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A Long Haul

With Mrs Thatcher thirteen points ahead in the opinion polls and the shadow of election year beginning to lengthen over the political scene, it is certainly time the Left undertook a little radical self-examination and began to calculate the chances of reversing some of the more worrying trends. There are many immediate questions to worry about. Can Labour stage a recovery and build on it? Will the unions survive the Tebbit onslaught intact? But these short term issues are connected to deeper, longer term questions which can't be kept separate. Are we in the middle of a profound secular shift in the disposition of political forces? Can the mass party of the working class survive in its present form? Is the structure of the working class changing? Is the working class movement basically in good shape, despite its little local difficulties?

Unemployment

Many on the left are still relying on unemployment as the magical 'material factor' which will undercut Thatcherism's ideological ascendancy. But unemployment has failed to deliver any such unequivocal political result. In 1979 the swing to the Conservatives was highest amongst those who had been unemployed between 1974 and 1979: 14.5%. The long term impact of unemployment is devas-

tating on all the sections of the population which it touches. But its immediate impact seems to be somewhat softened by the higher levels of benefits as compared with the 1930s — though that, contrary to the myth, did not precipitate a mass working class shift to the left either.

At a deeper level, three conclusions can be drawn. First, people are not wholly convinced that unemployment is attributable exclusively to Tory mismanagement or monetarist dogma. They know that the short term figures conceal worrying trends towards deep, structural unemployment. Second, unemployment is having paradoxical political consequences. It has stimulated national protest and some growth in militancy. But it has also helped the Government to hold the line on wages, damped down industrial militancy, driven a wedge between the employed and the unemployed, men and women, black and white, isolated militant shop steward leadership in the workplace and exposed their industrial base to managerial blackmail. Workers do not believe in it, but they are nevertheless being compelled by it. Third, it underscores the point that, in general, there is no automatic transfer from the 'material' to the 'ideological' poles. Unemployment does not guarantee rising militancy any more than pure class position guarantees voting behaviour

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or political support. In between the two lies the indeterminate terrain of politics, where these connections can be won or lost, depending on how struggles are conducted and what the balance of political forces turns out to be. This challenges a good deal of thinking in the labour movement where a certain vulgar economism is still firmly rooted.

A structural problem

It is precisely this automatism which is now falling apart. It is assumed that the old structure of support, the historic connections which sustained the Labour Party and the trade union movement are still in place, though somewhat disarranged. Unity, better policies, more effective leadership, material circumstances themselves will restore the organic connections between party and movement, on the one hand, and the classes, social forces and popular movements which they seek to represent. But there is growing evidence that it is precisely these relations of representation which are fracturing. This is not because of a swing in the electoral cycle but a result of fundamental, structural, historical and ecological factors — accelerated and telescoped, as Tony Lane recently argued in *Marxism Today*, by more immediate factors. In what follows, I want to examine some of those underlying trends. It is because the problems are not temporary or superficial that, far from a crisis of the system provoking a revival of the Left, the crisis of the capitalist system and the crisis of the working class movement are proceeding together, in tandem, mirroring and feeding off one another.

First there is the crisis of political representation in simple electoral terms. Labour's share of the vote is steadily declining. 1979 was the third consecutive election in which it fell below 40% of the electorate. In 1979 only one in three manual workers voted Labour and a majority of working class voters opted for another party. The percentage swing to the Conservatives was 6.5 among semi-skilled workers, 7% among trade unionists, 11% among skilled manual workers, 9.5% among men, 3% among women, 9.5% among those aged 18-22. Clearly, the circumstances surrounding the last election were rather special — acutely combining short term calculation and long term 'drift'. Also, the working class vote has always, historically, contained a significant proportion of Tory voters, ever since the Conservatives resolved that they would have to forge the working class connection if the party were to survive the coming of mass democracy. Earlier connections were forged through paternalism, deference, self-interest, patriotic sentiment; more recently, through a revived neo-liberalism, touching the daily realities of competition and individualism — 'the sharpest weapon against the proletariat in the hands of the bourgeoisie', as Engels once said. Nevertheless, in any long term electoral perspective, the underlying trends must be deeply worrying. Labour seems incapable of becoming a national popular political force, commanding the votes of the popular majority. The SDP-Liberal Alliance will exacerbate this problem. Specifically, Labour is losing votes in exactly those class, strata and social categories required if it is to achieve that kind of electoral leadership. Its defeat in 1979 was, specifically, achieved by the penetration of the radical Right into the very heartland of its support and, as Ivor Crewe recently remarked, 'a massive haemorrhage of working class votes.'

Changing composition

But — second — the party-class relationship cannot be adequately caught or expressed in electoral terms alone. More significant are the

political relations between movement and class — specifically, the way changes in the structure and composition of the working class are likely to affect the industrial structure and political culture of the labour movement. Again, historically, this is by no means the first period in which the working class has been fundamentally recomposed. We have seen this process at work at different phases throughout the history of industrial capitalism. The composition of the working class is always shaped by the capitalist division of labour, the pace and direction of technical change, the economic organisation of industry; above all, by the *unevenness* which marks the impact of all these factors on class formation. Periods of economic crisis or recession, like the 1890s or the 1930s, are precisely the conditions under which the restructuring of industry and the recomposition of the class takes place. We are in the middle of another such phase now.

Let us consider one aspect of class recomposition, to illustrate the point. Skilled male manual workers now represent a declining proportion of the labour force. This represents the numerical decline of a key sector of industrial and political support. It also coincided with the general decline of those sectors of the economy where skilled workers of this type predominated, and with the decline of those geographical regions which constituted the industrial heartland of the early labour movement.

Now these were not only sectors and regions of strong electoral loyalty to Labour. Their union strength and the density of the occupational communities associated with them provided the movement with its social infrastructure. They remain 'solid' in terms of Labour support, as the geography of the swing to Thatcherism reveals: the Labour vote held in Scotland, in the industrial north; it was weak even in the car and engineering-dominated Midlands; and weakest in London and the south. There is no long term consolation there. It means that the labour movement is most solid where industrial decline in general is deepest. Its roots are most shallow, its political support thinnest, in those sectors linked with the prosperous industries of the long postwar boom, the new technologies and in the few places where, despite recession, foreign investment in green sites or high-tec is taking place.

The implications are also ecological and cultural. For this skilled and semi-skilled manual working class stratum defined the dominant patterns of industrial unionism at a formative stage of the labour movement. It is also where the traditions of militancy and struggle are nurtured in the popular memory of the movement. It also defined the *culture* of the working class movement. Its ecology often depended on those occupational communities, where work, labour process, family and community ties, leisure and recreation, loyalty to locality and place overlapped and mutually reinforced one another. Through these informal networks a particular cultural pattern was transmitted into the heart of the culture of the working class movement. We are talking, then, not just about numbers and votes, but about a shift in industrial, political and cultural weight.

But recomposition means, not only (negatively) the relative decline of some sectors, but (positively) the relative proportional growth of others: and the resulting shift in balance and composition between the different elements. The new majorities in the working class will inevitably be drawn from different sectors, where a new division of labour prevails. Large numbers will come from the service and public sectors, where unionisation, bargaining (often with the local or national state, or state agencies) and political culture are very different.

Two contradictory tendencies

We have been considering some aspects of class recomposition and its industrial, political and cultural impact. But another aspect is the

impact of some of these new developments on the sectionalism and fragmentation of the class. The labour movement has always, historically, reflected, in its diversity and sectoral divisions, the ways in which workers are inserted into competing enterprises, into particular kinds of labour process, a particular division of labour, a particular organisation of the capitalist firm or enterprise, and a particular division of grades, crafts, skills. Each has helped, historically, to strengthen and deepen the internal sectoralism of the class, and thereby its reformism. This 'fractioning' and diversity is the real, empirical experience of the class: the class in its singular, already-unified form, is really a political metaphor. In fact two contradictory tendencies have been at work. On the one hand, the tendency to concentrate larger numbers of workers in the enterprise, the mass-collective worker, based on the maximisation of scale, advanced mechanisation, 'fordist' development in flow-line and fast-assembly processes, and the dilution of older craft-related skills. On the other hand, at each stage, a new division of labour, new hierarchies of supervisory and technical function, new distinctions and divisions.

Working class 'sectoralism' has been reflected throughout the development of modern industry in the craft-based structure of the trade unions themselves and in the break-up of occupations into different traditions of craft and skill, mediated by status difference, but preserved as the focus of occupational pride and self-identity. It has helped to sustain the reformism and economism of the labour movement by stimulating competition between different sections of the class, turning it inward into compromises and negotiation within the class.

The long boom and recession

All the factors we have been discussing in relation to the fracturing and recomposition of the working class have been shaped by specific historical factors: first, by the experience of the long boom — then by recession. Money wages rose during the 1950s and early 60s. Unions took advantage of the circumstances of full employment to exploit their bargaining power. But at the same time, leap-frogging, exploiting the 'drift' between local and national wage agreements, or between one plant and another, playing the 'differentials' game, and the 'special case' argument all helped to reinforce the separation of one part of the class from another, setting 'leading' sectors against the low-paid. On the other hand, the experiences and conditions of the long boom did help to strengthen the unions and widen membership. The picture is therefore somewhat contradictory. Ultimately, however, sectionalism undermined movement towards the unity of the class across these internal divisions and cross-cut any attempt to break across the sacred 'industrial/political' divide which keeps the industrial wing relatively depoliticised and robs the political wing, strategically, of its weight and power.

That was under boom conditions. But now the process is compounded by the period of recession which has followed. Deindustrialisation is hastening regional decline. Unemployment will hasten the permanent loss of skill. The new technologies will follow investment into areas where there are no strong traditions of trade union militancy, even though the unions will certainly try to unionise them. The further diversification of the capitalist enterprise — on regional and international lines — will increase fragmentation and geographical dispersal. The trade unions have been trying hard to adapt, but they may not have reshuffled themselves speedily or fundamentally enough to match the impact of the present accelerated reshaping of industry.

Opening to the new

It would be easy to simplify and exaggerate these trends. It is difficult to strike the right balance in assessing so complex a picture,

especially when so much is at stake, politically. To refer to the relative decline of a particular sector of a class is not to launch a political attack on those who have sustained the labour movement for so long and without whose political and industrial muscle the working class movement would be hopelessly exposed. It is perceived as the leading fraction or the 'vanguard' of the class, because this is the role which it has played for so long. At the same time, it should be evident what risks we run if the movement continues to have real roots only in the declining sections of a class. It *must* reflect — in organisation and culture — the real diversity and complexity of class formation. Its historic commitments cannot prevent it from centrally engaging occupational patterns and cultures thrown up by the new capitalist division of labour. It must discover ways of reflecting, in its social values, both the tight solidarities of the old communities and the greater diversity and openness of the new. This is not merely a banal search for 'modernity': a labour move-

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ment which is not sufficiently open to allow the currents of modern life, which are influencing and shaping its members, to blow through its structures and procedures is living off its past at the expense of the future.

In this context, it is worth looking at some of the more established cultural characteristics of the labour movement. For example, some of the older occupational communities maintain a particular sexual division of labour, a tight set of familiar roles and loyalties. Working class unity and labour movement fraternity have often been underpinned by certain versions of masculinity, traditionalism and domestic respectability. One has to recognise *both* what this set of mutual supports has achieved, understand why, historically, the one fed into the other in this way. But one also has to acknowledge its limitations, and recognise the changes, the emergent patterns.

The newer industrial strata are certain to be politically and culturally more diverse. They will certainly, for example, reflect the rising proportion of women in the workforce, and thus the growing place of part-time work and 'feminised' work roles. The labour movement must therefore prepare itself for a massive adaptation to new needs and demands — for example, the demand for greater flexibility in work organisation. The unions in general will have increasingly to take up new topics for negotiation and press for new requirements in conditions of employment. It also follows, I suspect, that the *patriarchalism of leadership, hierarchy and authority* which so strongly marks earlier styles of political and industrial organisation will not survive the impact. The labour movement will also reflect the wider social aspirations which women rightly and inevitably are developing: partly as a result of a historical shift in the relations between the sexes; partly as a result of the equalisation of rights; partly as a response to the diverse impact of the consumer revolution; partly as a direct influence from the women's movement.

What is at issue here is ultimately the politics of *constructing* the unity of a class — and in a recognisably present and modern, not simply historical, form. Heroic attachments to the past will serve for tall stories in the working men's club, but may not have much living connection to the real problems of class, party and movement today. The importance of 'leading sections' in the past is not at issue. But we must be concerned by the way in which the organic link between movement and class has become identified with one particular class constellation, frozen at only one moment of its historic devel-

opment. It is as if, when the working class no longer *looks* exactly like the factory operatives in the illustrations to Engels' *Condition Of The Working Class* we lose confidence that we will be able to recognise its existence at all.

New cultural patterns

Everything we have been saying has political consequences of a broad kind. But there remains the process of political condensation itself. Much has been written about the political complexities of the Labour Party, but less about its social infrastructure. Here, too, profound processes of social and political change have been at work. It is perfectly true that neither the impact of affluence in the immediate postwar years nor the redistributive reformism and corporatism of Labour's years of dominance brought about 'a fundamental shift in the balance of power and wealth in favour of the working people'. Nevertheless, now that the sterile elements of the so-called 'affluence' debate have subsided, we have to try to find terms adequate to describe real processes of social change which were neither radical nor fundamental nor structural — but which nevertheless shifted things or set new patterns in motion.

Such social mobility as occurred was largely the result of service and non-manual occupations replacing the manual skilled trades identified with the 'solid' working class. But shifts in the boundaries and imageries of class are not without their political and ideological consequences. Full employment and the welfare state did not destroy the foundations of class and equality in our society. But they set certain supports in position and gave, while they lasted, a certain room for manoeuvre in a class whose previous experience had been largely determined by uncertain unemployment and permanent insecurity. The massive concentration of capital and the expansion of market in the consumption industries were primarily geared to the exploitation of new social strata. But the unintended consequences of widening choice and increasing the fluidity of social life which is characteristic of periods of relatively high consumption made an indelible impression. Class inequalities, distinctions and differences did not disappear. Indeed, in many ways, they were exquisitely refined. But the interweaving of class with status distinctions, the growth of distinct sub-cultures, the differential access to goods, services and resources did give for a time a greater relative openness to social life.

Continuing features

What forces then, continue to sustain the traditionalist character of the working class movement? First, there is the corporate class character of the culture from which the labour movement has most directly drawn its strength. Its corporateness has weaknesses and limitations which are the reverse of, but inextricably combined with, its strength. What made it corporately strong and binding also made it closed, self-reliant, locked into the parameters of 'us' and 'them'. It is not a culture which has ever seemed capable of assuming a national-popular leadership or of refashioning bourgeois culture in its image. It is not a culture on to which it would be easy to graft the loosely framed cultures of modern consumer societies; or which would be hospitable to cultures of the class which were organised around different values — white unemployed youth or West Indian or Asian urban cultures, for example. It remains essentially non-hegemonic. And that character is given as much by social relationships outside the workplace — in family and community life, 'education, tradition and habit' as Marx remarked — as within it.

Second, there is the fact of the internal divisions and stratification of the class; the sectionalism which we explored earlier. Sectionalism is a better explanation of the reformism of the working class than the 'labour aristocracy' or 'ideological colonisation by the bour-

geoisie concepts because it reminds us that ideology always works on real material factors not illusions.

Sectionalism is inscribed in the spatial separations of the 'enclave' community cultures and occupations which I described. But of course it was powerfully reinforced by the divisions by craft and skill, which became, as well, *foci* of social identity, symbols of sectional loyalty, and pride. Both these aspects were overlaid by the strongest fragmenting force of all: the fact that labour confronts capital in different and highly differentiated workplaces, so that the nature of capital as experienced varies profoundly as between one sector of industry and another.

This has the effect of internalising negotiations, the compromises, advantages and trade-offs *within* the class, rather than solidifying the links, across different sectors. The experience of daily negotiations is the root instinct on which reformism feeds. The latter therefore arises *within* the sectors and strata of the class itself, as well as being imposed on the class from forces outside it.

Labourism

The third factor we would isolate is organisational. In one sense, this refers to the hierarchical nature of the movement: its reliance on formal organisational procedures, on hierarchies of command and communication, and on an exaggerated respect for office and position which is fundamentally at odds with its democratic character. Again, the two contradictory impulses are often inextricably mixed. The impulses which led to the forms of working class organisation — rule books, rules of procedure, delegation and 'reporting-back' — may seem outdated in the light of the modern fashion for looser structures and more open (some would add, more irresponsible?) participatory democracy. But they were, at root, fundamentally democratic in origin. On the other hand, in their actual operation, they preserve a certain formalism, constitutionalism in the modes of operation, which may be formally accountable to its members, but which lowers democratic access and participation.

Finally, one must reckon with the nature of Labourism itself — the contradictory, but indigenous and authentic reformist political ideology, which organises the universe of the labour movement. It is a mistake to see Labourism as simply the result of the impact of the reformist middle classes on the working class, for, in one sense, it is *par excellence* the political ideology appropriate to a strong but corporate working class. On the other hand, in one of its aspects, it does demonstrate the crossing of working class with a particular brand of middle-class 'progressivist' politics. 'Labourism' cannot be defined outside of the historic compromise which working class independency struck, at a certain historical moment, with Fabian collectivism. The latter imparted an indelible political colouration to the whole formation. It is intrinsically statist — reforms will be brought from above by the state through experts for the working class. Its effect is the *demobilisation of working class political self-activity*. Each is of course the reverse side of the other. The first produces 'socialism' and reform from outside and from above. It centralises politics in the state, while at the same time depoliticising the state. The second insists that, apart from electoral activity and consistent displays of loyalty, the class must not, on any account, be roused from its historic slumbers. It must not mobilise on its own account; power must not pass out of the keeping of its guardians, and seep down the ladder into the hands of ordinary folks. The sound of clients encroaching on the authority of the experts, of shop stewards getting notions of their own capacities above and beyond their station as relayers of power from elsewhere, of tenants who speak back to housing managers, workers who want to see the colour of a company's investments, pickets that refuse to stand still, sectors that won't subscribe to pay norms, women who won't settle to their



familial roles, blacks who assert their own self identities — the sound, in short, of the class in motion, of the democratic initiatives passing to the forces below — is a sound which has made Fabian consciences shudder and Fabianist nerves rattle down the ages. It is, of course, the mechanism by which democracy has been both 'represented' and 'deflected' at the very core and centre of the working class movement since it came to its maturity.

The offering for the future

We have moved, in this essay, from the immediate parameters of the 'crisis' to exploring some of its underlying, deeper, more structural features. In each aspect, I am aware of gross over-simplification in order to make a point or give substance to an impression. The language hardly permits us to express things dialectically — in their

true contrariness, double-sidedness, in their positive and negative — at the same time. The picture is impressionistic, and I hope it might provoke those who are much better equipped to speak on each of its aspects to correct, disagree or counterpose a different interpretation to the one I have given. I have offered the piece, essentially, for discussion and debate, not for polemic or to make a point; and for two reasons. First, because I am sure that the crisis the working class movement faces is not immediate and tactical but structural and long term. Second, because I deduce from what I have said that the historic task before us is not to shore up what we have or to make happen again what happened before, but to transform the movement into a political instrument which seems capable of dividing the country for socialism and beginning the movement towards it, not in the previous century but in *the next*. •

