Discussion:
Communist-Labour Relations
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Comrade Priscott has taken the most important political problem facing our party, the issue of Communist/Labour relations (Marxism Today, October 1977) and has, disappointingly, come up with a lemon. He recites the same well-worn litany of growth in the mass support of the Communist Party leading to closer ties with the Labour Party, leading eventually to the formation of a joint Labour-Communist government and (possibly) to eventual organisational unity. For 15 years this has been the theme and for 15 years the influence and membership of the party has declined. Whatever their final conclusions, most members would feel that our position vis-a-vis the Labour Party has played some part in this decline. Yet for Cde. Priscott there seems nothing but roses. No problems, just the song as before.

The History of Relations
The best place to begin a critique of this position is our history, for the past 15 years is only the continuation of a much longer period in which political unity has been our major (avoided) problem.

Party history exists in a curious void. There is a small explosion of interest in the history of the Soviet Communist Party, yet little or no effort is made to excavate the structures of our own past. The sands of time begin to flow over it, making the shapes indistinct and soon perhaps beyond recovery. Yet the key to left unity lies as much in the past as in the future, for political parties are the accretion of many years' struggle and cannot be altered in a day. To start almost as though the slate were clean, as Cde. Priscott does, dismissing, for example, past campaigns for Labour Party affiliation as now belonging to an irrelevant past means that speculation takes over from historically based analysis. In this article, any outline of the necessary history will be compressed but it must be attempted.

In 1920, British Communists chose to exclude themselves from the mass political organisation of the working class just at the moment when that body, the Labour Party, was crystallising as a genuine mass party after nearly 20 years of rather ambiguous political life. The applications for affiliation which accompanied the early years of the Communist Party should not obscure the basic point; that the organisational autonomy of the
Communist Party was kept as an immutable principle raised above tactical questions of unity. This enabled the affiliation campaigns to be fairly easily disregarded by the Labour Party leadership, who could always present them, with considerable truth, as no more than ill-disguised attempts at infiltration. Then, as in a rather more muted form now, the Labour Party was regarded by us as an unstable political formation, whose disintegration might be hastened by organisational attachment but to which no long-term strategic importance should be attached. It is astonishing that after 58 years the same essential message can be derived from Cde Priscott’s piece.

The self-imposed political exclusion of 1920, followed not from a specific analysis of the British situation but from the decisions of the Communist International which made the formation of independent national Communist Parties virtually unavoidable for national affiliates. The major consequences of this policy were the formation of the great European Communist Parties formed out of dependent national Communist Parties virtually from Cde. Priscott’s piece. Some of them supported Communists when they stood for Parliament; Pollitt in Rhondda is an example.

Subsequent Developments

It is impractical to continue detailing the subsequent changes in our position on left unity. How in 1935 we swung towards the Popular Front against the threat of fascism, then in 1939 dropped the idea of a fascist threat, regarding the war as based on intra-imperialist rivalries until 1941, when we decided that the war became anti-fascist (as most members had always believed). How in 1945 we urged such a degree of popular unity as to include even liberal Conservatives and withdrew half our candidates to demonstrate our determination not to rock the boat. And then from 1947 onwards, how we turned back to an increasing sectarianism that culminated in our original refusal to support the first great break with cold-war attitudes, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, on the grounds that it contained anti-Soviet elements.

Our present position was first stated in 1963, at the 30th Congress, by the slogans ‘Make the Communists the Fourth National Party’ and ‘Towards Left Unity’. The apparent contradictions between these were resolved by terming them dialectical opposites—though to many they remained just contradictory.

This crude compression of party history is not presented for the sake of picking at old scabs. It is one-sided and ignores most of the enormous pressures and attacks which Communists had to sustain throughout nearly all the period considered. But it does illustrate the point that Communist relations with the rest of the British Left have been historically both arbitrary and liable to sudden changes. And in large part the accusation that this has resulted from the acceptance of external dictate has been close to the mark. The rights and wrongs of this acceptance, particularly in the early periods of the Communist Inter-
The Nature of the Labour Party

In contrast to this, the Labour Party has always presented a slow, cautious but comparatively unwavering face. It has deviated very little from its stated aim, neither to adopt a more coherent or theorised socialism on the one hand, but also never to stray far from representing at least the short-term interests of the working class. The fact that the Labour Party has sustained this essential commitment to working-class interests is the factor which has enabled it to endure, though not without great bitterness, through the successive betrayals of the Labour governments, whether the blatant organisational sell-out of Ramsay MacDonald or the political failures of the Wilson and Callaghan governments. Cde. Priscott, who fails to see any role for the Labour Party other than as an electoral machine, is thereby led to ignore the very great loyalty and commitment which is given to the Labour Party by large numbers of the working class.

The problem of the British Communist Party is that we have remained a political party which, although accepted up to a point within the trade union movement, has always been essentially external to the British working class. The critical suspicion with which we have always been viewed cannot be smoothed away by the bland smugness of Cde. Priscott, who assumes that because of our Marxist revolutionary analysis we are automatically destined to assume the role of moulding mass consciousness so long denied to the Labour Left.

Cde. Priscott acknowledges working class support for the Labour Party as a kind of unfortunate aberration, explained by the working class being dominated by 'reformist' ideology. Unfortunately, in the absence of any historical perspective, this reduces to little more than mysticism with 'reformism' merely being used as a shorthand for some collective state of mind. It offers no explanation of why, for example, the British working class is so dominated, unlike the French and Italian—at least in terms of support for Marxist parties. And more important it offers no way forward other than exhortations to hard work and the preservation of our independent organisation pending the day when reformism will go away as mysteriously as it arrived.

Reformism is in fact a decidedly abused word, used to refer to both non-socialist reformers and to those who have a socialist perspective but regard the achievement of this as a matter of gradual change. It is totally simplistic to characterise the Labour Party as 'reformist' and the Communist Party as 'revolutionary' and thereby regard the political case for the existence of a separate Communist Party to be proven. As is easily demonstrated, the Communist Party is itself divided between 'reformists' and 'revolutionaries' if one uses the classic Marxist definitions of these terms.

Peculiar Feature

The peculiar feature of the Labour Party is that it retains within itself both non-socialist 'social reformers' and 'reformist' socialists as well as a section of unreconstructed 'workers' militia' revolutionaries. It has retained this unity, albeit uneasily at times, long after all the mass social democratic parties of continental Europe had split into two or three parts.

It is this historical unity, with its corollary—the uneasy and external position of the Communist Party already noted—which forms the major defining factor of the British Labour Party, not the organisational factor of trade union involvement on which Cde. Priscott places so much weight. And because he appreciates the organisational, but not the political, oddity of the Labour Party, he inevitably arrives at tactical conclusions which reduce to no more than organisational manoeuvre.

It is a cliche of British socialism that the Labour Party was set up by the trade union movement as a way of exerting pressure on the government of the day. The trade unions have continued to provide a large part of Labour Party finance, to exert considerable influence over policy decisions and to have incorporated representation at all levels of the Labour Party organisation. However, to reduce the Labour Party therefore to no more than the political organisation of the trade unions, which Cde. Priscott comes close to doing, is to misjudge completely the whole historic picture. In essence it differs not at all from those right-wing leaders who believe that nothing matters except keeping the block votes of the major unions sweet. Only for them it comes close to being the truth as they only wish to preserve and strengthen a position of political dominance maintained over many years.

Purpose and Importance of Left Unity

I have considered two major deficiencies in Cde. Priscott's approach; that he makes a sim-
plastic and misleading characterisation of the left, which leads directly to sectarian conclusions, and that he fails to consider any historical factors which have affected the issue of left unity. These are, however, subsidiary to, or at least derive from, the main weakness of his position; a failure to understand the specific purpose and importance of left unity in this country. His argument follows exactly the form of that policy introduced in 1963, though oddly his conclusions stand that policy on its head. The argument can be summarised as follows.

The British Left is composed of two complementary sections: the Labour Party Left and the Communist Party. These two groups effectively define the political focus of the Left though there remain certain residual unaffiliated groups, mainly centred around issues separate from the mainstream of labour movement politics. It is important that these groups should be brought into the main movement, but their existence does not substantially alter the basic Left Labour/Communist balance.

Left Labour and Communist are both engaged in the struggle to gain support for left policies. This struggle is not competitive and both will grow in strength as the bankruptcy of right-wing policies are exposed. Co-operative action between the two groups already exists in the unions and this mutual understanding will widen as the two grow in strength. At some point, the strength of the Communist Party will begin to be reflected in the election of Communist councillors and a small number of MPs, whilst at the same time Left Labour forces will extend their influence throughout the Labour organisation and the Parliamentary Labour Party. Co-operation will begin to extend to the electoral field, perhaps in the first instance by putting forward ‘mixed slates’ at local elections, eventually in agreements to accept Communists as Labour-backed candidates in certain constituencies. And, at some more or less distant future a Parliamentary majority of Left Labour plus Communist MPs will be won and some kind of transitional socialist government will be formed. At about this stage of development considerations of affiliation or some other kind of formal political union would emerge naturally from an advanced de facto co-operation.

It would be possible to embellish this with a number of qualifications, in particular about the possibility of there being ups-and-downs in growth rather than any smooth rise and about the need for mass activity outside the electoral sphere. It would be fair to say, however, that these two caveats remain relatively unspecified and that the main thrust of the policy is as described.

Cde. Priscott has modified this policy, presumably in response to its almost total loss of credibility, but before considering these modifications, the defects of the original must be considered.

Defects
The most immediate problem of this policy is that it is a scenario rather than a theorised strategy; it is a projection of a series of events which could happen rather than a concrete application of Marxist theory deriving from historical experience. The acceptance of such a scenario rests upon changing ‘could happen’ to ‘probably will happen’ and its rejection depends upon the phrase used above, ‘loss of credibility’, rather than any reappraisal of its underlying elements. However, the accepted policy scenario described above does contain certain implicit theoretical and political assumptions which can be challenged.

The most relevant of these is that political unity is relegated to a secondary issue. Left growth, both for the Communist Party and the Labour Left, is predicted to occur without any significant organisational change. Unity is referred to some more or less distant future when these two groups can negotiate on equal terms. Cde. Priscott reaffirms this by his emphasis on autonomous growth.

Moreover, this growth is assumed to take place for both groups, despite the widely different bases ascribed to them (one an allegedly non-Marxist reformist group, the other truly revolutionary). The only way this can be made consistent is to assume that short-term policy is the only factor influencing mass support. The suggestion that matters such as organisational structure or long-term objectives influence support is implicitly rejected. Again this implies a limited importance to unity of the left.

Finally, it assumes an essentially popular victory for the Communist Party and an essentially organisational victory for the Labour Left. This peculiar and highly sectarian result derives from the concept emphasised by Cde. Priscott that the Labour Party is little more than an electoral machine with no possibility of winning the mass support (potentially! available to the Communist Party.

I have already suggested that this scenario of growing electoral support, leading to eventual electoral unity, has collapsed under the weight of succeeding and intensifying failures in the electoral field. Cde. Priscott responds to this collapse in two ways; by abandoning the idea of independent electoral success and by emphasising another route to achieving de facto unity with the Labour Party via its trade union affiliations. Cde. Priscott would no doubt deny the former, but
it is difficult to draw any other conclusion from the vague and scattered references he makes to electoral success. His whole weight is put on building up the base of the Communist Party by other and largely unspecified means, referred to as 'mass work'.

**Mass Work**

Now it is difficult to deny the importance of 'mass work'. But what Cde. Priscott appears not to realise is that, by itself, the phrase means nothing. The point of articles such as he has written is to consider the type of mass work, its particular emphases and tactics, which is required in the present circumstances; in a phrase, to consider the politics of mass work.

All that he does is supply an alternative scenario, that also might happen, without paying any heed to the factors that have caused the long-term decline of the Communist Party and caused a previous scenario to fail. It may be that the right for Communists to attend Labour Party meetings as trade union representatives could be a useful stepping-stone to political unity (though it does beg an awful lot of questions). But the point at issue is far more fundamental; it concerns the whole historical role of the British Communist Party and its relationship with a working class which has always firmly denied it any substantial place in British politics. Such a pattern is not to be reversed by 'mass work', but by adopting a political strategy which includes mass work as a specific component, but which also contains some clearly defined way of reversing previous trends.

The detailing of such an alternative approach is a major project; indeed it can be described as the most important though as yet undefined task which faces us. Undefined because we have yet to find the courage to make the necessary confrontation with our own history.

**Alternative Approach**

The following points can only open up this area. Political unity is not a desirable end-point of left development; it is a necessary precondition for such development. This is not a condition which is specific to any one part of the left. It applies to the Labour Left as much as the Communist Party. However, it has a particular significance for us in that it must form the central core of Communist policy in a way that is impossible either for the Labour Left or for the large number of unaffiliated socialists who must form the third part of any strategy for unity.

Political unity is, as in all European countries, derived from a historical disunity; that is the splitting of the labour movement in the first quarter of this century, first by the disintegration of the Second International and then by the formation of the Third. The healing of this breach, which was hardened by long years of Stalinist sectarianism, remains the objective of Eurocommunism, for that is the specific heritage of European communism. The overall similarity of the historic disunity should not, however, obscure the very specific features of it in this country. These are the peculiarly loose structure of the mass social democratic party, the diversity of its component political parts, its historic unity, and the isolated position of the British Communist Party.

The results of these specifically British facets of socialist disunity are that the immediate problem is not organisational. As Cde. Priscott notes, all organisational approaches to unity (even the one he recommends) seem uniformly unrealistic at this time. This does not invalidate the first point made, that of the crucial position which left unity occupies in left growth. It does, however, illuminate the immediate task, which is not to pick out one of a set of unrealistic organisational alternatives as being the most likely to occur at some indeterminate future date, but to devote considerable attention to isolating and then reducing those factors which prevent the full politicisation of the issue of unity. Once this is done the tactical organisational problem will seem less formidable.

This means opening up first those areas of democratic structure, past history and future conceptions of power which have been thrust aside in the search for spurious and opportunistic agreement over short-term policy.

There is at the heart of a new policy an unresolved mystery; what exactly is the political reflection of the 'process' of socialist change to which we are now committed. This is not the place to attempt to unravel this mystery, but it is clear that whatever precise meaning is given, it must involve some different perspective to the party-political scenario which I have criticised above. In particular, it must involve, in some way, a gradually growing strength of popular control over all areas of society. One can be emphatic about this requirement because it really is difficult to see how a process of gradual transition to socialism can be encompassed without such a growth.

Such changes will not be carried through specifically by any political party, whether Labour, Communist or any combined body; the primary weight will fall upon working-class organisations existing specifically for such changes and appropriate to them, whether trade unions, community organisations, or specific groups such as women.

Political parties will play a crucial role in fighting for the rights of these bodies, in co-ordinating

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