

the **FIGHT FOR**

DEMOCRACY

in the **LABOUR**

PARTY



5p

A Red Weekly Pamphlet

* 1½ million unemployed.

* Incomes policy which has cut working class living standards by over 6% over the last year.

* Savage attacks on the social services.

These are the facts of life in Britain, 1976. In response to the economic crisis throttling British capitalism, the Labour Government has faithfully followed the Tories as servants of the ruling class. The bosses demand the Labour leaders provide one service at the root of all others: restore the conditions for increasing the rate of profit! Without this, the capitalist system is struck a death blow - bankruptcies abound, balance of payments plummets, inflation and unemployment soar.

Unload the burden of the economic crisis onto the backs of the workers! Bowler-hatted leaders of the CBI demand the Labour leaders act. Tory politicians might rant and rave about 'socialist dogma' and the like, but in all fairness to Callaghan and Healey, the Labour leaders have been totally obedient in meeting the bosses' demands.

But the Labour-fakers in Westminster and Downing Street knew only too well that there was and still is a big obstacle to their masters' wishes coming true. There exists no magic wand which can be waved to bring that about. After all, it's only two-and-a-half years since the working class mobilised in its millions against similar attacks from the Tories and brought down the viciously right-wing Heath mob. The memory of those battles is still fresh in the minds of hundreds of thousands of workers. And the workers' organisations which waged those battles - in particular the trade unions - are still strong and very much in tact.

So first Wilson, then Healey and Callaghan, devised a two-pronged attack. First, they entered on a political assault on the workers' movement. This involved the so-called 'protection' of the Labour Government, supposedly the sole guarantor of our 'democratic' way of life. Along with Len Murray, Jack Jones and Hugh Scanlon, they chanted the slogan: "don't struggle or the Tories will return".

Second, they made an assault on the democratic organisation of the rank and file in the trade unions. In order to strengthen the effectiveness of the united political offensive of the Labour and trade union bureaucrats, they had to eliminate the threat of the relatively democratic workers' movement in Britain being used as an avenue for the growth of opposition to their policies. Ryder spearheaded the attack in the car industry, with the so-called 'participation' schemes which were nothing more than an attempt to castrate the independent shop stewards organisations which had so effectively mobilised action against the employers' attacks in the past. The recent dispute involving four shop stewards at the Leyland plant at Cowley who were deprived of their facilities by management is only the latest stage in the carrying out of the Ryder scheme.

The TUC followed Ryder's example with the imposition of

'Rule 15' on Trades Councils, a rule which prevents Trades Councils from carrying out activity against the policy of the TUC: the penalty for doing so - disaffiliation! Many leaderships of member unions took their lead from the TUC. The NUT Executive introduced a rule which prevents unofficial action by schools or local NUT Associations. Others received press backing for a campaign for secret ballots rather than organising elections through branch or shop floor meetings where all the issues can be collectively broached through democratic discussion.

The whole attack on democratic organisation at the base of the trade unions was camouflaged, and ironically reinforced, by the introduction by the Labour Government of the Employment Protection Act. Whilst there are many aspects of this law which represent a step forward for the labour movement, one of its central pillars was the strengthening of the official trade union apparatuses and leaderships over the rank and file, and democratic organisation at the base.

THE LABOUR PARTY

In the Labour Party too, the assault on democracy was launched. This was not confined to the 'indirect' effects of the attacks on democracy in the trade unions within the Labour Party through affiliation, delegations at conference, etc. The bureaucratic running of Annual Conference was stepped up, ensuring that 'sensitive' issues such as the war in Ireland do not get a hearing on Conference floor. This year, the strict imposition of the 'three-year rule' has ensured that the Labour Government's handling of the attacks on women's right to abortion with the latest Select Committee report will not be debated. Irony of all ironies, the use of the three year rule has eliminated debate on the resolution, campaigned for by the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy, calling for the automatic reselection of MPs.

One has to marvel at the arrogance of the right-wing bureaucrats who use anti-democratic procedure to ensure that Conference cannot discuss the extension of Party democracy!

Even more pernicious was the production of the Underhill report. The report was designed to nip in the bud the development of any organised opposition to the present right-wing Labour leadership. The proposals of the report were produced to whip up a hysterical atmosphere in the Party against "Trotskyist infiltrators" and the collusion of the capitalist press ensured the success of this project. The fact that the NEC did not reject the report wholesale, but instead put it on ice shows that the left leaders have no real stomach for a fight against the attacks on democracy.

After all, the very idea of "Trotskyist infiltrators" goes against both the traditions of the British labour movement and the elementary first principles of workers' democracy. The Labour Party was created as the mass political party of the working class. Its support inside the working class rests on its affiliations from workers' organisations, especially the trade unions. Millions of workers, some who support the right-wing of the Party

leadership, some the left, some who support or who are members of the Communist Party or a Trotskyist organisation contribute financially to the Labour Party through paying the political levy of their trade unions. In general elections, the CP and every organisation calling itself Trotskyist call for the return of a Labour Government.

Despite this, they are banned from membership of the Labour Party.

The Labour Party gains its support from people who have widely differing attitudes as to which directions the Labour Party should be going. But the undemocratic Party Constitution and the witchhunt atmosphere of the Underhill Report are designed to prevent a democratic debate around these differing positions and maintain the right-wing leadership in control of the Party. After all, who best reflects the interests of the working class: the so-called 'Trotskyist infiltrators' or Reg Prentice?

The bureaucrats claim that they are protecting the 'democratic' Labour Party from the wreckers! But, in reality, it is the far left who are the best defenders of democracy in the Labour Party. We defend the right of any section of the workers' movement to organise together and fight for their point of view. For all its other faults, this principle is guaranteed by the Portuguese Socialist Party. But whilst the Labour leaders might have brought Mario Soares fresh from his collaboration with the CIA to address last year's conference, they prefer not to 'import' this elementary democratic principle from Portugal!

On the contrary, they prefer instead to erode still further the elements of Party democracy that remain!

LABOUR DEMOCRACY AND PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY

But the attacks on democracy take a different form in the Labour Party from the attacks launched against democracy in the trade unions. In reality, the Labour bureaucrats are already protected by such an undemocratic Constitution that they are not forced to 'erode' any 'gains' made by the rank and file. They only need to implement the existing Constitution, and create a witchhunt atmosphere against the 'wreckers' to facilitate its implementation.

The roots of the undemocratic Constitution lie in the history of the labour movement, and the reason for the formation of the Labour Party itself. Whilst the formation of the Labour Party was a big step forward for the British working class, it wasn't without its negative sides. On the one hand, the formation of the Labour Party represented for the working class its own political instrument, independent from the parties of the ruling class like the Liberals who had generally gained trade union support prior to the Labour Party's formation.

On the other, the winning of this 'political instrument' was understood in terms of the working class gaining access to where 'politics' was carried out, namely Parliament. The division of labour that resulted was that the trade unions could get on with their own narrow sphere in the factories, the pits, the sites,

the docks and the offices. There, they would defend living standards and working conditions whilst the Labour Party concerned itself with getting into Parliament, where it 'could represent workers' interests on the political front'. Accordingly, the Labour Party was built from the outset as an electoral machine. Its internal organisation was built not on the factories or other power-houses of working class action, but according to the constituencies. In short, the whole orientation of the Labour Party was, from the outset, an electoral orientation.

The problem is that, on the one hand, there is no such division between trade union and political activity on the basis of trade unionism in the factory, politics in Parliament. The history of the last few years explains that more than ever. Who, after UCS, could say that unemployment was a political question over which the trade unions should not meddle? Who, after the legal jailing of the five dockers, could say that the political question of the Industrial Relations Act should be left to the political representatives of the working class in the Parliamentary Labour Party? Who, after the blacking of Chilean ports by the National Union of Seamen, could say that political relations with foreign governments was the concern not of NUS Conference, but of Labour Party conference only?

On the other, and here is the fatal flaw, Parliament and Parliamentary Democracy were not produced to defend the interests of the working class. The whole notion of Parliament is that it provides a forum in which representatives of different 'sections of the community', and with differing ideas, can discuss and reach decisions which are in the interests not of this or that class, but supposedly of the 'nation' as a whole. In fact, MPs once elected should, according to Parliamentary Democracy, have responsibility first to Parliament.

Thus, whilst the Labour Party was formed to represent the independent political interests of the working class, its orientation and Constitution were designed to fit in with the workings of Parliamentary democracy, representing the interests of the 'nation' so-called.

But there are no interests which are common to all British people. The bosses have their interests, we have ours. The bosses' need to produce profit results in their interest for wage controls unemployment and cuts in social spending. The working class has no interest whatsoever in such policies. Just as socialists are opposed to the idea of coalition governments, where Labour and Tory unite for the 'common good', which in reality means for the good of the Tories and the bosses, so we must be opposed to the idea that Parliament is not a class institution representing definite class interests but is rather a neutral arbiter acting for the good of Britain as a whole.

The ruling class understands this full well. They use the idea of a neutral Parliamentary democracy to act as a smokescreen to hide the class character of the anti-working class measures they introduce. Under Heath, for instance, remember all the articles in the capitalist Press which argued that the unions were challenging the authority of Parliament. "The people elect MPs, MPs form a Government, the Government rules for the good of the nation", the argument goes, "and if you don't like what the Government does, then you've recourse to the ballot box in five year's time...."

Meanwhile, no section of the 'community' has the right to challenge the authority of the community as a whole which is represented in the decisions of the democratically elected Parliament."

And the right-wing Labour leaders understand this full well, too. Tied to the coat-tails of the ruling class, they defend Parliament against the 'wreckers'. This is why they lined up behind Reg Prentice. Prentice had been elected by some 30,000 people with a responsibility to Parliament. Now, some 50 members of the Newham, North-East GC, with their narrow interests, were threatening the interests of Britain as a whole, they said.

This is why, moreover, they oppose every move to the extension of Party democracy. It is not simply that the right-wing bureaucrats are just concerned at maintaining their positions of authority in the Party apparatus; not simply that they will cling on at all costs to a way of life dominated by wining and dining with representatives of the ruling class in posh restaurants.

Above all, the right-wing bureaucrats oppose the extension of Party democracy because it strikes at the heart of the very principles of Parliamentary, so-called 'Democracy'. Their overriding political interest is the defence of the institution of Parliament which serves the capitalist class so well.

Consider the example of the election of Party leader, for instance. When Wilson resigned earlier this year, the cry went up from many Constituency Parties that an emergency Conference be held to decide the issue. After all, it would seem an elementary democratic principle that the Party should elect its leader. But consider the consequences of the Labour Party electing its leader when the Labour Government is in office: it would mean that the Labour Party would in reality be electing the Prime Minister! The Labour bureaucrats could not countenance such an idea. The Prime Minister is after all, they retort, the representative of Parliament and the 'Nation', the Prime Minister must represent 'Britain' abroad; supposing the leader elected by Party Conference was union-sponsored and his union went on strike; how could the Social Contract be maintained!?

The question of to whom the Labour leader and ultimately the Labour Government should be responsible is also raised in the more than thirty resolutions calling for the automatic reselection of MPs. It was perhaps most graphically illustrated in the recent shrieks of horror from the Press which greeted the statement by the new Labour candidate in the marginal Kensington seat, Ann Holmes. She said that if elected, she would vote in Parliament as her Constituency Party decided. Quite correctly from their point of view, the Press complained that if every Labour MP adopted such a procedure, this would turn the Parliamentary Labour Party from a group of MPs responsible to Parliament, into a representative organ of the Labour Party, the mass political party of "simply" the working class.

FOR A LABOUR GOVERNMENT RESPONSIBLE TO THE MASS ORGANISATIONS OF THE WORKING CLASS, NOT TO PARLIAMENT!

Those in the Labour Party and Trade Unions who consider themselves Socialist pledged to the fight for the extension of

workers' democracy must take the bull by the horns. The fight cannot be victorious if there is any compromise on the "workers' democracy v. Parliamentary democracy" debate. Roger Barton must surely have discovered this after his rather pathetic appeal at last year's annual Conference, in protest against the decision not to debate his Brightside Constituency's resolution on the election of Party leader by Conference. The resolution called on the NEC to investigate whether such a decision by conference would breach Parliamentary procedure!

One tendency in the Labour Party that certainly has not learnt this lesson is Tribune. Stephen Kelly, writing in an issue of the paper at the end of July, argued that of the resolutions on the question of party leader submitted to this year's Conference, 'perhaps the more reasonable suggestion emanates from Rushcliffe CLP, which calls on the NEC to "establish a sub-committee to report within one year" on a new procedure.'

Such people will be in no position to justify the action of the comrades in Newham, North-East in their struggle to remove Reg Pretnice. They will have no argument to counter the tirades launched in the Press and by the right-wing bureaucrats that 'dear old Reg' was elected by thousands of voters to serve Parliament, and here are fifty 'wreckers' trying to unseat him. This goes against all the traditions of Parliamentary democracy.

There is only one counter-argument to this. "Yes, it does run against the traditions of Parliamentary, so-called 'Democracy'. But we know of a higher form of democracy - workers' democracy. We will struggle for all representatives to be subject to the rights of recall by those who elect them. We will call a conference of representatives of all working class organisations to decide who should be the workers' candidate at the next election. We will start in Stonehouse's old Constituency, Walsall North, where there are two workers' candidates - Winnick, the official Labour candidate and McAllum, the Socialist Worker candidate. In Walsall, we will organise a conference of delegates from shop stewards committees, trade union and Labour Party organisations, women's and black organisations. This conference will listen to the policies put forward by the candidates, and debate out the programme which the workers' organisations themselves consider to be in their interests; then it will decide which of the two candidates should stand. A Constituency General Committee is not so representative as such a conference; it doesn't, for example, have shop stewards representatives, moreover the delegates from trade union bodies and Party branches are not subject to the immediate right of recall.

But our struggle for the automatic reselection of MPs, for the election of Party leader by Annual Conference is the first step to achieving this higher form of democracy. Against the right-wing who seek a Labour Government tied to the coat-tails of the capitalist class and responsible to Parliament, we instead seek a Labour Government responsible to the mass organisations of the working class."

CLASS STRUGGLE OPPOSITION

Such a policy would ensure not only that the Eddie Milnes of the world would be official candidates rather than be isolated by the

corrupt Labour Party machine that he sought to expose. It would also ensure that there was a real debate in the workers' organisations about what programme such a Labour Government was to hold: policies of class collaboration embodied in the Social Contract, policies of mass unemployment, of wage controls, of cuts in social spending, or policies of class struggle based on mobilising the working class for resolving the crisis in its own interests against the capitalist class.

The fight for the extension of democracy, the fight for a Labour Government responsible to the mass organisations of the working class, is also the fight for alternative policies, and the fight against the present leadership of the Labour Party and for its replacement by a leadership committed to policies in the interests of the working class.

But such a fight needs organising. It is not going to be won overnight. Nor will it be won by trying to convince the present leadership of the errors of their ways. All talk by the left leaders of an "In Place of Strife"-type campaign must be ruled out of court. The present leadership has shown to whom it is committed - to the bankers, to the industrialists, to the International Monetary Fund. It has to be cleared out.

Faced by a right-wing leadership in the 1920s, the left organised into the National Left-Wing Movement to launch a challenge for the leadership of the Party. We need our National Left-Wing Movement today, an organised opposition based on policies of class struggle not on class collaboration, and one that fights for real workers' democracy inside the mass organisations of the working class.

The time for the drawing of lines has come. Half-measures are not adequate. Any capitulation to the right simply plays into their hands. Whether it be Stephen Kelly's desire to be reasonable. Whether it be the left leaders' talk of an "In Place of Strife" type campaign. Whether it be the Militant's failure to use the LPYS as a campaigning body in such a fight, or their failure to struggle for an LPYS leadership involving representatives of all tendencies in the LPYS, from supporters of Clause IV to the far left in a fully democratic youth organisation.

The Campaign for Labour Party Democracy could play a real role in the building of a class struggle opposition. It should immediately take steps to organise a conference of all Labour Party members and delegates from branches and constituency parties to plan the fight. It should collaborate with Labour Against Cuts and all other relevant caucuses and Socialist Societies in the Labour Party in building such a conference to organise the fight against the right-wing and its policies, a fight which must be waged both throughout the Labour Party and the trade unions.

"This Conference demands that all the policy decisions of this and all future annual conferences of the Labour Party shall be mandatory policy of the Parliamentary Labour Party, whether the Party is in government or opposition."

This resolution from Ince CLP will sum up the feelings of the majority of constituency delegates. More than 30 resolutions have been submitted on the subject of automatic re-selection of MPs. The National Coordinating Committee Against Cuts in the NHS has called a lobby of conference demanding the implementation of last year's conference policy on the health service. A big row is in the pipeline over the use of the infamous and anti-democratic 'three-year rule'.

Why is the Labour Party so undemocratic? What is the significance of the fight for democracy in the Labour Party? How can Labour Party activists most effectively contribute to that fight? This Red Weekly pamphlet is a contribution to the discussion of these questions. If you would like further copies of the pamphlet, or to further discuss its ideas, then write to Red Weekly, at 97 Caledonian Road, London, N1.
