Discussion:
The Forward March of Labour Halted?
Pete Carter

Eric Hobsbawm's article and Ken Gill's reply afford the left the possibility to begin an overdue debate, both on the period 1968-74 and on the whole question of the relationship between wages and trade union struggles and a strategy for socialist advance in a highly developed capitalist democracy.

It is also important because beneath the question is the problem of why the movement subsided so quickly after Labour came to power, and why it has not recovered since. The need to clarify problems relating to this period gain further urgency from the fact that we may now be standing on the edge of a new surge in wages and trade union struggle, renewed inflation, and a possibly worsened economy.

I think Hobsbawm's article begins to highlight a major problem confronting the labour movement. I found it fascinating reading and could relate its essence to the day-to-day struggles. I often sit and ponder about the last 20 years of struggle. It is true that during this period there have been some enormous class battles, some major confrontations, and actions, which repeatedly confirm the power and strength vested in the working class and its organisations.

But whilst on the one hand we have witnessed this enormous activity, one must ask the question why are we no further forward in winning political advances. There can be no doubt that people in the material sense are better off today (though one must not ignore the abundant poverty still around) but where has it got us?

What is good about Hobsbawm's contribution is that it helps situate today's struggles in an historical perspective, and in so doing highlights some of the poverty of these struggles. The ruling class in Britain have been able to manipulate history in a way that perpetuates their own existence. This has been at the expense of a developing consciousness of the working class movement and to a large extent restricts its ability to both come to terms and to understand the complex problems of current day politics.

Wat Tyler, John Ball, Jack Cade and the men of Kent, Cromwell, the Levellers and Diggers, the Chartist movement, the experiments of Robert Owen, the beautiful contribution of William Morris, Tom Mann and the early campaigns on industrial unions, Hobsbawm's major work on Captain Swing, the formation of the Labour and Communist parties are just to mention a few of the battles of yesterday that point to a richness in our forefathers that carry many lessons for us today.

Not to draw from the sum total of struggles denies today's and future generations the ability to understand the class changes that are taking place, the ever growing dangers of sectionalism within the working class and the reasons for instinctive rather than a developed class consciousness. For me Hobsbawm widens the area for trade union intervention in the revolutionary process and Ken Gill's response I find rather inadequate, narrow, certainly not helpful in the situation which we are now in.

The Arguments

Let us examine some of the arguments.

Both contributions raise a number of general as well as specific points. Firstly there is the general one of the speed of the advance or retreat of the labour movement, especially since 1968, and the causes of it. Hobsbawm's answer is that the Labour party and the Communist party have continued in their long post-war decline.

Gill's response is that the left is stronger and the working class more militant. Both come to their conclusion by looking at the evidence in different ways. Hobsbawm comes to his by looking at the evidence of political choice and behaviour, while Gill assumes that the number and nature of strikes in the 1970-1974 period is evidence itself of a leftward shift.

Neither seems totally satisfactory though the first seems more convincing than the second, and the incompleteness of the conclusions reached by these spokesmen in the party reflects the difficulties and uncertainties which we face.

The second general point raised is the type of relationship which exists between wages and political struggle. All too often assumptions are made about this relationship because there is little evidence that the struggles of 1968-74 had any lasting politicising effect.

Too often we substitute, as Gill has done, a certain kind of wishful thinking which says that because we
see struggle as political the mass of workers do also. In addition it should be remembered that the wages struggle is only one part of the class struggle and that at certain times some types of wages struggle may be politically self-defeating.

This is why one despairs when Gill says that the restoration of the wages movement is the key area of struggle, without any concrete suggestions of how it is related to either the political struggle of the left or other areas of struggle like what is the relationship between the fight for wages and the struggle over investment policy, the problems of workers' control, or whether products are socially useful or not.

The constant assumption is that all wage struggles are good and politically progressive for the workers. Apart from the positive role of the wages struggle, it should also be remembered that at the political and ideological level they can often legitimate capitalism, confirming the "law of the market" and the economic drowning of the working class' least defended sections. Where for example have the big manual unions been on the cuts in public expenditure and the campaign on low pay?

Gill seems to argue the view that to continue fighting for wages will see the eventual downfall of capitalism, and that militancy around this issue is enough. It is my view that nothing could be further from the truth. As a matter of fact I would go as far as to say that current wages struggles in isolation from political perspectives could create great divisions amongst the working class. The Ford workers' recent wages victory will (and should) be welcomed by the more advanced shop stewards as an important step forward, but for the vast majority of British workers they see it in terms of higher prices and a reduction in their standards and see the Ford worker- as the reason, and not the system. We ignore such problems at our peril.

There are other issues equal to that of wages that must be fought. Neither wages nor militancy are in themselves enough to make inroads in bringing about a more equitable organisation of society. I make this point from a position of many years involved in the wages struggle and assessing the value of this alone, compared to today being able to unite the wages issue with these issues of a broader nature.

The Building Industry Experience

I can only reflect on my own industry and my immediate experiences which although in embryo indicate more potential for revolutionary change.

The episode began in 1975 when Jack Munday an Australian Communist Party member and past secretary of the Builders Labourers Federation visited Britain. It was a very new experience to listen about a wider contribution Australian building workers were making to the political scene.

The whole development behind the Builders Labourers Federation was that of the need to make a wider contribution to the development of society through using its industrial muscle. Closely linked with environmental groups the BLF stopped property speculators developing bush land, curtailed the building of speculative office blocks, helped to preserve communities whose homes were under threat of demolition, halted the construction of a power station, stopped the demolition of historical buildings which ranged from pubs to pulpits, whilst at the same time was able to secure for its members the highest ever awarded wage increase. The BLF saw no contradiction, say, between using its strike weapon on a university extension on which the powers that be were denying women a course on feminism, and homosexuals entry because of their sexual orientation, and that of the wages struggle. In reality both struggles were essential and on both they were victorious.

My own union, UCATT, in the Midlands has begun to see struggle in wider terms and during the past four years has clearly identified with all sections of the community in struggle and participated with them.

Its role in campaigning to save a Victorian Post Office, its opposition to speculative office blocks, the campaign within its own ranks encouraging workers to demand their labour be used in a socially useful way. The fight to save direct workers departments linked to the campaign for public ownership of the industry around the slogan build for people and not for profits, has won for the union not just a wider appreciation for the role of trade unions from a wider section of the community, but more so an understanding of its own role.

It has been able to make the leap from pure wages struggle to identify with The Conference of Socialist Planners, The New Architecture Movement, the Anti Nazi League and Campaign Against Racism and Fascism, tenants movements and a whole variety of struggles that by and large are struggling against aspects of capitalism, but not yet fully conscious of the system. Friends of the Earth, Conservation and Victorian Societies, the Green Ban Action Committee, Hazards at Work group, Transport and Energy 2,000 movements all see in UCATT a source of strength aimed at helping them fulfill their aspirations. Neither is it all one way because UCATT gains strength and confidence through association. The involvement and working with wider sections of society helps to develop and raise its consciousness, helps it to get a deeper knowledge and a wider view. Broadens its horizons and helps it to get an all round approach, caring for the community's problems.

In no way does this approach weaken the union: on the contrary, it makes better fighters of its members because it gives confidence, knowledge and
other forces in the fight for change. It is a natural and essential alliance that is tackling capitalism on many fronts and in the process the clarity and unity from joint struggles help the growth of understanding the complications of the initial issues involved in. It is my belief that only through such a strategy can we begin to raise class consciousness.

**Shift to the Left?**

The third general point that is raised is the important one of the shift to the left. Here Gill and Hobsbawm are in direct disagreement. The shift to the left has been spoken about in the party press from the end of the 60s and to some extent reflected a real change. However, the party has been inadequate in looking at the problems in any satisfactory way. Generally what it has been taken to mean is the movement covering the Labour Party leadership, the Parliamentary Labour Party and a number of trade unions.

Now this has undeniably happened and should not be underestimated. But the real nature of the shift remains largely a mystery. What elements are available to allow us to penetrate it? Hobsbawm appears to be correct when he says that the numeral decline of the Labour and Communist parties and the vote reflects the sentiment of the average voter. 1970-1974 was an exceptional period in the labour history of the post war period which appeared to have led to the development of a new, politically more advanced cadre in the labour movement, but what their number and quality is, is hard to gauge.

Partly in contradiction to this, there is plenty of evidence that the mass of the trade union membership has not significantly shifted to the left. It should also be remembered, that with the exception of a few unions, the left is most entrenched in those unions where there are no direct elections. On many issues in the trade union movement over the last few years, there is plenty of evidence for the leaders being to the left of the membership. The last element, stressed by Gill and largely missed by Hobsbawm, is the growth of democratic-political struggles like the pay beds issue, forms of radical struggle which have yet to be sufficiently integrated into an overall left strategy.

Since Ken Gill carries by far the most day to day responsibility in the labour movement the main reply must be to his contribution. I was disappointed because he did not face up to Hobsbawm’s criticisms of sectionalism and racialism in the working class movement. I was also concerned about his over-estimation on trade union leaders. Sure Jones was better than Deakin, but the complete omission by Gill of the importance of the rank and file contribution leaves him wide open to the criticism of a bureaucratic conception of left advance.

Throughout Gill confuses trade union organisation with political understanding. On his definition we don’t need political parties, just trade unions clashing with the state, and in no way did he convince that the left is stronger than ever, the only evidence he offers is of something that might happen in the future.

My view is, for what it’s worth, that Communists and trade unionists and the labour movement in general needs to do some new thinking. I honestly believe the arguments advanced by Gill are the very reasons why the progressive movement is in decline and to base our future strategy on these thoughts will go to perpetuate rather than arrest the decline.

Hobsbawm does come to terms with the problems and based on his contribution we can map out a strategy of advance. And the first thing must be to turn the movement onto the offensive. All too often our actions are from a defensive posture.

**A Broad Front**

The working class and its organisations have enormous democratic strengths. Surely we need to use these strengths, free collective bargaining—yes, but over everything.

In other words our industrial muscle needs to be used in order to defend and improve the conditions of the weaker workers. The most powerful should stand side by side with the lower paid. Joint action needs to be taken, the annual conference resolution is not enough. We should be demanding a freeze on price rises. It would be possible to get workers to down tools over price rises but all too often this level of struggle is overlooked.

A broad movement should be worked for to stop cuts in public expenditure. The cuts have intruded into all aspects of our life. What is the point of trade unionists fighting for health and safety at work on the one hand, and on the other tolerating cuts in the hospital service, in education and in housing.

It seems a contradiction to me fighting for the right to work whilst at the same time negotiating the best possible redundancy payments. But very little is done to combat the ideology of redundancy payments, and the lack of a fight over this issue means acceptance of selling jobs, and more school leavers on the dole.

Most trade union leaders seem to be caught in a technological trap. They call for more investment in industry (but today this means less jobs) but never question investment in what. The philosophy of jobs at any cost is a bankrupt one and reflects a low level of political thought.

The Lucas aerospace corporate plan is of immense value in this respect. Its demands over production and not just distribution add a new dimension to trade union struggles. Their approach to the problem is an illustration of the maturity that has developed since the days not so long ago when
workers were smashing up threshing machines.

The corporate plan is the product of workers looking at their industry, questioning what is produced, and putting forward alternative socially useful products. It is this sort of initiative that the wider community responds to.

**Creative Marxism**

Industrial and political struggle, it should be remembered, involves only a fraction of the working population, and there is only the most tenuous connection between the relative handful of militants and the overwhelming bulk of the workforce. It is this strategic majority that has got to be won, and we need a policy for them as well as for the advanced sectors, if not, any wage advance will be short lived. Meanwhile, the ruling class, because of the massive influence which it exercises over the organised as well as the unorganised labour, will be able, as after 1975, to negate at the political and strategic level, the small left advances which have been won.

Hobsbawm’s contribution is much broader in its approach and makes history a living reality. Not only does it help to map a way forward from historical experiences, but aids with insight into our party’s programme the British Road to Socialism.

The need to broaden the campaigns of the labour and trade union movement is in essence the creative Marxism of our generation and is certainly continuing the struggle in the tradition of the great past masters who never lost sight of linking the vision or the gleam of Communism with the day to day struggles.

It is now within our reach to build a broad democratic alliance in which the working class will fulfill its leading role. But this position is not automatic, it must be won, and the wages struggle on its own will in no way begin to implement the concepts within the British Road.

George Matthews writes:

In his article "The Labour Government 1974-78" in the October issue of Marxism Today Graham Taylor quotes the question I asked in an article which appeared in the February 1975 issue of Marxism Today: "Is the sharpness of the Communist assessment and criticism really justified at so early a stage in the government’s life?". Readers may have been given the impression by his article that I was querying the Communist Party’s policy at that time. In fact the article made the case for answering the question in the affirmative, and not in the negative.