JOHN REX

The Labour Bureaucracy

Is the Labour Party a suitable instrument for bringing about a Socialist society in Great Britain and in the wider world? This is the key question which faces those many socialists who had imagined that there were other instruments and who have now returned somewhat reluctantly to the Labour Party. What likelihood is there that the Labour Party as at present constituted will ever take those decisions on defence and foreign policy which must be taken if the Armageddon of nuclear war is to be avoided? This is the question which the anti-H-bomb marchers must ask, now that their capacity for stirring the press by the numbers or the length of their marches has exhausted itself. I want to warn both socialists and members of the Campaign against wishful thinking about this. The Labour Party will by no means inevitably become a socialist party, simply because it is the party of the working class. And it will by no means inevitably become more internationalist in outlook just because it has been the most sympathetic party to pacifists in the past. But I still believe that it is the only possible political instrument available to us at present and that therefore it is the prime political task of the present to bring about within the Labour party those structural as well ideological changes which are vital to the achievement of our purposes. In seeking to do this we shall have to encounter and overcome the powerful system of bureaucratic control which operates within the party at present. This article is an attempt to outline the nature of that system as the writer has encountered it, during many years as a member of the party.

"Bureaucracy," of course, is a very loosely used term. In current left-wing parlance it has become the key excuse-word for explaining how Russia got Stalinized. The bureaucrats there are thought of as a class which develops its own special privileges arising from its peculiar relationship to the means of production, and which devotes most of its energies to defending these privileges rather than to the furtherance of the purposes of socialism. Some anti-Stalinists even go further and suggest that Russian bureaucrats constitute an exploiting class in the same way as capitalists had done previously. There are tremendous oversimplifications in this sort of analysis and the use of the term 'bureaucracy' in the title of this article should not be taken as implying that they are accepted by the Writer. But there are specific groups of people who exercise a decisive control in the Labour Party and who succeed in frustrating
rank-and-file initiative. A study of bureaucracy in the Labour Party is thought of here as the attempt to discover where control lies and what the motives and interests are of those who exercise it.

1. Control of Policy Making Organs.

The power to make policy in the Labour movement rests primarily with three bodies, the National Conference which determines the general lines of policy, the National Executive (the N.E.C.) which prepares more detailed statements and the Parliamentary Party which must inevitably make day-to-day decisions in the light of current debates. There is no need to make any detailed analysis of the structure of these bodies. A good account of them is given, for example, in Robert Mackenzies's British Political Parties. What I wish to do is to focus attention on the question of where decisive control is centred in them by pointing to recent decisions which they have taken.

No-one who has attended National Conference will need reminding that it is the Trade Union delegations which exercise decisive power. In fact they are able to cast about five-sixths of the total vote in a card vote even though the number of trade union delegates is usually less than half the total. The biggest union, the Transport and General Workers Union usually has more votes than all the Constituency Party Organisations put together. Moreover the relatively small number of trade union delegates has great flexibility of manoeuvre. They have rarely been mandated by recent decisions of union conferences on specific issues and are usually permitted to engage in a certain amount of log-rolling to enhance the power of their own union in the wider movement. Thus the treason of the Woodworkers over German rearmament. Thus the A.E.U. support for Gaitskell against Bevan as party treasurer. And thus last year the dramatic switch of the T. & G.W. vote in favour of the H-Bomb after a much-lobbied lunch. In all these cases very small bodies of men had the power to take decisions of absolutely crucial importance, which would commit the Labour movement and the British people for many years to come. Thus Britain was committed to German rearmament and all that that disastrous policy entails by the irresponsible decision of at most a few dozen men.

In practice, however, it is not the National Conference but the N.E.C. which takes the most vital policy decisions. But here the voice of the Trade Unions is even more powerful. Not merely do they elect from among their own numbers 12 out of the 28 members. They also have the overwhelming majority of the votes in the election of 5 women members and the Party Treasurer. Of the remaining 10 members 2 are elected by the Parliamentary Party and 1 by other affiliated organisations. Only 7 are elected by the rank and file. So it is that vital policy decisions are taken by a body of men and women whose very names are not usually known to Labour's rank and file. Among them are several who have been persistently rejected by constituency parties as Parliamentary candidates because of their lack of ideas and ability. Moreover since the first prize for a Trade Union leader is a seat on the General Council of the T.U.C., rather than on the N.E.C, there is a virtual guarantee that Trade Union members of the latter will be of second-rate quality. So far as the women members of the E.C go, year after year the results of the election show the defeat of the more popular women M.P.'s and the election of those who are known to be reliable from the T.U.C.'s point of view.

In the Parliamentary Labour Party no less than 102 out of about 280 M.P.'s are 'sponsored' by Trade Unions. What sponsorship means will vary in different unions. In many cases it will mean that any tendency to deviant action will lead to the threat of withdrawal of support. It has been suggested for instance that one of the N.U.M. M.P.'s with a very safe seat was threatened in this way when he declared himself for unilateral renunciation of the bomb and that it was this which led to the withdrawal of his name from a left-wing motion. On the other hand there are some M.P.'s like Mr. Craddock and Mr. Fernyhough of U.S.D.A.W. who have continued to enjoy the support of their unions even after a period in which the Whip was withdrawn from them. But what is always the case, is that to have become a sponsored candidate in the first place an M.P. must at some time or other have been vetted by a special committee of his union in order to ensure that his views were 'safe.' And, questions of policy apart, the tendency of such union selection committees has been to treat Parliamentary candidates as honours to be bestowed on long-serving members of the union if they are not good enough to get to the top of the Union's career ladder.

The result of the present system of selecting Trade Union candidates for Parliament should be manifest to anyone who looks at the present Trade Union members. Mr. Crossman recently suggested that not more than two or three could be considered for Cabinet Office. There is some truth in this, though one may quarrel with Mr. Crossman's selection of Mr. George Brown as one of his possibles. What is more important however is that the group does accept men like Mr. George Brown as its spokesmen. Nothing could indicate more clearly what the overall political complexion of the Trade Union group is like. It is the existence of this solid reactionary group which makes it possible for Mr. Brown to oppose Labour's Defence policy from the position of Shadow Defence
Minister and to publicly campaign for his private policy on the bomb. Unless it can be influenced or transformed the Parliamentary party will inevitably fail to meet day-to-day problems with Socialist solutions.

The selection of the leader of the party rests with the Parliamentary party and it might perhaps be expected that the Trade Union M.P.'s would have used their influence to appoint a Trades Unionist. But the lack of candidates of ability, apart from Bevan, whose flirtation with the left put him beyond the pale, forces them to look for some professional politician who is prepared to act as salesman for their policies. But the more obvious candidates have been either too old or too ambitious in other spheres, and it has proved necessary for them to back the unpopular and colourless Gaitskell as the one man who has the political skill and the intellectual equipment necessary to impose T.U.C. policies on the Labour movement.

But it may well be asked whether the control by the Trade Unions of the Conference, the N.E.C., the Parliamentary party and its leader is necessarily such a bad thing. Some would ask this on the ground that the Trade Union leaders are in theory at least responsible to the working class, others on the ground that the development of economic crises must inevitably force Socialist policies on the T.U.C. in the long run.

The short answer to this is that control of policy making by the union leaders has led to an end of nationalisation, to German rearmament, and the bomb. And I would maintain that the long answer is that it is almost inevitable, as matters now stand, that union leaders will adopt policies of this kind. The problem of bureaucracy within the trade union movement demands a separate study; but effective power in many unions (including some of the largest), is now in the hands of the career, trade union official, who approaches political issues with an eye to his own sectional interests. What will appear important to him above all will be the preservation of the present system of wage negotiation which he knows and feels that he understands. He is naturally and rightly suspicious of any attempt to undermine the worker's right to collective bargaining. But for the same reason, unless he has some understanding of the theory of socialism, which is only very rarely the case, he will be suspicious of nationalisation or any other scheme, which appears to him to involve the transfer of some workers to the other side of the bargaining table. On international affairs he may have no decided views, except insofar as he transfers the hostility towards Communists, which he has learned in his

1. See Alan Pickard on 'Democracy and the Trade Unions' in New Reasoner 4.
in the sense that no local councillor could be a Socialist or no trade unionist a councillor. But it is, nonetheless, true to say of most members that their prime reason for political participation is their membership of one of the groups mentioned. The character of a particular local party depends upon the sort of balance existing between these different tendencies.

In the strongly Conservative areas where Labour has little chance of electoral victory, the trade unions are meagrely represented if they are represented at all. Many of the rank and file members are, of course, Trade Unionists (e.g. the many agricultural workers who are delegates in the rural divisions), but they come to take part in a political rather than a trade union struggle and do not automatically look to their union leaders for guidance. In such circumstances leadership will usually pass to the convinced socialist, even though he may be of middle-class origin. The core of loyalists is quite content to follow left-wing leadership, while Councillors are few and far between and those that there are tend to respect the local leadership if it inspires enthusiastic effort at election times.

At the other extreme are the large borough and city organizations. Here party organization is complicated by the existence of a Borough organization covering two or more constituencies. The *raison d'être* of this organization is the necessity of preparing a common election platform in local elections and it is almost inevitable that councillors and their friends should play a large part in its governing bodies. But, further, since the centre of political gravity tends to move from the divisions to the borough, these same councillors play an important part in shaping policy on wider issues.

But to say that power in the City parties is in the hands of Labour councillors is to tell only half the story. The crux of the matter is that Labour councillors are selected both as councillors and as candidates in conditions of extreme apathy. In nearly all the big cities polls at local elections are between 20 and 40%, and there is usually great difficulty in finding enough candidates to go round, so that it is quite common to find the clerical staff from trade union offices standing as candidates. Election addresses commonly evade the main issues with vague generalizations, the main appeal of candidates often resting on their proof of long service in trade unions or other working class movements. Residence in the ward, no longer seems to be required, and carpetbagging has become universal practice for those ambitious for safe seats.

What has happened in many cases is that a process of bureaucratization has set in, in the local parties as the political life has gone out of them. Just as in the Co-ops, control passed to the shop assistants, so in some local Labour parties control is passing to trade union officials and their clerks. But even when things have not gone this far the Council group is very likely to be dominated by a caucus of local trade unionists, lacking in any clear political policies, but much preoccupied with questions of power and with the distribution of honours, e.g.: How many Labour Aldermen should there be? And whose turn is it to be Mayor next?

At this point it often becomes difficult for Socialists to regain control of the party, for possession of office either within the movement or in the larger community becomes a privilege and an honour, which the incumbent prizes and which he seeks to defend against outsiders. Thus while it is easy enough to show in theory that skilled organization could lead to the overthrow of the petty bureaucracy of the labour movement, one finds in practice that arguments such as 'Mr. X has been on City Party for years' or I It's Mrs. Y's turn to go to conference,' are usually decisive and the bureaucracy remains. Moreover similar arguments may be used to: prevent the discussion of key issues of policy. In one recent case in my own experience a local labour party wanted to send a resolution to Conference which was against the bomb. The delegates were persuaded by the Regional Organizer, however, that a resolution on school uniforms would give their delegate a greater chance of addressing the National Conference, and decided not to pursue the H-bomb issue.

There are, of course, many stages in between that of the rural party run by enthusiasts, and the rusty old city machine such as has just been described. But the process of local bureaucratization has gone far enough in most areas for the Regional Officers of the party to employ it to swing the local parties behind the N.E.C.'s policies. An excellent illustration of the way in which this might be done is provided by the following account of the banning of *Socialist Outlook* in Leeds.

As soon as the decision had been taken that all party members should be called upon to renounce support for *Socialist Outlook*, Alice Bacon was despatched to Leeds to ask the Leeds party to endorse the decision. Being a local miner's daughter who had to her credit a considerable personal achievement in politics, having been chosen as one of the five women members of the Executive, she was able to appeal to the local party on a personal basis and secured the required endorsement. Immediately this had been carried the local bureaucracy of party officials and councillors went to work to implement the decision. The local secretary drew up a form which all those whom he thought to be associated with *Socialist Outlook* were required to sign declaring the cessation of their support for the paper. The alternative to signing was to face expulsion.

*John Rex : The Labour Bureaucracy*
One of the recipients of this letter was Councillor Lake, who was actually Chairman of the City Party at the time and had just been chosen as the party's delegate to Conference, at which he intended to vote against German rearmament. Councillor Lake agreed to abide by the party's majority decision that members should not be associated with Socialist Outlook, but objected to the particular form which he had been asked to sign, and replied saying so. Thereupon after an entirely extra-constitutional meeting between the Regional Organizer, the Local Secretary, and two Vice-Chairmen of the party it was decided to take the extraordinary step of refusing Councillor Lake his credentials for Conference and giving them to the candidate whom the City Party had rejected. Later the City Party Executive endorsed this action, and the only chance which the City Party itself had to discuss the matter was on a motion to refer back the E.C. minutes. At Conference the Credentials Committee told Councillor Lake that this was a matter for the local party.

This was not the first action of this kind in Yorkshire. Only two years before Mr. Anson, the Regional Organizer, and his local allies had virtually destroyed one constituency party and severely damaged others by forcing through the expulsion of members of the Federation of West Yorkshire Peace Organisations. Moreover the conduct of purges against those who dare to raise a socialist banner against the bureaucracy is not confined to one area. The recent expulsion of the St. Pancras Councillors is another example of the Stalinist system of justice operated by Transport House. No doubt they will try to take action against Victory for Socialism and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament if they think that they can get away with it.

The important point to remember here, however, is that the organisers of the purge cannot succeed without some sort of local majority support to give their actions a semblance of legality. Recent arguments in the party about nuclear disarmament have exposed the incapacity of the machine to argue its case, and have swung a great number of the rank-and-file against it. The one thing which could restore its authority would be the withdrawal in despair of the many socialists who have recently returned to active political life.

III. Control of Selection Conferences.

Co-operation between Transport House and the local bureaucracies is most evident on the occasions when the Divisions select their Parliamentary candidates. But this is one sphere in which the rank-and-file have some chance of exercising influence and it has now become necessary from the viewpoint of the N.E.C. to take further action limiting the freedom of choice of the local parties.

The main means of securing the compliance of local parties in the past has been the financing of trade union candidatures. According to the 1948 agreement an organization sponsoring a candidate or the candidate himself could contribute up to £250 in an urban, and £300 in a county seat to the yearly party expenses, and up to 80% of the maximum election expenses. Since the cost of running a divisional party efficiently is about £1,000 per annum, most divisions have felt bound to take account of this source of financial help when drawing up a short list of candidates. In fact the only alternatives other than bankruptcy to having a Trade Union candidate, have been the selection of a Co-op, candidate or of a candidate with private means. But so many divisions have chosen these alternatives that Transport House has been forced into (a) pegging Co-op, candidatures at their present number and (b) limiting the amount which a private individual may contribute to party funds to £50 per annum while at the same time increasing permitted contributions for sponsored candidates to £350 and £420 per annum in Urban and Rural Divisions.

It is not, of course, possible to give anything like a comprehensive account of the politics of recent selection conferences, but in what follows I have tried to set out some of the key events which have led to the tightening of Transport House control, including first of all an account of a crucial selection conference in which I participated as a delegate.

The Cleveland by-election was caused by the death of Mr. O. G. Willey, an M.P. sponsored by the N.U.G.M.W. Its significance lay in the fact that it was the first of a number of by-elections in which the big unions lost control of parliamentary seats to Co-op candidates. Since the secretary of the N.U.G.M.W. has made a series of speeches which seem to imply that there is something improper about this process it is worthwhile to record what actually happened on this occasion.

When the short-list was drawn up a great number of nominations from local union branches were received, but since few of the nominees had ever participated in the life of the party only three were allowed to go forward. These were the candidates of the two steel unions, which are very important in Cleveland, and Mr. Jack Cooper, of the N.U.G.M.W. Apart from these, the names of Mr. Zilliacus who had been nominated by a number of ward parties, and Mr. Arthur Palmer, the Co-op, candidate, were added to the short list.

Mr. Zilliacus' candidature was, of course, somewhat controversial, because of his previous expulsion from the party, but his supporters were not quite prepared for the campaign which was
launched against him. The short list was leaked to the press, which vigorously attacked Mr. Zilliacus and some local Catholic working men's groups called upon the electors not to vote for him if he was chosen as the Labour candidate. Moreover at the selection conference dozens of union delegates appeared to swell the size of the G.M.C. from a normal 20 or 30 to 110. The majority of these delegates were determined above all to keep Mr. Zilliacus out.

Transport House was represented at the selection conference by Miss Sarah Barker, and Mr. Lewcock, the North Regional Organizer. Miss Barker began by asking the meeting to choose a trade unionist, because Mr. Attlee was short of M.P.'s 'with experience of industry'. Then the candidates' accounts of their own careers were read out. When Mr. Zilliacus' was being read, Mr. Lewcock intervened to complain that it was too long and was successful in preventing it being read further. Finally the candidates were allowed 10 minutes each to address the meeting. During this period four of the candidates spoke strongly in favour of steel nationalization and Mr. Zilliacus expressed his agreement with a statement on foreign policy drawn up by the local party. Mr. Cooper confined himself to an account of his trade union career and his recreational activities. The outcome of the voting was a first-ballot lead for Mr. Zilliacus, with the final victory going to Mr. Palmer. Thus the delegates responded to Miss Barker's appeal for the election of a Trade Union candidate, by expressing overwhelming support for the two candidates who were not. Amongst those voting for the two non-union candidates were many of the union delegates, who confessed that they felt compelled to switch their votes because of the obvious difference in the calibre of the candidates.

The next defeat suffered by the big unions at the hands of the Co-op, and the constituency parties was at Wednesbury, where the constituency party had at long last rebelled against their imperialist M.P., Mr. Stanley Evans, following his declared support for Eden over Suez, and forced his resignation. The big unions immediately lined up their candidates but Wednesbury did what Cleveland had done, and selected a Co-op, candidate. During the ensuing election campaign the N.E.C. announced the termination of its agreement with the Co-op., and effectively demonstrated that is was more concerned with ensuring that the unions got their due, than with Labour's electoral victory.

A good example of a selection victory by the unions was provided by the recent St. Helens conference. Here the left-wing candidate, Mr. Tom Driberg, succeeded in securing what few left-wing candidates can secure, namely the support of the N.E.C. But this was only possible because of a series of happy accidents. Eventually he was not short listed, and the trade union members of the N.E.C. were quite unwilling to support the recommendation of their own sub-committee against the local trade unions. Mr. Driberg himself complained that all but one of those short listed were Catholics, but the local party cleared itself of the charge of anti-Protestant prejudice, by finally selecting the only non-Catholic. Anthony Howard's interpretation in Reynolds News was probably nearer to the truth. This was that Mr. Driberg was excluded by the new rule which prevents non-sponsored candidates from putting up more than £50 a year.

The St. Helens' case was important because the right-wing press has used it in order to argue that constituency organizations have too much say in the selection and control of M.P.'s Thus it is quoted, along with the unsuccessful attempt to get rid of Bessie Braddock in Liverpool Exchange, as an example of the tyranny of the local parties. The truth is exactly opposite. St. Helens' demonstrates that the chances of non-sponsored candidates being chosen for safe seats have been greatly reduced by the decision of the trade union members of the N.E.C. to load all selection conferences in the favour of their own men.

For myself I am certainly not opposed to union candidates as such. That is why I have often suggested to my Trade Union friends that they should do all in their power to improve the quality of their candidates. This way of strengthening trade union representation is now being considered apparently by the trade union leaders in Parliament. Thus the Tinier reported recently, basing itself on the views of Mr. Charles Pannell, 'the solution is thought to lie in the deliberate search for possible candidates who stand a chance of adoption when they appear on a constituency party's short list with university men and members of the professions, and the concentration on them of a course of training for the Parliamentary role. Mr. Jack McCann, the winner at Rochdale, is an example of the new type of union M.P. He was singled out by his union and then trained for the job.' This is an excellent approach to the union's problem. But, of course, it will produce candidates like Mr. Jack McCann, who speak out against the bomb and have to be rebuked on the platform. Perhaps this is why the unions have done so little in the past to educate their M.P.s.

IV. The Task Facing Socialists.

If the picture drawn here is a true one, and the big unions or their officials do in fact control the Labour Party at all levels, what is there that those who are concerned to secure the adoption of socialist domestic and foreign policies can do? To this I do not believe there can be any dramatic short-term answer. We may, perhaps, succeed here and there in getting the Parliamentary party to
commit itself to this or that progressive policy (e.g. ending of H-bomb tests, or opposition to military action without United Nations authority), but these commitments will be largely verbal, and will usually be buried at some pre-debate meeting at which Mr. Gaitskell urges the need for statesmanship. The real answer is a long term one. We must either educate a new generation of Socialists to take over the local and national party machine, the trade unions and the Parliamentary Party, or we must be prepared to set about the building up of a new Socialist party.

I do not think, myself, that there is much hope of a new Socialist party arising unless it arises from a split in the present Labour Party. Therefore we have to direct our attention to the business of Socialist education. We must get down to the organization of this and be prepared to stand up to threats from the Regional Offices. In some places it may be best to organize under one banner, in other places under another. In all places, however, the attempt must be made to bring together for the interchange of ideas so-called intellectuals and the workers. What we have to overcome at all costs is the present disastrous division between trades unionists and socialists, which has arisen because of the domination of the trades unions by their bureaucrats. We have to see to it that the next generation of trades unionists are socialists prepared to use the political power which they have to create a socialist world.

Secondly we must insist on all occasions (though without allowing ourselves to be dubbed 'sectarian') on the rational justification of important policy decisions in terms of Socialist principle. The fact is that some of those who control the party at present have forgotten the habit of argument and appear quite naked when the Transport House debating points which they have used to ward off criticism in the past, are refuted by logical reasoning. Moreover the loyalist core of the local parties are quick to see that this is so. A little argument of this kind could easily bring life back into the local parties, who would then be in a position to resist the usurpation of policy-making power by the Regional Officers and at a higher level by the N.E.C.

Thirdly, I believe that the Labour Party can only be won back if Socialists are willing to do more work in and for the working class movement. That is to say that they must be prepared to become collectors and ward secretaries as well as councillors and trade union officials. Too often in the past there have been no left-wing candidates available to fill these jobs, and they pass to the petty bureaucracy by default. And more than merely occupying the offices, Socialists must be prepared to go out and canvass for members, both as a means of creating the possibility of wider-ranging Socialist education, and as a means of ensuring the future financial independence of the party in the face of trade union bribes.

A really serious programme of Socialist education must mean in the long run the emergence in Parliament and the T.U.C. of a new leadership, or at least a serious challenge to the domination of the right. When this is achieved the most important task of all remains. This is to break down the centres of bureaucratic power that have grown up and to establish a new relationship between leaders and rank and file. In particular, if ever the left finds that it is in a position to control the block vote, it must give up this power and be prepared to submit its case to the decision of the rank and file.

This is the most important issue of all. There are those who will say that rank and file control is out of the question and that Labour's rank and file would commit the party to all sorts of Utopian and unrealistic policies. Amongst the sociologists of political organization it has become almost platitudinous to say that democracy within a political party is impossible or undesirable. Against this I would say this: The Utopianism and extremism of the Labour Party Conference is itself the product of bureaucratization. The delegates are not offered serious arguments by the platform, and if they disagree they must disagree in the most striking manner possible in order to get themselves heard. But no-one has shown that a Labour leader who has to carry the conference with him in support of an unpopular policy, would be unable to do so by serious rational persuasion. The fact is that too often the platform is not prepared to defend its policies and could not face serious discussion of them, so it puts up some tired old trade unionist to call the delegates Communists and to remind them that the unions pay the piper and intend to call the tune. As long as the block vote continues, the temptation will be to rely on this threat rather than to argue a case. I believe that its abolition is not merely necessary as a means of getting socialist policies adopted. The block vote is in itself a part of a social system which Socialists must overthrow; a system which at the moment permits aggression in the Middle East suggests that this will be the case. But if we do survive, we must be prepared to recreate a Labour party ready to play its part in the building of a Socialist World.