

HOW CAN WE MOVE ON?

by Duncan Hallas

There is no effective socialist party in Britain. None of the existing organisations has the potential to become one. Yet the creation of such a party is indispensable for any real advance. This is, I think, a fair statement of the essential argument of Ralph Miliband's *Moving On (Socialist Register 1976)*.

The specifications given for an effective socialist party are modest enough. It is accepted that a mass party is not an immediate possibility. What is envisaged is 'a party of ten thousand members and upwards' with a serious implantation in the working class movement and 'a real measure of electoral legitimation'. The party must have the capacity to begin to challenge right wing dominance in the movement and it must be internally democratic.

Politically, the party must firmly reject the view that the Labour Party can ever be won to 'socialist policies'; hence it must reject the Communist Party's *British Road to Socialism*, for this view is central to that strategy. It must also take a critical attitude to the USSR and similar regimes.

This leaves some very large questions unanswered, not least the viability of the more fundamental assumption of the *British Road*—that there is a parliamentary road to socialism. This, and related questions, certainly cannot be evaded. Nonetheless, it will be useful to follow Ralph Miliband's approach, to concede at once that the party he describes does not yet exist and to ask how something like it could be created.

This is to take for granted that the analysis of the Labour Party given in *Moving On* is correct in its essentials, that the cause of 'reform' in that party is indeed hopeless. Those who are not convinced of this by their own experience or by the experience of the Labour lefts over seventy years, detailed in Miliband's *Parliamentary Socialism*, in David Coates' *The Labour Party and the Struggle for Socialism* and so on, will not be influenced by any arguments I can advance. For the time being they have to be left out of this discussion, although *not*, of course, out of joint activity for specific ends.

That said, there is a great deal more to the Labour Party question. As soon as we ask how, concretely, a serious left-wing party, albeit a small one initially—a 'ten thousand and upwards' party, can be brought into

being, we have variants of two basic possibilities. Either a split in a major existing working class party or the growth and development of one of the existing smaller organisations or some combination of these two. Of course, *formally* there are other possibilities. The Labour Party itself was not created in either of these ways.

It is *theoretically* possible that an entirely new political current could crystallise out of presently unaffiliated individuals and form the nucleus of a new party. And there is also the strategy of seeking to unite the existing left groupings into a party, the 'unity of the revolutionary left' strategy. For reasons that will appear, I think that these are exceedingly unlikely prospects.

The idea of banking on a split in a major party, the Labour Party in our situation, cannot be so summarily dismissed. I agree with Miliband that it is mistaken but it has influenced, over many years, a good many revolutionary socialists and is the real hope of numbers of Communist Party members who will admit (privately) that there is not really much chance of the Labour Party as a whole ever 'moving into the attack on capitalism' as the *British Road* has it.

The arguments for the split perspective are, at first sight, moderately impressive and it is not enough to dismiss them, as *Moving On* does, as merely 'one form of expression of a much more general aspiration. . . the hope of "capturing" the Labour Party for the adoption *and the carrying out* of socialist policies.' This is not the expectation we are talking about.

After all, the big Communist Parties of western and central Europe, the KPD, the PCF, the PCI, the Czech Party and others, arose out of splits in existing mass parties in 1920 and 1921. So too, to take much more recent examples, did such small parties as the Danish People's Socialist Party, the Italian PDUP and so on. The examples of building a party 'from the group up' under modern conditions are very few.

Naturally, no sensible person expects a repetition of the Congress of Tours translated into English in the 1970s. The historical background and the concrete conditions are enormously different. Time has moved on and the world is a different place. But this argument cuts two ways. The Labour Party does not exist outside time and space either. It is a specific product of the class struggle in Britain. It is subject to the political stresses and strains caused by the economic crisis of British capitalism—by which I mean what is happening *now*, not some crash in the future.

Consider what is likely to happen in the aftermath of an electoral defeat for the Labour Party at the next general election (most probable) or subsequently. Under the impact of the defeat and a Thatcherite Tory government the party will move to the left, just as after 1970. How far to the left depends on a number of factors, one of the most important being how far the trade union bureaucracies are pushed (by the Tory government) and pulled (by rank and file activity) into opposition to

government policies.

At any rate it is near certain that the Bennite wing of the party will be enormously strengthened and quite likely that it will dominate the leadership. Possibly there will be a 'social-democratic' breakaway to the right. In any case socialist rhetoric and 'socialist policies' will come back into fashion. Now we know, and it is the great merit of **Miliband** that he clearly and tirelessly insists on it, that all this means precisely nothing in terms of what Labour ministers would actually *do* when back in office—either in another Labour government or, as may well happen, in some kind of coalition.

However, goes the case of some of the 'entrists', those workers who have taken the Bennite rhetoric seriously will form the basis for a massive **marxist** opposition which, when the inevitable sell-out comes, can create the new party with a ready made working class base, provided always that revolutionary socialists have not 'isolated themselves' by hiving off into a party 'separated from the labour movement'.

I have put this 'enlist' case as strongly as I can for two reasons. First, because seeing what is wrong with it throws a lot of light on the actual problems of building a party and on the *kind* of party that can hope to seriously challenge the right-wing's dominance. Second, because the *negative* side of the enlist case is not without influence and must also be faced. As Ernest Mandel expressed it some years back: 'In fact, the whole conception of building a revolutionary mass party by starting with a few hundred members and then individually recruiting the membership one by one, is ludicrous.' A *mass* party is not the immediate prospect but *any* party which does not inherit a membership from another organisation must necessarily recruit members 'one by one', even if the ones flow in thick and fast. The argument, if it has any force at all, points inexorably to 'enlistment'.

What, then, is wrong with all this? The broad outline of the Labour Party's likely evolution is plausible. It may be objected that it rests on the assumption of continuing economic crisis and that any marked improvement in the situation of British (and world) capitalism would reduce the appeal of the left wing. But, if true, that would apply also to the appeal of an independent socialist party.

The real objections, the reasons that **Miliband** is right to dismiss 'enlistment' as 'not serious left-wing politics', are that it is based on a false identification of the Labour Party and the labour movement, that it fails to take into account the obvious facts that there is no connection between the Labour Party membership organisations and any actual working class *struggle* (with very rare exceptions like Clay Cross), that the vast bulk of the individual membership (which, incidentally, has declined by a third over the last twenty years) is a purely paper membership never seen at any party meetings, that the active membership is much less working class than the card-holders and that much of it (both left and right) represents a

political *selection* of individuals firmly wedded to Labour Party type politics, municipal and national, by *conviction* as well as habit. It is not a hotbed of frustrated militants struggling to throw off a thin layer of municipal careerists and would-be parliamentarians. Finally, it ignores the deleterious effects of the Labour Party environment on those who enter it in order to change it.

Entrism is a parasitic activity. This is not a moral judgement but a purely practical one. The 'entrists' political activity is necessarily dominated by the rhythms of Labour Party life, the conferences, the resolutions won or lost, the elections for this or that post or delegacy. The 'entrist' lives in the same milieu as the 'native' Labour left and tends, over time, to become extremely well adapted to it. 'Parasitism often results in weakness or disease of the host, but the effects of parasitism on the parasite are even more marked' notes a well-known text on the invertebrates (Buchsbaum) '... it becomes so completely adapted to its peculiar environment that it usually loses many of the structures characteristic of its free-living relatives.' It may become, in fact, incapable of independent existence.

It does not do to make too much of analogies, however suggestive, but it is certainly true, as Miliband points out, that the Labour Party has won over many entrists, people who having 'set out with the intention of transforming the Labour Party have more often than not ended up being transformed by it.' Everyone can make his own list of left MPs who have developed in this way. Certainly, a serious socialist party will have to win the active support of many now in the Labour Party. That is not at issue. But the active core of a new party needs a very different tradition and experience.

Now none of this precludes the emergence of a big Labour left-wing, even a temporarily dominant left-wing in certain circumstances. But it ensures that it will be, in large part, a left-wing of the 'revolutionary socialist' variety. The key question is that of connection with working class struggle. No socialist party worth a brass farthing can be built except by the most active *organised* involvement in working class struggles of all kinds and active propaganda to win workers (and others) to socialism. Which means, of course, fighting *against* the Labour Party on wages policy, on rents, on social service cuts, on unemployment and on the ideological front as well. It means an agitational newspaper (ideally, a *daily* newspaper) which necessarily attacks the Labour leaders and an *organised* struggle against the right-wing in the unions.

It should be obvious that organised activity of this sort, which is indispensable to make a political selection of socialists willing and able to form the nucleus of the party inside the labour *movement*, cannot be carried on inside the Labour *Party* (on any scale) except, perhaps, in

circumstances when the Labour Party itself is in turmoil, when the leadership has lost control, and then only for a shortish period. Since the Labour Party is not in turmoil we have to get on with the job outside. If and when the projected 'massive marxist opposition' ever does materialise and split then, of course, all but bone-headed sectarians will take it for granted that unity with these comrades in a single party is the way forward. But it is less than realistic to pin large hopes on what is no more than an outside chance.

Where does this leave us? *Moving On* devotes considerable space to the Communist Party. Actually it would be hard to better what Ralph Miliband wrote ten years ago (*Socialist Register* 1967) of the Western Communist Parties in general:

'For many years now they have behaved as if they wished above all to become "normal" parties, part of the ordinary political competition in their societies. This demands a degree of "reasonableness", of "moderation", of "respectability", all of which are incompatible with that determined and intransigent assertion of socialist principles and purposes which ought to be their overriding concern. . . . As one looks at the recent history of these parties, one cannot but be struck by their increasing resemblance to German Social-Democracy before 1914, with its electoral obsessions, its parliamentary fixation, its eagerness to "belong", the hollowness of its rhetoric, its conception of politics as manoeuvre, its consequent abdication from principled socialist politics. . . . It is by no means impossible that these parties will be successful in their present tactics and that they will in the proximate future, come to be the pillars of governmental coalitions in countries like France and Italy. But this incorporation in political life will not, it may be said with the utmost confidence, be on terms that hold out the perspective of socialist change in these countries.'

The British CP has the continental vices without the 'virtue' of being a mass party and so is without any realistic perspective. The *British Road* is very obviously a dead-end, unless you believe in the prospect of 'winning the Labour Party to socialism'. It is, however, questionable whether this state of affairs is due, to any large extent, to what *Moving On* calls 'the oligarchic control of the leadership over its members'. Obviously, since there are widely divergent tendencies in the party, the role of the apparatus in holding it together is not negligible. But it is easy to exaggerate it.

What is really striking about many of the younger members of the Communist Party, especially the recruits from the student field which is one of the party's few growth areas, is that they are genuine and convinced left-reformists. They know the case against the strategy of transforming the Labour Party—and they reject that case. They are not 'parliamentary roaders' because a party oligarchy prevents them discussing the matter and somehow keeps them in ignorance.

In any case, it is a pretty toothless oligarchy. Look at the discussion in *Marxism Today* on the *USSR*; not just John Gollan's two contributions

but the extremely varied contributions from members. Look at *Comment*. These are hardly the journals of a party run by a Stalinist-type oligarchy. No, the conversion of the party leadership to 'democracy' is, I believe, entirely genuine. It is part and parcel of that 'social-democratisation' which Ralph Miliband, among others, has himself described. Naturally, this conversion is entirely compatible with a bureaucratic party regime—look at the British Labour Party or the German Social-Democratic Party. There is nothing specifically 'Stalinist' about bureaucratic parties.

Moreover, and this is what makes the matter worth discussing, significant sections of the Communist Party's industrial and union activists have also undergone the conversion. The party still has good militants but as an *organised* force in industry it is essentially an electoral machine for promoting 'the Left trends' in the trade union officialdom, and the 'left trends' are social-democrats, sometimes left in words but right in deeds. As to the terrible 'sacred cows of "democratic centralism" and the "ban on factions" '; why, the CP has not even been able—in recent years—to ensure that party members do not run against each other in union elections! Ralph Miliband's discussion of these questions seems to be unduly influenced by what the party was twenty years ago. At all events we can agree that some CP members will play a role in the creation of a new force on the left but that the CP, as a party, will not. Its future, whatever form it takes, is with the social-democratic left.

Where then, *is* the nucleus of the new party to come from? From the group of collaborators around *Socialist Register*? The question is not put in any frivolous spirit. After all, it is Ralph Miliband who tells us (absolutely correctly) that 'the time has come to move on', 'to explore seriously what can be done', and who also takes the position that no existing organisation is adequate for the task. Therefore, presumably, he takes some responsibility.

'This *Register*', wrote E.P. Thompson in the 1973 number 'is the last survivor in the direct line of continuity from the old New Left, and its editors and publisher have done much to keep alive a tradition of un-doctrinaire, ecumenical, substantive Marxist analysis.' Thompson speaks for himself, not for a *Register* collective, but he is surely right in identifying the tradition. It is indeed the old New Left tradition, modified by the passage of time. That the 1976 *Register* should be so largely concerned with the events of 1956—the starting point of the New Left—is an appropriate and convincing demonstration.

What was the political substance of this tradition? To cite Thompson again:

'We addressed ourselves to the task of encouraging into being in Britain a movement of socialist thought and practice, purged of the old religious anti-communism, founded experientially upon British conditions, which was

revolutionary, rational, democratic: which accentuated self-activity, which was sensitive to cultural forms of exploitation, which affirmed the values of *égalité*!

Admirable sentiments, but also remarkably vague. I leave aside the fact that the early New Left had a strong 'Third Worldish' flavour and was extremely uncritical of Marshal Tito, Emperor Haile Selassie, 'Osagyefo' Nkrumah, Prince Sihanouk, 'Bung' Sukarno, Fidel Castro, Ben Bella and others among the then 'new emerging forces' of Third World 'socialism' and 'positive neutralism'—anyone interested has only to consult the early issues of *New Left Review* or *Out of Apathy*, the New Left's book-length manifesto.

More important was the ambiguity about agency and method in Britain. The New Left failed; no, it *refused*, to take a clear and unequivocal stand against left-reformism. It refused to come to grips with the Communist tradition in its original Leninist form and with the Left Opposition tradition that arose from it. It largely ignored the whole historical experience from 1914 to 1956. Significantly, it hardly discussed the Communist International. In short, it failed to develop a clear and consistent theoretical and political foundation. Ambiguity and vagueness reigned. There were reasons, substantial reasons, for this but that does not alter the fact.

This ambiguity extended to the question of organisation. Does 'movement' mean party in Thompson's context? He thought not at the time.

'... the Clubs and discussion-centres will be places beyond the reach of the interference of the bureaucracy, where initiative remains in the hands of the rank and file... Their influence will pervade the Labour Movement... The bureaucracy will hold the machine; but the New Left will hold the passes between it and the younger generation.' (*New Reasoner*, Summer 1959.)

Inevitably, given this politically amorphous and organisationally unserious character, the movement collapsed. The quite considerable numbers of intellectuals (and a small *but* still significant number of workers) involved, the talent and the enthusiasm; all this was dissipated. As Thompson, with truly commendable *candour*, expressed it in his 1973 article: 'My colleagues and I turned back to work in our specialist professional or practical fields. We no longer represented a coherent and identifiable position.' It may be objected that E.P. Thompson was not the New Left. Actually he was one of the spokesmen of the best in it. The attempted 'regroupment' around the May Day Manifesto in 1967-68, a weak echo of the original New Left, sank without a trace and for the same reasons.

But why go into all this after such a lapse of time? Not, certainly, to

score points retrospectively or to attempt to 'discredit' individuals. People change and we are concerned with the present and the future. What did survive the collapse of the old New Left, *Socialist Register* and the 'mutated' (Thompson's expression) *New Left Review*, are both now, in their different ways, raising the question of the need for a new Party. This is a wholly progressive development. The past experience is, however, still relevant. It demonstrates, I believe, that there is no possibility of now creating a significant party which does not have clear and unequivocal commitment to *revolutionary* socialist politics. There is really no middle of the road.

To avoid misunderstanding, it is conceivable that a 'New Left' type party which is equivocal about reform and revolution, about socialism as the self-emancipation of the working class, a sort of ILP or POUM or PSU, might possibly come into existence as a split from the Labour Party, but that is not, I take it, what Ralph Miliband is talking about. To *build* a party from a political nucleus is out of the question without political **clarity**. Political clarity is certainly not enough, not nearly enough, but it is one of the indispensable prerequisites. And here we come to the nub of the question.

The treatment of the 'ultra-left' in *Moving On* is, in my view, seriously misleading. It is not a matter of the sincerity of the author—which I take for granted—it is a matter of fact and of interpretation. The very use of the term 'ultra-left' (in italics admittedly) is not without significance. Words are also weapons. Now the Socialist Workers Party (IS) is not, on any candid examination, 'ultra-left' in terms of the discussion inside the Communist International in 1920-21. It *is* 'ultra-left' in terms of the political debate in Britain today. Whose terms do you accept? Those of the British mass-media? Or those of the communist tradition?

But perhaps we should start with some facts. My first quarrel with *Moving On's* discussion of the revolutionary left is that it is not factually well founded. We are told that: 'These estimates (of numbers. DH) may be rounded off with, say, a few hundred activists for the Workers Revolutionary Party and the International Socialists (i.e. SWP. DH), and so on for the other groupings on the left.'

This is inaccurate. The SWP has some thousands of activists (three to four thousand), not some hundreds, and certainly has *far* more active members than the whole of the rest of the revolutionary left put together. Of course, if the definition of an active member is pitched high enough the totals will be reduced—but the ratios will be unaltered. The reader will have guessed that I am a member and spokesman for the SWP. But I have no need or intention to represent the facts as other than they are.

There is a point of substance here. It is fashionable to portray the revolutionary left as divided into innumerable quarrelling sectlets. Well, the sectlets exist. A recent issue of a Maoist paper informs us that there

are more than twenty 'Marxist-Leninist' groups in Britain and a leaflet distributed by one 'Trotskyist' splinter tells us that there are more than a dozen 'Trotskyist' groups. Perhaps so. And no doubt there are sincere and valuable militants in some if not all these grouplets. But, seriously, there is only one revolutionary *organisation* outside the Labour Party of any size and substance, only one organisation which remotely resembles the Miliband prescription for a new socialist party—and that is the SWP.

It certainly falls well short of that prescription. Three to four thousand members is well short of 'ten thousand and upwards', our electoral activities are far from achieving that degree of 'electoral legitimation' which has to be achieved. We have more important weaknesses too. There is a long way to go. And it has to be said that there is another numerically significant tendency on offer. It is the 'Militant' tendency inside the Labour Party. But if we reject the 'entrists' perspective there is this effective choice—the SWP or start from scratch.

To start from scratch is justified if there are profound political differences and if those starting from scratch mean to throw themselves heart and soul into the immensely difficult job of building a real base in the working class on the basis of their own, clearly distinct, political platform.

There is no indication that this platform exists. There are valuable elements in the New Left tradition, elements which must be incorporated in the revolutionary party, but there is no basis for a *distinct* party. The tradition is too equivocal for that.

In the 1970 *Register* John Saville wrote of the then IS organisation:

'It would seem to have sufficient flexibility for the aims it has set itself, although one crucial test will be its stability to make the transition from a fairly open sect into something approaching a small party.'

We can fairly claim to have made that transition. In terms of members, working class base, workplace cells and branches, organised union activity, organised work among women and students, the fight against fascism and racism and a number of other issues, the SWP is 'something approaching a small party'. But a *small* party has no merit unless it can become a much bigger party. We have in common with Ralph Miliband and his co-thinkers the recognition of the urgent need for this bigger party. We can accept that, in a certain sense, the bigger party will also be a different party—growth also implies change. Nor do we expect anyone to accept the SWP merely on the basis of assertion—claims have to be tested in practice, in joint work.

But perhaps these are not the problems that trouble Ralph Miliband. He writes, of the revolutionary left, 'the main cause of their lack of attraction is not their sectarianism, dogmatism, adventurism and authoritarianism but their basic perspectives as to the ways of socialist

advance in Britain', in particular, a 'perception of socialist change in terms of a revolutionary seizure of power on the Bolshevik model of October 1917.'

What is meant by this? If what is being said is that the Russia of 1917 and the Britain of today are so radically different that it is out of the question for the course of events in Britain to closely follow the pattern of the Russian events of sixty years ago then there is no dispute. We have no massive peasantry, no mass conscript army bled white by years of wholesale slaughter. The relative weight of the working class in British society is enormously greater and the bourgeoisie in this, the oldest of capitalist countries, vastly more substantial and experienced than its feeble Russian counterpart and so on and so forth.

If, however, what is being suggested is that there is, after all, some non-revolutionary road to socialism then we have to part company. *Moving On* does not *state* this position but it gives—to me at least—the impression of a certain equivocation. I hope that is a mistaken impression. For this is fundamental. We already have one major and one minor party—Labour Party and Communist Party—committed to the 'parliamentary road' (or simply to the parliamentary lay-by in the case of Labour). There is no political space for a third. Nor is there much future for another ILP.

Accepting that the party must strive for 'a real measure of electoral legitimisation', this necessary activity can never be its main thrust. That *must* be towards rooting the organisation in the workplaces and in the unions and in a wide variety of types of grassroots direct action. Nothing else makes sense unless you entertain the parliamentary illusion.

There can be no radical transformation of society without a profound crisis—political and social as well as economic. Such crises are not made to order; they are the result of a long historical process. The building of a revolutionary party with serious roots and a serious tradition—the Communist tradition—is an essential part of that process and is indispensable for a successful outcome.

There are, of course, many things to be learned, new problems that cannot be solved simply by reference to some text or other. Only fools believe otherwise. But it is equally foolish to suppose that the accumulated experience of revolutionary marxists—from Marx onwards—can be dispensed with or that it is possible to build an effective *socialist* party which is agnostic about the need for revolution.

To 'move on' is only possible on a revolutionary basis. The SWP has made some modest progress on that basis. Without meaning to be in the least 'sectarian' or 'dogmatic', I suggest to those who accept the general line of *Moving On*, that collaboration with us is the most fruitful prospect of those realistically available.