



# Labour's misspent youth

supplement

## THE LPYS TODAY

### 1965-'79

#### 1965: Transport House's new constitution

AFTER THE *Keep Left* breakaway in February 1965, many thought it possible that the YS would be scrapped entirely. The NEC reorganised it instead.

The Blackpool conference of the Labour Party, meeting in October 1965, accepted proposals from Labour's NEC to change the constitution of the LPYS so that:

- YS NC members would be appointed by the regional Labour Parties, not elected by conference;
- there should be no discussion of politics, no general political resolutions for conference, only motions dealing with special youth problems,
- delegates to YS conference would have to be ratified by their local parties.

Even *Tribune* commented: "The decision of the Labour Party conference to accept the NEC's new constitution for the YS is stupid in the extreme. In effect the YS is converted by the NEC's decision from a reasonably responsible body to a glorified youth club" (quoted, *Keep Left*, October 1965)

Five million votes supported the NEC proposal; 800,000 opposed it, 200,000 of them union votes. This meant that constituency votes were cast three-to-one against the NEC. This adult party support was to help the youth to work free of most of the NEC shackles.

The first conference under the new constitution (and the first since Easter 1964) was set for November 1965, at Malvern. 243 branches sent delegates (there had been 347 delegates at Brighton, Easter 1964). In the course of the conference the delegates went a long way towards ripping up the new constitution, thus preserving the YS as something of a political youth movement.

The bureaucracy was forced to allow a debate on foreign policy at conference, against their own new rules. By 117 to 99 votes the Labour Party policy document 'Rebuilding Britain' was rejected. Instead a motion saying the government was following Tory financial policies and had reneged on its election promises was passed. So were calls for nationalisation under workers' control. The Labour Government's capitulation to the immigration control lobby was condemned.

At a private session the delegates, by a very large majority, rejected the new constitution — on all points.

## workers' ACTION

by Jack Cleary and Neil Cobbett

The platform had to respond to the determination of delegates to deal with politics either by closing down the conference or by bending. It bent, for the most part. On the second day the platform successfully blocked resolutions being taken on Vietnam, Rhodesia and anti-union laws (which the government was threatening) — but the LPYS had survived.

The Malvern conference registered 605 YS branches in existence, 117 less than the 1964 conference. Since in many areas rump branches survived despite severe losses in the split, and a number of dead branches would still be on the books, it would be misleading to judge the effects of the split only from the absolute fall in the number of branches. Actual numbers of individual members are difficult to get hold of. In 1970, the official report said that the average membership of YS branches was 12; in 1972 it was said to be 18, in 1973, 8. An average of 12 in 1965 (perhaps on the high side) would give a figure of about 7,500 left out of a claimed 25,000 at the Easter 1964 conference (which was also probably an inflated figure, in terms of real membership).

#### The YS Left after 1965

THE RIGHT-WING and/or careerist section of the YS was encouraged by the split, of course. The 1965 Skegness rally saw Government ministers speaking to the YS to applause, not barracking. For the left, the split and its aftermath caused considerable turmoil, as *Keep Left* tried to make the choice of remaining in the LPYS as difficult as possible by making the departure of its supporters as nasty as possible and forcing expulsions wherever they could. *Keep Left* succeeded in scattering the forces of the Grant tendency, in particular, on its way out of the YS.

In September 1963 the Grant tendency had split from *Young Guard*. When that month's Editorial Board meeting rejected a proposal to make their venerable Youth Charter (dating from about 1949) the basis of *Young Guard*, the supporters of that document from Liverpool and London walked out. Most likely they just got tired of the politically invisible role that was theirs within *YG* and decided to get out. From October 1964, *Militant* appeared as an 8-pager, the most promising 'new start' for their tendency for a long time. Initially it had the active collaboration of the future IMG (and future IWC) and also of a segment of ex-SLLers, Roger Protz, Gavin Kennedy, Bob Pennington, etc. All of these broke with *Militant* and denounced it over the 'Mani affair' in early 1965.

Mani, business manager of *Militant*, moved the expulsion of three *Keep Lefters* from Wandsworth YS, and, to give the business its proper flavour, in the course of the evening the right wing sent for the police to control the *KLers*. Mani and *Militant* insisted that the politics of the *KLers* did not come into it. The issue was the 'hooliganism' of *Keep Left*. It

was right to join the right wing in pushing out 'ultra-lefts' provided one could define them for one's own conscience as hooligans.

This was dangerous nonsense, and it disrupted *Militant's* own forces, causing the definitive break with the future IMG. Yet it illustrates the dilemma of the left which opposed *Keep Left's* perspectives: to allow themselves to be dragged into a break with the Labour Party, or, if not, how to avoid it? The dilemma was real enough to confuse people. It certainly confused poor Mani: while *Militant's* leaders continued to defend him passionately, he decided he had been wrong and denounced himself!

Oidium attached to *Militant* because of the Mani incident. But the central division on the left arose from how to respond to the Labour Government's policies and activities — how far to go in opposition. *Militant* responded to the Government by making very low-level general propaganda about socialism, and was determined to avoid clashes with the bureaucracy. *Young Guard* was more militant and combative, more focused on the struggle now than on the future socialist perspectives for Labour which preoccupied the *Militant*. *Young Guard* reacted with increasing anger against the Government: the only anger the leaders of *Militant* ever showed was against the less passive left.

#### The politics of Militant

IN ESSENCE the specific politics of *Militant* (apart from some general and for the most part common ideas about socialism) amounted to a commitment to a view of the future evolution of the labour movement and Labour Party into a mass revolutionary movement — and the relevant word is evolution. It required centrally of its supporters that they accept this view of the future, as well as making general socialist propaganda and integrating themselves into the labour movement as it existed and its routine practice, with a view to citizenship in the movement while it evolved. All that socialists could or should try to do to help it evolve was make patient explanations and propaganda for 'the perspective'.

The *Militant* saw themselves as waiting for 'the perspective' to grow, develop, mature, ripen. In this process the class struggle can be at best the excuse for a sermon about socialism.

Moreover, 'the perspective' said that as the labour movement ripened, the 'next stage', which was inevitable and could not be bypassed (the big crime of the SLL was seen to be that it tried to bypass it) was the development of a 'mass

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# 1959-1965: How Keep Left fought Transport House

## Introduction. 1959: the Marxists and the Labour movement

THE HISTORY of the Labour Party youth movement is also the history of the growth, struggle and defeat or neutering of militant Marxist tendencies within it (real, or counterfeiting as with the Stalinists in the 1930s and, to an extent, *Militant* today).

The British Labour Party at its best has been a reformist party. For decades it has been a bulwark of class collaboration and of the capitalist system. In government it has sometimes been the main bulwark; as an opposition it has consistently been loyal and Parliament-focused, doing its best to limit class conflict.

But youth — working class youth and often even petty bourgeois youth who are at all attracted to socialism and the working class movement — are least inclined for Labour Party time-serving, for tepidity, or for settling into a soulless round of petty reformism. The *ideas* and the vision of a socialist society to replace capitalism attract them; the experience of the working class and the special oppression of youth in our present system repel them and easily breed a desire to overthrow capitalism. Thus there is normally a rooted antagonism between layers (at least) of socialist youth and the right wing and its bureaucracy. (There are also usually to be found layers of careerist youth: in the '60s you could see them smoking Harold Wilson pipes!)

Into this situation, the Marxists, often very small groups, have thrust their explanations of class society and their programme of class struggle. Labour youth have responded eagerly. Conflict with the dominant political ideas of the reformist Labour Party and the Party bureaucracy, following inevitably, has more than once destroyed or seriously maimed the youth movement.

The 20-year history of the Labour Party Young Socialists since it was reconstituted by the Labour leadership in the wake of their third successive electoral defeat in October 1959 is also, and centrally, the history of a number of competing Trotskyist tendencies: their relationship with other members of the YS, with Transport House, and with each other. (The Stalinists, the main 'Marxist' current in the YS in the '30s, are not now important as an organised Labour Party tendency, though their ideas have great weight on the Labour Party left and occasionally influence the youth). Apart from the history of these Trotskyist tendencies — the SLL (WRP) or Healy tendency, the IS (SWP) or Cliff tendency, the *Militant* (Grant tendency) and others — the story of Labour's youth in the 60s and 70s is not comprehensible.

In 1959 the revolutionary Marxist movement consisted of one major tendency, possessing a continuous tradition, a cadre, a serious organisation, and an implantation in the labour movement, including industrially — the SLL, numbering a few hundred members — and a number of tiny groupings, without a cadre except for one or two leading figures and with little organisation or implantation in the labour movement to speak of. The *Socialist Review* group (later IS and then the SWP) had a few dozen members. It was a mainly middle-class group, organised loosely as a series of discussion circles. From 1959 to '68 it got ever more loose as it grew. It did not then consider itself Trotskyist or Leninist.

The Grant tendency, the prehistoric ancestors of what mutated into the present *Militant* tendency, also numbered a few dozen people, and was probably in a worse state than *Socialist Review*, unable to keep a four-page printed paper

going except sporadically, unable even to find the energy to contribute to a joint paper which they started with *Socialist Review* in 1961.

The seeds of the IMG had just separated from the Grant tendency.

The SLL was launched as an open organisation in February 1959 — and immediately proscribed by Transport House, together with its small weekly paper, *The Newsletter*. To sell the *Newsletter* was to risk expulsion from the Labour Party.

The SLL had been formed from the merger of that Trotskyist group, led by Gerry Healy, which began working in the Labour Party in 1948, and a large number of workers and intellectuals who broke with Stalinism after the Khrushchev revelations on Stalin's tyranny at the 20th Congress of the CPSU in 1956 and then the brutal Russian suppression of the Hungarian uprising at the end of that year. The Healy tendency converted some hundreds from the ten or fifteen thousand who broke with the CPGB in 1956 and '57 to Trotskyism, and made the greatest step forward any Trotskyist group in the world had made for well over a decade. It was strong enough to call five hundred workers, many shop stewards, to its industrial rank and file conference in 1958, even before it launched the open organisation, the SLL.

The setting up of the SLL actually marked a new departure from the previous practice of Labour Party work by the Healy tendency, in which there had been no public presence for the Marxists. For three years, after the paper *Socialist Outlook* was banned in 1954, they did not even have a paper of their own, though they did very important work in industry, especially in the ports and in engineering, despite this. Their experience after 1956 convinced them that to build an organisation capable of tackling the tasks of Marxists as regards the trade unions, the Labour Party, and open recruitment, it was necessary to combine having a public face — even if the Labour Party bureaucracy disapproved — with continued work in the mass party of the trade unions, the Labour Party.

Thus, in the newly re-established youth movement, three of the tendencies that had survived from the collapse of the Revolutionary Communist Party at the end of the 1940s found themselves working and competing in the same organisation again.

All were factional. Whenever there was talk of unity (for example, from the Cliff tendency) it was a *factional* posture by the most uninhibited and unscrupulous of factionalists. The Grant tendency was so venomously hostile to the Healy tendency that it refused to specifically oppose the proscription of the SLL (on the grounds that they did not agree with setting it up). On the Liverpool Trades Council they supported a centrist resolution which evaded the concrete issue by opposing bans and proscriptions *in general*, but not specially the one just enacted. Earlier, in 1954, when the editor of *Socialist Outlook* and one of his comrades (Bill and Ray Hunter) were being expelled from the Labour Party in East Islington, Ted Grant *abstained* (though he did not, as later WRP lies have it, vote for expulsion).

The personal and factional animosities ran very deep and came sharply alive again in the YS. Nor was the SLL the most factional — the others were. Beginning much smaller than the SLL, they combined among themselves and with Tribunitians and others against the Healy tendency, often cutting across the grain of their nominal politics.

To round this picture out it needs to be added that it would not have been possible, because of the character of the Healy regime in the SLL, for the smaller tendencies (had they wanted to) to be in the Trotskyist organisation. (Though, again, to explain the divisions entirely by the Healy regime is to be apolitical. Massive and urgent political questions were the first cause of the divisions; and Healy was entirely right as against Cliff on support for North Korea in 1950, and as against Grant on the need to organise the Labour Party left).

The history of the YS after 1959 can be divided into the periods of domination of the left, first by the SLL, then by the Cliff group (which grew in the early '60s), and finally by the *Militant* (which began to grow in the mid- to late '60s)

## 1960: Clause IV and the Bomb

WHEN THE October 1959 General Election defeat led the Labour leaders to the decision to restart a youth movement with a national structure, what they wanted was a tame, apolitical election machine to serve them. But the youth who began to join the YS were far from apolitical.

A sizeable number of youth sections of Constituency Labour Parties already existed, which had survived as isolated branches after the disbanding of the League of Youth in 1955. There were 262 in 1959. Something of a national link between these youth sections had been kept up through the paper *Keep Left*, which, of course, also influenced them politically.

*Keep Left* was started by the Wembley Leagues of Youth at the end of 1950, and became associated with the Healy tendency in the early '50s. It became a 4-page printed monthly (more or less) at the beginning of 1958.

The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, which began its famous Easter Marches from Aldermaston in 1958, had as many as 50,000 on the march by Easter 1959. In Easter 1960 and 1961 there were 100,000 people at the final rally in Trafalgar Square. Many CNDers were young people — often middle class, but there was a lot of support among left wing trade unionists, too. CNDers flocked into the YS, bringing with them the same politics which shook the Labour Party at the Scarborough Conference of 1960, when victory for unilateral nuclear disarmament split the party wide open.

Right at the beginning of the new youth movement, the leadership of the Party, around Hugh Gaitskell, attempted to amputate even the general aspiration towards a socialist society from the Constitution of the Labour Party: in the wake of the election defeat they tried to make the Labour Party respectable to 'middle of the road' and middle class voters by removing Clause IV. This caused a big reaction against Gaitskell, which ultimately forced him to abandon the attempt. It put the youth on its mettle, too.

From the beginning of the YS and throughout 1960 the controversy over Clause IV raged, and it became clear as the year advanced that there was a serious chance that the Labour conference would commit the Party to a policy of unilateral British renunciation of the H-bomb.

Enormous support had built up for unilateral disarmament since the Norwood resolution, inspired and moved by the Healy tendency, had been defeated at the Brighton conference three years earlier. Unilateralism as Party policy would mean a break with foreign policy bipartisanship and pit the Labour Party against the vital interests of the ruling class. Thus, tension rose through late 1960 as trade union conference after trade union conference fell into line in support of unilateralism in the build-up to the October Party conference at Scarborough.

At Scarborough, unilateralism became Labour Party policy. Hugh Gaitskell flatly refused to be bound by it, and declared in a passionate speech that he would "fight, fight, and fight again, to save the party we love" — i.e. to save it for capitalist politics.

The turmoil until the right wing did win at Blackpool the following year pitched the YS into the thick of battle. The YS was heavily unilateralist and known to be so. 200 Young Socialists, organised by *Keep Left*, had demonstrated outside the Scarborough conference with slogans like: Quit NATO, Close Rocket Bases, Stop Making H-Bombs, and 'Bring Down the Tory H-Bomb Government'.

## 1960-61: Keep Left campaigns against Gaitskell

THE INITIAL PLAN of the Labour Party leaders for the structure of the YS was reported in *Keep Left* (March 1960) as being:

- No conference-elected YS National Committee, but an NC with regional representatives appointed by the Labour Party and three representatives from the Labour Party NEC;
- A ban on discussion of most political issues. Regional federations were initially forbidden to discuss politics, but this rule was ignored and scrapped.

Agitation in the Labour Party during 1960 led Anthony Greenwood, a leading leftist and CNDer on the Labour Party NEC, to promise at conference that there would be no gags on youth. He could not promise YS control of the paper *New Advance* (started in November 1960); it would be edited by an official under direct control of Transport House, though the official would be of YS age. It was not clear when the first YS conference would be held (and until 1962 resolutions to the conference had to be vetted by CLPs).

After the Scarborough left victory, the control of the Labour Party machinery remained in the hands of the right wing and of Hugh Gaitskell. *Keep Left* reacted to the Scarborough decisions with a demand that the left fight to consolidate its victory, as yet a paper victory. It called a conference of its supporters, trade unionists, and young CNDers for November 6th, in Manchester's Free Trade Hall, under the slogan, 'Implement Scarborough Policy'. *Keep Left* for October-November 1960 argued that the Scarborough policy — official Labour policy — was the way to win youth to the YS and to build a mass youth movement. 150 youth, from 47 YS branches, attended the November 6th conference, and pledged themselves to fight for the Scarborough policies. "We have come to bury Gaitskell, not to praise him", said Gavin Kennedy, organiser of *Keep Left* and secretary of Hendon North YS, which sponsored *KL* together with Wembley North. The conference also pledged that if the Labour Party did not call the promised YS conference at Easter 1961, then *Keep Left* would call a YS conference at Whitsun 1961. It was in tune with the atmosphere of the battles of

1960 and the open defiance of Labour conference by the PLP and its leader; it expressed the need to fight for the Scarborough decisions. Yet already here the characteristic note of braggadocio makes its appearance.

The NEC's reaction was swift and sharp. At its meeting of 23 November, 1960, it decided to destroy *Keep Left*. "It is not the function of a branch, or branches, of the YS to issue a journal for national circulation", its representative wrote to Wembley North and Hendon North. They were ordered to cease publication. The keynote for the next four years had been struck.

The Right of the Party was beginning its assault on the unilateralist left with a seemingly easy target. Shortly afterwards, Michael Foot and four other MPs had the Labour whip withdrawn for voting against the Tory Government's Air Estimates. Ernie Roberts, an elected Assistant General Secretary of the AEU, had Transport House approval withdrawn as Labour candidate for Horsham, and was called to account for 400 speeches he had made! As late as 1962, there were attempts to exclude Bertrand Russell and Canon Collins from the Labour Party.

*Keep Left*'s response was as decisive as the NEC's. The December 1960 issue had a banner headline: "Our reply to the disrupters and the witch-hunters on the NEC: we shall not shut down this paper". And just under the masthead was a list of 16 YS branches sponsoring *KL*, where there had been two! By January 1961 there were 27 sponsoring branches; by February, 32; and eventually the sponsors hovered around the 45 mark until *Keep Left* was proscribed in May 1962. This was the strongest argument against the right wing! Many labour movement bodies supported *Keep Left* and protected it. For example, 250 delegates to Liverpool Trades Council unanimously defended *Keep Left*'s right to publish.

## 1960-61: Keep Left sets out to build the mass YS branches

WHILE FRANTICALLY organising to defend their paper, *Keep Left* supporters also turned outwards to build mass working class YS branches. A turn was made away from inward-looking small discussion-circle type branches, towards organising branches which combined social activities for working class youth with some often elementary politics.

Wigan YS, existing in a small and dull town richly endowed with Labour Clubs and their facilities, was the pioneer here. Organising dances, the original nucleus of half a dozen politics soon recruited 300 kids to the YS.

*Keep Left* had previously opposed attempting to 'compete with the social facilities available under capitalism'. Like the other tendencies, it had a sectarian-propagandist bias towards comparing and discussing 'line' and fine points of theory and analysis, rather than taking its political line into the working class youth to fight for it there. The 'mass YS' policy provoked the hostility and jeers of other YS leftists, more concerned with having exclusive circles of friends and congenial fellow 'thinkers' than with organising working class youth. In fact, it did prove possible in many areas to 'refine' from mass YSs a hard core of working class kids who developed politically and got involved in campaigns and struggles. The policy meant that the hard-core *Keep Left* supporters had to transform themselves from smug, book-

ish, often self-satisfied contemplators and 'thinkers' into people who could talk on all the varied levels required to the *real raw material of a YS movement*, take up their concerns, draw them into activity. It was often very difficult — for some people it proved impossible — but it was an antidote to the sort of frozen impotence that can be seen gripping the LPYS today.

A spokesman for the *Keep Left* tendency put the policy like this: "Building large YS branches, initially from socials, is not easy... Anyone who thinks because he can quote from volume 2 of the Selected Works of Lenin that he is better than the young working class boys and girls who come to rock and roll, is not just on the wrong foot — he is on the wrong planet. We must realise that these young people are potentially the future leaders of the labour movement".

The policy allowed *Keep Left* to mobilise working class youth, and, ultimately, it explains how they came to dominate the YS. In the context of a bitter three-way fight in the YS, the 'raw youth' were, it is true, often counterposed to the sort of discussions of political perspectives which were essential to the development of a realistic as well as a militant youth movement. And, in the exigencies of the faction fight, *Keep Left* cadres may sometimes have been manipulative with the raw youth. But that was created by the situation of intense warfare and Transport House harassment; it was not something intrinsic to the drive to turn out to working class kids. It was that drive which marked the *Keep Left* youth out as a serious revolutionary tendency.

If in the end nothing good came of this policy, and little was consolidated, it was because of the weak side of the *Keep Left*/SLL tendency, which led ultimately to a grotesque degeneration.

## 1961-62: Keep Left versus Young Guard

THE FIRST Y.S. conference did take place at Easter 1961, and was relatively free of restraints. Through 1960 Labour Party youth groups had multiplied almost threefold, and by Easter 1961 721 YS branches were registered. 381 delegates attended the conference. Politics could be discussed. A National Committee was elected by conference on the basis of regional blocks of delegates simultaneously electing a representative from each of 11 regions — though, meeting quarterly, the NC was very much in the hands of the full time officials and was not really free to campaign on YS conference decisions when they conflicted with adult Labour Party policy.

The conference was a pitched battle between Transport House and *Keep Left* for influence over the non-committed delegates.

The conference voted 222 to 97 against NATO and for unilateral disarmament. A vote of no confidence in Hugh Gaitskell was carried by 189 to 113. Roger Protz, the editor of *New Advance*, circulated a personal statement against the bureaucratic running of the paper, and was forcibly kept from the microphone. The witch-hunt of *Keep Left* continued. Right-winger Ray Gunter denounced *Keep Left* for criticising Aneurin Bevan, recently dead and already a labour movement saint. In Bevan's life-time, Gunter had tried to have him expelled! Demagoguery won, and by 172 to 148 a motion deploring the attack on *Keep Left* was lost. There was only one *Keep Left* representative on the National Committee, Liz Thompson.

In the heat of the conference, a number of the left currents disagreeing with *Keep Left* decided to pool resources

and publish a new journal. *Young Guard* began to appear six months later, in September 1961. This split in the left had big consequences. Most of the supporters of *Young Guard* considered themselves Marxists. *Rebel*, the paper of the Cliff tendency, amalgamated with *Rally*, the duplicated publication put out by the Labour Party supporters of Ted Grant's tendency. The 'Nottingham tendency', forerunners of the present IMG, which had recently separated from Grant, was involved. Left reformists from *New Left Review* and the *Voice of the Unions*, like Paul Rose, also enlisted. The war between *Keep Left* and *Young Guard* was from now on to be often as bitter as *Keep Left*'s war with the bureaucrats.

Despite its coalition character, politically *Young Guard* was in fact heavily a Cliff tendency paper. In 1962-3 it was perhaps the *main paper* of that tendency, together with *International Socialism* journal. *Labour Worker*, which they also published, was narrowly syndicalist by comparison.

All the successive editors of *Young Guard* were Cliffites. The Grant tendency did not withdraw from *Young Guard* until September 1963, but was little in evidence politically (though one of its people, Keith Dickinson, was business manager). It was left to some of the 'Nottingham tendency' and a Scottish tendency organised by Harry Selby (recently MP for Govan) to provide any opposition to Cliff's 'state-capitalist' tendency.

*Keep Left* believed in building a serious Marxist organisation within the labour movement, and that the time to work at it was at hand. *Young Guard*'s majority rejected the very idea. Many *Young Guards* considered Stalinism to be the product of Bolshevism, and a 'Leninist party' to be a Stalinist abomination. (Some of the features of the Healy organisation reinforced them in such ideas). The dominant note was pacifist and 'unadulterated' CNDism.

The Cliffites explained war as being tied to capitalism because arms production kept capitalism going, and developed from this link a bland pacifist-socialist conclusion that socialism was necessary and that CNDers should come into the workers' movement, i.e. the Labour Party and YS. They produced New Year greeting cards in 1963 with the same slogan as the CP: 'For Peace and Socialism'. Both Russia and the USA, they argued, were equally capitalist. Third World struggles might perhaps be supported, but were not centrally important.

*Keep Left* explained the drive to war in terms of imperialism, and considered support for the colonial struggles decisive. Moreover, states like the Soviet Union and China were not capitalist, but degenerated and deformed workers' states.

Obviously the *Young Guard* tendency was best suited to coexist with the CND and Committee of 100 and recruit from that milieu and from those generally 'socialist' but not committed to building a fighting organisation here and now. The Cliffites did not believe much could be done until they developed a perspective of industrial work, in the mid-1960s. Capitalism was stable, and would remain so for many years. This view is now sometimes presented as the *Young Guard* coalition being realistic, as against *Keep Left*, which considered a major crisis of capitalism as more or less always imminent (or in progress). In fact YG were no more realistic in assessment than *KL*. Believing that capitalism was indefinitely expanding and stable, they were bitterly disappointed after 1964 that the Labour Government did not deliver reforms to the working class. They joined with pacifists and right-wingers in demagogic campaigns against the Trotskyists because the latter were for defending the USSR and China against imperialism and were thus unwilling to call for Russian disarmament.

The defence of the Soviet Union was a major issue in the YS, not on the level of discussion among Marxists, but of a demagogic pandering to CND prejudices by *Young Guard*. Essentially the Cliffites, pacifists, and Tribunitians said to the Trotskyists: You have no right to oppose British capitalism's H-Bomb unless you oppose Russia's. The Grant tendency agreed with *Keep Left* on the question, but threw their weight behind the Cliff group: *Young Guard* carried the Cliff line while the Grant group kept their mouths shut.

The most central error of the Healy tendency, an error that shaped its whole future, was its inability to make an objective Marxist evaluation of the Cuban Revolution which unfolded after 1959. Yet even with this handicap *Keep Left* emerge as revolutionaries on Cuba, as against *Young Guard*.

*Young Guard* maintained relations with the Young People's Socialist League, the youth group of the small US social democratic sect rightly known as 'State Department socialists'. (The US cousin-group of the Cliffites, Shachtman's tendency, had joined the social democrats at the end of the '50s). They were bitter enemies of the Cuban revolution. *Young Guard*'s regular correspondent was one Sergio Janco, a genuine anti-Castro Cuban exile, whining and venomously hostile to the revolution that was going on in Cuba, although he subscribed to some social democratic notion of an ideal future socialism!

In the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, when President Kennedy was threatening to drop H-Bombs on Cuba if the USSR did not remove rockets which the Cuban government wanted in Cuba, the *Newsletter* came out with headlines: 'Say No to Yankee War', 'Hands off Cuba!', 'Defend the USSR'. *Young Guard* shouted: "Our demand is, 'All hands off Cuba'. No war over Cuba". But without the Russians' 'hands' (of course serving their own interests) the USA would have squashed the Cuban Revolution!

In *Young Guard*, a certain Paul Foot explained the Cliffite pacifist view, during the controversy that followed with Dave Abilt of the 'Nottingham tendency' (the Grant tendency was as usual silent) as follows: "Better 'all hands off Cuba' than 'more rockets for the Cuban workers'". In the actual situation of a great revolution menaced by a powerful enemy, this meant surrender to the power of imperialism if imperialism upped the stakes enough. It was a good explicit expression of the crass pacifism in which the Cliff tendency dabbled at this period (\*).

\* Paradoxically the pacifist/CND period prepared the way for its own inversion and for the overthrow of one of the dogmas on which the Cliffites founded their tendency. When the Vietnam war flared up, with the giant American war power trying to pulverise the Vietnamese, there was (to their credit) a great revulsion in previously CND circles, and many swung behind the slogans 'For the NLF'. The Cliffites did, too, effortlessly, in 1965. In principle it is impossible to separate Vietnam from Korea, opposition to support for which led to Cliff's split from Trotskyism. And Vietnam, like Cuba in 1962, could have led to nuclear war.

**Keep Left**  
The Paper for Socialist Youth

SPONSORED BY: BARKING, BLABY & DISTRICT, BULWELL, BURY, CARLTON, CATHCART, COVENTRY, DAGENHAM, EALING SOUTH, EAST SALFORD, EDINBURGH CENTRAL, EDINBURGH NORTH, GORTON, GOVAN & GORBALS, HACKNEY CENTRAL, HENDON NORTH, HENDON SOUTH, IRVINE, NORTH KENSINGTON, ORMSKIRK, RUTHERGLEN, SOUTHGATE, URMSTON, WEMBLEY NORTH, WEST DERBY, WIGAN AND WOLVERHAMPTON YOUTH SOCIALIST BRANCHES.

January, 1961

# Merseyside Labour Says: WITHDRAW THE BAN IMMEDIATELY

## Wigan Young Socialists Recruit 300 (See p.3)

THE Liverpool Trades and Labour Council, one of the largest of its kind in the country, decided unanimously at its January 19 meeting to support the right of Labour youth to publish *Keep Left*.

Over 250 delegates, including Mr. John Braddock and Mrs. Bessie Braddock MP, accepted the following resolution.

That this Trades Council and Labour Party condemn the attack on *Keep Left*, a Young Socialist newspaper. It considers that this action of ordering the Hendon North and Wembley North Young Socialists not to sponsor this paper is certain to damage the progress of the Young Socialists.

We consider that the reasons given for this action by the National Council are completely





Finally, *Young Guard* didn't believe in the need to fight the bureaucracy in head-on conflict. On the contrary. John Palmer, a leader of the Cliff tendency, put it like this in 1963: "The onus is on the YS to find a relationship with our Party which will radically reduce and eventually eliminate the sources of those frictions and clashes which are leaving such a bitter heritage in the ranks of young people joining the YS. *One thing must be made clear above all*. There is no future for the YS outside the Labour Party; our only hope is to find a relationship even more close to it than at present, but one which will allow us essential freedom as a youth movement". Which is quite a tall order given the right wing policies of the Labour leaders, then soon to be in government carrying out vicious attacks on the working class. A tall order — if what is meant is a fighting socialist youth movement. The point is that *Young Guard* had a rather cosy view of the future.

The *Young Guard* tendency did have more of the character of a real youth movement than *Keep Left*, because of its looseness, lack of driving purpose, lack of discipline (i.e. the lack of discipline and purpose of the Cliff tendency), and its easy-going relations with the bureaucracy. *Keep Left* youth were driven; and essentially they were a hard faction, led by a highly disciplined and centralised (indeed bureaucratic) organisation, vigorously warring with the Labour Party leadership and the general left while at the same time striving to build in the raw youth.

## 1961-62: Keep Left is proscribed, Young Guard saves its skin

THROUGHOUT 1961 the YS continued to grow, but slowly. At the Blackpool Labour Party conference, the right wing reversed the policy on unilateralism. The experience of a left victory which the left (like Michael Foot and Frank Cousins) did not fight to consolidate and thus lost was a decisive one for the Healy tendency. Not to emulate the 'fake left', but to fight the battle against the right wing through to the end, became their driving goal in the youth movement.

At the second YS conference, in 1962, there were only 356 delegates from 772 registered branches. It reiterated unilateralism, opposed the Tory immigration control Bill then being pushed through Parliament, and demanded Britain withdraw all troops from overseas and quit all military alliances. Only three *Keep Left* supporters were elected to the National Committee, with one supporter of *Young Guard*. But there was a left, unilateralist majority, which was maybe what spurred Transport House to act.

The right wing witch-hunters got through a resolution condemning *Keep Left* and asking for an investigation into allegations that some of its supporters had used violence against opponents. David Todd, who made the allegations, later retracted them and exposed the fact that the whole business was a plot hatched by leading right wingers such as George Brown. In fact violent clashes did occur in London and Glasgow on May Day, when Young Socialists rushed the platforms: those involved were *Young Guard* (IS), not *Keep Left*.

In May 1962, following the conference vote and the May Day clashes, *Keep Left* (which claimed a circulation of 10,500) was proscribed and an investigation was started into *Young Guard* (which claimed 3,000). *Keep Left* editor Roger Protz was expelled by St Pancras North Labour Party. In June, four of the National Committee were suspended: Liz Thompson, Mike Ginsberg and Dave Davis (KL) were eventually expelled, while Malcom Tallantire (YG) was reinstated. A report circulated that the remaining seven were told to accept the NEC action or have the YS disbanded.

*Young Guard* was not proscribed. In July 1962 the NEC interviewed YG representatives (among them Keith Dickinson of the Grant tendency) and threatened proscription unless:

- YG's 'tone' improved,
- YG included in its aims a statement of unconditional support for the return of a Labour government (this was *Keep Left* policy) and a declaration that the YS was part of the Labour Party,
- YG was made open to all YS opinion,
- YG cease to have speakers at readers' meetings, as that gave the impression that YG was a faction.

The National Editorial Board of *Young Guard*, meeting in September, accepted these conditions, stating, "We have always rejected the arguments of those who say that we should be building a faction within the YS. The YS, in its federations etc., has all the necessary organisation which we can utilise for the spreading of socialist ideas". This was hypocrisy, a bit obscene in the face of the triumphant Gaitskell faction. Though it might have been necessary tactical bowing to superior force, in fact it was a very pointed differentiation and separation from *Keep Left*, which fought without hypocrisy for the right of factions, which obviously was a faction, and moreover was the faction which was the target for the right wing just then.

The editorial in *Young Guard* explained that at their meeting with the NEC representatives, they "laid great stress on the democratic organisation of the paper and denied being a faction within the YS, pointing to the large disparities in the view between YG supporters". Read: "unlike the Trotskyists". In fact *Keep Left* too had a general meeting open to its supporters.

After this relations between *Keep Left* and *Young Guard* were extremely poisoned and rancorous. It did not require malicious invention to put the story in circulation that YG had done a secret deal with Transport House as the price of tolerance, or for it to be widely believed. Despite *Young Guard's* statements in defence of the rights of *Keep Left*, their acceptance by Transport House as the 'good', 'nice' left-wingers after they had made big efforts to present themselves as such seemed to many YSers the decisive thing in characterising them. This reduced the credibility of *Young Guard's* subsequent criticisms of *Keep Left* — many of which gained point as the *Keep Left* leadership made serious errors.

## 1962-63: Keep Left steers towards building its own YS

IN JULY 1962 the first issue of *Keep Left* since proscription appeared, announcing that it would continue despite the ban. *Keep Left* supporters made tremendous efforts to maintain circulation: it was sold in 'safe' YSs and by people who travelled out of their own areas to sell where they were unknown to potential witch-hunters. In the following six to nine months big advances were made in building YS branches, as *Keep Left* turned to a big campaign around youth unemployment, which reached a freak level at the end of 1962. (So did general unemployment, because of an exceptionally cold winter). In those campaigns, and despite the ban, the basis was laid for *Keep Left* to become the majority at the 1963 conference. Operating with a paper the selling of which merited expulsion from the Labour Party increased the tension, the rancour and the — justified — feelings of persecution of the *Keep Left* youth.

In retrospect it can be seen that the decision to defy the ban and continue *Keep Left* was a decisive turning point for *Keep Left* and the YS. It succeeded spectacularly in maintaining the forces of *Keep Left* and even in building up the YS in defiance of the witch-hunters and bureaucrats. But it implied a YS separated from the Labour Party, and in the next two years, step by step, the logic spelled itself out. In turn, it meant that to maintain momentum, all sorts of pretexts for agitation and action had to be sought or invented. It pushed the forces of *Keep Left* more and more into a self-sustained mental ghetto, and encouraged unrealism in assessing the state of the labour movement. Ultimately it led the SLL into counterposing its own small 'party' to the actual development of the real labour movement and to the big radicalisation of youth in the late 1960s, cutting itself off, mistaking its own wishes for reality and going over into a style of politics reminiscent of third period (ultra-left) Stalinism. Ultimately it was to lead to the more or less complete self-destruction of the entire cadre of the old Trotskyist movement, for the second time in 15 years, and to Trotskyism not being capable of capitalising on the great opportunities for the growth of a revolutionary party that emerged in the late '60s and early '70s.

*Keep Left's* policy in the YS only reflected the political crisis of the Trotskyist movement. We can only deal briefly with that crisis here. The SLL had been the British representative of the tendency led by J P Cannon, the founder of American Trotskyism. Despite terrible weaknesses, faults and errors, after 1949 no other group deserving the name Trotskyist existed in Britain. In the early '60s the SLL was in the course of breaking with Cannon, who, with remarkable perception, diagnosed as early as mid-1961 that the SLL was off on an 'Oehlerite [i.e. sectarian] binge'. Disappointed by the reversal which Gaitskell inflicted on the Labour left and the Tribune left's failure to fight seriously, the SLL began more and more to counterpose itself artificially to the labour movement, expressing itself more and more in a formalistic leftism derived in fact from the sectarian tradition of the CPGB.

The discovery that a YS movement could be maintained and built against Transport House after the proscription of *Keep Left* led them to forget how limited were the forces involved in the YS, compared to the task for Marxists of transforming the labour movement. The SLL's break with its international mentors gave free play to the SLL leaders' characteristic wishful thinking and tendency to mistake their own desires and assertions for reality. Responding to both the impatience of the ex-CPers with Labour Party work, and the patience and experience of Cannon, Healy had added the experience of a valuable innovation to the arsenal of the movement, by forming an open organisation without abandoning entrism. In the early '60s he cut loose from Cannon.

Politically, Healy & Co. committed the criminal folly of characterising the state that emerged from the Cuban revolution not objectively, according to the criteria applied, to other revolutions, but according to factional and subjective considerations. Those in the world Trotskyist movement who analysed Cuba as a workers' state (precisely what kind of workers' state, is a separate question) were considered enemies who had to be opposed: from this, the SLL developed a denial that the Cuban revolution had overthrown capitalism. Yet the criteria used by Trotskyists in analysing the Chinese revolution, for example, could not but lead to the conclusion that Cuba was a workers' state.

Since the SLL did not then follow up its analysis of Cuba with a re-analysis of China according to whatever criteria led it to consider Castro's Cuba still capitalist, but continued to call China a deformed workers' state (and indeed in 1967 the SLL became Maoists for a while), massive incoherence followed in its outlook on the world. For our purposes here, the point is that those who could be so irresponsible as to allow themselves to follow such a course for subjective, factional reasons had a dangerous ability to make themselves believe what they wanted to believe. That is what they did increasingly after 1962-3. Their make-believe and irresponsibility, applied to British politics, was to dominate the YS, especially in 1963-4.

But, more than any mistakes in assessment and analysis, more even than their political subjectivism, it was the bureaucratic nature of the SLL which led them and a section of the YS to destruction. A democratic regime allows the correction of mistakes, reassessments, the removal of leading cadres who persist in costly errors or pernicious practices. The SLL had a savagely repressive internal regime which excluded all but a very small group of the top leaders, or maybe all but one person, from effective policy-making and initiatives. This situation had been created by the long drawn out factional struggles in the Trotskyist movement of the '40s around turning to work in the Labour Party and other problems. At the end of the '40s, most of the cadres deserted the movement, leaving the Healy faction, which had fought a five year struggle for an orientation to the Labour Party, in control. It was a period of massive defeat for

the Trotskyists throughout the world, which took its toll everywhere. It threw the British Trotskyists back to a sectarian and authoritarian form of organisation, of the sort often to be found in the workers' movement in periods of immaturity, weakness, or defeat.

In the early 1960s, the influx of raw young people freed the Healy leadership from the limited restraints imposed by the cadre of the earlier period. The dictatorial regime, vigorously asserting its prerogatives at every point, linking its subjectivism and wishful thinking with the (politically healthy) impatience of the youth and at the same time building its organisation with considerable ability, locked itself more and more away from reality and from any consideration about reality it did not want to face: everything in the structure of the organisation was designed to do this as completely as the leadership should want to. There could be no feedback from the membership other than what the leadership wanted to take into account.

The drift of the Healy tendency is illustrated by the fact that at the beginning of 1963 Roger Protz took out a writ in the High Court seeking to have made null and void the NEC decision making anyone associated with *Keep Left* ineligible for Labour Party membership! He also sought a High Court declaration restoring him to membership of St Pancras North Labour Party. Psychologically, this would be rationalised by *Keep Left* supporters as using the right wing's friends in the bourgeois law courts against them. But it was a breach of the principle of keeping the bourgeois state out of the affairs of the labour movement. Any policy for maintaining an integration of revolutionaries in the labour movement with the help of the law courts is fantastic — as lacking in realism and sense of proportion as the recent efforts of the right-wingers Julian Lewis and Paul McCormack in Newham North East.

## 1963-64: The YS under Keep Left leadership

IN JANUARY 1963, a 1200 strong rally for jobs assembled in Smith Square (where Labour Party headquarters is situated) as the rump YS NC was meeting. Under this pressure, four of the remaining 8 members resigned (three of them were *Young Guard* supporters). They showed no signs of resigning before the rally. Two others walked out, without resigning. Of the 1962 NC, then, three have been expelled, four have resigned, and two have walked out of the meeting, leaving an NC of two.

Outside the Scarborough YS conference in 1963 there was again a big *Keep Left* demonstration. The YS registered a small advance: there were 365 delegates present, and 769 registered branches. This time, *Keep Left* supporters took seven of the 11 NC seats, with one going to *Young Guard*. It was the opening of a new phase of the YS's history, though much confusion reigned. The official Labour Party policy document, *Signposts for the Sixties*, almost got through; despite the *Keep Left* NC majority, conference passed a *Young Guard* resolution from Hackney against all H-bombs and all military alliances.

The YS NC immediately launched a big official YS campaign on youth unemployment. The Tory Government was heavily discredited by now, and tottering towards defeat in 1964. Harold Wilson, a former Labour left, had succeeded Gaitskell as Labour leader, and the Tribune left was conciliated.

The YS NC organised another big rally and lobby of Parliament for February 11th, 1964. But the YS was not exactly thriving. The Brighton conference, at Easter 1964, had 347 delegates claiming to represent 25,000 members organised in 722 branches (this would include 'social' elements in *Keep Left* branches). It was small enough after four years.

Again conference rejected support for *Signposts for the Sixties*, opposed immigration controls, and called for nationalisation of the basic industries under workers' control. Again a *Keep Left* majority of 7 out of 11 was returned for the National Committee.

Chairman John Robertson announced at conference that he would shortly be expelled, for he had been caught red-handed selling *Keep Left* in a rural area of Scotland... Brighton was to be the last official YS conference for 18 months. By the time of the next conference, the YS had split and the Labour Party had reorganised its remaining youth with a new constitution and even a new name.

## 1964-65: Transport House goes for a purge, Keep Left goes for a split

IN 1964, for the second year running, *Keep Left* had the majority on the YS NC. But Transport House stood in the way of developing the YS on left politics, and the imminent General Election spurred on Transport House to settle with *Keep Left*.

They began to pick off the leaders of *Keep Left*. John Robertson was duly expelled. Dave Ashby, his replacement as chairman of the YS, quickly followed. And now *Keep Left* gave increasing signs of being willing for a break with the Labour Party.

At the time of the Easter 1964 YS conference there were already whispers about plans for a 'Young Marxist Alliance' which could throw off the Labour Party shackles and go on to build a real mass youth movement. Initially *Keep Left* denied such a perspective. Events, however, had their

ABERDEEN, ASTON, BARKLEY, CHORLEY, CIRENCESTER, COX, EDINBURGH CENTRAL, EDINBURGH HACKNEY CENTRAL, HENDON, RUTHERGLEN, SKELMERSDAL, WEST HAM S

Vol. 10 No. 5



Young workers and apprentices flock to the ranks of the YS anti-NATO and

UNDERH

'NEW A

REG UNDERHILL, 46-year Labour Party—the man in charge appointed editor of the official

This is a deliberate snub to National Committee of Young Socialists which, implementing

logic. Transport House was looming and the YS wings should not be allowed the Labour Party. *Keep Left* and more and more the ha recruiting raw kids.

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The hysterical atmosphere *Keep Left* meeting at the 11' argue by John Robertson i were nothing but 'scabs' ant with *Keep Left* were 100% way or we'll go over your ba the warning. Scuffles betwe owed.

Roger Protz, *Keep Left's* ing. Earlier (in 1962), the YS faction, Gavin Kennedy left buffer began to form t *Guard* and Transport House wing opposition to its course extremely factional and fa Cliff tendencies (though IS e

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# Keep Left

The Paper for Socialist Youth

4p

NG, BEDDINGTON AND WALLINGTON, BEDFORD, BLABY AND DISTRICT, BURY, CARLTON, CATHCART, ENTRY CENTRAL, COVENTRY EAST, DAGENHAM, EALING SOUTH, EAST HAM SOUTH, EAST SALFORD, URGH NORTH, FINCHLEY, GLASGOW CENTRAL AND KELVINGROVE, GORTON, GOVAN AND GORBALS, NORTH, HULL, IRVINE, LFAMINGTON, LUTON, NEWCASTLE CITY, NORTH KENSINGTON, ORMSKIRK, SOUTHGATE, SOUTHPORT, STOCKPORT, TAMWORTH, URMSTON, WEMBLEY NORTH, WEST DERBY, SOUTH, WHITCHURCH, WIGAN AND WOLVERHAMPTON YOUNG SOCIALIST BRANCHES.

June, 1961



usted with Tory government policies, will its Left-wing anti-Gaitskell, anti-bomb, re nationalization policies.

## ALL EDITS ADVANCE

Assistant National Agent of the of the Young Socialists—has been S paper New Advance by the N.E.C.

KEEP LEFT FILM

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## YS National Conference gave the Movement a Militant Fighting Policy.

Now we can —

# HAMMER THE TORIES!

By BARRY JONES

NO one in the Labour movement who followed the reports of the Easter Conference can be in any doubt as to where the Young Socialists stand. By overwhelming majorities the youth of the Labour Party declared that they are for basic socialist policies—no nuclear weapons for Britain, break with the NATO war alliance, nationalize the basic industries, out with the Tory agent, Gaitskell; these are policies which re-affirm the Scarborough decisions and declare war on those opposed to them.

It is a policy that will turn the Tories' recent cries of victory in the local elections into a death rattle.

It is a policy that will attract thousands of young workers and apprentices to our ranks— young workers and apprentices who are

called leaders along with their lackeys in Smith Square will ride rough-shod over everything they dislike, and that includes democracy inside our youth movement.

Alacrity

policies of the manifesto". "At Brighton we told the bureaucrats we would not tolerate witch-hunts and expulsions. We meant exactly that. We will not tolerate them. We will fight on irrespective of the actions of the bureaucracy and the right wing. As far as we are concerned, they can go to hell, with a well-placed boot from us in the rear to help them on their way". Forward to the September 27 'Fight the Tories' demonstration. "For a Labour government with socialist policies".

As *Young Guard* put it in September: There was now a sulphurous smell of witch-hunting in the air. According to later SLL/WRP myth, what happened next is that Transport House expelled the YS, which refused to be snuffed out, choosing independence instead. There were expulsions and purges, there were closures, sometimes the police were called to remove recalcitrant YSers, but there was no suppression of the YS as such. The leaders of the *Keep Left* tendency decided on an organised break with the Labour Party in face of the witch-hunting and limited expulsions, and thereafter they set out, by being awkward and provocative in local Labour Parties and elsewhere, to have as many people as possible expelled and branches closed down. The bureaucracy did not need much provocation!

Finally, the *Keep Left* NC majority announced that it was calling a conference of the YS independent of the bureaucracy for February 27/28, 1965, and invited every YS member to attend.

To stop the split a rather feeble 'Save the YS campaign' was started, capable of attracting only 200 to a meeting in London in October 1964 despite having the support of *Tribune*, the ex-*Keep Lefters* such as Kennedy and Protz, *Young Guard*, *Militant* (which published its first issue in October 1964), and the proto-IMG. Transport House contributed to 'saving the YS' by issuing a circular telling people not to attend the meeting. They were entirely for the secession of *Keep Left!* It may be that *Keep Left's* departure averted the complete shutdown of the YS.

## 1965: A revolutionary youth movement?

WAS THERE NOT a case to be made for the policy of taking the youth outside the Labour Party straitjacket and continuing to build?

It must depend on an assessment of the situation. For all the bluster, *Keep Left* was a very small force; so was the entire YS. It was ludicrous to pretend that YS conference decisions could meaningfully be counterposed as official policies to the Labour Party without a complete break. The break would lead to the hiving-off of a small youth group with some ideas to make propaganda for. Was that desirable then, was it responsible revolutionary politics in the situation?

The SLL reprinted articles by Trotsky dealing with the situation in France in 1935. The French Socialist Party bureaucracy had started to move against the revolutionary leaders of the Socialist youth. Trotsky argued for a bold orientation to building an independent party: the situation was fast

becoming revolutionary, war and fascism threatened, the SP leaders wanted 'to make docile cannon fodder of the youth' for French imperialism and to beat down opposition to the SP's alliance with the bourgeois Radicals in the Popul- ar Front.

But for the Healy tendency to hive themselves off in 1964, on the eve of a Labour government, after they had been working in the Labour Party for 16 years, was political nonsense. The 'brave' talk was toytown politics, rightly seen by Wilson & Co. as aiding them. And the leaders of *Keep Left* had a big element of choice — a free choice on whether to take all their forces out.

A policy of setting up an independent revolutionary YS might logically not have prevented a section of the youth from also being individual members of the Labour Party. In 1965 the SLL leaders occasionally talked of things like this for the future. But if the SLL leaders had been capable of such a balanced policy and strategy, then they would never have allowed themselves to be pushed into a break with the Labour Party on the eve of the formation of the first Labour Government in 13 years, an even which would (and did) allow millions of workers to learn about political reformism from experience. The point is that the break was unbalanced and hysterical.

The SLL developed ludicrous theories about the possibility of a short cut to a mass revolutionary organisation via 'the youth', as if it were possible artificially and at will to separate a generation of youth from the general experience of the class and labour movement. In reality they went marching out with a few thousand mostly raw youth, organised by a few hundred revolutionaries, proclaiming they had defeated the Labour bureaucracy. They went chasing their will-of-the-wisp on the eve of one of the most important experiences of the working class with reformism, removing their section of the revolutionary youth from the struggle in the political labour movement.

One consequence of this was that after 1966, when the Labour Government secured a majority in the March election (thus losing its excuse) and they went on a witch-hunting binge against striking seamen and introduced a statutory wage freeze in July, the sincere reformist activists simply began to drop away from the Labour Party. Had the earlier sectarian bloodletting in the YS not occurred, probably they could have been organised to give the Wilson government a difficult passage.

Servicing the YS as an independent organisation demanded more and more of the efforts and attention of the entire SLL cadre, a few hundred strong. By 1965, for example, building worker militants in Manchester were being harangued and browbeaten into accepting that their industrial work was unimportant compared with organising 'revolutionary' youth clubs. (Some of them eventually joined IS). The same youth-centred concern meant that shrill denunciation (occasionally justified, often not) of the CP in industries such as the ports, for the propagandist enlightenment of youth on the 'essential' nature of Stalinism, replaced responsible concern with unity in the class struggle. In the dock strike of 1967, for instance, the SLL pursued a vicious propaganda war against the Communist Party, some of whose members were fighting the Devlin scheme in alliance with revolutionaries, with *Workers' Fight* for example. This replacement of the real struggle with newspaper commentaries was part of the process of losing touch with reality and with the real working class and the real labour movement. In the past the SLL had won influence in the ETU by a sensitive and principled common front with CPers whose leaders had been convicted of ballot-rigging. Now shrill propaganda for the youth replaced everything else.

It took some years, but eventually the Healy tendency's entire work in the labour movement was destroyed. The last of it went with the Workers' Socialist League in 1974. With the WRP now way outside rational working class politics, the only forces representing some continuity with what was once the chief revolutionary tendency in the British labour movement are the International-Communist League, whose initial nucleus came from a break from the SLL at the end of 1964 followed by an attempt (based on a political misunderstanding) to work within the *Militant* tendency. The organisation the WSL broke from in 1974 had a good ten years of the most degenerate anti-Trotskyist practices and politics between itself and its Trotskyist past.

## Keep Left after the 1965 split

THE 1964 turn was a turn away from the labour movement and from the work of transforming it which was to prove irreversible for the Healy tendency. Impatience with the tempo of development in the working class movement and wishful thinking about what could be done outside the labour movement with a small section of youth (and a good printing press!) led the Healy tendency to what became — for all their bluster — a sectarian-abstentionist capitulation to the dominant reformist bureaucracy in the labour movement.

That the break with the Labour Party was the product of a qualitative political degeneration and of hysteria was demonstrated to anyone still capable of learning (or still needing to learn) by the events of November 1964, when the seceding 'revolutionary' YS engaged in strike-breaking!

Apprentice engineers, mainly in Manchester and Liverpool, had begun to organise an unofficial movement around wages and conditions. A big unofficial national apprentices' strike had come from similar beginnings in 1960 and in 1951. In September 1964, 1500 apprentices took part in a one-day strike. A committee was elected. *Keep Left*, the Young Communist League, *Militant* and others were represented. Bending to the untutored militancy of angry apprentices, it set the date for a strike. The *Keep Left* minority on the committee opposed this action as premature. Almost certainly this judgment was correct. Did they accept the decision of the strike committee majority? Not the 'majority of the YS'! They now considered themselves the appointed leaders, by right, of the youth — of all youth. They broke away from the committee and denounced the YCLers and 'Pabloites' for consciously betraying the apprentices. Then they announced a date (March 9th, 1965) on which they would call their own apprentices' strike! On November 2nd they toured engineering factories with leaflets telling apprentices not to strike. In Manchester they

even physically attacked ('counter-revolutionary') YCLers trying to bring apprentices out.

The strike was a failure. It is difficult to assess what degree of responsibility for this rested with the sectarian strike breakers. When the date came in March for the YS-decreed strike, nothing at all happened. They vaguely announced a new date in May, which was eventually abandoned. *Keep Left* blustered and justified itself.

Though the actual strike-breakers were politically immature lads, the sectarian ultra-leftism here was not of the sort that was to be so widely seen after 1968 — anarchic, schematic, youthful ardour, impatience, unreality, and lack of tempering. Essentially what happened was that the SLL leaders attempted to submit sections of struggling youth to their bureaucratic ukase — and ordered their youth to behave with typical bureaucratic brutality when they were 'disobeyed'. Trotsky once pointed to the bureaucratic commandism at the heart of the ultra-leftism of the third period, which separated it from 'naive' ultra-leftism: the attempted extension outwards to the general labour movement and even to the working class as a whole of the bureaucratic internal regime in Stalin's Comintern. (Because of its bureaucratic inner structure, it was also capable of negating itself to the right, 'effortlessly'). In the apprentices' strike the bureaucratic and commandist leadership of the SLL attempted to extend the methods of their internal life to a section of the movement. It was a qualitative step in a self-cutting-off process which led to the total isolation of the SLL. It signalled a further loss of awareness of reality for the closed-in leaders of the SLL.

## 1964-65: From splitting to strikebreaking

IN FEBRUARY 1965 the Morecambe conference called by the *Keep Left* YS NC majority was attended by 1,000 people. It declared itself to be the YS from then on, with *Keep Left* as its official paper: effectively it became the youth wing of the SLL, which now went off on an 'Oehlerite binge' to end all Oehlerite binges, and whose central political slogan became, 'Join the SLL, build the revolutionary party'. For them, the party became an entity separate from history, from society, and even from politics (their politics were wildly unstable), when the needs of its onanistic development required it. It was concerned essentially only with its own growth and survival, by almost any means and on any conditions, and irrespective of its relationship to the labour movement and the working class, irrespective of what damage techniques such as systematic lying would do to that movement.

If it were not for the character of the SLL, the break with the Labour Party might not have been irreversibly harmful, nor so self-destructive for the once-Trotskyist organisation as it was ultimately to prove to be. Inescapably it would have been needlessly costly, but the experience of the reactionary Wilson government, especially after 1966, might have vindicated *Keep Left*. They had properly understood the utter uselessness of the 'Tribunite' left. The radicalisation of youth in 1967 and '68 might have opened up great prospects for them. The stagnation decline of the soon to be renamed Labour Party Young Socialists certainly meant that the *Keep Left* YS had much more life in it for a long time.

For example, the *Keep Left* YS organised 2,000 young people to demonstration outside the Blackpool conference of the Labour Party in 1965 calling for the removal of Wilson. Later it organised YS demonstrations under the slogan, 'Make the Left MPs fight' (which might have made some sort of sense if they were in the Labour Party). The independent YS was foremost in organising demonstrations for Vietnam in 1965 and '66. But the continued political degeneration of the SLL spelled doom for whatever was still alive in the YS.

The youth were organised always on the perspective of imminent revolutionary crisis, and sent on one campaign after another. Certainly by the mid-'60s (probably earlier) the SLL leadership was using this as a conscious technique. Those whose political degeneration began when they started deriving an 'analysis' of Cuba from their factional needs, not from objective reality and the theory of the Trotskyist movement, could not be expected to scruple about manipulating their 'line' to keep the youth galvanised (though the operation can scarcely have been completely cynical and free of delusions on their part). The fact that the perspectives of the SLL were always quickly falsified led to a rapid turnover in membership. Many of the cadres dropped away in the mid-'60s. Ashby and Robertson for example. Robertson, who ate state-capitalist 'scabs' for breakfast in 1964, was knocking around with Leeds IS in 1968-9. The regime destroyed real political life. From about 1966, systematic lying about political opponents and their positions became a prominent feature of the SLL. Surviving cadres suddenly had to accept the line that Ernest Mandel and Michel Pablo had supported the Russian invasion of Hungary in 1956 — something none of them ever heard about until a decade after it allegedly happened! Nevertheless, many of them — all those who 'survived' this period — swallowed it. Then when the great mass movement against the Vietnam war erupted in 1967, the sectarian SLL, finding 'its' territory encroached upon, could only denounce it, isolating itself from the post-1968 radicalisation. It is a grim and tragic story, but we will not follow it beyond this point.

The secession of *Keep Left* marked the end of a definite period for the YS. In the early '60s it had been politically centre stage, with a more or less clear field for development as a socialist youth organisation, in a way that even those who support its current majority's ideas cannot seriously claim it has been in the 15 years since 1964. The 1964-5 split marked a defeat for socialist youth, a defeat centrally the responsibility of the Labour bureaucracy, but which happened also because the leaders of the old Trotskyist movement failed the revolutionary youth. A mass YS had not been built. The character of the Wilson government, especially after 1966, made the YS far from attractive to militant and socialist youth in the late '60s. The great youth mobilisation after 1967 was to pass the rump LPYS by (while the *Keep Left* YS hid from it). Prospects of real development did not open again until after 1970, and by then the LPYS had other problems.



## 1924-32: Beginnings

JUST AFTER the first World War a group of young people formed a Young Labour League in Clapham. Gradually other such groups sprang up but the adult Labour Party insisted that there could be no national or regional organisation, only youth sections of local parties.

In 1924, alarmed at the growth of the Young Communist League, the Labour Party allowed the formation of youth sections, and in 1926, after the formation and rapid growth of the ILP Guild of Youth, it decided to reorganise the 150 youth sections into the Labour League of Youth (LLY).

The LLY was for those aged 14 to 21. Those up to 25 could be members if they took out membership of the

Labour Party. By the end of its first year the LLY had more than 200 branches.

Supposedly, it was controlled by the members themselves. But it had no elected National Committee (as the ILP's Guild of Youth had) nor any regional committees. In 1928, some branches requested a democratic structure: the Party's NEC refused this 'on financial grounds'. But in 1929 a conference was held to elect a National Advisory Committee (NAC) to coordinate activity in consultation with the NEC. A 1931 official pamphlet stressed that 'as it is an integral section of the Labour Party the League does not concern itself with questions of policy. ... The work of the League of Youth should be mainly recreational and educational'.

## 1932-39: The cancer of Stalinism

AROUND 1932 and '33 there was a growth of radical ideas especially among youth and young intellectuals: unemployment was rife, MacDonald had just betrayed the entire workers' movement, the Nazis were on the way to power and the Japanese imperialists had begun their attempt to invade China. The whole system was discredited in the eyes of many.

Just at this point, the ILP broke away from the Labour Party and it looked as though they would attract to their ranks many of the radicalised and angered elements in society, especially to the Guild of Youth. The Labour Party bureaucrats acted quickly to try and cut off this development. A full time Youth Officer (Maurice Webb) was appointed to help build the LLY, which now had 302 branches. A monthly paper, *The New Nation* was set up. The changes were announced at the 1935 LLY conference, but when the conference told the NAC to request the right to discuss Party policy they were snubbed.

### Dull

*The New Nation* was pathetically dull. It was controlled by Transport House officials who cut out anything lively or critical for fear of radicalism. Maurice Webb showed his attitude to the LLY: "If we do not give them leadership they will find it elsewhere". In his 1934 "Handbook on the Organisation of the LLY" he strictly defined the functions of the LLY. Conference could only discuss organisational matters, make recommendations to the NEC and elect a National Advisory Committee to administer the LLY and "advise" the NEC. The adult party would allow young people to build branches as they liked — as long as this didn't lead to "contraventions of the Party constitution and programme".

The contradiction between the members' radical tendencies and the bureaucrats allowed for the creation of an

unofficial paper, *Youth Forum*, edited and supported by a left alliance including Ted Willis from Tottenham, (now Lord Willis, long time author of the police-glorifying series *Dixon of Dock Green*), and Roma Dewar from Balham. Later Willis and some others joined the YCL but at this time the CP and YCL still opposed imperialist war and the Trotskyists, who had been expelled from the CPGB in 1932, were able to make common cause with their faction in the LLY.

### War

They got the 1934 conference to reject a Transport House statement pledging Labour support to a capitalist government in a League of Nations was, and to call instead for the formation of anti-war committees based on Labour Parties, Co-ops and Trade Unions (passed 90 to 17).

LLY members were also heavily involved in the fight against Moseley's Fascists and they also helped the unemployed hunger marchers who came to London from the depressed areas.

Transport House got quite flustered by all this and a debate in *The New Nation* on the fight against war was simply cut off in mid-stream. The 1935 conference received a long lecture from a NEC member but still called for raising the age limit from 25 to 30 (Transport House wanted to force experienced LLY members into the Labour Party so that the LLY lost its best fighters). And despite being reproached by the *Daily Herald* for taking a class line in opposition to the Party leadership on several issues, LLY members still went out and "made a nuisance of themselves" by taking part in the demonstrations against the Royal Jubilee celebrations that year.

But the (albeit limited) possibility of joint activity for the Left in the LLY was rudely and abruptly broken in mid-1935 by the turn of the CP to the Popular Front line of the Comintern. This turn

was dictated by the diplomatic turns of the ruling Stalinist bureaucratic caste in the USSR, which had decided that the interests of the international proletariat and the world revolution had to be subordinated to the interests of building "Socialism in one country". (Which, of course, meant socialism in no other country for the foreseeable future). Between 1935 and 1938 the Stalinists increasingly turned away from class struggle policies and socialist ideas towards attempted alliances with Liberals and Tories in an attempt to get the Tory Government to adopt a more friendly attitude towards the USSR. Because their potential allies were bourgeois (and hence against the workers' struggle) the Stalinists had to tone down any references to the class struggle or even to renounce it and denounce those who practised class struggle socialism. Not only did this lead to a break with the Trotskyists and *Youth Forum* (Willis and his group set up their own paper *Advance* in late 1935) and an attempt to dissolve the working class nature of the LLY, but also a ferocious stepping up of the slander campaign against the Trotskyists.

Given that it had the support of the YCL, *Advance* soon took the leadership of the fight for LLY autonomy and democracy. (In this they were, of course, supported by the Trotskyists). At the 1936 LLY conference *Advance* won control of the NAC. The conference put forward a set of demands including election of their own youth officer, control of their own paper, etc, and the right to discuss Party policy.

*Advance* managed to combine this with a proposal for an LLY-YCL merger, appealing to youth's feelings for working class unity.

Transport House immediately disbanded the NAC and circulated a memorandum proposing: (1) an age limit of 21 (not 25); (2) exclusion of the NAC chairman from NEC meetings from then onwards; (3) suspension of *The New Nation*; (4) that the 1936 LLY conference not be held; (5) that from now on the LLY must confine itself to recreational and educational work and cease its demands for the right to discuss Party policy.

At first *Advance* talked about resistance, but by November had buckled and Will-

is wrote: "Any talk of a new organisation, of a split from Labour, is extreme folly", and that despite its restrictions the memorandum left sufficient freedom and scope for the LLY to function adequately.

From November 1936 *Advance* really pushed the popular front line with a

## by Neil Cobbett

vengeance. Every hint of a working class or socialist viewpoint disappeared. It talked of uniting all sections of youth, whatever their class, religion, or beliefs, in a crusade for peace. *Advance* wanted to draw the LLY into their schemes for an alliance with the Liberals, "progressive" Tories, etc. This meant wiping out the working class character of the LLY. Of course, the best way to do this was not to fight the memorandum, and to combine a loyal stance towards Transport House with use of their positions discreetly to recruit to the YCL within the LLY.

### Defy

After Willis broke away, the Trotskyists began a new paper called *Youth Militant*. In this they agitated for the disbanded NAC to call an unofficial LLY conference, and for defiance of the memorandum. They argued that the LLY should temporarily withdraw from the Labour Party in order to gain some experience as a genuinely autonomous and socialist youth league. The League should then campaign in the workers' movement for the right

internally against those clauses in the Party constitution which now embody the terms of the memorandum." This was coupled with a series of ferocious and unscrupulous attacks on the Trotskyists. At a special meeting of the YCL in January 1937, the month when the second of the frame-up trials of Old

Bolsheviks in Moscow was held, the Trotskyists were denounced as "fascist wreckers" in the LLY in line with Stalin's slanders against Trotsky and other leaders of the Russian Revolution as being "agents of Hitler and the Mikado". Issues of *Advance* were given over to other such slanders and incitements against the Trotskyists. Ted Willis wrote in the March '37 issue: "There is no place for Trotskyists in a live movement, just as there is no place for boils on a healthy human ... Turn them, lock, stock, and barrel, out of the Labour movement".

At this time the main political question was the Spanish Civil War. The Trotskyists, like everyone else, worked as hard as they could to give what aid they could to the anti-fascist fighters. However, they also pointed out how the Popular Front line, and the Stalinist-bourgeois alliance, far from ensuring "unity for victory" had doomed the anti-fascist struggle to defeat by suppressing and defeating the working class struggle for socialist revolution in the Republican held areas. To most Republican sympathis-

1933 the LLY had 15000 members!). Only resolutions from the NAC were allowed at this conference, with branches restricted to amendments. The line of the *Advance* ex-NAC as explained by Willis was that "We accept the memorandum in order to defeat it, as we accept capitalism in order to defeat it". The conference requested the NEC to call an official LLY conference and to prepare a "suitable" programme for the LLY!

In preparation for the next Labour Party conference the *Advance* group, continuing its grovelling to Transport House, made sure the LLY didn't do anything to give offence. At a London conference in September, the Stalinist chairman bureaucratically suppressed a resolution calling for an international workers' embargo on arms to Japan (which was continuing its conquest of China). At this point, dockers in Glasgow, Southampton, and other ports refused to load Japanese ships with scrap iron and the Labour and CP leaders did all they could to prevent this action from spreading.

### Basis

Party conference of 1937 did decide to recognise the LLY once again, but on the basis of the memorandum — an age limit of 21 and no political discussion. *Advance* declared this a victory and offered Transport House full co-operation, even asking that *Advance* become the LLY's official paper. An official conference was called for March 1938. No resolutions were allowed from bran-



The left mobilised Labour's youth against the fascists. But Stalinist sympathisers used the anti-fascist struggle as an excuse to push their 'Popular Front' line of class collaboration.

ches. A new NAC was set up with 10 representatives from the Labour Party NEC and 8 elected from the LLY. Without any consultation, Ted Willis was appointed national organiser. *Advance* carried more articles attacking the Trotskyists, for wanting to put amendments at the conference. At the conference, a right winger, George Dallas, chaired the session, with Willis to advise him. 63 out of 78 amendments were ruled out of order, referred to the NAC, or withdrawn at the chairman's request. Key issues such as the age limit, enlarged LLY representation on the

Hence at the 1937 LLY special unofficial national conference the Trotskyists were in a tiny minority. When they tried to speak they were howled down and their paper and literature sellers were physically attacked. The conference was held in London, where *Advance* was in control, and 130 out of 172 delegates came from London, although London had only 700 out of a membership of 3500. (In

# YOUTH 1924-55

## 1945-55: The fight for a self- governing youth movement

NAC, etc, were ruled out of order.

Advance was rewarded by becoming the official LLY paper in May 1938, with 3 out of 5 editors appointed from Transport House, who turned a blind eye to Willis being over-age. The LLY was transformed into a social club. (*Youth for Socialism*, a Trotskyist paper taking over from *Youth Militant*, attacked this policy, saying that the LLY couldn't compete with the leisure facilities of the bosses organisations. This was true, but it may have led the Trotskyists to undervalue the importance of such things in building a political organisation from working class youth.) Willis and Co. increasingly used the LLY to push CP policy and this led to a clash.

The CP had decided that a Labour Government was not on the agenda, and called for a coalition of Labour, Liberals, and "patriotic" Conservatives (Churchill and Eden!). The right wing of the Labour Party was able to point out that advocates of the Popular Front with the Liberals were defeatist about the possibility of the Labour Party forming a government, and were harking back objectively to Lib/Lab politics of the pre-1914 vintage! Trotsky pointed out that objectively in terms of working class politics, right wingers like Herbert Morrison were to the left of the Stalinists and their Labour Party supporters.

Willis involved the LLY in joint activities with the Young Liberals, League of Nations Union, and other groups, without making any socialist propaganda. *Youth for Socialism* warned in March 1939 that, having used the Stalinists for its own ends, Transport House wasn't going to let them use the LLY and was preparing a new memorandum. Transport House, itself smuggling up to Chamberlain's Government as war loomed, denounced the CP's Popular Front line; Willis was forced to resign on grounds of age, the NAC was disbanded, and conference cancelled. All this was done on the pretext of *Advance* associating the LLY with anti-Party activity. There would be no national or regional structures for Labour youth — only youth sections.

Once things were out in the open, Willis and Co. quit messing about. In a complete about-turn from their 1936-7 line of no break with the Labour Party, they joined the YCL in June 1939 and called on all LLY members to follow them, as many officers and even whole branches did, leaving Labour's youth movement a wreck.



Glasgow apprentices on strike, 1937. The Trotskyists fought to turn Labour youth towards industrial workers.

IN 1945, A LABOUR Government was returned with a huge majority, reflected in the number of young people who turned to Labour. The youth movement began to grow again as young Labour election workers continued to meet informally. In July 1946 Transport House began *Young Socialist* as the paper of the Labour Party League of Youth, and decided to organise the 200 branches which had sprung up on a regional basis with an age limit of 21. Up to 1948 the only way that youth could get together was at national summer schools and through the pages of the paper, where they demanded raising the age limit to 25.

Conscription continued. Labour was supposed to be against it, but when they got into office the Party leaders and the PLP buckled under pressure from the military leaders (although some MPs voted against). Some members of the League of Youth (LOY) who proposed a campaign against conscription were promptly expelled. As a condition for re-admission they had to agree not to launch a campaign.

In 1948, worried by the growth of the Young Tories, Transport House decided to bring the 300 branches of the LOY together in a 'democratic' national structure with an age limit of 25. The National Youth Officer was the Assistant National Agent, A L Williams. Ted Willis, who had broken with the CP, was his 'adviser'.

### Elect

Williams was immediately faced with demands for a proper elected national executive with its own staff and press, and not just a national consultative committee — which is all that the promised 'democratic structure' turned out to be.

Alice Bacon made clear what she and the NEC thought in *Labour Youth* (successor to *Young Socialist*) of October 1948, when she justified the national consultative committee's being "selected in the regions and not elected by a League conference" as being appropriate for a group "concerned with organisation and education rather than political decisions".

The LOY grew rapidly. By 1949 there were 500 branches. With the growth,

the demands for autonomy became more strident. At the first NCC *Labour Youth* was criticised as dull. It was replaced in 1949 by *Socialist Advance*, which soon carried editorial replies to demands for democratisation of the LOY and especially for a national conference.

At the 1949 London regional conference, delegates criticised the right-wing policy statement for the 1950 election as being a retreat from nationalisation, workers control and a 'socialist foreign policy'. A mass rally was organised for September and the Left organised to fight for a programme for democratisation of the League.

### Filey

2,000 youth attended the mass rally at Filey. It was not held on a delegate basis, and Transport House smugly thought they could get away with a stage-managed show. When the NCC report came up for discussion, reference back was moved from the floor, but the Chairman ruled it out of order. Then the Chair was challenged — but that wasn't accepted, either. Speaker after speaker argued for the demands for democracy, associated closely with the Wandsworth branch which was influenced by the Trotskyists.

Soon a campaign, the 'National Status Movement' (NSM) was set up to fight for the 'Wandsworth demands'.

- For an annual League of Youth conference, delegates to be elected from League branches.

- This conference to elect its own executive committee responsible to conference;

- For resolutions and a League delegation to the Labour Party conference;

- For a representative on the NEC;

- Executive Committee of the League shall control *Socialist Advance* and other League literature.

Transport House became alarmed. Williams wrote an article denouncing the ulterior motives of 'a small minority'. In addition, Labour did badly in the 1950 election, and it became obvious that without a turn to the left and to the working class Labour would get trounced in 1951, which it did. Wandsworth LOY launched a campaign for the LOY to lead a revival of the Labour Party, on a

clear political programme for youth.

After Filey the NCC twice requested a national delegate conference. The NEC did not reply. In May 1950 Wandsworth and six other branches called an unofficial conference in London (for June), to put pressure on the NEC. The London Labour Party promptly denounced the conference, and hinted that if it went ahead then the LOY might be dissolved.

On June 2nd Wandsworth branch was dissolved. This move aroused angry protest at a Southern Region rally. With 600 youth present, Williams was unable to make himself heard above yells of 'Reinstate Wandsworth!'. The Wandsworth branch put up a fight for reinstatement in their wards and in the unions, and Wandsworth GMC was forced to reinstate them. The unofficial conference was a success, with over 300 present from 59 branches.

The left had become too powerful to be ignored, and in September 1950 Williams had to call a national conference.

The conference would discuss organisation and activities only, and all delegates had to be endorsed by their CLPs.

### Korea

The first conference of Labour youth since 1938 took place at Easter 1951 in the Beaver Hall, London, with 349 delegates. There were 820 League branches, with a membership of 25,000, as against 622 branches the year before. This growth belied the argument of the right wing that the National Status Movement would lead to a decline.

A fraternal delegate from the Labour Student Organisation was cheered when he said that his organisation fully exercised its right to discuss policy. Resolutions were passed demanding an annual delegate conference with delegates chosen by branches. But the NSM failed to get most of its programme passed, and the June 1951 *Socialist Advance* carried the headline, 'National Conference marked by the NCC's Rout of Critics'.

One reason why the left lost momentum was the question of the Korean War, in which British troops were fighting. Some of the Trotskyists rallied to Tony Cliff's position that, as the USSR was state-capitalist, it had imperialist intentions in Korea. Though Russia was not involved, what was happening was a 'proxy' war between US imperialism (whose troops were involved) and 'Russian imperialism'. The Stalinist forces in Korea therefore could not be supported and defended against the US imperialists.

### Wave

It was to be 15 years before Tony Cliff revised his views on such questions in time to support the NLF in Vietnam. But the political climate had changed dramatically in those 15 years, and British troops were not involved. There was a great tide of opposition to the Vietnam war in the late '60s, whereas in 1950 the Trotskyists had to stand firm against a wave of anti-communism and British chauvinism. Only those who did stand firm were

revolutionaries then.

As the sole supporters of the Korean national liberation struggle against US imperialism and its puppets, the Marxists stood alone in the LOY and for a while were extremely isolated politically.

These difficulties for the Marxists coincided with a swing against Labour (the Tories returned to power in 1951) which was reflected in a decline in LOY membership. After the Beaver Hall conference, Transport House had announced a similar conference for the next Easter, but later they said that because of the spring local elections no Easter conference could be held. Rather, the conference would be held at another rally at Filey, in the summer. The adult parties were to choose the delegates and the resolutions.

When the conference met in June 1952, the LOY was in a bad way, with only 666 branches and only 5,000 members. The left had recovered a little, and some good resolutions were passed: that branches be free to choose their own delegates and resolutions, that Party policy be discussed, that the LOY be able to send delegates and resolutions to Party conference, and for a National Membership Campaign on a socialist programme.

But by the 1953 conference there were only 538 branches. Resolutions were passed calling for a delegate to the NEC and the right to discuss policy. The left won a hard fight to get the LOY to orient more to the industrial struggle and young trade unionists. The left also used the discussion of the 'study group reports' to get statements of the conference's feelings on key political issues, despite the formal ban on politics. The delegates were against a mixed economy and objected to heavy compensation of nationalised firms. They did not consider the USSR imperialist, and they wanted all troops withdrawn from the colonies.



Aneurin Bevan

By the last conference, in 1954, there were only 384 branches, and only 120 delegates attended conference. Emergency resolutions opposed the new South East Asia Treaty Organisation and West German re-armament as imperialist war moves. Another called on the ICFTU and IUSY to convene a conference to decide a socialist position on the atom bomb. The Party officials said that if these resolutions were taken the LOY would be disbanded, and so they were withdrawn under protest.

90 of the 120 delegates sent a letter to Aneurin Bevan supporting him against SEATO and West German rearmament.

The previous year's policies were implemented despite opposition from Transport House. Just after conference, Transport House announced a campaign against conscription. The LOY took this opportunity to org-

anise meetings, but Transport House stifled the campaign by sitting on a promised supply of literature. In the middle of the LOY campaign the NEC, at the 1954 Party conference, opposed resolutions calling for the abolition or reduction of conscription, and committed the Party to supporting two years' conscription. Shortly after, the Tories announced plans to end conscription!

In 1955 there were only 237 branches, and Transport House moved in for the kill. In the LOY the left fought to oust the Right from its positions and to sort out the waverers. It gradually progressed, taking the lead in the main towns. Resolutions to conference conflicted sharply with Transport House policy. In *Socialist Advance* of February 1955, Williams warned that anyone who did not agree that 'constitutional means' were the only way to socialism would be thrown out and denounced as a subversive infiltrator.

### Shut

The Southern Regional Youth Advisory Committee was promptly shut down when Southern Region conference protested against Transport House's ban on *Socialist Outlook* (a paper which partly reflected the views of the Trotskyists) and the expulsion of some of its supporters from Norwood Labour Party (among them, Ted Knight, now Leader of Lambeth Council). The region continued its association via a joint federation, but the NCC was completely apathetic both over this witch-hunt and when the 1955 conference was cancelled.

The 1955 Party conference discussion on youth was deliberately confused when Alice Bacon from the NEC and two regional secretaries rammed together two resolutions, one vague and meaningless and the other highly critical, at the compositing meeting. When young delegates requested that the NEC clarify its position on the LOY, they were ignored, and the vague composite was quickly pushed through with the help of the Chair.

When she spoke for the NEC, Bacon declared that they were interested in aiding the growth of the youth movement and wanted to give more help. Delegates voted thinking they were doing the youth a good turn.

In the evening, Labour general secretary Morgan Phillips held a press conference and announced that the LOY was to be disbanded. There would be no national, regional or area youth structures. A series of circulars were sent to the NCC and the regions announcing new plans for youth recruitment — disbanding the LOY!

A letter was sent to the federations saying simply, you are disbanded, hand over the money and the books. All unofficial committees were banned as well.

That was the end of Transport House's second attempt to set up a 'safe', tame youth movement and of all official youth organisation on a national scale until 1960.

This feature is based on 'The Story of Labour's Youth', a 'Keep Left' pamphlet by Pat Sirockin, published in 1961.



left wing'. The *Militant* could only wait, doing routine work and making propaganda for this to develop. 'Premature' struggle, conflict with the bureaucracy, or even attempts to go out and organise the Labour left would be more harmful than useful. 'The perspective' would be its own midwife.

Essentially this view meant that the Grantites believed themselves to exist before their proper historical time. (It was like the sort of view of the world, and their own place in it, which the most pedantic of the Russian Marxists drew from the conviction that the Russian Revolution could only be bourgeois, and that the preordained protagonists in it were the bourgeoisie. The *Tribune* left was *Militant's* 'bourgeoisie'). *Militant* really did not think there was much they could do in the Labour Party (in the '40s, their tendency had refused to join it)... or, for that matter, outside it. This was the basic reason for the incredible 'patience' they prided themselves on in the late '60s (though their strange added-optimistic view of the world, reflected in *Militant*, may have contributed something here: "Rhodesia; White settlers forced to come to terms" (Julian Silverman, May 1966). June 1966 editorial: "a Tito solution" for Vietnam [i.e. a neutral, independent Vietnam] "as predicted in *Militant* and then later by De Gaulle and [Robert] Kennedy". February 1967 editorial: "Imperialism trapped in Vietnam"....).

## 1966-70: YS in decline

THE LABOUR Government's complicity in the Vietnam war, its obvious compliance with the needs and views of the capitalists, its racist White Paper, and then, after it got a majority in March 1966, its full-blown attack on working class standards and rights — all this was not designed to attract militant youth to the LPYS. The YS stagnated, now universally no more than small discussion clubs. People began to resign when the Labour Party conference at Blackpool endorsed the racist White Paper on immigration control. (But *Militant* fought with unaccustomed energy to prevent *Young Guard* and other leftists arraigning Home Secretary Frank Soskice before his own Labour Party as a racist. That would only 'personalise' things — and anyway the bureaucracy would strike back...). When the Labour Party conference in 1966 failed to oppose Labour Government policy (which already included the first statutory incomes policy — July 1966 — with sanctions against the trade unions), an exodus began from the Labour Party and the YS.

The Cliff tendency began to focus more and more on work directed to industrial militants. Its supporters remained in the Labour Party and YS: when some people left the Party over Soskice's Immigration Bill in 1965, *Young Guard* commented: "*Young Guard* is totally opposed to this step. We have no illusions about the Labour leadership, or the ability of the left to reverse this year's decision next year. But so long as the working class of this country looks to the Labour Party as its political party, so long as working class political activity takes place in and around the Labour Party, socialists have no option about working in the Labour Party" (November 1965).

But the collapse of the left in the Labour Party in face of Wilsonism, and above all the growth of big struggles outside the Labour Party and directed against the Labour Government, changed that view, and by 1967-8 *Young Guard* had drifted out of the YS (without ever actually deciding to leave). The YS was left to Wilsonites, Tribunites, and the *Militant*.

In 1967 there were 532 registered YS branches, but only 216 delegates at conference. In 1969, there were 386 branches, dead branches having been removed from the lists: since there were only 150 delegates to conference, perhaps the pruning was not ruthless enough. *Militant* became a majority on the NC in the regional elections between the 1969 and '70 conference. In 1970, at the first conference in which *Militant* had the NC majority, there were only 126 delegates (457 branches registered). The YS had declined and shrivelled up.

## 1966-69: Workers and youth against Labour

IN THE MIDDLE and late '60s, the role of giving a political lead to the working class (in so far as one was given) against 'its own' party in power fell to the shop stewards movement and then to the TUC, who were forced into a head-on clash with the Labour government over its attempted anti-union legislation, 'In Place of Strife'. The YS made oppositional sounds about the Government's policies, but played little role in struggle.

*Militant's* reaction to the Donovan Commission, for example, was a lead article saying 'No to Legislation', but explaining that there was no point organising any campaign. "The hollowness of the employers' threats is evident... They dare not lift a finger at the present time" (*Militant*, December 1965/January 1966). *Militant's* supporters who tried to start organising a campaign were quickly rebuked.

In the late '60s, in face of the fact that the centre of working class political life was shifting to the industrial struggle, *Militant* defined the politics that were to dominate the YS in

the '70s. In their April 1967 editorial, commenting on the YS conference, they wrote: "... although a syndicalist interpretation could be given to the last paragraph of the Hornsey resolution, which used the formula of 'rank and file committees at the point of production', both at the *Tribune* meeting and the *Militant* meeting supporters of this journal explained that this was an incorrect course to recommend to a YS conference. [One understands how important it is to warn the Parliament-orientated Tribunites against syndicalism!]. While it is obvious that all independent action by the working class, including the formation of ad-hoc strike and rank and file committees, deserves the support of every YS member, it is incorrect to hold out the prospect of activity at 'the point of production' as an alternative to the struggle for a political, a socialist, programme within the broad labour movement. Indeed the industrial struggle of the working class will inevitably spill over into the trade union branches and the wards, CLPs and Trades Councils..."

Here *Militant* counterposes (propaganda for) 'the socialist programme' against the class struggle at the point of production (or, as it was to be in the following years, in the streets).

The reason why the self-defensive struggle of the bedrock organisations of labour, the trade unions, took on a syndicalist character, was that the reformist political organisations created by the labour movement were solidly entrenched behind the bourgeois state — and attempting to administer society for the bourgeoisie. Resistance did not wait on 'reclaiming' the Labour Party from bourgeois alliance. Though the 1968 Labour conference voted 5,098,000 to 1,124,000 against anti-union legislation, there was no way conference could control the Cabinet. But the bedrock labour movement acted.

Even as late as 1973-4, with Labour in opposition and with things 'made up' between the trade unions and the Labour Party, the political struggle against the government took the form of direct action self-reliance.

That there is truth in some of *Militant's* concerns here emerges from the impotence of the great industrial victories to change society even after bringing down Heath, because the political labour movement was in the hands of the Lib-Lab reformists. In 1967 and for many years after, however, the passive propagandist focus on the Labour Party as the political wing of the movement, stressing that little could be done without it, cut in the opposite direction to the thrust of real working class political struggle (political at least in the negative sense of opposing the view of the governments of the day on how society was to be administered). The YS were at best the tail-ending supporters of direct action struggles which were central for the working class.

Yet *Militant* commented on the 1967 conference: "Despite the numerical weakness, this conference can assist the regeneration of the YS. If the political issues are clarified, a clear programme (particularly on youth demands, etc.) is worked out, and the YS refrains from indulging in the infantile 'leftism' characteristic of previous years, it can help to reinvigorate the TU branches and the CLPs. It can disseminate the ideas outlined at the Llandudno conference to the active layers of the movement". The YS — the entire body of an allegedly mass youth movement — was to make socialist propaganda.

IN 1967 A MASS opposition to the Vietnam war took to the streets, hundreds of thousands strong. It had the dimensions of the CND movement which had aided the growth of the early YS — but it was a great deal more militant.

In the course of 1967-8 these rebel youth came out solidly for the Vietnamese against US imperialism. In May 1968 the general strike in France demonstrated once more the power and potential of the working class. In August the invasion of Czechoslovakia brought home to the radical youth the nature of Russian Stalinism. It was a concentrated sequence of dramatic world events that might have been designed as an effective crash course in revolutionary politics (all that was 'missing' was an experience showing up Mao-Stalinism and populism). And the youth learned.

But the YS could make nothing of the opportunities. The spontaneously revolutionary youth were raw and 'ultra-left', but a serious socialist youth movement would have dealt with this by immersing itself in their struggles, for example on Vietnam. The LPYS, shrivelled and afflicted increasingly by *Militant's* passivity, could do nothing of the sort. It did not participate in the Vietnam movement (unless you count a few sellers of *Militant* on demonstrations). The years of the upsurge were the years of the organisational nadir of the YS. They were also the years when *Militant* gained the NC majority. The 'Marxist' YS was born away from the storms and the struggles of that period.

## 1970-79: Militant in control

THE THIRD phase of the history of the LPYS — stable for the last decade — has seen *Militant* in full political control.

(It has been, of course, control through the domination of the ideas of a current of opinion round a paper, not the sort of aggressive factional control associated with *Keep Left*).

Previously, leftists had been at daggers drawn with the bureaucracy (*Keep Left*) or showed mutual contempt with it (*Young Guard*). *Militant* has worked out a modus vivendi with the bureaucracy. Through years of responsible work, it has won their tolerance to put its resolutions, and their confidence that nothing much will come of it.

Before *Militant* took control, John Ewers, an (appointed) NC member wrote in *Militant* (September 1967): "The YS should aim to recruit youth to its ranks on a mass basis. It can only do this effectively with a national, regional and local organisation, elected by and responsible to the YS themselves... The NC must be elected by the members themselves..."

es, at YS conference, at which there should be no restriction on the topics discussed..." In 1968 the curbs were eased and regional elections were introduced for NC members. John Ewers hailed this as "half a step forward" (*Militant*, April 1968). But since *Militant* got control it has agreed, hand in hand with Transport House, to exploit the bureaucratic structure whereby a National Committee not elected at conference dominates it completely.

Until about 1974 a sizeable Tribunitite group still existed, debating with *Militant*. After that it declined sharply. After 1970 Labour was out of office and no longer a millstone round the YS's neck. The class struggle intensified until it blew Heath out of Downing Street in 1974. This was still an industrial struggle, in its methods and in its focus. Nevertheless the Labour Party, far from opposing it, is often in support, mending its fences with the unions. A trickle of militants and socialists began to enter the Labour Party (not quite the 'spill over' from the industrial struggle that *Militant* talked about in 1967, though).

*Militant* had become the leading tendency of the YS just when the objective situation was opening up possibilities for it in the labour movement. True, the LPYS's incapacity to relate to the radicalised youth in 1967-68 and after meant that it was less strong than it might have been for the struggle against the Tories. But the YS had itself to blame for its less than prominent role in all the struggles.

The YS grew a bit in the early '70s, apparently levelling off after 1975. Today, in 1979, the NC's target for expanding the YS is 6,500 members. The YS has done nothing remotely like what should have been possible for a Marxist-led national youth organisation affiliated to a mass labour movement which was engaging in sometimes semi-revolutionary struggles against the Tory government. The YS did behave as it was projected in the 1967 *Militant* editorial it should behave — as an 'enlightening' propagandist extension of *Militant*, not as a fighting youth movement concerned with the struggles and the interests (social, intellectual, sexual, cultural, as well as political) of the working class youth around it.

The YS has conducted campaigns 'for a Socialist Spain' but done less than the Young Liberals on the burning issue of British troops in Northern Ireland. When the Anti-Nazi League mobilised youth in 1978 on a bigger scale than anything since the Vietnam movement or CND (and working class youth particularly), only the *Workers' Action* minority in the YS showed any interest in intervening. The *Militant* majority were content to reassure themselves that only the mass labour movement, armed with a socialist programme, could finally deal with racism and fascism.

In 1974 the YS, following *Militant's* arguments about 'working class unity', failed to give support to black strikers at Imperial Typewriters, Leicester, locked in conflict with racist white workers (though in 1977, the YS did turn to attempting to organise black youth, in the peculiar form of the British youth branch of the Jamaican People's National Party). The women's liberation movement has passed the YS by — fended off by the *Militant* sectarians. Reflecting the political backwardness of the *Militant* tendency, the 1973 conference voted down a motion on gay rights.

For most of the period of *Militant's* domination, the chief minority in the YS has been Tribunitite. The Tribunitite element has faded since 1974, but has been deliberately kept half-alive by *Militant* as a chopping block for their explanations of what they consider Marxism.

Since 1974, however, a new revolutionary opposition has developed within the YS. In 1975 supporters of *Workers' Fight* got 100 people to a fringe meeting at the YS conference, and people from 20 YS branches to a day school a few weeks later.

This left-wing opposition to *Militant* was continued around the paper *Workers' Action*, started in 1976. By 1978 the *Militant*-dominated platform was referring to *Workers' Action* as "the minority". *WA* was by far the most vocal and visible opposition, and numerically about level pegging with the Tribunitites' alliance of all those to the right of *Militant* (19 votes for the *WA* candidate for YS representative on the NEC in 1978, 20 votes for the Tribunitite candidate).

The big battles have been over Ireland and over a class-struggle concept of socialism as against the *Militant's* rote formula of 'nationalising the 220 monopolies'.

## The future of the YS

THE Y.S. is afflicted by the fact that a passive propagandist tendency like *Militant*, though it may have young supporters, can scarcely do youth work. *Militant* stands at the opposite pole to the positive qualities of youth in socialist and working-class politics — ardour, combativity, willingness to take risks and shake up stale old structures, the impatient belief that they themselves, here and now, can accomplish something in the class struggle and for socialism. The YS since the early '70s has been the result of a tacit agreement between the *Militant* tendency — with its politics consisting of stereotyped socialist recipes and routine involvement in the labour movement — and the Labour bureaucracy, keeping the youth movement half-alive and thus solving the dilemma that has dogged the bureaucracy's relationship with youth since the '30s.

Without a radical change not only in political positions but also in the very conception of politics, the future for the YS does not look promising. Today the Labour Party bureaucracy tolerates *Militant*. Andy Bevan, like Ted Willis in the 1930s before him, is of use to the bureaucracy — but only until they decide that they need to have 'their own' youth movement or would rather have none at all. The idea of endless political coexistence with the bureaucracy is in fact a snare for *Militant*.

Which way forward for the YS? Democratise the YS. Turn to organising ordinary working class kids. Turn to the work of building a mass working class youth movement, using social affairs and amenities. Teach the politics old before their time to reach out, to talk to and involve themselves with working class youth.