The Future for Labour's Left

By Cliff Slaughter

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WITHOUT a change of leadership and policy the British working-class movement is faced with major defeats at the hands of the capitalists and their Tory governments.

At Scarborough last year the policy of unilateral disarmament adopted by the Labour Party conference opened up the possibility of a major breakthrough not only in British working-class politics but in the international Labour movement. Here was the oldest Labour movement in the world rejecting its apparently permanent attachment to the foreign policies of the ruling class.

What has happened since then? How is it that Gaitskell has been able to regain the vote of several big unions and so ensured victory against the unilateralists at the Blackpool conference this year? Why is it that once again the movement faces the complete domination of capitalism's agents in the Right wing of the Labour Party? Unless the Left can answer these questions, both in theory and in practice, then the situation will become more and more dangerous.

From the threat of nuclear war to defend the decaying imperialist system to the attack on trade union rights and the steady rise of racialist and Fascist groupings in our major cities, these dangers can only

be avoided by the action of the working class. To free the working class to organize such action requires the defeat of the Right wing, whose function it is to harness the workers to the interests of the ruling class.

THE MAIN DANGER

Ever since the Scarborough conference the capitalist press has given its full support to Gaitskell, because they recognized the importance of the decision on unilateralism. That is why Gaitskell cares nothing for the fact that he may be defeated on Polaris bases or German troops in Britain; as he puts it, 'the main danger has now passed'. The main danger for him and his friends was that the working class would organize against his real masters, the capitalists, as the only way of fighting against war. If that should happen then there would be no room for him and his careerist gang in the Labour Party.

The Times of July 3, attributes Gaitskell's victory to a 'craving for unity' in the Labour Party, and Crossman now talks about the great mistakes made in drafting defence policies in the past, indicating that he is quite satisfied with the latest official version, which is just the latest method of tying us to the NATO war-chariot. There are lessons to be learned here. In a way it is true that a certain 'craving for unity' stopped the Left from driving home its victory and expelling Gaitskell. And what about those 'Left-wingers' who thought that an appeal to Crossman to uphold the Scarborough decisions would suffice to defeat the Right wing?

NO ACCIDENT

If we examine carefully the role of the Left, from the treacherous Crossman, right through to the Communist Party and its fellow-travellers we shall find that in varying shades they all in fact helped the Right wing to reverse the Scarborough decision. In some cases this was simply a matter of their selling out to the system, but in others it derives from a fundamental misunderstanding of the role of the Right-wing opportunists in the Labour movement. As The Newsletter has consistently pointed out, there is nothing accidental about the betrayals of Gaitskell and Co. Every action they take must be seen as a step in the defence of the imperialist system on which they depend, and this is recognized clearly by the class enemy when it talks about the need for a vigorous and united opposition.

But The Newsletter also insisted from the start of the fight for the Scarborough decisions, that all those so-called Left-wingers who failed to break completely with the Right-wing parliamentarians would end up by compromising on principle and going the same way as the class traitors themselves. Already at the beginning of the year the New Statesman and Kingsley Martin set the pace by pleading with Mr. Gaitskell to unite the Party against the 'worst aspects of NATO'. See how the typical petty-bourgeois insistence that 'there's a bit of good in everybody' in practice helps the class enemy. This kind of tactical retreat from Scarborough was a sign that the centrists had no intention of organizing the struggle against Gaitskell.

COMPROMISE

Meanwhile The Newsletter has exposed the setting up of Gaitskell's opposition faction, the Campaign for Democratic Socialism, an organization which used Party resources to overturn conference decisions while the centrists still bleated that 'the debate must continue'. Ever since then the initiative has gone more to the Right in the Labour Party, so that now the Tribune, after being well and truly hooked by the Crossman-Padley compromise, can only reassure its readers that we 'won the debate' even if we lost the battle.

The role played by Crossman and Padley is a useful lesson in the famous English 'genius for compromise'. It was designed to confirm the initiative for the Right wing by appealing to all wavering opinion which was not prepared to be as ruthlessly anti-Gaitskell as Gaitskell was anti-Labour. This genius for compromise is nothing more or less than the accumulated experience of British capitalism in preventing its enemies, be they colonial revolutionaries or British workers, from taking the decisive line required to overthrow the capitalists and their agents. Crossman

and Padley have taken their place in the historical tradition.

WORDY WARRIORS

The Observer of July 2 commented that in October last year the Left had the ball at their feet but refused to kick it. That is correct. To drive home the victory meant to get rid of the Right-wing leadership and turn to working-class action against the bomb. But there was no grouping in the Parliamentary Labour Party prepared for such a decisive change. Newsletter pointed out, many of these centrists were capable of excellent criticism of the Right wing so long as it was only a matter of words, but once action was required then they were the mechanism by which the Right wing regained the initiative. For example, the National Committee meeting of the Amalgamated Engineering Union was a decisive turn in this year's votes on the H-bomb. Just before the meeting, Tribune handed victory to the Gaitskellites on a plate by coming out in favour of the Crossman 'compromise' and joining with Canon Collins in condemning the CND supporters who clashed with the police outside the US embassy after the Aldermaston march.

PARALYSIS

There is no doubt that the handful of votes which swung the issue in favour of Carron was exactly in the category of trade union representatives who take their political thinking from papers like Tribune. The Communist Party and Daily Worker's concentration on Polaris and German troops rather than on unilateralism also helped to swing the balance. They all joined in heartily with Canon Collins and the others in saying, 'Of course we're all multilateralists too', instead of condemning the 'collective security' talk for the hypocritical deception it has always been. At junctures like this decisive leadership is the all-important factor, and neither the Tribune Left nor the Communist Party was capable of giving it.

Now there are very definite reasons for this paralysis

of leadership. The Labour Party centrists are hopelessly committed to Parliamentary politics and to the intrigues of petty journalists and trade union bureaucrats. The Communist Party cannot take a consistently revolutionary line against the Right wing because its policies are based on the diplomatic requirements of the Kremlin bureaucracy. These two groupings lean on each other despite their verbal arguments. Raymond Fletcher does a whitewash job on the Kadar regime in Hungary, and the Daily Worker supports Nye Bevan's betraval at Brighton in 1957, because he might be the next Foreign Minister and be more friendly to Khrushchev. (And they would do the same for Denis Healey.) Through all of this of course Bevan kept earning his coppers with articles in The News of the World. All these centrist groupings consist of people whose political outlook remains firmly within the bounds of the existing system. That is why they shout louder against the leadership when the leadership is in no real danger. Just now they are all running for cover.

One of the devices which has undoubtedly swung a certain amount of weight behind Gaitskell recently is the hoary old argument about the need for unity. This despite the fact that unity behind Gaitskell is responsible for losing three elections already, and that unity with Gaitskell means the betraval of socialism. For the Right wing, unity was possible only if the Left was Socialist unity in the Labour movement defeated. meant the expulsion of the Gaitskell gang, a split. The Left's failure to recognize this was the root of their tactical blunders, and it flowed from their refusal to gauge Gaitskell and his friends in class terms. Instead they chose to argue from the point of view of 'fair play' and 'continuing the debate' and 'seeing a bit of good in everything and everybody.'

These habits of thought, and the refusal to see every political action and actor in class terms, is typical of those middle elements in society who can make no conscious choice between imperialism and the working class. Consequently they vacillate between Left and Right, invariably calling for 'unity' and 'debate' just when a decisive break is necessary. While Gaitskell reveals more clearly every day his class role, so the Left in the Labour Party remains dominated by

people who can see a bit of good in the latest policy statements of Gaitskell's Executive Committee. While Gaitskell is consoling Macmillan with his agreement on the inescapable necessity of fulfilling treaty obligations to the Sheikh of Kuwait (who democratically elected him?), the 'Left' prepares to unite behind him for the next election.

Wanted: Marxist Leadership

THE centrist tendencies in the Labour movement are representative of the middle stratum of society, squeezed between the main classes but playing the role of providing the masses with ideas which in essence discipline them to conform to the capitalist system. This is the meaning of the stress on peaceful roads to socialism, which characterizes both the reformists in the Labour Party and the world's Communist Parties.

The Soviet bureaucracy has a similar conciliatory policy to the middle-class nationalist leaders in the backward countries as do the Tribune Left and the New Left. They stress the 'progressive role' of the new nations instead of going to the class essence of these new regimes, which is their ability to temporarily restrain the struggle of the workers and peasants while the imperialists create conditions for new exploitation after the struggle for political independence.

All these 'Left-wingers' support the idea of a United Nations police force and intervention in the world's 'trouble spots' (i.e., those places where the workers and peasants 'get out of hand'). Here again they play the role of finding Left-sounding formulas which adapt the working class to imperialism's needs while at the same time giving a 'progressive' tinge to this adaptation.

The betraval of the Left in Britain then is part of an international problem. All over the world the problem faced by imperialism is to achieve social stability in which its profits can be realised and new investments safely made. But in order to do this they need the international trend in politics which opportunism. Opportunism is a policy which leads the workers along a road of class-collaboration for the sake of temporary or sectional gains. A whole new middle class has sprung up, both in the imperialist countries and in the colonies, which lives by administering this social equilibrium — managers, negotiators, diplomats, U N commissions, publicists and educationalists.

START FROM THE CLASS

This is the class force to which centrism corresponds in politics today. It includes people who have a straightforward relation of interest to the bureaucracies and government machines. It includes also a variety of people who play a reactionary role precisely because they cannot recognize the class basis of the social-traitors. Instead they urge unity and the avoidance of 'sectarian' clashes with the opportunists.

We need a new kind of Left Wing if we are to defeat the opportunists, a Left wing that starts from the international interests of the working class in overthrowing capitalism, and proceeds to fight with both hands against its opportunists at home as its best contribution to that new international movement. It will not be easy to build such a movement. Even many Marxists have to learn again to start from the activity of the working class itself instead of reckoning each new nationalist movement or trend in the bureaucracy according to some measure of 'progressiveness'. Those who do not start from the need to consciously organize for the overthrow of capitalism have the responsibility of cultivating illusions about peaceful roads, the possibility of peace under capitalism, the possibility of permanent gains for the colonial peoples or for the working class as long as capitalism still exists.

This searching round for 'progressive' forces, and the insistence on the 'objective' forces which drive even reactionary politicians to progressive actions, is a sign

of complete lack of confidence in the working class itself. There are Marxists and Left-wingers who go in for this kind of talk, even if they dress it up with formulas like, 'for the time being the centre of the struggle has passed to the colonial peoples'. They too have succumbed to the domination of the Labour movement internationally by the Labour bureaucracy and the Kremlin opportunists in the period of comparative class peace in the advanced countries since the last war.

GREAT POTENTIAL

Such pessimism is entirely unjustified. In the working class of every country lies the great potential revolutionary force for the coming class battles. reactionary prattle about the universal phenomenon of delinquency and non-conformity among the youth is only the verdict of a decaying ruling class on the revolt of youth against degradation and corruption. Because all the traditional parties and ideologies are based on the outright support of imperialism, with its militarism, racialism, and oppression, all covered with a sickening hypocrisy, or upon some adaptation to the system in the period of working-class defeats between the wars. they hold no attraction for the youth. Their revolt can take many directions, even Fascist ones, and they present a tremendous challenge to the Left to inspire them with the message of the Socialist revolution.

In Britain this is just as true as it is in Japan, in Mexico, or in the United States. It is not at all remote from the problem of how to defeat Gaitskell and his clique, for it is in the youth movement that we shall find the forces for the the British socialist revolution.

Everywhere the Labour Party bemoans the collapse of ward organization, the disappearance of active members. Trade unionists complain of the apathy of their fellow-workers. The existing leaders of the movement are directly responsible for this state of affairs through their consistent betrayals of socialism. The Left after Scarborough did nothing to start a campaign in the ranks of the party to stir up the real force behind the Labour Party, the working class itself. The 'craving for unity' which played its part in

Gaitskell's comeback reflects the cowardly hesitancy of the officialdom and lower ranks of the bureaucracy who swung to unilateralism last year, rather than any swing in the rank and file. Gaitskell did not swing the ordinary party and trade union member away from unilateralism. He concentrated instead on the same people who temporarily were swayed by C N D in 1960. All he has done is to tighten the organization of the Right wing at all levels of the machine; the only way the Left could defeat him was by going deeper and deeper into the movement. This was the very opposite of prating that 'the debate must continue'.

CND

Many people in C N D are now despairing that the victory of Scarborough was only a flash in the panand shows the wrongness of working through the Labour Party. What it does show is that such work will not get the right results unless it is consciously organized to defeat the agents of the capitalist class in the party and trade union machine. But C N D was also dominated by essentially centrist thinkers. They saw their role as converting people in positions of influence rather than going to the roots of the working-class movement. This was the reason for the sudden reverse after Scarborough. It is nonsense to say, as some do, 'There hasn't really been any defeat'. Instead it is necessary to understand the nature of the defeat and learn the lessons.

As in every other sphere of working-class politics the answer must be found in the active force of the working class itself, and not in some 'influential' individual or group in some section of the bureaucracy which dominates the movement. In the Labour Party this means above all building a socialist youth movement. Such a movement will not be satisfied with the role intended for it by the Right wing, that of electoral errand-boys, but will campaign for socialist policies against the Right wing. The responsibility of Marxists is to assist in the organization and education of such a movement, to give it a chance to develop against the inevitable repetition of the machine's attempts to strangle all socialist youth movements.

Only revolutionary socialism and not centrism can provide an adequate leadership for this new movement. Because centrism is based upon the middle strata, the Labour aristocracy and the bureaucracy, every Left move with which it is associated, like the one at Scarborough, will be dragged back by formulas like 'the craving for unity'. What that really means is that the social elements behind these centrists cannot face a split which might involve the loss of their parliamentary seats, their city council sinecures, their tinpot column in Tribune, or their regular day off to sit on the local employment committee. Even many past fighters for the working class have fallen into this routine. They would rage and stamp their feet if anyone said it was an adaptation to British imperialism, but that is precisely what it is, even though the same people no doubt make excellent speeches about the brotherhood of man.

The unilateral renunciation of the H-bomb, the kind of campaign it requires, the nationalization of the arms industries, the breaking of all colonialism, these cannot be carried out by a leadership which has a stake in the system. Gaitskell's comeback will be only a temporary victory for him. British imperialism, upon which he rests is doomed to face ever more acute problems. The centrists have had their opportunity in the last nine months and have shown themselves to be what this paper called them months ago-running dogs for the Right wing. Only a leadership based on an understanding of the class position of the Right wing can really get rid of the employers' agents in the Labour movement. The Socialist Labour League was formed to fight for the scientific principles of Marxism in the Labour Party and trades unions. These principles are vital weapons in the political and industrial struggles facing the working-class movement.

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