

Introduction

We have deliberately kept these notes short, for everyone's sake, and the fact that they are notes emphasises three things: they are a contribution to discussion, not a would-be last word on the subject; at the same time, they make many points that often get neglected in BF's discussions on the subject; they should be taken together with other ESG documents. There is some continuity between what is said here and recent BF positions, such as in the articles "We'll have to fight any government . . . Vote labour - Keep the Tories Out" in May 1979's BF paper, and in the 1979 BF pamphlet "Labouring under the Tories?". We have also tried to relate what we say to discussions among other communists, such as Rosa Luxemburg's work, and also to use international comparisons (with France, the USA, Ireland, among others) to shed light on the situation in Britain. The notes are divided in four:

- a. Reforms and reformism
- b. Specific features of British reformism
- c. strategic considerations
- d. topical and difficult questions.

A. Reforms and Reformism

1. In line with previous communists we should distinguish between (a) reforms (b) reformists and (c) reformism. Revolutionaries rightly spend a large part of their time struggling (in a revolutionary way) for reforms; revolutionaries always have to relate to reformists, sometimes as allies (eg in the trade unions), sometimes as people we want to get concessions from (notably labour councils), sometimes as people/institutions we simply fight against (such as the last labour government); nevertheless, revolutionaries should unequivocally oppose reformism, both left and right, whether in the form of institutions or of demands or of methods of struggle or whatever

2. The traditional BF distinction between reforms and revolutionary demands has been fairly clear and pretty good: not just looking at the wording of the demands, but insisting that a struggle around a very "limited" demand, during which people were helped to learn about revolutionary politics, and developed their strength, was a revolutionary not a reformist struggle. But probably we should put more emphasis on the need for revolutionary ways of struggling, which increase people's understanding confidence and strength including against reformism, and also on the fact that and given gain is only one battle in a larger war.

3. So it's essential, as well as stressing the importance of fighting for reforms, also to emphasise their limitations and their partial, frequently contradictory character. That is, even if a reform is "won", from an employer or the state or men or whoever, nevertheless (i) it is easily reversible by the powers-that-be should they so chose (as is happening in relation to the labour process throughout the British engineering industry), and (ii) it is partial and liable to produce or reinforce conflicts among the oppressed (see the example of Child Benefits in the Rayah Feldman article in the current Rev Soc), and (iii) in any case the reform only counts if the masses (or sections of them) are able to struggle (or convincingly threaten to struggle) to ensure it is enforced: equal pay. An aspect of all this worth special mention is that "reforms" are very often not internationalist, either because of reliance on a specific nation state (at best) or because they actually serve to pit working people in one country against those in others: many legislative reforms, welfare measures, etc have one of these faults. The miners' victory earlier this year (which we all so welcomed) is a good example of pitting British workers against foreign workers: the state subsidy which was won serves as a substitute for import controls, with many similar defects.

4. Against the dominant Trotskyist traditions of the British left, it is important to assert (i) that reforms are worth winning, and (ii) that even in a situation of sharp crisis they can be won (provided the oppressed fight hard enough: eg, the miners early in 1981 over jobs), but that (iii) although it is important to struggle for concessions from the state, much of the transitional demands approach is manipulative, or involves leaving things to Labour politicians.

5. But it is also vital to reject the tradition (which has influenced BF in the

past) of Italian "anarcho-marxism" (for want of a better word); this approach, which can for example be found in the pamphlet "Take Over the City", is scornfully dismissive of reforms, reformism or any electoral activity. The experience of the last eight or so years - in Britain, in Italy, elsewhere - has fully discredited this attitude. However, limited - most wage increases; the 1967 Abortion Act, even the right to vote - reforms can have a vital effect on the lives of millions, and can't be rejected without dismissing what matters to those people.

6. Throughout the world, throughout the last sixty or more years, with at most a handful of exceptions, the historic role of reformist parties of the labour movement has been to assume the leadership of an upsurge of workers' struggle only to co-opt it and reintegrate it into the capitalist system. This is not because of evil intentions on the part of reformist politicians (though we don't want to commend the intentions of a Callaghan, a Wilson or a Schmidt), but because of the relationship between demands, masses and leaders and the state, which have been involved. Even in a case like France, 1936, when a left government sparked off a powerful wave of factory occupations, etc, that same government in the rather longer run had the effect of disorienting and demoralising working people. The key elements in such a process have typically been: limited (and frequently sectional) political demands; reliance on the leaderships of labour movement organisations; underestimation of the opposition of the bourgeoisie and of domestic or international reaction; parliamentarism leading the masses to rely on the state not themselves. Every one of these is characteristic of the present labour left and its relations with working people, with the possible small exception of the entryist revolutionaries. So the prospect must be that any left government in the foreseeable future will not, in the long run, advance towards socialism unless there is a mass movement to its left which is unwilling to delegate trust to it.

7. It is worth mentioning that reformist political currents are not exclusive to the Labour movement. There can often be even a reformist movement of the specially (or nationally) oppressed, as has happened for example in the case of the dominant sections of the American women's movement; after all, traditional labour movement reformism doesn't even begin to meet these people's needs. There is a notable reformist current within the women's movement, for example, here in Britain at the moment, exemplified by academic women in the CP such as Mary MacIntosh and others involved with the journal Critical Social Policy, though obviously in this case there is a connection with labour movement reformism.

8. Deserving mention, as a text on reformism/reforms that really repays (critical) reading, is Rosa Luxemburg's "Social Reform or Revolution". It is there that she argues for the famous formula, which informs what we have said above, that the struggle for reforms is the means to the end of revolution.

B. Specific features of British reformism

1. Reformism is much more than a set of ideas, or of slogans or whatever: it is a complex system, involving demands and political ideas, political institutions (notably the LP, the unions, and their relations to the British state), divisions amongst the oppressed; it has roots in daily life and the attitudes of "ordinary people". Emphatically, it is not a "straight-jacket" superimposed upon a working class which typically or in its majority is straining at the leash to burst into struggle.

2. Because of its relationship with the state (locally, nationally, to a certain extent even internationally) the Labour Party is a central focus of reformist relationships within British society: the LP locally and nationally is employer, landlord, boss of the police and army, etc etc for millions of working people. Contrary to what the Chartist MCC wrote recently (BF DB 42) it is not at all like your friendly neighbourhood tenants association or trade union branch. In particular, to have a national perspective of LP membership (for a person or a group) involves taking political responsibility for the actions of labour councils and governments.

3. The need to vote labour (with certain exceptions): this is an important respect in which we can learn from international comparisons. For example, where there are two or more parties with mass influence within the Labour movement, as in France, Belgium, Italy, it isn't easy to decide which to vote for (given, say, the French CP's anti-migrant pogroms, it's hard to see what revolutionaries should have done in France earlier this year: the argument for voting CP where possible because the CP was the most left doesn't sound very convincing nowadays). For example again, where the electoral system makes it easy for revolutionaries to stand without splitting the vote (eg, under a two-round system as in France, or a system of proportional representation, as in Italy) it's much more practical for class struggle candidates to run. Eg, although the US democratic party is allegedly more "left" than the Republicans, it isn't part of the working class movement, and should never have the votes of revolutionaries. Eg, in recent general elections there the Irish Labour Party has stood on a promise of being the junior partner in a coalition with an openly bourgeois party, and it would have been wrong for Irish revolutionaries to have voted for it. The essence of voting for a party or parties that are part of the labour movement is to identify with, and urge others to identify with, working class struggle, not only or even mainly "electoral" struggle a la Labourism, but the whole struggle of the whole movement. In 1979 at the May general election in Britain, for example, all those sections of British society who solidarised with trades unionists in struggle (after the witch-hunts of the 'Winter of Discontent') would have voted Labour, while all those opposing the Trade Unions and joining in the attack would have voted Tory, following the Daily Mail headline: "Remember last winter: Vote Tory"; this - despite the anti-union policies of the Labour Party - remains a social fact about relations between the classes in Britain.

4. On the other hand, "lesser evilist" motivations of a Labour vote are entirely mistaken, not only because Labour often has policies that are no less evil than those of the Liberals (or, sometimes, even the Tories) but also - in the perspective of overthrowing British capitalist society because the Tories and Labour are not (and have not been) alternatives: they have lived off each other. For example, MCC (in his already-mentioned article in DB 42) makes much of the reforms achieved by the 1974-79 Labour government, while also acknowledging the attacks it carried out against working people. But he appears not to realise that - however desirable by themselves - the reforms were a quid pro quo for the attacks: notably, pro-union legislation purchased the silence of most bureaucrats in the face of incomes policy and cuts. Furthermore, ed MCC totally neglects that legitimate grievances (as well as less defensible ones) at Labour's record were what lead many not to vote Labour, and some even to vote Tory, in 1979. The Labour government demoralised and alienated its own supporters while reinforcing the ranks of the Tories, making the latter's 1979 victory almost a foregone conclusion: the Thatcher government is the most enduring product of the Wilson & Callaghan regimes. In the past Big Flame has talked about this relationship between Labour and Tory as the Labourist cycle, and has urged revolutionaries to seek to break it: we ought not now to let labour's verbal leftism change our minds.

5. There is no question of voting SDP, since despite its "socialist" pretensions the SDP in this country is a split from, not a part of, the working class movement. A similar grouping in Portugal has during the last seven years evolved to become the most plausible (and currently the governing) party of the Portugese Right. A similar (less spectacular) evolution has taken place in Italy since the 1950s.

6. By contrast with European reformist parties, British reformist organisations are peculiar, partly because of the split between electoral activity (represented by the Labour party) and TU activity (represented by the TUC and its affiliates), partly because in this country the unions set up the LP, while outside the English-speaking countries it was almost without exception the working-class party which set up the TUs. This is related to the exceptional (if now declining) strength of the single TU federation in Britain, compared to the weakness of the several rival politically-based federations of unions in many (not all) other European countries.

7. There are many other complications which could usefully be followed up further, such as British Labour's affinity for Empire, or the role of religion within the LP, or the fact of a single big openly bourgeois party (unlike in virtually every other European country), or the fact that within the British state Wales and Scotland are each much more left-wing and much more working class than is England, or ...

C. Strategic considerations

1. We are interested not just in left reformism, but in reformism as such, for despite the present major conflicts within the LP present-day 'left' reformism is very much in the mainstream tradition of British Labourism, from which the LP has diverged rightwards during the last quarter-century: furthermore, right reformism retains an enormous influence, clearly revealed in the Healey victory in the LP deputy leadership election and the choice of the LP's National Executive Committee.
2. There is a major problem over explaining the SDP split and the subsequent success (relatively speaking) of the SDP-Liberal alliance, in local elections (including the St Pancras north ward of the GLC) and nationally at Warrington and Croydon. To seek to explain it by media hype is nonsense, because it fails to take into account what it is about the voters that (supposedly) enables the media to influence so many of them. The two key problems seem to be: (1) what is the difference between the Healey/Hattersley/Foot combine on the Labour right and the Owen/Williams/Rogers splitters?, and (2) from what social groups, why, does the SDP draw its support (eg, a new Professional and Managerial class, or at least part of it? Or the more privileged and conservative section of the working class? Or more traditional Tory supporters who have lost their nerve given the recent economic policies and crisis? Or what mixture of all three?). This is an important question for BF to do more work about because left denunciations of SDP "renegades" miss the point that the SDP and Liberals are now appealing to legitimate grievances.
3. We clearly need to have positions favouring (1) voting Labour (subject to some minor qualifications, of which class struggle candidates is the most relevant one), plus (2) paying the political levy (which the SDP plans to challenge). NB that voting Labour ought not to depend on the merits of the individual candidate: for example, Roy Mason is a prominent Labour imperialist, but most other Labour MPs have backed his line over Ireland. BF also needs to decide whether its members can accept delegation by affiliated bodies (such as TU branches) to LP constituency branches. It seems reasonable that they should, since representing a large number of people who are organised in some way (although it has its own dangers) is quite different from being an individual LP member. On the other hand, BF members ought not to go out of their way to seek such delegation.
4. We need to think in terms of a long-term strategy that doesn't avoid the need for patient, consistent building of a revolutionary movement either by disappearing into the party-mongering of the SWP or by looking for 'get-rich-quick' stratagems in IMG fashion: these latter consistently, necessarily result in losses of demoralised comrades, outweighing the adherence of new ones.
5. In such a strategy, it is necessary to insist time and again that revolutionaries don't just fight over - and the working class shouldn't just fight over - so-called "working class" issues (factory issues, etc, of the type the SWP is increasingly plugging at every conceivable opportunity), but over all oppressions, not just in Britain but internationally. But it is also vital to do long-term work within the trade unions, raising questions specific to workplace situations as well as other ones.
6. In the long run, a mass socialist movement in Britain will not come about without a leftward split of major proportions from the presently existing Labour movement, including a split within the trade unions.
7. In the struggle for socialism, "soviets" or some similar form of self-organisation of the workers and of other groups of the oppressed will be essential, partly

as the best way of organising the struggle, partly as a school for self-management in a new society.

8. The need for prefigurative demands and ways of organising, not just seeking to extract concessions from the state. This is very well illustrated by, for example, the self-help movement in (women's) medicine. But prefigurative ways of organising and demands are harder in relation to housing and the economy, not to mention the organs of state repression: things like squatting, the Lucas plans, are a start, but leave a long way still to go. What is essential is to go beyond simply rejecting the system and making propaganda for a new one, for it will be impossible for revolutionaries to carry workers with such a simplistic approach.

D. Topical and difficult questions

1. While we need to keep up a critique of left labourism which, after a belated start, has not been too bad, we also need to go further into explaining why there are such bitter divisions within the LP, why the Tribune left itself is split, and why Benn is getting so much support for such bad policies....
2. We also need consistently to bear in mind the need simultaneously to combat, to ally with and to extract concessions from various elements of the Labour movement. For example, we should have clearly defended Benn's right to stand, and union members right to vote, during the recent deputy leadership campaign: to do so would have brought us into de facto alliance (of a very limited, but still very important type) with the labour 'hard left' against the party Right and some sections of the union bureaucracy (though not where the bureaucrats were Bennite, as lots are....).
3. Because of the particular relationship of forces in Britain at the moment - notably a weak, confused and demoralised revolutionary left - gains for left reformist currents electorally, such as the GLC election, are more likely to encourage interest in left reformism from former revolutionaries than to encourage any sort of flow in the other direction. But we ought not to tell any LP comrades who are interested in our revolutionary politics that they simply ought to leave it and join us: rather we should encourage them to fight, as long as is possible, to build a current on revolutionary politics within the LP section that they belong to. Given the political differences, it isn't likely that such a phase could last very long, but it could be very educative.....
4. We need to emphasise both participating in and transforming the daily struggles whether of waged workers or of other groups of oppressed people, rather than subordinating them to electoral considerations or counter-posing them to party-building in SWP style.
5. In relation to LP membership, there will undoubtedly be a few cases where particular areas of BF's work can be furthered by BF members joining (or remaining in) the Labour Party. But the whole of what we have said about reformism, about the relationship of the LP to the state, and about the (political) weakness of the revolutionaries relative to left labourism leads to the conclusion that we should reject a national perspective of work inside the LP (whether "entryist" or under some other label). Furthermore, given the intensity of our present debate, and the fact that BF members joining the LP has implications for the whole organisation, decisions about LP membership should be subject to NC ratification.
6. This means rejecting the idea of ed Jack Brown (DB 44) that, if all BF members had politics similar to his then we should have a good few members inside the LP. Similarly, what we have said about the politics of left reformism means we should reject the Kimberley resolution offering critical support for Benn.
7. There are still important problems not touched on here, involving the AES, alternative plans, etc. It will be important after Conference to keep paying attention to such topics, not to let things that have come up in the present discussion get left hanging around for a further twelve months.