

# Where next for the Campaign?

*A personal statement—*

*Alan Lovell*

THE need for political action and education in this country, particularly in relation to the General Election, is obvious. Socialists are now beginning to do something about education but so far political action has generally remained the prerogative of the Communist Party or the various Trotskyist groups. In this article I want to discuss the kind of action that is known as Direct Action, because it seems to me that it provides a technique of action that can be of great value and which has important implications for our political thinking. For most people Direct Action means the two demonstrations at the North Pickenham rocket base in December of last year. But these were only the most spectacular of a whole series of actions; let me mention some of the more unspectacular.

The Committee began in 1957 when it helped Harold Steele in his attempt to get into the British testing area in the Pacific. Its next project was the Aldermaston march of 1958. Some months after the march, the Committee returned to Aldermaston for an eight-week picket. The aim of the picket was to make people in the area aware of what was happening at the Aldermaston establishment, to get trade unions to black work on the establishment, and to get individual workers to leave the place. During the eight weeks, the Committee visited trade unions, distributed leaflets and held factory gate meetings, and canvassed in the surrounding villages.

As a result of these activities, five people have actually stopped work at Aldermaston; three men who were going to apply for work at the base changed their minds; and five lorry drivers said that they would not drive any more loads to the base. The pickets were well received by the workers—when a new leaflet was produced the workers often stopped to ask for a copy.

## **North Pickenham**

For a month before the civil disobedience project at North Pickenham, similar activities were pursued in the North Pickenham area. This time greater attention was paid to the trade unions. Several union branches were visited and the Committee was often told that their visit was the first time for many years that there had been a lively political discussion in the branch. A combined meeting of the Amalgamated Engineering Union and the Amalgamated Union of Building Trades Workers in East Dereham expressed support for the campaign; branch meetings in Swaffham and Wisbech also expressed sympathy with the campaign; and the T. & G.W.U. branch at Wisbech agreed to call a further meeting on the subject so that it would be possible to pass an official motion of support.

One worker left the North Pickenham base; another said that he would leave if he could get alternative employment and he thought that there were about thirty workers on the base who would do the same.

Similar campaigns are now taking place in the Watton area in Norfolk, where it is believed that a Bluestreak rocket base is being constructed, and in Stevenage, where the Bluestreak rocket is built.

None of these results is spectacular. I have quoted them to show the context in which the more spectacular projects take place. I now want to describe the general theory behind this kind of direct action.

## **Civil Disobedience**

The most immediate reason for the civil disobedience projects was to make real to the construction workers on the base the issues symbolised by the base. "A construction worker and the public may regard a missile base as a new source of income for the locality, a glamorous toy. Actually a missile can cremate alive three million people and pulverize the largest city. The realities of death are excluded from an American city, but a non-violent resister sitting in front of a truck raises these realities to public consciousness. The truck driver finds himself faced with the choice of running over the man and killing him or stopping and dragging him out of the way. The idea of murder is not normally associated with the missile base for him. Now it is. He sees a man who is sitting in the dust before his truck who is silently saying to him, 'Kill me before you build this missile base; kill me before you help kill a million innocent people.' Non-violent obstruction raises the moral issue of murder, the reality of death." (Brad-Lyttle "On non-violent obstruction".) The other main reason for the demonstration was a dissatisfaction with the liberal explanation of how democracy works. According to this, when there are disagreements about policies, people argue and debate with each other. The people with the most sensible and convincing arguments win. Now this is a patently false way of looking at democracy. It is much too intellectual. Most people's beliefs are a mixture of emotions, prejudices, and thoughts. Until you can break open that complex you are not usually able to convince people. And you are not usually able to break open the complex by argument. It is usually some kind of action that is needed that will open people up, so that they will listen to argument. The demonstrations aimed to do this opening up.

People also need some confidence in the people they are arguing with. This is important at a time when politics has become more and more a matter of talk which has no relation to action. People begin to suspect that politics is just a way for some people to realise their ambitions. This is particularly the case with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Most of the people are middle class. When they ask people to vote against nuclear weapons they are in many cases asking them to vote themselves out of a job. If you want people to do this, you must show them that you are prepared to make similar sacrifices. The demonstrations at North Pickenham, where all the demonstrators showed that they were ready to go to prison and where some showed that they were ready to lose their jobs, was evidence that the demonstrators were ready to make similar sacrifices.

These are things that ought to be well known to people in the Labour Movement. Unfortunately they do not seem to be. The Labour Movement seems to have been

completely won over by the liberal theory of politics (or perhaps a Marxist version of this where the liberal theory is supplemented by slumps and crises as stimulants to action—so that socialists spend a great deal of time waiting for the slump.) Many people in the Labour Party talk as if the progress of the socialist movement depended almost entirely on speeches in the House of Commons and at public meetings. But of course this is not so. The real gains of the socialist movement have been won by direct struggle. By the courage and independence of miners and dockers, who have been prepared to strike for months at great personal hardship, who have been prepared to demonstrate and organise despite the possibility of severe jail sentences. It is only through sacrifices of this kind that the socialist movement has made any progress.

This is not to say that speeches and other forms of conventional propaganda are of no importance. It is only to say that they are part of a more general form of political activity.

The most usual objection made to Direct Action is that it is undemocratic. Now I think that this objection can be attacked on several levels. First, how democratically was the decision to build nuclear weapons arrived at? On all the vital issues of nuclear weapons Parliament has rarely been consulted. Certainly at no election has the manufacture of nuclear weapons been an issue. Michael Foot in his articles in the *Observer* described how the Parliamentary Labour Party arrived at a decision to support the manufacture of the H-bomb. The decision was taken at a meeting of the parliamentary party where no previous notice that the subject was to be discussed was given and where the discussion was ended by a simple majority vote. The rocket bases highlight how undemocratic the system now is. Last year the Labour Party and the T.U.C. in a joint declaration opposed the building of rocket bases in this country until summit talks took place. But the Parliamentary Labour Party having made this declaration did nothing more. When the Direct Action Committee attempted to send a deputation to the T.U.C. to discuss rocket bases, Sir Vincent Tewson refused to meet them on the grounds that the Committee had no connection with the Trade Union Movement.

### **Embarrassed Critics**

But the system is not only operated undemocratically by those with vested interests in it. It also makes prisoner some of its severest critics who try to operate inside it. Thus, Michael Foot, when he went to S.W. Norfolk to speak for the Labour candidate in the by-election there, made no mention of the bomb and did not even reply when asked why he had not done so. One can imagine that he was embarrassed by the fact that the Labour candidate took the orthodox party line, but need he have put himself in that embarrassing situation?

The system is undemocratic in another sense. When we talk about democracy, we assume that a great majority of the electors will have enough information to make a decision on the matter. This is certainly not the case as far as nuclear weapons are concerned. The issues are complex enough. But the Government has made no attempt to get an informed public opinion. Indeed, it has done all in its power to mislead public opinion. Civil Defence is just one example of this; do you remember the CD. pamphlet which suggested that after the bomb

had fallen, you should use your vacuum cleaner to get rid of the dust? Nor have the Press, television or the cinema properly discussed the issues. Anti-nuclear campaigns have been ignored; and when there have been programmes about the bomb they have been squeezed into twenty minutes, often at off-peak listening hours. I should guess that very few people in this country knew of the existence of rocket bases until the North Pickenham demonstrations.

The existence of nuclear weapons makes it necessary for us to look afresh at democracy. Previously it was plausible to argue that since the decisions of the Government in this country affected only people in this country, a decision was democratic if a majority of people supported it. But in the case of nuclear weapons, even their testing affects people who have no say of any kind in the British Government's decisions. If a vote was taken by everybody in the world, it would go against the testing and use of nuclear weapons by Britain, Russia and America. For that reason majority decisions by the people of this country are not democratic when they are concerned with nuclear weapons (the same, of course, is true of the colonies).

### **Direct Action and Democracy**

Finally, we need to remember what we mean by democracy. It has never meant just a simple majority decision. There are some actions which cannot be democratic however many people support them. This point was well made by the Chairman of the Direct Action Committee, Michael Randle, in a letter to the *New Statesman*, "The question arises, is it democratic to obstruct preparations for genocide. Or, to put it another way; could it ever be democratic to prepare to commit genocide. There is a difference between democracy and mob rule. In a democracy certain human rights are guaranteed to all citizens. The persecution of minorities can never be said to be democratic in the broad sense of the word, however many people support it at a particular time. If this Government, or any popularly elected Government, started, say, to immolate the Jews or incarcerate the Irish, it could hardly be said to be undemocratic to obstruct it non-violently once the usual constitutional methods had proved ineffective. Surely the systematic preparation to murder millions of innocent people, be they citizens of this country or of any other, ought to be regarded in the same light."

The other objection to Swaffham was that it was aimed at the wrong place. The responsibility for these policies is in Westminster and not in Norfolk. But the ability of people in Westminster to carry out their policies depends on the co-operation and support of the workmen at the North Pickenham base. Until that support and co-operation is withdrawn, the politicians will carry on with their policies.

Direct Action is therefore not merely a particular tactic that is used by one branch of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. It points to a new attitude to political action; the new attitude is, however, one that has grown out of the anarchist and libertarian socialist traditions, traditions that have for too long been neglected. It challenges the social democratic frame of mind which sees everything in terms of parliamentary manoeuvring. Because the fight to get rid of the bomb and to establish a socialist society will be a long and hard one, the sooner we realise how hard and difficult it is likely to be, the better.