

About Labour Focus on Eastern Europe

The initiative for Labour Focus came from Peter Gowan and his partner, Halya Kowalsky. The events in Poland in 1976 and the creation of Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia convinced them that it was essential for the left in the West to offer support and solidarity to those working class and democratic oppositionists in Eastern Europe suffering repression from the Communist Party regimes and to inform the working class movement and socialists in the West about the existence of these groups which were ignored by governments and media unless they were able to exploit them for Cold War purposes. Peter had already argued in an article in *New Left Review* in 1977 that these events and their political dynamic had significance for Eastern Europe as a whole and that this dynamic had produced "a highly explosive conjuncture in Poland and one that will increasingly demand the attention of the revolutionary left throughout Europe". (The Third Round in Poland, *NLR* 102, 1977, p70).

Peter's personal charm made him the ideal person to gather together quite an eclectic group of left-wingers from the various left groups, the Labour Party, and even the Communist Party, along with émigré activists. The magazine started on a shoestring but it had significant intellectual support on the left. In addition to its editorial collective, the magazine had among its editors and sponsors a number of people associated with *New Left Review*, among them Tariq Ali, Quintin Hoare, Branka Magas, Tamara Deutscher, and Nicholas Krasso. It also included Vladimir Derer, Czech emigré and leader of the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy; Leonid Plyushch, Ukrainian mathematician, imprisoned by the Soviet authorities in 1972 and living in France from 1976; and Hillel Ticktin, editor of what was then the Soviet Studies journal, *Critique*.

Peter and Halya were able to forge a team with the political and linguistic skills to make Labour Focus a vital link with the outside world for numerous dissidents in Eastern Europe and create an unparalleled documentary archive of oppositional movements during the years leading up to the collapse of regimes in 1989/90. Leo Panitch, editor of *Socialist Register*, described Labour Focus as "the best source by far for evidence of strikes and other forms of protests against the authoritarian Communist regimes". It is, today, an invaluable documentary archive for research into oppositional activity in the USSR and Eastern Europe in the decades before the collapse of Communism and also an important source of information on political currents and working class organisations in the decade following.

The very first issue of the magazine explained its aims as follows:

"A growing number of socialists and communists are taking a stand against the suppression of democratic rights in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The Labour Movement has international responsibilities in this field as well as in the field of solidarity action with those struggling against oppression in Chile or Southern African or Northern Ireland.

Labour Focus is a completely independent bulletin whose editorial collective includes various trends of socialist and Marxist opinion. It is not a bulletin for debate on the nature of the East European states, nor is its purpose to recommend a strategy for socialists in Eastern Europe. Our purpose is to provide a comprehensive coverage of these societies with a special emphasis on significant currents campaigning for working class, democratic and national rights."

During the late 1970s and until the collapse of the system in 1989/90, although the magazine was able to list a number of prominent academics among its supporters, it was not a typical magazine written by Western academics *about* the USSR and Eastern Europe. It was mainly a documentation of opposition movements in those societies but, as the political crisis deepened in Poland in the 1980s and later, with developments in the USSR under Gorbachev and emerging conflicts in Yugoslavia, the magazine also provided more in-depth analysis of economic conditions, political currents and conflicts in society, as well as conditions in the workplace, with key contributions on these areas from Peter Gowan, David Mandel, and Branka Magas.

During this period, we had contacts and personal meetings with similar teams in Paris, West Berlin, and Vienna and there was a sharing of information, contacts and documents. Personal contact with dissidents inside Eastern Europe was important and was easier in some countries than in others. State surveillance of dissidents was much more intense in Czechoslovakia and East Germany, for instance, than it was in Poland or Hungary.

In London, Jan Kavan, whose father, a Czech diplomat, was sentenced in a show trial to 25 years in prison in the 1950s, emigrated to Britain after 1968 and established Palach Press, a source of documents from the Czech opposition. Labour Focus worked closely with Kavan and most of our Czechoslovak documents came through Palach Press. Here is how Kavan described his actions in support of the Czech oppositionists:

"During my 20 years in exile in London I remained in close touch with the Czechoslovak opposition at home, where the backbone of the human rights opposition groups were the activists of 1968. I was responsible for smuggling about 25 tons of literature (also copiers, cameras etc) to Czechoslovakia. My

couriers also smuggled out of the country all Charter 77 and VONS (Committee for Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted) documents, samizdat books, films and photos. I published it all via my Palach Press. We made secretly filmed material available to the BBC's *Panorama*, Granada's *World in Action*, Thames TV, and also to the US, Canada and elsewhere."

One incident created quite a stir in Czechoslovakia and resulted in a special programme on Thames Television. This was when the van carrying material into Czechoslovakia was impounded by the Czech police. Czech TV, in 1981, carried a 20-minute account of how the Czech secret police had uncovered this Western imperialist plot to undermine socialism. With a somewhat sinister musical background, one could watch the police unscrewing all the secret compartments and displaying the hundreds of documents and publications. The Thames TV programme portrayed it as a kind of John Le Carré spy story, with turned up collars and dark glasses.

The impounded van was a setback but there were victories. Peter Gowan tells one story:

We got someone called Platts-Mills to go to Prague at the time of a rather large trial of Charter 77 people. He was a very eminent QC, in the Middle Temple, if my memory is right, in constitutional law matters, but he was also rather a notorious old commie. He had been expelled from the Labour Party, while being a Labour MP in 1948 because, when the so-called Prague coup took place, Platts-Mills happened to be in Bucharest, and he immediately jumped on a plane and flew to Prague to hail the Czechoslovak revolution. Back in London, he was booted out of the Party. And he continued to be an intransigent opponent of imperialism and all the rest of it, but he thought all this Brezhnevite stuff – locking up handfuls of dissidents and so on – was a ridiculous business, and so he was ready to go to Prague to insist on observing the trial.

Now, this was a particularly effective operation because Platts-Mills for many years had been the chair of something called the International Association of Democratic Lawyers, which was the pro-Soviet international lawyers' organisation. And it happened that the judge at this trial, as well as more senior judges in the Czechoslovak hierarchy, knew Platts-Mills only too well – they had been at many conferences together, drinking partners, and so forth. Platts-Mills, of course, pulled rank on them within the International Association of Democratic Lawyers. Platts-Mills, who by this time was close on eighty, but incredibly vigorous, flew into Prague and flew them into quite a tizzy. In the end - they had been inclined to throw him out – he was there

making a real fuss and they felt that they had to let him into the trial, but it was quite a gas – and certainly it would have been quite a significant talking point in Communist circles in Prague." (Interview with Mike Newman and Marko Bojcun)

On the GDR, Günter Minnerup was our main writer and a lot of material came through West Berlin. We were able to document debates among GDR activists about strategy and about the ideas in Rudolf Bahro's *The Alternative*. Labour Focus also enabled the occasional interaction of dissidents from different countries, a good example of which was Wolfgang Templin's reply to Petr Uhl's text, Human Rights and Political Revolution, published by Labour Focus (LF 30, no 1 in 1987). The magazine paid special attention to the peace movement that emerged particularly strongly in the GDR.

In Poland, especially during the Solidarity period, Labour Focus devoted a huge amount of effort to collecting and translating the programmes, documents, debates and personal stories of working class activists. The magazine published the entire collection of Solidarity bulletins from Gdansk and Szczecin, the Solidarity programme, and the numerous debates that went on inside the movement both before and after martial law in 1982. David Holland was invaluable both as contributor and translator. We established lasting relationships with prominent activists such as Tadeus Kowalik, Jozef Pinior and Milka Tyszkiewicz. Peter Gowan had been personally involved in Poland right from the beginning.

"The big concentration, towards the end of the '70s, was on Poland, and I was quite deeply involved in work on Poland. Through contacts that I made actually in London, funnily enough, quite by chance, I got involved in two extremely interesting networks in Poland.

One was a network of psychologists, established in the main enterprises across Poland, with the backing of the Communist Party leadership of Gierek after the upheavals of 1970/71 on the Baltic. And the purpose of these psychologists was to humanise the workplaces for the workers there, and to address their occupational problems and so on. Now, the man who had established this network had actually been killed in a car accident in the mid-'70s. I was rather suspicious of this, and I have to say that his widow was a bit suspicious of it as well. But the people involved in the network were still in place, by and large, and I was in close contact with one such psychologist who was working in the shipyards in Szczecin – in the biggest of the shipyards there, the Warski shipyard. And, through him, I got to see the life of the shipyard workers and in 1980, when the strikes began and Solidarność was

being organised, I was in the shipyard more or less from the beginning and got fantastic access to what was going on there – so that was extremely interesting.

A second network that I was involved with, actually through more or less the same circles in Warsaw, was a group which was formally a clandestine group in Warsaw University known as the Sigma Club. The Sigma Club involved Marxists, mainly communists – both lecturers and students, although I think the students were postgraduate students – discussing important issues connected to what was perceived to be the crisis in the People's Republic of Poland. And I went to a very fascinating conference up in Frombork – the home town of Copernicus, a lovely little place up on the Baltic – where there was the most fascinating conference in 1977, a conference of academics from all over Poland, focused on two issues. One was: Is there a ruling class in Poland – an exploitative ruling class? They had all been carefully studying a Swedish book arguing such a thesis and it was an interesting book – I learnt about it although I didn't read it myself – it was interesting because, to some extent, it was a new debate on this subject, not the old kind of Trotskyist debates.

But the second thing that was going on there, which was fascinating for me, was very detailed reports provided by sociologists as to exactly what had happened in the 1976 upheavals in various shipyards, also at Radom and Ursus, at the big tractor factory, the Massey-Ferguson tractor factory at Ursus. And this was very interesting, because they showed, amongst other things, how the workers, particularly in the Lenin shipyard in Gdansk, had remembered the way they had organised in 1970 and repeated it. And that was very interesting.

And then a third network I was involved with was one where I helped Edmund Baluka, who had been the leader of the strike committee in the shipyard in Szczecin in 1970/71, but who had been given an offer he couldn't refuse to get out of the country in 1971 – I helped him to re-establish contact with members of his strike committee from that time by going to Szczecin and meeting some of them, and I was able to take a letter back to him. I was therefore quite deeply involved in Polish developments." (Interview with Mike Newman and Marko Bojcun)

On Hungary, we were fortunate to have Bill Lomax with his wealth of knowledge on Hungarian history, especially the events of 1956. Under the more repressively tolerant regime of Janos Kadar, we were able to meet openly with dissident groups, attend their parties and be taken on tours of Lake Balaton or Szentendre. We were

able to meet and discuss with quite a large number of oppositionists including Janos Kis and György Bence, authors of the very influential book, *Towards an East European Marxism*, published under the pseudonym Marc Rakovsky by St Martin's Press in 1978.

In the case of the USSR, contact was mainly with exiled dissidents. Through Zhores Medvedev in London, we had contact with his brother Roy in Russia. We also had personal contact with Piotr Egides, expelled in 1979 and living with his wife in Paris. We invited him to attend the Labour Party conference and speak at a fringe meeting. Halya Kowalsky and I escorted him for a week around the conference centre in Brighton. From inside Russia, the magazine documented attempts to establish free trade unions, highlighted the arrests of dissidents, and carried material from the Samizdat journal, *Poiski*.

The coverage by Branka Magas of the contradictions and developing conflicts in Yugoslav society that would eventually lead to the tragedy of war was unrivalled for its depth of knowledge and insight. It remains today essential reading for anyone wishing to understand the political, social, and cultural origins of the destruction of Yugoslavia.

Labour Focus was fortunate in having input from an expert group of second generation leftists from the Ukrainian diaspora - Marko Bojcun, Jarko Koshiw, and Jean-Paul Himka. The magazine took up the issue of the political abuse of psychiatry in the case of Viktor Klebanov, the former coalminer from the Donbas region of Ukraine, who established the Association of Free Trade Unions of Workers and was detained in psychiatric prison. David Mandel provided detailed and informed coverage of workers and trade unions.

In 1978 Labour Focus produced a special issue on the situation of women in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe and the theme was continued thereafter with articles from Alix Holt, Sheila Malone and, after 1990, Anna Pollert, Tatiana Zhurzhenko, and Sonja Lokar.

The magazine also carried information about labour movement activities in Britain and Western Europe in support of dissidents. One such regular activity was the organisation of a fringe meeting at the annual Labour Party conference. Vladimir Derer, perhaps better known at the time for his role in leading the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy, was also actively involved with Labour Focus and, with the enthusiastic support of the Labour MP for Liverpool, Eric Heffer, campaigned in the Labour Party for demonstrations of support for Soviet and East European oppositionists. Jan Kavan was a regular speaker at these meetings and we also had Zbigniew Kowalewski, Solidarity activist, and Piotr Egides, the founder of the Soviet

samizdat journal, *Poiski*. They didn't just speak at meetings but were able to meet Labour Party notables and trade unions leaders, all part of building support in the British labour movement.

After 1990, Labour Focus documented and analysed the economic and social changes, the emergence of new parties, trade unions, and new left-wing groups. We established new links with the people around *Ezmelet* in Hungary with László Andor and Tamas Krausz, the journal *Alternatives* in Russia with Alexander Buzgalin, and the very active regional groups that now contribute to the website [LeftEast](#). It carried the debates around EU integration of Eastern Europe and Western military intervention in Yugoslavia with important contributions from Branka Magas and Catherine Samary. Peter Gowan's contribution after 1989, his analysis of Western political and economic interests in the integration of Eastern Europe into the EU, the significance of NATO expansion eastwards, and his analysis of the military intervention in Yugoslavia (*The Twisted Road to Kosovo, LF62*) were important interventions in the debates on those issues. David Mandel continued his analysis of the conditions facing trade unionists in Russia and Ukraine.

The magazine was edited by Peter Gowan from 1977 until 1986 , by Günter Minnerup from 1986 to 1991, and then by Gus Fagan until 2004. Copies are deposited in the British Library and in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. The magazine ceased publication in 2004.