

This document has been compiled at the request of the NC as background for the Dayschool on the Labour Party in June. It aims through a series of extracts from past BF publications and motions to answer the question often asked by new members- what is our present position on the Labour Party? Looking at these extracts soon reveals large gaps of areas not covered and inconsistencies between statements produced at different dates. This is because BF has never had a fully worked out position on the Labour Party and has usually made a series of ad hoc adjustments to its position when issues such as whether or not to vote Labour in a particular election have cropped up. Inevitably many people reading the extracts will find them inadequate or in need of modification or will think of other important areas which are omitted. The main aim of producing this document is to encourage them to write articles for the next Discussion Bulletin which will have as its theme articles devoted to the two Dayschools on the Labour Party and the Newspaper.

F.M. (for the NC)

I. ANALYSIS OF REFORMISM

BF's traditional analysis of reformism can be found in the 1977 Draft Manifesto:

"Historically reformism has been based on two main standpoints. Conventionally we understand it as the theory and practice that accepts the 'national interest', thus eliminating the fundamental conflict between the classes. It forges the possibility of achieving socialism through a series of reforms within the capitalist system, without destroying the bourgeois state.

This denial of the necessity of destroying the capitalist state gives rise to parliamentarianism- the strategy based on slowly winning over a majority inside the bourgeois parliament, and the reduction of class struggle to a form of pressure on parliament to pass more 'progressive' legislation.

...But reformism is based on a deeper fault and misconception- that of failing to understand the contradiction between the forces and relations of production. Firstly, the reformists tend to identify the relations of production solely with who owns the profit-making property. The result is that they see socialism in limited terms, concerned only with changing some patterns of ownership (through nationalisation) and wealth (through income distribution), at best. They do not stand for the transformation of all social relations of life, work and leisure. Secondly, reformism accepts the supposed 'neutrality' and 'objectivity' of production. Science, technology and machinery are seen simply as 'productive forces' to be developed regardless of the type of society we live in. We must oppose this idea with the necessity to transform the nature of science, technology and all productive forces under socialism."

(Towards a New Revolutionary Socialist Organisation, 1977 p11)

The analysis argued that reformism since the Second World War has been rooted in the type of struggle characteristic of this period, in particular on sectionalism and delegation:

"When we talk of sectionalism we must be clear on a point of confusion. We do not say that every struggle, if it is confined to one sector, is reformist and that the only revolutionary struggle is that of the working class as a whole for the seizure of power. On the contrary struggles of one sector can open up the way for the rest of the class and therefore to the revolutionary process. No struggle is in itself revolutionary or reformist, this depends on the content, context and form of the struggle. The struggle of women on an estate for safety barriers, for example, is not reformist if it increases the level of anti-capitalist consciousness of the women, their organisation and the unity of the working class in the community.

Secondly, delegation. The habit, pushed by the institutions of the labour movement, to leave it to others- 'your representatives'. The politics which doesn't stress the necessity of involving the mass of people. The best way to keep the working class under control. At a general level, the conviction that a Labour government still may deliver the goods without struggle."

(ibid p12)

2. ANALYSIS OF THE LABOUR PARTY

(a) Experience of Past Labour Governments

Since the Second World War reformism has changed in another way:

"The Labour Party and the trade union machines have been integrated into the running of the system. The Labour Party was the overseer of the important post-war reforms aimed to extend the system by using working class needs and struggles as a motor of development in a conscious and planned way. Since then they have not had a real reforming strategy, now competing solely as better managers of capitalism without altering the structures."

(ibid p11)

(b) Past Experience of the Labour Left

The weakness of the Parliamentary Labour Left was illustrated during the 1974-79 Labour Government:

"The Labour left, its confidence badly dented by the referendum defeat, was further hit by the defection of left union leaders like Jones and Scanlon and the integration of key figures like Foot, formerly part of the Tribune Group, into the Callaghan camp. They did little to challenge these measures save a few noises and token voting rebellions."

The problem with those who pin their hopes on the Labour left is not simply that they can so easily be removed from positions of influence. It is that, with the exception of a few MPs, they are totally unwilling to mobilise any working class fightback outside the narrow confines of Parliament. It is easy to criticise them for not acting as revolutionaries, but they cannot even function as an effective opposition in purely reformist terms."

(Labouring under the Tories or a Socialist Alternative, 1979 p8)

(c) Relationship of the working class to the Labour Party

BF has in the past criticised what it has called a fundamental misconception about the relationship of the Labour party and reformism to the working class:

"It assumes that the mass of the working class identifies with the Labour Party. The main evidence used is that the majority of the working class vote Labour and belong to the unions that are linked to it. But few working class people vote Labour because they have illusions that it will advance socialism, or even their daily interests. They vote Labour as part of a class vote against the Tories, and it cannot be assumed that because the major unions have an institutional link to the Labour Party that all their members are conscious Labour Party supporters or activists."

(ibid p15)

3. WHETHER TO VOTE FOR THE LABOUR PARTY

The position adopted by BF on the Labour vote at the 1979 election was:

"Except where they offer an alternative, revolutionaries should call for a vote for Labour on the following perspectives which can be adapted to slogans:

- a) the working class will have to fight any government
- b) vote Labour to keep the Tories out.

We do not call for a Labour vote on the basis of its programme. The Labour Party is a bourgeois party based on working class support. We reject the view that the Labour Party is a 'lesser evil', and affirm that Labour governments are enemies of working people, as well as the Tories.

We call for a Labour vote because we recognise that the working class votes Labour to affirm its own class identity against what it recognises as a class enemy. As revolutionaries do not at this time offer a governmental alternative, we realise that the working class will nevertheless seek a choice of government. Revolutionaries therefore have to side with the working class in choosing a party built out of the working class movement, rather than the traditional class enemy.

We recognise that the Labour Party in power presents better conditions for revolutionaries to break militants from Labour, as a Tory government lets Labour off the hook, encourages phoney radicalisation and disarms militants."

(Motion adopted in National Ballot, Big Flame Newspaper Oct 1978 p9)

4. WHETHER TO JOIN THE LABOUR PARTY

The position which has been agreed by the NC on membership of the Labour Party is:

"Big Flame is opposed to entrism as a tactic in regard to the Labour Party and does not believe that the strategy for revolutionaries should be to seek to transform the Labour Party from within. Where BF branches exist BF members do not join the Labour Party (It may sometimes be the case that for specific overriding reasons a member may need to hold a Labour membership card. They should discuss the position with their local BF branch.)

In the case where there is no BF branch and no possibility of building a branch in the short term (e.g. where there are less than 3 BF members or sympathisers) membership of a local Labour Party is acceptable provided the following:

- i) the BF member's perspective is to be involved in independent struggle and to seek in the medium term to build a BF branch or group of sympathisers.
 - ii) that the comrade does not hold the perspective that the Labour Party can be transformed from within and that he/she does not devote the great bulk of their political energy to winning positions within the Labour Party.
 - iii) that the comrade does not operate in a secret manner inside the Labour Party and does not conceal his or her membership of BF. Big Flame is not a proscribed organisation. However public acknowledgement of membership or support for BF has to be tempered by the 'security' situation prevailing in regard to BF membership in the Labour Party both locally and nationally. If there is a danger of a 'purge' of an individual comrade or against BF nationally the situation will be reviewed.
 - iv) any member of BF wishing to take up membership of the Labour Party must discuss it first with the National Committee (and local or nearest group, where appropriate). BF comrades already holding membership of the Labour Party must discuss their position with their local branch and the NC.
- (Motion adopted at the Nov 1980 NC, Conference Bulletin no4 1980 p31)

5. THE ALTERNATIVE ECONOMIC STRATEGY

BF's perspective on the AES is linked to its support for 'counter planning from below':

'We should take into account the alternative economic strategy (AES) of the Labour left, which (supported by the trade unions) will probably be included in some form in the programme of a future Labour government and exerts at the moment a strong influence over the tactics, strategies and struggles of many militants.

We do not think that the AES provides a basis for any viable transition towards socialism. Its many crucial weaknesses include belief in the ability to transform capitalism from the inside, without involving in a central way the mass of the working class. But because of the influence of reformism and the AES within militant sections of the working class we shall often find ourselves fighting alongside militants influenced by the AES and waging the same struggles within command demands (e.g. against cuts and closures). This has particular relevance for our notions of counter-planning from below, since in making demands such as on the state or Labour government for funds we shall find ourselves struggling alongside people who think that the AES and Labour provides some meaningful way forward.

As revolutionaries, we attempt to bridge the gap between specific struggles and areas of work, and a long-term political overthrow of capitalism and the state at a general level. It is at the general level of the economy and state that the AES concentrates attention and, at present, provides for many militants the only serious alternative to monetarism. In certain areas of work, notably unemployment and the cuts, these ideas find some resonance with activists looking for concrete solutions to the problem of developing a focus against the Tories (e.g. relating to Labour-controlled Councils). The AES taken as a whole is statist and national chauvanist, and hence insupportable, but- while in no way making attempts to 'manage capitalism'- we should seek to locate 'counterplanning from below' initiatives within the varied forms of struggle which the AES may help encourage at local and

national state levels, give critical support to those elements of the AES which benefit the working class, but give unremitting opposition to those which attempt to shift the burden of the crisis on to the working class which are counterposed to our ideas of socialism, or have the prime effect of shoring up capitalism. For example we are opposed to import controls, but we would use a context of increased state intervention and public spending to press for independent working class demands."

(Motion passed at 1980 Conference, Conference Report p10)

6. THE CAMPAIGN TO DEMOCRATISE THE LABOUR PARTY

The same Conference motion also discussed the attempts to democratise the Labour Party. It continued:

"In this context we should support moves to democratise the Labour Party, whilst not putting forward our own demands in this respect. While such moves may lead to illusions in Labour, democratisation strengthens the left as a whole (both inside and outside the Labour Party) against the Labour Right, helps to encourage Labour Party members to be active in struggles, and helps make clearer the limited and contradictory nature of reformist politics in the eyes of important sections of the working class. We should, however, note how limited the 'democratisation' moves are."
(idid p10)

Some suggestions for reading on previous debates in BF on the Labour Party:

Article by PT in Discussion Bulletin June 1977.

Articles by Bradford and Moriarty in BF/RMC DB July 1977.

Articles by Duncan and Jones/Brown/Courage in Conference Motions and Documents 1978.

Various articles in the Special Bulletin on the Labour Vote DB August 1978.

Article by Duncan/McKenzie in DB Jan 1979.

Theses on Reformism in Conference Bulletin no1 1979 and amendments by Miller (Conference Bulletin no3) and Brown (Conference Guide) plus article by Johnson (Conference Bulletin no3)