

International

NOVEMBER 1981

Volume 6

Number 4

60p

MITTERRAND'S FRANCE: WHO'S PULLING THE STRINGS?

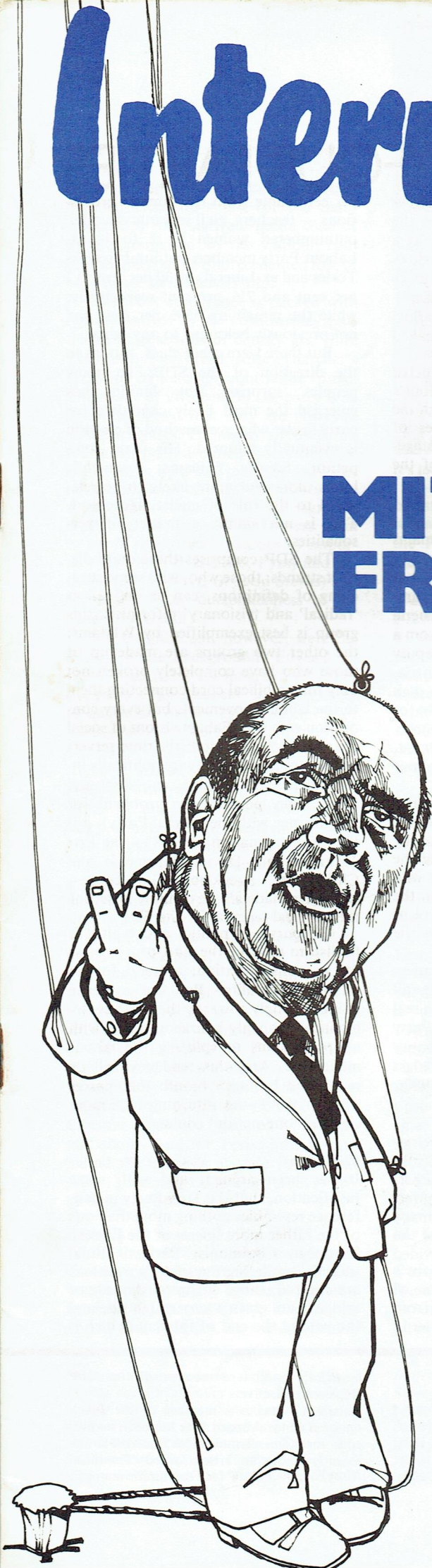
JACQUES KERGOAT

Municipal Socialism,
Steve Marks

Cliff & Zetkin, Valerie Coultas

The Police, Tony Bunyan

Labour's Youth Movements,
Julian Atkinson



British Features

LABOUR'S YOUTH MOVEMENTS

BY JULIAN ATKINSON

Julian Atkinson argues that the past of the Labour youth organisations can be seen as a possible future of the Labour Party as a whole, in the first of a two part series on the history of Labour's youth movements.

The Labour Party has a dual nature: its programme, and even more clearly, its practice have been pro-capitalist, but at the same time it partially represents the interests of the working class and gains its support from that class. This class divide within the Labour Party means that it would be split if an authentically socialist current were to gain control. The pro-capitalist sections of the party would try to destroy it rather than allow this to happen.

This scenario is not some abstract speculation when one examines the history of Labour's youth organisations. On a series of occasions the Labour Party leadership have played Herod to their own youth.

Right from the start the Labour leaders have been suspicious of youth. After the First World War a number of Socialist Youth groups were spontaneously formed around the country. One of the most active of these centres was in Clapham, where the Young Labour League was formed. The YLL approached Arthur Henderson, secretary of the party, with the aim of getting Labour Party help in forming a national organisation.

Arthur Peacock of the YLL described the meeting with Henderson thus: 'He listened attentively, told me as party secretary he did not encourage outside organisations but wanted all the various activities to be with the party machine, and promised to bring the matter to the notice of the National Executive.'¹

The League decided that it would receive no help and it decided to convene a national conference on its own. In June 1922 the conference was held and twenty groups attended to set up the National Young Labour League with its own paper *Young Labour*. There is little evidence to suggest that the politics of the NYLL could have provoked the hostility of the Labour apparatus.

The League helped Labour Parties, organised social events — especially cycling — and had a hard fought debate over whether to produce their own distinctive blazers. The Labour apparatus was suspicious of youth movements as such.

It was not until the 1924 Labour Party conference that it was decided to set up Young People's Sections. The age limit was from 14 to 21 and youth were to work within the party and not be part of any national organisation.

The sections 'should be mainly recreational and not too much attention paid to politics. However, in relation to election work, there was to be full advantage taken of young people's energy and desire to serve.'²

The restrictions on age, role and structure were resented by the NYLL who had not been consulted. A meeting was held with Herbert Morrison: 'He did not understand why we were so angry. The Executive thought we would welcome the scheme. We suggested there should be a national conference, a national committee, a youth secretary. Again Mr. Morrison said "No" and "No" very emphatically.'³

The following fifty odd years in the history of the relationship between Labour and its youth were to hear again and again

the echoes of that 'No'.

Changes did occur however in the thinking of the Labour leaders. The 1926 Labour Party conference set up a Labour League of Youth with an age limit of 26 and with a promise that the League would have an annual conference.

The most convincing explanation of the turn-around lies in the competition that existed to Labour in the field of youth work. The Independent Labour Party set up its Guild of Youth in 1925. By 1926, due to its intervention in the General Strike, the Guild had grown to 9000 members in 182 branches and was attracting the left wing youth. The Young Communist League, which had been formed in 1922, had a membership of nearly 2000 by late 1926.

By 1927, when the radical tide was receding, Transport House had second thoughts. Henderson explained that a youth conference was 'too expensive and the 229 League of Youth branches were too small to warrant it.'⁴

After pressure the first conference of the League of Youth was held in January 1929. A committee of the League which was purely advisory was elected to the Labour Party NEC. It would have no secretary of its own but rather the NEC would appoint one. The League slowly increased its membership and in 1930 some 330 branches were in existence, but by 1933 this number had fallen to 300.

The crisis of 1931 and the split of MacDonald produced a short term left shift within the Labour Party. The rise of fascism, unemployment and the peace campaigns, radicalised a section of the left. But all this took place against a backdrop of the massive defeat inflicted on the unions in the General Strike.

In 1932 the ILP split from the Labour Party and began its process of decline which especially affected the Guild of Youth. From 1932, the League of Youth began to move to the left.

In January 1933 the League of Youth was allowed a newspaper *New Nation*, but its three editors were appointed by Transport House. The League of Youth conference immediately called for control of *New Nation* by the membership and for the right of conference to discuss politics and not just organisational matters.⁵

Many of the League of Youth were in favour of a united front of all working class organisations to fight fascism. *New Nation* was the spearhead for official disapproval of the United Front but the letter columns were open to both sides of the argument. There was such disgust over the role of the paper that some branches wrote letters calling for a boycott of *New Nation*. The letters column was closed.⁶

Arthur Peacock, now an editor of *New Nation*, described the situation: 'The "left" members wanted full autonomy for the League. They seemed to think that the only way to prove their personal sincerity was to attack Transport House increasingly. They attacked *New Nation* — the League organ which I edited. They declared the Labour Party exercised censorship over it. The reverse was the case.'

It was my job to submit proofs of the paper to Will Henderson, chief of the party's publicity department. He was concerned solely with ensuring that nothing was published in opposition to the official policy. He never was a dictator. Now and then he would send for me and talk about paragraphs which he thought offended and say, "Well, brother, we can't have that, can we?" and usually he was right.'⁷

The League became more active and was in the thick of the fight against Mosley's fascists as well as the campaign against the means test. The greater political involvement caused the League to grow and in March 1934 there were 25,000 members in 440 branches.⁸

The inability of the League to discuss policy resolutions became an intolerable restraint. This was exacerbated by the controversy over the United Front. In early 1934 the ILP and the Communist Party approached the Labour Party with a re-

British Features



Photo: NIGEL HENDERSON

quest for a united front to counter the threats of war, fascism and unemployment.

Within the Labour Party the left wing Socialist League of Cripps and most of the League of Youth supported the United Front. *New Nation*, as might have been expected, unwaveringly supported the Labour NEC even when it proscribed the 'Relief Committee for the victims of German and Austrian Fascism' in the autumn of 1934.

The left in the League of Youth began to organise and produced a duplicated magazine called *Youth Forum*, which involved both Trotskyists and supporters of the line of the Communist Party. At the end of 1935 the latter group split away to produce a paper called *Advance*. The two main points raised by this paper were the United Front and self-government for the League of Youth.

As the months passed the call for a United Front of the working class became turned into a demand for a Popular Front of all patriotic British, including progressive Tories, to rally behind the League of Nations and collective security to contain the fascist threat. The influence of *Advance* grew rapidly and it was run by monthly editorial meetings in London, Glasgow and Manchester to which all branches of the League of Youth were invited to send delegates.

The Trotskyists, opposed to the Popular Front policy now being put forward by the Communist Party, and to support for the League of Nations, now formed their own group and began publication of a duplicated paper *Youth Militant*, with Roma Dewar of Balham and Tooting Labour League of Youth and Alf Hasler of East Islington as editors.

The League of Youth grew in 1935-36 with the *Advance* tendency as the dominant one. But the Trotskyists also grew slowly in strength and influence. At the 1936 conference of the League, Roma Dewar was elected to the NAC, all the other positions being won by *Advance*. *Youth Militant*, whose editorial board had new been joined by Charlie van Gelderen (East Islington) and Fred Emmett (Peckham), now went into print.

Both the NAC and the resolutions passed at the League conference were unacceptable to the Labour leaders. A memorandum was drafted by the NEC for the 1936 Labour Party conference. This proposed that the NAC be disbanded, the 1937 League conference be not held, *New Nation* should be closed down and the age limit lowered to 21:

'For some time the NAC, instead of devoting themselves to the organisation of the League have spent their time in criticising the NEC and party policies, encouraging the branches in this opposition.. There is clear evidence that the idea has been fostered that the League should be a 'youth movement'. This is contrary to the original concept of the League as laid down in 1926.⁹

By August 1936 over 100 Constituency Labour Parties had come out against the memorandum. The NAC announced that it would not accept it: 'The NAC is still solid and determined to meet and function.' It would press ahead for a merger with the Young Communist League, Co-Op Youth and the Woodcraft Folk and, 'bring in Liberal and religious youth into the fight against fascism.'¹⁰

The 1936 Labour conference endorsed the memorandum

British Features

but the majority of the League followed the now 'unofficial' NAC that turned *Advance* into its 'official' paper. The history of the unofficial League of Youth was a mixed one. Initially due to its vigorous campaigning, the League of Youth grew.

The League ran activities around the Hunger Marches, unionisation drives, the means test, and filling a food ship for Republican Spain. It is doubtful whether 'Labour' youth organisations before or after, were ever again so outwardly oriented and dynamic.

But there was another side to the coin. The League stagnated, then rapidly declined as the Transport House ex-communication was imposed in the localities. The *Advance* group leadership of the League closely followed every twist and turn of Stalinist policy. This meant that demoralising positions were taken on the Spanish revolution and *Advance* carried hysterical anti-Trotskyist attacks, most viciously mouthed by (Lord) Ted Willis. In this witch-hunting atmosphere there was a sharp fall in democratic norms.

On the advice of their CP advisors the NAC, in March 1937, made the first of a series of approaches to Transport House to heal the breach. This in itself was quite permissible, but increasingly it became obvious that the NAC would pay any price.

In May 1937 a national unofficial conference was held with 175 delegates from 125 branches. The conference had positive features such as the emphasis on an industrial orientation for the League, but the atmosphere was poisoned by adherence to the Moscow line, even including support for the purge trials.

The early advances made by the independent League stopped. Willis and the *Advance* group decided that a compromise had to be achieved with Transport House and the League had to be made official at any price. The negotiations allowed the NEC to report to the 1937 Labour Party conference that a sub-committee had collected information on the League and had decided there was enough support for its continued existence. Accordingly an Administrative Officer was to be employed and the NEC would appoint a National Advisory Committee for the League of 'appropriate persons' who were to include some actual League members. The League would lose its representative on the NEC but would be allowed a national conference.

The ugly reality of the deal became fully apparent in March 1938 when the League conference took place. No resolutions were allowed from branches. A NAC of 18 persons was set up: 8 were elected by the League, 3 from the NEC, and 7 were young people appointed by the NEC.

The line of the *Advance* group was to avoid any fight. Instead they asked Transport House to make *Advance*, which was selling 15,000 copies a month, into the official journal of the League. In May 1938 this was done and a joint editorial board of five people was set up, 3 of whom were appointed by Transport House.

By July 1938 *Advance* was selling 25,000 copies a month. The *Advance* group controlled the base and operated a tactic combining Popular Front policies with lots of social events. The League grew significantly and a paper membership of 150,000 was claimed for late 1938.

Of course the politics of the League did not help a real fight against war and fascism, but spread illusions about 'Patriotic Tories'. Also the League was never prepared to resist any further attacks by the Transport House hatchet-men.

The trigger that caused the next onslaught on the League was the crisis in the adult party. After the faint flickerings of radicalism in the immediate wake of MacDonald's defection, the right wing took over total control within both the TUC and, in their majority, the constituency parties.

In May 1937 the Socialist League was proscribed and it dissolved itself. In 1938 the Popular Front came to the fore and in Oxford and Bridgewater the local Labour Parties endorsed independent Popular Front candidates.

In early 1939 Cripps and other lefts made an appeal for all CLPs to support the Popular Front. The NEC meeting of March 1939 expelled Cripps, Bevan and the others. Almost as

an afterthought the League was swotted: the NAC was suspended and the League conference cancelled.

Some of the Leaguers recognised the failure of the NAC to defend the League. In April an emergency conference of Midlands Leaguers passed a motion of no confidence in the ex-NAC: the NAC 'utilised the militant feeling within the League of Youth in 1935 to climb to the leadership, betraying every principle on which it was elected.'¹¹

In June Ted Willis announced his intention to join the Communist Party. The *Advance* group had decided to end its operation inside the League. Leading officers and federation secretaries joined the Young Communist League, and some branches went over wholesale. By the end of the year the malediction could be pronounced: 'That the League of Youth has been well high annihilated is a undoubted fact.'¹²

The experience of the pre-war League of Youth was seared into the collective consciousness of Transport House. All of the prejudices that had been exhibited when the concept of a youth organisation was first mooted were triumphantly confirmed. A crucial part of the apparatus that dominated Transport House in the fifties, sixties and even into the seventies had been politically formed in the 1930s.

A collection of repentant ex-Lefts was assembled whose welcomed pennance was the most vigorous prosecution of the current leftists. The feared Sara Barker had been a member of the Socialist League. Len Williams, who was to become secretary of the party, had been a Trotskyist and a writer of inflammatory pamphlets.

Reg (Lord) Underhill once, while chiding the author about some supposed left manoeuvre whilst secretary of the Labour students, revealed that he knew all about trickery since Reg, when in the Clarion Clubs, had tried to claim left delegates for general management committees (and I have no doubt that he carried through that operation with customary efficiency).

This coterie was absolutely opposed to Labour youth organisations and when, reluctantly forced to organise them, did so with a wary and scarce-veiled antagonism.

After the war, the League began to reform in a spontaneous way and by 1946 some 250 branches were in existence. The 1946 Labour conference formally recognised the League but sought to clip its wings by setting age limits of 16 to 21 and by not allowing any national or regional structure. A further problem for the League was the introduction of conscription in 1947 which removed male League members for two years.

By 1948 the League had only achieved a total of 260 branches and was effectively stagnant. At the 1948 party conference Ian Mikardo attempted to remedy this by getting the following resolution passed: 'This conference calls upon the NEC to provide the money and facilities necessary to co-ordinate the League into an effective national body, with an upper age limit of 25, and with a democratic structure and an organising staff.'¹³

Political measures were taken to satisfy the letter if not the spirit of this resolution. A paper, *Labour Youth*, and later *Socialist Advance*, was brought out and a National Consultative Committee was set up, to which each Labour Party regional council appointed two members of the League of Youth.

In spite of the 1948 resolution being implemented in the most minimal form, the League grew and in 1949 had 507 branches. But as it grew so did the demands that it must have a national status. To let the pressure subside, Transport House organised a rally at the Filey holiday camp in September 1949. A representative from the International Union of Socialist Youth, the Second International body, attended and could scarcely conceal his amazement at the short leash on which the League was held:

'A National Consultative Committee was composed, consisting of League members. This committee has no chairman, secretary etc, and none of the League members is a paid functionary of the League. All the potential work is done by the

British Features

have fallen away disgusted, few recruits can be made and those who remain have become 'ultra-revolutionary' cheering every attack on the leaders, desperately demanding 'socialist' solutions, although I suspect with little confidence in getting them.

'In this kind of atmosphere it is not surprising that a somewhat exotic brand of pure socialism has developed in which the construction of "socialist" programmes tends to take the place of a mass campaign against Toryism.' By January 1953 the number of branches had fallen to 538. The League overwhelmingly supported the Bevanite revolt.

One of the most glaring political divisions between the League and the party came over conscription. The League was opposed to conscription and campaigned against it. A number of Leaguers went to prison rather than be called up. One such was interviewed, with his head poked between the cell bars, shouting: 'Tell my comrades I am sticking to my principles. I shall refuse a medical even if this means an increased sentence.. it is only by personal sacrifice that we can show our determination to prevent another war.'

But of course Gaitskell and the Labour leaders supported the Korean War and the rearmament programme. This meant that the editorial comment in *Socialist Advance* on the interview was appropriately balanced, moderate and statesman-like: 'While the Labour Party fully endorses the necessity for increased defence preparations in the present international situation, it is at the same time vigilant in its championship of democratic rights, both in peace and in war.'²²

By 1954 the crisis in the League was well advanced. The League conference of that year was the most turbulent. 122 delegates attended from 384 branches. Emergency resolutions were tabled on German rearmament, the H-bomb and Bevan's resignation. They were refused by the standing orders committee and its chairman resigned in protest.

After a 15 minutes cooling off period the League chairman Ron Keating had to inform conference that if conference persisted then the party might not allow a further conference. Conference contented itself by passing a resolution calling for the right to discuss political resolutions.

The NEC fraternal delegate to the conference, Percy Knight, managed to bring things back to the boil again by dismissing the conference as a 'safety valve'. But a concession was offered in that the League would be able to choose four subjects for debate and the party would then pick two of these to be discussed at the next League conference. The proceedings ended with 90 of the delegates signing a declaration of support for Aneurin Bevan.²³

There were some ominous signs for the League. The Labour Party paper *London News* printed an article by a full-time agent entitled 'Is the League of Youth out of date?' The article appeared to be the result of a conference of Labour agents. It began: 'Controversy about the League of Youth still continues within the party and it appears to some that the League of Youth is out of keeping with the present conditions.'²⁴

The one ray of hope was that the League at the 1954 conference had won the right to run a 'cut the call-up' campaign. Most Leaguers wanted an end to conscription but this gave the branches a chance to turn outwards and build. All over the country branches responded. Throughout the summer, meetings were held and petitions circularised, and in September a week of action was held around the slogan 'Two years is too long'. Then the campaign was rapidly wound up.

The Parliamentary Labour Party had come out in support of the Paris Treaty that supported German rearmament and a two year conscription period for the next forty four years. Two years was just right. Six MPs who voted against the Bill in Parliament were expelled from the PLP.

In 1955 the witch-hunt entered the League. The southern region committee of the League was closed down. Expulsions were carried out in Norwood League. It is worthwhile recalling the genteel courtesies of inner-party democracy in the days of Gaitskell before the 'Bennite bully-boys' moved in.

The NEC ordered the expulsion of 3 Norwood members after a subcommittee of Alice Bacon, Sara Barker and the London Regional Organiser Jim Raison had sniffed out a 'disruptive faction'. The constituency Labour Party refused to act. The London Women's Organisation and the Norwood agent were sent from door to door to get members to ward meetings. Eventually an emergency general council was held.

With Raison present, a motion was put endorsing the expulsions. No amendment was allowed. 'It was made quite clear from the chair that to vote against it was inviting expulsion. It was carried 22-16 with six abstentions. Still the bureaucrats weren't satisfied; they had to have their Pyrrhic victory complete. The 22 who had not favoured the motion were told to stand up in turn and state whether they would now vote for the motion, and if not, why not.

'First came an 18 year old League member, a girl who had only joined the Labour Party about a year before, with a belief that it stood for freedom and democracy. Think of yourself or other League members in this situation!'²⁵ She held her ground and refused to recant. As Raison continued his interrogation some, including a councillor, capitulated. Eventually the meeting broke up in chaos and some members tore up their Party cards.

The writing was now on the wall for the League. First the League conference planned for Easter 1955 was cancelled. The party conference settled the matter. Alice Bacon wound up the League in her NEC report. Youth sections were to be organised in each constituency under the control of subcommittees set up by the constituency party. National structures were to end.

Socialist Advance, now redundant, sang a characteristic and optimistic swan song: 'The 1955 Labour Party conference has laid the foundation stone for a bright and expanding youth organisation for Britain's young socialists. Opportunity is knocking for thousands of potential Labour Party members.'²⁶

It was not a foundation but a grave stone. Paddy Wall, a NCC member, gave the following obituary in an afterthought: 'All sections of the Labour Party experienced a decline in activity during the years 1951-55. The young and weak League suffered more disastrously than any section of the labour movement and it would be more true to say that at the 1955 conference Alice Bacon buried the corpse of the League rather than build a flourishing organisation.'

End of part one

References

- 1 Arthur Peacock *Yours Fraternally*, London 1945
- 2 Labour Party Annual Congress Report (LPACR)
- 3 Peacock, op cit
- 4 LPACR, 1927
- 5 *New Nation*, February 1933
- 6 *New Nation*, August 1933
- 7 Peacock, op cit
- 8 *New Nation*, March 1934
- 9 LPACR, 1939
- 10 *Advance*, August 1936
- 11 *Youth for Socialism*, June 1939
- 12 *Youth for Socialism*, December 1939
- 13 LPACR, 1948
- 14 *IUSY (International Union of Socialist Youth) Survey* Vol 10, No 1
- 15 *Socialist Advance*, June 1950
- 16 *Ibid*, October 1950
- 17 *Ibid*, April 1951
- 18 *Ibid* July 1951
- 19 *Ibid* September 1950
- 20 *Ibid* July 1952
- 21 *Socialist Outlook*, 27 June 1952
- 22 *Socialist Advance*, September 1952
- 23 *Socialist Outlook*, 23 April 1954
- 24 Quoted in *Socialist Outlook*, 28 May 1954
- 25 *Oi You*, newsheet of Kent and Surrey Federations, February 1955
- 26 *Rally*, December 1957