



The British Working Class and Its Party

Agreed in 1971 at the Party's second Congress, and adopted subsequently as its programme.

With the original preface by Reg Birch, and a new one written in 2001.

New preface, January 2001

This document, agreed thirty years ago at the Party's second Congress, was adopted subsequently as its programme. It has remained so ever since, unchanged, because its fundamental tenets are as true and important today as they were then.

Since it was written, the world has changed. The collapse and break up of the Soviet Union have altered the political map world-wide. Capitalism appears rampant, its power and penetration global.

But capitalism is in truth weak, because its only answer to the world's problems of poverty, hunger, war and pollution, is more exploitation for greater profit. Human knowledge and technology are advancing more rapidly than ever, bringing vast leaps in our capacity to meet people's needs and aspirations, yet the capitalist mode of production is incapable of delivering the progress workers need, deserve and could provide if they took power. And the capitalist class fears the working class, which it knows can eject it from Britain. The lesson of the Russian Revolution of 1917 remains as sharp today as ever.

Nowhere is this more clearly shown than here in Britain. Here, the "free" market wrecks our country's infrastructure, and skilled, highly productive workers are thrown out of their jobs while manufacture moves abroad. Capitalism makes war on British workers because they could destroy it tomorrow. And through its attacks on our industry and sovereignty makes war on Britain, because that is our home.

Workers have the solutions to these problems, if they choose to seek them. In applying Marxist analysis to Britain, this programme outlines why a Communist Party is as vital today for Britain as it was when it was written. We do not take the easy way by bidding for popularity, avoiding difficult issues, ducking responsibility. The clarity of thought which comes from involvement in struggle, and the courage to express that thought, remain central to the task the Party sets itself in this programme.

The original preface written by our first Chairman, Reg Birch, is reprinted here. Reg Birch played a key role in establishing the initial direction of the Party. After 31 years working as a toolmaker in several London factories, he became an official of the Amalgamated Engineering Union in 1966. For four years he was a member of the General Council of the TUC. He founded the Party in 1968.

Revolution is the main trend

For over 200 years the battle between the classes, i.e. in Britain the working class and the capitalist class, has raged. It has ebbed and flowed according to the strength, understanding and contradiction between these two classes. The working class never ceasing, never surrendering but neither remaining true to its revolutionary origin nor ever totally pursuing that aim without reservation.

“Theories”, suggestions have been proffered from time to time to explain this phenomenon. The truth is that the revolutionary aims of Marxism have been distorted to deliberately corrupt the working class mind, direct it to reformism – even, if allowed, to subservience. The social democrats have filched from us, the workers, our national heritage. Yet they have failed, for the incessant war rages, the classes cannot be reconciled. Today this is more and more clear, the contradictions cannot be concealed, hence revolution is the main trend.

All over the world the struggle continues in many forms at all stages.

In the Middle East, in Latin America, above all in Vietnam, a gallant nation, true to its revolutionary destiny for freedom, socialism and the emancipation of mankind. In Vietnam they have defeated the most powerful military might ever developed by an imperialist power, the strongest today in the world. The U.S.A., driven back, surrounded, unable to extricate, lashes out like a wild beast, a dying beast, crossing borders in attempts to escape, and turning on its own at home.

Two great peoples, nations of peasant and worker joined together point the way — Albania and China. Marxist-Leninist Parties everywhere build daily, fight more strongly.

The struggle in Britain so constantly denigrated as “economic” is as organic and necessary to revolution as the gun, just as is the fight for land, bread and liberty for the peasants in other lands. It is corrupting only if it becomes an attempt to live with the opposite class, the capitalist class.

This is not possible when Heath — in a covert declaration of war against our class — says the new danger to the fabric of society is Civil War. Only the destruction of the class for which he speaks, the overthrow of the capitalist state power, will suffice. Violence is not the monopoly of a capitalist state and class. The answer to attack is attack, hit harder. Guided by Marxism-Leninism with a revolutionary party so directed we shall meet the struggle and establish workers' power.

We must see the great developments of Marxism-Leninism through the teaching of Mao Tsetung, which led the great Chinese people to victory and to develop socialism. These developments of that great teacher are not for the Chinese alone, they are part of the universal truth of Marxism-Leninism; adapted, they apply everywhere in the world of revolutionary struggle according to the region or country and are a living great extension of Marxism-Leninism today for which we are eternally indebted.

Be not afraid, we are not alone, the world of workers is rising and fighting back.

Revolution is the main trend.

REG BIRCH Chairman

The British working class and its party

All political organisations in Britain and all institutions have it in common that they are for the preservation of capitalism in some form or other. From the Rightest reactionaries to the Leftist reformists the common aim is to live with the system and make it work. The only exception is the one Party whose aim is the revolutionary overthrow of capitalist class power and its replacement by the dictatorship of the proletariat for the building of socialism. That is us, the Communist Party of Britain (Marxist-Leninist).

We cannot accomplish our aim without an understanding of the forces in our society, how they are in contradiction, and how to develop and intensify those contradictions in such a way that the ruling class cannot continue and will have power taken from them by the working class. We must also be clear as to the role of our Party in that struggle and its relation to the working class which alone is the force that can destroy capitalism.

Class struggle in Britain

Class struggle has always existed since there were classes to struggle. The interests of the classes, and in Britain there are only two — those who sell their labour power and those who exploit the labour of others — are so opposed as to make struggle inevitable. Workers accept this as a fact without acknowledging the logical historical conclusion. We who claim political clarity must relate to the class struggle not simply to be able to explain that question which puzzles Marxists abroad — why is the oldest and most experienced proletariat so lacking in political acumen — but to change this situation.

Before coming in detail to the class struggle in Britain and the role of our Party we must dispense with the idea that there is no struggle or that it has been “toned down”. The case has been glibly argued, usually to explain the better wages and conditions in Britain than in her colonies, that the working class became a partner of capitalism in imperialist plunder and was rewarded with the “crumbs” of this plunder in the form of wage increases and various welfare benefits (free education, council housing, health service, etc.). The working class was therefore content to live in peace with its own capitalist class.

We repudiate this idea totally. First, there is not today and has never been such a peace declared. The working class lives in a state of perpetual guerrilla conflict with the employers. The level of struggle has varied according to region, according to industry and according to the political understanding of the workers concerned but it has never ceased. Second, wage increases have been won in the course of this struggle. No employer has ever conceded “crumbs” to workers out of benevolence; any improvement has been extorted from him by the mass strength and tactical ingenuity of the workers. Third, welfare measures were no gifts but were paid for by taxes on workers' wages. They suited capitalism because in a highly industrialised economy literate, healthy workers can be exploited all the more intensively.

The truth is that the more highly industrialised a country is, the more productive is its labour power and the greater is the value produced by its working class. Workers are able through

struggle to make some inroads into this value they create in the form of wage increases – inroads which could not have been made in a non-industrialised economy where the value has not been created. Poverty, therefore, is far greater in the colonial non-industrialised world than it is in a country like Britain. Yet the form that poverty takes varies depending upon the level of industrialisation, and there is scarcely a worker in Britain who is more than one wage-packet away from extreme destitution. But if absolute poverty is less in Britain than in the colonial world, the exploitation is no less, for what the workers produce is stolen by the capitalists.

Imperialism, the highest form of capitalism, is stronger than national capitalism. It follows that an imperialist power fights on all fronts as a predator; equally it is the more flexible by virtue of its power. Its organic aim is to encircle and enslave all within its orbit. Nevertheless that flexibility which enables it to advance on one front as against another from time to time constitutes a great weakness as well as a strength. But as Marxists we can never say that because it does not continually wage war on all fronts, in all regions wherever it is, that its inability to do so or its greater pre-occupation with one area as against another is in any form a suggestion of leniency to the whole or any part thereof, leave alone any idea that it is ever open to that power to bribe, corrupt or appease any section, because of the irreconcilable class conflict it engenders. It is axiomatic that reaction abroad breeds reaction at home: witness today the greatest imperialist power, the U.S.A. — the more inextricably engulfed in Vietnam the more vicious and reactionary it is at home. This is a natural law.

The different forms and different degrees of exploitation and poverty in the industrialised imperialist countries and the non-industrialised colonies should blind no-one to the fact that in essence they are the same wherever encountered. There is an irreconcilable antagonism between working people the world over and the imperialist monopolies that exploit and oppress. In Britain this antagonism has never ceased to generate class struggle at the point of production.

As situations have changed for the British ruling class they have always been able to adapt in order to continue their power to exploit. British capitalism has withstood many severe crises, it is no longer one of the major imperialist powers, but it has still managed to preserve its power. Through its various phases its interests have brought it into conflict with the workers sometimes in a mass form and all the time in sporadic class battles wherein workers have struggled to defend some gain or secure some immediate advantage. Capitalism has always managed to avoid the decisive class conflict in which not just its means to regulate its system is challenged but the system itself.

Trade unions and class struggle

In every industrial country save Britain there is relative industrial peace. Here every agreement is but an armistice and tomorrow is the war. That is because in Britain the birth of the Trade Unions was the birth of dignity for our class. They were not in origin a bourgeois institution, nor are they today in the mass; hence the perpetual conflict between mass and “leaders”. In Britain, the oldest industrial country, the Trade Unions developed as organs of class struggle with no other purpose. They were established in conspiracy and against the law. All the forces of the state were employed to destroy them, and today when the exercise of the normal functions of the Trade Unions poses a serious threat politically and economically to the ruling class, that class wields state power to render these functions illegal and punishable. The Trade Union despite all the efforts of the ruling class is still in Britain a working class organ and weapon made up of that class and is not part of the establishment – no more so than going to work for capitalism makes us capitalist or part of capitalism. Because

some individuals become or seek to become bourgeoisified it does not mean our class is so. The question before the working class at present, and only our Party raises it, is why is it that the ruling class as weak as it is can threaten the life of the Trade Unions and not the Trade Unions threaten the life of the ruling class. Our answer is this: of course the Trade Unions will not destroy capitalism. They are organs of mass struggle but they are not revolutionary organs and never were.

The most backward aspect of trade unionism is shown by their creation, the Labour Party. The Trade Unions, born out of struggle, gave birth to the Labour Party which has always denied and betrayed struggle. This Labour Party which was created to defend and advance the workers' interests has never done anything politically but to betray its class origins. Its efforts in recent time to put shackles on the Trade Unions for the self same purpose as the Tories is only one of its manifestations as a party of the establishment, part of the system, an arm of the state. The mass abstention at the 1970 general election was a sign that more workers than ever now see, because it is now so clear, the real role of Social

Democracy. The historical relationship of the Labour Party to the Trade Unions is not paralleled in any other country and should be seen as more important in relation to the failure of the British working class to develop politically than any other factor.

The revisionist Communist Part of Great Britain in terms of its own platform as well as its performance in the class struggle and the Trade Unions differs only from Social Democracy in appearance and phraseology and even that difference is becoming noticeably narrower. Its "peaceful co-existence", "unity of the left", etc., only add up to the concept of living with capitalism and not destroying it. To destroy capitalism or to live with it is the touchstone and point of departure. Our position is clear but so long as it is only clear to us and not to the mass, capitalism will survive whatever the form, be it called bourgeois democracy or fascism. All the signposts today point to the development of the Corporate State. Our role therefore becomes all the more urgent.

The party and class struggle

We alone do not see class struggles as ends in themselves for if we do we are no different to the others who seek to live with the system. But while we do not get the struggle for the bits and pieces out of perspective we cannot ignore it, more than that, we have to be, and be seen to be, part of that struggle; but how?

We cannot relate to class battles as sympathisers, cheerleaders, commentators. Neither can we be judged in relation to class struggle by what we say about ourselves. Whether the struggle is in factory, Trade Union, school, university or wherever the ruling class or its agents are challenged we cannot be effective unless we are involved. Such involvement entails a proper understanding of the role of the Party in relation to the mass. The Party line must be a mass line or we are only posturing and phrasemongering.

There can be no acceptance of our Party by the working class as a political leadership unless we show the working class from the standpoint of their own experience not only that we are the most advanced section of the working class in the day to day tactical struggle with capitalism but also the necessity to relate all struggles to the central issue of class power. Nobody else will persuade the workers that as necessary as it is to fight the class enemy the economic gains of all types of struggle are temporary and in the long run illusory. The true gains are political and consist in the ideological clarity that can be won in such struggle.

In the conduct of economic struggles we must be seen as the most astute in terms of tactics, practising as well as teaching the lessons we have learned. Showing our readiness to learn from the workers as well as instruct. Showing courage but not adventurism, leading but never tailing. Leading, but in such a way as not to be separated from the mass and all the time seeking to take from among the working class in struggle the best, the most intelligent, honest and courageous to form a vanguard which alone can relate all tactical issues to the central strategy of the conquest of power. We must be able to bring to the working class, who have a long history of struggle often involving much sacrifice, the understanding that perpetual defence involves permanent subjection, that the class war expressed in economic struggles has to be a guerrilla war, a protracted offensive related to a strategy of utter defeat for the class enemy. The alternative is the class collaboration so well epitomised by Labour governments and all the erstwhile working class leaders bedecked with knighthoods and peerages.

Nobody else knows the British working class as we do, its history of struggle and betrayal, the false trails, the easy ways out, the illusions many still remaining. Nobody else can do what we set out to do.

The party of the working class

Our Party, founded by industrial workers, must be a part of our class, must in every sense belong to our class. If we say such a party is based on the working class as it must be to be revolutionary, then it cannot be above the working class, an intellectual force based on the theory of Marx separate from the working class. In fact the intellect and the leadership must come from the working class, for it is this class force that makes revolution possible. In a word, Marxism is not a separate theory, an intellectual force to be bestowed on the working class but is, in fact, a derivative of that class.

Often the assertion that the working class is the force for revolution, that they make the revolution, is largely lip service. It is rather considered that a revolutionary party is made up of special men whose knowledge of Marxist theory is a peculiar and unique study to be doled out to those more ignorant as the guiding spirit given a revolutionary situation. This concept is wrong, for it must of necessity make the theory of revolution the special art of a few and not that of the people, and must imply that the motive force, i.e. the working class, are inspired by the environmental situation and respond emotionally in anger and protest to revolution without knowing why, and that this ignorance is corrected by Marxist-Leninist theory supplied by an elite body, i.e. the Party. This is in contradiction with the premise that the working class is a revolutionary force. It cannot be if it does not know the how and why of revolution.

Without our Party understands this relationship to the working class and accepts the conclusions and conducts this task it cannot be a revolutionary party. In our desire to identify ourselves as of the proletariat superficial approaches must be avoided. To say students must go into the factories to integrate with the workers is patronising. Equally, to define white-collar and professional workers as petty bourgeois is adolescent and reactionary. In this, the oldest and most proletarianised of capitalist countries, all the intermediate classes left over by feudalism have been absorbed into the proletariat, as has the peasantry. There are more and more while collar workers in industry and latterly there has been a growing trade union development among teachers, draughtsmen, scientific workers and others. They have fought against classification as bosses men and for equality gradings with industrial workers.

To say three cheers for every strike is another superficial approach. You cannot be truly

identified with a strike unless you are on strike also. What is required is that the mass, the strikers, are motivated to make revolution, which means they must be led by revolutionaries from their own ranks. Above all, the action they are taking, even though not of a revolutionary character, must be strategically sound and tactically well conducted. Then the class struggle itself will be the necessary teacher. It follows that we must recruit from these skilled class warriors and that the party must be made up in cadre force overwhelmingly with these leaders. It follows also that we have the task of assisting them in strategy and tactics, in the analyses that will create such action, for there is no such thing as a hand-picked natural Marxist.

To believe that sympathy with strike action will proletarianise the party is to suggest that association makes identity, very like guilt by association. Particularly could the latter be true when strikes are ill conceived, tactically misdirected. It is our job to assist – more, ours to be of, i.e. have Marxists in such action and where possible to lead. If all we ever do is sit by and rest on the general objective that all class struggle is good, how are we leading? At best we applaud spontaneity. If that action results in defeat as it frequently does (which is not of itself a criterion, remembering that defeats are temporary, that in ultimate it is a question of losing a battle but going on to win the war), and if from lack of understanding or ineptitude it results in the demoralisation of that force then we who associate uncritically without assisting compound that demoralisation, and will ultimately ourselves be demoralised. When there are setbacks, to explain that this is due to the treachery of Trade Union officials is too facile. It is done to excuse ourselves and is also excusing the ignorance of the whole section in struggle which is unpardonable, and also contributes to the theory that workers do not know what or why they are doing to be so misled, which again brings us back to the question of revolution. What if we substitute a Party in treachery for the Trade Union leaders in treachery? We cannot so be if we are part of that revolutionary force, the working class. For when they know the what or why, they cannot be betrayed. They will destroy the counter-revolutionary which is what our Party would be if it betrayed.

The unmistakeable conclusion is that our task is nothing less than to change the ideology of our class. To do this we have to convey our politic to the mass through our Party and not just through the agency of some "broad front". To the extent we do this in the right way we render the working class immune from the ideology of capitalism and its agents in the form of social democracy and revisionism. In all our struggles we must seize every opportunity to relate Marxist-Leninist theory to the practice of the working class. Only thus shall we, the workers, make the change in the ideology of this working class of Britain, which has demonstrated all the way since Tolpuddle and before that all it lacks is its own ideology and has yet to discover that that ideology is Marxism-Leninism. We must therefore judge all our efforts against the contribution made to this end, for if we do not then our efforts will only perpetuate the confusion of thought which alone has held back the British working class for so long.