

Labouring for what?

A history of the British Labour Party

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Contents

CLASS COLLABORATION	3
FABIAN SOCIALISM	3
WAR AND COLLABORATION	4
A ROLE FOR LABOUR	4
ANOTHER WAR: SAME POLICIES	5
NATIONALISATION OR SOCIALISM	5
SOCIALISM OR STATE CONTROL?	5
ON AND ON	6
NO PAST:NO FUTURE	6

FEW GENUINE socialists would claim the Irish Labour Party has any sort of glorious socialist past, outside of Connolly's involvement in setting it up. It's record is one of abstention from real struggles, attacks on the left and, in coalition, attacks on Irish workers. Many of its supporters believe Labour can come to power in Ireland in the long term through an alliance with the Workers Party.

This article takes a brief look at the British Labour Party. It demonstrates how the same problems arise in an organisation which has been able to form majority governments. We are looking at the history of the British Labour Party because it is to this organisation that many socialists in the Irish Labour Party look for inspiration.

In Ireland this is a curious thing as we have been at the receiving end of over fifty years of the bipartisan politics of Tory and Labour governments alike. It was a Labour government that sent troops into the six counties and re-introduced internment.

The support of Labour MP's for British withdrawal has always been on the basis of "bring our boys home". This is on the basis of what's good for Britain rather than in support of the right of Ireland to self-determination. Even this is a feature that has been unique to Labour being in opposition. Leaving this aside, what has been the tradition of the Labour Party in Britain?

CLASS COLLABORATION

From late in the last century the British ruling class sought to form a relationship between the state and the trade union bureaucracy as a way of controlling union militancy. Unions were recognised but the right to strike was limited. Acts in 1893 and 1896 drew up compulsory arbitration and conciliation procedures between bosses and unions. It was these rather than strikes which settled most disputes. The Liberals under Gladstone in the 1890's appointed trade union bureaucrats as factory inspectors, justices of the peace, etc. so that the well behaved bureaucrat could look forward to a retirement post in the Civil Service.

The convergence of interests between the bureaucrats and the state led the bureaucrats to see the state as a neutral organ (rather than one of class rule) and so look to parliament to further their interests. The Liberals regularly stood "labour candidates" from the ranks of the trade union officials but in 1900 the bureaucrats set up their own parliamentary organisation, the Labour Representation Committee (L.R.C.). The policy of this organisation which was to become the Labour Party was one of class collaboration. In 1906 when the Labour Party proper was formed it embraced "a readiness to cooperate with any party which for the time being may be engaged in promoting legislation in the direct interest of Labour".

FABIAN SOCIALISM

The ideology behind the Labour Party was Fabianism. The Fabians were a group of intellectuals who were more interested in social work than socialism. They saw socialism being introduced very gradually through reforms and were antagonistic to any revolutionary ideas that arose.

The Fabian writer Sidney Webb drew up the Labour Constitution, including the much cited 'clause four' which committed it to securing equitable distribution of the "full fruits of industry" and "common ownership of the means of production on behalf of the workers". This ideology

ruled out independent action by the working class and saw a slow evolution toward socialism as inevitable.

Another Fabian, Beatrice Webb, exposed the basis for this in “Our Partnership” when she said that the “myriads of deficient minds and deformed bodies” of the working class were incapable of acting constructively. In the “Impossibilities of Anarchism” she derided the anarchist call for the self activity of the working class as the means for introducing socialism. Instead all kinds of deals and tricks were necessary, involving “the gravest violations of principles” and “compromise at every step”. The Constitution came into effect in 1918 at the close of the first world war

WAR AND COLLABORATION

This war was to be the first international test of Labour parties all over the world. They all failed, they voted with their parliaments for an imperialist war which was to see the slaughter of millions of workers. The left of the Labour Party put up some resistance on the grounds there was not sufficient cause for war but even the leader of the smaller Independent Labour Party said “A nation at war must be united”. Prime Minister Lloyd George went so far as to refer to Labour as “the best policemen for the Syndicalist”.

This proof of the Labour Party as a loyal opposition however meant it became acceptable to the bosses as a party capable of running the state in their interests. In order to reinforce this further a stricter separation from the Trades Union Congress was agreed, the TUC parliamentary committee being replaced with a general council. Later the first Labour government insisted Trade union bureaucrats who became ministers gave up their TU positions.

The first world war was to see another test of the Labour Party. In 1917 the workers rose in Russia, overthrowing first the Tzar and then the bourgeois government of Kerensky. Although the Bolsheviks were soon to crush independent working class activity, initially Russian workers were to take over and run the factories through their factory committees. Henderson, the Labour party leader of the time who visited Russia, described this as a disaster and complained that “the men are not content with asking for reasonable advances”.

The Labour Party presented itself to British capitalism as its safeguard against revolution. The 1922 election manifesto ended with the headline “Against Revolution” and the explanation that “Labour’s programme is the best bulwark against violent upheaval and class wars”.

A ROLE FOR LABOUR

Their support for the first world war and opposition to the Russian revolution was to guarantee a role for the Labour Party in the eyes of the British bosses over the next few decades. This was the context of clause 4 of the constitution. It served to tie those in the party to working through parliament and provided left cover for the party in government. The Labour Party formed a government with the Liberals in 1923 and 1929.

In this period it was instrumental in defeating the 1926 general strike. At the time Ramsey McDonald, then leader of the party, said in the House of Commons “...with the discussion of general strikes and Bolshevism and all that kind of thing, I have nothing to do at all. I respect the constitution”.

In the slump of the 30's Labour cut 20% off the unemployment benefit before a split in the cabinet saw McDonald doing a deal with the Tories and forming a majority government. Electoral disaster followed in 1932. In opposition the party became radicalised as membership increased by 25% and it adopted radical policies based on nationalisation of industry. Most of the lost vote was recovered in 1935 and again the Labour party turned to respectability and seeking alliances with the Liberals.

ANOTHER WAR: SAME POLICIES

The second world war again allowed the Labour Party to gain respectability as it entered into the 'national government'. It played a major part in the creation of the ideology of a "people's war" which aided the government in making strikes illegal and keeping workers passive. In the course of the war there were some strikes as workers fought for their own interests above those of the ruling class. When miners struck in 1944 Bevin (a leader of the Labour left at the time) described it as "worse than if Hitler has bombed Sheffield".

The war also saw full employment and economic efficiency in the production of munitions. British workers asked if this was possible at a time of war, why not also in peacetime? The armed forces numbered millions, and they were asking the same question, some regiments were at the point of mutiny. It was clear they could not be relied on to suppress any large scale workers' movement. In addition a massive programme of re-building was necessary for the British economy.

NATIONALISATION OR SOCIALISM

This set the scene for the massive Labour victory of 1945. An enormous segment of the British economy was nationalised including the Bank of England and the mines. Some 20% of the economy was taken over. This occurred, not as an attempt to build socialism, but rather as necessary steps in the re-building of British capitalism. The industries that were nationalised were those required to service the economy as a whole but which were too costly to attract private investment from individual bosses.

Even Churchill said the nationalisation of the Bank of England was not "any issue of principle". The compensation paid to the owners of these industries was re-invested in the profit making sphere, while the nationalised industries provided cheap goods and services to British industry. In this way the bosses had their cake and ate it!

SOCIALISM OR STATE CONTROL?

The industries that were nationalised were not handed over to the workforce to manage. Rather they were run by boards which commonly included the old bosses. Stafford Cripps a "labour left" of the day said "I think it would be almost impossible to have worker controlled industry in Britain even if it were wholly desirable".

Anarchists reject the idea that nationalised industry is progressive for its own sake. Workers in such industries live under the same conditions as workers in the private sector. The purpose

of nationalisation is always to bail out bosses in trouble, or provide cheap services for the bosses in general. It is never to give the workers any control of their workplace, pay or conditions.

At the same time the Labour government was carrying out more direct attacks on the working class. In 1947 an austerity program which included cuts in housebuilding was imposed. The largest proportion of Gross National Product of any western power was being spent on defence and in March 1946 peacetime conscription was implemented for the first time. In addition the government sent British troops to fight in the Korean war and was secretly developing its own atomic bomb.

The wartime ban on strikes was continued. By 1950 troops had been used 18 times to break strikes, up to 20,000 crossing picket lines at certain times. This, along with the fact that much of the funding behind the rebuilding of industry came from the Marshall plan, shows how the policies of this government had nothing to do with improving conditions for workers and everything to do with saving British capitalism.

ON AND ON

Indeed after the Labour defeat of 1951 the Tories continued working within the changes introduced by Labour. Labour's record to the present day has been one of compromise with the bosses and selling out the workers. In government they cut social services and supported the Vietnam war (1964–1970). In government between 1974 and 1979 they imposed a real cut in workers wages through a 'social contract' in '75 and '76, (something no Tory government has succeeded in doing since 1945) and used troops (yet again!) to break strikes, this time of the firefighters and refuse collectors.

Even the left of the Labour Party around Militant and similar organisations showed itself on the wrong side of the barricades in the Poll tax riots. Left MP George Galloway ranted about "lunatics, anarchists and other extremists". The British Militant of April 6th, although condemning the cops for "lashing out at innocent bystanders", blamed "anarchists and quasi-Marxist sects" for "unprovoked attacks on the police".

Militant supporter Tommy Sheridan of the Anti-Poll Tax Federation said their inquiry would have no qualms about "informing the police" of the identity of rioters. The main Labour Party was much worse, Kinnock for instance talked of the rioters as "cowardly and vicious ...enemies of freedom" who should be "treated as criminals and punished".

NO PAST:NO FUTURE

There was no glorious period of Labour Party socialism, and never will be. It is a bosses' party which at times of crisis is every bit as willing to attack the working class as the Tories. Some of the left in the Labour Party, unable to avoid it's rotten record, will put their hope in some future Labour government led by the 'left'. Their hopes are as futile as those who see a majority Labour government led by socialists bringing in socialism in Ireland.

Many of the leaders of the Labour Party including McDonald, Atlee and Kinnock were seen as on the left of the party at one time or another. McDonald had been the victim of press slander campaigns. Atlee in 1932 had said "the moment to strike at capitalism is the moment when the government is freshly elected and assured of it's support. The blow struck must be a fatal one".

Even Kinnock had defended miners violence in 1972 and voted against the Labour government of the 70's 84 times (Tony Benn voted against it twice), Kinnock even voted against the PTA twice. In power or in opposition all these individuals however are exposed as something less than socialist (to put it mildly). This is not because they were secretly right wingers all along. It is because the election of a Labour government and its ability to retain power relies on it demonstrating to British bosses that it too can manage capitalism for them.

In any case their concept of socialism, in so far as they still have one, is large scale nationalisation carried out on behalf of the workers. This is a far cry from the anarchists who see socialism as something that can only be brought about through the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism by an organised and independent working class.

The anarchist concept of socialism includes changing the basis of production so that it satisfies the needs of the mass of the people and is under the democratic control of the workers. We want to see a maximisation of freedom for the individual. We want a completely new form of society. Today's Labour Party merely wants to administer a more parental style of capitalism.

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