

Why the Left needs a Thatcher

So, Thatcher is dead, the victim of a rotten egg that she told the workers it was safe to eat. The offending chicken has been ritually slaughtered by the Guildford Association of Conservative Ladies. The funeral cortege passes slowly through the streets of London, which have been cleared of beggars the night before. Behind the coffin march vast rows of stockbrokers and workers with red-rimmed glasses and portable telephones; they have gone from deepest Surrey and deepest Sussex, from Hants and Herts and Bucks and Beds. In Dorset the firm selling black armbands (made by cheap labour in Hong Kong, of course) is expecting a boom. The cops and soldiers, saddened by the loss of an Empress, pacified by the overtime bonus paid out for funeral duties, march tearfully. Behind them shuffle the silly old proles who will weep at anything: they wept when Charles and Di got married and when the Queen Mother swallowed a trout bone (who would have believed she'd outlive Thatcher) and when The Firm got Dirty Den in *Eastenders*. They cried with joy when they received the letter telling them that Maggie was going to let them buy their council slum, and with fear when a letter came informing them that the whole estate had been bought by a property company on the Isle of Dogs. The media whores march along, forgiving the old girl for her excesses; after all, she was a character to write about. And who is this tailing on to the procession? They are weeping more than anyone. They feel deserted, they have lost a cause, Satan has descended to Hell and the children of righteousness have no-one to blame for their misfortunes. With Thatcher goes into the grave Thatcherism: a decade of leftist illusion being carried away to be chewed up by the worms. What will they do without her?

The British Left needs Margaret Thatcher. Bankrupt of ideas or vision, all that is left for them to do is detest hers. The Left rarely talks of capitalism—except, as at the Labour conference last year, when Kinnock said that his government would have to run it better than the Tories. The aim of the left-wing has always been to establish state capitalism, the profit system planned centrally by a miracle-performing state. Eight Labour governments have demonstrated that the miracle cannot be performed. Whoever runs it, the capitalist system must exploit and oppress the working class; that is its inherent nature. So, the debate on the Left is about how to run capitalism. And to do the job as ruthlessly and callously as the system demands has come to be called Thatcherism.

Most of the Thatcher policies are hated by the Left for good reasons. Thatcher is a militant class warrior. Not even *The Daily Express* would ever have called Wilson or Callaghan that. Laws have been passed in the past ten years which have hurt workers and blunted our instruments of self-defence. The unions have taken a battering; services like the NHS, which Labour had boasted was the cream of the reformist gains, have been attacked and then attacked again. It is understandable that many workers see in Thatcher the personification of all that is wrong in society. The question they must ask themselves is, Would society have been a much better place to live in had Thatcher never come into office? The answer, based on the hard evidence of history, is that Thatcher has not been governing capitalism, but that it has governed her. Just as it governed the Labour government before she came to power. That is why the last Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer, Denis Healey, introduced the policy of monetarism as a means of cutting the state budget in a bid to deal with inflation. It was

under the last Labour government that expenditure limits within the NHS were first introduced. It was the last Labour government which took on the low-paid workers of NUPE and NALGO in the winter of 1978—when Callaghan told the unions that they would have to take cuts in real wages. Back in the mid-Seventies there were "Fight The Cuts" rallies being organised across the country. Whose cuts were being fought but those of the last Labour government? It was under the last Labour government that unemployment doubled to the then "wholly unacceptable" level of one and a half million.

And those Thatcher policies which Labour did not implement before 1979, they are now ready to accept as their own. Before 1979 Labour was opposed to British membership of the Common Market. Now they agree with Thatcher that Britain should stay in. Labour was opposed to selling off council houses. It is now Labour policy to sell them. Labour was opposed to selling off nationalised services, such as Telecom. It is now official Labour policy not to take back such services from private hands, lest the votes of the shareholders be lost. Labour made noises of opposition to the monstrous Tory laws aimed to limit union powers. Kinnock is now on record as opposing any substantial alteration to those laws in the event of a future Labour government. So, where does the Labour Party actually disagree with the wicked Thatcher who is supposed to stand for everything that they are against? Membership of NATO? Both parties agree that Britain should stay in. Troops in Ireland? Both parties want to keep them there. The nuclear bomb? With passionate unilateralists like Neil Kinnock, the men at the Pentagon need have no fears that both British parties of capitalism will be with them on the day. The chief differences between Thatcher and Kinnock are these: she admits to being a swine who will do whatever the system requires of her, he lies about it; she is in power, he is not.

Some of the Left are of the view that capitalism has been fundamentally changed by the Thatcher years. It is no longer the same system. It is now a new phenomenon called Thatcherism. It is, to be frank, very difficult to know what such people are talking about. The Communist Party's latest policy document *New Times*, claims that we are now living in a period of "post-Fordism" in which the old working class has disappeared and been replaced by a new Thatcherite breed. The CP's response to these "new times" is to seek some sort of broad, popular front reform movement, comprising every brand of political timewaster from the SNP to the SDP, with a view to offering the voters a better lifestyle under the system than Thatcher has offered them. The entire theory is flawed by two basic mistakes.

Firstly, the working class never was just that group of people who wore cloth caps and worked on the line at Ford. "Post-Fordism" is a mourning at the funeral of a class which has not disappeared at all, but is now exploited in new areas of the economy. There are vastly more workers in the service industries now than in manufacturing, and over the last ten years the move away from making to selling has been a characteristic of the European and US economies. But the workers in these countries are still wage (and salary) slaves, legally robbed by their employers. You don't have to be a miner to be in the class struggle.

Secondly, the assumption that the way to fight a system is to concentrate all of your forces into defeating its leader of the moment is as foolish politically as it would be militarily for the Warsaw Pact to imagine that it could win the next world war by

knocking off the current head of NATO. The Communist Party theorists argue that the crucial battle is at election time when a non-Tory alliance must win the day and slay the Thatcherite dragon. But what if a new dragon in the form of an Owen or a Kinnock or a Hattersley is elected instead? Surely, it is the job description and not the person appointed to do the job which is the real issue. The point of the battle should be to put an end to the dirty job of running capitalism. But, disloyal to the working-class interest in its death throes as much as it was at the outset, the CP is of the view that it is better to have capitalism run by "the lesser evil". And who are they, who spent most of their political history telling us that Stalin was "the lesser evil", to advise the workers on such matters? The foolish tactical plans of Professor Eric Hobsbawm for a broad anti-Thatcher alliance are to the cause of socialism what Groucho was to Marxism.

Back in 1979 the Socialist Party took the same principled position that we take now. We are opposed to capitalism and all who seek to run it. We do not want reformed capitalism or the profit system better managed. We are not looking for "nice" leaders or any kind of leaders for the workers to follow. The wages system is against the interest of the workers and only workers' self-emancipation will solve the problems that we face. We were told not to waste our time upon such revolutionary ambitions. Many on the Left urged us to join the Labour Party and achieve what little could be achieved. After all, that was the party of the workers, so we were told. The present writer was even urged by Neil Kinnock no less (when the latter was Shadow Minister of Education and the former was a persistent questioner at a meeting) to join the Labour Party and help swell the ranks of "real socialists". We were told that with just a little harder push Tony Benn would take the leadership and set the world ablaze. Those who joined the Labour Party in 1979 have not had much for their subscription money. The Tories have won three elections, with millions of trade unionists voting for them, despite the fact that the union leaders count them in as affiliated members of the Labour Party. Foot was elected as Labour leader (to loud cheers from the Left) and proved to be an utter failure; then Kinnock was elected as the Left's choice against Hattersley. Now Kinnock is detested by the Labour Left—before he has even had a chance to betray them in power.

Most political commentators, and most of the more candid Labour leaders, do not think that the Labour Party will win the next general election. Indeed, a split in the Labour Party is on the cards. Where Labour is in power locally it has shown that it can be just as ruthless at cutting essential services as the Tories. In short, after ten years of degrading and unprincipled compromise of the few principles that they once had, the Left stands without much hope, without much support and with a few cranky theories of further opportunism about joining with Dr Owen, the Greens and the Nats to form a reformist alliance. The so-called hard left retreats annually to Chesterfield to lick its wounds, praise the achievements of Gorbachev and listen with devotion to the guru, Benn. The other hangers-on to the Labour Party (who have urged workers to vote for them in every election) have turned into parodies of themselves. The Workers' Revolutionary Party is now busy singing the praises of the Russian dictators and the SWP has degenerated further than ever, existing now as a group engaged in a few single-issue reform campaigns, such as opposition to the poll tax and—the sign of real senility—support for the Khomeni regime in its territorial conflict with Iraq. The Left which warned the Socialist Party that we would be left behind while they stormed the fortress has been left seriously wounded, largely by its own utter lack of principles.

That is why the Left needs a Thatcher. It needs that hideous voice and that look of contempt that leaves you in no doubt that you are being politically abused by the woman even when she is simply telling you the time. The hope of the Left is that hatred of Thatcher will cover up the fact that the opposition has nothing to offer in her place. The Socialist Party does have a clear alternative to the mean-minded narrowness of what Thatcher stands for. And when Thatcher is cold in her grave and another despicable faker is mouthing her lies, the call to the workers to transcend this system of misery will be as fresh and as urgent as ever.

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