

Fabian Society No. 515

Labour and Youth: The Missing Generation



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Labour and youth: the missing generation

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I. Introduction

The Labour Party has a good chance of making a healthy recovery from its disastrous general election result of 1983. The Government's attacks on the trade unions' links with the Labour Party have been turned to the Party's advantage. Women and the ethnic minorities are making some progress — albeit rather slowly — towards representing themselves fairly at all levels within the Party. There are many major hurdles to cross in all these areas and, doubtless, some self-inflicted wounds to overcome, but at least there is an awareness of the problems, and an increasing attention being paid to them.

However, the Labour Party and indeed the labour movement have chosen to ignore the issue of young people, sometimes quite deliberately.

Young people in Britain today are not involved in political parties in large numbers. Few participate in political activity. A dramatically decreasing number are involved, even passively, in the trade union movement. Compared to their continental counterparts, British youth have little interest in or understanding of socialism. This is not to say that young people in Britain do not have any political consciousness or beliefs, but that they find British socialism and the British labour movement unappealing in the way it is currently presented.

The response of Labour to young people has traditionally been one of paternalistic expectation: you trust us and we will see you right. For that trust to be built on, political apathy has often been encouraged. It is the view of the authors of this pamphlet that breaking this apathy, whilst not the key to socialist change in itself, is a pre-requisite to any form of sustained democratic socialism in this country.

There is also a second angle which we wish to tackle, and that is the youth vote.

Many political beliefs and prejudices are formed at an early age, and traditionality in voting has been long recognised as a motivating force in national elections in Britain. By the next general election none of the 18-25 electorate will have voted in such an election with a Labour Govern-

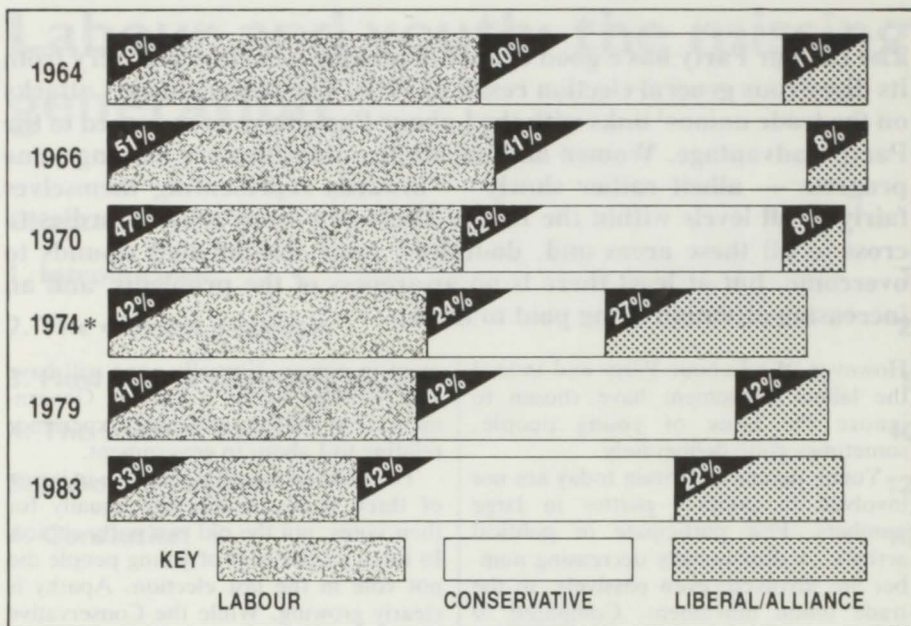
ment in power. Virtually none will have ever worked under a Labour Government. Few will have any direct experience relating to Labour in government.

The political age that they live in is one of three parties competing equally for their votes, not the old two party choice. In total, 47 per cent of young people did not vote in the last election. Apathy is clearly growing. While the Conservative Party is becoming extremely unpopular amongst young people, there is no prima facie reason why Labour will naturally be the alternative. Labour's efforts at winning the youth vote so far have not recognised the two 'As' — Apathy and the Alliance — and have not learned the lesson of its failure to win the allegiance of young people over the last few elections.

The tradition for young people today is overwhelmingly not to vote for the Labour Party. In the 1979 general election, young people preferred the Conservative Party to Labour. In 1983 Labour support was reduced to less than one third of the young people who actually voted. Taking into account those not voting, there is a minute proportion of young people voting Labour. There is no socialist party in Europe which has survived as a credible party of government without a solid base of support from young people.

We would suggest, not as scaremongering but as straightforward political reality, that Labour will not win another general election without a significant level of support among young people.

Diagram 1
Youth voting trends (under 25)



(* This refers to the election in October of that year)

(Sources: NOP and MORI from the various books, written by David Butler et al, analysing the results of British general elections from 1964-83, published by Macmillan Press)

2. The current situation

All available evidence shows that young people are the most volatile voters. Their traditional allegiances have largely disappeared. The statistics show that Labour cannot depend on the youth vote; it is also a well-known political fact of the eighties that a majority of the young unemployed do not indeed vote at all. How can Labour break down the alienation towards politics generally? What sections of young people should Labour concentrate on winning over? How can the attractions of the Alliance be countered? These questions, if they have been asked at all, have not been answered and there is little evidence of an understanding or coherence of strategy at constituency level.

To begin to answer them requires an understanding of the current social and economic situation of young people.

In May 1966, there were 8.37 vacancies for every unemployed male under the age of 18 in Britain, and 14.84 for every young

woman unemployed. Of the Easter school leavers, 1.2 per cent were unemployed. There were 120,197 entering apprenticeships for skilled crafts that year. Young people in Britain had the choice at school leaving age (fifteen) of employment, education or training. There was much wrong with the system, not least the lack of equal opportunities for young women. The overall situation was one, however, in which much greater changes could have been attempted in areas such as equal opportunities with a background of general advance in choice and independence.

In 1986, such choice and freedom has substantially deteriorated. Employment prospects have rapidly disappeared. Well over one million under 18s had National Insurance cards in 1966. Today, only one third that number have jobs. The Government has attempted various methods of ensuring that those who are in work receive lower real wages than their predecessors.

In education, student grants are substantially lower in real terms than they were in 1966. The major breakthroughs of the 1960s in opening up and extending post-school education are being eroded.

In training, the apprenticeship system has virtually disappeared to be replaced by the Youth Training Scheme (YTS), the Government's most brilliant and least understood manoeuvre. The Manpower Services Commission (MSC) was founded to fill the perceived need for a more vocational approach to education and training, and for increased skills in the age of high technology. However, despite filling a void, the YTS has, in essence, been developed into little more than a clearing house for the nation's youth.

The Government realised some time ago that youth unemployment was its major weakness. It has, therefore, skillfully developed YTS from the specific skill training role that was first envisaged for the MSC into the vacuum cleaner of youth unemployment. Whether this means inadequate, underfinanced and poorly managed training, or cheap labour, or a combination of the two, is not the issue as such. What the Government is doing is

soaking up youth unemployment in the cheapest and most marketable way.

This is why ministers have been attracted by the idea of making YTS compulsory — the elimination of youth unemployment at a stroke! Rather than risk the political opposition that this would entail, they have sought to use underhand methods to do so, such as through the social security system. By the spring of 1986, they had extended YTS to two years. In effect, the Government aims to remove under 18s from the labour market.

A further sting in the tail in the run-up to the next general election, is the falling number of school leavers (due to demographic reasons). Lord Young, the minister responsible for youth unemployment, will in all probability be able to stand up at the next election and give youth unemployment as the evidence that the Government's economic policies are working! This is precisely why he was brought in from the MSC which he used to head.

The results of the collapse in freedom and choice can be seen in Diagram 2. What is apparent, new and depressing is that the traditional level of what can be called the 'natural optimism' of youth is disappearing. 43 per cent of those who are not students believe that they have less opportunities than their parents had in the 1960s and amongst young working class men, the figure is over 50 per cent. More worrying is the lack of faith in political change to improve the situation. Young people are less committed to any one party than any other age group. They are also less likely to vote, with only 55 per cent saying that they were certain to vote in the run-up to the last election.

They are also less dated in their viewpoints, as private polls carried out by the Labour Party indicate. Young people see unemployment and nuclear weapons as crucial issues, but not the Common Market. Young people are the age group most concerned about nuclear weapons, and tend to identify with Labour as the party most likely to solve the problems of unemployment. Conservative policy on housing has a low impact, but the issue has

not been used in a way that greatly benefits Labour. On industrial relations (48 per cent) as well as on unemployment (45 per cent) Labour is seen to have the best policies.

On many of Labour's main policies there is much backing. 75 per cent support increased public spending to create new jobs, 73 per cent for increased housebuilding and to ensure management consultation with the unions, 72 per cent for working closely with the unions, 68 per cent for import controls and 69 per cent for grants for 16-19 year olds. Increased defence spending, cuts in council spending and private education are very unpopular. The areas where Labour loses out to the right are on law and order — seen by the young as an important and high priority — and opposition to nationalisation. Yet on all issues more young people claim ignorance of the policies of all the parties than any other age group.

Labour has also to take on board two major differences in the outlook of young people. Young women believe themselves

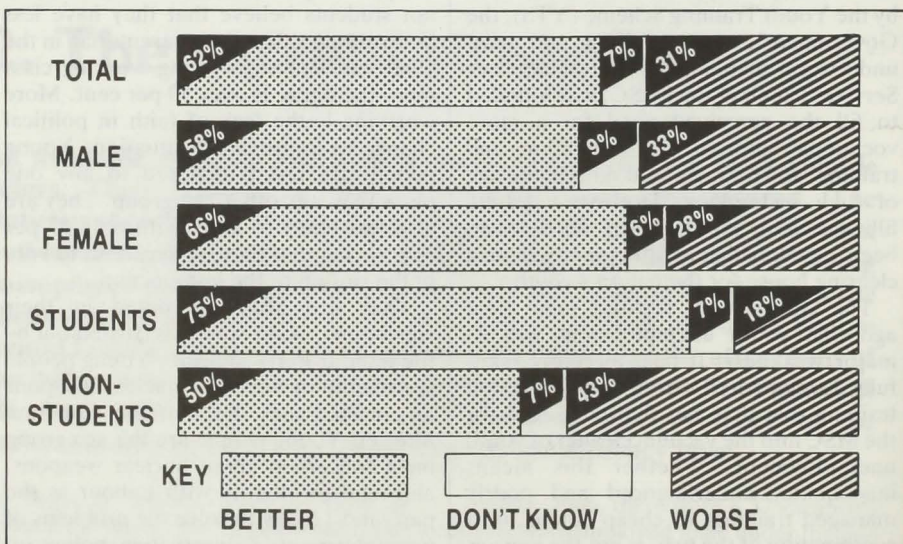
to have better opportunities than their mothers in the 1960s, and students believe their opportunities are likewise much greater. It follows that current attacks on the rights of young women and on educational opportunities will do untold damage to the Conservative Party at the next election, providing Labour is capable of showing itself equal to meeting the aspirations of young women and students.

There is, however, a feeling of despondency, with nearly two thirds of young people believing that Britain will be a worse place to live in the year 2000 — as Diagram 3 shows. Alongside this, there is distrust of politicians, with only 15 per cent believing that they take young people seriously.

Mrs Thatcher has succeeded in alienating a whole generation of people. The young have come largely to reject politics as an answer to their problems. This, more than anything, shows that Labour's approach to the youth vote will need care, attention and some sophistication. Occasional rhetoric about youth unemploy-

Diagram 2

Do you think you have better or worse opportunities than your parents when they were the same age?



(Source: Marplan, Oct 1985)

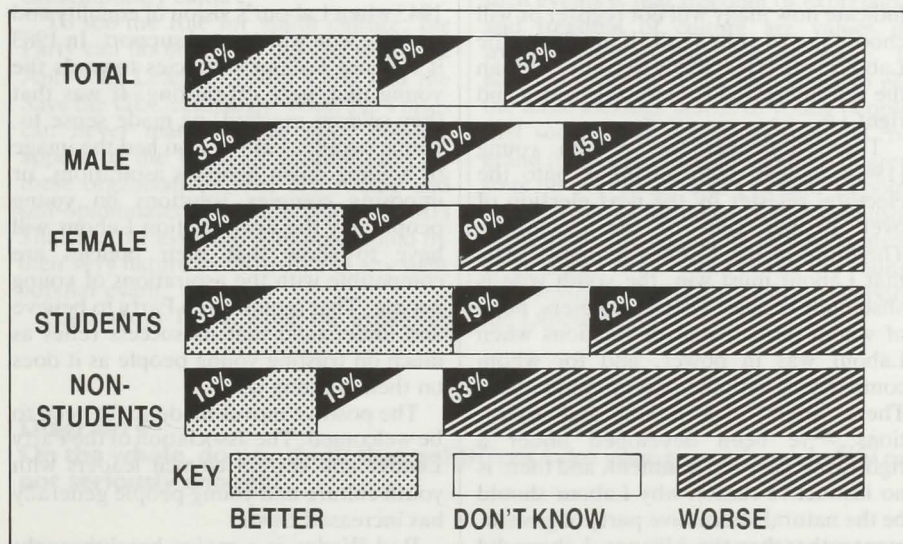
(figures rounded up)

ment and the evils of Thatcher will win neither the youth vote, nor the next election.

It is a lesson that some will find difficult to swallow.

Diagram 3

Do you think that Britain will be a better or worse place to live in the year 2000?



(figures rounded up)

(Source: Marplan, Oct 1985)

3. How to win the youth vote

According to the pollsters, Labour won 51 per cent of the 21-24 year olds voting at the 1966 election. Despite 18-21 year olds being given the vote from 1970, that figure has never been surpassed. Indeed as the number of unregistered and abstaining young voters has increased, Labour managed to win only 17 per cent of the 18-22 vote in 1983, with the Conservatives winning a majority of first-time voters. According to Gallup, Labour came third in the 18-24 age range with 29 per cent of those actually voting.

What is quite clear is that only a minute proportion of young people chose to vote

Labour in 1983. A majority of the young unemployed did not bother to vote

Labour. The traditional class allegiances which automatically gave Labour a solid youth vote in the past are no longer guaranteeing Labour votes from the young working class.

The opinion polls now look better, with about 40 per cent of young voters saying they will vote Labour. But the youth vote is very volatile, and such polls do not indicate how many will not register or will choose not to vote at all. If anything, the Labour vote is less likely to come out than the self-interested vote for the centre and right.

There are over five million young (18-24) voters, with an influx onto the electoral register by the next election of over 10 per cent of the electorate. Therefore in the 130 key marginal seats that Labour must win, the youth vote is absolutely crucial. These are voters, none of whom participated in elections when Labour was in power, and for whom comparisons with the past are redundant. These voters' expectations and aspirations have been developed under a right-wing Tory Government, and there is no instinctive reason why Labour should be the natural alternative party of government rather than the Alliance. Labour did not comprehend this in 1983.

Neither will things be altered by a few vague, well-meaning promises, a leaflet and a poster, a party political broadcast, a concert and an advert in *New Musical Express*. They are steps in the right direction, but Ready Brek politics do not provide the substance that will leave young voters trusting Labour.

Labour must understand several things about young people.

Firstly, they do not listen a great deal to old politicians. Labour has dozens of Parliamentary spokesmen (for men they usually are) queuing up to give their opinion. It is not that those opinions are wrong, but that they rarely reach young people.

Secondly, young people will not respond well to bland messages written in condescending terms.

Thirdly, most young people have material aspirations that they wish to see fulfilled. They want jobs with decent pay

and security. They want cars to increase their freedom of movement. They want houses, and often they want to buy their own homes.

Occasionally Labour has done well with the youth vote. In the 1960s, Labour offered a powerful vision of a modern technological society. It caught the aspirations of the post-war generation, as in 1945 when Labour's vision of equality and security won widespread support. In 1983 it was not Labour's policies towards the young that were off-putting. It was that they seldom reached, or made sense to, young people. Labour also had the image of holding down people's aspirations, or imposing complex solutions on young people. By the next election Labour will have to show that their policies are compatible with the aspirations of young people. That requires the Party to believe and understand that its success relies as much on trusting young people as it does on them trusting it.

The positive moves made so far need to be welcomed. The association of the Party Leader and certain council leaders with youth culture and young people generally has increased trust.

Red Wedge is a major breakthrough: formed after Billy Bragg's 'Jobs for Youth' tour, it aims at creating a link between young people, young artists and the Labour Party. The Party's Youth Charter was incomparably better than anything Labour has ever produced for young people before. It does not insult their intelligence or cut across their instincts. It states the truth — that the answers to their problems are not simple — without intellectualising, sloganising or providing false promises.

By creating a vehicle to channel a variety of creative skills and talents, Red Wedge is able to offer new avenues for presenting and explaining Labour's policies and ideology. By working with the unions, the Party, and in particular with Labour local authorities, Red Wedge is especially well positioned to encourage the opening up of facilities and opportunities for young people to express and develop their artistic talents.

We believe there is a significant role in

the next election for Red Wedge and similar initiatives. Their main impact needs to be at a local level, and long term, by tying the Party inseparably into youth culture — a role that should have been done by a vibrant youth section. The success of Live Aid shows how a political message can be popularised through contemporary culture.

To see the role for youth culture, the Party can do no better than to study the Anti-Nazi League, Youth CND and the Save the GLC campaign. What the Tories can never match is the mass popular appeal of the open-air concerts run by these organisations. The rich, smug and self-opinionated musicians who back Mrs Thatcher (or even the Alliance) would by their very nature be incapable of any such popular event.

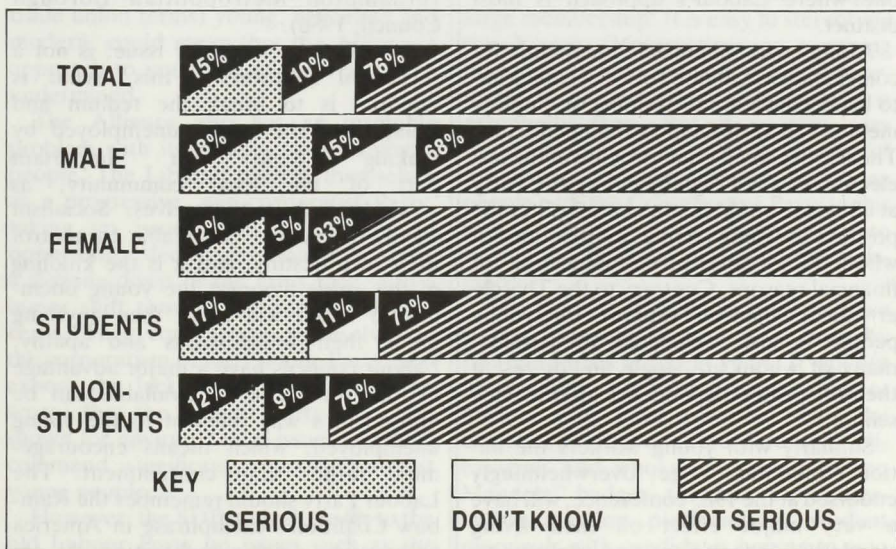
The Labour Party, using the expertise

of those in Red Wedge, should organise an annual festival on the scale of those held on the Continent. This, amongst many other advantages, will provide a forum to interest and recruit some of the sympathetic young people that the Party and the LPYS currently fail to attract.

The message that would come from such events is that freedom of expression and freedom of culture are values of socialism not of the right or centre. If handled properly it can also begin to get the basic message across to young people that socialism is not about coercion, or grand plans organised by old men in grey suits on everybody else's behalf. Labour must get across the message that socialism is about people beginning to take control of their own lives — and unless the young are convinced of this, they will not support the Labour Party.

Diagram 4

On the whole, do you think that politicians take young people seriously or not seriously enough?



(Source: Marplan, Oct 1985)

(figures rounded up)

Precisely because of this, we believe that the paternalistic approach of Labour — vote for us and we will take care of your interests — needs demolishing.

Labour's approach to the youth vote has been dominated by two dangerous themes. Firstly, that young people will naturally vote Labour — we have explained how this is untrue. Secondly, that with a troublesome youth section it is best to ignore youth during an election. By showing an understanding of young people's aspirations, and indicating a willingness to accord them an effective economic and social priority, Labour stands to gain heavily from the youth vote. This means that when talking about young people, the Party needs to extend well beyond talking about unemployment, training and education; the traditional catchwords used in relation to young people.

The key to young people's immediate aspirations, whatever their social and economic situation, is financial independence. The freedom given by financial independence is the one most seriously eroded by this Government, the one the Alliance fall back on accepting, and the one where Labour's approach is most distinct.

Along with financial independence comes choice. Labour's offer of choice has to be of education or training or employment — all with financial independence. The £25 per week grant promise at the last election was not highlighted by the Party at all, yet it would fundamentally alter the position of young people, up to a third of whom do not enter further education for financial reasons. Contrary to the Thatcher ideal, financial support for young people is also welcomed by parents, many of whom are single and/or resent their offsprings' dependence after leaving school.

Similarly with young workers the national minimum wage, overwhelmingly endorsed at the 1985 conference, will have a very major effect on their living standards, expectations and aspirations. The provision of equality of treatment of the young in the social security system, as proposed by Labour, would help the

refounding of self-respect which the Fowler measures attack.

A training scheme of high-quality standards and decent remuneration would bring a very different response and outlook to that given by the coercion of the Youth Training Scheme. In campaigning for these policies, local parties have a key role to play.

Youthaid has shown how the young unemployed are a major potential political force, with the number of unemployed under 25 years old exceeding the electoral majority in 41 of the seats that Labour must gain at the next election (*Youthaid Bulletin*, 26 April 1986).

As a youth review by Wolverhampton's Labour Council identified, there is a great problem of isolation and alienation amongst unemployed young people. They lose mobility through a lack of financial independence, and are excluded from many popular leisure activities — again for financial reasons. Isolated and stuck at home, uncertainty, rejection and lack of hope mean that registering and choosing to vote are not uppermost in their minds (*The Social Conditions of Young People (16-24) in Wolverhampton in 1984*, Wolverhampton Metropolitan Borough Council, 1986).

A leaflet, on whatever issue, is not a successful solution to this. What is required is to break the tedium and isolation of the young unemployed by making them an important part of the local community, as a whole and in themselves. Socialism stands for people being able to control their own destiny, and it is the kindling of this pride amongst the young unemployed which will more than anything break their hopelessness and apathy. Labour councils have a major advantage in that the resources available can be utilised in a way relevant to the young unemployed, which means encouragement rather than containment. The Labour Party should remember the Rainbow Coalition's catchphrase in America to encourage voter registration: "I am somebody".

There are far more young people not registered to vote than any other section

of the population. This is not a natural problem caused by entering the electoral roll for the first time. More 21-24 year olds are unregistered than 18-21 year olds. Alienation and mistrust of politicians are the cause of this. For many, coming of age and registering on the electoral list, like opening a bank account, are assertions of independence which quickly disintegrate once the realities of modern life become apparent.

The opposition

The Alliance is attempting to portray itself as a modern and youthful partnership, capable of understanding and meeting the aspirations of the younger part of the electorate. There is little doubt that they had some success in doing this in the 1983 election, especially when compared with the Labour Party.

However, the appeal was very superficial, concentrating exclusively on the age, appearance and image of their leading figures in contrast to the aged leaders of the labour movement. The new Labour Party leadership, backed up by a number of trade union leaders who are (in trade union terms) young, articulate and modern, could mean that the Alliance's approach to young people is very much undermined.

The Alliance also has an insoluble problem with its policies towards young people. The Liberals portray themselves as a progressive, anti-corporatist Party, taking up issues such as equality of opportunity, decentralisation of the state, a slowing down of the arms race, and a major shift towards environmental concerns. They counterpose themselves to the corporatism of the Labour Party, and expose the lack of concern (and often scorn) that the Labour Party has often shown for environmental issues — which command significant support amongst young people.

However, the SDP is much closer to the old Labour Party on issues such as the environment and arms reduction than the Labour Party itself. This fundamental contradiction between the Liberals with

their policies which could appeal to young people and the SDP with their sub-Thatcherite image needs exploiting fully.

This contradiction permeates the tiny youth and student sections of both Alliance partners. The Liberals have more in common, and have worked more closely with the Eurocommunist-led Young Communist League than with the Social Democrats. The Social Democrats in turn recruited a number of their youth leaders from the Conservative Party — much more so than their senior party. The gulf is, and will remain, unbridgeable and this fragile and unholy alliance of incompatible groupings will form the flimsiest of election machines at youth and student level. This is all the more reason for Labour committing time and resources to exploit these divisions.

The Conservative Party has done remarkably well amongst young people for a long time. It has regularly attracted 40 per cent of those voting, and it has a youth section remarkably more successful in involving young people than any other party.

Young Conservative leaders are happy to admit that the social operations of their organisation are the key to maintaining its large membership. It is easy to stereotype the Young Conservatives as a roving marriage bureau moving from dinner-dance to garden party — because it is essentially true. But it is also easy to underestimate the political benefits of associating a large number of young people with the Conservative Party in this way. At elections it often materialises into substantial financial and physical assistance.

The Conservative Party students have suffered severely through a takeover by far right forces in recent years. It will not be credible for Conservative student leaders who have travelled with the contra-terrorists and murderers in Nicaragua, and who wear "Hang Nelson Mandela" badges, to speak on Conservative election platforms in student marginals with candidates hoping to woo the student vote.

Similarly there is a major distrust of a party whose student leaders are against

student grants and for cutting student living standards. A clear campaign on educational issues in the colleges will render the Conservative image extremists and anti-education, and leave its election machinery impotent and isolated. Indeed Tory Central Office will be hoping for the minimum possible campaigning throughout the colleges.

Amongst young people generally, the Conservatives have a bad image. The anti-Conservative feeling is quite enormous, fuelled by youth unemployment and the scorn poured on young people's aspirations by the Government. It is essential that perceived shortcomings in Labour's approach — which generally no longer actually exist — are not the issues that young people's eyes are focussed on during the next two years. Mrs. Thatcher's image of radicalism and assertion in 1983, which appealed to people's self-aspiration, is the very image which is now perceived as dogmatism and arrogance and can be exploited by the Labour Party. The young fundamentally reject authoritarianism which is not matched with respect. Authority which gives young people no respect will receive none in return.

Therefore, Labour must not be, and must not be seen to be, in favour of a large, bureaucratic, distant and unaccountable state machinery — the party of bureaucracy. Labour must be the party for: opportunity in housing for young people, not the party against mortgages for first time buyers; jobs in Britain's motor industry, not the party for banning the choice of car ownership; effective defence, with a reduction in global tensions and a reverse of the arms race, not the party of weakness and isolation.

Above all else, in relation to the youth vote, Labour must not be the party of bland paternalistic promises. Young people know they have talents and potential; they expect to be promised jobs — indeed the earth — by politicians. What is needed are explanations of how Labour will do things, why they will work, what socialist values are and how they differ from the other parties, and the consequences of this. Labour needs to show that it understands young people, relates to young people, and trusts young people. If it fails to appreciate this, then it stands to lose the next election.

4. The student vote

Many local campaigns have suffered through the misguided belief that the student vote is best left undisturbed. The reality is often that Labour cannot win without it.

The student vote merits consideration for a number of reasons. The fact that the Party has not undertaken this to any serious extent is simply a reflection of the general lack of understanding of the student movement, which is misunderstood even by those who have experience of studenthood themselves. The diversity of institutions and the composition of the student population is great, with the university undergraduate being the excep-

tion and the teenage, further education student the norm.

There are four major reasons why the student vote is of strategic importance to the next general election and beyond.

Firstly, the student population currently of voting age is greater than the electoral margin in 42 key marginal constituencies, and of 16 and above in 60 key constituencies in total. The overwhelming majority of the current full-time

student population (approximately 1.4 million) will be entitled to vote in the next general election. Most Constituency Labour Parties do not recognise the size of their own student vote — mainly comprising of first time voters. With successive grant and other educational cuts, the student movement is an extremely large floating vote, unlikely to vote for the Conservative Party.

Secondly, students are entitled to choose in which constituency to cast their vote: where they live or their place of study. (It is interesting to note that the Government is considering amending the Representation of The People Act to debar this choice given their calculation that the pro-Labour student vote now outweighs the pro-Tory two home-owners' vote!)

This opportunity for large-scale postal voting means that a high level of organisation can maximise the student impact on every one of the key marginal seats that Labour needs to win. No other party has the scale of organisation in the colleges to be able to match this.

Thirdly, the student population is compact, rendering organisation relatively straightforward. Students often live and study in the same location or in large student-only communities. Traditionally, constituency parties have ignored these centres assuming, wholly wrongly, a hostile reception.

In the halls of residence, for example, there is a large untapped potential, which is often hostile to the Tories, but has not been persuaded by Labour. The alternative is, of course, to allow the mass media to be their sole channel of communication.

Fourthly, whilst the Labour Party's youth section has been spectacular only in its failure to recruit and convince, the Party's student section has achieved a sustained growth. Support for Labour amongst students has increased considerably since the realignment of student politics at the end of the seventies. Also, because students are commercially and politically relatively weak, they have suffered disproportionately and severely since 1979. Despite Labour's perfor-

mance in 1983 its support amongst students held, and in certain areas increased.

Both locally and nationally Labour now is the only significant party political organisation in the colleges. Yet in 1979 both Conservative and Liberal were strong. Labour must recognise the current situation, and provide resources to benefit from it.

A high degree of organisation of the student vote will win Newcastle Central, for example, where the Tory majority over Labour is 2,228. There are currently 13,948 full-time students of voting age studying in the constituency. Glasgow Hillhead won by Roy Jenkins for the SDP in 1982 has a majority over Labour of 1,164. There are 7,193 students studying in the constituency. If one considers the current student population that will be of voting age in 1987 then the importance is undeniable, particularly in the 42 key marginal seats where students outnumber the Tory majority.

Opposition to Tory policies is, not unsurprisingly, extremely strong amongst the student body. Cuts in funding and the level of the student grant directly attack students' sense of self-respect and purpose. But whilst one might expect this opposition to benefit the SDP/Liberal Alliance given the social composition of the student body, rather it is the Labour Party that is attracting most support.

The failure of the SDP/Liberal Alliance in their respective student sections is partly the reason for this. As already noted, the Union of Liberal Students have tended to ally themselves with the Communist Party rather than the SDP, and the current political stance of the Federation of Conservative Students is a definite liability to its parent party. Combined with the deep-set hostility to the Government amongst students, this has long-term implications for the Conservative Party.

These factors have been exploited by the National Organisation of Labour Students (NOLS) to maximum effect, cancelling the potential advantage to the centre and right given the social background of many in higher education. As well as this, most students are in fact in

further education, where Labour is the only party organised and where it has an in-built social advantage.

The policies and strategies adopted towards students by the Labour Party and its student section nationally have begun to turn anti-Tory sentiment to one of being pro-Labour. Whilst the student body is traditionally cynical towards politicians and is perhaps more demanding than other sectors of society, nevertheless, the Labour Party fares well amongst students.

Undoubtedly, the continued growth in cultural activities which has been provided by the Students' Union organisations (which compose 35 per cent of the country's 'live' venues) benefits the Labour Party, and offers many possibilities for Red Wedge-style initiatives.

Similarly, the policies and strategies towards the major issues which affect students as students, those of student grants and education funding, adopted by the Party and its student section are of crucial importance. Students regard paternalism and authoritarianism not so much with antipathy but downright hostility. What students demand most of all, and a major motivation in becoming a student, is independence. The opportunity to live away from home, the experience of the student life style in the company of contemporaries, combine to produce a strong desire to be independent. Recent policy measures by the Conservative

Government (whose 1983 election manifesto placed higher education in the chapter headed 'Responsibility and the Family') are diametrically opposed to this desire. The Labour Party must therefore provide post-school education policies which promote students' independence, such as the Educational Minimum Grant.

Students more than others, however, are conscious of future prospects. Job opportunities are a major factor, but it is often the type of job available which concerns students more. The authors do not subscribe to the view that graduates and colleges are motivated by future financial advantage to a more significant degree than the general population. However, they are more discerning in their attitudes, and motivated by the expectation of job satisfaction as well as future financial remuneration.

The strategy to maximise the student vote for Labour must also recognise, as the National Union of Students has done, the threat to the Conservative Party of the parental lobby. The emphasis we give to independence, educational opportunity and job prospects has appeal to parents of current and would-be students as well as to students themselves. Labour should harness the potential of the post-school education lobby which on the issue of student grants forced the biggest backbench revolt of the Thatcher Government.

5. Labour's youth

At the September 1985 Labour Party Youth Committee, a report was accepted which estimated the membership of the Labour Party Young Socialists (LPYS) at 7,223 (see Table 1). The number of branches reported by the Youth Officer to Party Conference was no greater in the early 1980s than it was in the early 1970s, and much lower than 20 years ago.

In essence, Labour's youth section is moribund. It is scorned by the Party, laughed at by Labour's opponents, and,

most seriously, irrelevant to the young people of this country. It is matched in its insignificance amongst all the many varied

youth organisations in this country only by the tiny rump that comprises the joint youth membership of the Alliance.

In a recent Fabian Society pamphlet (Martin Linton, *The Swedish Road To Socialism*, 1985) the author asks us to imagine a British Labour Party which could match the Swedish Social Democrats with 100 full-time youth organisers. We do not need to imagine: it exists. The life of about 100 Militant Tendency full-time organisers revolves around local branches of the Young Socialists. Such efforts are put in that not only are individual branches minded, but new recruits personally visited, and even the slightest sympathy or friendship relentlessly pursued.

Militant have a stranglehold over the Young Socialists through such organisation. It is in their vested interest for the Young Socialists to remain small in size so that they can maintain their influence. Consequently, the organisation has stagnated over the years. Young members are treated as cannon fodder, with those who survive providing Militant with their hardened new cadre. Our starting point is thus simply to say that a relevant, mass Labour youth section and its domination by a Trotskyist organisation are mutually incompatible.

Labour Party rules categorise young members as being aged 15-25. Trade unions, where they recognise young people as such, use effectively the same definition of workers under 25. There are, in fact, relatively few 15 year olds joining the Party. Many who do, come from active Labour families. It is much more common to join Labour in one's twenties than in one's teens.

It is often felt and said that this is a good thing because the excesses of youth have worn out, and the Party is recruiting reliable, more experienced and articulate members. Trade union involvement has exemplified this. Experience is seen as crucial to union activity. The manual unions had a four or five year apprenticeship to incorporate young workers.

In the colleges, it is only in the 1980s that Labour has organised beyond the higher education section. Until recent

years, Labour student organisations had been designed almost exclusively for university students.

It is, therefore, not too surprising that Labour is increasingly dominated by young, articulate, professional graduates who, regardless of their political stance, have entered the Party in the same way. Labour increasingly has a recruitment structure geared towards the middle classes rather than the working class.

When a young person joins the Labour Party, they may or may not be asked to join the Young Socialists. Membership of the Young Socialists is a nebulous concept. Any Labour Party member aged 15-25 can attend their local branch; five such members can set up a branch within a Constituency Labour Party. However, there is no requirement to inform new young members of the existence of a branch of the Young Socialists or to inform them of meetings, including the Annual General Meeting. It is impossible to join the Young Socialists without joining the Party, but it is not in fact formally possible when in the Party to join the Young Socialists.

Such a loose arrangement allows great flexibility in organising the Young Socialists. However, such flexibility is of immeasurable use to Leninist groups operating within such an ill-defined structure.

Each Constituency Labour Party has the possibility of electing its own Youth Officer to coordinate with the Young Socialists, but it is rare for this to be a contested position and certainly not unheard of for this to be unfilled.

Labour's youth also has a regional structure mirroring that of the Party, and an annual conference. At all levels throughout the Party, the Young Socialists have representation. Invariably, the representatives are over the age of 21.

There is an obsession within the labour movement, not exclusive to the Young Socialists, with creating representative positions on every level of the democratic tier. Every section of the Party aims to obtain a representative at this or that committee or conference.

We believe that there needs to be a major shift of emphasis, away from repre-

sentation to participation through the Labour Party. Although the type of democracy in the Labour Party has recently been the subject of discussion, this has been around the one member, one vote argument. The debate needs extending. A socialist party should be based on participation, if it believes that socialism is about control of one's own life. Nowhere is this more necessary than in the Party's youth section.

There is a shortage of young people participating in local parties. Young people who do get involved often get burnt out as they are placed on committee after committee after committee as the Party relentlessly chases the shadow of its own accountability. What is totally missing is mass collective activity for young people and political education. In our view, the Party should be providing such a service for all those at secondary school and up to the age of 21 — that is, aiming our youth work almost exclusively at teenagers with the aim of involving as many as possible.

Without wishing to hark back to the past, many great socialists spoke of learning their socialism in the old socialist Sunday Schools. Similarly, the camps of the Woodcraft Folk and the Labour

Table 1
Estimates of LPYS membership in September 1985

London	1,737
Southern	901
South West	210
Wales	216
West Midlands	626
East Midlands	528
Eastern	597
Yorkshire	328
Northern	130
North West	735
Scotland	1,215
Total	7,223

(Source: Labour Party Youth Committee, September 1985)

League of Youth left socialism embedded in young people's hearts and minds. To compare that form of political involvement and education with the annual summer camp traditions of the Young Socialists today, is to compare the finest traditions of Methodism to the worst excesses of the Evangelical Church. Attending a summer camp to learn the teachings of dead Russians has never

Table 2
Membership of organisations for young people in the UK (thousands)

	1961	1971	1983
Scouts	272	216	229
Girl Guides	266	316	325
Sea Cadet Corps	18	18	17
Army Cadet Force	44	39	46
Air Training Corps	30	33	36
Combined Cadet Force	76	45	44
Boys' Brigade	159	140	129
Girls' Brigade		97	88
Methodist Association of Youth Clubs	110	115	100
National Association of Boys' Clubs	156	164	174
National Association of Youth Clubs	180	319	707
National Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs (under 26)	50	40	51
Young Men's Christian Assoc. (Registered participants under 21)		154	92
Duke of Edinburgh's Award participants	80	122	159

(Source: Abstract of British Society Trends, HMSO, 1985)

attracted the vast majority of young people and never will.

However, organising large-scale cultural and social activities, as do, for example, most European Young Socialist organisations, will attract young people. It is in precisely this way that church organisations, the Scout Association, and many other organisations attract, involve, and win the support and loyalty of young people (see Table 2). Yet the Labour Party, with its community links by no means severed, and with a rich cultural vein running through its history, does not even attempt to do similar.

Over half a million young people are members of the scout and guide movement — involvement in which is usually on a weekly basis. Over 700,000 are members of the National Association of Youth Clubs. A million and a quarter belong to the Labour-led National Union of Students and their local student unions. The Methodists' youth organisation has 100,000 members — and the Anglicans and Catholics even more. Young Oxfam involves 20,000 young people and there are 18,000 card carrying members of Youth CND.

In their different ways, all these separate organisations instill political values into their members.

For better or for worse, the scouting movement is pro-establishment and pro-monarchy. Many of its principles of self-help and charity bear a striking similarity to the message of the Conservative Party today.

The non-conformism of the Methodists may translate itself into liberal or socialist values and beliefs. We do not intend to argue which, but to point to the influence that seven teenage years spent in the Methodist youth organisation is likely to have in forming political ideas.

Single-issue pressure groups have had varied success. Young Oxfam's 20,000 members, nearly all of them teenagers, are active in political campaigning on the issue of development.

Youth CND has branches throughout the country, including school branches, and while a 60,000 strong national demonstration and carnival is its most public

success, local initiatives have often had more of a consistent success in raising political consciousness.

The use of mass popular carnivals was the cornerstone of the Anti-Nazi League's success. The ANL, and, in particular, Rock Against Racism produced a mini-generation who were capable of isolating racists of a similar age, and creating a popular identity which was both multi-racial and anti-racist.

More recently, the GLC used mass entertainment in a similar way to win widespread understanding and support amongst young people. And, of course, Live Aid and Sport Aid have used this appeal on a worldwide scale. The key message of the latter being participation.

The evidence is clear that young people are being politicised from both reactionary and progressive perspectives, but not much from a Labour Party perspective.

Trade union youth sections

British trade unions have little understanding of the need of young members. Very few have any kind of youth structure. The Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) and the Technical Administrative and Supervisory Section (TASS) are the only unions which have any kind of national youth structure, though in Scotland the existence of the Scottish TUC Youth Advisory Committee has led to parallel committees being formed in unions such as National Union of Public Employees (NUPE). Much of the Scottish structure was built up by the Young Communist League, and it has become increasingly ineffective as that organisation has declined.

The AEU has a structure, in existence for many years, of Junior Workers' Committees, though they have relied very heavily on AEU district committees supporting them which has often led to them not functioning. Their decline has continued with the enormous drop in the number of apprenticeships, robbing much of their potential membership. Nowadays very few are in existence, and attendance and active participation levels are very

low. The AEU also has an annual youth conference, held in most years since the war, and eligible to send elected observers to the union's ruling National Committee.

For any structure to work though, a reason is needed to be involved. In particular, there needs to be an active promotion of the involvement of young members, and high priority accorded to youth recruitment.

While the potential for the AEU Youth Section is very dependent on apprentice numbers, other unions have not lost as much of their major potential recruitment source. Most, however, have lost out through the Youth Training Scheme, and through high youth unemployment.

In response to this, it is most noticeable that the efforts of TASS and NUPE, with their respective youth advisory committees, have shown greater understanding of the problems of organising and recruiting young workers and youth trainees than most other unions.

Other unions have tended to treat young workers as they would any other recruit, failing to realise that the longer young people are outside school and non-unionised, the harder it will be to recruit them to a union.

The Youth Training Scheme, in particular, conceals an in-built time bomb for the trade union movement. If up to half a million young people are working for poverty wages, but often doing real jobs in a non-unionised workplace, and if the unions ignore them, this will create apathy towards trade unions. Worse, if the unions appear in the form of a local official, handing out free union cards and then do nothing, the apathy will begin changing to hostility. Even NUPE, which has organised youth trainees better than any other union, with trainee shop stewards, admits that it has great problems incorporating youth trainees into its structure.

The established methods of recruitment and democratic involvement are not necessarily the ones most appropriate to young people. One sure way that the unions can begin this process is by consulting its own young members, and involving them in recruitment campaigns and in planning educational programmes. If the

unions fail in this — and it may mean going further, producing materials for schools and youth organisations — then the time bomb of a whole generation, apathetic to the unions, will explode. It is as much a question of self-preservation as giving young workers a proper democratic say in their unions.

A new youth section

Attracting this mass participation of young people has diminished: annual Christmas parties organised for children, outings suitable for children, Halloween and other such parties accessible to people of every age are traditions that the Party has often allowed to die out.

Nor do teenagers need to be excluded from Party events. Few teenagers are likely to be captivated by the average Labour Party social, yet how many local parties organise regular discos, or put on concerts for that age group? Virtually none! A quick look at other organisations, such as youth clubs, churches and many more show what a captive audience there is. One Red Wedge concert a year in the nearest big city is skimming the surface of the problem, welcome though it is. The identification of the young with the Party, and the ability of the Party to involve socially, as well as politically, every age group must be relocated to provide much more of a community base. Socialism is not about endless evening meetings, and neither should the Labour Party be.

Hence the need for a proper youth section in the Labour Party, relating to the everyday life of young people and not merely mirroring the inadequacies of the existing Labour Party structure.

In Sweden, the Social Democratic Party's youth section (the SSU) reflects the daily lives of young people. The local branches own musical instruments — from violins to electric guitars and drum kits — which are available for use by young members. Surprise, surprise — they do not need to look far for local bands to play at Party-organised concerts. They possess sport equipment and organise many sporting activities, be it football or

more expensive pursuits such as rock-climbing and sailing.

They devise and perform their own drama, putting on plays or performing street theatre, as do many young church groups in Britain. They make their own videos and films and produce their own photographic displays. Thousands of young Swedes go on summer camps and weekend trips, which combine political education, with sports and recreation.

As an example, one of SSU's priorities is a campaign on acid rain, which has killed many of Sweden's lakes. They organise field trips, both to examine the problem and to try out practical measures to alleviate it. They listen to speakers, watch films and form working groups to discuss the various political aspects of the problem and the practical campaigning needed on the issue. Such field trips also include an organised social and sporting programme.

These events take place regularly around the country, throughout the year. Most of the participants are aged 14-17. The 30 year old 'minders' who attend the annual British Young Socialist summer camp would stick out like a sore thumb. The vivid differences in outlook and organisation explain why, relative to the population size, there are 50 Young Socialists in Sweden for every 1 in Britain.

Red Wedge-style initiatives should be seen in the Continental context, not of image-making but of showing that social-

ism and culture are complementary. The Party should look to expanding its activity towards sport, cinema and the whole broad range of arts, concentrated especially at a local level. The potential, if developed alongside local unions and Labour councils, is enormous. A membership of 50,000 like that of SSU in Sweden illustrates how socialism can be attractive for young people.

The type of Labour youth section we would like to see is the kind described earlier, based on participatory democracy as much as representative democracy, with a heavy Party involvement in terms of political education and organisation. This youth section should be for 13-21 year olds.

The Party should establish an effective youth committee, which means representatives of the varied areas that Labour's youth is involved in, including trade union youth sections, to coordinate the Party's activity amongst young people, on the youth vote and on youth issues.

Local parties should organise their own youth events, and Regional Labour Parties should coordinate weekend schools, camps and all the other forms of activity we suggest — rather than the turgid discussions of Trotskyist theory that currently take place.

Labour's youth section has been irrelevant for thirty years. It needs re-examining, re-thinking and re-constructing from its very roots.

6. Conclusion

The Labour Party should totally rethink its approach if it is to have the foundation of support and membership from that sixth of the electorate which can be labelled 'young people'.

The Labour Party and the trade union movement must recognise the potential crisis caused by a 16-21 year old age group for whom trade union membership and activity is currently missing. So far we see few signs of a recognition of the time bomb laying in wait for the movement.

In order to recruit the majority of the population who have not experienced higher education, Labour needs to establish a real youth section.

There is one underlying change needed: to build a mass participating youth organisation whose main aim is to involve as many young people as possible in the socialist experience. In this we would like to see the Regional Labour Parties responsible for initiating and coordinating musical, sporting and other cultural opportunities and activities beneath the umbrella of the labour movement. Local councils, trade unions and the cooperative movement may all prove useful allies in this.

Combining enjoyment with socialist teaching and learning from, rather than mimicking, our European counterparts will provide the basis for youth involvement. We should reiterate that we see such an enjoyment meeting the aspirations of today's youth, and political education and activity as totally compatible.

We believe it is essential that a youth section should have a distinctive youth identity. The experience of a 25 year old is not the same as a 16 year old. Labour's youth section should be for those aged 13-21 with Party membership at a reduced rate, and with a youth membership identity. If the aim is to instill socialist values and ideals in young people, then this is the age-range to aim at — in exactly the way that the churches, the scouts and others have done.

The emphasis on involvement of the

youth section in party bureaucracy should be diminished. We want to see young people involved and encouraged, not driven away by factional in-fighting. Therefore, there should be a lessening of the intensity of the current LPYS representative structure. The regional committees play no useful role and should be replaced by Regional Labour Party youth committees incorporating young people from the LPYS, trade unions, colleges and affiliated organisations.

The Party should establish a national youth liaison committee comprising young people from trade unions, the LPYS, NOLS and others to guide its work into the next election, and beyond.

The National Conference of the LPYS should be every two years, giving stability and ensuring maximum participation, and youth sections should be based on one per constituency.

The Party nationally should utilise expertise such as Red Wedge and Arts for Labour to encourage the combining of socialism and youth culture. This should cover the whole of the arts in its widest sense. Socialism can be bright, enjoyable and relevant!

As part of this, the Party should organise a major annual festival, with Red Wedge, aimed in particular at young people, as some of our Continental counterparts do so successfully.

Breakthroughs such as the Red Wedge tours should be encouraged whilst recognising that such developments in isolation from a real change in the Party's attitude will be seen as gimmickry.

The theme of independence is the key to winning youth support. Young people want their independence, financially and in every other way. Therefore, Labour's approach has to address this. It must also be recognised that for young people

history is irrelevant, the future vague and the present all important.

Labour's real problem with young people is that, over the years, the Party has chosen to ignore them; such disinterest is the major reason for Militant's stranglehold over the LPYS. Yet Labour can never expect youth support if the Party continues to dismiss young people. To win the youth vote, Labour must show that it

can identify with young people. More than anything, this involves showing that the Party trusts them.

The aspirations for independence of young people are only possibly met through a socialist approach to the problems of our time. If Labour trusts young people then young people will trust Labour.

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Labour and youth: the missing generation

There are now 5 million people between the ages of 18-24 on the electoral register, a generation which has reached political adulthood during the last two Conservative Governments. These young people have been the victims of Thatcherism in terms of unemployment, lost educational opportunities and cuts in social security. And their votes will be crucial in deciding the outcome of the next general election.

Yet only one third of young people who voted at the 1983 general election supported Labour. And recent poll evidence shows that the majority of young people have come largely to reject politics as an answer to their problems. Far from benefitting from a surge of young members, the Labour Party has not been able to overcome the apathy and alienation induced by youth unemployment and the reduction of choice.

In this pamphlet, John Mann and Phil Woolas examine Labour's failure to harness the aspirations of young people or to engender hope for the future. They highlight the insignificant membership of Labour's youth section by comparison with youth movements of religious groups and single-issue pressure groups. And they evaluate the success of Red Wedge in bringing politics into youth culture.

Labour can hope to win the next election, they argue, only if it can persuade millions of young voters that socialism is about freedom of expression and culture and people beginning to take control over their own lives. That in turn will require new forms of organisations, including:

- a reconstructed youth section open to young people between 13-21, with a reduced membership subscription;
- collective activity and political education based as much on participation as on representation;
- the organisation of a major annual festival with Red Wedge, to encourage the combining of socialism and youth culture.

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