

A Note on West Fife

The decision of several members of the editorial board of the "New Reasoner" to support the candidature of Lawrence Daly in the West Fife election has provoked a good deal of discussion among our readers. Most of the comment has been favourable but there have been vigorous arguments the other way; and the whole matter raises some important questions of both principle and tactics.

The argument most commonly used by those who oppose the idea of any independent socialist candidate relies largely on the evidence of past history. The recent record of independent candidates on the Left is certainly not encouraging. The conclusion that most draw is that there can be no electoral advance except within the Labour Party; and the clear implication for all militants is to get in and push, especially for better candidates. Moreover, despite all its weaknesses, the Labour Party is the only vehicle for social reform in Britain today and there is therefore no alternative open to the socialist but to work wholeheartedly for the return of a Labour Government. Of course, within this general argument the Left has a clearly defined role, namely, to continue to extend the political influence of the Left among the constituency parties and the trade unions and thereby generate as powerful a socialist movement as is possible in the contemporary situation. The Left, in a collective sense, has no illusions about the leadership or the policy that is being undertaken in the general name of the Labour movement, but given the massive fact that the only alternative Government to the Tories is a Labour administration, it can see no other way forward. Nor do the small groups outside (or on the fringe of) the Labour Party, which offer the alternative of a disciplined working class party, differ in a number of respects from this analysis. Both the Communist Party - by far the largest group of socialists outside the Labour Party - and the much smaller Trotskyist groupings, take for granted the necessity of a Labour Government. Some of their thinking continues to acknowledge the advice that Lenin gave in 1920 - that the destruction of reformist ideas among the workers can come about only as a result of progressive disillusionment with a Labour Party in office; but however mixed the reasons, the sectarian Left outside the Labour Party works for the development of a Left current within the Labour Party and for the return of a Labour administration.

These are without doubt powerful arguments, whatever their source, and much of the general discussion is indisputable. This is why it is possible for the various groups on the Left, inside and outside the Labour Party, to analyse the present political situation,

after three consecutive defeats of the Labour Party at the polls, and to agree that if only the Left in the '50's had been wider and taller, the outcome would have been very different. So the slogan 'the mixture as before, but more of it' is inevitably convincing to the old Left.

At this point the paradoxes of the past fifteen years begin to obtrude themselves. In the past decade in particular, three trends have been noticeable within the Labour movement which, taken together, do not fit our traditional analysis. The **first** is a general strengthening of Fabianism inside the movement as a whole and within the leadership in particular; the second is the dismal failure of the Left within the Labour Party, apparent before Aneurin Bevan embraced Mr. Gaitskell, but certainly underlined by that particular marriage of convenience. The **third** fact is the equally dismal failure of the Left outside the Labour Party, and it is a failure which has paralleled both the political and intellectual bankruptcy of the Labour Left.

The most important single reason for the miserable performance of the Left in this past decade is the simple fact of its intellectual collapse in the face of full employment and the welfare state at home, and of a new world situation abroad. The Left in domestic matters has produced nothing of substance to offset the most important book of the decade - Crosland's "The Future of Socialism" - a brilliant restatement of Fabian ideas in contemporary terms. We have made no sustained critique of the economics of capitalism in the 1950's, and our vision of a socialist society has changed hardly at all since the days of Keir Hardie. Certainly a minority has begun to recognise our deficiencies in the most recent years, and there is no doubt that the seeds which have already been sown will bring an increasing harvest as we move along the sixties. But we still have a long way to go, and there are far too many timeless militants for whom the mixture is the same as before.

The second point is a good deal more controversial and requires much more discussion than can be given it in this short note. Granted the rejection of the independent working class party approach by most socialists, if not at the beginning of their political life then at some point along the road, what political action is there for a socialist but to join the local Labour Party? Once inside, our socialist militant, lively and energetic, more often than not finds himself moving up the hierarchy and ultimately perhaps, serving on a Labour controlled Council. He and his comrades, given the accepted limitations, do excellent work, notably in housing and education. No one who has had experience of a good Labour Council will underestimate the importance of their contribution, but this is

not the whole of the story. Most militants who accept office, either in the Labour Party machine or in the trade unions, find themselves increasingly enmeshed within factional battles and the support of one sectional interest against another. At best they continue to serve the local community well or to render a good account to the trade unionists who have elected them - but of socialism and socialist ideas there remains little if anything. We thus have too often the spectacle of a progressive Labour dominated Council, led by men who a couple of decades ago were militant socialists, at the same time as the Labour movement in their town is decrepit in its organisation, devoid of any crusading zeal and regarded with indifference if not hostility by many of the local citizens who in other circumstances would be their allies. And the town councillors, looking at the social changes of the past decades, just do not understand the 'ingratitude' of their people and of the younger generation in particular.

This is a shorthand account of one pattern that has been repeated in many different parts of the country. There are many variations within this pattern. At worst, our socialist militant finds himself within a corrupt Labour Party machine against which he and his allies struggle in vain. What is rare is the existence of a local leadership in power which has kept its contacts and its roots in a vigorous socialist movement among its own people. Indeed, does such a situation exist anywhere in Britain today?

This is where we have to begin - with the recognition that our central problem is the recreation of a vigorous movement for socialism among the ordinary people. This involves both the development of a body of socialist ideas that makes sense in contemporary terms, as well as the translation of these ideas into forms of political and cultural activity that reach out beyond the existing sects and groups. We have set our face against the development of a new political party; both our past history and our present analysis reject this. But if we are to take our ideas into and among our own people in the labour movement, and then beyond the movement to begin to make socialists from among the rising generations, we shall have to find forms of political work that in part will be traditional but in some respects will be new. And our present forms of work will not necessarily be the ones that will suit us in five years time.

We have to come back to an appreciation of the failure of the fifties, and to a recognition that changing a decline into an advance demands very special efforts. Momentum counts for much in politics; and at the same time the possibilities of new advances are undoubted. It is a situation that demands flexibility and an imaginative understanding of the opportunities that are opening for us. It

is emphatically not a situation in which a simple formula can be operated. What may fit the conditions in one part of the country will not obtain in other towns or areas. The only question we have to answer is this: which course of action is calculated to develop most quickly the enthusiasm and the energies of socialists in such a way as to make the maximum impact in the long as well as the short term? In some places, because of the way the local Labour Party has evolved, the New Left can only grow outside the traditional organisations; in most areas, it is safe to predict, the New Left will be partly within, partly outside, the Labour Party; in others again, wholly within the existing Party. We have to recognise that the rebuilding of a socialist movement will be an uneven and bitty historical process; and there are no Sacred Cows which have first to be bowed to.

It was this kind of reasoning that led to the support of Lawrence Daly in West Fife. There is no general principle here - that the only way to defeat a bureaucratic lib-lab Labour Party is to set up independent candidates. We do not believe this, but neither do we believe that the Labour Party is to be supported at all times and in all places. There were special conditions in West Fife which led us to support a candidate in opposition to the Labour Party (and to the Communist Party). Such conditions may well arise again, in some more critical political context. At the same time we felt no political conflict in supporting Lawrence Daly on the hand, and on the other taking an active part in our own local constituencies on behalf of the official Labour candidates.

The circumstances which decided Lawrence Daly's intervention in the general election may be summarised as follows:—

(i) West Fife is a constituency with a long and vigorous socialist and communist tradition. Even in the most unlikely eventuality of the anti-Tory vote being split into three equal parts, there was no possibility of the Tory candidate being elected.

(ii) There was an active and vocal discontent with the sitting Labour M.P. who is neither a miner nor a local man, and who in foreign affairs particularly is on the right wing of the Labour Party; and he is supported by an apathetic and bureaucratic local machine.

(iii) There was no sign whatever of any swing back to Communist allegiance among the Fife miners. The Communist vote had dropped to 5,000 in the last two elections and was expected to drop further (and this indeed happened with William Lauchlan, the Communist candidate, receiving under 4,000 votes - 1,000 less than Lawrence Daly himself).

(iv) A policy of militant socialism together with a clear affirmation of unilateralism would provide a rallying point for socialists in an election where no other candidate was offering a principled statement of policy, and would assist the further development of a socialist movement in West Fife in the future. The insistence upon unilateralism was important, not least because of the way in which the Scottish miners vote was used to defeat the unilateralist resolution put up by Derbyshire at the Scarborough Conference of the NUM this year (thereby allowing a situation in which the miners' vote was used at the TUC in support of the platform against Frank Cousins); and it is necessary to record that Daly did not just pay lip service to unilateralism but at all his meetings in the election argued the whole case for the unilateral abolition of the Bomb.

The decision to stand was taken by Lawrence and his supporters in West Fife, and owed nothing to outside intervention from any quarter. In personal terms he was an exceptionally strong candidate, - a county councillor, a pit delegate, and an outstandingly good speaker with a wide influence and popularity in his own area. We are convinced that his decision to contest the election was abundantly justified in the event, and that a very real advance in a principled socialist movement has been recorded. The Fife Socialist League now has political contacts all over the constituency and is preparing to extend its general influence and to expand its political activity.

It is unlikely that we shall see repeated in many other places the combination of circumstances that produced this independent socialist candidature in West Fife. But if we develop a really powerful new current of ideas and political activity it is not impossible that a similar situation may be produced elsewhere. If it is, then we shall have to ask ourselves again the central question: is this an action that will push forward the movement for socialism, or will it result in a setback to our ideas and our ideals? The answer will depend on the circumstances of time and place and personalities; it will not rest upon a simple assertion that what is not favoured by the Labour Party organisation is in itself wrong for socialists and the socialist movement. With a Labour Party dominated by Mr. Gaitskell and a world dominated by nuclear weapons, no socialist can give that answer.

John Saville.