

Bob Rowthorn

The Politics of the Alternative Economic Strategy

The Alternative Economic Strategy is the Left's great strength
But it lacks vision and, above all, it must be seen as part of a political strategy

British capitalism is in serious difficulties. Britain has lost its former pre-eminence as a leading industrial nation; and, despite huge revenues from North Sea Oil, is now the weakest of all the major capitalist powers. Since the world slump of 1974 the British economy has stagnated, and the country is now entering a severe economic crisis in which output is falling and unemployment is rising at a speed unprecedented in modern times. The worsening economic situation has gradually undermined and, finally, destroyed the 'moderate' consensus upon which British politics has been based since the Second World War, and has led to the emergence of radical new forces on both Right and Left. In the Tory Party the old idea of a humane and guided capitalism has been replaced by a ruthless doctrine of economic liberalism, under which the free market is enshrined as the ultimate arbiter of human destiny. The present Thatcher government is consciously promoting an economic crisis as a way of restoring the primacy of market forces in economic life. The intense competition resulting from this crisis will, it is hoped, compel firms to become more efficient — by driving some out of business and forcing the others to adopt new production methods — and both weaken and demoralise the trade unions, by creating a sense of fear and insecurity amongst workers. This is, of course, a classical Marxist vision of how a crisis cleanses the capitalist system and lays the basis for a renewed period of profitable accumulation. For this reason one might describe Thatcherism as a form of right-wing Marxism.

In the Labour Party a similar disillusionment with consensus politics is also evident, and a strong Leftist coalition has emerged which is challenging the old leadership on a wide variety of issues, ranging from inner-party democracy to economic policy. This coalition argues that the old policies of conciliation and compromise have failed, and that only a radical alternative can defeat the Thatcher government and restore the health of the British economy on terms which are acceptable to the working class. There is disagreement about just how radical this alternative should be, and about its exact details, but most of the Labour Left would support some version of the so-called *Alternative Economic Strategy*. This strategy is not simply a creation of the Labour Left, and both the trade unions and the Communist Party have played a major role in its development and dissemination.

THE ALTERNATIVE ECONOMIC STRATEGY

There are many different versions of the Alternative Economic Strategy (AES), some of which are so modest that they hardly deserve such a grandiose name. For example, the Cambridge Economic Policy Group calls for a traditional Keynesian package consisting of little else but reflation of the economy, import controls and an incomes policy. In what follows I shall use the name AES in a more restrictive sense to cover the fairly radical programmes put forward by the Labour Left

and the Communist Party. These programmes differ in some respects, but their basic proposals are as follows:

- *reflation of the economy* to raise output and create more employment;
- *import controls* to protect industries on the verge of collapse and to keep imports in line with what Britain can afford;
- *price controls* to prevent firms from exploiting the sellers' market resulting from import controls and economic expansion;
- *compulsory planning agreements* to force big firms, especially multinationals, to pursue different production, employment and investment policies;
- *nationalisation* of key industrial firms to provide the public sector with the skill and knowledge required to control the private sector — following the example of the British National Oil Corporation (BNOC) set up by Tony Benn;
- *public ownership* of the major financial institutions to give the state control over the investment policies of pension funds and other sources of industrial finance;
- *new powers for workers* and their trade unions to bargain with big companies and monitor their activities;
- *withdrawal from the Common Market* and abrogation of the Treaty of Rome which outlaws many of the above measures;
- *expansion of the social services* to restore the Tory cuts and deal with new problems created by the present crisis;
- *a reduction in military expenditure* to help finance expenditure for other purposes;
- *redistribution of income and wealth* to eliminate some of the gross inequalities in Britain today.

This programme clearly represents a major challenge to the powers at present enjoyed by national and multinational capital, and if implemented would lead to a radical shift in the balance of power in favour of the working class and its allies. However, the economy would remain primarily capitalist in nature, for most production would still be in the hands of private firms whose main aim is to make profits. Thus, the AES accepts the 'mixed' economy and seeks to alter the mix radically in favour of the working class. In this sense the

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strategy is *democratic* rather than revolutionary in character. It is also democratic in another sense. It is merely the economic part of a wider programme of social reform which seeks to eliminate many of the privileges enjoyed by the upper classes and to extend democratic control over economic and political life. In addition to the economic

measures listed above, such a programme of social reform would include abolition of the public schools, curbs on private medicine, reform of the Official Secrets Act, greater accountability for public bodies such as the police, and measures to break the monopoly of the press barons. Thus the AES is just part of a much wider attack on the power and privileges of the upper classes. This fact is often neglected by supporters of the AES who usually present it in purely economic terms, and fail to point out how it links up with the wider movement for social reform.

As a democratic, but not revolutionary, programme the AES is limited in its objectives. It is also limited in another sense. Its primary frame of reference is the nation, and many of its measures involve a unilateral attempt to weaken our links with the rest of the capitalist world, with the aim of strengthening Britain's power to make independent decisions. The strategy discounts the idea of a radical shift to the left in continental Europe in the near future, and its ideas on new forms of international cooperation are almost non-existent. Thus, the AES is a *national democratic programme* which seeks greater powers for the working class and its allies *within* the nation, and greater independence for the nation so that these powers can be exercised effectively. Indeed, many of its supporters see the working class as the agent of a national revival, as the only truly patriotic force left, now that Britain's capitalists have gone multinational and have abandoned the national economy to its fate.

The AES has been fiercely attacked from the Right as impractical and authoritarian. From the Left, it has been denounced by the Socialist Workers Party on every conceivable ground — as authoritarian, reformist, impractical and chauvinistic — and criticised sympathetically by Militant, the International Marxist Group and others for not being radical enough. Some of these attacks are clearly absurd, and can be dismissed out of hand, but others contain a germ of truth and must be taken seriously. However, it is not my intention to go through the criticisms point by point, but rather to discuss the AES in general terms and consider its wider political meaning. In the course of this discussion it will become clear where I agree or disagree with some of the critics.

The political context

Any assessment of the AES must ask what is the purpose of this strategy — a question which can only be answered by considering the political context in which the strategy is being elaborated and disseminated. This context has both national and international dimensions. Internationally, the prospect is not very bright. The capitalist world is going through a conservative phase, and in Western Europe — which is the area which concerns us most — there is not the slightest prospect of a revolution in the coming period, and not really very much chance of a radical shift to the left. Nationally, the Left is just beginning to recover from a long period of decline, but is still quite weak in terms of organisation and support. Despite recent advances, there is very little chance of the Left gaining undisputed control of the Labour Party, and still less of it forming a majority government on its own. Even if the Left could form such a government, its freedom of action would be limited by the immense power of the Right in the state apparatus and in society at large. In practical terms, the best the Left can hope for during the next few years is some kind of alliance with the Centre, in which it enjoys a position of real authority and can make a significant impact on government policy. Any talk of a revolution in the foreseeable future, or of initiating a rapid transition to socialism, is just wishful thinking.

Given this political context, it is extremely unlikely that any very radical version of the AES will be implemented in full. Whilst some of its proposals may be adopted, as they stand, by a future Labour government — such as, perhaps, import controls — those which

represent a real threat to capitalist power — such as nationalisation of the major financial institutions — will almost certainly be watered down. This is not just a matter of internal Labour Party or parliamentary politics, but of the likely balance of forces in the country as a whole during the coming period. Although not a revolutionary programme, the full AES, as outlined above, is extremely radical, and would meet with enormous opposition at home and abroad. To implement the programme in full in the face of such opposition would require a level of support and coherence which the Left does not at present possess, and is unlikely to acquire in the near future.

For a change, the Left will have the initiative instead of merely responding to events

If this is the reality of the situation, what is the purpose of the AES, and of all the effort which has gone into its creation and dissemination? This question can be answered at two levels: tactical and ideological. Let us consider these in turn.

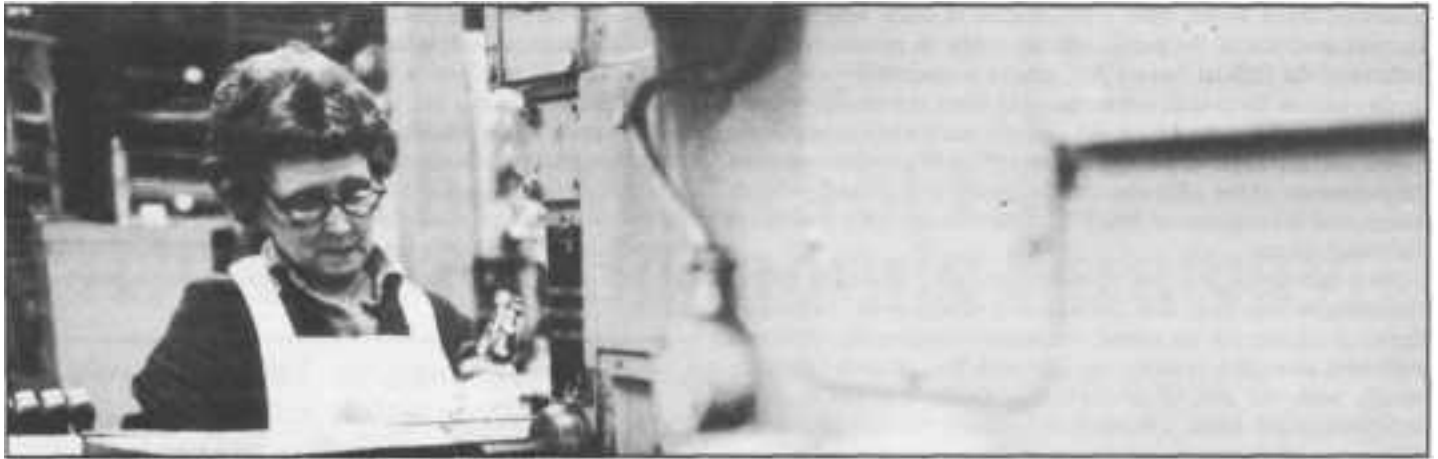
Tactical uses of the AES

Given that the Left cannot expect to gain undisputed leadership of the labour movement in the coming period, it will be forced into alliance with less radical elements in the movement, such as Foot, Silkin and Shore, and will also need to establish a working relationship with the so-called 'moderates' like Healey and Hattersley. There will inevitably be a great deal of jockeying for position and bargaining between the rival factions, and each will be trying to rally support for its cause. In such a situation it is always a major advantage to have a clear programme and perspective around which to organise and mobilise support, and for this purpose the Alternative Economic Strategy can be of great use to the Left. The 'moderates' have no clear programme or perspective of their own, and the Left has a chance to present itself as the only coherent force within the labour movement. If it promotes the AES with sufficient vigour, the Left can define the terms of debate about future policy, and can keep the 'moderates' permanently on the defensive. For a change, the Left will have the initiative instead of merely responding to events, as it has so often in the past. Indeed, the AES has already been extremely useful in this respect and, as the economic crisis deepens, the tactical advantages of having such a clear programme will become increasingly important.

Ideological aspects

On an ideological level, the AES must be seen in relation to what is happening to the Left as a whole. The development of the strategy is part of a wider process of revival and change, in which the Left is just beginning to recover from a long period of decline and is slowly changing its character. For the first time in thirty years it is starting to win new support for its ideas, and is becoming a significant force in British society¹. Moreover, the Left is becoming dissatisfied with its old role of moral conscience to the labour movement, and is seeking real power. No longer resigned to eternal opposition, the Left is starting to think of itself as a potential future government, and is beginning to confront the practical difficulties of achieving power and ruling the country. The AES can contribute and indeed already has contributed in a number of ways to this process of recovery and change.

¹ For an interesting description of the decline of the Left in postwar Britain see Eric Hobsbawm's article 'The Forward March of Labour Halted', *Marxism Today*, September 1978.



The very act of creating and developing an Alternative Economic Strategy is an important exercise in self-education for socialists. It helps them to think coherently and forces them to consider how various reforms can be welded into a unified whole. It compels them to confront the practical difficulties of administering a modern society, and thereby helps to overcome the legacy of moralism and sloganising which has dogged the Left for so long. That helps create a fund of expertise and knowledge, and contributes to the formation of a body of informed cadres — which is so desperately needed, if the Left is to become an effective political force which is genuinely

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capable of transforming society. As a result of its efforts to create a viable economic strategy, the Left is now much better informed and more realistic than previously, and has acquired quite a sophisticated understanding of the British economy and its problems.

The existence of an Alternative Strategy is giving the Left a new self-confidence and helping to establish its credibility in society at large. It offers a comprehensive alternative to the policies of the Thatcher government, and its programme is beginning to reach significant sections of the population. Despite many weaknesses, the AES is more coherent and well thought-out than anything the 'moderates' in the Tory, Liberal and Labour parties can offer, and is providing the Left with a great advantage in the battle of ideas. Using the AES as a programme, the Left can present itself as a realistic alternative to both Thatcherism and the ineffectual moralising of the 'moderates'. As the recent popularity of Tony Benn illustrates many people are beginning to see the Left as potential rulers of the country, and not just as a group of trouble makers and dreamers. This represents an enormous advance compared with just a few years ago, and indicates that the Left is now entering the mainstream of British politics. The process has been greatly helped by the fact that the Left has a programme of limited reforms which are seen as realistic by so many people. The Left would isolate itself completely, if it followed the example of Militant, the Socialist Workers Party, and others who demand what has aptly been called 'instant socialism'. Most of the support now flowing towards it would ebb away, and the Left would revert to its old role of moral conscience — denouncing the powers-that-be by exerting at best a marginal influence on real events.

Day-to-day struggle

The AES can also play an important role in the day-to-day struggle against right wing policies and their effects. One of the most debilitating factors in any struggle against these policies is the

widespread belief that there is simply no alternative, and that the economic crisis is inevitable. This leads many workers either to abandon struggle altogether because it is hopeless, or else to fight a purely sectional battle designed to defend themselves at the expense of some other group of workers. Take, for example, the steel industry. Many workers in this industry have accepted the argument that plant closures are inevitable because of the falling demand for steel, and their response has been either to take their redundancy money and go, or else to fight for the survival of their own plant at the expense of some other plant. These attitudes have made it difficult to mount an effective national campaign against closures, and have helped the Steel Corporation to pick individual plants off one by one. The AES can help overcome such pessimistic attitudes in several ways. By providing a concrete alternative to present government policies, it demonstrates that the present economic crisis can be overcome and that the decline of major industries can be prevented, or at least significantly retarded. In this way it can provide hope to those threatened with redundancy and can stiffen their resolve to fight. And, by showing how the problems of various industries are interrelated and could be overcome within the framework of an overall economic recovery, it can act as a catalyst and stimulate workers in different industries to combine in a unified opposition to government policies. So far, the AES has not been used very much in this way, and has not figured very much in particular struggles against redundancy and government policy. But the potential is there, provided the strategy is more widely disseminated and its relevance is more clearly demonstrated. Over the coming period, the AES is likely to figure more prominently in actual struggles than hitherto. To sum up. The AES is potentially of great ideological significance. Its creation and development are a valuable exercise in self-education for the Left, and the strategy is giving the Left a new self-confidence and establishing its credibility in society at large. And, by providing a concrete alternative to present government policies, it gives workers hope and may encourage them to fight. Even if its programme is never implemented, the AES can play an important role in the process of revival and transformation which the Left is now undergoing in Britain, and can help stimulate opposition to the present government.

SOME WEAKNESSES

Having praised the alternative strategy so handsomely, let me now point out some of its weaknesses. The first concerns its lack of vision. The AES is a *limited* programme for dealing with the immediate problems of British capitalism, and for halting Britain's industrial decline. It is not a programme for long-term economic and social transformation, and the image it presents is that of a more democratic, egalitarian and prosperous version of what already exists. It does not tackle, or even recognise, many of the issues raised by such groups as

the ecologists or the women's movement, and it certainly presents no vision of a radically different kind of society, based on radically different forms of consumption and economic life. The question of energy, for example, will become increasingly important over the next twenty years, not just for Britain but for the entire world. The lifestyle to which Western countries are accustomed, and which is now being copied by socialist and developing countries, is extremely wasteful in energy and cannot be sustained much longer. Nuclear power offers no real solution, for it is too costly and too dangerous to be adopted on the massive scale required to provide the world as a whole with the style of life now enjoyed in the West. If the entire world is to achieve some degree of prosperity, and if a severe energy shortage is to be avoided, basic changes in lifestyle and technology are needed. Yet these questions are hardly even mentioned in the Alternative Strategy, and its plans for economic recovery and growth would lead to a large rise in the use of energy. Or, to take another example, the role of women, where it is mentioned at all, is seen primarily in terms of civil rights and better social services. More fundamental questions — such as the sexual division of labour and the role of the family in modern society — are largely ignored, and the strategy gives us no real idea of how it expects or wishes the role of women to change over the medium or long-term.

Such a lack of vision is not really surprising in a programme with the limited aims of the AES, and its immediate appeal might be reduced if it chose to tackle some of these more fundamental and long-term questions. What is disturbing, however, is the fact that the AES seems to exist in a vacuum, not even recognising the importance of many of these fundamental questions, and divorced from any long-term perspective for transforming society. This is not, of course, just a failing of the AES alone, but of the orthodox Left as a whole. The fact is that the orthodox Left in Britain, as in many other countries, is rather conservative and is only just beginning to absorb ideas which have been around for some years in less orthodox circles — amongst people often dismissed as 'freaks' or 'cranks'. Absorbing and modifying these ideas is bound to be a long and difficult process, and it will be a fair time before the orthodox Left can develop its own distinctive vision of the future; and know what kind of economy and society it really wishes to create. Given this lack of direction in the orthodox Left, it is inevitable that the AES should lack any clear vision of the future. It could hardly be otherwise.

Overemphasis on the state

Another weakness of the AES lies in its overly centralised and bureaucratic conception of economic planning. Most versions of the strategy mention new forms of worker participation and wider powers for trade unions; but the general image is still very much that of reform from above and of highly centralised administration by the state bureaucracy. Many of the measures advocated by the strategy — for example, import controls, price controls, nationalisation and planning agreements — would greatly strengthen the state bureaucracy and could prove extremely undemocratic in practice. Certain advocates of the AES, such as Tony Benn and the Labour Co-ordinating Committee, have recognised this danger, and have stressed the need for democracy and popular involvement in economic planning. But their views have not been taken up in any mass way in the labour movement, and schemes for popular involvement remain just an embellishment on what remains primarily a programme for greater state control of the economy. This overemphasis on the role of the state has several disadvantages. It prevents most people from contributing in any positive way to the development of the Alternative Strategy, and it excludes them from any active control over the economic priorities embodied in the strategy. This in turn limits the ability of the strategy to capture

recent pamphlet *There is an Alternative* the Labour Co-ordinating Committee suggests that the government should provide workers in *all* large companies with the facilities required to produce alternative plans of their own along the lines of Lucas Aerospace. This seems an excellent idea. Indeed, the principle could be extended more widely, and resources could be provided for all manner of local and national organisations wishing to produce their own alternative proposals for such areas as education, health, housing or transport. If the idea of alternative plans ever caught on, the result would be an explosion of creativity and enthusiasm, and those involved would receive a practical demonstration of the potentialities of democratic socialism. It would be an example of 'the new society growing up in the womb of the old'. Of course, not all would be sweetness and light, and there would be a good deal of conflict. For example, just as in Lucas Aerospace, workers in large companies would clash with management, and there would be a struggle to determine what and how to produce. This struggle would inevitably involve the state, and there would be three-cornered negotiations to hammer out planning agreements and coordinate the final decisions of different firms. The important point about these negotiations, however, is that workers would come along armed with their own positive proposals, and not merely act as a rubber stamp for plans hatched-up by management and the state bureaucracy.

Workers plans of the kind just described are only one possible way of decentralising power and initiative. They have been singled out

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people's imagination and harness their latent energy and creativity. It also means that popular support for the strategy is likely to be superficial and may evaporate at the first sign of real trouble. If the AES is to capture people's imagination and arouse a real loyalty to the ideas it represents, its whole thrust must be altered so as to emphasise popular involvement in both its development and implementation. This would extend and deepen popular support for the strategy, and give it a clear socialist identity.

The planning procedures envisaged by the AES should be decentralised as much as possible, so that people in many different walks of life participate in making decisions, and the final plan is the result of a great ferment of ideas welling up from below, instead of just a set of instructions handed down from above. A good example of how this might be achieved is provided by the workers of Lucas Aerospace, who replied to the threat of redundancy by producing their own alternative plan for the company.² Challenging conventional notions of how a firm should be run, they showed how, instead of sacking people, the company could use the skills and energies of its workforce to make new products for which there was a great social need. In the event, the plan was rejected by a management jealous of its traditional prerogatives and concerned to keep power in its own hands. Despite this, the plan was of great importance because of the ideas it contained and the self-confidence it gave to the workers concerned.

People's plans

The workers of Lucas Aerospace were fortunate in receiving outside support for their efforts, and were provided with accommodation and resources by a charitable trust and a sympathetic Polytechnic. In its

² Lucas Aerospace and the question of workers' plans is discussed in *State Intervention in Industry: a Workers' Inquiry* by Coventry, Liverpool, Newcastle and N Tyneside Trades Councils (1980).

because, if the experience of Lucas Aerospace is anything to go by, such plans combine several features which are rarely found together. The act of creating a workers' plan arouses the dormant talents and energies of workers, and gives them confidence in their ability to change society. At the same time, the autonomy of workers' organisations is preserved because the plan is drawn-up by workers independently of, and perhaps in opposition to, management and the state. This is in marked contrast to normal forms of participation which absorb working class militants into the existing management structure, undermine their links with the rank and file, and destroy

Moreover, as in Chile, the Left may take office in a situation of acute economic crisis

their capacity for independent action. Such a danger is minimised, although not actively eliminated, where plans are drawn up independently by the workers concerned. Workers plans have another advantage. They can be drawn up at any time. There is no need to wait for a Left government to take office, and workers in each firm, industry or locality could begin straight away on the task of considering how the resources at their disposal could be better employed. If this was done on a large scale throughout Britain, the Alternative Strategy would become the focus of a vast movement for economic and social change. It would cease to be a document drawn up by experts for consumption by a passive population, but would become a living creation of the people.

International questions

The AES is also weak on international questions. It is not based on any coherent analysis of the world economy, and it gives no real indication of how Britain's economic relations with the rest of the world should evolve over the next twenty or thirty years. Its approach to international affairs is largely negative. In particular, it fails to recognise the degree to which the economies of Western Europe are now interdependent and require a common policy for dealing with the problems created by this interdependence. The strategy is against the Common Market — which it sees as an obstacle to Britain's economic recovery — but it provides no positive alternative. It contains no suggestions for new forms of international cooperation in Europe, and gives no real indication of how it expects or wishes Britain's economic relations with other European countries to change over the medium and long term. It also fails to confront any important questions about our relations with Western Europe. What, for example, can or should we do about the economic forces which are tying Britain ever more closely to Western Europe? Should Britain seek to reduce its trading links with Western Europe? Should we seek to dismantle the multinational corporations which now span the whole of Western Europe, or should we accept the new international division of labour they represent, and seek to control them in cooperation with other West European countries? What form of cooperation do we envisage with these other countries if Britain pulls out of the Common Market? How should Britain seek to influence the economic development of Western Europe during the coming decades? The AES has virtually nothing to say on any of these questions.

There is a real failure in the AES to accept that the economies of Western Europe are now highly interdependent, and their problems cannot be completely solved by each country acting in isolation from the rest. Some form of cooperation between the countries of Western Europe is absolutely necessary. It is not sufficient to be against the Common Market. We need something to put in its place, and the British Left should develop its own positive ideas for an alternative

form of cooperation in Europe. However, the Left should not restrict itself to Western Europe alone, but should consider how cooperation could be extended to include Eastern Europe as well. So far, the British Left has not accepted the need for a positive approach to European economic questions, and seems to be getting even more isolationist than ever in its attitude towards Western Europe. The failure to present, or even recognise the need for, a positive alternative to the EEC is one of the greatest weaknesses of the AES.

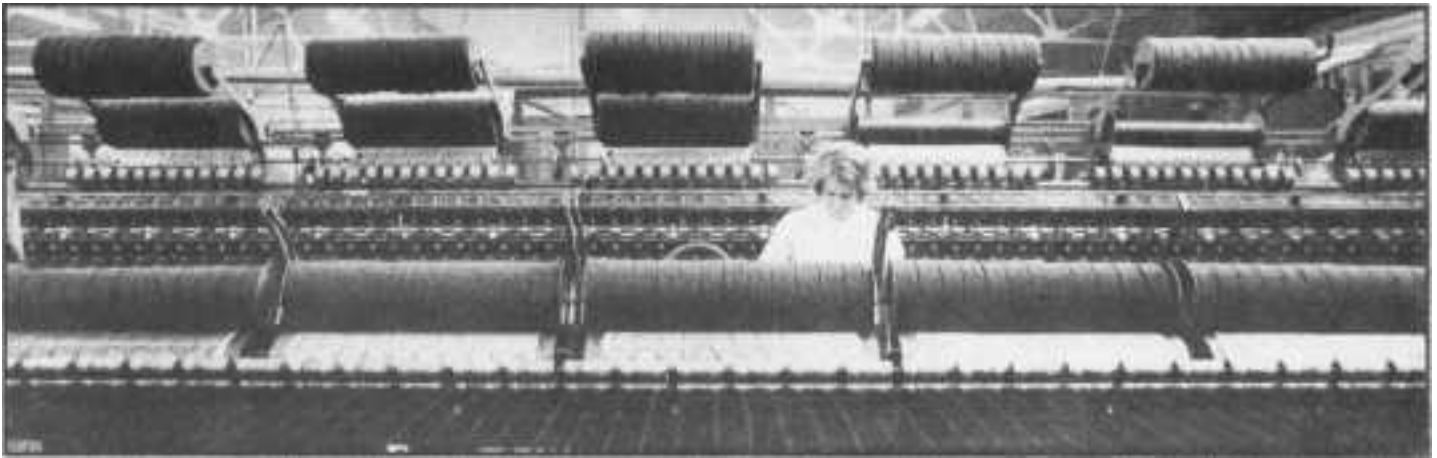
A LEFT GOVERNMENT

So far, we have assumed that the Left is relatively weak and that no attempt is made to implement in full any very radical version of the AES. The discussion has therefore concentrated mainly on the ideological role of the strategy in winning new support and giving the Left greater coherence and self-confidence, and on how the strategy can help the Left in its tactical manoeuvres inside the labour movement. This is clearly a realistic approach if one is thinking only of the next few years or so, when there is virtually no chance of Britain having a left wing government willing to implement a radical version of the AES, and the best we can hope for is some watered down version of the strategy. Over the longer term, however, it is the hope of virtually all socialists that there will be a Left government in Britain. Such a government might face a rather different economic situation from that existing today, and its policies might be rather different from those envisaged in present versions of the AES. Even so, it would almost certainly pursue a strategy of the same general kind and seek to implement a programme of democratic reforms, designed to shift the balance of power and the distribution of income and wealth in favour of the working class and its allies.

Such a programme would not in itself amount to a revolution, and even after its implementation the means of production would remain largely in the hands of private firms. However, despite its limited character, a programme like that of the AES would arouse intense hostility in capitalist circles, both at home and abroad, for it would threaten powerful vested interests and would be *correctly* perceived as a prelude to something more extreme. The degree of this hostility, and potential resistance, is not usually appreciated by Labour Party supporters of the AES, most of whom do not seem to understand the political issues involved and ignore the fact that a programme of this kind will be seen as a declaration of war by major capitalist interests. All too often the AES is discussed in purely technical and economic terms without regard to its political nature and consequences³. The strategy may not in itself be revolutionary, but when combined with wider social and political reforms it is far more radical than anything put forward by the Italian Communist Party in recent years, and is comparable in scope to the programme of Salvador Allende in Chile. If fully implemented, a programme of this kind must strengthen the Left and must inevitably give rise to demands for further change. For this reason alone, the programme will meet with enormous hostility in capitalist circles, and will be resisted. The extent of resistance, and the ability of the government to overcome this resistance, will depend on the balance of political forces at the time. Under certain conditions, a programme like that of the AES can be implemented successfully, whilst under other conditions it cannot, and any attempt to implement the programme will end in failure or even disaster. To explore this question further let us consider a variety of scenarios.

The scenarios

In the most optimistic scenario, often assumed by advocates of the AES, the government and its strategy would enjoy support from an overwhelming majority of the population, say seventy to eighty per cent. Under these conditions, it is unlikely that the bourgeoisie or foreign countries would pursue a systematic policy of disruption and



sabotage, for the risks of attacking such a government would be enormous. A destabilisation policy, like that of the United States towards Chile, could easily backfire and push Britain even further to the Left. Moreover, the Right would find it difficult to stage a military coup against a government enjoying the support of seventy to eighty per cent of the population — many members of the armed forces and police would be unwilling to act against the democratically expressed wishes of such a large fraction of the population, and indeed many of them would have been influenced by the general shift to the left in society at large. Thus, provided the government could count on support from an overwhelming majority of the people, a strategy like the AES could probably be implemented without too much overt disruption on the part of the bourgeoisie or foreign governments, and the way would be open for a gradual and fairly orderly transition to socialism.

Unfortunately, this is an extremely unrealistic picture. It is most unlikely that a future Left government will enjoy overwhelming support if it seeks to implement a programme of gradual reforms. The Right will almost certainly be well-organised and have a considerable mass following amongst small capitalists, the self-employed and salaried workers. Moreover, if the going gets rough, the political Centre may split and many previously neutral elements may go over to the Right. Thus, a future Left government will have to implement its strategy in a situation where the people are divided, and the Right enjoys real mass support. This does not mean that the government meets trouble as soon as the Left takes office, for there may be a honeymoon period during which opponents are disoriented and divided, and many people are waiting to see how things turn out. Moreover, as in Chile, the Left may take office in a situation of acute economic crisis in which there is massive excess capacity and unemployment, and output can be raised very quickly simply by reflating the economy and making fuller use of existing capacity. Such extra output may allow them to buy off certain opponents and provide something for their own supporters.

But honeymoons do not last very long and the government will soon run into problems. Once the economy is operating at full capacity, the scope for easy economic gains will be exhausted and the Left will be faced with the far more difficult task of improving basic methods of production. Moreover, opponents of the government will by now have regrouped and will have recovered from the initial shock of a left wing victory. As economic problems multiply and the Right begins to mobilise, there is bound to be a sense of uncertainty and tension. The question is must the situation inevitably develop into a head-on collision as in Chile, and, if it does so, must the Left inevitably lose? To the first question the answer is obviously 'no'. If the Left retreats in the face of opposition and abandons its programme, many of its supporters may be disillusioned and desert it, but at least it will live to

fight another day. In Chile, for example, if Allende had resigned the country would still be a bourgeois democracy and the Left would be far stronger than it is today.

The armed forces

Instead of retreating in the face of opposition, the Left can push ahead with its programme. Since we are assuming that popular support is about evenly divided between Right and Left, the success of this course of action depends very much upon who controls the armed forces. If the military is completely under the control of the Right, the result is a forgone conclusion. There will be a military coup and the Left will be crushed. The country will be an ideal candidate for a destabilisation of the Chilean-type. The Right and its foreign allies, such as the United States, will sabotage the economy and ferment conflict so as to make the country ungovernable. The population will polarise into opposing factions, the economy will begin to disintegrate and eventually the military will intervene on the pretext of restoring order and saving the nation. There are two crucial elements in this scenario. The population is divided and the armed forces are firmly in the hands of the Right. This enables the Right to mobilise mass opposition to the government, and ensures that when the military intervenes it will support the bourgeoisie and crush the Left. Given its weakness in both civil society and the state, there is no way in which the Left can defeat the Right, and the only viable course of action is to retreat, no matter how humiliating it may seem. Anything else would be suicide.

Suppose, however, that the armed forces are not securely under right wing control, and that there is a substantial and organised body of military opinion which is sympathetic to the Left. Under these conditions the Right could no longer count on the undivided loyalty of the military in the event of a showdown. The armed forces might either support the legitimate government and crush the Right, or else might split into rival factions, thereby plunging the country into a civil war from which the Left might emerge victorious. Faced with the possibility of such a defeat, the Right would be far more cautious in opposing the government, and so too would their foreign allies like the United States. Thus, provided the Left has a strong presence in the military apparatus, there is a real risk that a destabilisation campaign of the Chilean type will backfire, and drive the country further to the Left. Under these conditions, the bourgeoisie and its foreign allies may adopt a less obstructive approach towards the government and resign themselves to the policies contained in its reform programme.

³ Even the Labour Co-ordinating Committee pamphlet mentioned earlier, which is perhaps the best Labour Party statement on the AES, greatly underestimates the degree of opposition it would face and avoids the consequent political problems it poses.

To sum up. A real challenge to capitalist power, as envisaged in programmes like the AES, can only succeed if either (1) the Left has overwhelming support in civil society — in which case the old military apparatus will disintegrate if the bourgeoisie seeks to overthrow the legitimate government by force; or (2) the Left has a strong foothold in the armed forces — in which case the Right, and its foreign allies, may be frightened to sabotage the economy, for fear of provoking a conflict which they might lose.

The military and the alternative strategy

In a bourgeois democracy it is extremely difficult to build up an overwhelming degree of popular support for radical change, and the Left will normally be thrust into office and expected to govern in a situation where it has the support of perhaps half the population, or even much less. Under these conditions the question of who controls the military apparatus is of paramount importance. There is a marked reluctance to accept this fact amongst supporters of the AES, most of whom either refuse to discuss the question altogether on the grounds that Britain is a democratic country where things like military coups simply do not happen, or else take refuge in the illusion that the strategy will be so popular that the bourgeoisie will be powerless to sabotage it. One exception to this blindness is the Communist Party's *British Road To Socialism* which is quite explicit about the dangers of a military coup, and calls for drastic reforms in the state apparatus to break the hold of the Right. These include the replacement of top personnel in the armed services, and the granting of full trade union and political rights to all servicemen and women. In this way it is hoped that 'class struggle' can be carried into the armed services, and the power of the Right thereby undermined. The aim is not for the Left to capture the armed services, but rather to make sure that they are not used to subvert the democratic process. Such changes will be

difficult to achieve in Britain which has a highly conservative military system, but they do have precedents in continental Europe, where in several countries soldiers have trade unions.

Since the achievement of a Left government in Britain is rather a distant goal, there is always a temptation to put aside such a difficult question as what to do about the armed services. But this is a mistake. To force the military establishment to accept reforms, and even to persuade the labour movement of a need for such reforms, will take a long time, and the sooner the task is begun the better. In Labour governments the Left has traditionally sought to occupy ministries concerned with social and economic affairs such as health and industry, and positions such as Minister of Defence or, even Home Secretary, have been occupied by the Right. This is partly due to the balance of power within the Labour Party, but it also reflects the Labour Left's excessive faith in parliamentary institutions and failure to recognise the dangers involved in right wing control of the armed forces.

The above emphasis on the role of the armed forces under a Left government does not mean that other parts of the state apparatus are of no importance. The Right is extremely powerful in the police and the civil service, and could use its power in a thousand ways to sabotage and block a Left government. However, these aspects of the question are now being taken up by the labour movement, and there are already demands for more open government, democratic control of the police and for reform of the civil service. These demands are still only in an embryo stage, but at least something is happening. So far, there is no sign that the labour movement is willing to confront the more difficult, and ultimately decisive question of the armed forces. Yet unless the power of the Right in Britain's military apparatus is challenged, all our plans for radical economic and social change are worthless.

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