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Hard Labour

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The 'centrist turn' that Labour is now making is being blamed by many traditional Labour Party members and by those outside like the SWP as being down to the actions of one man and his clique—the nasty Tony Blair. If only it were as simple as that.

The accelerated rotting of Labourism has taken place because, like similar parties throughout the world— the French Socialist Party, Greek PASOK, Spanish PSOE, for example— it cannot adapt to the end of Keynesian economic strategy which involved the development of a Welfare State and 'full employment'. It can no longer even make any promises that it can carry out a reformist programme to transform capitalism into something more 'humane' (but still exploitative) But even mild reforms cannot now be granted under capitalism because of the development of the global economy. If the boss class is to stay competitive on a world scale it cannot offer concessions. It has to press ahead with its austerity packages and redundancies, in order to streamline national economies and make them leaner and meaner, able to stand up in a bout in the global economic ring.

Now many social-democratic parties are openly rejecting any reformist window-dressing altogether. This was already the case with Callaghan's monetarist policies in the 70s, and for the last decade has been the practice of the Socialist Party in France, PASOK in Greece (see article on Greece in this issue) the Labor Party in Australia.

Alongside this shift in social-democracy away from being the defender of the Welfare State is the development of the trade unions. The Labour Party is historically the mouthpiece of the unions. The present period has shown a move away from them being the negotiator for better wages and conditions (and never an agent of revolution), for exactly the same economic reasons. The unions always sabotaged 'unofficial', wildcat, spontaneous strikes by workers, and any action that attempted to escape from their orbit. Now they fully act to police the work-force, and are integrated into the corporatist mechanism that controls the mass of the population.

This accounts for the push to break the power of the unions over Labour. The 'new Labour' factions think that they can go it alone without the unions if necessary, and will transform the Party into something more along the lines of an electoral machine like the US Democrat Party.

This was recognised by Blair in the address he gave to the News International editors' conference in Australia. He admitted that 'globalisation is changing the nature of the nation state' and recognised that with the growth of new technology the ability of governments to control their own economies would mean that 'the old left solutions of rigid economic planning and state control won't work'. The role of Labour would now be to represent 'the national interest' by creating a 'competitive base' of renovated infrastructure and newly skilled workers to attract investment. This would mean offering terms which would compete with the low wages and lousy conditions and hours of South-East Asia.

As we noted in Organise!³⁷ Blair is planning on more repressive police actions, more people sent to prison for longer, greater State surveillance. He confirmed this in his speech to Murdoch's hacks. As we said then: 'Blair knows that if he is elected it will be in a situation of continuing mass unemployment and increasing poverty. He will need increasing police powers as he attempts to carry on the work already put into operation by the Conservatives, the attacks on living standards, wages, and benefits against which many may decide to act'.

Whether Labour comes to power or not, the crisis in its ranks will bring about interesting developments. Whilst it has recruited tens of thousands of new members, these are from the same constituency as the SDP and the Liberal Democrats, managerial strata, professionals, and skilled workers, whilst 38,000, mainly traditional Labourists, have left in disgust. The changing environment inside Labour will create havoc in the ranks of both the Trotskyist entrists still inside Labour, and those now outside, like Militant Labour and the SWP, who continue to foster illusions in Labour. Plans to build an alternative Labour party are already being called for by various Trotskyist groups. In doing so, they calculate that sections of the Labour left and the unions would split from Labour to join this new party, in which their particular Trotskyist group would have an inordinate influence. But if such a move was made, it would only be to create another Labour Mark 2, which would continue to attempt to defend reformism, parliamentarism and trade unionism and to continue to fool the working class. It would attempt to capture any independent working class movement that developed.

However, these developments would open up the possibility for the expansion of the libertarian communist movement, and the spread of revolutionary ideas. We urge our readers to seriously think about the construction of an anarchist communist alternative and to come forward to help us in this work.