

Tony Blair & the British Left

Class Politics &

Labour Loyalism

The electoral victory of the Labour Party on 1 May 1997 brought an end to 18 years of Tory rule, the longest tenure in office by any British political party this century. In the previous general election, in 1992, the Conservatives had narrowly retained power with a majority of 21 seats; in 1997 Labour won with a 178 seat majority—even larger than its famous landslide victory at the end of World War II. Labour replaced a government whose avowed purpose had been to roll back the conquests of the working class since the 1930s, and which, in its last years, under John Major, appeared shamelessly and openly corrupt.

All over Britain there was great relish at seeing the Tory rabble humiliated; even in many “safe,” rural, affluent constituencies, Tory MPs (including a number of leading ministers) were thrown out and replaced with Labour (or sometimes Liberal Democrat) newcomers. The Conservatives are now completely without parliamentary representation in either Scotland or Wales. In many of England’s major cities, such as Manchester and Liverpool, there are no Tory MPs whatsoever. In Birmingham, Britain’s second city, there is only one Tory MP left. The Conservatives, after winning four elections in succession, each with an overall majority of the 600-plus parliamentary seats, were reduced to only 162—for them, an unprecedented catastrophe.

Yet the election results represent less a positive swing to “New Labour” than a defection from the Conservatives. Tony Blair’s party captured a *lower* share of the national vote than in the victories of 1945, 1950, 1964 and 1966, when Labour was elected with smaller majorities. Minor parties, such as the Liberal Democrats and Scottish nationalists, also made significant gains. The middle-class swing away from the Conservatives was a more significant factor than working-class enthusiasm for Blair. In many areas that Labour used to consider its natural base—in core working-class urban constituencies—its vote *declined* as compared to the 1992 election, which Labour lost.

The decline in working-class support is not surprising. Blair’s whole project—the culmination of many years of rightward motion by decisive sections of the Labour Party’s careerist bureaucracy—is to create a party that can be a governmental force for British capitalism *pure and simple*. Since its founding, the Labour Party was inherently contradictory: on the one hand, it was the expression of the need for political independence on the part of the working class; on the other hand, it was thoroughly pro-capitalist in its ideology. By weakening its historic links to the trade-union movement, New Labour is now seeking to resolve that contradiction and become merely another party of the ruling class.

Blair’s reformist facade is paper-thin. It consists primarily of a largely cosmetic decentralization of the British state—including “devolution,” i.e., regional parliaments for Scotland and Wales, and an elected mayor for London.

The Blairites did repeal the ban on trade-union membership at the Government Communications Headquarters (i.e., spy center) in Cheltenham, a measure that was widely seen as overstepping the bounds of bourgeois democracy itself. But under New Labour, Thatcher/Major’s anti-union laws will stay largely in place.

Meanwhile, Blair has already carried out a spate of anti-working-class measures, direct and indirect. He has introduced tuition fees for students, ending free higher education. He has authored a form of U.S.-style workfare, the so-called “Welfare to Work” scheme; though funded by a £5 billion levy on privatized monopoly utilities, it will compel unemployed youth to work for their pitiful benefits, and subsidize employers who take on welfare recipients. This will encourage bosses to replace regular workers with low-paid Welfare to Work “trainees,” and hence drive down wages, working conditions and unionization levels. Other schemes being mooted by the new government are the privatization of the benefits service itself, as well as of the London Underground, and cutting benefits to single parents. The Tories, especially in their later years, were often reluctant to carry out measures like these because of the anger they would arouse. New Labour, trading on its reputation as a party of the “left,” and seeing little serious opposition, has fewer qualms.

In a more indirect attack, Blair has freed the Bank of England from any semblance of public control, placing the power to set central interest rates exclusively in the hands of a committee of bankers. This move, which provides Blair with an alibi for further cutting the “welfare state,” is rationalized as laying the basis for long-term, recession-free growth. Unlike classical Keynesians who sought to minimize the effects of the capitalist business cycle through increasing government spending (and deficits) during downturns, New Labour seems intent on trying to limit the extent of the upturn in the hope that this will soften the impact of the recession that must inevitably follow.

Blair’s policy of maintaining a stable currency is designed to benefit bankers and other investors, while pushing Britain’s economy toward compliance with the Maastricht convergence criteria for a single European currency. Several hikes in interest rates have already taken place since the election. The result will be an increase in long-term unemployment, as the bankers seek to put the brakes on economic expansion for fear that the current “boom” may translate into higher wages.

Right Labourites vs. Blair

The continuity of New Labour with Thatcherism is striking even to elements who were formerly on the far right wing of old-style social-democratic Labourism. Roy Hattersley, Neil Kinnock’s former deputy party leader, who in

the 1980s helped implement vicious witchhunts against more leftist social democrats like Militant Labour, now seeks to distance himself from the results of his handiwork. Soon to be granted a peerage, Hattersley is perversely acquiring a reputation as a dangerous leftist for his attacks on the Blair government for renouncing socialism, equality and defense of the poor. This is an index of just how far to the right the Labour Party has moved.

Yet opposition to Blair within the Labour Party is scattered. The aging left social-democratic icon, Tony Benn, has recently given sonorous warnings that the co-option of Liberal Democrat MPs into Blairite cabinet committees as advisers could prefigure the Labour Party's descent into a new "Lib-Lab" coalition. (Within such an alliance the current policies of the Lib-Dems would put them on the left wing!) But the dissident outbursts of Benn and Hattersley appear at this point as simply the anguished cries of individuals on the verge of political retirement; both of them understand the relationship of forces within the Labour Party after the mass recruitment of Blairite footsoldiers hostile to even the traditional social-democratic parody of "socialism." At this point there is no indication that any organized grouping, or even prominent individuals, within the Labour Party are considering a break with Blair.

Neither, it would seem, are the overwhelming majority of what passes for the "far left" in Britain. Most, in fact, displayed indifference or outright hostility to the electoral challenge by sections of the old Labour Party who have actually been driven to *break* from New Labour and stand for election on a pro-working-class platform—Arthur Scargill's Socialist Labour Party (SLP) and the left-reformist Socialist Party (SP—formerly known as Militant Labour). In fact the bulk of the ostensibly revolutionary left are more conservative and cretinously loyal to the Labour Party than many militant working-class reformists, who at least understand that when a party has ceased to stand for the aspirations of its working-class base in even the most minimal way, it is necessary to begin again.

Left Candidates & the Election

Given the enormous pro-Blair pressure from the Labour Party, the trade-union bureaucracy, and the "far left," and the intense desire to kick out the Tories, the vote for those leftists who dared stand against Labour was bound to be small. However, both Socialist Labour and the Socialist Party did make a mark in constituencies where their candidates were reasonably well known.

The highest vote for a candidate standing on an avowedly socialist platform was for Tommy Sheridan, a well-known supporter of Scottish Militant Labour (SML). Standing as a candidate for the Scottish Socialist Alliance (an umbrella group comprising the SML, the maverick centrists of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and Liberation, a reformist pro-working class split from Scottish nationalism) Sheridan polled 11.1 percent in solidly working-class Glasgow Pollock. This was down from 1992, when he received almost 20 percent of the vote while in jail for non-payment of Thatcher's hated Poll Tax. But it was nevertheless an impressive result. The Socialist Party also made a respectable showing in Coventry South, where Dave Nelist (a nationally known former Labour MP) won 6.5 percent.

Three Socialist Labour candidates got more than the 5 percent threshold required to save their deposit. The best SLP result was scored by the well-known Asian leftist and

anti-racist lawyer, Imran Khan, who gained 6.8 percent in a working-class constituency in East London. Terry Burns, the SLP candidate in Cardiff Central, polled 5.3 percent, closely followed by the president of the National Union of Miners (NUM), Arthur Scargill himself, with 5.2 percent in Newport, also in South Wales. Scargill stood against Alan Howarth, who sat as a Tory MP during the 1984-5 miners' strike, but then, over a decade later, jumped to Blair's New Labour because it was continuing Thatcher's policies.

The votes for the SLP and SP/SSA should not be dismissed. They laid down a marker, in an extremely unfavourable situation, for a future left challenge to Blair, as his government inevitably comes into conflict with the working class.

British 'Far Left'—Prostrate Before Blair

The tension between old-style reformists and the new breed of neo-liberal bourgeois politicians like Blair, who are emerging from social democracy (and not only in Britain), is not insignificant. It is the result of the perceived bankruptcy of social democracy as a force for a gradual transition to socialism, or even for the humanization of capitalism. Left splits from social democracy can degenerate into bureaucratically-run utopian-reformist sects. But that is not the only possibility. Many of the militants in groups such as the SP and SLP are motivated by a profound hatred of capitalism; when the bankruptcy of reformism is demonstrated in practice, some can be won to a revolutionary perspective.

The job of Marxists is not to sneer at such individuals and groups, but, as far as possible, to develop their best instincts into revolutionary consciousness. Of course there is no guarantee of success in such an endeavor. But to write off such possibilities in advance bespeaks not a revolutionary impulse, but passive acceptance of the inevitability of victory by the Blairites and their ilk.

Yet this is *exactly* the perspective of most of the British far left. The largest ostensibly revolutionary organization in Britain, Tony Cliff's Socialist Workers Party (SWP) advised workers to "Vote Labour" and, after the results were in, raved that:

"This vote was a class vote. It was a dramatic rejection of Tory values and priorities which were said to have been so entrenched in every level of society, that ideas of collective responsibility and redistribution of wealth were history. Far from being history, these ideas are central to the expectations that the mass of people have in the new government."

—*Socialist Review*, May 1997

This echoes Hugo Young, a liberal journalist and biographer of Thatcher, who commented in the *Guardian* (3 May):

"Tony Blair had two objectives during this election. The first was to win, the second to minimise every expectation of what would happen then....Now he has got a totally unforeseen result. The strategy turns out to have produced a triumphant contradiction. So huge was his performance that it has given rise to massive hopes and dreams, far exceeding what he promised in order to secure his victory."

Whatever "massive hopes and dreams" Blair's victory may have given rise to, they have little to do with the "hopes and dreams" of socialism, or even significant reforms in the interests of working people. Even Roy Hattersley knows that.

The SWP is not the only left organization in Britain with a rotten position on the Labour Party. The Workers Power grouping (WP), for instance, has for many years maintained a niche as a left (and supposedly orthodox Trotskyist) alternative to the SWP. Yet, in recent years, particularly since a 1995 split by some of its international co-thinkers over WP's scandalous refusal to defend the Bosnian Serb militias against NATO, Workers Power has more and more reverted to its Cliffite roots. During the recent election WP was even more cravenly Labour-loyal than the SWP, whose members occasionally muttered about supporting Socialist Labour and Socialist Party candidates against Labour. WP, by contrast, issued a leaflet in Newport, South Wales, calling for a vote to Blair's Tory recruit, Alan Howarth, *against* Arthur Scargill, the leader of the NUM during the great miners' strike of 1984-5!

Workers Power views the task of the working class, according to its oft-repeated mantra, as getting Blair elected, in order to then "force Labour to meet our needs." This strategy of making working-class demands of an openly anti-working class, bourgeois government necessarily involves an unhealthy dose of reality aversion. Workers do not have any kind of left illusions in Blair because he ran on an explicitly anti-working-class platform. The fact that left reformists like Scargill can see this, while Workers Power cannot, testifies to the depth of its centrist muddle-headedness. In the post-election issue of *Workers Power*, the Hugo Young piece quoted above is cited as evidence that the working class has been roused to some sort of class consciousness by Blair's victory. In reality, Young's rhapsodizing represents the joy of reborn English liberalism at the banishment of even reformist aspirations for "socialism" from the political mainstream.

In 1992 WP at least called for votes to Militant Labour candidates Nellist, Fields and Sheridan (the latter retrospectively after a revealing opportunist flip-flop when Sheridan did better than expected). This time around WP simply dismissed the SLP and SP as "tiny parties with little support in the working class" (*Workers Power* election special, May 1997). In case socialist-minded workers were unimpressed by such small-baiting (from a group far smaller than either the SP or SLP), WP tacked on a more political explanation:

"But surely you have to start somewhere?" some might object. True: except that these parties' programmes offer no coherent alternative to Labour. And this is the most important point.

"For all their talk of 'socialism' both the SP and the SLP offer only a more left wing version of the parliamentary road to socialism.

"They offer more radical slogans than Blair (which is not difficult). They call for renationalisation, for higher taxes on the rich, for a shorter working week etc.

"But they are silent on the most important point about how socialism can be established.

"...consistent socialists are revolutionaries. We say openly to the working class that we will need to overthrow the state and break up the capitalists' apparatus of repression through a mass movement prepared to use force."

This cynical "leftist" critique is a smokescreen to hide WP's prostration before Blair. It is also a willful falsification: no one imagines that New Labour stands for the "parliamentary" or any other "road to socialism." The new British PM rarely misses a chance to praise Margaret Thatcher, and met with her to seek her advice before attending a European summit shortly after he took office. *Tony Blair no more stands*

for the "parliamentary road to socialism" than Margaret Thatcher. To pretend otherwise is absurd.

Workers Power's Anti-SLP Cardiff Caper

A grouping of former WP members in the SLP which publishes *Socialist Labour Action* (SLA) has been intervening in the internal struggles of the SLP against the party's undoubted bureaucratic deformations, with the purpose of using these issues to win SLP members to its pro-Blair perspective. Despite professed support for the SLP during the election campaign, immediately after the vote, SLA announced its "public" support for Workers Power, an organization that called for a vote to Labour *against* the SLP in all but one seat! The comrades associated with SLA have put themselves in an untenable position: even those SLP members who are angry about their leadership's bureaucratic behavior are hardly likely to take seriously the views of those opposed to the very existence of the SLP.

Workers Power only supported the SLP against the Blairites in one constituency:

"There is one constituency where Scargill's SLP is standing on a revolutionary programme. It is in Cardiff Central and we urge a vote for their candidate Terry Burns.

"There has been a struggle going on inside Arthur Scargill's SLP. Many socialists have already [been] expelled or 'voided' from the party. Vauxhall Constituency in Lambeth was dissolved for just daring to discuss a local election manifesto! This is because it was a revolutionary programme, not just Arthur's preferred version of warmed-up old Labour reformism.

"Cardiff Central has refused to be intimidated and is standing its candidate on a clearly revolutionary manifesto. This is excellent. Workers Power wholeheartedly supports Terry Burns. We encourage other SLP branches to follow Cardiff's example."

—*Ibid.*

Workers Power may have imagined that its "revolutionary" influence had transformed the Cardiff SLP into something qualitatively better than the rest of the party. But while WP offered its "wholehearted" support to Terry Burns, the gesture was not reciprocated. Interviewed shortly after the election, Burns was asked about *Workers Power's* assertion that he had been "the only candidate standing on a revolutionary programme," when it was known that he had been distributing the SLP's official election manifesto. He replied:

"As a branch we drew up a statement for the election which we as a branch stood on, but we stood on the national platform as well—otherwise why be in a party if you are going to stand on an independent platform? We did not have an independent manifesto, but a statement of where we stood as individuals in the party.

"In our branch we have people from many different left-wing groups and by coming together we have changed our views on many things just during this election campaign. We have differences in our branch for instance on whether there should be a vote for the Labour Party, or for other socialist candidates. Those who argued that we should vote Labour in other areas found that more and more difficult during the campaign. Particularly when we had the support of Workers Power members, who were calling for a vote for me, but not for Scargill in Newport, which was totally untenable.

"My ideology might be more libertarian and my politics more revolutionary than Scargill, but in fundamental

terms we were arguing for socialist transformation of society. How WP could put a fag paper [a cigarette paper] between the two, when we were standing on the same manifesto, and decide they would vote for one and not the other I don't know. Nevertheless WP members came to our meetings and defended those positions against our criticism, but we were still able to work together."

—*Weekly Worker*, 8 May 1997

Burns' revealing observation that, as the election campaign wore on, Cardiff SLP comrades became progressively less inclined to heed WP's advice to vote for the Blairites where the SLP was not standing (let alone its grotesque appeal to vote for Howarth against Scargill!) is quite an indictment. And contrary to WP's claim, the "revolutionary" manifesto which so excited WP was *not* what Burns campaigned on, but an internal statement of position. Rarely are the inflated claims of opportunist hustlers so rapidly and humiliatingly uncovered. Workers Power has exposed itself to rank-and-file SLP members not merely as right-wing and pro-Blair, but as extremely foolish as well.

WIL's More Rational Labour-Loyalism

A marginally more rational variant of WP-type Labourism was advanced by the Workers International League (WIL). A step to the left of Workers Power in this election, though historically slightly to its right, the WIL advocates a more straightforward version of WP's approach. While denouncing the SLP and SP campaigns for "standing against Labour on a sectarian basis," the WIL nevertheless issued a call to "Vote Nelligan, Sheridan and Scargill." They selected these candidates purely on the basis of their perceived personal popularity:

"In Newport East, we call for a vote for Arthur Scargill despite our overall opposition to the Socialist Labour Party's election strategy. Although the SLP does not have a significant local base in Newport, Scargill has a national profile as a radical trade union leader, and still commands the respect of many class conscious workers. He is therefore likely to find a reasonable level of support among workers in the constituency."

—*Workers News*, April-May 1997

This position perhaps befits an organization that frankly opposed the formation of the SLP from the very beginning, but has had to come to terms with the fact that the SLP commands the loyalty of some of the best militants in the British labor movement. The WIL, like WP, calls on Blair to implement a radical program of "full employment," repeal of Thatcher's anti-union laws, taxes on the rich, re-nationalization of privatized utilities, and implementation of a laundry list of assorted other left-reformist demands.

Why would Blair, who was elected on the basis of his hostility to these kind of traditional social-democratic measures, now suddenly decide to carry them out? Like WP, the WIL evidently believes there is a fundamental difference between Blair's government and the Tory administrations that preceded it. In reality, of course, one could not get a "fag paper" between Blair and Thatcher/Major on most of the questions on the WIL's laundry list.

Marxists may make demands on a Labour government, but they have to be carefully formulated in order to destroy illusions, not to create or perpetuate them. But the WIL's demands on Blair's government, which has no socialist pretensions, owes more to Alice in Wonderland than to the Leninist tactic of critical support. If the WIL's demands on

Blair have any effect at all, it can only be to *create* illusions where few exist.

Spartacist League: Political Cowards in Fear of...SLP!

The flip side of the Labour loyalism of the mainstream British Trotskyoids, and their consequent hostility to the SLP and SP, is exhibited by the Spartacist League/Britain (SL/B). The ailing British section of James Robertson's grandly titled International Communist League (Fourth Internationalist), is rarely seen in public these days. At its peak, the SL/B had four branches—in London, Birmingham, Liverpool and Sheffield. Some years later, several of these were cannibalized to create a branch in Glasgow. Today the SL/B is reduced to a single branch, in London, where it is generally regarded as a somewhat unsavory and frequently hysterical bunch of cranks.

The SL/B remains somewhat interesting politically, if only because it is still capable of approximating aspects of a Marxist approach toward New Labour and the SLP. To its credit, the SL/B is very clear in its opposition to voting for Tony Blair's Labour Party. Not only that, but it was one of the few leftist outfits to recognize the importance of the formation of Socialist Labour, which, it wrote, "offers the possibility for a fundamental realignment of the political configuration in this country out of which a genuine working-class party can be constituted" (*Workers Hammer*, February-March 1996). This would appear to be the beginning of wisdom. But for reasons it is unable to articulate, the SL/B abstained from participation in the founding of the organization that offered such important possibilities.

The SL/B has apparently decided that maintaining its own separate press and organizational structure is sacrosanct, even though it is a tiny grouping without roots in the working class. The SL/B's activity since the formation of the SLP has been limited to turning up in by-elections where the SLP stood candidates and handing out leaflets offering critical support. The SL/B leaflets, which tend to be both abstract and repetitious, read as if they had been drawn up long in advance with only the candidate's name and location left blank, to be filled in as the occasion arises. The SL/B's "critical support" is a cardboard position, without political impact.

The Robertsonites have sought to justify their abstentionism with orthodox-sounding appeals to the historical experience of the Communist International:

"Critical support is an application of the united front tactic which was developed by the Communist International. It means unity in action among the participating organisations, combined with an opportunity to test out their competing political programmes. The SL/B has extended critical support to the SLP in three previous by-elections, where we actively campaigned for the candidate and distributed their election material. At the same time in our paper *Workers Hammer* and in interventions at meetings we presented our Trotskyist programme...."

—SL/B electoral statement, 21 April 1997

The Comintern's united-front policy was intended to bring about joint actions with other, mostly reformist, parties on single issues. It is, however, another matter when there is a real possibility of participating in a "fundamental realignment" of the workers' movement. In situations such as that presented by the founding of the SLP, where the leadership of a new workers' party has a paranoid fear of

“raiding” by opponent groups, small Marxist groupings should jump at the chance to participate in building a genuinely socialist current within the proletariat. Within a larger movement, Marxists need not renounce their revolutionary views, and can find greater opportunities to help develop socialist consciousness among the working class and the oppressed. The SL/B, however, does not operate as a group of genuine Marxists, but rather as the British branch office of a declining political sect whose leadership secretly fears that, if allowed to participate in a broader political milieu, its remaining adherents may cease to regard their aging American leaders as infallible, and their fragile hold over them will be lost.

Such fears are, of course, not entirely irrational. It is quite probable that any real communist militants who remain in the ranks of the SL/B would, through participation in the SLP and the experience of direct intervention in the political struggles of the working class, come to view their old group in a new light. Sooner, rather than later, this would mean goodbye to Robertsonism in Britain.

Robertsonites on SLP/SP: a Distinction Without a Difference

Sectarian as their attitude is toward the SLP, the Robertsonites are much more hostile toward the Socialist Party/Militant, which they regard as untouchable. In fact, the SLP and SP are rather similar. Shorn of a certain residual “Trotskyist” phraseology, the thrust of the Socialist Party’s politics is left social-democratic and barely distinguishable from Scargill’s SLP. The Socialist Party, as the general election results show, has, in some parts of Britain (notably Glasgow and Coventry) a real, if modest, working-class base.

In the period leading up to the election, both the Socialist Party and Socialist Labour had differences within their leaderships on the question of advocating electoral support to Labour where no socialist candidate was standing. It is generally thought that “No Vote to Labour” sentiment was stronger in the leading committee of Socialist Labour, whereas, in the Socialist Party, the leadership was more evenly divided. In practice, however, neither party explicitly called on workers not to vote for Blair. In the pre-election issue of its paper, SLP Vice-President, Patrick Sikorski, wrote:

“Our Party presents the only real Socialist alternative to the three major parties, each of which supports capitalism and the free market.

“One of the founding tenets of the SLP is that New Labour has so fundamentally altered its policies and its constitution that it is now indistinguishable from the Tories and Liberal Democrats, and Socialists *can no longer support it.*”

—*Socialist News* No. 4, March/April 1997
(emphasis added)

The Socialist Party/Militant position on the election was in substance identical:

“Every week there’s more Labour backtracking on policies such as privatisation....Most people see them as having the best chance of kicking out the rich, sleazy and detested Tories.

“Few expect real improvements for ordinary people under a Blair government.

“Labour’s policies are now as anti-working class as the Tories’.

“*That’s why we don’t endorse Labour in this election. Vote for Socialist Party candidates where you can. Wherever you are, campaign to get the Tories out and help us build a*

fighting force for socialism and real change.”

—*The Socialist*, 11 April 1997 (emphasis added).

Both of these statements are formulated in such a way as to *fudge* the question of whether or not to advocate a vote for Labour where neither the SLP nor SP were standing. They neither call for a vote to Labour nor a boycott of Labour. The similarity of these statements reflects the essential political similarity between the two parties—which has led many militants in both parties to see the division between them as undesirable and artificial.

Yet, in its 21 April 1997 election statement, the SL/B claims to have discovered a great difference between the two: “Nor do we advocate voting for the Socialist Party (formerly Militant Labour) whose campaign is *entirely subordinated to electing a Labour government*” (emphasis added). This statement is a complete falsification. Why does the SL/B insist upon a major difference where none exists? It is well known that most of the SLP’s left wing (including a sprinkling of former SL/B members and sympathizers) tends to favor unification with the SP. In its electoral statement, the SL/B mentions SLP members who advocate closer work with the SP, and comments, “their opposition to Scargill comes from the right” (*Ibid.*). If the SP were a pro-Blairite outfit, then those SLPers advocating unity with it would indeed be “rightists.” But this is not the case. Is the SL/B’s insistence on a bogus distinction between the SP and the SLP just plain stupidity? Or is this nonsense intended to discourage any SL/B sympathizers, or supporters, who might be entertaining notions of regrouping with elements of the SLP left?

SL/B vs CPGB: Political Bandits vs Stalinoid Sectarians

The SL/B has made a particular target of one component of the SLP left—supporters of the CPGB, which, like the SP, it characterizes as being to the right of Scargill. The SL/B makes much of the CPGB’s forerunners’ flinch on the “ballot” question during the miners’ strike of 1984-5 as evidence of this. While this was indeed a mistake by the CPGB, the SL/B is diplomatically silent about the fact that Arthur Scargill made at least an equally serious error in taking the Labour Party to court as a means of reformist “struggle” against the right wing’s abolition of Clause IV.

The SL/B electoral statement does criticize Scargill for “refus[ing] to stand against New Labour ‘left’ MPs—Tony Benn, Ken Livingstone, Jeremy Corbyn and Dennis Skinner.” But it fails to mention that one of the key points of confrontation between Scargill and those linked to the CPGB was over the Brent (North London) SLP candidacy of Stan Keable, who ran against Ken Livingstone. Scargill intervened publicly when Keable’s candidacy was announced, to proclaim that Keable was not an SLP member (i.e., effectively expelling him). Scargill also stated that “the SLP has never intended to contest, and will not be contesting London’s Brent East constituency in the General Election” (*Morning Star*, 3 February 1997). The decision to run against Livingstone hardly fits the SL/B’s characterization of the CPGB as being to Scargill’s right. True to form, the Robertsonites do not hesitate to misrepresent reality in pursuit of petty sectarian advantage.

Many SLP members were critical of Stan Keable’s campaign, *not* for the entirely correct decision to stand against Livingstone, but for the sectarian manner in which it was executed. After being denounced by the SLP leadership,

Keable continued to stand against Livingstone, and was quoted in the *Weekly Worker* (1 May 1997) as saying, “In Brent East we chose to stand on the communist manifesto we believe in,” that is, the CPGB’s “Communist Manifesto,” which explicitly claims to be a revolutionary alternative to the SLP’s program. There was nothing wrong with Keable standing on the program of his choice, but he should have done so on a CPGB ticket. To stand on his program, while still claiming to be an SLP candidate, was a sectarian stunt. It could only outrage mainstream Scargillites, who saw Keable appropriating their name for the project of another organization.

Marxism vs. Labourism

In “Labourism & the British Left” (1917No. 17) we wrote: “The Labour Party question is at present *the* strategic question for Marxists in Britain. Opportunism toward the Labour Party, particularly its left wing, runs deep in the

ostensible Trotskyist movement, and has played a major role in derailing more than one serious attempt to forge a revolutionary party....[S]terile sectarianism...is a complement to this opportunism—the opposite side of the same coin. The sectarian, like the opportunist, fears confrontation with the reformist misleaders in front of the working class.”

The reaction of the British left to the rightward collapse of Labourism, and the resulting left splits from it, has confirmed our analysis. The organizations of the British far left have faced severe tests in this last period...and for the most part been found wanting. We hope that those British leftists who read this journal, and have some affinity with our program, as well as an understanding of the very fluid political situation that exists at the moment, will not fail to seize the present opportunity to work toward supplanting Labourism with revolutionary Marxism among the advanced detachments of the British working class. ■