Militant and Labour - perspective in ruins

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It would be possible to fill page after page with categorical predictions by the leadership of the Militant Tendency about the imminent triumph of its politics, all of which have been disproved by subsequent events. Lying behind each of them is a false method of drawing up perspectives. It is a method which, applied to the prospects for the Labour Party in Britain, is currently disorientating the Militant leadership.

Scientific perspectives are a key component of modern revolutionary Marxism. But Grant and Taaffe’s perspectives are invariably a parody of Marxism since they embody a false, one-sided view of the prospects for revolution. For Militant the historical process not only creates the objective conditions for revolution (the class struggle) but also solves the subjective condition: the attainment of a revolutionary consciousness within the working class. Militant once summed this up in the phrase:

?The objective situation is moving in the direction of Marxism and the subjective situation as well.? 

Militant further elaborated this in 1981:

?Marxists can only have an effect in relation to the inevitable processes that take place in the minds of the working class. It is not agitators who create such situations, but the situation itself. All that the Marxists do is make conscious a process that is unconsciously taking place in the minds of the workers.? (British Perspectives, 1981)

But there is nothing inevitable about the ?process? in workers? minds. Still less is it an unconscious process. If we argue that workers are advancing unconsciously towards a revolutionary consciousness, it is a short step to arguing that the ?making conscious? only needs to take place by stages, as events unfold.

This perspectival method has an important practical conclusion for Militant. If objective events are moving in the right direction, if the ?hammer blows of class struggle? inevitably produce centrist and then revolutionary consciousness within the minds of millions then there is no need for the decisive subjective factor?the guiding intervention of a revolutionary party.

Throughout the last decade Militant has refused to contemplate any meaningful obstacle to its progress in the Labour Party. In the 1983 election it wrote:

?If the Tories win, as the right wing never tires of repeating, Marxism will gain. If Labour wins that will be even better. Marxism will gain even more.?

Faced with the witch-hunts, which in 1983 saw its Editorial Board expelled from the Labour Party, Militant was full of lofty optimism:

?Whatever action is taken, the right wing will fail. If they witch-hunt us we will gain influence. If they do not witch-hunt us we will gain more influence.? 

Heads I win, tails you lose.

So how could Militant have possibly arrived at its present situation? That is the question that now faces Militant comrades. The Tories have won three elections, and the witch-hunt in the Labour Party has intensified dramatically
since 1983. The influence of Militant within the Labour Party has been massively eroded, calling into question its whole project of transforming the Labour Party into a vehicle for legislating socialism.

**Militant’s schema for Labour**

Militant’s schema for the progress of the Marxist wing of the Labour Party has always been false to the core, always destined to lead to opportunism and disorientation. At root Militant argues that long-term entry work into the Labour Party is dictated both by the relative isolation of revolutionaries from the masses, and by the inevitability of those masses joining their traditional organisations in times of crisis:

> All history demonstrates that at the first stages of revolutionary upsurge the masses turn to the mass organisations to try and find a solution for their problems, especially the young generation, entering politics for the first time. (Problems of Entrism, March 1959)

Because of the inevitability of the masses entering the Labour Party Militant argues it will be possible to transform the Labour Party into a vehicle for socialism. This will be made easier, Militant insists, because Marxism has always had a place within the Labour tradition, and that it is the right wing politics of the leaders which are alien to the Labour Party. For Militant Labour is basically a workers’ party which has been hijacked by the bosses’ agents.

The victory of the left within the Labour Party is in the long run assured since the crisis of capitalism, according to Militant, spells the end of right wing reformism. Because there are no reforms to deliver the right wing will be reduced to a rump, whilst the left grows, first in a centrist then in a revolutionary direction.

This self-comforting scenario neatly absolves Militant from using Trotsky’s Transitional Programme in a revolutionary way. Their whole series of demands is raised as the programme for a socialist Labour government. Since the masses are going to find their way to revolutionary consciousness under the impetus of the objective situation there is no need to reveal the revolutionary end point of the linked chain of demands; namely, soviets, the workers’ militia and the insurrection. Militant’s perspectives and historical laws about the Labour Party dictate that the transitional programme is abandoned in favour of a series of minimum demands.

Let us examine each step in Militant’s schema.

**The masses turn to Labour?**

Clive Heemskerk, writing in the aftermath of the Walton by-election, argued that:

> The historical law formulated by Marxism, that workers will move to reclaim their traditional organisations, is a process in which a complex interplay of different factors are involved? (Militant International Review?MIR 46)

He cites such complex factors as the economy and the development of workers’ consciousness lagging behind events. None of this can hide the fact that the historical law formulated by Militant is far from accurate.

It would be true in general to say that the masses can never give up their old organisations until these have been tested in the fire of experience? (Programme of the International 1970). But the history of the working class struggle does not simply follow a cyclical pattern.

Workers’ organisations, having been tested in struggle, may disintegrate and fragment. Workers’ illusions in them may be deflected onto other false leaderships, their internal structures may be altered to distance the parties from the possibility of mass influx.

All workers’ organisations which are reformist or Stalinist led contain a fundamental contradiction between politics and social base which, according to the laws of dialectical materialism, cannot exist forever. The resolution of these contradictions can take place in a reactionary as well as a progressive direction.

What this means concretely can be seen through numerous historical examples. In addition to millions of workers
turning to Social Democracy in the revolution of 1919 hundreds of thousands locked to the centrist USPD and to the revolutionary KPD. Faced with the bankruptcy of the Communist Party in the early 1930s French workers locked to Social Democracy, attempting to turn it left.

Today, the world-wide collapse of Stalinism is leading to a falsification of the "historical law" across many continents. The masses have not locked to the ANC in South Africa, nor has it moved left under the impetus of mass struggle. In Latin America a decade of savage attacks has not (apart from in Brazil) seen a growth in the parties of the left, but a decline, fragmentation and the growth of bourgeois and populist parties instead.

In Britain, when the workers' movement hit the obstacle of the Thatcher government there were certainly periods when attention focused on Labour rather than on the trade union struggle. But at no stage during the 1980s did workers turn en masse to individual membership of the Labour Party. Nor did they have to in order to effect a turn to politics. It is through the bureaucratic machine of the unions that the organised workers' movement exerts its influence on the Labour Party. Today individual membership of the Labour Party is at a post-war low and activism extremely depressed.

As Workers Power argued from the very beginning of the Thatcher years, the scope and the limits of the left turn within the Labour Party after 1978-79 was dictated by the temporary rupture between the union bureaucracy and the Parliamentary Labour Party. By the 1982 Bishop Stortford Conference this had been healed and the left was in retreat. It was this perspective which events confirmed. Compare it to Militant's, written in 1981:

"An inexorable process of turning and moving towards the left will take place in the labour movement as a whole, and will turn the Labour Party into a left reformist party or even moving it in a centrist direction." (British Perspectives 1981, p17)

Conceding the possibility that the Tories would win a second term in office Militant wrote:

"Such an eventuality would push the masses inexorably on to the road of industrial struggles and a further transformation of the Labour Party and the unions. The Labour Party and the unions would be pushed even more to the left than they have been as a result of the defeat of the Labour government in 1979?" (ibid p18)

Whilst the second Thatcher government did provoke unprecedented industrial struggles in the 1984-86 period these were defeated, and as a result the right wing consolidated the hold it had already taken in both the Party and the unions. Militant's perspective of continuous radicalisation and leftward movement was falsified again and again.

Of course, none of this rules out a future attempt by masses of workers to flood the Labour Party, turn it leftwards and so on. But this is not a historical law, not an accurate generalisation from experience. So any strategy based on its inevitability, let alone on its imminence, will be false. Nor does such radicalism necessarily have to affect Labour first or most. We only need look at the experience of Scotland to see confirmation.

The anti-poll tax struggle in Scotland after 1989 was part of a deep going radicalisation and mass activity of Scottish workers and youth. But it did not lead to an influx into the Labour Party, nor to a left or centrist move inside Labour. It certainly led to support for Militant because of their early direct work on the housing estates. But at the same time it has led to masses of radicalised youth deserting Labour, and damaging Militant's prospect of transforming the Labour Party. Instead workers and youth looked to left? Scottish Nationalism for political answers. Jim Sillars scored a spectacular by-election victory over Labour in Govan. Today half of under-24 year olds now support the SNP.

Labour's right wing vanished?

But even if Labour were to be the main beneficiary of the radicalisation this would not inevitably lead to Labour's transformation. The main reason for this is the role that Labour plays for the bosses and hence the centrality of the right wing within the party.

Militant believed that, in conditions of economic crisis, the material basis for right wing reformism would disappear. This is the linchpin which holds together the many other, internally contradictory parts of Militant's analysis. That it is...
central to Militant’s perspective can be proved beyond doubt.

In 1981 Militant argued that “as events develop, the right wing as an organised force will be shattered?.” (MIR, July 1981)

Even when the right wing consolidated their grip in 1983, with the election of the Kinnock-Hattersley dream ticket Militant declared, “In reality Labour’s old right wing is shattered? (MIR, November 1983). In autumn 1985 Militant argued:

“The movement of workers into the Labour Party will be a reflection of the struggles of society as a whole. It is an inevitable process, that when thwarted politically as in 1983 the working class moves onto the plane of industrial action, but equally when a period of struggle on an industrial level fails to lead to a fundamental transformation of the situation, workers will draw political conclusions again, rst of all seeking a return of a Labour government but at a later stage participating more actively in the party itself. From this point of view the right wing are already living on borrowed time.?

This prediction too has been rubbished by reality.

The whole false schema was based once again on a fundamental misunderstanding of the role of the Labour right, summed up in the assertion:

“The old Labour right is finished because in a historical sense their role is played out? (MIR November 1983)

For Militant right wing reformism only had an historical role in the period of the post-war boom, when social reforms could be won from the capitalists who were enjoying unheard of prosperity and expansion. Militant maintained that, with the end of the boom, as the bosses turned to clawing back the gains won by the working class, the right wing would be left with no concrete role. As MIR put it in 1981:

“The effects of decades of reformism in a period when reforms could actually be gained on the basis of the upswing of capitalism are being swept away on the basis of the downswing of capitalism which is now developing. All the muck and encrustations on the trade unions and the Labour Party which have brought the Neanderthal men to the fore will be dissolved and washed away as a result of the crisis of British and world capitalism.?

But the purpose? of right wing reformism is not just to secure reforms for the workers, it is to tie the workers? organisations to the capitalist system. And for this task the right wing are always in demand especially in a period of crisis.

The end of the boom did not lead automatically to the withering away of the right wing. The Neanderthal men? were replaced by the slick Kinnock clique (of course aided and abetted by Neanderthals like Jordan and Hammond in the trade unions). It was the possibility and the necessity of presenting pro-capitalist Labourism as some form of socialism which declined. This was the legacy of defeat on the industrial plane and of the cyclical revival of the capitalist economy after 1982.

Modern imperialism has no need of the planning boards and wages policies of former Labour governments. The economic nationalist programme of state-funded production behind trade barriers is an anachronism for British imperialism faced with 1992. It never had anything to do with socialism and has been unceremoniously junked by the Labour right. Without as yet severing the trade union links which make Labour a bourgeois workers? party, the right wing have managed to systematically reforge Labour?s politics and survive in charge of the mass workers? party, despite the ending of the post-war boom.

Because Militant completely misunderstood the role of the right wing in the Labour Party they believed that it was always looking to split the party. This was important for them since it allowed them to believe that the Party would be abandoned by the right and the Marxists could repossess it as a result.
All of this leaves out of account the role Labour plays in the running of capitalist society. Whilst it is certain that a section of the big bourgeoisie had a direct hand in the creation of the SDP (Sainsbury, etc) it is not the case that the bosses? media, or the Tories consistently fostered a MacDonald type split in the Labour leadership.

In fact by 1982, with the Bishop Stortford retreat by the union tops and the Bennites, the split of the SDP had done most of its work for the bosses. It cowed the left and strengthened the centre and right. It put them in a position whereby they could begin to wrest control of the party from the left and over an eight year period complete a counter-reformation in the party.

Militant predicted further splits of the right wing after 1981 under the impact of the class struggle. But it did not happen and, as Workers Power predicted, was never likely to. Why? Because without the unions an SDP style new party could not play the vital role of incorporating the working class organisations into the system of exploitation. Since the war there have been only two governments under which workers? real wages fell: both of them were Labour.

Labour leaders understand their role. Even today, with the unions on the retreat, they sell themselves as the party best able to harness wage inflation and prevent outbreaks of class struggle. The Labour leaders knew their jobs, and the bosses knew the worth of a mass party of the unions far too well for the class struggle?even one as dramatic as the miners? strike?to propel them in the direction of a split.

Problems of entryism

Militant, like all the main centrist ?Trotskyist? groups in Britain, emerged from a tradition which, until the early 1960s regarded total entry into the Labour Party as obligatory. But it claims to differ from the other entrist groups, past and present, in one important respect: that it refuses to conceal its own existence, has a separate programme and publication. As we shall see this is a hollow claim. Whilst Militant makes no attempt to confuse its programme with the left reformists through joint papers and lists of demands etc, its own ?separate? programme is one big accommodation to reformism. This is inevitable, once entryism becomes a strategy instead of a tactic.

Writing about the 1930s, Militant?s leaders admit that entryism was conceived as a short term tactic by the Trotskyists, to be used in specific situations:

?The tactic of entry was also considered as a short term expedient, forced on the revolutionaries by their isolation from the masses.? (Programme of the International, p6)

Writing about the Fourth International (FI) leadership immediately after the war, the document continues disparagingly:

?In Britain they raised the question of entry in the immediate post-war period because they saw at the time the conditions of slump and the existence of a strong and developing left wing within the Labour Party!? (ibid)

Ted Grant was one of the few leaders of the British section of the FI who could see this perspective was false at the time. But writing about the degenerate Trotskyism of Pablo and Healy in the mid-1950s Militant says:

?Entrism was imposed by the objective situation and the weakness of the revolutionary forces, but they operated it in a purely opportunist fashion.? (ibid)

What had changed? Why had Trotsky?s short term tactic, which Grant rejected in the immediate post-war period, become a long term tactic? imposed by the objective situation? The answer lies once again in Grant?s perspectival disorientation. The man who had been able to see through the perspectival errors of Pablo/Mandel and Healy succumbed to the same methodological poison.

Behind Grant?s insights into the possibility of a post war recovery lay a refusal to recognise the possibility of a boom. As early as 1946 he argued that the recovery:

?. . . cannot lead to a blossoming of the economy of capitalism. A new recovery can only prepare the way for an ever
greater slump ... there can be no real growth in the productive forces.? (The Unbroken Thread, pp381-83)

By 1952 Grant argued that the world recovery was drawing to a close. In 1960 he claimed that "the world economy is beginning to move towards a slump" (ibid, p392).

It is precisely those conditions which Grant derided in 1945?imminent slump, imminent left turn in the Labour Party, which have become timeless features of Militant?'s perspective and which, along with continued isolation from the masses, dictate the total entry tactic as a long term necessity.

Trotsky?'s entry tactic was short term for one sound political reason. If the tactic has to involve the open ?ght for the revolutionary programme it must inevitably bring the Marxists up against the bureaucracy of the mass workers? parties. It may even bring sections of the left reformists up against the same obstacle, provoking mass expulsions and a ban on factions.

In this situation the choice is either to lower the revolutionary banner, refuse to ?ght, or gather all the forces possible around that banner for the inevitable split. If there are overriding perspectival reasons for staying inside the mass parties then the logical consequence is some form of détente with the bureaucrats and some form of programmatic accommodation to them.

For Militant this has taken several forms. After 1983 it has resulted in repeated capitulation to the witch-hunts, as in 1985 when they advised Hatton to accept expulsion ?under protest?. Still worse it takes the form of a consistent attempt to depict the revolutionary Marxist programme as something intrinsic to the Labour tradition.

**Defending Labour?'s ?socialist? traditions**
The most recent example of this can be seen in Richard Venton?'s attempt to defend Terry Fields and Dave Nellist against the wrath of the Labour NEC. He writes

?Terry Fields and Dave Nellist are amongst the very few Labour MPs who can truly claim the mantle of Keir Hardie.? (Militant, 20.9.91)

Whilst admitting that Hardie was not a Marxist, Venton claims that he fought for policies ?with an uncanny resemblance to the policies which Kinnock denounces Terry Fields for today?. He follows this with a quote from Hardie calling for common ownership and a socialist commonwealth. Venton goes on to cite Clause IV of the party constitution with its commitment to common ownership, quotes Atlee who ?spoke of an enabling act?, cites the FBU rule book, which gives a commitment to building a ?socialist system? and ?nally reveals that Neil Kinnock himself once called for the overthrow of capitalism.

Let?'s be clear about what is going on in articles like this. Militant is attempting to defend its MPs against expulsion from the party at the cost of systematically distorting the relationship of Marxism to Labourism.

In the ?rst place no verbal commitment to socialism ever made Keir Hardie, Atlee, Bevan, Benn or any trade union leader anything other than a reformist socialist. Has Militant forgotten that the Mensheviks, long after they took up arms against the October Revolution, retained in their party programme the dictatorship of the proletariat?

Clause IV was written, by the admission of its author Sydney Webb, in order to mean anything, at any time, to any Labour leader. It can mean state capitalist nationalisation or it can be interpreted to mean wider share ownership. No one except the poor deluded reformist workers led to one defeat after another by the Atlees, Bevans and Benns ever thought it meant the expropriation of the bosses.

This is what a real Marxist, Friedrich Engels, once wrote about Keir Hardie:

?The ILP is extremely vague in its tactics, and its leader Keir Hardie is a super cunning Scot, whose demagogic tricks cannot be trusted for a minute . . . He appears in Parliament only on demagogic occasions, in order to cut a ?gure with
phrases about the unemployed?without getting anything done?or to address imbecilities to the Queen on the occasion of the birth of a prince.? (Selected Correspondence, Marx and Engels, p449)

The same could be said about all left reformists, from Hardie to Heffer.

Marxism is politically alien to Labourism, even the Labourism of 1945, the Labourism of Clause IV and of Keir Hardie. It should claim its right to membership of the Labour Party not on grounds of political affinity, but because Labour is the mass party of the trade unions. Every Marxist pays their political levy in the affiliated unions. Every Marxist should ?ght for non-affiliated unions to affiliate as long as there is no alternative mass workers? party to Labour. It is on this basis that we, like the early Communist Party, should demand full membership status within the Labour Party. Anything else leads, as with Militant, to an opportunist distortion of Marxism.

Grant versus Taaffe: a question of tactics?

Militant?s leadership has not been impervious to the gradual but insistent falsification of its perspectives. During the latter part of the 1980s it has been pushed pragmatically to adopt a more ?left? face on a number of important questions, and to develop a periphery and activity outside the Labour Party.

In contrast to the days when Militant prevented discussion of lesbian and gay rights at LPYS conference by moving a resolution about football (!) we now see Militant supporters with a high profile on the Gay Pride demos. In contrast to the ?rst two hundred and ?fty issues of Militant which contained only four articles specifically on the woman question we now see women?s struggles and concerns covered in depth. Not just economic questions but the problems of reproductive rights and sexual harassment. And whereas Militant opposed the setting up of Labour?s Black Section on grounds of the need for class unity it has now set up its own black front organisation in the shape of Panther.

During the anti-poll tax struggle Militant developed real roots in working class communities. But these workers were at best indifferent to or, in the case of Scotland outrightly hostile to, the Labour Party. In response Militant has adopted various forms of independent work, effectively party work not entry work. In Scotland it has redrawn its programme to accommodate the schema of a Scottish assembly being the focus for a ?workers? government?.

However, Militant took this tactical turn very late in the day: too late to stop it alienating tens of thousands of youth when it condemned the poll tax Trafalgar Square riots in March 1990 as the work of ?anarchists? and ?outsiders?, and offered to ?name names? to the police. Too late as well to pose itself as a real alternative for the radicalised youth in anti-war campaigns after Hussein?s invasion of Kuwait.

It is no surprise that the vast majority of youthful and active comrades within Militant now supports the section of the leadership which masterminded this tactical turn to the left. But the Taaffe leadership majority has not broken in principle from Grant?s strategic entry scheme. This is clear from Taaffe?s letter to the Guardian:

?Militant sees Labour as the traditional party of working people, who in years to come will force it back to the left. We have no intention of abandoning it . . . We will not be urging people to tear up their party cards. We will be building a force inside and outside the party that will in the end transform Labour.? (Guardian, 4.9.91)

The message is plain. Militant may be forced to make a tactical retreat within the labour movement but it is sticking to its schema of transforming Labour. One day Grant?s predictions will come true, the Labour right will give up the ghost, the masses will pour in. In the meantime, the difference between Grant and Taaffe remains a tactical one: whether to lie inert in the stagnating wards or whether to carry on independent ?party? activity.

But despite the intentions of the leaders there are real objective difculties facing the Taaffe project. If Militant are forced into supporting Fields and Nellist they will face yet another round of witch-hunts. And such campaigns cannot be carried out under the slogan of ?retreat?.

As the Liverpool experience shows, such open party work has a tendency to induce wild optimism in Militant?s supporters and organisers about Labour being ??nished?.
And this is not just the result of individual excess. It is impossible to rouse halls filled with hundreds of workers and youth to the fight for an independent candidate without calling into question their loyalty to Labour, without effectively getting them to tear up their party cards. In the age of the Polaroid camera and fax machine canvassing for a Militant backed MP is as good as tearing up your card, as Walton showed.

There will be those in Militant who want to go much further than Taaffe in a break from Grant. In the coming months this may manifest itself in the struggle over particular tactical questions, or in the outright call for an independent party. It may even manifest itself in the shape of outright revisionism and anti-Trotskyism, or a collapse towards the SWP by some elements unable to contemplate life as a smaller group.

Trotskyism has not failed: Militant has. Those who want a progressive solution to the factional struggle must make a clean break with the method of Militant, elaborated over forty years of centrist disorientation and opportunist practice, and look to the genuine Trotskyism of the LRCI.