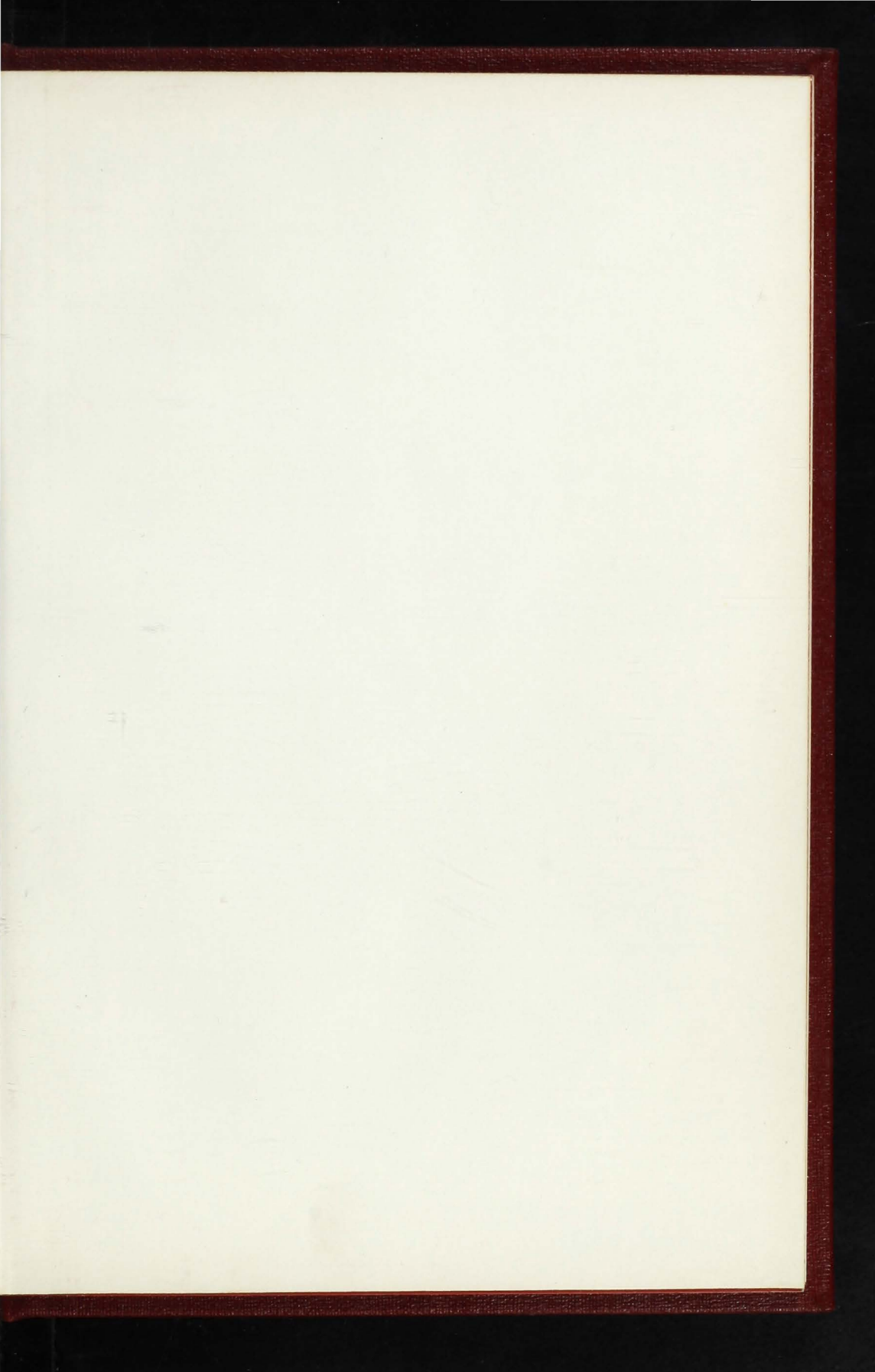
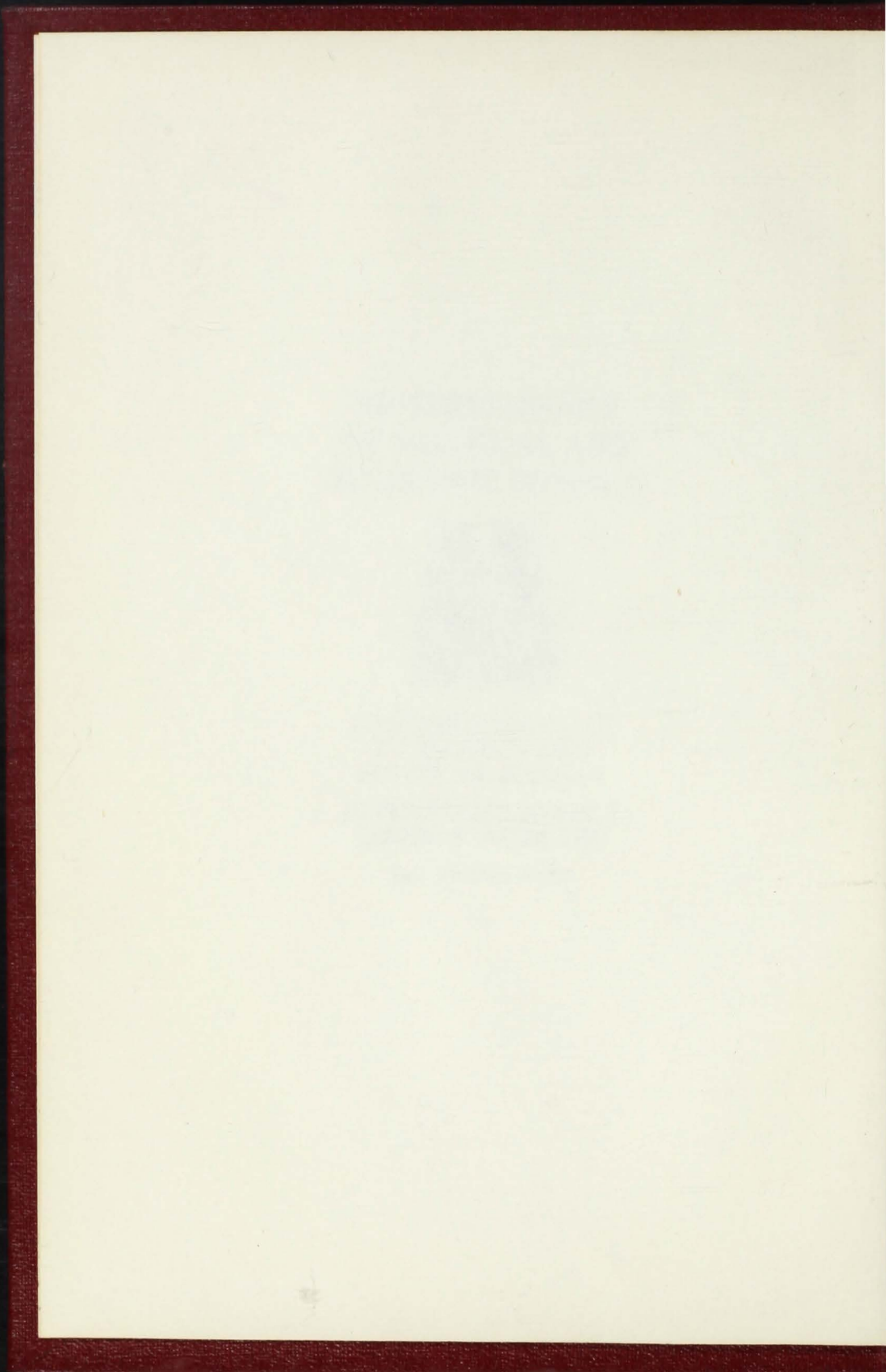


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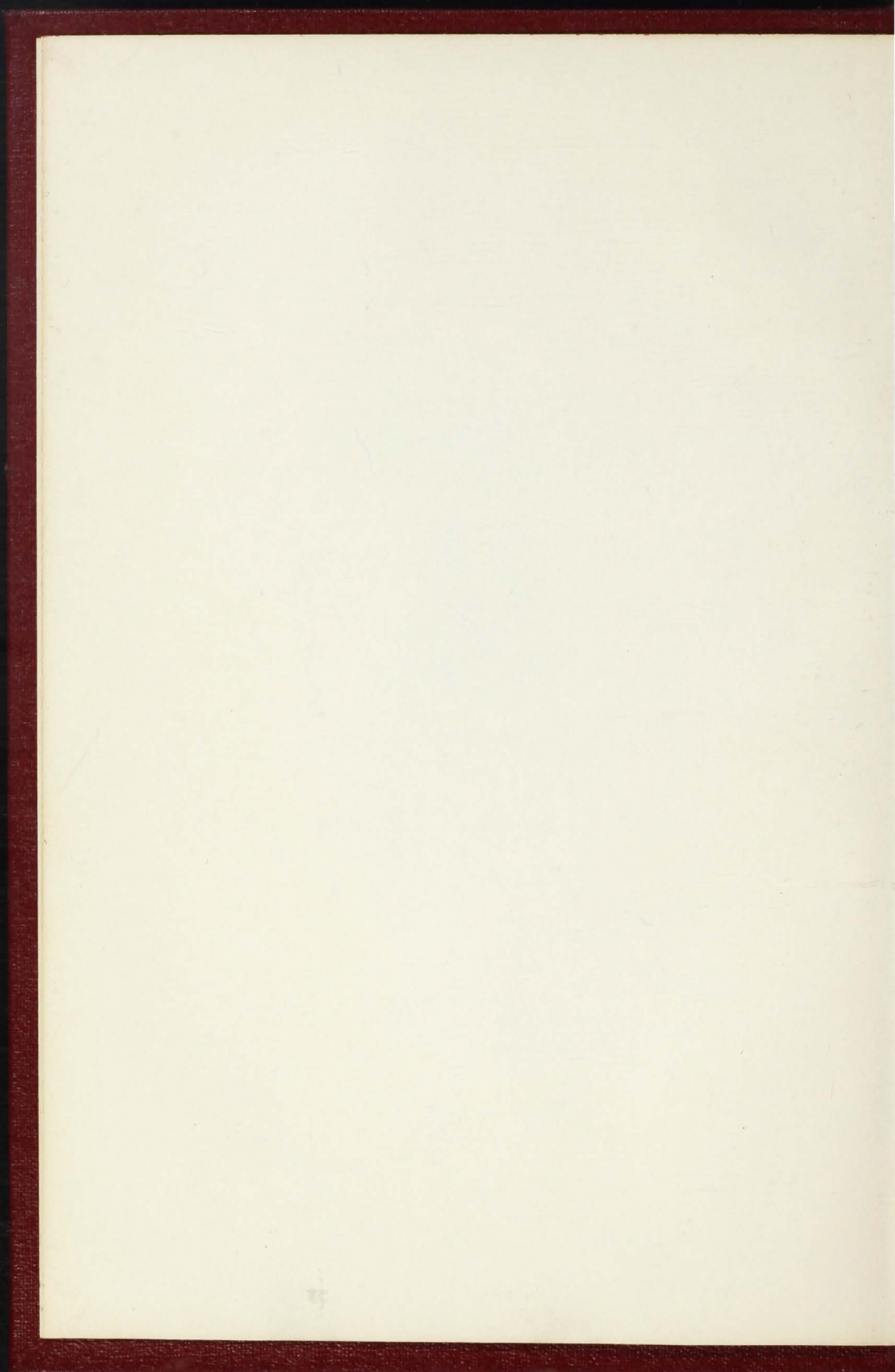
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# the labour party and the new left

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## the labour party and the new left

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### *Introduction*

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Since the May 79 Election, as the "Left" in the Labour Party have scored one victory after another, many people have become aware that this "Left" is different in character from the familiar Tribuneite or Bevanite left, or from the old Communist left. Its protagonists are said to be intolerant, to have an appetite for class conflict and to be opposed to Parliamentary democracy. Talk of Trotskyists has become increasingly common. In speaking of a "new model" Labour Party, Peter Shore voiced a widely shared view that this new left is changing the whole nature of the Labour Party – a view corroborated by Paul Foot of the Socialist Workers' Party who wrote "large numbers of socialists have joined the Labour Party, which is being transformed before our very eyes" (*Socialist Worker*, 30 May 1981).

The object of this pamphlet is to examine the new Labour left as a political phenomenon: its nature, ideological origins, social roots and processes of growth. How close is it to control of the Labour Party? And where would its ideas lead, if it were to win governmental power?

The pamphlet will look first at the ideological currents at work in the Party and then at the relationship between them. It then examines how far the key ideology of Trotskyism is reflected in the policies and values of the Labour Party and at how its rise

has come about. There is a brief discussion of the consequences of Trotskyist policies, were they to be implemented, and finally, the prospects facing the Party are considered.

It is hoped that the pamphlet will be of value not only to those aware of the dangers, but also to many presently influenced by Trotskyist ideas. For, while the ideas may be flawed, their revival has real social roots and their proponents are often sincere and idealistic, moved by a genuine spirit of enquiry.



# 1. *Three ideologies: ultra-democracy, modern British trotskyism, social democracy*

There are three main identifiable systems of ideas in the Labour Party and unions at present: here called *ultra-democracy* and *modern British Trotskyism*, and *social democracy*. *Trotskyism* and *social democracy* are both varieties of socialism and offer more or less complete philosophies, or worldviews, while *ultra-democracy* is more limited in scope, and is compatible with a variety of other ideologies. This list of three does not exhaust the ideologies found in the Labour movement – others, such as orthodox Communism and the newer “ecologism” are also important. But these three are crucial.

## *Ultra-Democracy*

Since the mid 60s, there has been widespread acceptance of the idea that, whatever the economic or political system, power should so far as possible be passed downwards, or “decentralised”. Where, for practical reasons, decision making must remain at higher levels, full dissemination of information should take place from higher to lower levels, with people at the lower levels being consulted before decisions are made. Many political developments in the last 15 years have been organised around this theme: Welsh and Scottish devolution, demands for industrial democracy, constitutional changes in the Labour Party, Community Health Councils, the Skeffington Report on participation in local planning, tenant participation in housing management, the revival of the cooperative idea, the demand for a Freedom of Information Act, “open access” in the media, wider disclosure rules in the Companies Acts, parent, student and pupil representation on governing bodies. **Ultra-democracy** has also featured as an element in the opposition to the Common Market. Similarly, its guiding spirit, that people should make decisions for themselves, is seen not only in the area of collective decision-making but also in that of private

behaviour, so that the decriminalisation of homosexuality and abortion are part of the same trend.

The term **ultra-democracy** is used not to disparage, but to differentiate this ideology from more traditional ideas about democracy, in which “rule by the people” was not usually thought to involve much direct participation by the ordinary man or woman in the street. The term “ultra” is used to indicate that this ideology, in itself, implies the furthest possible downward extension of decision making: limitations and exceptions are only reluctantly admitted, if at all.

**Ultra-democracy** has been a potent political force and, since the reform programme implicit in it is uncompleted, it remains so. Its rise is due to higher living standards, the spread of further and higher education, the growth of leisure, technological changes making the dissemination of information easier, and a reaction against bureaucracy. There is no need to go into this here: it is sufficient to establish the political potency of **ultra-democracy**. For this is the key to much of the jockeying for position of other ideologies within the Labour Party.

## *Modern British Trotskyism*

The essence of **Modern British Trotskyism**

(so called here in recognition of its historically specific character) lies in the claim that the failure of Marxist-Leninism in Russia and elsewhere was due not to any essential feature of the doctrine itself, but to accidents of history. The corollary of this claim is that the theory and political strategy may be applied without any essential revision. It is therefore very much a fundamentalist variety of Marxism – essentially a revival of Bolshevism. In case this characterisation seems overdrawn, let us quote the Marxist writer Ralph Miliband, writing about organisations such as the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) or Workers' Revolutionary Party (WRP): "All these organisations have a common perception of socialist change in terms of a revolutionary seizure of power on the Bolshevik model of October 1917" (*Socialist Register*, 1976).

### Classes

The notion that society is divided into *classes*, whose essence lies in their relationship to the means of production, is basic to any form of Marxism. **Modern British Trotskyism** is distinguished by its peculiarly crude and rigid view of the class structure. Trotskyists believe that Britain is run by a small, homogeneous and immensely powerful ruling class, formed of the owners of the means of production and their principal agents, which among other things exerts tight control over the media. Dominated and exploited by this small capitalist clique is the "working class".

For sophisticated Marxists, a basic difficulty in the conceptualisation of the "working class" is the analysis of the extensive middle strata of highly educated non-manual workers. Trotskyists follow Trotsky in insisting that it is industrial manual workers *alone* who can bring about revolutionary change. This class

must emancipate itself, without relying on allies from any other social groupings. The concept of a "broad progressive alliance", favoured by Eurocommunists, is rejected. This narrow view of the "working class" leads to great difficulties for Trotskyists who are not manual workers. Such difficulties are frequently resolved by resort to "workerism" – the conscious and artificial adoption of styles of life, including dress, speech and types of entertainment, which are typical of the traditional industrial working class.

### Class Conflict

**Modern British Trotskyism** is a doctrine of conflict: struggle and violence are wholeheartedly accepted. It is believed that capitalism (the economic and social system based on private ownership of the means of production) is bound to collapse sooner or later. Trotskyists tend to believe that this collapse is imminent. They conclude that any intensification of class conflict is unequivocally good, in heightening the contradictions within capitalism and bringing about a "raising of consciousness" and mobilisation of the working class for revolution. This is the reason for the unremitting appetite for industrial conflict which distinguishes Trotskyists in the unions and in the Labour Party, and for their otherwise apparently irrational choice of trivial or (from the workers' point of view) self-destructive issues on which to fight.

It is also the fundamental reason for the remarkable "economism" of Trotskyist tactics – that is the pursuit of narrowly financial goals at the expense of wider political objectives. Economic issues are those on which it is easiest to mobilise struggle, since it is relatively easy to win support among non-socialist and non-political trade unionists. This concern overrides any doubts about the justice of supporting groups defending positions of

affluence and power – for instance, the upper ranks of the civil service and local government. Within a Trotskyist perspective, all that matters is to overthrow the capitalist system. The machine of history will ensure that socialism will follow. “Workerism” and “economism” together imply uncritical support for unions and, in particular, union militancy. This contrasts with the view of Lenin and the classical Bolsheviks, who were most insistent upon the limitations of “trade union consciousness”.

The pursuit of conflict leads to a conscious disregard for truth, the most important instance being the practice of *the politics of exposure*. Ralph Miliband comments: “Supporters of a ‘revolutionary’ as opposed to a ‘reformist’ strategy have generally tended . . . to press for reforms which they did not believe to be attainable, as part of a ‘politics of exposure’ of capitalism – and also of ‘reformist’ labour leaders” (*Marxism and Politics*, 1977).

### **The Revolutionary Party**

The key role in carrying through the overthrow of capitalism is attributed to the revolutionary Party whose basic model was set out in Lenin’s 1902 tract *What is to be done?* The Leninist Party is extremely tightly disciplined, secretive and, in practice, authoritarian. Lenin attempted to reconcile the need for authority with the desire for democracy with his concept of “democratic centralism”. This is merely verbal resolution of the dilemma: effectively the model is elective dictatorship. The history of the Bolshevik Party showed how power really lay at the top, and could be monopolised by a determined General Secretary in the form of Stalin.

### **Insurrection**

The term “revolution”, within Marxism, need only imply the transfer of state power from one social class to another. Violence

is not a necessary feature of this transfer. But Trotskyists believe in the overthrow of the state by force. They insist that a socialist society cannot come through Parliament, and they therefore believe that Parliament must be overthrown. Subsequently, the rule of the working class through the Party will be enforced by violence on the rest of society – the “dictatorship of the proletariat”. However, *within* the working class, direct rule by the masses will be ensured through the workers’ councils or “soviets” which will spring up everywhere during the Revolution. Trotskyists have never resolved the contradiction between the desire for a strong centralised authority to smash their enemies, and the commitment to direct rule by the masses.

### **The Socialist Planned Economy**

After the seizure of state power, all the means of production would be nationalised, markets abolished, and production organised through state central planning. Nationalisation before the seizure of state power cannot, it is believed, bring about socialism, but is favoured because it weakens the capitalist ruling class. This emphasis on the dominant role of the state has been labelled “statism” by its critics. In the long run, however, Trotskyists believe, with Lenin, that the state will “wither away” – why, or how, it is not easy to discover.

### **International Perspective**

The international perspective of Trotskyism is distinctive. Usually summed up, misleadingly, in the phrase “socialism in one country”, it in fact means that socialism is *not* attainable in one country alone; international working class solidarity will bring about revolution simultaneously in all (or at least most) countries. The almost mystical faith in the working class leads to the belief that working class solidarity can

transcend international barriers – hence policies such as the “solution” to the Northern Ireland problem to be brought by joint working class action in all 36 counties; the slogan “for a united socialist states of Europe” to replace the EEC; and the opposition to any form of import controls.

*To sum up:* whereas Soviet-orientated communists accept that Russian experience shows that compromises are necessary in the building of socialism, Trotskyists reject all unpleasant aspects of historical experience and cling to a naively hopeful perspective, as if the Soviet Union had simply been a bad dream. The naivety in Trotskyism is well captured by the Marxist, Régis Debray: **“At bottom Trotskyism is a metaphysic paved with good intentions. It is based on a belief in the natural goodness of the workers, which is always perverted by evil bureaucrats but never destroyed. There is a proletarian essence within party and workers alike which cannot be altered by circumstances. For them to become aware of it themselves, it is only necessary that they be given the word, that objectives be set for them which they see without seeing and which they know without knowing. Result: socialism becomes a reality, all at once, without delay, neat and tidy”** (*Revolution in the Revolution, 1967*).

### *How has the Revival of Trotskyism Come About?*

The extraordinary revival of Trotskyism in Britain can be traced back to the growth, since the 1960s, throughout the Western world, of varieties of Marxism hostile to the orthodox Communism of the Soviet bloc.

The break with the Communist Party in 1956 of the original British New Left and parallel developments in the United States

had an enormously liberating effect on Marxism. Under soviet control, Marxist ideas had become narrowly dogmatic and routine. The birth of an intellectual centre outside Moscow or Peking was almost bound to produce an enormous development of Marxian ideas, and the rediscovery of deviant Marxian writers including Trotsky and the early Marx.

This development gained impetus from the events of the later 1960s. The Vietnam war was an enormously powerful mobilising influence over younger people, and the French May Events of 1968 and similar developments elsewhere – with their strongly anarchistic character, far removed from the style and ideas of orthodox Communism – also proved influential.

As a result, the Marxist Left is immensely stronger than in the mid 60s. Its ideas are well represented among university and polytechnic teachers, and there is a well developed Marxian literature in most academic disciplines, as well as numerous political monthlies, weeklies and dailies, and a wide range of community newspapers and groups. Few people aged under 30 joined the Labour Party between about 1966 and 1979. Probably a majority of left inclined young people belonged to, or passed through, Trotskyist sects, such as the SWP, WRP (formerly the Socialist Labour League, SLL) and the International Marxist Group (IMG), or Trotskyist-influenced student socialist societies. Throughout the period, the main student socialist society of most British universities and polytechnics was “revolutionary socialist” in character; Labour Party-affiliated or inclined societies were usually in a minority.

Within the Marxist left, the dominant position is held by Trotskyist groupings, as is conceded by Sheila Rowbotham, who writes of the “paralysis of libertarian Marxism as a challenge to the hegemony

of the Trotskyist groups in the British left which is apparent from the mid seventies" (*Beyond the Fragments*, 1979).

This is due to peculiarities of British political history. In Europe, although there has been a growth of Trotskyism and anarchism, the most marked feature has been the development of "Eurocommunism", in other words, the movement of existing Communist parties towards abandonment of the notion of insurrection, to acceptance of Parliament and electoral and legal means of campaigning, and to the search for a broad class base comprising much of the middle class as well as the traditional working class. In Britain, by contrast, while the very small Communist Party has moved in this direction, it could not offer an attractive home to those seeking a left wing alternative to the Labour Party. But Britain did have, during the 50s and early 60s, a number of very small Trotskyist sects, which were well placed to take advantage of the opportunity presented to them, and experienced large scale growth.

The rise of Trotskyism has been aided by certain features of the life experience of the generations aged under about 35 – who provide most of its support. The expansion of higher education produced a crop of first-generation students from working class or lower middle class backgrounds. Although relatively privileged *objectively* by comparison with their parents, they have been acutely conscious of the poverty, narrowness and humiliation of their parents' lives and of their own distinctness, in the characteristic ways of the British class system, from their fellow-students from the "higher" social classes. In such circumstances, an aggressive affirmation of working class identity – corresponding to the 'workerism' mentioned earlier – is, for many, a natural reaction.

Whiteley and Gordon's survey of

constituency delegates to the 1979 Party Conference showed that only 30 per cent were blue collar workers, 70 per cent white collar – yet 72 per cent claimed to be working class and only 22 per cent thought of themselves as middle class (*New Society*, 11 January 1981).

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**“The 1956 break with the Communist Party, the events of the 60s, the strength of Trotskyism amongst students in the 60s (when the left in Europe was moving to Eurocommunism), the growth of higher education, the decline of deference, rising expectations and the absence of experience amongst the young of real violence – all here helped the rise of Trotskyism in the Party.”**

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Higher education was bound to create a strong demand for more theoretical politics than was generally on offer from the social democrats of the Party. Potentially, social democracy has a stronger base in theory than has Marxism. But its political theory is relatively underdeveloped – especially in the Labour Party. The rather isolated work of Anthony Crosland is not open to this criticism. But the drawback is that it does not spring from a first hand experience of being working class; in spite of the acuteness of its analysis, it does not exhibit the required intensity of feeling – it is *too* objective. It could not easily meet the emotional needs of this particular audience.

In its Trotskyist rather than old Communist version, Marxism has also fitted in with important features of youth culture. The violence, or at least violent expressiveness, of much rock music has its

parallel in political insurrectionism. Rejection of "straight" culture in favour of "alternatives" has mirrored the Marxist critique of capitalist society, especially where this has drawn on the elements in Marxism – stemming from the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844 and the *Grundrisse* of 1859 – which are more humanist and subjective in emphasis.

Some broader influences have also played a role. The decline of deference is obvious: it *must* enhance the appeal of the **ultra-democratic** model of the Party, and of the **Trotskyist** vision of the self-emancipating working class ruling through workers' councils.

For those in work and on decent incomes, Britain in the last 20 years has been a rather self-indulgent culture: the attitudes expressed in the phrase "You've never had it so good", and the experience of the welfare state, have bred high expectations. For many, a perfect new society off the shelf on the morrow of a quick and possibly rather enjoyable revolutionary upheaval simply seemed a realistic expectation.

Finally, this generation have never experienced political violence, or even military violence, except in fringe areas or by proxy. The rather farcical model of the French May Events has made playful revolution thinkable. The appetite for violence has had little chance to turn into disgust at the reality. It would be foolish to deny the importance of Marxist groupings which are not Trotskyist, such as the Communist Party or the intellectual New Left, or to fail to recognise their often deep hostility to Trotskyism. The Marxist, E.P. Thompson, for instance, writes of "Marxisms with which I cannot associate myself" (*Socialist Register*, 1973), and observes that "Some sectors of the organised left have a far greater command of the language of destruction than they do of affirmation. Apart from an extremely

vague notion of something called 'revolution' (a notion which should be subjected to a very serious critique), they have very few constructive strategies" (*The Leveller*, January 1978).

But in practice non-Trotskyist Marxists are weakened either by lack of organisation or, in the case of Communists, by their unpopular association with the Soviet Union. In relation to the Labour Party, they inevitably make common cause, most of the time, with Trotskyists, since they have much in common. Even when they do not, their presence tends to reinforce the strength of **Trotskyist** ideas, since the different varieties of Marxism resemble each other more than they resemble **social democracy**.

## *Social Democracy*

The third major ideology in the Labour Party can be termed **social democracy** (as it is also called by contemporary Marxists). It is often referred to as "democratic socialism" – the relation between the two terms will be discussed in a moment. Because it has been taken for granted for so long, there have been few explicit statements of the ideology, political argument having focussed on issues *within* the ideology, not on the principles themselves. It is only now, with the rise of Marxism within the Labour Party, that explicit statements are appearing – by the leading social democrats in the new SDP, and by the many social democrats who remain in the Labour Party.

The central idea of **social democracy** is that of *equality* – equality, so far as possible, of wealth, income and opportunity; equality of esteem, in the sense of the repudiation of class, caste or status differences; and, crucially, equality of political rights and political power. Marxists also aim to achieve these – at the end of a

revolutionary transition – but in the here and now argue that class differences must be emphasised and antagonisms sharpened, and that political rights must not be equal: those of the ruling class must be removed completely and, within the working class, power must be substantially removed from the masses and vested in the leading circles of the revolutionary party.

**Social democrats**, inspired often by humanism or religious feeling, reject the view that long term good will come of short term evil, and insist on the exclusive use of persuasion, within a Parliamentary system, and on the repudiation of political violence.

**Social democracy** also involves a commitment to the mixed economy, that is, to private as well as state ownership of the means of production. This is not based on hostility to collective ownership but on the empirical belief that political democracy is not sustainable in a centrally planned economy in which the state has a monopoly of the means of production (see chapter 5).

The concept of “representative” democracy is also basic to **social democracy**. This stems partly from a genuine commitment to Parliamentarism, partly from the belief that elected representatives must be capable of listening and responding to the views of electors other than members of the majority party – essentially a humanistic belief – and partly from the knowledge that good decisions require more intensive study and better advice than is possible in meetings of party activists.

### “Democratic Socialism”

If these are the elements of social democracy, what, then, is **democratic socialism**? It is *de rigueur* for Labour politicians to deny that they are social

democrats, but to claim the title **democratic socialist**. One typical definition was given by Roy Hattersley; “I am not a social democrat, because I want to change society fundamentally; I am a democratic socialist”. While one may accept that some social democrats want more change than others, it cannot seriously be argued that **social democracy** is an ideology opposed in principle to social change. The term **democratic socialist** as defined by Hattersley is therefore without separate content, unless particular types of change are specified.

In fact, there is one plausible definition which has a separate content: a **democratic socialist** is one who believes in a socialist (that is, centrally planned and collectively owned, economy) but wishes to attain this by consent; *and* who believes that political democracy will be sustainable under total state ownership and control. Most people who claim to be **democratic socialists** do not in fact want or believe these things; they believe in a mixed economy and could equally well be called **social democrats**.

Some members of the *Tribune* group probably do qualify as **democratic socialists** in the collectivist sense. But Aneurin Bevan, for instance, who called himself a democratic socialist did not: he believed in the mixed economy and wrote “Where the frontier between the public and private sector should be fixed is a question that will be answered differently in different nations, according to their traditions and stage of historical development. . . . In the Western world the extension of the principles of public ownership will be influenced by the extent to which large aggregations of private capital have coagulated into monopolies and semi-monopolies in which profit is a clear tax on the community and no longer a reward for risk. So also, the existence of producer and consumer co-operatives may be expected to exert their influence on the

character and direction of the public domain" (*In Place of Fear*, 1952). Bevan's own definition of "democratic socialism" is remarkable for its vagueness: "not a middle way between capitalism and Communism... It is based on the conviction that free men can use free institutions to solve the social and economic problems of the day" (*ibid*).

It does not seem correct, therefore, to identify **democratic socialism**, in the

collectivist sense, as one of the major ideologies active in the Labour movement, although it must have its adherents. To avoid confusion, this pamphlet prefers the term **social democrat** to democratic socialism used in a non-collective sense. Some people who share the ideas will prefer to use the term democratic socialism, but they will need to work hard to rescue it from its present ambiguity.

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## 2. *Relations between the Three Ideologies*

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The three ideologies of *ultra-democracy*, *Trotskyism* and *social democracy* do have certain points in common. These determine which political alliances are possible between their adherents.

Perhaps the most important set of relationships is that between *Trotskyism* and *ultra-democracy*. The emphasis in *Trotskyism* on mass activity and rule through workers' councils has a close parallel in *ultra-democracy*. It will be argued later that this is entirely spurious: in practice, *Trotskyism* is extremely authoritarian, and must be so. But it claims to be *ultra-democratic*, and this claim is widely believed. The economic utopias implied by *Trotskyism* and by *ultra-democracy* are effectively identical. This connection was well caught by Tony Benn: "We too accept that any society requires discipline, though the discipline of the market place and the discipline imposed by the top people are both equally unattractive. We believe that the self-discipline of full democratic control offers our best hope for the future" (*Arguments for Socialism*, 1979).

If *ultra-democracy* is interpreted within a narrow Labour Party perspective, the two ideologies are also in agreement on the changes to the Party constitution which imply (or are held to imply) more control from below. *Trotskyists*, like *ultra-democrats*, are against government secrecy and elite control of the media – when these are a "capitalist" government and "capitalist" elites. Support for "direct action" can also be found in both ideologies.



### 3. Modern British Trotskyism and Labour Party Policy

There are, of course, important differences between **ultra-democracy** and **Trotskyism**: such as the intolerance shown by **Trotskyists**, and their manipulativeness, and the authoritarianism and centralism of the **Trotskyist** state. It can also be argued that the rule of law is an essential corollary of democracy, so that illegal action, favoured in a **Trotskyist** perspective, is impermissible in a democratic one. As far as inner party democracy is concerned, "one man one vote" seems more in conformity with **ultra-democracy** than does the indirect democracy of the Leninist model.

**Social-democracy** can also claim affinity with **ultra-democracy**: it is consistently democratic, and against concentrations of power. But it has been hampered by its association with phenomena which are unattractive when seen from an **ultra-democratic** perspective: the bureaucracy of the welfare state, "corporatism", Morrisonian nationalisation, opposition to Freedom of Information. And it suffers from another disadvantage. Denis Healey and David Owen (*Face the Future*, 1981) have both quoted with approval the emigré Polish writer, Leszek Kolakowski: "the trouble with the **social democratic** idea is that it does not stock and does not sell any of the exciting ideological commodities which various totalitarian movements... offer dream-hungry youth. It is no ultimate solution for all human misery and misfortunes." They could equally well have quoted Bevan: "The philosophy of Democratic Socialism is essentially cool in temper. It sees society in its context with nature and is conscious of the limitations imposed by physical conditions. It sees the individual in his context with society and is therefore compassionate and tolerant. Because it knows that all political action must be a choice between a number of possible alternatives, it eschews all absolute proscriptions and final decisions. Con-

sequently it is not able to offer the thrill of the complete abandonment of private judgement, which is the allure of modern Soviet Communism and of Fascism, its running mate" (*op cit*).

Thus Trotskyism has been well placed to benefit from the advance of ultra-democracy; social democracy has been much less well-placed.

#### *The Thoughts of Tony Benn*

The forging of the ideological links between **ultra-democracy** and **Trotskyism** is shown at its clearest in the development of the thinking of Tony Benn, who could fairly be called the principal ideologist of Labour's New Left.

Tony Benn's earliest essay in political thought was the Fabian pamphlet *The New Politics: A Socialist Reconnaissance* (1970). This is an almost pure statement of **ultra-democratic** ideology, and while the ideology was running strongly – as shown, for instance, in the upsurge of the Liberal Party's "community politics" – Tony Benn was the first national politician to espouse it fully. Many familiar themes are already there, including industrial democracy, abolition of government secrecy and democratisation of the mass media.

There is little sign of any anti-capitalist feeling. The only exception is this comment: "The potentiality of greater industrial democracy in the mass media forcing the owners of existing outlets to share their power with those who work for these papers, or on their stations, may have a significant part to play."

Benn's successful advocacy, later, of a referendum on EEC membership fits the same **ultra-democratic** pattern. But during the early 70s, a second element entered Benn's thought and was for a long time his most distinctive position. This was the economic programme of the AES (Alternative Economic Strategy): import

controls, planning agreements, action against multinationals, extensions of state ownership. Commitment to this strategy was the main theme in his hostility to the EEC.

Much more recently, a third element has shown itself: Marxism.

The 1976 speech which provoked the famous exchange with Shirley Williams argued that Marxists were entitled to play a role in the Labour Party (*Arguments for Socialism*, 1979). At that time Benn's own thought was clearly not Marxist. But the Marxian element in his thinking has become increasingly prominent. In the *Debate of the Decade*, 1980, for instance, he says: "The reality is that we have come as far as can possibly be advanced within the basically capitalist system. Indeed we have come now to the point where the capitalist system cannot even allow us to sustain the gains that were made before". It may be doubted how far Benn's Marxism goes beyond rhetoric. For time and again he seems to get to the point of revolution but then draws back. No specific proposals

for the transition to socialism appear in this or other speeches; his commitment to parliamentary democracy is reaffirmed. The weakness was identified by Eric Hobsbawm: "Democratic socialism as you (Benn) put it is neither a policy nor a structure; it's a political style, democracy combined with an aspiration, socialism and social change. But what's in between?" (*Marxism Today*, October 1980). Nevertheless, anti-capitalist declarations of this kind are bound to attract Trotskyists within the Labour Party and outside it. And the affinity of Benn's thinking with modern British Trotskyism is not merely superficial.

The two elements which were present before Benn's thinking became explicitly anti-capitalist, – participatory democracy and centralist statist economic policies – correspond to the main elements in Modern British Trotskyism. **Both are equally naive in believing that centralisation and decentralisation can be pursued at the same time.**

### 3. *Modern British Trotskyism and Labour Party Policy*\_\_\_\_\_

If our assessment of the potency of the *ultra-democratic* ideology is correct, we would expect to find the Labour Party's policy and ideology moving in this direction. However, if an *ultra-democratic* advance were all that were involved, this pamphlet would never have been written. What is alarming is the extent of the inroads made, especially since 1979, by *Trotskyist* ideas.

A preliminary word is needed about the nature of the changes. It is vital to look beyond formal, official policy *statements*, important though these are. Such statements tend to use soft, evasive formulations: in any case they come at the end of the process of policy formation. We must also look also at the nature of the *demands* which are gaining support, and at the speeches of leading politicians. More fundamentally, since we are talking about the growth of a new worldview, we need to examine *statements of belief*, and at the *values* implied by people's behaviour and by the symbols they adopt.

Let us begin, with the **ultra-democratic** ideas. Later in the chapter, some of these will be reinterpreted from a **Trotskyist** viewpoint.

#### *"Ultra-Democratic" Policies*

Some of the most important **ultra-democratic** demands are those which the 1974-79 Labour Government has been most attacked for not carrying out: abolition of the House of Lords, introduction of a Freedom of Information Act, large scale introduction of industrial co-operatives and industrial democracy. The programme of constitutional changes (automatic reselection, widening the franchise for the election of Party leader, and the writing of the Manifesto by the NEC) has also drawn on **ultra-democratic** support, although the specific proposals do not fit as easily within an **ultra-democratic** framework as would possible alternatives – especially "one-man-one-vote" for reselection and for the election of the Party leader.

There are a number of other issues where **ultra-democratic** support is likely to fall clearly on one side (the "left"): the EEC, incomes policy, unilateral nuclear

disarmament, nuclear energy, reform of the Press, and the ending of a British presence in Northern Ireland. A distinguishing feature of all these issues is their complex nature: in every case, it is possible for a wholehearted democrat – or even a Marxist – to oppose the "left" position for excellent reasons. For example, in the case of the EEC, there is a strong current of pro-European feeling within the Marxist left (John Palmer, "Europe's Left Opposition," *New Statesman*, 7 November 1980; Tom Nairn, "The Left Against Europe?" *New Left Review* 75, 1972) and even among **Trotskyists** (Ernest Mandel: *Europe versus America?*, 1970).

On all these issues, a simple-minded approach fits more easily with an **ultra-democratic** perspective. One of the less fortunate implications of the rise of **ultra-democracy** is that populism must be expected to grow correspondingly. Hence any politician who takes up a more complex approach tends to find his democratic credentials being challenged; this has been partially responsible for the difficulties experienced by the Labour Parliamentary leadership in the last two years.

## Trotskyist policies

Let us now turn to explicitly **Trotskyist** ideas. The most important of these are the rejection of Parliament and the rule of law, and the acceptance of insurrectionary methods.

### Parliament and the Rule of Law

The most striking example of an insurrectionary policy becoming official was the adoption at the 1979 Party Conference, virtually without debate, of the commitment to *renationalise without compensation* public assets hived off by the Conservative government. This policy reappeared in the NEC Statement, *Peace, Jobs, Freedom*, approved at the May 1980 Special Conference, without being separately voted upon.

Expropriation has long been demanded by Trotskyists within the Party. It is essentially insurrectionist because it makes no sense except in a revolutionary perspective, so high is the level of conflict it would precipitate. It would obviously make the sort of collaboration between public and private sectors envisaged in the Labour Party's "Alternative Economic Strategy" (AES) impossible. It is also profoundly "statist" in that it elevates into a crime the shifting of any activity from the public to the private sector, instead of viewing the boundary as involving two-way traffic; and it is inconsistent with the rule of law in creating retrospective penalties for acts legally done. It is significant how cautious the Communist Party has been, by comparison, in handling the concept of expropriation. The 1978 edition of its programme *The British Road to Socialism* states that "In all cases (of nationalisation) only limited compensation should be paid to shareholders".

The implications of "renationalisation without compensation" were spelled out in the *Briefing* issued at the 1979 Party

conference by the Socialist Campaign for a Labour Victory (SCLV): "It involves a *revolutionary* measure, for in all probability a Labour Government which even attempted to nationalise industries without compensation would be met with refusal of the Royal Assent to its Bills... To go forward, the Labour Government would have to defy the Crown, defy the Armed Forces chiefs... and base itself on *our* movement's combined industrial and organisational strength to take the power. And if our leaders faltered, we would have to take the power ourselves on behalf of and in defence of the elected Government."

More recently, a similar policy – a commitment to the cancellation of local authority debt – was inserted into the Labour Party's 1981 GLC Election Manifesto. The implications of this policy are similar to those of the preceding one, although it makes even less sense either in purpose or in mechanism. Once again, negligible debate occurred – the policy was simply inserted into the Manifesto by the Executive and never separately voted upon. More recently, the 1980 Party Conference adopted a resolution calling for the repurchase of council houses bought under the Conservative "Right to Buy", at a price set to recover the value of the discount. Statist, punitive, retrospective and deeply insensitive to ordinary people's feelings, this policy has now been rejected even by the NEC as totally impracticable. But its adoption shows the strength of the Party's newly found confiscatory impulse.

*More direct attacks on Parliament and on the rule of law can be found in statements by leading politicians, if not in formal statements of policy.*

For example, at the 1979 Party Conference, Joan Maynard MP, speaking for the NEC, commented: "... we have to bear in mind that the law has never been on our side. It was made by the other people for their people and not for ours. Let us hope that we can stop these sales (of

council houses) and these cuts within the law. I am personally doubtful, but one thing is certain, that the sale of council houses and the cuts must be stopped." At the 1980 Party Conference, Tony Banks, now chairman of the GLC Arts Committee, declared, to applause, that "the streets in the end are going to be as important as Parliament in building socialism in this country."

More recently, an article in the *London Labour Briefing*, attracted national attention. Commenting on the Brixton riots, it said: "An alternative view would be that the street fighting was excellent, but could have been (and hopefully, in future, will be) better organised! Some of us feel that there are occasions when, in defence of genuine legality and democracy, insurrectionary methods become necessary" (*The Guardian*, 3 June 1981). The *Financial Times* reported Michael Foot's view that the actions of "extreme left wingers in the Labour Party, including supporters of the *Militant* Tendency and self-styled Trotskyists" in support of the rioters in London, Toxteth and Manchester had been "deliberately inflammatory" (10 July 1981).

### **The Appetite for Conflict**

There is other evidence of the Labour Party's growing appetite for conflict: the *clenched fist salute*, now often seen at Party conferences and gatherings; and the greater emphasis put on *marches* as opposed to debate and discussion. This is especially apparent when those marching are MPs, who have much more effective methods of persuasion open to them: The march by 100 MPs on the Department of Employment was one striking example; the threats made by Colin Barnett, North West Regional Secretary of the TUC against MPs not taking part in the "People's March for Jobs" managed to highlight both the militancy and the intolerance of the new Left (national press, 11 May 1981).

Shirley Williams is no longer alone, as she was in October 1980, in drawing

attention to the incidence of intimidation, together with a more general intolerance and abandonment of debate. In his reproach to Tony Benn, Michael Foot wrote: "Our appearance will not be improved by examples of sectarian intolerance or by the ruthless pursuit of internal feuds". (*Guardian*, 4 June 1981). John Silkin, Denis Healey and Janey Buchan MEP have all made similar comments.

We must also consider the changed values in the unions as evidenced in the "winter of discontent". The willingness of so many trade unionists to extend industrial conflict into hitherto sacrosanct areas of life – leaving the dead unburied, the sick untreated, schoolchildren untaught – profoundly shocked many in the Labour Party and outside it. Here was a hardening of feeling which had never been seen before in the Labour movement. And the excesses of the closed shop – bitterly defended by Trotskyists – have cast the unions in the embarrassing role of persecutor, instead of defender, of the ordinary man or woman.

### **Economic Policy**

The main outlines of the Alternative Economic Strategy (AES) were laid down in the early 70s. While Marxist in approach, the AES could not be described as Trotskyist: indeed it has been bitterly criticised by Trotskyists outside the Labour Party, and supporters of *Militant* regularly put up resolutions embodying their own policy. In some respects, the AES draws on much wider, and non-Marxist support, particularly in its stress on import controls, which is shared by Wynne Godley's Cambridge Economic Policy Group.

The strategy is attractive to the Left because of its emphasis on state ownership and control. It would involve a massive intervention in people's choices if implemented in full. On the other hand, it

explicitly accepts the continuation of the mixed economy, although speeches by Tony Benn have undermined the commitment of the AES to a mixed economy and therefore undermined its coherence. At the 1979 Party Conference, he argued that "compassion in administering decaying capitalism does not make that system work." In the same speech he declared that to restore full employment "means taking on, I fear, the business and banking community.... There will be a tremendous battle."

The difficulty with this attitude, which fits perfectly the **Trotskyist** conflict model, is that it is incompatible with the basic philosophy of the AES, which is that while state influence over the economy should be increased, the non-state sector should be positively aided to function effectively, and (implicitly) profitably, in order to contribute to economic growth. It is clearly not possible simultaneously to sponsor prosperity in the private sector and to fight a war against it. The attitude expressed by Benn (and presumably taken also by those who applauded him) makes sense only in an insurrectionary perspective.

In fact, there are many new writers on the Marxist left who do see Labour's AES as being about conflict. In the journal *Capital and Class*, the London Group of the Conference of Socialist Economists wrote: "the central demands of the AES... would necessarily conflict with the interests of big capital... the response (of the AES)... is essentially *aggressive*, attacking the power of big capital domestically and through its foreign connections... The perspective would then be for further and more decisive struggles" (Summer 1979). Francis Cripps quotes Bob Rowthorn, "a persuasive supporter of the Strategy", as supposing "that it could eventually lead to confrontation with the power of capital on such a scale as to end in Chilean-style destabilization and

a military coup" (*New Left Review*, July-August 1981).

Pressure from rising consumption demands can lead to inflation. The AES is particularly vulnerable to inflationary pressures, because of the desire to shift resources into investment and because import controls reduce real national income. While some Marxists have always been willing to consider incomes policies favourably, **Trotskyists** have been one of the main centres of opposition to any acknowledgement that some form of incomes policy is unavoidable in the AES. Their position is that there should be no class collaboration of any kind - only intensifying conflict; some also perceive that a competitive wages struggle reduces profits, investment and economic growth, and should therefore be encouraged as hastening the onset of economic crisis. At the 1980 Wembley Special Conference, Tony Benn made some genuflection to this view in his ringing declaration that "no incomes policy or wage control can revitalise capitalism when it has declined to the level that it has in this country."

Trotskyist opposition to any form of wage restraint is due not only to a commitment to class struggle but to a belief in the efficacy of the "politics of exposure". For the Labour Party to accept an incoherent set of economic policies is positively advantageous, since their inevitable failure will discredit "reformism" in favour (it is believed) of insurrectionary socialism. Another important example of the "politics of exposure" at work is the recent adoption by the NEC of the demand for a 35 hour week with no loss of living standards. This has long been campaigned for by the *Militant* Tendency. It is incapable of being realised quickly, and even over time could only be achieved if substantial economic growth were forthcoming.

The **Trotskyist** perspective involves, during the revolutionary transition, a

drastic extension of state ownership. Present Labour Party policy on nationalisation is intriguing. Tony Benn does not appear to envisage a fully state-owned economy. Indeed, he has written explicitly of Clause IV of the Labour Party Constitution: "The phrase 'common ownership' is cast widely enough to embrace all forms of enterprise, including nationalised industries, municipal and co-operative enterprises" (*Arguments For Socialism*, 1979). The NEC's new policy statement, *The Socialist Alternative*, even adds to this list "ownership by Workers' Capital Funds". Yet rhetoric from the NEC and at Labour conferences still stresses massive extensions of state ownership. Arthur Scargill recently called for "a commitment by the Party to take into common ownership (without compensation) the means of production, distribution and exchange in the weeks (not months and years) following the election of a Labour government" (speech to Labour Co-ordinating Committee Conference, 18 July 1981) and has made it clear that this means nationalisation.

### *The Battle over Local Government Spending Cuts*

An increased emphasis on statism and on conflict has been evident at local government as well as national level.

Since 1979, much of the political running has been made in the course of struggles over local authorities' response to the Conservatives' pressure to cut spending. Two policy "lines" have stood out: "no cuts" and "no cuts and no rent or rate rises". The former need not necessarily be specifically Trotskyist, but does fit into a Trotskyist framework much more easily than into a social democratic one. It is essentially statist and insensitive to individuals' needs. It asserts that any state

spending, no matter how marginal in terms of priorities, must take precedence over any private spending. New carpets for the Town Hall are more important than a new pair of shoes for a working-class child. A resident was shown on TV putting the point very effectively at one of Ted Knight's public meetings: "You talk of 'No cuts' – but there are cuts: all you are doing is forcing us to make the cuts instead of you."

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**"New carpets for the Town Hall are more important than a new pair of shoes for a working class child."**

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The policy also exhibits the economism of the Trotskyists' trade union practices: it suits the short term interests of the largely middle class trade union, NALGO. And Ted Knight has made it clear that the policy is about confrontation: "Let's say to Heseltine and the Tories, we have gone so far, we go no further, we are prepared to threaten your existence!" (Speech to the 1980 Party Conference).

The policy of "no cuts, no rent or rate rises" – which has received much support in the last two years – is very expressive of the characteristic outlook of modern British Trotskyism: taken literally, it implies the sharpest possible confrontation with central government. Its logic is the abandonment of elective office (regarded as worthless anyway) in favour of bankruptcy and direct mass action. At the same time, it has the characteristic naivety: the assumption that mass support would be forthcoming and, for some of its supporters, the assumption that resources can always be got from somewhere to sustain unaltered real levels of spending in the face of reduced real revenue.

## *Policies with a double meaning*

Some policies which are fundamentally **ultra-democratic** in impetus look different when seen from a **Trotskyist** prospective. Perhaps the most important of these is the programme of constitutional changes.

Although some changes are, or could be, liberalising, the salient point is that their overall effect is to bring Labour closer to the Leninist model of the Party. *The basic features of representative democracy are largely abandoned*; instead of being open to influence by people at large, the elected Member becomes a prisoner of the Party, through reselection, exclusive control of the Manifesto by the Party, and loss of the right even to elect the Group or PLP leader. Demands are being pressed to make the Member subject to direction by the Party between elections; in the case of a Prime Minister, this is already so, since he or she can now be subjected to a contest for reselection by a simple majority vote of the Annual Conference.

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To compound the exclusion from influence of the ordinary voter, the Labour Party and unions are both already characterised by an extremely indirect form of democracy. In the Labour Party, conference delegates are elected by GMC delegates who are in turn elected by the usually tiny meetings of activist Party members. At the lowest level, election of GMC delegates is often effectively self-

selection by those who are interested. In a typical trade union, the pattern of indirect election normally involves at least as many stages and sometimes more.

There are only two important respects in which the new constitution diverges from the Leninist model: entry is still open to all who wish to join and, although refusals of membership do occur, the rules are weighted in favour of the applicant; and trade unions are given the dominant role, both in Party conference votes (at national and regional level) and in the new Electoral College for the election of Party leader.

The leading role of the trade unions fits in well with the **Trotskyist** perspective which, as already noted, differs from Leninism on this point.

Trotskyists have attacked Parliamentarism on the grounds that it gives the citizen nothing more than a single vote once every five years; ironically, the Labour Party's constitutional reforms reduce his role exactly to that and no more. Even where an extension of democracy is sought within the workplace – through “industrial democracy” or “workers’ control” – nominations will be controlled by the same tight apparatus of the trade unions.

A consistently **ultra-democratic** position on the constitutional reforms would have come much closer to that pursued briefly by Frances Morrell and Brian Sedgemore (*The Guardian*, 26 November 1979): rank and file election for all trade union Conference delegates, parity for CLP and unions in voting at Conference, selection of MPs by all Party members, two day single subject policy making conferences. That such proposals have not been pursued by the Labour Co-Ordinating Committee (to which both authors belong) shows how the **ultra-democratic** impulse has been forced to accommodate to less democratic perspectives.

Abolition of the House of Lords assumes a very different meaning within a **Trotskyist**



perspective from that which it has had in the past. The unpleasant fact is that a single chamber Parliament, elected on a "first past the post" system, in a state without a written constitution or any entrenched safeguards (such as are provided in the USA or West Germany by the existence of a constitutional Court) would be ideally suited to the seizure of power by Parties either of the left or of the right (see Stuart Bell, *How to Abolish the Lords*, Fabian Society, 1981). In Britain, little over one-third of the popular vote would be required. A second chamber is not the only possible guarantee of the constitution – but there has been negligible discussion in the Party of any alternatives.

One other ideological connection is worth a brief examination. This is the

relative Trotskyist success, in the Labour movement, in gaining support from an apparent espousal of *ecological issues*, especially opposition to nuclear energy. In reality, as the split and subsequent electoral collapse in 1980 of the West German "Greens" suggested, this is not a feasible long run marriage, any more than is that between Trotskyism and ultra-democracy. This is due not only to the essential centralism of Trotskyism, but also to its economism. Pressure for higher wages and salaries in pursuit of higher material standards is simply not compatible with the economic self-abnegation objectively required of a genuine ecologist. For the time being, however, this incompatibility has not been recognised.

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## 4. *The Growth of Trotskyist Influence over the Labour Party*

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So far, the discussion has been mainly about ideas. But organisation is also crucial, and we now turn to the mechanisms which have aided the growth of *Trotskyist* influence over the Labour Party.

It has been shown how the potential existed for an ideological alliance between *Trotskyism* and *ultra-democracy*. For this potential to be realised, a practical political alliance had to be based on it.

The essential precondition for this alliance was the abolition by the NEC in 1973 of the Labour Party's list of proscribed organisations – that is, of organisations membership of which is incompatible with

membership of the Labour Party. In practice, most of the main Marxist political organisations – the Communist Party, SWP, WRP – have remained proscribed as a result of the automatic ban on those

contesting elections in opposition to Labour candidates. But this has left unaffected many other Trotskyist groupings and the very large number of Trotskyist-influenced people not in any Trotskyist organisation. More fundamentally, it has meant the disappearance of any *ideological* boundary separating a *parliamentary* Labour Party from *insurrectionary* socialist ideas. There is, unfortunately, nothing in the Labour Party constitution which explicitly commits the Labour Party to the defence of Parliamentary democracy and the rule of law. Clause IV, 1, "To organise and maintain in Parliament and in the country a political Labour Party", is not a sufficient statement.

The Labour Party has been left wide open *both* to "entrism" and to the growth of Trotskyist ideological influence.

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**“The essential preconditions of an alliance between Trotskyism and ultra-democracy was the abolition in 1973 of the Labour Party’s list of proscribed organisations . . . there is, unfortunately, nothing in the Party’s constitution which explicitly commits the Labour Party to the defense of parliamentary democracy and the rule of law.”**

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### *Entrism*

Much attention has been paid to the question of "entrism" – the pursuit of a *conscious* strategy of infiltration of the Labour Party by members or supporters of Trotskyist or other far left groups, with varying degrees of approval by their parent organisations. There can be no doubt that entrism *has* been extremely effective. The "fools" of the *Militant* Tendency, who

rushed in where the "angels" of the more intellectual Trotskyist groups feared to tread, have had a major impact on debate within the Labour Party, and succeeded in maintaining their identity. They now have at least two Parliamentary candidates. But it is important to realise that *Militant* forms only a small part of the Trotskyist forces; many other sects helped to build up the hegemony now enjoyed by Trotskyist ideas. This hegemony is now making entrism a phenomenon of a wholly different kind and scale from that seen during the 1970s. Conspiratorial entrism is now less important. What matters is the *spontaneous* arrival in the Labour Party of new members influenced by Trotskyist ideas. An article in the Communist Party magazine *Comment* says: "The leftist organisations that are openly Trotskyist . . . have lost their attraction – and membership – to the Labour Party. But those who have entered the Labour Party have taken their politics with them" (8 August 1981).

### *Differential Recruitment*

What could be called "differential recruitment" has been proving vital in the struggle for control of the Labour Party, and will be more so in the coming years. Every victory for the left makes it *more* likely that those in the large reservoir of Trotskyist-influenced younger people will actually join the Party. At the same time, those victories make it *less* likely that social democrats will join. The setting up of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) has removed from activity in the Party some of the most active opponents of the left. The new left's widely-criticised intolerance and intimidating tactics have the same effect, often intentionally.

Many people, including the bulk of the Parliamentary Labour Party, political commentators and older Labour Party activists, have until recently been unaware of the sheer scale of the upheaval which has been taking place, for two reasons. Firstly, broadly speaking, it is only people in their 30s or younger who have been affected (that is, those who had their intellectual formation since 1966). Secondly, until 1979, the change largely occurred away from the structures of real political power. Politicians and commentators took no more than a passing interest in the activities of the Trotskyist sects, the student socialist societies or (less sensibly) Labour Party GMCs or Regional Conferences. But the people concerned are nonetheless alive, thinking, and often politically active. It could only be a matter of time before they made their presence felt at national level in the Labour Party and in the trade unions.

### *The Party's Vulnerability*

A tentative glance at the arithmetic of the various groupings will make clear how vulnerable the Labour Party is, as a result of its decline. The Party's actual membership in 1979 was estimated by *Labour Weekly* at only 284,000, although by 1980 the Party's own figures showed an increase to 358,950 (*New Society*, 16 April 1981). It seems likely that only about 80,000 of these are active members (see Whiteley and Gordon, *New Statesman*, 11 January 1981). Thus to win a majority among Labour Party constituency activists probably requires only about 40,000 people. This is an order of magnitude probably smaller than, and at any rate commensurate with, the number of convinced Trotskyist or other revolutionary socialists.

At any one time the SWP has around 5,000 members – but the readership of its

newspaper, *The Socialist Worker*, is about 30,000. The number of people who, while not members, have been influenced by it must be much larger. The other Trotskyist sects have fewer members. The WRP has around 2,500, with several thousand more in its own Young Socialist organisation, and the IMG has between 500 and 1,000. There are various other Trotskyist groupings outside the Labour Party, such as the Revolutionary Communist Tendency and Big Flame, which must total several thousand more. Once again, all of these groupings have influenced many people who are no longer members. Then there are the Trotskyist groups active within the Labour Party. *Militant* has around 2,000 "subscribers", but most of the membership of the Labour Party Young Socialists – approaching 8,000 – must effectively be counted in. Various other Trotskyist groupings within the Labour Party such as the Socialist Campaign for a Labour Victory (SCLV) and the Workers' Socialist League (WSL), an offshoot of the WRP, may in total have several thousand more. The Communist Party, now standing at 18,458, compared with 25,284 in 1977, has been losing members rapidly, and must have contributed several thousand seasoned activists to the Labour Party in the last few years.

By contrast, the Fabian Society affiliates 3,001 members to the Labour Party, and the number voting in the recent ballot on SDP membership – probably a good measure of total activists – was 2,887. The Campaign for Labour Victory (CLV) (which had a mailing list of 4,000) and the recently proscribed Social Democratic Alliance (which claimed 3,000) have been decimated by the setting up of the SDP.

Whiteley and Gordon showed that, in 1979, 36 per cent of the Conference delegates opted for the description "Left of *Tribune/Militant*" as best describing their political position, and a further 24 per cent

chose "*Tribune/Left of Centre*" (*ibid*). There can be little doubt that by 1979 the inflow of the revolutionary left into the Labour Party had not gone nearly so far as it has done now.

### *The Role of the NEC*

The Parliamentarist left on the NEC have been encouraging the movement of insurrectionary socialists into the Labour Party. The most notorious example is the appointment in 1976 of Andy Bevan, a *Militant* supporter, as the Party's Youth Officer. A more recent example was Tony Benn's invitation to Trotskyists to join the Labour Party: "These debates (on the manifesto and reselection) are now going on in as interesting a form inside the Labour Party as well as inside the ultra-left groups. That is why some on the left are saying this might be the moment to join. This week (the Party Conference) will have started a tremendous debate with the left groups . . . I wish they wanted to join us . . . I would like to make us a party those people would like to join" (*The Leveller*, November 1979).

Usually, the encouragement has been less overt. It has most often taken the form of a defence of the right of "Marxists" to join the Labour Party. Tony Benn has usually been careful enough to say that they should accept Parliamentary democracy – but has been unmoved by the manifest fact that all too many do not. In line with this stance, the NEC have refused to confirm any expulsion of Trotskyists from the Party – even in the most flagrant cases. For instance, Oxford Labour Party were not allowed to expel Ted Heslin, who is admitted by the IMG's *Socialist Challenge* (25 June 1981) to be a supporter of the WSL and a seller of its newspaper *Socialist Press*, and who, according to the *Daily Mail* (14 July 1980) is actually a member of the WSL's National Executive.

It has also been common for NEC members to deny that there are any but a negligible number of Trotskyists in the Party. In taking up this position, they have reinforced the taboo which already prohibited open discussion of Trotskyism within the Labour Party.

By a striking dialectical process, the period of right wing dominance in the 50s and early 60s with the expulsions of Communists and other insurrectionary socialists led to a reaction among ordinary party members against *any* criticism of the far left. This position has become increasingly absurd as the strength and aggressiveness of the anti-parliamentary left has grown, and it has rendered parliamentarists in the party completely defenceless. Trotskyists have made the most of this advantage by never putting more of their cards on the table at any one time than they have had to.

*The most important encouragement to Trotskyists to join the Labour Party has been the adoption of policies such as renationalisation without compensation, which conform to a Trotskyist but not to a social democratic worldview.*

### *Trotskyism in the trade unions*

Paul Foot has stated that "The extent of the leftward movement among active rank and file trade unionists has been seriously underestimated everywhere, even in *Socialist Worker*" (*op cit*).

Political commentary generally has paid far less attention to changes in the unions than to those in the Labour Party. Yet the simplest assumption is almost certainly correct: that the character of union activists has been changing in the same way as in the Party. Some of the unions in which Trotskyist activity has been most apparent (CPSA, NUT, NATFHE, NALGO) are not affiliated to the Labour Party and play no direct role in its affairs. But only very

strong assumptions about the mental isolation from the rest of their generation of the blue collar workers who make up the membership of most of the Labour-party affiliated unions would justify the view that they could have remained unaffected by the ideological hegemony exercised by modern Trotskyism.

It could only be a question of time before trade union votes at annual and regional Party conferences began to reflect the new outlook, as younger workers gradually took over the key positions on divisional and regional committees, national executives and conference delegations. Many people, including some union leaders, have been surprised at the growing difficulty those leaders have had in "delivering" union votes for the parliamentary leadership. But in view of the fundamental differences in ideology and values which are involved, no other result was to be expected.

The Labour Party has added absurdly to its own vulnerability by allowing members of organisations ineligible for affiliation, including the Communist Party and all the Trotskyist groups, to play a full role in the choice of union delegates to Party conferences and of resolutions for submission to the Party. Entrism has never been necessary in the unions: every Communist or Trotskyist has already been an "affiliated" member of the Labour Party simply as a result of paying the political levy. Publicity has given recently to the role of three Communist members of the UCATT executive in swinging the union's vote behind Tony Benn in the election for the Deputy Leader. But this is only one example from what is a universal and consistent pattern.

### **Mechanisms of Influence**

The use of "front organisations" is a time-honoured tactic of the revolutionary left,

still in much use. Organisations within the Labour Party act to similar effect. The so-called "Rank and File Mobilising Committee for Labour Party Democracy" formed in 1980 brings together both "legitimate left" and Trotskyist groupings; of the ten organisations included, three are clearly Trotskyist – the *Militant* Tendency, the *Militant*-controlled LPYS, and SCLV, which according to Tom Forester (*New Society*, 10 January 1981), is an offspring of the WRP via "Workers Action" and the "Chartists".

Trotskyist influence is also strong in the National Organisation of Labour Students, another member of the Mobilising Committee. The Tribune *Briefing*, a daily broadsheet circulated at National and Regional Labour Party conferences, and an extremely important ideological and tactical influence over delegates has, since 1979, merged with the explicitly Trotskyist rival daily broadsheet of the "Socialist Campaign for Labour Victory". Other similar alliances have been operating within the Labour Party – for instance in relation to the selection of candidates for GLC and London Borough elections.

In July 1981 the Labour Co-ordinating Committee set up an apparatus similar to the Mobilising Committee, to work within the trade unions. The description of this in the press as a "broad left" alliance is rather misleading; the term "broad left" has normally meant an alliance of "Eurocommunists" with left social democrats from the Labour Party *against* Trotskyists. Here it means an alliance which includes Trotskyists.

The tactical voting discipline made possible by arrangements of this kind has been very important. It is not always realised just how strong is the position of a minority which knows what it wants *vis-à-vis* a majority that does not. A single coordinated block of votes within a much larger total can win most of the time if the

remaining votes are cast randomly – and there has been no united opposition in recent years to Trotskyist propositions.

The block of around 50,000 to 60,000 votes in the constituency section of the NEC which can be clearly identified as Trotskyist controlled, together with the larger number swayed by the Rank and File Mobilising Committee, have proved remarkably effective at keeping the left in line, given the presence of a considerable number of candidates clustered around the 250,000 to 350,000 level. *Briefing*, at the 1979 Party Conference, for instance, had this message: "USE YOUR VOTE WISELY! The *Briefing* team will vote: Allaun, Benn, Heffer, Kinnock, Richardson, Roberts, Skinner. (We cannot support Joan Lestor this year – she blotted her copybook last year by her conduct of the Chair.)" And the penalty meted out to Ian Mikardo for compromising over automatic reselection is well-known. Each NEC member knows that if he or she develops doubts others are ready to take their place.

Campaigns against individuals taking a social democratic line (for example the attack by *Militant* on John Golding which led to his libel suit, for which he was again attacked) have served to *encourager les autres*. Since the 1981 Wembley Conference, the use of "hit lists" has become routine.

### *The Effects of the "Generation Gap"*

The difference in age between those holding the new ideas and those continuing to hold social democratic views has added the sharpness of a generational conflict to what would already be a bitter clash. Matters of lifestyle unrelated to political differences have increased the sense of distance between the antagonists, and reduced the possibilities for dialogue. A

review in *The Leveller* of the 1979 Labour Party Conference illustrates this sense of distance: "(the Conference) had none of the fringe culture characteristics of the extra-Parliamentary left, no discos... no theatre, no happenings, no life." The age gap has had another effect. People may lose some of their energy and freshness of response as they age, but they do gain in their understanding of the complexities of politics and of the defects of apparently simple solutions. The naivety of many of Labour's new left policies does not prevent them from winning the support of the younger and newer members of the Party, but obviously leaders in, or close to, power, simply cannot afford to go along with them. If such policies are pressed by the left, they can be used to bring the leadership into conflict both with "left" backbenchers in their council or Parliamentary group and with the Party outside. The leadership can, in the last resort, even be successfully ousted. This device must be as old as politics itself; it can also be seen as another form of "the politics of exposure" already mentioned. Whether consciously or not, it forms an essential part of the battleplans both of Tony Benn in relation to the Parliamentary Labour Party (still in progress) and of Ken Livingstone in relation to the GLC (already successful).

### *Existing Features of the Labour Party and Trade Unions*

Various characteristics of the Labour Party and of trade unions have also aided the advance of **Trotskyism**. There are long standing elements in Labour Party ideology which correspond more closely to a Marxist than a social democratic perspective. In 1956, Anthony Crosland noted the unusual strength in Britain of class resentment, and of an ideology of class betrayal – "the touchy, defensive, almost neurotic fear that

'the class enemy' will somehow fatally weaken the working class" (*The Future of Socialism*). He concluded that "our class stratification is a direct incitement to social antagonism and resentment" (*ibid*). Sadly, this is equally true today.

Social democrats in the Labour Party, other than Crosland and his followers, have been victims of their own ideological vagueness. The Party's aim has been universally agreed to be the achievement of "socialism". But this has rarely been given a clear content other than the collective ownership of the means of production. The deference paid to the term by almost everyone in the Party has been bound to work in favour of those who do believe in what they see as the "real thing".

Some events in the Party's recent history have also played a role. The dominant interpretation of the 1970 election defeat was that the Party had lost not because of economic mismanagement, but because traditional working class labour voters, alienated by wage restraint and anti-union proposals, had stayed at home. The inference was that closer links were needed with the trade unions. This view, deeply held in the Labour movement, and apparently confirmed by the election victories of 1974, has conformed with some of the fundamentals of the Trotskyist worldview and aided its growth. In fact, these closer links have not improved the Party's electoral performance, but the first-past-the-post electoral system enabled the Party to ignore its declining electoral support, since the prospect of government has remained intact.

Events of the last 15 years have also promoted a climate within trades unions

favourable to the growth of Trotskyist influence. The two attempts (In Place of Strife, 1968, and the Industrial Relations Act, 1972) at curtailing trade union power, by invoking the sanction of imprisonment against shop stewards, created a feeling of persecution which fitted perfectly the Trotskyist worldview. Penal sanctions and industrial militancy fed and justified each other.

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**"The first past-the-post electoral system enabled the Party to ignore its declining electoral support, since the prospect of government has remained intact."**

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Debates and struggles over incomes policy have favoured the Trotskyists. The rational case for incomes policy is strong – but it makes the role of a trade union ambiguous and complex. Trotskyism legitimates economism, which makes the unions' role clear and simple, and tends to maximise membership.

Finally, modern Trotskyism has been a more convenient ideology for the trade union movement to adopt than ultra-democracy pure and simple would be. The latter would in many ways be profoundly threatening – suggesting universal postal ballots, abolition of the closed shop, which would dilute the power of union apparatuses and of activists. Trotskyists have benefitted from that most powerful of political forces – inertia.

## 5. *Where Do Trotskyist Ideas Lead?*

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It is not difficult to show that the promise offered to many in the Labour Party by the ideas of Trotskyism is false. Since this pamphlet is addressed as much to those who have encountered the influence of Trotskyist ideas as to those who have not, use is made here of Marxists' own writings in order to demonstrate that, in reality, Marxism and, with it, Trotskyism is disintegrating intellectually – ironically, at the very same time that the Labour Party is succumbing to it.

### *Class Analysis*

Undoubtedly, a traditional manual working class continues to exist in Britain, probably to an extent greater than in other industrial countries. There is a very sharply differentiated working class culture and lifestyle, distinguished most of all in modes of speech, so that it is very easy to tell exactly which social class someone belongs to and say, for instance, that playing football, eating a main meal in the middle of the day, and drinking beer are all working class things to do. Snobbery is endemic and ferocious. Furthermore, a recent study by Goldthorpe has shown that upward social mobility within an occupational structure in which the number of higher status jobs has been rising has left a large part of the manual working class completely untouched (*Social Mobility and Class Structure*, 1980). Thus, with few entrants from the downwardly mobile, it has remained extremely homogeneous and relatively isolated. For socialists or social democrats, the reduction of such social class divisions must be one of the most important issues on the political agenda.

There are, however, two fundamental difficulties with the political conclusions drawn by the Trotskyists from the continued existence of a traditional working class, even supposing that Trotskyist ideas had much popular appeal: firstly, the small size of this class and, secondly, the nature of its presumed allies.

The general level of skill in the workforce has been rising, so that by 1978 only 28.8 per cent of male employees were classed as semi-skilled or unskilled manual workers, compared with 45.0 per cent in 1951; foremen and skilled manual workers had risen to 40.0 per cent in 1978, from 35.3 per cent in 1951; professionals, managers and administrators had risen to 31.9 per cent, from 12.8 per cent. The trends for women workers have been similar (Royal Commission on the Distribution of Income and Wealth, *Report Number 8*, 1979). Important geographical changes have been occurring also: industrial production has been moving out of the cities into smaller towns and peripheral areas, in which working and living conditions tend to be better. Thus the proportion of the population who would identify themselves with the traditional working class has been falling, and is clearly now in a minority. And the traditional working class is less powerful than it once was. To some extent, the decline of the traditional manual working class may be seen as offset by the growth of unionisation amongst white collar workers. The question is: does unionisation imply that white collar workers can be expected to throw in their lot with the manual workers?

There are many militant Trotskyist-inclined socialists active in white collar unions which consequently appear to have policies indistinguishable from those of a manual union. This, however, is not



surprising, since hierarchies of authority are as important an organising principle as ownership of the means of production – and it is quite easy for a white collar worker in a junior grade to see himself as being in the same position as a manual worker. But the crucial question is whether white collar occupational groups as a whole have the same economic interests as manual workers.

Statistics do show that a small proportion of the population owns a large proportion of total wealth; for instance in 1978, 5 per cent owned 44 per cent of all personal wealth (although their share falls to 25 per cent if occupational and state pension rights are included). But over 40 per cent of personal wealth was in the form of owner occupied housing, which yields no return in the form of profit or interest, and a further 4 per cent was in the form of other non-interest or -profit yielding assets. As a result the share of national income going in the form of profits and interest is relatively small, at 11 per cent in 1979 (*National Income and Expenditure*). The amount available for consumption is very much smaller, since the bulk of income from profits and interest is reinvested. Total consumption out of profits must have amounted to less than 5 per cent of national income over the last decade. It is this alone that is available for redistribution. But divided up among wage and salary earners it would make very little difference to them; on average, there would be a once-for-all gain of perhaps 1 per cent – less than would be yielded by one good year's economic growth! And even this calculation exaggerates the benefits to be obtained by raiding profits, since occupational pension schemes now control over £20 billion of funds, and together with life insurance schemes take over one-third of each year's profits and interest.

The conclusion is of fundamental importance: objectively, the important differences of economic interest in our

society are *among* those whose income comes from employment, and not between the owners of wealth and the rest.

The notion that it is the ownership of capital which is the main source of inequality in income can be rehabilitated if the concept of capital is extended to include human capital – that is, the productive powers formed in an individual as a result of education and training. But while this is helpful to the Trotskyist case in one sense, it is subversive of it in another, more important, way. For it reinforces the view that the effective reduction of inequalities can only come from the redistribution of wealth and income among those in employment. **This means that the idea of a broad political alliance of manual and white collar groups against a capital owning ruling class, on a programme of expropriation of property owners, is simply not feasible.**

If the political trends of the last 20 years in Britain are examined, it is hard not to conclude that the revival of the Liberal Party is partly the effect of the new middle groups finding their own political voice. It is only the "first past the post" electoral system which has given the impression of great instability in the Liberal vote: if the overall share at general elections is examined, it shows a succession of waves, reaching steadily higher at each peak. From 2.6 per cent in 1951, it rose to 11.2 per cent in 1964, falling back to 7.5 per cent in 1970 but rising again to 19.3 per cent in February 1974. Its decline in 1979 was only to 13.8 per cent. The corresponding long run decline in the Labour vote was from 48.8 per cent in 1951 to 36.9 per cent in 1979 (a mere 27.7 per cent of the electorate). Why would these developments have been occurring if the effective result of changes in the economy was to extend, rather than shrink, the scope for political mobilisation around a self-consciously working class party?

## 5. Where Do Trotskyist Ideas Lead?

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**“A broad political alliance of manual and white collar groups against a capital owning ruling class and programme of expropriation of property is not feasible. However, the Trotskyist road – though militant action by a minority working class party with few allies from other classes cannot lead to success via an electoral majority. The electoral system may produce a parliamentary system of only a third of the popular vote – but in carrying through major changes, there is no substitute for real popular support. Such changes would be reversed after the next election.”**

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### *The Strategy of Conflict*

The Trotskyist road, through militant action by a minority working class party with few allies from other classes, therefore cannot lead to success via an electoral majority. But one of the consequences of the “first past the post” electoral system is that an outright parliamentary majority can be gained with many fewer votes than 50 per cent – certainly under 40 per cent, and perhaps as few as one-third. In the long run, however, the comfort derived from the electoral system is illusory. In carrying through changes in society, there is no substitute for real popular support. Unpopular policies would almost certainly be reversed at the election following a minority victory. In fact the conscious aim of Trotskyists, rather than their fellow-travellers, is not to rely on electoral support

at all, but upon industrial action, other forms of coercion and intimidation, and eventually violence (for instance, through the “workers’ militia” called for by *Socialist Worker*).

But why should a minority be thought likely to succeed? Why should not the majority be able effectively to use violence against this minority? History shows numerous instances where it has been right wing violence which has prevailed – as in Nazi Germany or Chile. The logic of the pursuit of an insurrectionary strategy is to hope for a successful putsch, or *coup d'état*, in which small forces are used selectively and the majority of the population are not involved. This is exactly what occurred in Russia in 1917 – and the consequence is plain to see: for a minority to perpetuate its power over a majority all the apparatus of totalitarian suppression (and bureaucracy) must be brought into use. Trotsky was as much in favour of this as any of the Bolshevik leaders, both early in the revolution (see *Terrorism and Communism*, 1920) and in the middle 1920s, when the object of the proposed coercion was the peasantry (Stalin later put this into effect). What Trotskyists call Stalinism was therefore the inevitable result of the revolution in the circumstances of the time; it would also be the inevitable result of any insurrectionary seizure of power by a working class party in modern Britain, and for essentially identical reasons. The claims of the Trotskyists that they are offering something different from Stalinism are thus exposed as a cruel fraud. Put in these terms, the stark unreality of the path the Labour Party is embarking upon is unmistakable.

Unfortunately, this Trotskyist programme is already implicit in the posture of parts of the trade union movement. It is precisely an alliance of all employed groups against the owners of capital which trade unions have been

attempting, with brief interruptions during periods of incomes policy, to put into effect in the period of industrial militancy since the end of the 1960s. All trade unions together – including doctors, senior civil servants, university professors, top broadcasters and journalists, and so on – attempt to press for higher real wages, while preserving differentials among groups. In 1865, Marx wrote in *Wages, Price and Profit* that “A general rise in the rate of wages would result in a fall of the general rate of profit, but, broadly speaking, not affect the prices of commodities.” It was true then that such pressure could tap large reserves of profits or of luxury consumption (for instance, there were several millions of domestic servants in the labour force, who could be switched to more productive use). But in the conditions of Britain today, the only consequence of such a broad trade union alliance, on these terms, can be and has been inflation. There is very little potential for redistribution in this way.

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**“For a minority to perpetuate its power over a majority, all the apparatus of totalitarian suppression (and bureaucracy) must be brought into use.”**

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Marxist writers have been well aware of this fact. Some have correctly concluded that to organise working class action around illusory goals is dishonest and must in the end be counterproductive. Thus there has always been an undercurrent of support among Marxists, especially on the Euro-communist wing of the Communist Party, for an incomes policy of some kind linked to socialist political demands: examples of writers taking this view are Michael Barratt-Brown and Royden Harrison (*New Left Review* 37), Bill Warren, Mike Prior

and David Purdy (*Advanced Capitalism and Backward Socialism*, 1975, and *Out of the Ghetto*, 1979) and Sam Aaronovitch (*The Road from Thatcherism*, 1981).

The destructiveness of wage and salary militancy across all employed groups is, however, openly welcomed by Trotskyists. Andrew Glyn, one of the principal economic theorists of the *Militant* tendency, co-authored in 1972 *British Capitalism, Workers and the Profits Squeeze*, whose gleeful message was that a combination of industrial militancy at home and stiffer competition abroad was leading to a decline in profits which in turn must produce declining investment and real wages, increased conflict between employers and workers and eventually the collapse of the capitalist system. Trotskyist writers and organisations continue to advocate the same programme.

Relatively few of those who have been responsible for the self-defeating wage struggles of the last decade – or those who brought down the last Labour government in the “winter of discontent” – actually intend to overthrow Parliament and the capitalist system. Unfortunately, Trotskyists can rely on the essential character of trade unions – their “economism” – in order to get the desired result. The fact that unions are actually doing what fits in with the Trotskyists’ overall strategy is a source of enormous strength to them – but it is not bringing prosperity to ordinary people.

## *Marxian Politics*

Modern British Trotskyism, like classical Bolshevism, is bitterly hostile to the institution of Parliament. Universal suffrage suffers from the defect that, since the ruling ideas in any society are controlled by the owners of its means of production, it is difficult for a political party

representing working class interests to obtain a Parliamentary majority; even if it did so, the ruling class would probably resort to violence against it; and even if it survived these two threats, its parliamentary representatives would succumb to the pressure of the existing establishment to conform with its ideas.

What the argument boils down to is in fact a truism: that there *is* a real structure of power in society which does not necessarily correspond to the formal structure of power which emerges from the results of Parliamentary or local elections. The essence of Parliamentarism, and its value in any democratic or even humanitarian perspective, does *not* lie in any suggestion that the formal political power and legitimacy conferred on political leaders by the ballot box can in all circumstances and in an unlimited way override all the other sources of power. Rather, it lies in the belief that the use of the power which lies outside Parliament, and especially the use of violence, must be controlled and regulated through the rule of law, and that law must be made in a considered and careful way, after thorough and open debate, by representatives elected by a majority of the of the people. The only alternative to Parliament is the untrammelled struggle for power of the various actually or potentially organised groups in society, which must in the end imply the resort to violence and civil war. The Trotskyist wager is that the working class, organised by a revolutionary party, will prevail in this struggle. Not only is this unlikely, but if it were successful, the result would be Stalinism.

The British writer who has contributed most to the dissemination of the contemporary attack on Parliamentarism is Ralph Miliband, whose book *Parliamentary Socialism* (1961) was a lengthy catalogue of the alleged betrayals of the Labour Party (or of the working class) by Labour's

parliamentary leaders, from the day the first Labour MP set foot in the House of Commons up to 1959. Although interesting as a narrative history, its theoretical content is extremely weak, amounting to little more than an assertion that since the Labour Party did not bring about a fully socialised economy during the period and, since it was a Parliamentary party, the former must have followed from the latter. Rather absurdly, the book takes it for granted that mass support was really there all the time for the revolutionary establishment of a socialist society. Nevertheless it has been extremely influential in fostering a climate of hostility to Parliament, being the true prototype of the betrayal theory which has since been deployed so successfully in Labour's constitutional battles.

Interestingly, when in 1977 Miliband examined the Marxian alternative, he had to concede its extreme weakness (*Marxism and Politics*). Marx and Engels wrote little of a prescriptive nature about the *practice* of revolutionary politics, as opposed to critical history or economic analysis.

Little of value has been written by Marxists subsequently, and Miliband is forced to write of "the absence in Marxism of a serious tradition of political enquiry." He goes on to provide a devastatingly effective criticism of all the key ideas which the modern British Trotskyist programme relies upon. The notion that in revolutionary politics there is genuine rule from below, by the class rather than by the party, is sharply rejected: "some degree of 'substitutionism' (that is, the substitution of a higher for a lower level) is bound to form part of any kind of representative organisation and of representative politics at all levels... the notion of the party achieving an organic and perfectly harmonious representation of the class is nothing but a more or less edifying myth". "Revolutions, even in the best of circumstances, are not *made* by majorities, least

of all revolutions which are made by way of insurrection . . . , revolutions are made by minorities, and have usually been the work of relatively small minorities."

Miliband goes on to highlight the weakness of the argument that "workers' councils", or soviets, can function as an effective means of asserting popular power (this is what Trotskyists propose as the alternative to Parliament). He points out that neither Lenin nor Trotsky had the slightest idea how these councils would relate to the revolutionary Party and writes: "Nor can it be contended that the pyramid of councils, of the kind which Rosa Luxemburg projected in 1918, resolves the question of direction and democracy. For the structure which she proposed was, very reasonably, to be capped by an Executive Council 'as the highest organ of legislative and executive power': and it is clear that, whatever her intentions, this organ would have been, and would have had to be, an extremely strong *state*, possibly representing the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', but not amounting to it" (*ibid*).

**There is, therefore, no coherent basis for the view that there are somehow alternative socialist political institutions which are better or more effective than Parliament.**

After noting "the extremely strong attraction which legality, constitutionalism, electoralism and representative institutions of the parliamentary type have had for the overwhelming majority of people in the working class movements of capitalist societies", Miliband opts for a model of socialist change which oddly enough, corresponds remarkably closely to that traditionally held by the Labour Party! Legislative action by an elected government is to be supported by a "a flexible and complex network of organs of popular participation operating throughout civil society and intended *not* to *replace* the state but to *complement* it". This is to involve "a vast extension of democratic

participation in all areas of civic life" (*ibid*).

It is silly to suggest that anyone in the Labour Party ever thought that Parliamentary action *alone* could do much to change society; a whole range of activity by groups such as trade unions, pressure groups, voluntary associations and tenants' and residents' associations, has always been necessary to show what changes are possible, and to make them work. If there is anything which characterises social democrats rather than modern Trotskyists, it is the belief in the need for such an extension in participation. Trotskyists, with the Labour Left, believe in a *narrowing* of power, especially within trade unions and the Labour Party. The constitutional changes in the Labour Party, and the model of trade union democracy, which are being pressed by Labour's New Left, cannot be reconciled with "a vast extension of democratic participation in all areas of civic life", or with the desire, noted by Tony Benn at the 1979 Party Conference, of "people . . . impatient with the centralisation of power . . . to play a larger part in the control of their lives in their communities and at their place of work."

### *The Socialist Planned Economy*

We now turn to the nature of the socialist society which, in the Trotskyist view, is to supersede capitalism. It is a centrally planned economy, democratically controlled, which operates entirely without markets. We are asked to believe first of all that such an economy is feasible, and secondly that it would yield better results economically and politically than the mixed economy which we currently have.

Tony Benn and Labour's Trotskyists share the same view of how such an economy would operate. At the 1980 Annual Conference, Benn spoke of "self-

management as an alternative either to market forces or the hideous bureaucracy"; at the 1980 Special Conference, Ray Apps, of *Militant*, spoke of enabling "the next Labour government . . . to involve working people democratically in planned production."

The difficulty is that centrally planned economies suffer from certain inherent, and not accidental, weaknesses. These may be summed up as follows. First the problem of *information*. To function at all, a complex economy requires phenomenal amounts of information to be transmitted between consumers and producers, and among producers, about needs and preferences, production possibilities and the availability of supplies of finished goods, materials and labour. In a capitalist or mixed economy, it is the price mechanism which conveys information of this kind, and automatically lets the rest of the system know the results of any decisions by individual consumers or producers. Central planning limits the amount of information which is made available.

Second, the problem of *incentives*. Why should anyone in a socialist economy attempt to produce more or better? Even if it were sensible to expect a permanently high level of political commitment from workers and enterprises, the effect of their trying harder may be counterproductive, upsetting the planned programme of production. But if they are not committed, it is all too easy to fulfil production plans in ways which conform to the planners' specifications but are wasteful or unsatisfactory (for instance, volume may be emphasized at the expense of quality, materials may be used wastefully, innovation may be avoided as inconvenient and disruptive).

A third characteristic of a planned economy arises from the problem of *decisions* about production quantities and methods. In an economy without markets,

the task of ensuring consistency between the activities of the various producers and consumers must fall to a central body. Hence a planned economy must be characterised by a high degree of centralisation and bureaucratisation. Once again, the emergence of the much-abhorred phenomenon of Stalinism is not an accident, but a structural necessity. It was Trotsky who first argued that bureaucracy was *not* a necessary characteristic of a planned economy; Trotskyists today argue the same. But, as Assar Lindbeck argues in *The Political Economy of the New Left* adherents of this stream of thought simply do not reflect much consciousness of the necessity to make a choice between markets on the one hand and bureaucracy on the other (1971). This dilemma was recognised in classical Marxism. But the answer given then – in the optimistic climate of the late 19th Century – was that abundance (that is, the existence of enough wealth to satisfy *all* imaginable demands) was not far away and would quickly be attained under a rational organisation of society. Who could seriously argue this now, as we face acute shortages of raw materials and energy sources? In conditions of scarcity, there are only two ways in which an individual or group can acquire goods: they can be free to buy them (in a market economy) or be obliged to ask permission (in a planned economy).

The model put forward by Labour's New Left is based on an evasion of these truths. It means that to the cumbersome process of plan-making will be added a further complex and difficult process of consultations, with the certainty that not all will be satisfied with the eventual outcome, which *must* still be decided centrally. The truth is that those who want decentralisation, and democracy exercised in smaller units, must be in favour of the use of markets to some degree.

It has also to be remembered that, in the

words of Aneurin Bevan, "If confidence in political democracy is to be sustained, political freedom must arm itself with economic power" (*op cit*). Just as Marxists argue that under capitalism political freedom is worthless to the poor, so it must be conceded that under fully collective ownership no one could be independent of the power of the state bureaucracy.

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**“Centrally planned economies have three inherent weaknesses: the impossibly high level of information required to plan sufficiently; the centralised bureaucracy needed to take decisions, and the lack of incentives in the system.”**

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It is time that socialists recognised that the whole notion of a choice between “capitalism” and “socialism” is in reality outmoded. There is such a thing as pure or almost pure capitalism, in which almost all capital is privately owned and almost all production is for the market. It is unattractive, we do not want it (nor do we have it or have to have it). There is also such a thing as pure socialism, that is collective ownership of the means of production, with central planning and the abolition of markets. No democrat could seriously want it.

What we do have is a mixed economy, with elements of collective ownership and

of private ownership; elements of central planning and extensive use of markets. We need to change elements in the mix, but not to abandon it. Some form of mixed economy is the best attainable form of economic system, so far as can presently be seen.

It is significant that there is a powerful emerging criticism of the “statism” which is indissolubly linked to the demand for central planning, coming from both Marxist and social democratic writers. On the Marxist side, examples are Phil Leeson’s “Capitalism, Statism and Socialism” (in *The Popular and the Political*, edited by Mike Prior, 1981); and Hindess *et al*’s *Marx’s Capital and Capitalism Today* (1978), which includes the comment: “State spending does not as such contribute to the development of non-commodity and co-operative relations. Arguably, ‘private’ co-operative bodies and popular mutual aid may make more of a contribution in that direction.”

On the social democratic side there is Evan Luard who in *Socialism without the State* (1979) consciously draws on earlier elements in the socialist tradition in reaffirming the necessity for non-state initiative, by both private and community groupings. Many of the genuine goals of those who regard themselves as either “social democrats” or “democratic socialists” could be realised by changes in the nature of the authority and ownership relations *within* individual enterprises, without any extension of the boundaries of state activity – and even with a shrinkage.

## 6. *Prospects*

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**It would be wrong to suggest that the outcome of the struggle for control of the Labour Party must necessarily be a simple victory for one side or the other. It has been argued that modern British Trotskyists an increasingly dominant element in the Left coalition; but there are many elements in that coalition which would reject some of their key ideas. It has also been shown that there are crucial contradictions at the heart of the Trotskyist ideology, which must eventually lead to political divisions.**

The possibility of victory for the Left coalition but the dilution of the Trotskyist elements is a real one and is what many parliamentarist left wing leaders are aiming at. The chief difficulty in their way, however, is that they are vulnerable to exactly the same processes of ideological compromise and differential recruitment as the social democratic right has been. It is difficult to maintain the support of the Trotskyists without making concessions to them; but the more concessions are made, the more the support is lost of those to the right, and the more Trotskyist supporters are encouraged to come into the Party.

The practice of politics is essentially about forming alliances with those with whom one disagrees. However, the tactical alliance of the Labour "left" with insurrectionary socialists is a peculiarly unprincipled one. Some principles are more fundamental than others, and to compromise, by obfuscation, the most fundamental political freedoms, for which generations of working people have struggled, may be considered as extreme a betrayal as can be imagined. No doubt many on the "legitimate left" argue that they can keep the upper hand. But who is to say that, having emulated Faust, they will not suffer a similar fate? Unhappily, given the balance of forces we have discussed, it seems likely that they will.

### *What Is To Be Done?*

Since the argument of this pamphlet is that the strength of the Trotskyist position in the Labour Party stems primarily from the widespread acceptance of the worldview it

implies, it follows that any fightback must be based first of all on a direct challenge to that world view, and a reassertion of social democratic values. Those who have left the Labour Party to set up the SDP have obviously recognised the importance of doing so. The social democrats who have remained in the Labour Party have usually been content to prevaricate about fundamental principles. This is fatal.

Only repeated, open statement of social democratic principles can permit the clear identification and rejection of ideas which belong exclusively in a Trotskyist framework. Trotskyists have gained enormous tactical advantage from their ability not to identify themselves as such. This has permitted a gradual erosion of the Labour Party's traditional values, by the insertion little by little into inner-Party debate of ideas which are in conflict with a social democratic worldview. To force out into the open the Trotskyist worldview as a totality must erode the support it has from people who have never thought things through.

The most obvious place to start with an assertion of social democratic values is the Party constitution. At present, this lacks clear commitments to Parliamentary democracy, the primacy of public elections, and the rule of law, and any repudiation of political violence.

That it might be difficult to get appropriate changes to the constitution is revealing – it shows how strong within the Party is the position of those who oppose these principles. Indeed, it may already be too late. But the call for such changes would



be a rallying point and could, if successful, split the Trotskyists from their fellow-travellers. This call would need to be accompanied by others, some relating to organisation, and some to policy. In either case, it is essential that they should unambiguously express a genuinely **social democratic** worldview: anti-elitist organisational measures in the unions and the party (such as postal ballots, one-member-one-vote and reform of the block vote) and policy measures which involve a commitment to the mixed economy but also to social democratic values – a genuine and far reaching redistribution of wealth and of incomes, including through an incomes policy; equality in all aspects of life, at home and at work; protection for individual liberties and an increase in involvement in decision making, including through industrial democracy. Furthermore, those elements in the Left programme which have been opposed out of conservatism should also be accepted and fought for. Freedom of information and automatic reselection, for example, really are more compatible with social democracy than with Trotskyism.

Fortunately, but probably not accidentally, a collective statement of **social democratic** ideas – of democratic socialism in the non-collectivist sense – has been

taking shape, by various hands, although up to now relatively unnoticed. Whatever the appearance on the surface, real intellectual debate has been moving away from insurrectionist varieties of socialism. But the underlying strength of social democratic ideas represents only a potential. The battle for values, attitudes and beliefs in the Labour Party still has to be fought. For there is much at stake. Permanent control over the Labour Party of the degrading and inhuman ideas of political Marxism, the totalitarianism and intolerance, the acceptance of violence, the glorification of conflict, could set back for a very long time any hope of achieving what generations of Labour supporters have really meant by socialism: **a society in which freedom is real, in which people really do emancipate themselves, but at their own pace and in their own way; not a utopia, but a society in which the sources of inequality are constantly counteracted; a tolerant society, in which contrary beliefs are respected, and rational argument and the pursuit of knowledge are valued as much in politics as in other areas of life. For men and women to delude themselves that they are merely cogs in a Marxist history machine, and to lose, or fail to develop, the capacity to respond to the personal reality of other people, is to forego part of their humanity.**

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### **The Labour Party and the New Left**

The pamphlet examines the three main ideologies currently commanding support in the Labour Party – named by the author as “social democracy”, “ultra-democracy” and “modern British Trotskyism” and considers the extent to which Trotskyism is now reflected in party policy, values and terminology. How Trotskyism has grown so rapidly is detailed as are the potential effects of its proposals should they be implemented. The author believes that many of the beliefs of Trotskyists are fundamentally in conflict with those of the traditional Labour Party and he calls on the Party to add to its constitution a commitment to parliamentary democracy as the only vehicle of change and also a renunciation of violence. David Webster sees the trends towards a Leninist model of a political party in the Labour Party – where an elite minority control the apparatus and the policy – as a danger to its continuation.

### **The Author**

David Webster has been a member of the Labour Party for 17 years. He is a former Chairman of St Pancras North Constituency Labour Party and ASTMS Branch Treasurer. He has served on the Labour Party NEC's Housing Sub-Committee and is a member of the Fabian Society's Social Policy Committee. The author of many articles on housing, he was a contributor to the Fabian book, *Labour and Equality*, 1980. He works in local government.

**This pamphlet, like all publications of the Fabian Society, represents only the views of the author and not the collective view of the Society. However trenchant these views appear to some, they are, in the view of the Society, worthy of consideration in the Labour movement. Other assessments of the role of certain sets of ideas current in the Party would be welcomed by the Society and, hopefully, this pamphlet will be just the start of a debate that should take place.**

**Fabian Society, 11 Dartmouth Street, London SW1H 9BN**

