

The 'French Turn' in New Zealand Trotskyism and the New Labour Party

In late April 1990, the Permanent Revolution Group (PRG), New Zealand section of the International Bolshevik Tendency, completed a year-long entry into the New Labour Party (NLP). This was one of the few principled and successful applications of the Trotskyist entry tactic in recent memory. The NLP was founded on May Day 1989 as a left split from the Labour Party, the traditional organization of the New Zealand working class. Having pursued overtly Thatcherite austerity policies since 1984, the Labour Party had abandoned even a pretense of defending the interests of the working class.

The NLP centered around a fairly right-wing social-democratic member of parliament, Jim Anderton. It immediately attracted a mishmash of disgruntled union bureaucrats and independent leftists. But its declared stand was clear: the Labour Party had betrayed, and so working people needed a new party. The PRG joined the NLP when it was formed, and deliberately set out to apply the lessons of the "French turn" of the 1930s.

As a result of its entry into the NLP, the PRG won several important recruits to Trotskyism, and established a public profile as the leading exponent of revolutionary politics in New Zealand. The PRG resigned in April 1990 after a farcical "expulsion," in which the Anderton leadership maintained that the group's revolutionism was in irreconcilable conflict with the NLP's "implicit" principle of the inviolability of bourgeois parliamentarism.

The PRG was initially joined in the NLP by the Communist Left of New Zealand (CL). The Communist Left is a peculiar centrist grouping based in Auckland. After years of political solidarity with the anti-Soviet hucksters of the Revolutionary Communist Party of Britain, the CL is now gravitating toward the British Workers Power's "League for a Revolutionary Communist International."

The CL accused the PRG of capitulating to reformism because the latter characterized the NLP's break with the Labour Party as a step to the left, and because it attempted for a time to fight for a revolutionary program within the new party. But the CL's posturing as "hard" revolutionists was merely a cover for tactical ineptitude. They began their intervention in the NLP by announcing their intention to carry out a split (*Redletter*, April 1989, No. 51). This made it easy for Anderton to expel the CL, despite the opposition of the PRG and other leftists.

The CL congratulated themselves on the "principled" nature of their entry, despite the fact that they gained neither recruits nor influence. While they claimed to stand in the tradition of the Trotskyist "French turn," they had a good deal more in common with the positions of the Oehlerite opponents of the tactic. Whereas the

French Bolshevik-Leninists had supported the efforts of SFIO left-wingers who tried to move their party's program in a revolutionary direction, the Communist Left presumed that the NLP ranks could not be won over. They assumed that they were going to lose, and that attempting to fight to win the party to their program was hopeless. This supposed "intransigence" amounted simply to a rhetorical cover for abstention from political struggle. Why bother to enter the NLP in the first place if the maneuver was doomed from the start?

The PRG proved much more troublesome for Anderton et al. While actively building the Wellington NLP branches and supporting the few pro-working class initiatives taken by the leadership, PRG supporters forthrightly advanced Marxist positions within the NLP. Instead of provocatively declaring their organizational disloyalty, they announced their intention to remain and fight for Marxist politics in the NLP for as long as they could.

Reprinted below is the text of the PRG's 25 April 1990 resignation statement from the NLP.

26 April 1990

When it was first founded, New Labour was a party with the potential to be a voice of ordinary working people, of the oppressed and disadvantaged; it could have been a vital and dynamic gathering place for people with a broad range of viewpoints from the working-class movement. But twelve months later it is now clear that the NLP and its membership can only be a tool for some out-of-power bureaucrats wanting to be in power: NLP democracy is dead.

The first real step came in July last year with the expulsion of the Auckland-based Communist Left group. The CL had openly declared that they were there to wreck; but their expulsion was, just as openly, an anti-communist move. It was a danger signal, and the PRG opposed it vigorously.

The last few weeks have seen that rightward move deepened and consolidated. One thing's clear: it's Jim's party now. And Jim's voice is the only voice we'll hear coming out of the NLP.

Constitution Flouted

The Founding Conference at Queen's Birthday weekend last year rejected draft constitutional provisions which would have excluded organisations like the PRG. We established a broad-based democratic party open to all groups who fought for the interests of the oppressed and the disadvantaged.

But the National Council has changed all that. In order to make sure that it's only Jim's voice we'll hear,

the National Council has had to disregard the NLP constitution. On 18 March this year it passed the following resolution:

“That pursuant to Articles 5.2.1 and 5.1.5 (a and c) of the Interim Constitution, membership of the PRG is incompatible with membership of the NLP.”

But these provisions of the Constitution give no grounds for the expulsion or proscription of the PRG whatsoever.

Article 5.2.1 concerns organisations which may choose to apply for associate membership. There is nothing to say that any organisation has a duty to apply. This article is simply not at issue in this case.

Incompatible Objectives?

Article 5.1.5 (a) is about proscribing those organisations which espouse “beliefs and principles which are contrary to the principles and objectives of the NLP.” The principles and objectives of the NLP are stated in its constitution; we support all of them. It doesn’t say anywhere that you have to believe that Parliament is a sacred and eternal institution. The PRG accepts and has repeatedly declared its acceptance of the principles and objectives of the NLP.

Article 5.1.5 (c) is about proscribing organisations which act “in a way which is disruptive of the NLP administration or organisation.” But PRG members have all observed the administrative and organisational requirements of the NLP with care. The PRG is guilty of no act disruptive of the NLP; and the National Council hasn’t even bothered to try and invent any. No specific disruptive act has been charged by them.

The Need for a Hearing

But, in any case, proscribing an organisation under the constitution requires a hearing. That means that the case for proscription has to be made in a way that those opposed to it are given a fair chance to answer that case. There was no attempt to make the case for our proscription before the National Council reached its decision. We were invited to make a submission to the March 18 meeting at which we had to try and guess what their case might be. The little they told us was false: the Chair informed us that Article 5.1.5 (c) was not relevant to the proceedings!

So they rode roughshod over the Party constitution. And they knew it of course. We suggested that the matter be put to arbitration: we can find a respected, independent trade-unionist or two, put both sides of the argument and get an impartial view on the constitutional issues.

But no, they wouldn’t want to do that. NLP president Matt McCarten refused to comment when this was put to him (*Dominion*, 19 April), and they’ve done nothing to take up the suggestion. They fear an impartial view because it would show not only their deliberate violation of the constitution, but also their motives.

And their motives are simple old McCarthyite anti-communism, together with a desire to have a party where everyone thinks the same way.

So they made no serious attempt to present a case

against us. Since the Communist Left expulsion they had tried to foster a sentiment that only left-wing “extremists” are concerned with things like constitutional provisions, with the party adhering to its own rules. For the Anderton leadership a constitution is something to be used only when you’re in the mood.

Their “case” was only a general assertion that deep faith in the parliamentary system is somehow implicit in the party constitution. So how many other positions are “implicit” in the constitution? And just when and how does Jim let ordinary members know what they are?

Sue Bradford’s Resignation

Left Currents member Sue Bradford, the founding Vice-President, announced her resignation on 9 April. Referring to the expulsion of the PRG she said:

“I felt it was the beginning of the end in terms of a process whereby people who did not agree with what the Anderton group were laying down would eventually be kicked out....

“They [the PRG] were the first lot to go. It could have been me or people from our group next. It could have been feminists. It could have been the green groups.”

—*New Zealand Herald*, 10 April

Sue Bradford is right. Anderton is now consolidating a right-wing hold on his party. That’s the meaning of the expulsions.

For instance, the vast majority of the NLP has been exerting a consistent pressure on him to introduce an abortion law reform bill into Parliament, and he doesn’t want to do that. He’s got to pick out the ring-leaders. And a lot of the ring-leaders were PRGers. There’s no chance the NLP will do anything about abortion now.

Similarly, there are a lot of NLP members who would like to push for a real programme to end unemployment, including massive public works and a thirty-hour, four-day week with no loss of pay. For Anderton it’s necessary to get rid of a core of these members, and getting rid of the PRG does that.

And even though most NLP members are not ready to fight for a massive round of nationalisations of industry and commerce under workers’ control, the presence of the PRG in the party, wanting to put that question on the agenda from time to time, was an embarrassment.

So they simply made an unconstitutional and invalid decision to exclude the PRG. Our reaction was simple: we insisted on the truth—that the party rules meant that we remained members. But matters couldn’t last like that for long.

Wellington Central Selection

On Tuesday 17 April a meeting of NLP members resident in the Wellington Central Electorate was called to select the NLP candidate. Two members of the National Council stood at the door and obstructed the entry of members. They allowed entry only to people who signed a statement to the effect that they were not members of the Permanent Revolution Group. About ten people signed and went in. The majority of NLP members present objected to the procedure as unconstitutional and undemocratic, refused to sign, and became

angry at being obstructed from entry to their meeting.

As the *Dominion* said on 18 April:

“it was clear to observers many of the dissatisfied people were not members of the group [the PRG]. Some New Labour Party members backed the trotskyst faction’s right to be at the meeting and complained about what they said were attempts by party leaders to override members’ wishes...”

Some party members left the building before the trouble started, saying they were appalled they were not given a chance to vote on whether the revolutionaries should be allowed in.

For half an hour there was a stalemate. The General Secretary of the Party then went to get the Police, and while he was gone the crowd outside the hall started to push, and got in very easily despite the attempts of the two National Council members to hold people at the door.

Karen Donaldson’s Tale

Every radio news bulletin over the next twenty-four hours seemed to report a new and additional injury to the chief of the NLP guard at the door, Karen Donaldson. None of it was true. According to the *Evening Post* (18 April): “She said she was pushed over, had her arm twisted and lost her shoe in the melee.” She wasn’t pushed over, she didn’t have her arm twisted, and her foot remained firmly in her shoe throughout. “She intends laying charges against those who had pushed her”, the *Post* went on. This is, at best, improbable. She certainly did not lay charges, and she certainly had no grounds on which to do so.

For our part, we had nothing to fear from any charges—although we suggest that an independent arbitrator is the way to deal with disputes like this. For our part, we’d welcome an independent investigation.

But these people don’t want anyone to know what really happened.

All they’re interested in is smear. The prospective candidate, Jeff Montgomery, joined in the accusations of PRG violence. “That was particularly despicable,” he said (*Evening Post*, 18 April).

And Jim Anderton described the PRG as “violent fanatics who had no place in a democratic organisation” (*Dominion*, 19 April), and “a bunch of thugs” (*Evening Post*, 23 April).

Intentional Political Lies

These are all intentional political lies. And Anderton has been pushing the same ones since the Founding Conference: there he even managed to convince sections of the media that the Conference had seen calls for immediate political violence. As we said then, we believe in democracy and we don’t want violence. But we believe the road ahead will see those who run the capitalist system resisting a movement for socialism with violence, and when that time comes we must be prepared. When it’s necessary we’ll be for self-defence against the violence of the bosses.

But we are thoroughly opposed to violence within the workers’ movement. We believe in democracy in the left,

with decisions made by majorities. We can accept being in a minority. Anderton knows this; but the truth does not constrain him.

The Real Violence

Salient, the student newspaper, got it right when it said that the “violence” at the meeting was “the kind off pushing you’d expect in a crowd” (23 April). But there was also something else more serious at that meeting: real violence, real undermining of democracy. It was carried out by the NLP leadership. Not direct violence, of course—they don’t need that right now. But the NLP leadership is quite willing to use the background violence of the bosses’ state and its police in order to force its will on this “New” Labour Party.

At the 17 April meeting they called the Police to keep NLP members out of an NLP meeting. The Police got there too late to keep anyone out, so they used the Police to close the meeting down. That is the use of violence. That is what was despicable at the 17 April meeting. And that is the way Anderton intends to continue: they’ve now called on the Police to give “protection” to the forthcoming candidate selection meetings in the Wellington area (*Evening Post*, 23 April).

The PRG has declared repeatedly that we would honour a majority decision of a meeting of NLP members resident in an area. We were prepared to face the test of democracy at the 17 April meeting: if we were properly asked to go, we would simply have gone. Along with the other NLP members outside the doors we called: “Let the meeting decide!”

But the NLP leadership could not face the test. They claimed afterwards that the PRG had sabotaged the meeting—but “the meeting” was outside wanting to get in. The bureaucrats sent to play guard were faced with the embarrassing situation of blockading the hall from the majority of NLP members attending.

So the decisions of the Founding Conference, the constitution, truth and democracy all went out the window. The Police were called. The PRG was evicted.

A Wounded, Bleeding Party

The NLP is a damaged party; it’s been badly wounded by its own National Council. As a result there’s been a severe haemorrhaging of unorganised leftists—people resigning or simply fading away.

All the best people are leaving.

The PRG has been fighting for its membership rights, for the right to party democracy. We wanted to be part of a party with a membership which fought for the interests of the working people and the disadvantaged, and which brought together all the tendencies which share that aim, irrespective of their differences.

But the NLP is not that kind of party any more. Democracy is dead in the NLP—the interests the Party serves now are the interests of a man who has no higher ambition than personal power.

So we resign.

Many good people remain in the NLP, but they can now be servants of only one master. They will discover this. And the haemorrhaging will continue.