front*** *to defend our class*

tns

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LET'S FACE FACTS

This week's *tns* is devoted to a full-length examination of the 1987 general election, against the background of the Thatcher years. For now, we shall leave it to the establishment press to dissect the percentage point performance of the old parties. Our immediate concern is to work out why, after eight grim years, we are stuck with a third Thatcher government, and how we can turn things around to give the working class a fighting chance against the Tories. The first thing we must do is to face the facts about what Thursday's results really represent.

Many people on the left are expressing their satisfaction that Labour has improved its position from the disastrous result in the 1983 election. Before the 1987 campaign kicked off, left-wing commentators were panicking about the rise of the Alliance. They warned us that Thatcher was out to destroy the Labour Party and to create an American-style electoral system dominated by two openly pro-capitalist parties.

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Now the radical pundits are breathing loud sighs of relief. They comfort themselves with the thought that the Alliance has failed to overtake Labour, that Kinnock has closed the gap on Thatcher, and that we are moving back into the old two-party system where it's us against them. This week Raphael Samuel, a prominent left-wing academic who has previously been very critical of Neil Kinnock, declared that, 'Labour may not yet be ready for government, but for the first time since 1979 it is beginning to have the making of a real opposition.' This rosy interpretation is wildly off the mark. It ignores the fact that Thatcher *has* succeeded in redrawing the political map; but it is Labour, not the Alliance, which has emerged as the alternative middle class party dedicated to defending the British establishment.

Every debate which came up during the election campaign confirmed that, in political terms, Kinnock's Labour Party definitely does not have 'the making of a real opposition' to Thatcher. Labour has adopted Tory values on key issues. In their electoral exchanges, spokesmen from both parties agreed that being left-wing is a sign of derangement, that millions must remain unemployed, that aggressive displays of trade union militancy like the miners' strike are shameful, and that our wages are too high while spending on the state's police and army is too low.

Through this election campaign, Labour has been stripped of any pretence of being a party that can stand up for the working class. There is nothing progressive about Labour outdoing the Alliance in a battle to be the alternative champion of British capitalism. Yet many on the left are closing their eyes to this reality.

On one level, the left has simply substituted a fantasy about what Labour might become for a cold look at what Kinnock's party really represents. For example, the special election issue of *Labour Briefing*, the paper of a hard-left Labour grouping, conceded that 'Labour's manifesto and campaign priorities are a major barrier to success.' They then list a make-believe programme of socialist policies, introduced with this observation: 'Wouldn't it be nice if this programme appeared in the Labour Party election leaflet that dropped through every letter-box?' The fact that Labour's election propaganda emphasised Kinnock's commitment to stamp on anybody proposing such left-wing policies is ignored, as the left retreats into the world of wishful thinking.

In the real world, the left has lowered its horizons to adapt to Kinnock's rightward shift. It is now prepared to accept that an election campaign devoid of one left-wing idea, built around the stage-managed razzamatazz of presidential-style rallies, and based on the cult of Kinnock the statesman, should be considered as a step forward for socialism. The left will no doubt discover other radical qualities in Kinnock's pro-capitalist policies in the immediate post-election period. The very concept of what we mean by 'left-wing' is being redefined to fit in with Labour's new moderate image.

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The truth is that Labour's performance in this election offers even less hope for the working class than it did in 1983. Four years on, we are about to suffer still fiercer attacks on our jobs, living standards and civil liberties from an establishment which is increasingly concerned about the survival of its corrupt system. Yet at this moment of crisis, when we need to rally maximum resistance against the third Thatcher government, Labour has gone over to the side of capitalist class more openly than ever.

If we face up to these facts, we must conclude that there is no future in looking to Labour.

The urgent need now is for us to organise some opposition to the Tories and make a stand on the side of the working class. Earlier this year, the Revolutionary Communist Party sought to provide a focus for such resistance, by launching a campaign to build a *Red Front* of left-wing groups and individuals around a platform of basic demands that could defend the working class. This week, *Red Front* candidates contested the election in 14 constituencies. Their results are not known as we go to press. But however they fared, the fact that they stood against Labour has put down an important marker for organising a fightback in the struggle against Thatcher's new government.

The fight to build *The Red Front* is just beginning, and is becoming more urgent. The precondition for working out a fresh way ahead for the working class is to get to grips with what has gone wrong over the past eight years. That is the aim of this special edition of *tns*.

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In the pages that follow, Frank Richards (chairman of the Revolutionary Communist Party) and Mike Freeman (editor of the RCP's theoretical journal, *Confrontation*) examine the forces that have shaped the Thatcher years. They look at the way in which the political weakness of the leaders of the official labour movement has allowed the Tories to stay on top. They examine how the defeats of the last eight years have divided and demoralised many workers. And they map out a way to unite our class and turn the tide against Thatcher, by building a new movement which owes no loyalty to the dead-end politics of the past.

The coming period contains many dangers, but it will also provide us with real opportunities. The way in which the Tories panicked at the slightest upset during the election campaign revealed the fragility of their declining system today. The campaign also confirmed that the Tories have no new solutions to the crisis. In the last few days before the election, they were even reduced to using slogans ripped off from their 1959 election campaign. The theme of this paper is that Thatcher's only real strength is the political weakness of her opponents. If we can alter that state of affairs by forging a determined *Red Front*, her victory celebrations will be shortlived.

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Public Meetings

After the election WHAT NOW?

BRADFORD: Tuesday 30 June, 7.30pm. Central Library, City Centre
GLASGOW: Tuesday 30 June, 7.30pm. McLellan Galleries, Sauchiehall Street
LEEDS: Monday 29 June, 7.30pm. West Indian Centre, Savile Mount, Chapeltown Road
LIVERPOOL: Wednesday 1 July, 7.30pm. Trade Union Centre, Hardman Street
LONDON: Thursday 18 June, 7.30pm. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square WC1
MANCHESTER: Thursday 18 June, 7.30pm. Black Lion Pub, Blackfriars Street
NOTTINGHAM: Tuesday 23 June, 7.30pm. Workers' Educational Association, Shakespeare Street
PONTEFRACT: Thursday 2 July, 7.30pm. Red Lion Pub
SHEFFIELD: Saturday 13 June, 1pm. Octagon Centre, Sheffield University

● tns

We have had to raise the price of *tns* to 40p from this week, to cover the cost of extending the paper to 16 pages. This is only our second price rise in over seven years, and there is no truth in the rumour that we kept it a secret until after the election to avoid losing votes. We are also maintaining the optional £1 fighting fund price — still a small price to pay for the paper that supports our class.

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The third Thatcher term

'After three consecutive election defeats, it should be clear that the old solutions are irrelevant, and that it is worth asking whether the Labour Party serves any useful purpose at all.'

It was clear from the start of the 1987 general election campaign that whichever party won, the working class would not benefit. The campaign was a continuation of the pattern established in British politics over the past decade. Despite her unpopularity, the leader of the Conservative Party succeeded in dominating the debate. The leaders of the opposition parties criticised Thatcher and her record, but to no great effect. For the working class the whole campaign was bad news. None of the main parties promised to get rid of unemployment or to abolish anti-trade union legislation. All the parties supported immigration controls, the war in Ireland and the police, and they all upheld the need to build up Britain's armed forces. It was as if the election campaign was a three-way contest between different sections of the British establishment. It was not surprising that the Tories, the most consistent champions of the British ruling class, had the best chance of coming out on top in such a debate.

The 1987 election was also a disaster for the left. The left itself stayed out of the contest lest it embarrass the Labour leadership. The left only existed during the campaign as a *problem*. It was portrayed by the Tories and the Alliance as the biggest menace to society since the arrival of Aids. By its guilty silence the left confirmed the view that being left-wing is like having a lethal infectious disease.

The humiliation of the left calls for a thorough reappraisal by all those committed to the goal of human liberation and a socialist society.

It is important that we do not repeat the sort of reappraisals that followed the 1979 and 1983 Thatcher victories. On both of these occasions there was a widespread reluctance to tackle the real problems. It was taken as read that the answer was to be found through the Labour Party — the debate was about how, and through what kind of Labour Party. Since the outcome of the reappraisal was decided in advance, the process failed to get to the root of the problem. The validity of traditional Labour policies was taken for granted and the defeat at the polls was blamed on some incidental factor such as the Falklands War, the media or the treachery of the founders of the SDP. Today, after three consecutive election defeats, it should be clear that the old solutions are irrelevant, and that it is worth asking whether the Labour Party serves any useful purpose at all in present-day society.

Pandora Anderson

DON'T CRY FOR KINNOCK

The post-mortem on the 1987 election campaign will no doubt feature the usual recriminations between left and right. Such debates about who was to blame do not really aim at political clarification. Their objective is to allocate blame and evade responsibility for defeat. The character of the campaign gives the right scant grounds for blaming the left. Despite suffering repeated provocation and humiliation at the hands of the party leadership, the left remained loyal to the end. The left evidently had no role in Labour's media presentation, no say in the content of the manifesto and no visible presence for the duration of the campaign. It cannot be held responsible for any aspect of Labour's election performance. At the same time, having put forward no distinctive profile in the election, the left has no authority to criticise the way the right ran the campaign.

Since 1979 the Labour leaders have taken advantage of election setbacks as an excuse to make further concessions to the British establishment. They invariably explain defeat as the result of policies that have been misunderstood or which are out of tune with the British people. Their conclusion is that Labour's policies should be more resolute — that is, more right-wing. Given the fact that Kinnock went to the electorate with a resolutely right-wing manifesto on 11 June, this would seem a difficult argument to sustain. But no doubt after a few days, when memories of the manifesto have dimmed, the Labour leaders will suggest that they lost because of their radical defence policy, because of the power of the 'loony left' or because of the party's links with the unions. Labour's steady drift to the right in recent years makes such conclusions inevitable. A reappraisal of this sort will not produce any profound revelations.

It will merely amount to an admission that if Labour is to get ahead in British politics it will have to become even more like the Tories.

If the reappraisal proceeds true to form, left-wing intellectuals will step forward to explain that Labour's election defeat was the result of changes in objective circumstances. A favourite thesis is that the working class is in terminal decline and that class-based parties are relics of the past. A variation on this theme is the notion that the changing composition of the working class has eroded the basis for a collective response to the current predicament of the labour movement. Proponents of this approach endow the Tories in general and Thatcher in particular with unique powers which are said to explain their success.

As we shall see, these theories seek to explain away the defeat rather than confront it. They are restatements of conventional right-wing views in a left-wing form. For decades the right has argued that class is unimportant in the determination of political choices. When radical intellectuals repeat such views they simply expose how far they have come under the influence of the British establishment.

RETHINKING

In the end such superficial reassessments tend to give way to amnesia. After three or four months of breast-beating and agonising most of the left drifts back in line and pretends that nothing happened. Thus, during the 1987 election campaign the left acted as if 1979 and 1983 had never been. Everybody dutifully took up their position in support of the Labour Party, arguing that there was no other way. In their innermost thoughts left-wing activists were often uneasy about supporting Kinnock's brazenly right-wing campaign, but they swallowed their pride and carried on canvassing for a no-hope party. Arguments which were already jaded in 1983 sounded even more forlorn in 1987.

If we are to stop the Tories from capturing the nineties as well as the eighties, we need to stop dodging the issues and do some serious rethinking.

We need to assess the experience of the past eight years to understand why the Tories have been so successful. At the same time, we need to put the strategy of the established left under scrutiny. Finally it is necessary to outline a perspective for the period ahead — one that is adequate to today's conditions because it can begin to confront the crisis facing the working class.

Chris Black

Capitalism on the attack

THE THATCHER era stands out as a period in which the capitalist class has pursued a ruthlessly confrontational approach. Mass unemployment, anti-trade union laws, police repression, and restrictions on civil liberties are just some of the features of the period from 1979 to 1987.

However, the Thatcher era has not been eight straight years of out and out confrontation.

Thatcher has moved carefully, concentrating her forces against one target before going on to attack the next. In between the big conflicts with the unions, she has launched propaganda campaigns designed to win wide backing for Tory policies.

ANIMOSITY

Thatcher's main set-piece battle in her first term was against the steelworkers. The Tory offensive against the unions was held up by the need to deal with the inner-city revolts of 1981 and the Irish hunger-strikes in the same year. But Thatcher was also concerned not to rush ahead before preparing the ground, by winning the arguments and strengthening the appeal of reactionary solutions. The Tories' main achievements in this period were in making 'union power' an object of public animosity and in beginning to popularise a chauvinist and individualistic outlook. Their success was remarkable. While unemployment soared at a rate unprecedented in recorded history, the government managed to deflect criticism by setting an agenda of public debate about the trade unions, law and order and extremism in the Labour Party.

The Tory victory in 1983 indicated that Thatcher had won the key arguments. She might not have endeared herself to most of the British public, but she had succeeded in discrediting Labour and in establishing the view that 'there is no alternative.' From this position of strength the Tories could step up the attack. After their 1983 victory the Tories moved on to a more direct offensive against the working class. In December 1983 the police broke up a mass picket of print workers at Eddie Shah's *Stockport Messenger* plant at Warrington. The anti-union laws which had been enacted but not widely used before the election now came into more frequent operation. In January 1984, Thatcher banned trade unions at GCHQ. In March the miners were provoked into a strike for which the employers and the government had long been preparing. The News International print workers were the next in line.

JINGOISM

Between 1983 and 1987 the Tories were even more successful in dealing with their opponents than they were in Thatcher's first term. There were times in the early eighties when the government was in real trouble. Throughout much of 1981 the Tories lagged behind in the polls and surveys indicated that Thatcher was the most unpopular prime minister in half a century.

David Rourke

GCHQ: THATCHER BANNED UNIONS IN 1984

The cabinet was deeply divided between loyal Thatcherites and an influential faction of 'wets' with substantial backbench support. By the end of the year the government was in a state of panic: the Falklands War came just in time in the spring of 1982 to provide the boost in support that allowed Thatcher to recover.

BRITTAN: RESIGNED

The Tories never reached such a low point after 1983, though they had their fair share of crises. Notable events were sexual scandals involving prominent Tory figures Cecil Parkinson and Jeffrey Archer, the Westland helicopter affair which led to the departure of cabinet ministers Michael Heseltine and Leon Brittan, and the scandal arising

Pandora Anderson

HESELTINE: RESIGNED

from the government's attempts to suppress revelations by a former MI5 agent in an Australian court. Yet the government always recovered: Thatcher no longer needed to launch a naval task force to consolidate her position.

Because the capitalist offensive has now been underway for some eight years it is easy to lose sight of what is at issue. For many people, Thatcher represents a special kind of Tory meanness and the unashamed celebration of privilege and wealth. The sentiment that 'we've got to get that woman out' is widely held and deeply felt among ordinary people.

The passions provoked by Thatcher's abrasive personality often blind people to the wider purpose of her government.

Thatcher is not such a unique political figure. She is distinguished by her success and effectiveness, not her brand of policies. Policies very similar to those being pursued by the Tory government in Britain are being followed throughout the Western world. All Western governments are presiding over mass unemployment, implementing cuts in services and privatisation measures, tightening up law and order, imposing anti-trade union regulations and promoting reactionary morality. Socialist governments in France, Spain and Greece have implemented policies which are virtually indistinguishable from those of the British Tories. As one influential journalist has observed, Thatcher is very much part of an international pattern:

'Thatcherite economic policies are not very different from or better or worse than, those to which other European governments, whether called conservative as in Germany, or socialist as in France, have found their way.' (S Brittan, *Financial Times*, 15 November 1984)

CRUSADE

The capitalist offensive is not the property of any nation or party. It is the consequence of the economic crisis which has afflicted the Western world for almost 15 years. But the Thatcherite crusade does mark a radical departure from the norms of capitalist rule established in Britain over the post-war years.

Since the Second World War, there have been two distinct phases in the way in which the British capitalist class has exercised its rule. The first phase corresponded to the period of post-war expansion and the early stages of recession up to 1979. During these years, especially in the fifties and sixties, the British establishment managed its affairs through a political framework which sought to achieve consensus. Consensus politics involved a continuous dialogue between the state, the unions and the employers. These three parties were drawn together in a range of institutions designed to establish joint responsibility for the running of the system.

Consensus politics relied on the involvement of labour in the management of British capital.

COSY

In return for supporting the broad objectives of the capitalist class, the leadership of the labour movement received concessions and status. In these years the employers and successive governments built up the trade union leadership as a means of containing conflict in industry. The aim of consensus politics was to forge a common approach on most of the key political questions facing British capitalism, and to limit class conflict to the narrow sphere of wage negotiation. In effect trade union officials were charged with the task of containing the working class. *Capitalist domination was exercised indirectly through the union leadership.*

This arrangement suited the labour leadership perfectly. The TUC established a cosy relationship with British employers, and the union leaders became closely involved with the promotion of government policies. The establishment accepted the official labour movement as a legitimate institution of the realm, and union leaders won unprecedented status for services to the state. This newfound influence had a profound effect on the labour movement leadership, which became increasingly reliant on its connections with state institutions. While the trade union leaders turned into a branch of personnel management, the Labour Party became the party of the state. All of its distinctive policies assumed state intervention. Nationalisation, incomes policy, and welfare measures all presupposed a close relationship between the labour bureaucracy and the state.

The give-and-take atmosphere of the consensus years reached its peak in the social contract under the last Labour government between 1974 and 1979. It has been shattered in the Thatcher era. A new phase began with the deepening of economic recession after 1979 and the election of a Tory government. The forms of political rule perfected in the previous two decades could not survive the recession.

The capitalist class could no longer afford to let the state prop up unprofitable enterprises and keep up social services. The crisis itself, not the personalities of politicians, forced the employers to adopt ruthless methods to shake out industry and force people out of work. The state was obliged to impose harsh restrictions on welfare spending to ensure that resources were concentrated in the hands of the capitalist class. In such circumstances consensus politics made little sense. The labour bureaucrats, who thrived on the strength of their relations with the state, became an obstacle to those who wanted to 'roll back' the state. The capitalist establishment needed to bring compromise to an end and to adopt a *more direct form of class domination.*

Thatcher is the personification of this approach.

Many politicians who were used to the old methods of negotiation and compromise could see little sense in Thatcher's aggressive class approach. Even Tory wets brought up on the culture of 'one nation' were shocked by the callousness of her government. The leaders of the labour movement were stunned. After more than 30 years of being made welcome in the corridors of power they were now given the cold shoulder. The *Economist* summed up the new attitude in response to an engineering dispute shortly after Thatcher first came to power: 'The government is sticking to non-intervention. There will be no beer and sandwiches at Downing Street for Mr Terry Duffy, president of the engineering union.' (22 September 1979)

HEARTLESS

Thatcher was not interested in friendly chats with union leaders. She was out to dictate new terms for their relations with the capitalist class. Thatcher's approach shattered a generation of union officials whose whole world was defined by negotiations and consultations. This was when Thatcher gained her image as a heartless and unbending 'Iron Lady'. But many observers have failed to grasp that Thatcher had little choice about adopting this approach. British capitalism was in a precarious state and it required extreme solutions. The survival of the system demanded that the working class be disciplined and that millions be kicked out of work. Thatcher was simply the person responsible for implementing the new form of class domination that was essential for the new requirements of British capitalism.

In fact Thatcher moved cautiously. During her first term she sought to set the stage for the new way of dealing with the working class. The far-reaching innovations in capitalist rule did not become evident until the miners' strike of 1984-85. Then, for the first time this century, the state intervened directly to defeat a group of workers. The police were given leave to make up the law, as they set about making it impossible to picket. The authorities even ensured that strikers did not receive social security benefits. The capitalist courts, which in the past had sought to maintain the pretence of neutrality, were pushed into the front line. Judges ordered the sequestration of trade union

'The crisis itself, not the personalities of politicians, forced the employers to adopt ruthless methods to shake out industry and force people out of work.'

THE MINERS WERE THE FIRST WORKERS FOR DECADES TO FEEL THE FULL FORCE OF THE STATE

Why Thatcher is winning

THE SIGNS of Thatcher's success are all around us. The trade unions have been seriously weakened and militants have become isolated in the workplace. Mass unemployment has bred passivity and bitterness, but not resistance. Social services have been cut back and parliament has passed repressive public order, immigration and anti-union legislation. The steelworkers, miners and printers have been defeated. The Labour Party has been forced out of entire regions of the country and the working class is more divided than at any time since the Second World War. It is true that the Tories have been helped by the ineptitude of Labour, the split in the anti-Tory vote through the emergence of the Alliance and by the insecurity bred by unemployment. But when all the excuses have been made, their record still looks impressive.

The key to the Tories' success is their effectiveness in defining the political agenda.

Thatcher has not just survived. She has forced the Labour Party to accept many of her policies. The *Sunday Times* gloated over the prime minister's achievement at the end of 1983:

'The single achievement of the Thatcher years has been the way the prime minister has moved the political battle on to her terrain. David Owen has discovered the radical potential of market economies and Neil Kinnock sounds more and more like a social democrat.' (Cited in *tns*, January 1984)

Thatcher has not only prevailed over her opponents but has also managed to re-educate them in her policies.

Many of the policies which were once central to the programme of the labour bureaucracy have been replaced by policies derived directly from the Tories.

SPOUTED

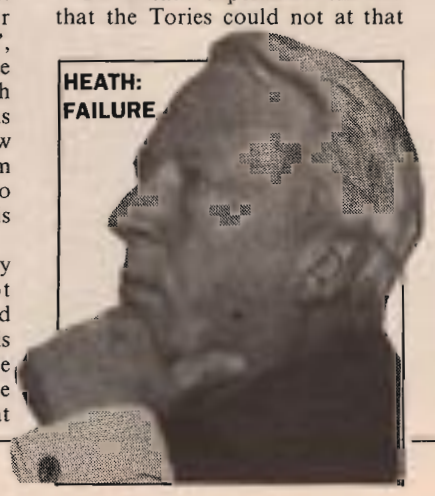
Labour's 1987 manifesto has the stamp 'inspired by Tory central office' on every page. The old left alternative economic strategy, the basis for Labour's policy documents since the early seventies, has been discreetly dumped. Nationalisation has been dropped from Labour's programme. Labour's promise to create one million jobs in two years really represents an acceptance of indefinite mass unemployment. Labour now accepts the need for anti-union legislation, and has adopted the law and order issue as its own. It supports the police, Nato and the armed forces. Following the Tories, Labour denounces 'picket-line violence', inner-city rioters and the struggle for Irish freedom. Views which would have been regarded as outrageous in Labour circles a few years ago are now spouted from Labour platforms without so much as a blink. How did this come about?

Contrary to the views of many radical pundits, it was not Thatcher or Tebbit who popularised the view that 'trade union power is responsible for the problems of the British economy.' Nor did the Tories establish the prejudice that 'workers on high wages have priced themselves out of a job and helped create unemployment.' Let's look at the matter more closely.

DISMAL

Until Thatcher took over at the head of the Conservative Party, the Tories had been singularly unsuccessful in dominating the political agenda. Back in the early seventies, the Tory government of Ted Heath attempted to pursue many of the policies associated with Thatcher. Heath promised to reduce the role of government in the economy and argued for a radical break with consensus politics. He was determined to confront the unions and keep wages down. Yet he failed dismally to realise his ambition and he was thrown out of office after provoking a wave of strikes and a major upsurge of anti-Tory sentiment.

The Heath experiment showed that the Tories could not at that time convince the majority of society that their case was just. Consequently, the Tory Party could not grasp the political initiative. But if the Tories could not produce a shift in working class attitudes, perhaps Labour could? The history of recent Labour governments shows just how important they were in preparing the ground for Thatcher.



HEATH: FAILURE

The identification of union power as a major problem for society has proved to be one of the most powerful propaganda weapons for the British establishment — and it was a Labour government that first focused on the issue. In the late sixties Harold Wilson and Barbara Castle launched a campaign around the document *In Place of Strife*, which blamed trade union militancy for Britain's poor economic perfomance. At the time the significance of this campaign was far from clear, especially as Wilson's attacks on the unions provoked significant resistance. But the damage had been done.

The Labour government of Wilson charted the way for the anti-union culture consolidated during the Thatcher era.

But the real damage was still to come. The main legacy of the Wilson-Callaghan Labour governments of 1974-1979 was to educate the working class to accept the realism of capitalist solutions to the crisis. The 1974-1979 Labour government anticipated the main themes of Thatcherism in many areas of policy. The major plank of the Labour government's strategy was the social contract, which provided a framework through which the working class would bear responsibility for the future of the British economy. The labour bureaucracy itself promoted the view that working class action would damage the economy unless the unions accepted the need for austerity and sacrifice.

PRUDENT

As early as November 1974, Labour leaders raised doubts about the growth of public expenditure, implying the importance of 'prudent housekeeping'. By February 1976 public sector wage increases were under government control, and Labour imposed cuts in state spending in July 1976. Though at first it was almost imperceptible, Labour was creating a climate in which the legitimacy of state intervention was brought into question.

In a major speech in January 1976, Roy Jenkins, then Labour home secretary, questioned whether the recent growth in public expenditure had reached a point at which it was possible to 'maintain the values of a plural society with adequate freedom of choice' (P Riddell, *The Thatcher Government*, p28). This identification of the capitalist market with the freedom of choice — now promoted through Tory policies as the 'right to buy', or the right to choose private health and education — was not the view of an eccentric minority within the Labour government. The whole Labour cabinet was soon to launch the experiment in monetarist economic policy which is widely believed to have begun under Thatcher.

JENKINS: THATCHERITE

Pandora Anderson

By September 1976 Callaghan was telling the working class that Britain could not spend its way out of the crisis. The message was clear — the market must override all considerations, austerity and mass unemployment were unavoidable. Between 1975 and 1976 unemployment doubled and by mid-1977 it was above 1.5 million. Finally in December 1976 chancellor Denis Healey accepted monetary targets and promised to reduce public spending. Monetarism had arrived. As one observer put it, 'If there has been a Thatcher experiment, it was launched by Denis Healey.' (Ibid, p59)

CALLAGHAN: MONETARIST

The last Labour government did not only introduce monetarism and mass unemployment. It was also responsible for raising many of the key issues that were subsequently to top Thatcher's political agenda. It passed the Prevention of Terrorism Act, which was used to harass thousands of Irish people living in Britain and helped foster the atmosphere in which the fiction of 'international terrorism' would gain currency. A Green Paper demanding tighter control over immigration, which Thatcher subsequently implemented as the Racist Nationality Act was another contribution of the Labour government. The Victorian values which Thatcher was to make her own were originally a central theme of Callaghan's appeal for public sympathy. In 1977, he declared that his aim was 'to strengthen the stability and quality of family life in Britain':

'We have got to pay much more attention than we have done in the past as to how industry organises women's role at work, so that her influence as the centre of the family, and the woman usually is the centre of the family...is not weakened.' (See E Wilson, 'Thatcherism and Women: After Seven Years' in *Socialist Register 1987*, p204)

Thatcher's morality was already firmly on the agenda way before the Tories were elected into office.

EDUCATING

Back in 1979 the significance of the Wilson-Callaghan era was far from clear. Labour's attempt to restrain the working class had only mixed success. The 1978-79 winter of discontent marked the limit of Labour's effectiveness in holding back working class aspirations. Sections of the British establishment believed that the labour bureaucracy had failed in its mission. Pointing to the strike wave during the winter of discontent the *Economist* observed that 'today's union leaders are shadows of their predecessors in the 1950s and 1960s. As they proved last winter, they cannot lead and cannot deliver' (6 October 1979). In fact the labour bureaucracy had played an important role in educating the working class to accept the premises of capitalist solutions to the crisis. By softening up the working class, Labour enabled the Thatcher era to get off to a good start. Half the battle was already won.

How the propaganda war was lost

LABOUR'S POPULAR NATIONALISM HELPED TO CREATE THATCHER'S FALKLANDS FACTOR

THATCHER could not simply carry on where Labour had left off. The cumulative effects of the British crisis required more drastic measures. British capitalism could not continue without the destruction of a major part of industry. The attack on the working class had to be speeded up and the balance of class forces had to be radically altered in favour of the bosses.

In embarking on her new course, Thatcher was conscious of the danger of resistance.

Although Labour had helped to pave the way it was unlikely that workers would welcome the devastating measures that Thatcher had in store. From the outset Thatcher understood that the kind of programme required by the system — unemployment, driving down living standards, cutting social services, shaking out industry — could not win the support of many people. On the contrary, these measures were likely to unleash hostility and resistance.

Thatcher concluded that to minimise the instability caused by her aggressive policies, it was necessary to mobilise as much popular support as possible around key themes that were identified by the Tories and promoted through the media. Thatcher's propaganda war skilfully exploited the fears and insecurities in society resulting from the recession. She selected trade union power, left-wing extremism, law and order, British chauvinism and Victorian family values as issues on which a new reactionary consensus could be created.

Despite the devastating impact of austerity and industrial collapse in the first Thatcher term, the prime minister succeeded in cultivating a climate of reaction around her chosen issues. However, she did not have things all her own way. The rapid rise of unemployment and the equally precipitous collapse of industry inevitably provoked a storm of protest. By 1981 even sections of the Tory Party were expressing alarm at the scale of the destruction of industry. Thatcher herself became deeply hated and mistrusted not just by workers but also by some middle class people. Nevertheless, Thatcher was able to keep a grip on the situation. How did she do it?

Although Thatcher faced widespread criticism, she never confronted a coherent alternative.

The Labour Party could do nothing to make unemployment or spending cuts into a political issue. Labour's criticism of the Tories lacked conviction because Wilson and Callaghan had carried out similar measures with similar results when they were in office. Labour's alternative policies had been so far discredited by experience that the Tories had no problems in savaging them. In the absence of any apparent political alternative, unemployment was increasingly accepted as an unpleasant fact of life.

Thatcher's opponents could not offer an alternative to her economic policies. On the contrary, in their attempts to argue against Tory policies, Labour only confirmed their legitimacy. All the main arguments against Thatcher were based on the premise that her policies violated the 'national interest'. Instead of advocating a strategy which sought to defend the exploited from their exploiters, Labour offered the alternative of economic nationalism.

DISARMED

The central assumption of economic nationalism was that it was possible to revive British industry and at the same time protect the interests of workers. Labour suggested that profits could be restored, living standards maintained and jobs preserved — all at the same time. In fact capitalist industry could achieve profitability only if it made workers redundant and only if living standards were slashed. By suggesting that it was possible to reconcile the interests of workers and capitalists through a different set of policies for running industry, Labour persuaded workers to identify with the state of their industry instead of their class interests. Unions which took responsibility for the future of their industry were disarmed when they were told that the survival of their factories required job losses and redundancies. Economic nationalism thus ideologically softened up the workforce before the Tory offensive.

The official labour movement offered no class alternative to the Tories. Both right and left wings of the movement could speak only in terms of the national interest. This is how the moderate TUC bureaucrat David Lea appealed to the employers' organisation, the Confederation of British Industry, to cooperate with the unions in the sphere of economic policy:

'This is an area of policy where the TUC and the CBI must begin to take action together because if we do so the government will surely see that the interests of the country as a whole are at stake.' (*The Times*, May 1980)

As he pointed the finger the Tories, Tony Benn also waved the flag with his spare hand: 'The anxieties in the Tory Party was because they saw the destruction of British industry in the interests of allowing international market forces to work their way through as an act which could only be called a sort of economic treachery.' (*The Times*, 29 February 1980)

Benn's close colleague Eric Heffer pleaded that the crisis should be 'dealt with on the basis of equality throughout the whole community'. His main criticism of the government was that it 'put the full burden on to the shoulders of ordinary working people'. (*The Times*, 28 March 1980)

Appeals to the interest of the nation or the 'whole community', even from the left, cannot challenge the Tories. This line of argument can only strengthen the nationalist outlook inside the labour movement, sustaining the myth that British workers and capitalists have something in common and helping to suppress the class point of view. It also plays into the Tories' hands. In a contest between patriots the true-blue Tories are bound to come out on top. They can take the argument a step further and insist that the trade union movement is a divisive force in the community which must be curbed in the national interest.

With their economic nationalist arguments, the Labour leaders inadvertently helped to consolidate Thatcherite reaction.

While the opposition protested that Tory economic policy was devastating the nation, Thatcher pressed ahead with her propaganda campaign. The Falklands War provided the perfect opportunity to consolidate the emerging reactionary consensus. At a time when Thatcher was leading the nation into battle, Labour's whining about her supposedly unpatriotic policies sounded pathetic indeed. The new spirit of national unity against 'the Argies' allowed Thatcher to ride out the storm of protest about mass unemployment and the decline in the quality of life.

Many left-wing commentators surveying the impact of the Falklands Factor have tended to attribute the revival of Thatcher's fortunes exclusively to the war against Argentina. The connection between the Tories' 1983 electoral triumph and the war in the South Atlantic is undeniable. But the Falklands Factor cannot be reduced to one episode of militarism. Thatcher was only able to use the war to such good effect because a dangerously reactionary political climate already existed. The popular nationalist culture advocated by the labour bureaucracy was an important contributory factor.

While prominent left wingers recoiled from the jingoist excesses of the Falklands campaign, their own advocacy of British interests against the EEC and foreign imports had helped to establish chauvinism as an acceptable standpoint in the labour movement. But the main credit must go to Thatcher for her energetic pursuit of the battle of ideas in the period leading up to the battle for Port Stanley.

Thatcher's relentless barrage of abuse against the unions, the state bureaucracy, immigrants and other deviants appeared to make sense at a time of economic insecurity and social uncertainty. Major media debates on union power, crime statistics, hanging and family discipline stirred up popular prejudices. This was the Falklands Factor in the making. The Tories were cultivating a climate of opinion in which every assertion of working class interest could be dismissed as union blackmail or a threat to law and order.

The 'enemy within' already existed in the popular consciousness, long before Thatcher pinned the label on the striking miners two years after the Falklands War.

Labour's response to the Falklands Factor was predictable. Party leaders hoped that the war would soon recede into the background and that things would get back to normal. This naive hope was clearly articulated by Tony Benn:

'Now that the fighting is over, working people throughout Britain are thinking. Millions are expecting and demanding that the challenges of peacetime — the securing of jobs, housing, dignity and a future for our people — are met with a determination no less compromising than that which has been shown in the pursuit of war.' ('Never Again', *London Labour Briefing*, July 1982)

However, for Thatcher the fighting was only just beginning. The forces the Tories had mobilised against Argentina could now be directed against the 'enemy within'.

CONQUERORS

In June 1982 the *Economist* took the opportunity to remind the Conservative government that there was a lot to fight for:

'When the conquerors of Port Stanley return to those shores there might be no trains to whisk them home: a national rail strike is scheduled to begin on 28 June. The wounded and battle weary should not expect too much care and attention from the national health service: strike action by ancillary workers has reduced hundreds of hospitals to emergency and accident services only. Worse is to come: the coal miners are massing for another fight. Britain is still some way from being a land fit for heroes.' (19 June 1982)

Even the pro-Labour *Daily Mirror* wanted to use the new spirit of national unity for domestic purposes: 'The prime minister demonstrated over the Falklands that she can give single-minded, determined leadership. Now she must apply it to the country's other problems' (23 June 1982). And so she did.

TWIN-TRACK

At the height of the miners' strike in 1984 Neil Kinnock and his colleagues were taken aback when Thatcher turned the spirit of the South Atlantic into a weapon against the labour movement:

'Having fought the enemy without in the Falklands, the government has to fight the enemy within which is more difficult to fight and more dangerous to liberty. The miners' strike is an attack on democracy and the rule of law. The country must stand firm and militancy must not win.' (July 1984)

Although outraged at what he described as a slur against the miners, it was not long before Kinnock himself was upholding the 'rule of law' against militant strikers.

Thatcher's twin-track strategy was to get on with the unpopular measures dictated by the needs of capital, and to deflect opposition by constructing a reactionary consensus supporting her ideas.

This is still in operation today. During the 1987 election campaign Labour was forced to keep quiet about defence in case its patriotic credentials were challenged by the Tories. And although millions were preoccupied by unemployment and feared for their future, they were also distracted by 'loony left' councils, the Aids scare, crime and a whole range of other diversions popularised by the Tories.

'Having fought the enemy without in the Falklands, the government has to fight the enemy within.' **Thatcher, July 1984**

David Rourke

Labour lets her off the hook

IT IS EASY to exaggerate the power of the Tories in the Thatcher years. Despite three major election triumphs and a string of victories against opponents at home, the Tories are not omnipotent. Nor are they as popular as the media suggest. Since Thatcher first came to power in 1979, electoral support for the Tories has fluctuated between 40 and 44 per cent. It is worth recalling that the Tories achieved their landslide election victory in 1983 with just 42.4 per cent of the popular vote — a fall of 1.5 per cent from 1979. Despite appearances the Tories have failed to capture many new supporters — they have simply managed to hold on to their electorate of 1979.

Despite their effectiveness in determining the terms of political discussion, the Tories are far from invincible. For example when they banned union membership at the government's GCHQ spy-centre in February 1984 they overplayed their hand. Thatcher's appeal to the demands of national security found little popular support. The Anglo-American air-strike on Libya in April 1986 exposed the myth of Thatcher the Invincible. Here was a favourite propaganda issue — the threat of international terrorism. For months the Tories had stirred up chauvinist prejudice against Libya's Colonel Gadaffi and sympathy for the police after a woman police constable was killed in a shooting incident outside the Libyan embassy in London. Yet the Anglo-American air-strike did not generate the anticipated response. It was a profoundly unpopular act: millions of British people were outraged at this barbarous attack on Libyan cities. Opinion polls showed that more than two thirds of the electorate were opposed to the air-raid.

The air-raid on Libya showed that popular support for Thatcherite reaction does not run very deep. But this event was also instructive in another respect. It revealed the secret of Thatcher's ability to recover from setbacks.

The initial public response to the air-strike was one of horror and sympathy for the victims. Then Neil Kinnock and Denis Healey made their statements. They criticised the air-raid, not out of sympathy with the victims of imperialism, but on the grounds that it was an inept tactic. Kinnock argued that such an overt display of military aggression would strengthen Gadaffi's position in the Arab world rather than undermine it. He accepted that Gadaffi was a genuine problem — his criticism was of the methods used to deal with it. By accepting the premise of the Tory propaganda campaign against the Libyan bogey, Labour lost its credibility. It thus ensured that the popular sentiment against the air-strike never acquired a coherent political focus. It let the Tories off the hook.

The Libya incident confirmed that the strength of the Tories depends on the weakness of the opposition.

There are a number of reasons for Labour's weakness — some of which will be considered later. But one crucial failing which the Thatcher period has exposed is that the political programme of Labourism is exhausted. The capitalist crisis has brought home the irrelevance of traditional Labour solutions: the last Labour government confirmed this programmatic failure. Since 1979 Labour has faced a crisis of policy. Any serious attempt to work out policies for running British capitalism meant adopting the main planks of Thatcher's platform. But Labour could not draw this conclusion without risking the loss of its political identity.

For a time Labour tried to hang on to its old Keynesian tradition of state intervention. But after the 1983 electoral debacle Labour knew that such policies would doom it to irrelevance. The new Kinnock/Hattersley party leadership recognised that the traditional economic programme had to be ditched. There could be discussion about how policy was presented, but the substance was beyond question. The substance of the policies now adopted by Labour was nothing more nor less than the outlook of the Conservative government.

Labour signalled its conversion to Thatcherite economics in the summer of 1985 with the publication of a major policy statement, *A New Partnership, A New Britain*. The *Financial Times* was enthusiastic:

'Overall it seems likely that Labour will end up with a modified version of Reaganomics, with increased public investment the priority rather than tax cuts and a fairly firm monetary and exchange rate policy to hold inflation in check' (6 August 1985). The only major remaining difference between Labour and the Tories was over the level of taxation. On all other issues, government and opposition were united by the commitment to prudent housekeeping.

The intense hatred of the Thatcher government has allowed the convergence between the Tory and Labour programmes to escape attention within the working class.

Even during the 1987 election campaign many Labour supporters were convinced that their party's economic policy was radically different from that of the Tories. While the financial press celebrated Labour's open endorsement of capitalist policies, labour movement activists continued to live in a world of make-believe.

CARICATURE

The transformation of Labour's programme also meant the demise of its left-wing variant, the alternative economic strategy. No less a personage than 'Red Ken' Livingstone pronounced the last rites:

'The perspective around which the Labour left fought for a decade, that of revitalising welfare capitalism through the alternative economic strategy, is dead. It has been killed by the international recession.' (*Guardian*, 23 September 1985)

To this day the left has no plausible policies on economic matters. Whenever economic issues are discussed the left sounds like a caricature of itself. In the era of transnational corporations and international money markets, the left takes its stand on what used to be called municipal socialism. To project local authority enterprise as the engine of economic growth in the eighties is absurd. Yet, for Livingstone and the left, this has become an article of faith:

'Essentially we have to convince people we can save the economy. The Prescott line of local job creation is a popular way ahead. The leadership must give a higher profile to this approach. People have much more trust in their local councils to create jobs than the large corporations.' ('How Labour Can Win', *Chartist*, May/June 1987)

PARALYSIS

It is a symptom of the moral and political paralysis of the Labour left that it argues such nonsense. As long as job creation by local authorities is put forward in all seriousness as the solution to the crisis, Thatcher can comfortably look forward to a fourth term in office.

The left's lack of any coherent alternative economic policy is indicative of its dearth of distinctive policies on most issues.

This incoherence is not the result of intellectual decay or a lack of imagination. It is the consequence of the fact that any party which aspires to run British capitalism is forced to accept — at least in substance — the Thatcherite conclusions.

The only option open to a party like Labour is to shift emphasis towards the sort of populist demands that can be reconciled with a capitalist economic strategy. Thus Labour can argue against tax cuts and demand that the resources be spent on jobs or the health service. In reality this policy is little more than a gesture, because creating jobs under capitalism requires industrial investment in profitable enterprises. Nevertheless, such gestures can be offered as a caring alternative to Thatcher.

The left advances similar populist gestures on other issues. Instead of challenging British nationalism, Labour seeks to give it a populist twist. Ken Livingstone argues that Labour's defence policy should be promoted through the 'idea of standing up for Britain and rejecting the Tory approach of being a doormat for the United States' (*Chartist*, May/June 1987). Instead of challenging British chauvinism the left tries to use it for its own ends. Of course it is easy to mobilise anti-American prejudice. But in the long run such sentiments can only serve the cause of reaction. The Tories have perfected the technique of turning all forms of chauvinism against domestic opponents.

The failure of the Labour Party to come up with an alternative means that it cannot effectively oppose Thatcher. That is why Thatcher has survived one crisis after another. On more than one occasion Thatcher has faced a major setback if not a defeat. Throughout 1986 the government reeled from one crisis to another. The year opened with the Westland scandal and ended with the MI5 affair. But if Thatcher was having problems, the opposition was in no position to exploit the situation. So she has survived.

VULNERABLE

Whenever she faces problems Thatcher knows that she can fall back on key issues where her opponents are very vulnerable. She can denounce picket-line violence at Wapping one week, then go on and demand that Kinnock dissociate himself from Scargill the next. She can then raise the stakes by claiming that the extremists are still running the Labour Party. Thatcher can be certain that instead of standing up and fighting back, Kinnock will react by denouncing the boot-boys on the picket lines and expelling members of his own party.

In the year leading up to the 1987 election Labour compounded its weakness by attempting to emulate the Tories. Party leaders constantly emphasised realism, respectability and tried desperately to avoid controversy. Kinnock told the world that he was a solid family man who had once considered joining the police. Labour's patriotism was put on frequent public display and the Labour frontbench began to criticise the Tories for not doing enough about crime. Kinnock hoped that this new moderate image would help him to outflank Thatcher. In fact the result was the exact opposite.

The more Labour began to sound like a party of Tory wets, the more it became susceptible to Tory pressure.

TREACHERY

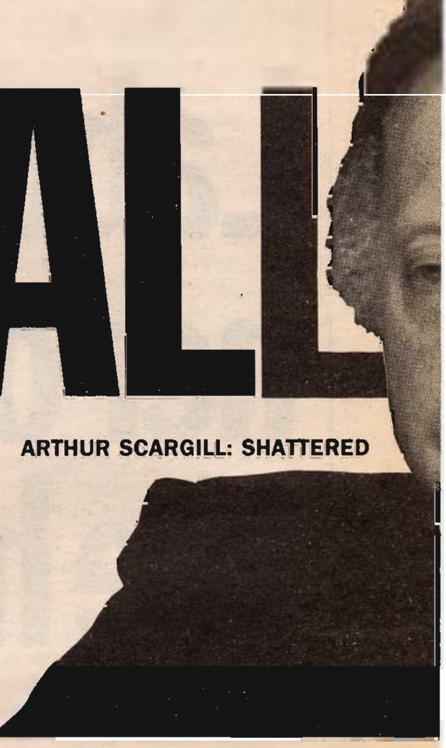
In effect Labour has volunteered to be measured by Tory standards. The consequences were all too apparent during the scandal over Thatcher's attempt to ban Peter Wright's revelations about MI5. The government made one mistake after another, making Britain a laughing stock around the world. It took considerable skill for the opposition to make no capital out of this scandal. Yet Kinnock managed it. Thatcher got Kinnock on the run over his allegedly disloyal phone conversation with Wright's lawyer in Australia. Having accepted Tory standards of behaviour, Kinnock became vulnerable to every accusation of treachery which Thatcher chose to make.

The confidence of Thatcher does not stem from any internal strengths of the Tory Party. Her continued influence over British political life is made possible by opponents who do not know the meaning of the word 'oppose'. The ultimate secret of Thatcher's power is to be found not in Tory central office in Smith Square, but at Labour's HQ in Walworth Road. Having looked at the broad trends of the Thatcher era, we can now turn to explore their effects on the working class.

David Rourke

THE REVOLUTIONARY COMMUNIST PARTY ORGANISED A 2000-STRONG DEMO AGAINST THE US/BRITISH AIR-STRIKE

THE UNIONS FALL FROM GRACE



ARTHUR SCARGILL: SHATTERED

EIGHT YEARS of Tory rule have wrought devastation on the official labour movement. During the last Labour government trade union membership reached an all-time peak, union leaders enjoyed close relations with ministers, senior civil servants and industrialists, and parliament passed a series of laws which strengthened union organisation. Today union membership has fallen by around a third, and union leaders are treated by the establishment with ill-concealed contempt, when they are not simply ignored. Anti-trade union legislation has provided hostile employers with powerful weapons with which to undermine union organisation and militancy.

The contrasts between the late seventies and the late eighties are dramatic.

As leader of the transport workers' union, Jack Jones played a leading role with Harold Wilson in drawing up and implementing the social contract. At the TUC Len Murray was consulted by the government over everything from the budget to the latest industrial dispute. He was treated with the respect appropriate to somebody of ministerial rank by the media and hardly a night passed when he did not appear on national television. Today's TGWU leader Ron Todd is so much a prisoner of warring factions inside his own union that he can exert little influence inside the TUC or the Labour Party, never mind on wider matters of state. Norman Willis, TUC general secretary, is widely regarded as figure of fun and is scarcely known by the general public.

Successive Labour defeats have gravely undermined the confidence and coherence of the leadership of the official labour movement.

SQUEEZED

In the 1979 general election less than half the manual workers who went to the polls voted Labour. Many, particularly the younger and more skilled workers, voted Conservative. The swing against Labour was highest in areas where workers were relatively well-paid and differentials had been squeezed by Labour's incomes policies — in the West Midlands and the South-east.

The 1979 defeat was widely regarded as a setback, but not a disaster. Everybody pointed to the winter of discontent, putting the balance of blame on the Callaghan government or on the public sector unions, according to their prejudices.

Yet the unions were still powerful, the Labour Party was still solid and the Tory majority was not overwhelming. Left-wing MP Stuart Holland summed up the emerging consensus in the radical post-mortem on the election:

'It is possible that current Tory policies will result in such a slump and such social discontent as to put Labour in a position to win the next election with a decisive majority.' (In K Coates ed, *What Went Wrong?*, 1979)

But it was the Tories who won a decisive majority in 1983.

The Tory landslide was a bitter blow both to the hopes of the union leaders and to the dreams of the left. The election took place after the most drastic ever shake-out of labour in British industry, with unemployment at around three million. The unions were on the defensive after suffering setbacks at the hands of the employers, and the Labour Party was reeling from the 1981 breakaway of the founders of the Social Democratic Party. Under the leadership of Michael Foot, the Labour vote slumped to 27 per cent — only two per cent better than the new SDP/Liberal Alliance. Labour seats were now largely confined to Scotland, South Wales, the North and the inner cities. Polls suggested that less than half the unemployed and only 39 per cent of trade unionists voted Labour.

SALVAGE

While academics and journalists discussed the decline of the traditional working class and asked whether Labour was destined to disappear, senior trade unionists launched a salvage operation. Retiring electricians' leader Frank Chapple bluntly summed up the choice facing the unions as 'socialism or survival' and he was in no doubt which they should choose:

'So long as trade union leaders elevate the idea of socialism above all else, the greater the risk to the future of the trade union movement.' (*Guardian*, 17 June 1983)

He demanded a 'fundamental change' in the Labour Party, insisting that this meant 'jettisoning extremist policies, ousting infiltrators, regaining the nation's trust and evolving a new relationship with the trade union movement'. Within months the union leaders had installed the new leadership of Neil Kinnock which followed faithfully the agenda set out by Chapple.

The left took much of the blame for the 1983 defeat. Its policies of support for nationalisation, unilateral nuclear disarmament and withdrawal from Europe were widely regarded as big vote losers. The left's campaigns to reform Labour's constitution and to elect Tony Benn as deputy leader were held to have created a public image of internal party strife. Yet the left lived to fight another day. It retained its popular campaigns such as CND, its bases in local government in London, Liverpool, Sheffield and elsewhere, and still had friends like Benn and Heffer on Labour's national executive and Scargill (miners), Buckton (train-drivers) and Knapp (rail-workers) at the top of major unions.

The outcome of the 1987 election may be better in electoral terms than that of 1983, but in terms of the wider implications for the labour bureaucracy the latest defeat is much more serious.

EROSIVE

The last time Labour lost three elections in a row was 1959, but that was in a period of steady economic expansion and rising living standards. The 1987 defeat opens up a third Tory term and a renewed capitalist offensive after eight years of unprecedented mass unemployment, austerity and employers' attacks, with the erosive effects on the labour movement this has entailed. Labour may have succeeded in reducing the Tory majority in parliament, but the result confirms Labour's shrinking social and geographical base and the party's chronic inability to challenge Thatcher's ruthless capitalist programme.

Shattered by the miners' strike and Wapping, the union leaders now preside over crumbling and demoralised organisations. Since the abolition of the GLC, the demise of Militant Liverpool and the fiasco of the rate-capping campaign, the left has lost its municipal power-base. The old Broad Left union leaders have now either retired or retreated into ineffectual isolation and even CND can no longer rally hundreds of thousands. On 11 June even the slickest packaging could not sell Kinnock to the British electorate, or even to a majority of the working class. After eight years of Thatcher all Labour's bluffs have been called and the left has nowhere left to hide.

Scrambling for survival

OVER THE Thatcher years, the trade union leaders have pursued three more or less distinct approaches in their response to the Tory offensive. In the early eighties they put considerable faith in the possibility of a 'U-turn' in government policy, as the result of a change of heart by Thatcher or of the triumph of the wets inside the cabinet. Union leaders appealed repeatedly for a return from confrontation to consensus.

While they have never given up pleading for consultations, by the time victory in the South Atlantic was secure in the summer of 1982, the bureaucrats recognised that Thatcher and the Thatcher style was here to stay. Hence they turned to put more emphasis on reshaping the Labour Party and trying to popularise its alternative policies at national, industry and local level. After the debacle of the 1983 election, the philosophy of 'new realism' swept the trade union leadership. The combination of company union methods in the workplace with acquiescence to anti-union laws dominates the outlook of the unions in the late eighties.

1. Pleading for mercy

THATCHER'S government marked a radical break in relations between the unions and the state. She made clear that she had no intention of personally intervening in industrial disputes to achieve negotiated solutions in the style of her Labour — and even Tory — predecessors. Traditional pre-budget consultations became increasingly perfunctory. In November 1982 the prime minister issued a confidential memo to the cabinet office concerning appointments to public bodies. She specified that 'no trade unionists should be included' on Royal Commissions and other national bodies. She made clear that the intention was not to exclude the unions entirely, but to reduce the status of their representation: 'Whenever the need arises for the services of a trade unionist there are special arrange… hoc consultation.' (S… *Taking Control*, p22…

In its 1980 *Econom…* TUC begged the T… back from their o… the labour moveme…

'There is no answ… tation. Solutions for… have to be found … But agreement … possible if our peop… that we are part of a… interests. Britain, th… the longest industr… union tradition, ca… successfully if there… consensus among o…

When persuasion … the government, … leaders resorted to … Sid Weighell, the m… workers' leader, thr… a general strike if t… refused to adopt a m… attitude towards t… 1982 David Basnet… figure in the TUC a… general and muni… union, warned the … danger of riot and … they continued … aggressive policies.

The TUC's desp… only gave the T… confidence to pres… the attack.

BLUFF

They red… the nat… interests to e… depicted the un… obstacle … When the… union leaders could … support of … strikes and d… the govern… W… pursued t… capitalist c… openly th… TUC t… nostalgia for the … begged for a return … of class col…

> ***'While the Tories pursued th… interests of the capitalist class … TUC took refuge in nostalgi… and begged for a return to ol… style class collaboration.'***

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Events in 1981 gave some glimmer of hope to the union leaders. The miners lined up with the coal board and used the threat of strike action to force the government to back down, at least temporarily, on its pit closure plans, and to increase investment in the industry. The summer riots gave the TUC an opportunity to show that it could make a positive contribution to social stability by policing the unemployed in a network of unemployment centres.

AIR-STRIKE

However, in 1982 the last shreds of optimism vanished. The Tories stepped up the legislative attack with Norman Tebbit's Trade Union Bill. Over the same weekend in April that the TUC held its special Wembley conference to rally opposition to the new laws, Thatcher despatched the naval task force to the South Atlantic. By the end of the summer, the warships were returning displaying banners which were eagerly relayed to the nation, threatening 'Call off the rail strike, or we'll call an air-strike.' In August the TUC decide on an indefinite boycott of talks with the employment minister — a measure which certainly hurt the unions more than it offended Tebbit.

While the term 'U-turn' has disappeared from the bureaucrats' vocabulary, they have never quite given up hope of a return to the traditions of the social contract. Whenever employers impose mass redundancies or changes in working practices the bureaucrats protest, not so much at the attack on living standards, but at the lack of consultation with union officials. When disputes break out, the union leaders declare their preference for a negotiated solution, rather than a trial of strength.

JAW-JAW

Throughout the long months of the miners' strike and the dispute at Wapping, there was scarcely a day when some sort of talks or talks about talks were not in progress. The most bitter charge union leaders bring against new-style bosses like Ian MacGregor and Rupert Murdoch is that they refuse to stick to established procedures for conducting disputes.

Union officials are tireless in their pursuit of conciliatory talks; they are rarely to be found mobilising effective action to achieve workers' demands.

2. 'Alternative' capitalism

IN 1981 the TUC published a consultative document entitled *The Organisation, Structure and Services of the TUC*. This document proposed various measures to strengthen the TUC machine to face up to a twofold challenge:

'The first is to campaign for the TUC's alternative policies to ensure economic and social advance...the other is to ensure that the movement is ready to enter into discussions with any government that puts full employment and rising living standards at the top of its agenda.'

Once all prospect of a Tory U-turn had vanished, the only government likely to put the policies of the TUC anywhere near the top of the agenda was a future Labour government. Between 1981 and 1983 the unions devoted considerable resources to promoting their alternative policies and to strengthening links with the Labour Party.

VICARS

The trade union leaders' alternative policies offered solutions to the problems of the recession at national, sectoral and even at company and plant level. The bureaucrats' policies were alternatives both to the capitalist strategy being pursued by the Tories and to any anti-capitalist strategy which might gain working class support. At national level the TUC proposed a programme of increased public expenditure, centralised planning, import and price controls and industrial democracy. The TUC claimed that this scheme could lead to industrial regeneration and economic expansion. It could also, the bureaucrats claimed, create jobs and a more fair and equal society.

Every union put forward alternative policies appropriate to its particular sector, following the same lines as the TUC's national strategy.

At local level, union officials got together with sympathetic academics, councils and politicians, even with vicars, managers and local shopkeepers, to devise alternative plans to justify keeping open some threatened factory, pit, school or hospital. These alternative plans aimed to justify trade union resistance in defence of workers' living standards on economic grounds. In some cases, for example, the South Yorkshire 'Save Our Steel' campaign in 1982 or the Consett Crusade in 1983, and in numerous campaigns against pit closures, the alternatives won widespread support in the threatened communities. Indeed, given the indifference of the government and the employers at national level to the TUC's initiatives, it was at local level that this approach had most effect — and did most damage to the struggle to defend jobs.

The alternative plans redefined the object of trade union action. Workers were no longer fighting to force the employer to meet workers' demands. The aim of these campaigns was to persuade the employer or the government to safeguard the future of a particular firm, industry or service by adopting a different set of policies for running it.

SACRIFICES

Employers and managers generally welcomed union attempts to find a mutually satisfactory way of guaranteeing the future of their enterprise or service, but rejected the union alternative plans as unrealistic. They then asserted that the only way the commonly agreed goal of a more efficient operation could be achieved was through redundancies, even closures, and through various ways of intensifying exploitation, by introducing flexible working and raising productivity.

Union officials who started out trying to work out a scheme which would protect both worker and employer ended up negotiating over the scale of sacrifices in workers' jobs, wages and conditions required to achieve the employer's goal of economic viability.

At both national and local level the trade union leaders' promotion of alternative strategies led to stronger links with the Labour Party. For the TUC leaders the Labour Party was the only instrument for reopening the doors into the corridors of power from which they had been excluded by the Tories. At local level the Labour Party offered the resources of its MPs and councils to union officials seeking assistance in developing and publicising plans to save local industries and services. After 1979 the union leaders stepped in to sort out the Labour machine. They reorganised its finances and brought in former union official Jim Mortimer to run the revamped apparatus from the party's new Walworth Road headquarters. The top-level TUC/Labour Party liaison committee formulated the details of the common alternative strategy of both wings of the labour movement.

Labour's defeat in 1983 was a setback for the project of using Labour to advance alternative strategies. Under the new Kinnock leadership after 1983 the Labour Party gradually abandoned the alternative strategy approach in favour of a set of policies which made no pretence of safeguarding the particular concerns of the working class. Union officials continued to pursue the alternative plan approach at local level, in response to threatened closures such as Gartcosh and Ravenscraig steelworks and the Caterpillar tractor plant in Scotland, with uniformly disastrous results.

BRENDA DEAN: TALKS ABOUT TALKS

ERIC HAMMOND: RIGHT-WING NEW REALIST

3. New realism

THE IMPACT of the 1983 defeat, together with the mounting evidence of fragmenting union organisation at the grassroots, combined to produce the mood of 'new realism' that overwhelmed the 1983 TUC congress. A chastened TUC talked of the need to come to terms with the harsh realities of a hostile economic climate, a hostile government and hostile public opinion. The TUC leaders pondered the problem of a membership which no longer shared the traditional loyalties of the movement and was increasingly indifferent to the fate of its established institutions. The union chiefs talk of the need for 'reasoned discussion' and 'partnership with the elected government.

At its special conference at Wembley in April 1982 the TUC voted to defy the Tories' anti-union legislation. It was fashionable at the time for union leaders to declare that they would go to prison rather than succumb to such viciously anti-working class laws. In practice employers, who recalled how Tory industrial relations legislation had been defeated by militant unions in the early seventies, were reluctant to rush to put the new legislation to the test. However, once the Tory landslide revealed a much more favourable balance of forces, it was not long before the newspaper proprietor Eddie Shah took on the print unions in the first major attempt to use the new laws in an industrial dispute. This dispute also provided the TUC with the first opportunity to display the new realism in action.

SURRENDER

In December 1983 the National Graphical Association called a 24-hour national print strike in solidarity with six of its members who had been sacked at Shah's *Stockport Messenger* for attempting to form a closed shop. The strike call was in explicit defiance of an injunction under the Employment Act. When a TUC subcommittee voted to support the stoppage, Murray intervened to call it off.

In the spirit of the new realism Murray ruled that the law must be obeyed, even if this meant surrendering to a law that set back union rights by half a century.

During the miners' strike the leaders of the TUC and the Labour Party repeatedly reinforced the Tories' propaganda attack on the miners over the issue of picket-line violence. Every time the Tories proclaimed the sanctity of law and order, the leaders of the official labour movement insisted that the miners must obey the courts and the police, even when this meant the imposition of virtual martial law in the coalfields, the sequestration of union funds, thousands of arrests and dozens of imprisonments. Once the strike was over the right-wing leaders of the engineers and the electricians set about pushing the TUC away from its Wembley posture of defiance of the law into open compliance with state interference in union affairs.

SEDUCED

In an attempt to seduce the unions into acquiescence with the new framework of legislation, the Tories had long offered government funds to finance union elections and strike ballots. As part of its Wembley defiance of the whole Tory package, the TUC had insisted that no union should accept such funds. At the 1985 TUC engineers' leader Gavin Laird told other union leaders that his union had voted to apply for Tory funds. He was supported by Eric Hammond of the electricians, but bitterly criticised by other union leaders. Some demanded the expulsion of the right-wing rebels from the TUC if they refused to toe the established TUC line. However, Laird and Hammond pointed to the facts that the TUC and individual unions already accepted large sums of Tory money for education and other purposes, that several unions had already discreetly flouted the Wembley stand by conducting ballots on closed shops and other issues, and that all the unions could badly do with the money.

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'The union bureaucrats' response to the 1983 election defeat was to tighten up the Labour Party machine and shift policy to win the approval of middle class public opinion.'

For a few hours the TUC teetered on the brink of expelling the rebels and creating a major rift in the official union movement. It then decided not to expel the engineers and the electricians, but instead to adopt their abject collaboration with the Tories as official TUC policy. Within weeks Wembley was a dead letter and official union resistance to Tory anti-union laws was in ruins. When the 1986 TUC voted in support of a joint TUC/Labour Party document which accepted Tory-imposed ballots before strike action, capitulation to anti-union legislation was complete.

MURDOCH: NO BOTHER

The second area where new realism made its mark was in relations between employers and unions. Here again the leaders of the engineers and electricians pioneered a new style of company unionism, particularly in greenfield sites in the new technology sectors. In return for exclusive membership rights in such plants, the AEU and EETPU were prepared to give up the right to strike and to accept redundancies, victimisations, imposed wage settlements and totally flexible working conditions.

The TUC endorsed the company union approach.

In February 1984 it responded to the government ban on trade union membership at the GCHQ Cheltenham spy-centre by offering a no-strike deal in return for token union recognition — an offer contemptuously rejected by the employers. Again, at the beginning of the dispute at the News International plant at Wapping where Rupert Murdoch sacked 6000 print workers in January 1986, the TUC, in collaboration with the print unions, offered a comprehensive package of concessions which included giving up the right to strike and a great deal more. But Murdoch had already got all he wanted without the bother of having the print unions inside his new plant: he unceremoniously showed the TUC chiefs the door.

At first left wingers in the TUC were highly critical of the right's open endorsement of company union methods. But in 1984 the electricians' union fought back by exposing the complicity of other unions in similar arrangements. In February 1983 transport union leader Moss Evans had recommended no-strike deals in key public services under a future Labour government. The TGWU offered what amounted to a no-strike deal to Nissan following its decision to set up its new plant at Washington, County Durham. Dockers in the TGWU at Liverpool and Tilbury have accepted limitations on the right to strike. Within a few months the open class collaboration of the new realism had permeated all sections of the trade union movement.

RAMSHACKLE

The third area where new realism made an impact was on relations between the unions and the Labour Party. The bureaucrats' response to the 1983 defeat was to tighten up the Labour Party machine and shift policy to win the approval of middle class public opinion. Larry Whitty, formerly right-hand man to David Basnett at the general and municipal workers' union, was installed as Labour's new general secretary. His brief was to shake up Labour's ramshackle apparatus and to supervise the purge of the left. He came to play a key role in creating the framework for Kinnock's 1987 presidential-style election campaign and in crushing Militant, especially in Liverpool.

Basnett's former campaign, Trade Unions for a Labour Victory, was reborn as Trade Unions For Labour, its new title reflecting more modest ambitions after the defeats of recent years. The new campaign was restricted to fund-raising and a behind-the-scenes organisational role. It provides veteran union officials to assist Labour in election campaigns but keeps a low media profile, leaving the publicity work to Labour's team of media professionals.

The shift in official labour movement policy was codified in the two key documents approved by both the TUC and the Labour Party conferences in 1986. *Low Pay: Policies and Priorities* proposed a national minimum wage at the starvation level of £80 a week and signalled the joint commitment of unions and Labour Party to state regulation of wages. *People at Work: New Rights, New Responsibilities* confirmed Labour's commitment to uphold the interference of the law in trade union affairs along the lines popularised by the Tories since 1979.

POLICEMAN

Events in the months leading up to the 1987 general election have confirmed the state of panic and paralysis that now afflicts the official labour movement, particularly its trade union wing. Declining membership and income has pushed many unions, notably the AEU and the TUC itself, into financial crisis. The AEU has been forced to cut costs and lay off staff, while the TUC has been forced to consider selling Congress House and cut down on meetings and paperwork. The choice facing unions outside the more sheltered areas of the public sector is to merge (like Astms and Tass) or die in the increasingly competitive struggle for recruits. The TUC's main function has become to police inter-union conflicts in the desperate fight for survival.

Meanwhile, the Tories have stepped up the attack on the unions. The Green Paper *Trade Unions and Their Members* published in February proposes further legislative restrictions on the closed shop, the right to strike and on internal union affairs. The TUC's response indicated its beleaguered outlook:

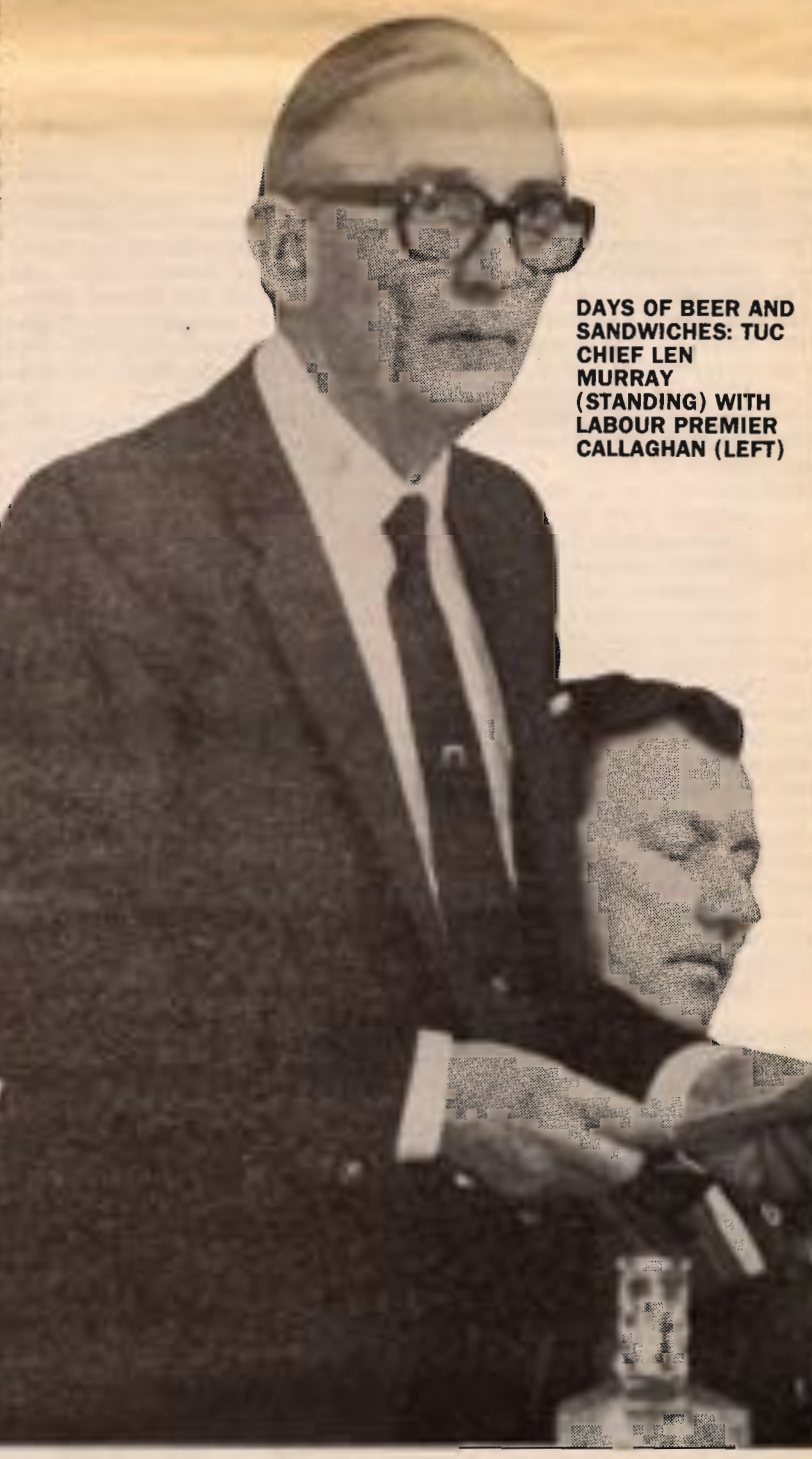
'It had to be recognised that the reported proposals were not likely to be electorally unpopular, and the TUC should not assist in heightening public awareness of them. The government clearly hoped to put unions on the defensive on issues on which it was difficult for the unions to respond effectively.'

The government had evidently succeeded in putting the TUC on the defensive: it concluded modestly that it 'should avoid making a high profile response to the government's plans at this stage'.

While the TUC considers itself incapable of campaigning against the government on the issue of trade union rights, it appears to have endless resources for campaigns which have no practical consequences for trade union members. For example, the TUC has now turned the anniversary of the destruction of trade union rights at GCHQ into an annual pilgrimage on a par with its celebration every year of the transportation of the Tolpuddle Martyrs from Dorset to Australia in the early nineteenth century. The labour bureaucracy's penchant for commemorating past defeats borders on the macabre. In May the TUC played a prominent role together with various showbiz personalities and the churches in organising Hands Across Britain, an attempt to form a human chain across the country in a symbolic protest against unemployment. The event was a flop.

As the election drew nearer, Labour's quest for respectability forced the unions to keep a lower and lower profile.

When the Tories stepped up their attack on the teachers by depriving them of negotiating rights as well as refusing to redress longstanding grievances over pay, Labour's education spokesman Giles Radice stepped in to demand that the teachers suspend industrial action until after the election. In the campaign itself the unions were nowhere to be seen. In 1974 the highpoint of Labour's election campaign was a joint rally in Liverpool starring Jack Jones and Harold Wilson. In the 1987 campaign it seemed as though Kinnock had personally paid for the entire TUC general council to spend a month in the Mediterranean.



DAYS OF BEER AND SANDWICHES: TUC CHIEF LEN MURRAY (STANDING) WITH LABOUR PREMIER CALLAGHAN (LEFT)

David Rourke

How the union chiefs helped to split our class

ONE OF THE most striking features of the demise of the labour bureaucracy is the eruption of conflicts within the trade union leadership in recent years. Squabbles over single union agreements and accusations of poaching members have become commonplace. More significantly, big disputes have led to major rifts both within unions and among TUC affiliates.

The miners' strike led to a split in the NUM and the formation of the breakaway Union of Democratic Mineworkers, led by former NUM officials based in the Nottinghamshire area. In the Wapping dispute, the employer directly recruited scab labour through the electricians' union to do jobs previously organised as the preserve of the print unions. Scab unions have emerged from a number of smaller disputes: the health service strike in 1982 led to the emergence of a breakaway ambulance drivers' union and greatly strengthened the position of the non-striking Royal College of Nurses; in the same year a group of railway workers refused to join a national strike and broke away from the NUR; the long-running dispute in the schools has led to the growth of non-striking professional associations among teachers.

The fragmentation of the trade union bureaucracy reflects important trends in the working class itself.

The recession and eight years of Tory government have fostered a sense of fear and insecurity with far-reaching consequences. On the one hand, mass unemployment and widening differentials within the working class have encouraged a sense of 'everyone for themselves' as everybody is forced to seek an *individual* way out in the struggle for survival. On the other hand, the capitalist offensive has provoked a resort to *collective* responses, particularly among the more militant sections of the working class.

Though the collective solutions offered by the traditional institutions of the labour movement have generally proved ineffective, the cynicism and indifference of the rest of the working class has reinforced the defensive loyalty of the activist minority to the trade unions and the Labour Party, under their existing leaderships. While it would be a mistake to emphasise one of these mutually reinforcing trends, in isolation, it would be equally foolish to ignore the way they have combined to forestall the emergence of a political response to the capitalist offensive from the working class. Let's look at the divergence in the working class in more detail.

'I'm alright Jack'

THERE HAS been much discussion in recent years of the restructuring of the working class, the decline in traditional manufacturing, the rise of the service sector, and the consequences for trade union identification and party allegiance. Much of this discussion is narrowly sociological and ignores the political consequences of the impact of the recession on the working class.

The people hit hardest by mass unemployment are young school-leavers and older men who have been made redundant from declining industries in declining areas. They are excluded from the world of work, isolated from the rest of society and neglected by the labour movement. The most likely route back into the labour market for these, or for anybody else, is through the expanding marginal areas of part-time, temporary, unskilled work in badly paid and insecure jobs, or through becoming self-employed. Women and black workers are disproportionately employed in these fringe sectors of the labour market.

MYTH

At the other end of the spectrum of working class life in Thatcher's Britain stand the success stories of popular capitalism. These are workers who have high-paying, secure jobs in some hi-tech plant or private service somewhere in the South-east. They own their own homes and a bulging portfolio of shares in British Telecom, British Gas and Rolls Royce. However, the prosperous worker is something of a myth: few jobs are secure in Britain's fragile economy and most of the consumer durables are on credit. Yet the myth helps to foster the spirit of rugged individualism throughout society.

In both the world of the upwardly mobile and that of the secondary labour market, trade unions have no existence, the Labour Party is an irrelevance and everybody lives on their own wits. The self comes first, followed in close succession by the family, the company and the nation.

The working class is regarded as an obsolete concept.

Much of the recent decline in union membership and workplace organisation is the result of a more aggressive management strategy. But it also indicates that many workers are now little concerned about whether or not they are in a union. Few identify strongly with traditions of trade union militancy.

The mortal blow to the miners' strike was not the refusal of many officials in the Notts area to back the national leadership; it was the fact that the great majority of Notts miners also decided to stay at work. The fact that up to a third of the miners never came out on strike doomed the year-long struggle from the start. With a few heroic exceptions, workers in other industries — on the railways, in the steelworks, on the docks, in road haulage — made no challenge to their own union leaders when they refused to organise effective solidarity with the miners. It was the same story at Wapping. While the electricians' union provided scabs for Murdoch, journalists, lorry drivers and even members of the print unions crossed the picket lines and helped to distribute Murdoch's papers with the complicity of their own union leaders.

In recent years it has become commonplace for trade unionists to cross picket lines set up by fellow trade unionists and to turn a blind eye to appeals for sympathetic action. In Thatcher's Britain the philosophy of individualism has deeply corroded the spirit of class solidarity.

The slump in the Labour vote in recent elections reflects the declining identification of workers with the traditional party of the labour movement. The fact that Labour won an increased share of the vote in the 1987 election does not contradict this trend. Since its landslide defeat in 1983 Labour has regained electoral support on a platform which denies any concern to advance the specific interests of the working class. Kinnock has constantly emphasised his commitment to British capitalism and his popularity is based largely on the strength of hostility to the Thatcher government.

Labour's success in the series of trade union ballots on the political levy held under the new Tory legislation in 1985 and 1986 illustrates this point. When the ballots began there were widespread fears that, given opinion polls which showed that Labour voters were in a minority in several unions which had long supported Labour, the results would bankrupt the party. The union leaders ran a series of campaigns which scarcely mentioned the Labour Party, but presented the issue as a question of democracy in the abstract. Indeed the bureaucrats cynically blurred two quite distinct issues — the right of a union to maintain a political fund in general and the payment of such a fund to the Labour Party in particular. The results were uniformly favourable to the bureaucrats, but having presented the issue as one of abstract democracy, they could scarcely claim that the results indicated loyalty to Labour among union members.

VICTORIAN

A final factor which both reflects and reinforces the individualistic outlook of a growing section of the working class is the resonance for the campaigns of reaction which the Tories and the media have promoted. There has always been a strong residue of support for Church, King and Country in the more backward sections of the working class, and the Tory Party has assiduously cultivated it ever since workers got the vote on a large scale around the turn of the century. In recent years the Thatcher government with its particular selection for the values of Victorian Britain has revitalised all those traditional prejudices and added quite a few more. While the Falklands War and Libyan terrorism provided the ideal focus for stirring up national chauvinism, moral panics around child abuse, abortion and contraception, crime and hooliganism, child abuse and drugs, and above all Aids, have provided a focus for the drive to restore law and order and traditional family values.

DAILY SCAB EXPRESS AT WAPPING

David Rourke

Defending the devil you know

IN RESPONSE both to the offensive from employers and the government and to the prevailing mood of individualism, the more active workers have stuck firm to the organisations, the practices and the strategies of the official labour movement. This response has been strongest among activists and those who live in areas, such as mining communities or parts of the North, Scotland or South Wales, where labour movement traditions still have some vitality. People who work in nationalised industries or public services, where union organisation remains strong and antagonism to the Tory government acts as a unifying force, are also more likely to remain loyal to the unions and Labour.

In recent years, the loyalty of active workers to the official labour movement has taken on a strikingly defensive character.

In the seventies trade union militants organised independently of union leaders, whom they regarded with suspicion if not outright hostility. In the miners' strikes of the early seventies, all the initiative came from left wingers organised semi-autonomously from the national union leadership. The Fleet Street chapels of the print workers were so jealous of their independence that they would not allow national officials into their workshops. In the winter of discontent that marked the closing months of the last Labour government, national union leaders needed to be protected from their own members at fiery rallies.

Today, rank and file organisation scarcely exists, the 'broad left' networks that once linked up radical activists inside the major unions have largely disintegrated and the national union leaders enjoy unprecedented authority within their own unions. Activists who could once command majority support among their workmates for industrial action have found themselves increasingly isolated. They also often feel themselves to be virtual lone voices surrounded by a chorus of bigotry against women, gays, and blacks. How did this situation arise?

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One factor is that militant trade unionists have found it increasingly difficult to carry the argument for strike or solidarity action with workers who put their individual preoccupations before their loyalty to their workmates or their union. Another factor is the apparent ineffectiveness of trade union policies in defending workers against redundancies and deteriorating working conditions. When union officials are prepared to negotiate away jobs and union rights, it is not surprising that militants have difficulty convincing their workmates to identify with the union line. The lack of credibility of official labour movement policy at a national level compounds this problem.

A third factor is the failure of industrial action to secure workers' objectives. When workers have experienced the ineffectiveness of strike action, either directly or through following events in other unions, they have become more and more pessimistic that anything could be achieved through militancy.

Over a prolonged period of recession the effect of all these factors has been to increase the gulf between the active and passive sections of the workforce. As more and more workers have become cynical and demoralised, union activists have become more isolated. Losing confidence in their own capacity to carry wider support, they are inclined to stick their noses in the *Guardian* and to dismiss with scorn the mass of *Sun* readers around them. Activists are now likely to find something in common with trade union officials than they are with rank and file workers, even though the policies and methods of the bureaucracy are largely to blame for the isolation of the militants.

The tendency of activists to cling to the bureaucracy reinforces the divisions in the working class rather than helping to overcome them.

The marginal position of left-wing Labour politicians like Dennis Skinner and Eric Heffer and radical union leaders such as Arthur Scargill reflects the weakness of rank and file pressure on the labour bureaucracy. Ten years ago, even three years ago, these prominent left wingers responded to the concerns of the more militant workers and articulated their views at mass rallies, demonstrations and labour movement conferences. They are now scarcely seen in public, and when they appear it is as figures from the past who now seem out of date and out of touch.

ALONE

The consequences of the deepening divisions in the working class came to the fore in the major dispute of the Thatcher years — the miners' strike. From the very beginning activists, particularly in Yorkshire, South Wales, Kent and Scotland, recognised the difficulty of mobilising majority support among the miners for a fight against a pit closure programme that primarily affected the peripheral coalfields while the more secure central areas, notably Notts, were relatively spared. Previous attempts to win support for all-out action through a national ballot had failed, so the militants decided that the only way was for the militant areas to go it alone and to try to drag Notts out, either through picketing, or when the police blocked this approach, through manipulating the union rule book. When the Notts miners refused to respond, the militant areas fought on alone.

The strategy pursued by the national NUM leadership during the miners' strike was to try to use the leverage of industrial action to force the coal board to honour the joint commitment to an expanding industry made by management and unions in the 1974 document *Plan for Coal*. The problem was that the NUM could not unite miners in areas threatened with pit closures with those in the Notts area around this strategy. Only a strategy that put the need to preserve jobs above all considerations about the viability of the British coal industry could have united the miners. Unfortunately, the only force putting forward such a strategy in the miners' strike — the Revolutionary Communist Party — lacked the base in the mining areas that would have been necessary to win substantial support for this approach around a campaign to win a national ballot for all-out national action.

DESPONDENT

In the event, the militant miners' response to their own weak position in the union was to stick doggedly to the Scargill line. They turned all their resentment against the Notts miners and later against other miners who began to drift back to work, rather than against the strategy of the national union leadership.

The outcome of the miners' strike revealed all the dangers of defensive loyalism. Not only were the miners defeated, but the nature of the defeat was such as to deepen divisions and demoralisation in the working class.

The militant miners clung to Scargill to the bitter end, so that, in effect, the rank and file rather than the union leadership got the blame for the final return to work.

In the welter of recriminations against the Notts miners who never came out, the South Wales miners who first voted to go back and the miners in all areas who had gone back early, the inadequacies of the *Plan for Coal* strategy and Scargill's bureaucratic leadership were never exposed. The conclusion drawn, not only by the majority of miners who returned to work before the end of the strike, but also by many workers in other industries, was that militant action did not work. As despondency set in throughout the coalfields, the Notts miners broke away to form the UDM and Scargill became an embattled figure on the NUM executive.

The Wapping dispute followed a broadly similar pattern to the miners' strike. Here the split in the labour movement took place between the print unions and the electricians, rather than within one union as in the miners' strike. Again the union leaders' policy was to use the leverage of the pickets to press the employers to come to a negotiated solution. Meanwhile the energies of the activists were directed into a campaign to oust the electricians from the TUC, instead of trying to mobilise rank and file solidarity among all the unions involved in the dispute around a plan to put real pressure on the News International distribution network. The inevitable result was that as the months dragged on, the activists became more isolated as the mass of strikers became increasingly disillusioned.

'Strikes in the eighties have tended to become longer. It is an iron law of the class struggle that the longer a strike goes on, the less likely we are to win.'

RESILIENCE

The tendency of strikes to become longer and longer is a characteristic feature of the eighties. Apart from the miners' strike and Wapping, several other groups of workers have passed more than 12 months on the picket lines. These include industrial action by hospital workers at Barking and Addenbrookes Hospitals, the dispute at the Silent Night bedroom furniture factory in Lancashire, and the strike by artificial limb makers at Hangers in Surrey. It is an iron law of the class struggle that the longer a strike goes on the less likely the workers are to win it: this follows from the simple fact that workers rely on weekly wages, whereas the employers can rely on their own resources or their colleagues in the bank to see them through a difficult patch.

The capacity of workers to continue strike action for months through considerable hardships is a tribute to their resilience. But it also shows the difficulties strikers have in winning the wider solidarity action they need to hit the employers. In response to these difficulties activists often dig in and sit it out. Unfortunately, the advantage in such situations always lies with the employers. Other workers will be inclined to keep their heads down rather than risk a similar fate.

The defensive loyalty of active workers takes the pressure off the leaders of the unions and the Labour Party.

It allows union leaders to sign no-strike deals, to agree to mass redundancies, to accept flexible working conditions, to sell out strikes — all without any fear of being challenged by the rank and file. As the tendencies towards fragmentation have gathered momentum in the aftermath of the miners' strike, right-wing union leaders have become much more confident of their base of support among the more passive ranks of union members. Thus, despite a record of class treachery unprecedented in recent years, Eric Hammond of the electricians' union was happy to put himself up for re-election as general secretary in May. Following the end of the miners' strike Arthur Scargill was so unsure of the extent of his support that he changed the rules of the NUM so that he no longer needs to face re-election as union president.

CONFIDENT

The feebleness of the left in the Labour Party parallels the isolation of militants in the unions. Neil Kinnock has faced no internal resistance of any consequence to his drive to make the party more acceptable to middle class public opinion. He is confident that the party activists will continue to support Labour no matter how far to the right he moves. Generalising from their own sense of isolation and loss of confidence, activists simply shrug their shoulders and ask 'What else can he do?' The horizons of labour movement activists have shrunk so low that they can regard a few good rallies, several well-presented press conferences and one successful television broadcast about Kinnock and his family in the course of the election campaign as major achievements and some consolation for Labour's failure to oust the Tories at the third attempt.

The most damaging consequence of the mood of defensive loyalism is that it tends to provoke a hostile response to any attempt to challenge the policies of the labour bureaucracy with an anti-capitalist alternative. Activists feel a sense of intense vulnerability at a time when the institutions of the labour movement are under attack from the employers and the mass of workers appear indifferent to the fate of their traditional organisations. Whatever their misgivings about the policies or methods of the leadership, activists are inclined to hold their peace lest they jeopardise the future of the organisation. They are also inclined to regard any criticism of the labour bureaucracy from a working class point of view as divisive, even though the bureaucrats' strategy — as in the miners' strike and at Wapping — itself has the effect of undermining the unity and effectiveness of the working class movement.

BARRIER

During the miners' strike many activists in the NUM were hostile to the RCP's campaign around the call for a national ballot to unite the miners and change the direction of the dispute. At Wapping too, militants in the print unions regarded our opposition to the diversionary campaign to expel the EETPU from the TUC as a threat to their position. In these circumstances workers' loyalty to the bureaucracy acts as a barrier to the adoption of an alternative course of action which could provide unity and coherence to workers' resistance to the capitalist offensive. At a time when recession leads to a growing conflict between the bureaucrats' determination to safeguard their own positions and the needs of the working class, the future of the working class depends on taking a course that is independent of the bureaucracy.

David Rourke

'Wapping officials directed the energies of activists into a campaign to oust the electricians from the TUC, instead of trying to mobilise rank and file solidarity.'

Pandora Anderson

THE LEFT LET KINNOCK'S TEAM HAVE THE LAST LAUGH

The left: running scared

THE MOOD of defensive loyalty towards the institutions of the labour bureaucracy provides the framework within which the British left operates. The left from above all becoming isolated from the most militant workers. Thus it has now toned down its own perspectives, reflecting the conviction that the survival of the unions and the Labour Party in their existing form is the highest ambition of working class politics.

The restricted outlook of activists in the NUM and the print unions set a precise limit on the positions adopted by the left in these disputes. In the miners' strike, the entire left joined with the militant miners in endorsing every twist and turn of the Scargill line and in denouncing the Notts miners and all those who went back to work as incorrigible scabs. At Wapping the left backed the print unions' ritual mass pickets of the Highway and joined in the chorus of abuse of the electricians' union. Fearing that it might provoke the wrath of the union leaders or the activists, the left stuck blindly to these positions as the strikes dragged towards defeat, despite the abundant evidence that these very strategies were largely responsible for paralysing the initiative of the strikers.

The same fear of isolation from the activists dictated the attitude of the left towards the general election.

There were three main themes in the left's approach to the election — support for Labour as the lesser evil, critical support for Labour with a view to exposing the betrayals of a future Labour government, and the attempt to downplay the call to vote Labour as a merely tactical question.

DISCOVERING

'Right now Neil Kinnock's Labour Party is the best option the working class has' declared the editor of *Socialist Organiser* (4 June) in his address to the electorate. This paper of one hard-left faction inside the Labour Party may have gone further than some of the left in discovering progressive features in Kinnock's party — a major feature in the same issue proclaimed that 'The Labour Party enters the 1987 election with an outstanding socialist environment policy, perhaps the best of any socialist party in the world.' But the message was common to virtually the entire British left. Labour's leadership may have shifted to the right and its policy on all the key issues may differ only slightly from that of the Tories and the Alliance, but for the left that slight difference justifies choosing the Labour option.

By urging workers to support Labour as the lesser evil, the left confirmed militants' existing attitudes. Millions of workers voted Labour on 11 June, not out of any enthusiasm for Kinnock or his policies, but simply 'to get that woman out'. So great is the antipathy of many workers to the Tory government that they are prepared to vote for a Labour alternative which promises to implement similar policies. Instead of challenging this fatalistic approach, showing the common features of the Labour and Tory programmes and emphasising the need to organise resistance against a government of either party, the left encourages workers to choose between two different forms of capitalist degradation.

DISASTROUS

Sections of the left outside the Labour Party tried to distance themselves from the lesser evil approach. Perhaps recalling the long-established Marxist tradition of rejecting this apology for reformism and its disastrous consequences for the working class movement in the past, the Socialist Workers Party monthly insisted that its call for a vote for Labour 'is emphatically not because Labour is the "lesser evil"' (*Socialist Worker Review*, May 1987). Yet the same article goes on to argue that support for Labour 'is about defending the organisations of the working class, however feeble and imperfect they are'. But this is simply the lesser evil argument in a different form: Labour is better than the Tories or the Alliance because of its historic links with the trade unions. To compound the confusion, the article also admits that 'Labour governments are as capable of attacking workers' organisation, of holding down wages or of fostering racism as any other government.'

It is significant that as election day drew nearer, and the SWP threw its resources behind Labour's election campaign, all criticism of the lesser evil position was abandoned.

The left also justified working for the return of a Labour government by arguing that this would create the most favourable conditions for showing workers the dangers of putting their faith in Labour, and for winning them over to a revolutionary alternative. The left invoked a longstanding tradition of giving Labour 'critical support' in elections, the better to expose the party in government. *Labour Briefing* put forward this approach in large type on the front page of its election special:

'We urge the whole of the working class and the oppressed to vote Labour....A Labour government will provide the best conditions to reverse the years of Tory misrule, the best conditions for unity and combativity against the bosses.' *Briefing* went on to insist that Labour's 'present policies are completely inadequate for the battles ahead'.

However, in small type on page 7 of the same issue, *Briefing* contradicted the central theme of its front page:

'Even if Labour wins a majority of seats, the politics favoured by the leadership would lead, under present economic conditions, to bitter disappointments for the working class and renewed attacks on the oppressed.'

It is not only the present economic conditions, but the present balance of forces in the labour movement which would make the *Briefing* scenario the inevitable outcome of the return of a Labour government. As well as lacking significant influence in the working class, the bulk of the British left lacks a coherent alternative to the programme of the Labour leadership.

The result is that the left's support for Labour at the polls merely confirms workers' loyalty to the Labour Party, while its criticisms of the inadequacies of Labour's policies have no consequence.

The tactic of critical support could make sense only in circumstances where there existed an influential layer in the working class which had already rejected Labourism and was armed with a coherent Marxist alternative. Such a vanguard section could make the experience of betrayal at the hands of a Labour government conscious to the mass of the working class. But to put forward the critical support slogan at a time when the left is isolated and incapable of challenging Labourism is to invite defeat and humiliation, not only for the left but for the whole of the working class.

The third element in the left's approach to the election was the argument that the decision to vote Labour was just a tactical question and that what really mattered was the struggle in the workplace and the unions. This view was argued by leading SWP theoretician Alex Callinicos in an article in the party's theoretical journal published some six months before the election:

'The only way out is to break with electoralism altogether, to cease to make votes a criterion of success, and instead to focus on the consciousness and combativity of workers themselves' ('Looking for Alternatives to Reformism', *International Socialism*, Winter 1987). This approach sounds like a radical repudiation of electoralism and parliamentarianism. In practice it means accepting the authority of the labour bureaucracy over the working class — *and* calling for a vote for Labour.

Radical anti-electoralism reinforces a division of functions within the labour bureaucracy.

CONFINED

The trade union leaders set up the Labour Party to pursue their interests in the parliamentary sphere and to keep politics out of the unions. As long as they seek to achieve legislation that protects the position of the unions, the Labour leaders are free to determine the policy of the labour movement on all issues that are not strictly trade union affairs. However, their policies on these issues do not reflect the standpoint of the working class, but the position of bureaucrats seeking to become an alternative party of government. Thus the only arena within which the working class has a distinctive voice is the unions, where it is confined to narrow bread and butter matters within a framework which accepts the domination of capital. In parliament Labour speaks on behalf of the labour movement but in the language of the 'national interest', the interest of the capitalist class.

When the left elevates narrow trade unionism and downplays elections, it endorses the division between economic and political struggle that has paralysed the working class for decades. Today this means allowing Kinnock to dictate the terms of working class politics, while left wingers look for some strike in which to bury their heads. But workplace militancy will not spontaneously generate anti-capitalist consciousness until left wingers challenge the politics of Labourism. These may be formulated in parliament and on election platforms, but they still dominate every workplace discussion and dispute.

HYPOCRISY

It is striking that once the election campaign opened, the left's anti-electoralism evaporated as it threw its energies into Labour's election campaign. One person who forgot his past distaste for elections in his enthusiasm to see Labour do well in the polls — even in the opinion polls — was Alex Callinicos, as he told readers of his regular television column:

'News on Saturday of the Harris poll putting Labour only four percentage points behind the Tories had me cheering at the television.' (*Socialist Worker*, 6 June)

The SWP's abject support for Labour in the election campaign exposed the hypocrisy of its earlier anti-electoral postures.

'Although putting faith in Labour is foolish, a vote for Labour is vital' explained *Socialist Worker* at the outset of the election campaign (16 May). The striking feature of the left's diverse justifications for voting Labour was their incoherent, almost irrational character. In fact the decisive factor in determining the left's election strategy was its reluctance to risk unpopularity by challenging the defensive loyalties of active workers to a party that offers the working class nothing but despair.

Looking back with Labour

THE THATCHER years have been wasted ones for the working class. This is not merely because the Tories have won three elections in a row. If, in the course of the past eight years, issues had been clarified and workers had become more politicised, then the working class would be stronger irrespective of the Tories' election victories. Unfortunately, instead of clarification the Thatcher years have produced a process of mystification.

SWALLOWED

Labour has moved closer and closer to the Tories. It has become less and less prepared to articulate even the most modest aspirations of the working class. Despite Labour's rightward shift, there has been no serious attempt to construct an alternative. The left inside and outside the Labour Party has gone along with Kinnock, on the grounds that getting Thatcher out was what mattered most. Instead of raising questions and opening up debates, the left has closed its ranks and has demanded that loyalty to Labour must come first.

The biggest indictment of the British left is that since 1983 it has never challenged Kinnock on any matter of substance.

There have been minor controversies over Black Sections and witch-hunts — issues arising from the internal workings of the party. But the left has swallowed Kinnock's right-wing programme almost without comment. Confident that he would face little resistance from such a servile left, Kinnock has pressed ahead with his drive to push the party to the right. Thus Kinnock could attack with impunity the Black Sections and even oust Sharon Atkin as a prospective black MP. He knew

David Rourke

ATKIN: OUSTED

that the left and black activists would do nothing that might harm Labour's election prospects.

The left's deference to Kinnock verges on the irrational. The predominant sentiment has been one of fantasy born of desperation. This sentiment is clearly summed up by the attitude of *Labour Briefing*, the journal of one hard-left pressure group in the Labour Party:

'So the prospects for 1987 look gloomy. What should the left be doing? Despite everything, we must campaign vigorously for a Labour victory. Only a Labour victory can open the door to any of the political initiatives to which the left is committed. A third Tory government would be a huge defeat for us — and for the cause of the oppressed.

'But as we fight for the election of a Labour government, we must say clearly that we have no faith in the capacity of the present programme — or leadership — to solve any of the severe problems facing the working class.' (15 January 1987)

PRIORITIES

If *Briefing* has no faith in Labour's programme or leadership, what is it asking workers to vote for? Campaigning for a party that has no solutions to 'the severe problems facing the working class' is an admission that these problems must stay at the bottom of the list of political priorities.

Nothing can be achieved until the left's order of priorities is reversed and the problems facing the working class are moved to the top of the agenda. The Thatcher years have shown that any alternative which relies on Labour as the instrument of change in practice means abandoning working class politics. Since 1983 the left's solution to every problem has been to re-elect a Labour government. This perspective has deadened discussion and debate. It has also undermined the capacity of the working class to fight. If the election of Labour is the magic answer then any action that might jeopardise Labour's electoral prospects must be suppressed. The message has been clear: 'Be patient and don't do anything that could be used against Labour.'

RESTRAINT

The left must bear the heaviest responsibility for holding back workers' aspirations to fight. Instead of contributing to resistance by giving it a clear political focus, the left spoke with the voice of restraint, urging workers to stick with Labour. The left thus dampened workers' anger and made sure that the working class had no voice in the 1987 election campaign. The left itself did what it thought was the decent thing and faded into the background for the duration of the campaign.

The fact that the left is embarrassed by its political outlook indicates that it does not believe in itself, and has no confidence in its own arguments.

The left's crisis of confidence is not misplaced. The British left has no independent existence — it is politically reliant on the labour bureaucracy. Whatever its reservations about the Labour leadership and criticisms of its methods, the future of the left depends on the survival of the bureaucracy. This is why all the arguments that the hard left puts forward for supporting Labour sound like so many excuses. The blank cheque which the left has given to Kinnock is the price of its own survival.

Despite its weakness, the British left has succeeded in compounding the disarray in the working class. Through its own example it has discredited left-wing solutions. By its inaction the left has confirmed the view that there is no left alternative to Kinnock. This has had a damaging effect on the morale of the working class.

HEARTH

All the pressure on the working class has come from the right. While the Labour leaders have advised workers to moderate their objectives, Tory politicians and commentators have encouraged workers to turn away from class politics and collective solutions and to take refuge in hearth and home. Since there has been no radical counterweight to the influence of Kinnock's moderation or Thatcherite reaction, it was inevitable that right-wing notions would gather support among sections of the working class. This state of affairs was apparent during the 1987 election campaign.

Resignation and despair are rampant among some workers and the unemployed. A sense of apathy is particularly evident in inner-city areas. The spread of reactionary sentiments even among those who have not given up hope is an even more disturbing sign of the times. Many workers who naturally hate the Tories have nevertheless become influenced by aspects of their policies — especially on issues such as law and order, defence, race, lesbian and gay rights. It would be wrong to suggest that support for these sentiments runs very deep, but in the absence of a vigorous radical counter-culture, there is considerable potential for reaction to gather momentum.

The fact that most workers will still vote Labour regardless of their prejudices on these issues disguises the true extent and corrosive consequences of such views.

MINORITY

The undercurrent of apathy and right-wing sentiment exerts strong pressure on the whole working class. Thus in many working class communities the pressure of reaction sets the dominant mood. This mood encourages workers to adopt a pragmatic outlook, keep their heads down and accept limited objectives. It also provides Neil Kinnock with his base of working class support. Throughout the country, *Red Front* canvassers found that there was very little criticism of Kinnock from the left. In most working class areas the prevailing sentiment was that with Kinnock there was at least a small

David Rourke

KINNOCK'S 'HEADS DOWN' DIKTAT HAS GONE UNCHALLENGED

chance that things might get a little better.

Workers who take an active interest in politics are a small minority. Their isolation is reinforced by the overall conservative outlook that prevails in many working class communities. At present this outlook forces activists to keep their heads down and wait for something to turn up in the future. Whereas in the past an active minority could influence millions of workers, today it is the other way around — it is the activists who are influenced by the dominant mood in the working class.

The picture we have drawn of the British working class, based on our political experience, is really no more than a snapshot taken at a time when workers' views and allegiances are more volatile than they have been for many years. The present state of working class consciousness is not the product of some economic fact or an inevitable outcome of the recession. It is a consequence above all of the collapse of the official labour movement. The trade unions and the Labour Party can no longer hold the working class together. The irrelevance of the official labour movement is revealed by the capacity of the British establishment to influence workers *directly*.

Workers cling on to their traditional organisations only because there is nothing else, not because they inspire enthusiastic commitment or loyalty.

'Since there has been no radical counterweight to the influence of Kinnock's moderation or Thatcherite reaction, it was inevitable that right-wing notions would gather support.'

However, the institutions of the official labour movement also leave the working class defenceless. The trade unions leave the unemployed to fend for themselves. Those in employment find that they can expect little help from their union when the boss tries to impose redundancies or harsher working conditions. They too are forced to look after their own interests. In significant parts of the country — the South-west, the South-east, and parts of the Midlands, the unions are moribund and the Labour Party takes a poor third position at the polls. The result is that the working class is more fragmented than at any time this century.

FRUSTRATION

While the traditional labour movement is disintegrating, the working class has not lost the will to fight. Passivity coexists with frustration, anger and hatred of the capitalist system. There is a widespread feeling that something ought to be done. However, this sentiment is often qualified by the conviction that it is not possible to do anything. Thus the working class has both an active and a passive side. In recent years its active side has received little encouragement, so that, overall, passivity holds sway.

We now face the danger that, after the general election, the passive side will be strengthened even further. The labour bureaucracy will seek to secure its survival by moving further to the right. The process begun by Kinnock will be consolidated. The leaders of the unions and the Labour Party will pursue the logic of 'realism' to the point where any expression of workers' interests can be dismissed as divisive or extreme.

CHANGE

Those who are not afraid to look back and learn the lessons of the last eight years cannot escape the conclusion that something will have to change. Working class politics cannot be revitalised through the Labour Party or around the institutions of the official labour movement. Trying to pursue this course would allow the right to benefit from the demoralisation that the continued influence of Labourism will inevitably breed inside the working class. Labourism cannot evolve in a progressive direction — it can only create conditions for a thoroughgoing triumph of the forces of reaction.

Looking forward to The Red Front

THE FUTURE of the working class need not be the same as the future of Labour. Or to put the same point in a different way, our class can have no future while Labour retains its monopoly of political influence. Labourism as a political outlook is too steeped in the past to relate even to the most modest aspirations of the modern working class.

Only the fear of starting out on a new road could prevent activists from drawing this inescapable conclusion.

The ruling class offensive has just begun. Those who expect that further repression and more unemployment will automatically lead to resistance and political radicalisation have not learned from the experience of the Thatcher era. The ruling class must go much further in changing the balance of class forces if British capitalism is to restructure itself to match up to foreign competition. This will inevitably be a protracted process stretching over the next decade. But the capitalist class will not only attack physically and economically. The employers will also fight a political and ideological offensive. Their aim is not to destroy the working class, but to fragment and ideologically enslave it and thus render it harmless.

DIVIDING

Most of the Tory policies in the 1987 manifesto are designed to alter the balance of class forces by dividing workers and undermining the potential for collective resistance. Privatisation measures make little economic sense — their aim is to celebrate individualistic solutions. Tory policies on education and on other matters which promote the 'right to choose' have the same purpose. The Tories do not need more anti-union laws — they already have all the laws they require to attack the unions. The proposed new legislation, upholding such individual liberties as the 'right' to scab, aims to discredit collective action still further. And this is just their public manifesto. In the months ahead we can expect to see even more of the reactionary propaganda campaigns that have become such a distinctive feature of the Thatcher years.

Unless the labour movement produces a political response that measures up to the scale of the Tory ideological offensive, nothing will stop their forward march. Labourism can only retreat before such an offensive — or join in. Only a Marxist perspective can stand up to these attacks by reasserting class interests and class politics. Marxism need not give way to the Tories' ideological offensive, because it is based on the premise that there are no shared interests or shared ideas between workers and the employing class on any issue.

POLITICISE

For Marxists the coming ideological offensive is more of an opportunity than a problem. The British establishment has no choice but to politicise every aspect of class relations. Questions that in the past were 'above politics' are now subjects for debate — education, family life, standards of personal behaviour, etc. Politicising class relations is a dangerous game for the capitalists. It provides an opportunity for questioning things which were once taken for granted — and hence for clarifying issues along class lines. For Marxists this process is an opportunity for testing arguments and for politicising society from the point of view of the working class.

Resisting the Tory offensive and seizing the opportunity provided by the politicisation of class relations are two aspects of the same process of building a new working class movement.

A new movement organised around the interests of workers is a precondition for a successful outcome to the struggles ahead. This is why the Revolutionary Communist Party launched *The Red Front*, which ran a slate of candidates in the 1987 election campaign on a platform of basic working class demands. We intend to continue to fight around *The Red Front* in the period ahead.

EVOLVE

The analysis presented here provides the political justification for *The Red Front*. The need for a new movement free from the dead hand of Labourism is long overdue. But a new movement cannot simply be declared. It can only evolve out of the process of struggle. The Revolutionary Communist Party is committed to building a mass internationalist revolutionary party. At the same time we recognise that the immediate future of the RCP and that of the working class depend on the creation of a new political movement. This is where *The Red Front* comes in.

The Red Front is not a call for unity for its own sake. It is based on the recognition that all anti-capitalists have an interest in building a movement free of the inhibitions and reactionary influence of Labourism. Unless workers begin to organise and fight independently of Labour, no anti-capitalist forces, including the RCP, can go much further. Neither the RCP nor any other party or organisation can set up a credible alternative on its own. Through a united fight for a new movement, however, it will be possible to create an alternative focus for those workers who want to fight back.

PREMATURE

The Red Front is not at this stage an attempt to build a mass movement. Such an objective is premature; it would mean jumping over stages that the working class has not yet been through. The aim of *The Red Front* is to provide an organisational framework for those who are already prepared to fight back. At present anti-capitalists are an isolated minority in the working class, a minority whose isolation is intensified by the absence of a coherent political focus through which they can organise. Without such a focus militants and activists are in no position to influence the rest of their class. *Yet this is the immediate challenge facing anti-capitalists.*

In historic terms the aim of *The Red Front* is modest, yet critically important. Through fighting for a new movement *The Red Front* can give coherence to those who already express anti-capitalist sentiments. It can thus open up possibilities of influencing others from an anti-capitalist point of view.

Without such influence there will be no counter to the ideological offensive of the ruling class.

The policies around which the struggle for *The Red Front* can be advanced are a matter for debate and discussion based on experience. Different organisations within *The Red Front* will no doubt fight for their own perspectives — that is not a problem. *The Red Front* does not aim to achieve *programmatic unity*, but *unity in action*. Such unity can be established in specific instances in pursuit of agreed objectives that are consistent with the defence of working class interests. The aim of *The Red Front* is not to evolve a common programme. Its most immediate aim is to create the conditions in which those who want to fight back have the means to do so. The very existence of *The Red Front* as an alternative slate of candidates in the general election showed by example that it was possible to fight back. Those who support *The Red Front* are in effect saying 'We are ready to stand up and fight and if we can do it so can you.'

ENOUGH

Despite our intervention in the general election, at this stage *The Red Front* has no real existence as a movement. It is a perspective, an argument for a movement of working class resistance. The basis for the movement are people who have had enough and want to do something that will change their lives. An anti-capitalist movement can only spring from the struggles that emerge from such attitudes. Fighting for *The Red Front* can prepare the way. It can provide clarity and confidence so that when workers do enter into struggles there exists an alternative which can encourage their action. Without such an alternative the leadership of the labour movement can continue to suppress every expression of class instinct.

The Red Front is the only way forward. Anything else means returning to the old dogmas and the old organisations. Some will say that nothing can be done until there is an upturn in the class struggle. But waiting for an upturn is not a strategy — it is a recipe for inaction. In any case, what happens when an upsurge comes? Without a prior process of political struggle and clarification such an upsurge will lack perspective and will be vulnerable to defeat.

REALISM

Unfortunately, the bulk of the British left has invested so much of its time and energy in the official labour movement that it will be resistant even to considering new solutions. Some will argue that the way ahead is to work for the return of a Labour government in 1991 or 1992. But the arguments for postponing action and waiting for Kinnock that had such devastating consequences between 1983 and 1987 can only produce even more serious setbacks in the years ahead. To restate this Labourist perspective is to pretend that we have not lived through the last eight years, or to resolve to learn nothing from the experience.

The choice ahead is clear: repeat the arguments that have failed throughout the decade, or draw the conclusion that the time has come to set about creating a new working class movement.

A new working class movement cannot accept what passes for realism in the official labour movement. We refuse to take the realism of the exploiter as the starting point for our strategy. Class unity can only be achieved if every issue is approached from the standpoint of the working class as a whole. That is why we can afford to make no concessions to the politics of racialism on any question. Instead of making concessions we have to stand up and defend every victim of state repression.

We have to challenge the drive towards war by rejecting the idea that workers have anything to defend in common with their exploiters. We have to fight the attempts of the courts to interfere in the unions or in any aspect of working class life. We have to fight for jobs for all and for a decent wage regardless of the cost to the capitalist class. Our realism is based on what is necessary for the majority of society. Half-hearted pleas for a few crumbs will inspire nobody. This is the only sort of realism that is worth fighting for.

RED FRONT **CANDIDATE KUNLE OLUREMI TAKES ON LABOUR MP STUART HOLLAND (LEFT)**

Pandora Anderson

JOIN THE GREAT DEBATE IN JULY

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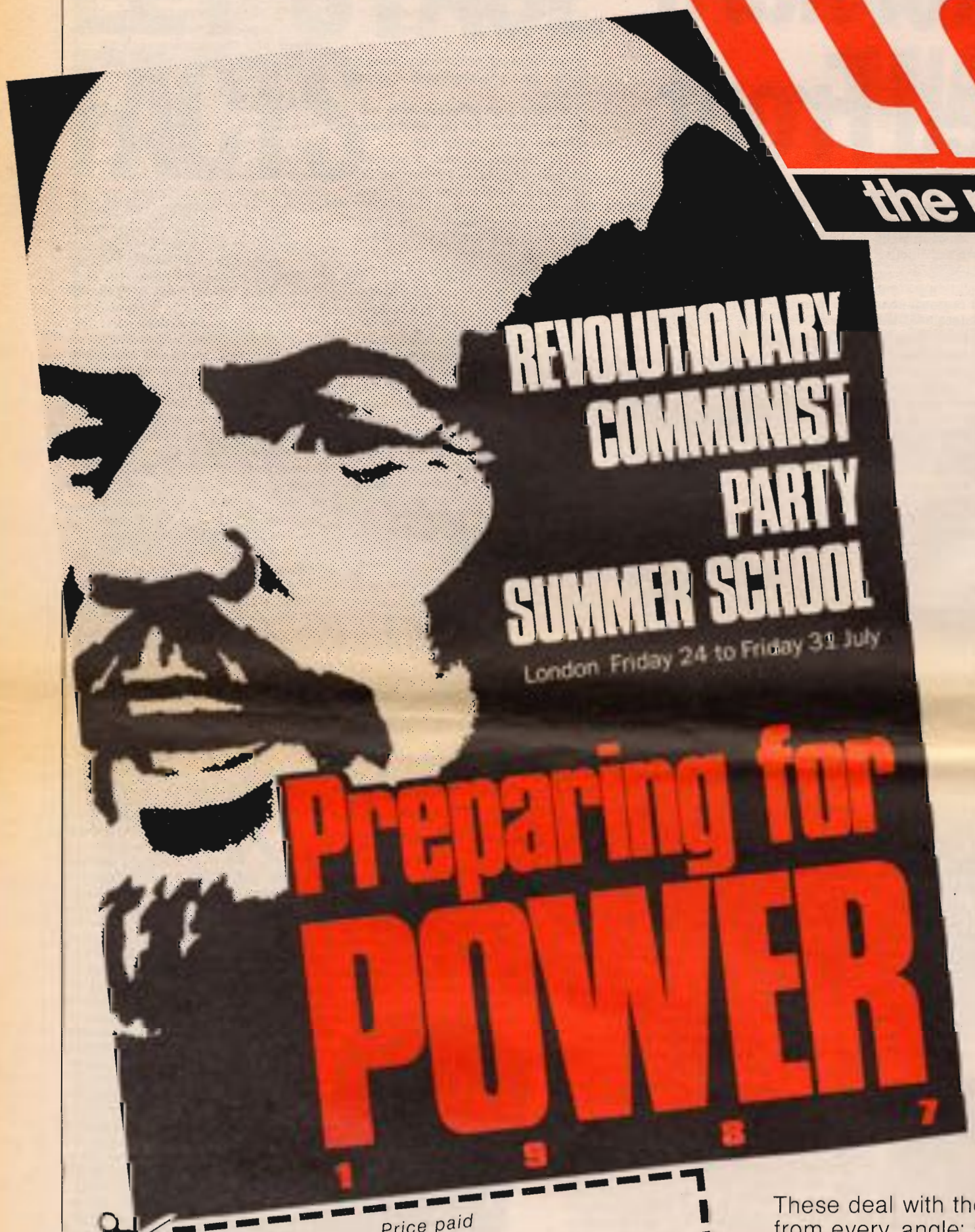
the next step - 22



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