

# Workers ACTION

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## VOTE ~~NEW~~ LABOUR

There are some on the left who hope that May 5 will see Labour punished at the polls, with abstention and protest voting by former Labour supporters leading to the loss of a number of seats. Of course, the real responsibility for any such defection will lie with the New Labour leadership, which from its starting point of embracing neo-liberal economics and big business, and distancing itself from the labour movement, has gone on to introduce a raft of right-wing policies from foundation hospitals and university top-up fees to the privatisation of air traffic control and identity cards, and has enthusiastically joined the United States in waging war on Afghanistan and Iraq.

While it is possible to understand why some people will express their disenchantment with the government by staying at home, and why others will vote for parties that were against the invasion of Iraq or whose policies in general seem to be to the left of Labour's, we have to point out that this is not the best way to build an effective left opposition to the Blairites, and that in the worst case scenario, it could be the critical factor in giving the election to the Tories.

Teaching the government a lesson by reducing its majority in parliament is all very well in theory, but it's too complex a form of tactical voting to have any control over. How do you campaign for *some* people to vote for parties other than Labour or to abstain, but for *most* people to vote Labour so that there's no chance of the Tories winning the election? And anyway, what about the poor folk in the constituencies that get landed with Tory MPs as a result of this tactic?

### Playing with fire

Socialists who think along these lines, like Tariq Ali who declares that he is voting for the Lib Dems in Hornsey and Wood Green because that is the only way to get rid of Barbara Roche, or those who will be campaigning for Respect or other left-wing candidates, are playing with fire. If enough people in enough constituencies follow their example – and one presumes that that is what they intend – then Labour will be defeated, the Tories will form the next government, and the Lib Dems will be strengthened.

The favoured outcome for some on the left is that Labour loses its overall majority and is forced into a coalition with the Lib Dems – after all, they argue, many Lib Dem policies are to the left of Labour's. But, if anything, the Lib Dems

have moved to the right over the last couple of years, no doubt because many of their target seats are Tory-held. For example, they opposed the rises in the minimum wage announced by the government in March 2003. Vince Cable, then their trade and industry spokesman, said: 'Making a commitment to a two-year deal, at levels significantly above inflation and at nearly double the current level of average earnings growth, sets a dangerous precedent at a time of almost unparalleled uncertainty.' They are in favour of PFI, the privatisation of selected state assets, ending national pay bargaining in the public sector, cutting thousands of civil service jobs, and what amounts to a strike ban in essential services (see page 7). Although they opposed the actual invasion of Iraq, they support the occupation and played no part whatsoever in building the anti-war movement. They also supported the Nato bombing of Yugoslavia.

### Stirring up prejudice

Would it make any difference if there were a Tory government in place of New Labour? For millions of workers on low or average incomes, yes, most certainly! There is a danger of underestimating the Tories: they are the party of wealth and privilege, ideologues of inequality who are dedicated to cutting public spending in order to fund tax cuts to the already well-off, holding down wages and smashing the unions. Their election campaign has centred on 'dogwhistle' policies designed to stir up primitive racist prejudice against gypsies and non-white immigrants. Among the things they say they will do if they form the next government are: reduce the number of university places, opt out of the European Social Chapter to 'liberate small businesses from job-destroying employment legislation', cut 235,000 civil service jobs, subsidise patients to have operations done privately and pupils to go to independent schools, extend the 'right to buy' to housing association tenants, implement a massive programme of road building and extend the franchises of the train operators, abolish the New Deal and privatise Jobcentre Plus, and freeze the minimum wage. Respect may set out to punish New Labour, but if the Tories get back it will be ordinary workers who feel the pain.

Workers Action is unequivocally in favour of returning a Labour government. We believe that the best conditions for fighting against the New Labour leadership are when the trade

union and labour movement is strong and combative, not when it is demoralised and under siege from the Tories. Moreover, we consider it the primary duty of socialists to fight for the raising of living standards and the extension of rights, and, while the difference between a Tory and a New Labour government is in some respects a matter of degree, the period since May 1997 has seen, among other things, political reform (notably devolution in Scotland and Wales), improved living standards for the poorest sections of society through the minimum wage and family credit, progressive social legislation such as the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 which gives public authorities a statutory duty to promote race equality, the repeal of Clause 28 and the lowering of the gay age of consent to 16, more money for health and education, and increased funding for the arts, including the restoration of free entry to major museums and galleries.

We do not think that any of the left-of-Labour parties represent a serious alternative in this election. Even if George Gallows defeats Oona King in Bethnal Green and Bow, this will be attributable to the particular demographics of that part of east London and won't significantly alter the balance of forces. And while Respect is clearly going to win the support of many people who are sincerely opposed to the war on Iraq, its tactic of presenting itself as 'the party for Muslims' reinforces the view that it is a single-issue campaign group rather than an inclusive socialist party, and, more seriously, could open the door to communalist politics.

Of course, as currently constituted, the Labour Party offers no guarantees as to its ability to defend workers' jobs, wages and conditions. If this is to become a possibility, the left in the party will have to be considerably strengthened and its influence in the wider labour movement increased. To this end, socialists should concentrate their efforts in this election on ensuring that the highest number of left-wing MPs will be sitting on the Labour benches in the next parliament. So when we call for the biggest possible Labour vote on May 5, we are not giving anything to New Labour; indeed, we recognise that New Labour is a serious obstacle on the road to meaningful reforms, never mind socialism, and that the success of future struggles will in no small part depend on the decisive defeat of the New Labour faction.

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## Asylum and immigration

# Tories let the dogs out

It's no exaggeration to say that race will play a greater role in this election than almost any other in memory. Of course, politicians from all three main parties will claim they abhor racism and support equal opportunities, and will field small numbers of ethnic minority candidates.

But when the Tories open their pre-election poster campaign by asking if we're thinking that 'It's not racist to impose limits on immigration', they are sending a set of messages, all of which have a racist subtext. By suggesting that anti-immigration paranoia isn't racist, the Tories aim to make racism respectable for the 'I'm not racist, but . . .' brigade. At the same time, they are reassuring the openly racist right that their concerns have a central place in mainstream political debate. There's also a none-too-subtle suggestion that immigration is currently uncontrolled, and when Michael Howard bangs on about it, nobody thinks he's referring to an influx of Australians or New Zealanders. Immigration, like asylum, serves as a proxy to fan the flames of racism.

Even though asylum and immigration are distinct issues, in the minds of many they are the same thing. A survey of voting intentions in the *New Statesman* in February found that one in five of the electorate was either considering or was prepared to consider voting for the fascist BNP or the Euro-sceptic Ukip. Both parties draw on a common reservoir of xenophobic and racist paranoia, but where Ukip mainly picks up disenchanted Tories, much of the BNP's support comes from defecting Labour voters, either in the ex-industrial towns of the north, or in white flight areas around the major cities.

The last period of acute racial tension in Britain lasted from the heyday of the National Front in the mid-1970s to the inner-city rebellions against police harassment in 1981 and 1985, and, like today, began under a Labour government. For the next 15 years, in spite of Thatcher's best efforts, race relations in Britain appeared to evolve in a progressive direction. The far right was not a serious electoral force, except in a few localities, and among large sections of young people in particular, racism became distinctly uncool. While attempts to demonise the black population never went away, they had less and less resonance as workplaces became increasingly integrated, inter-racial relationships became more commonplace, and black culture entered the mainstream.

## Rising tide of Islamophobia

But the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, coinciding as they did with heightened xenophobia and Euro-scepticism, have changed all that. Although the National Front had targeted the Asian community in the 1970s, much of its efforts were directed at attacking the black population. Since September 11, it is Muslims who have borne the brunt of state, fascist and media-driven racism, and Islamophobia has made huge strides forward. It draws inspiration not only from the far right, but also from such mainstream commentators as former *Today* programme editor Rod Liddle, and even sections of the left. Above all, it has gained respectability from this government's raft of anti-terror legislation – some the most repres-

sive ever passed in peacetime. Muslims have become fair game for attack from all points of the compass.

Back in the 1970s, the National Front demanded 'no race mixing'. Now Muslims are attacked for failing to integrate. Immigrants and asylum seekers are accused both of 'taking our jobs' and of scrounging on the dole. It's damned if you do and damned if you don't time.

There are many on the left who hold Blair primarily responsible for asylum and immigration taking centre stage, and it is certainly true that by surrendering trench after trench to the right, Blair, Blunkett and Clarke have helped create the current climate. Even police chiefs report that every time senior politicians attempt to outbid each other in sounding tough on asylum and immigration, it leads to an increase in racist attacks, while BNP leader Nick Griffin is on record as saying that it is doing his party's work for it.

### Reputation in tatters

Labour's traditional reputation as an inclusive and tolerant party lies in tatters. Part of this reputation was always dubious. While Labour, under Harold Wilson, passed the largely toothless Race Relations Act, it also passed acts specifically designed to limit non-white immigration. Nevertheless, it was the party to which the vast majority of black and Asian workers looked to advance their status in British society.

Blair the warmonger is likely to reap his electoral reward in terms of large numbers of Muslim defections and abstentions – even in seats with anti-war Labour MPs.

But it would be a mistake to believe that Blair represents the right-wing pole of the immigration and asylum debate. Much of the left has failed to register adequately that there are forces well to the right of Blair at work – starting with the Tories, who want to impose quotas on asylum and withdraw from the UN refugee convention. The Tories, Ukip and the BNP are united in seeing Blair as soft on asylum and immigration. The left may have landed a solid blow by accusing Blair of lying over the war; the trouble is, the right is happy to brand Blair a liar because it believes that he is engaged in a sinister conspiracy to flood the country with illegal immigrants and bogus asylum seekers.

The fact that this belief is strongly rooted in areas where seeing a black or brown face is a significant event underlines the extent to which Britain is dividing into two nations that don't speak the same language when it comes to race.

It's by no means all bad news. Compared to most big European cities, London is a success story that demonstrates both multi-culturalism and integration in practice, and this positive experience has been repeated in other towns and cities to a greater or lesser extent.

Then there's the other Britain, where hatred of London (as the centre of government and wealth, but also as a multi-cultural refuse tip) merges with a feeling of victimhood – of being a stranger in one's own country, of suffering the tyranny of political correctness, ignored by the metropolitan chattering classes, and living under the shadow of a European super-state.

### Re-establish an inclusive party of Labour

gration and asylum, and re-establishes the party as an inclusive party of Labour. More than that, Labour and trade union activists must give support to initiatives like Unite Against Fascism, take up the struggle for equality within the workplace, and fight for the repeal of the repressive legislation of Labour's second term. But it's not enough to exhort people to be nicer to each other. The pervasive feeling in many of Labour's traditional heartlands that the party has neglected its own has some real basis, even if the anger this generates is frequently misdirected towards other oppressed people. Labour must bring hope, jobs and regeneration to the most blighted parts of post-industrial Britain if it is draw a line under Thatcher's legacy and move on.

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## The anti-war movement

### The Iraq factor

Since the invasion of Afghanistan, the anti-war movement has faced a dilemma over how to intervene in elections. The Stop the War Coalition has maintained a position that it doesn't support any particular party in the elections but should use elections to promote opposition to the war. This is absolutely correct: for the STWC to adopt any other position would have forced a split in a campaign that has attracted supporters of a number of different political parties and of none. Aligning the coalition to any single electoral party would have been the death knell for the coalition as a broad campaign.

While the resistance to adopting a single tactic over elections is welcome, there has been little discussion in the anti-war movement about how to make the most out of the political situation. The movement has clearly wounded Blair in the eyes of the overwhelming majority of the British population, but Blair is almost certain to win the forthcoming election, albeit with a much-reduced majority, and the left within the Labour Party remains incredibly weak. On the eve of the Iraq war the STWC headed the largest demonstration in British political history, and followed this up with several more mobilisations of hundreds of thousands. However, the movement is looking collectively incapable of making sufficient political capital from this.

### Impact on public opinion

For Blair's part, three years ago he might have expected the war to boost his popularity and for it all to be forgotten in a matter of months. The strength of the anti-war movement has had such an impact upon public consciousness that it has resulted in the war having exactly the opposite effect. We are left in the bizarre situation where pretty well everyone, even Blair, acknowledges that he is a liability to Labour, though the very forces that could have removed him as leader of the party rallied round to keep him in place. Many of the accepted rules of mainstream politics don't apply in the current situation.

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bour's traditional base of support, often relishing being seen to be taking on the most militant sections of the working class. Ideologically committed to a right-wing agenda, they have felt able to attack workers because they believe the left has nowhere else to go electorally. Taking their strategy from the 'New Democrats' in the early period of the Clinton administration (which even Clinton ditched in later years), they have concentrated on winning the support of the wavering voters in between the Tories and Labour. At the same time, they have aimed to undercut the Tories by adopting ever more right-wing policies – a strategy they refer to as triangulation.

For anyone interested in implementing a progressive agenda this strategy was always anathema as it meant that any commitment to principles was abandoned in order to achieve electoral success. Obviously, for the small group of people at the core of New Labour this was never a concern – Blairites have never had any interest in the working class and the Labour movement, or any notion of socially progressive policies.

### The New Labour consensus comes unstuck

The Blair agenda has always been to modernise British capitalism to suit the multinationals, while at the same time crushing the Labour Party as an effective arena of resistance. In order to achieve its aims, New Labour very successfully constructed a much wider alliance across the trade unions, the party and the broader labour movement, not on the basis of support for the project, but by insisting there was no alternative other than a Tory government even further to the right. The whole strategy of New Labour has come unstuck, however, in the face of the mass anti-war movement.

The Labour Party has lost around half its membership since 1997, the most important factor by far being the two wars that Blair has involved Britain in as part of the neo-cons' response to 9/11. But the true scale of the disaster facing Labour is reflected more accurately in the unwillingness of members to be involved in party structures or to campaign for Labour, and in the loss of support from traditional Labour voters. At the same time, the alliance that Blair built has dissipated, leaving New Labour as a tiny, isolated minority, albeit one that tightly controls almost every key position within the party at a national level. The paradox of this is that it has never been so easy to get rid of Blair and New Labour since their rise to power, and the only thing that saves them is the haemorrhaging of the left within the party, with little sign of an organised opposition capable of making a challenge for leadership.

The majority of activists central to the anti-war movement have adopted a position of launching electoral challenges to Labour where there are pro-war sitting MPs, primarily, but not exclusively, around Respect. While this might make activists feel better about themselves, it doesn't amount to an effective strategy for opposing the occupation of Iraq. George Galloway may well win a seat from Oona King in Bethnal Green and Bow, but this will hardly bring about the withdrawal of British troops. Many on the left, including Labour Party members, argue for challenging prominent pro-war Labour MPs but voting Labour elsewhere. The problem with this is that the most prominent MPs have the largest majorities and are not likely to be unseated by anti-war campaigns. Reg Keys, from Military Families Against the War, has played a very brave and significant role in the anti-war movement, but is not going to overturn Blair's 17,000 majority in Sedgefield.

The key to forcing a withdrawal of troops remains inside the Labour Party. A reduced majority for Labour could potentially mean a much greater influence for the anti-war MPs, though some will almost certainly lose their seats as voters punish MPs for the war crimes of the leader they opposed. The real problem with those looking for electoral alternatives to Labour is that they have encouraged some of the best activists to drop out rather than to wage a fight where they can really make a difference. If even a fraction of the 200,000 members who have left Labour in disgust had remained (only a handful have joined Respect; most simply dropped out of party politics altogether), the left could have deselected pro-war MPs and replaced them with anti-war activists, making a British withdrawal from Iraq a far more imminent prospect. As it stands, the left is very weak within the party, although the majority of members are almost certainly anti-war and a fight within Labour is still the only realistic prospect for achieving a withdrawal from Iraq in the near future. If US forces were left to go it alone in Iraq, that in turn would transform the nature of the debate within US politics, making their withdrawal far more likely.

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## The election in Wales

# Referendum on Assembly government

In Wales, as in Scotland, Westminster elections have taken on greater complexity since the introduction of democratic devolution in 1999. Thus, although this general election will ostensibly be about the record of the Blair government, for Welsh voters it will also be, to some extent, a referendum on Rhodri Morgan's administration in Cardiff Bay.

The link between the two has been dramatised in recent weeks by the case of Peter Law, Labour Assembly Member (AM) for Blaenau Gwent, who has confirmed, at the eleventh hour, that he will stand as an independent candidate against Labour's Maggie Jones for the same constituency's parliamentary seat, in protest against the use of an all-woman shortlist to select Jones. This automatically excludes Law from the Assembly Labour group, which has in turn cost Rhodri his one-vote majority and threatens the demise of his administration. (Bizarrely, Law was diagnosed as suffering from a brain tumour on the very day he planned to announce his candidacy, causing him to withdraw his threat and apparently granting Rhodri a reprieve; however, after successful surgery, he has now returned to his original plan.)

More prosaically, the *Western Mail*, the self-styled 'national newspaper of Wales', has been trying to ensure that the election is fought on the devolved policy area of health – reinforcing genuine public concern about long waiting times. Labour activists in Wales will probably, therefore, find themselves defending the Assembly government's record on the doorstep as much of that of New Labour in Westminster. This is not necessarily a bad thing, however, as Welsh Labour's record, while not unblemished, is far more defensible than Blair's.

Welsh Labour has made a number of public services free at the point of use – from bus travel for pensioners and the disabled, to access to museums and galleries. It is in the process of phasing out NHS prescription charges for everyone. In education, it has scrapped school league tables and standard assessment tests and has introduced a limited student grant. It has quietly dropped PFI and has explicitly renounced the 'reform' of public services on the basis of market competition and consumer 'choice'. It has rejected foundation hospitals and variable tuition fees.

### Longer hospital waiting lists

In health policy, Welsh Labour has taken a great deal of flak for Wales's waiting lists, which remain stubbornly lengthier than in England and Scotland. Undoubtedly, there are genuine structural problems in the health and social care system, which the Assembly government is aware of and is seeking to address. But many of Wales's health problems are a consequence of social deprivation, caused or exacerbated by de-industrialisation. The Assembly government recognises this and is seeking to address it by emphasising health promotion and the reduction of health inequalities – in other words, stressing prevention rather than cure. This has meant taking less of a focus on meeting targets than in England, which has al-

lowed the waiting times situation to remain unchecked. Unfortunately, this has provided the media and the opposition parties with some opportunities to exploit. Even some Welsh Labour MPs, fearing for their slender majorities, have joined the party's opponents to demand a change of policy; in recent weeks, Tony Blair and Peter Hain have let it be known that they have also told Rhodri Morgan to adopt policies closer to those implemented in England. Nevertheless, Welsh Labour's health policy is fundamentally progressive and should be defended by socialists.

While Welsh Labour's Assembly Members have at least attempted to carry out policies that put the needs and priorities of their constituents before Blairite dogma, their colleagues at Westminster have a far from distinguished record over the past four years. Sixteen Welsh Labour backbenchers voted against the Iraq war, but far fewer rebelled over other right-wing policies – only four voted against foundation hospitals and only nine against top-up fees. Several of the others no doubt cynically assumed that they could get away with propping up the government, as the policies in question would not apply in Wales. While some of Labour's new parliamentary candidates – notably Nia Griffith (Llanelli) and Siân James (Swansea East) – may join the ranks of the Westminster rebels, this will be offset by the departure of longstanding rebels like Llew Smith, and the selection of some very 'on-message' new candidates, like Welsh Labour general secretary Jessica Morden in Newport East. Consequently, the Welsh Parliamentary Labour Party will, in all probability, continue to provide reliable support to the party leadership after the general election.

### Real fight is within the Labour Party

Nevertheless, parliamentary politics in Wales are too closely entwined with devolved politics to permit engagement with the one and abstention from the other. In Wales, as in England, the real fight is within the Labour Party, and socialists have been strengthened over the last two years by the formation of Welsh Labour Grassroots, a rank-and-file body that is steadily gaining support among constituency and trade union activists and has won respect from left AMs and MPs.

There is no credible challenge to Welsh Labour from the left in this election. The Plaid Cymru MPs Simon Thomas (Ceredigion) and Adam Price (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) are both further to the left than most Labour MPs, and Price has boosted the anti-war movement with his 'impeach Blair' campaign. Nevertheless, as Welsh Labour in the Assembly has moved slowly but steadily to the left, Plaid has, if anything, moved in the opposite election. Whereas two years ago, Price was calling for a 'red-green' Labour-Plaid coalition in the Assembly, he has recently argued that the non-Labour parties in the Assembly (i.e., including the Tories) should work together to address the waiting times 'crisis'. The prospect of the Labour administration falling over the Peter Law candidacy has even given rise to detailed discussions among the non-Labour parties over the formation of a grand coalition. Yet this is all quite opportunistic on Plaid's part, as its policies on most issues – health included – differ from Welsh Labour's only in degree, not in kind. Other left parties are barely even on the radar screen in Wales.

Immigration and asylum are less controversial issues in Wales than in England, although that has not stopped the BNP from putting up candidates in Swansea East – where an Iraqi Kurdish refugee was killed in a racist attack last year – and in

Wrexham – where there were riots, partly directed against Iraqi Kurdish asylum seekers, in 2003. Clearly, anti-racist activists will have to work hard in these two constituencies to prevent the far right from establishing any sort of electoral base in Wales. Of almost equal concern is the likely election of David Davies, currently the most right-wing Tory AM, in Monmouth. Davies is a cunning and odious populist who is not above playing the race card, and is the bookies' favourite to win the Tories their first Westminster seat in Wales for eight years.

The only other Welsh Labour seat that seems almost certain to be lost is Cardiff Central, which is expected to fall to the Liberal Democrats. Other seats are also vulnerable, however, including some where the sitting members have taken a principled stand against the war and other Blairite policies – these include Cardiff North (held by Julie Morgan), Gower (Martin Caton) and Ynys Mon (Albert Owen). These MPs deserve the active support of socialists in Wales. Labour activists whose own constituencies are represented by right-wingers, and who may therefore be inclined to sit on their hands in this campaign, should instead go and work for the re-election of decent MPs like Morgan, Caton and Owen. This election is unlikely to be inspiring, but there will be many important battles from which socialists cannot afford to abstain. All the big political issues will still face us on May 6, and it is important the parliamentary left is in the strongest possible position to play its part.

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## Stupidest left candidacy of 2005 award

In reverse order:

Third prize in this hard-fought contest goes to Nancy Taaffe of the Socialist Party, standing against Labour MP for Walthamstow Neil Gerrard. Not only has Gerrard consistently supported the anti-war movement, but he has voted against the government on foundation hospitals, top-up fees and a range of other Blairite monstrosities. The key reason for standing seems to be that Walthamstow is home to the Taaffe family, which includes SP leader Peter.

The prize for runner-up goes to Celia Pugh of the Communist League – an obscure micro-sect linked to the American SWP – who in her wisdom is bringing her group's message of salvation through Castro worship to the good people of Bethnal Green and Bow. This, of course, is the seat being contested with a real chance of success by George Galloway of Respect. But if you think it's a principle to stand against Labour, why split the far left vote?

First prize, however, must go to the Respect candidate in Dorset South, Berny Parkes – a former police officer. The constituency is Labour's most marginal seat in the whole of Britain. Apart from the current parliament, the Tories have held the seat since the dawn of time, with the sole exception of 1964, when an anti-Common Market candidate split the Tory vote. Never mind that Respect's membership is probably in single figures in Dorset South (main town: the hotbed of radicalism that is Weymouth) and there's no Muslim vote to chase. Even a couple of hundred votes for Respect could deliver the seat to the Tories.

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## Callaghan – the last Labour prime minister?

The death of Jim Callaghan at 92 on March 26 was accompanied by all the customary tributes from the major party leaders and political contemporaries. Distance and the unpopularity of Blair among Labour loyalists seems to have lent Callaghan the appearance of an inclusive and essentially decent sort, who tried to rule by consensus, and prompted some to call him the last Labour prime minister.

It's true that under Callaghan the cabinet and the NEC was a far broader church than it is today. But no amount of rose-tinted nostalgia can obscure the fact that Callaghan was a pillar of the right wing, whose prime ministerial record prepared the ground for the disastrous Thatcher years.

He may have been the only person to hold the four highest offices of state – chancellor of the exchequer, home secretary, foreign secretary and prime minister – but his tenure of each post was accompanied by crisis.

### Sterling crisis

As chancellor, he presided over the devaluation of sterling in October 1967. Shortly afterwards, he swapped posts with the home secretary, Roy Jenkins. Where Jenkins had been surprisingly liberal, Callaghan was hostile to the social upheavals of the late 60s. Meanwhile, the 1968 Commonwealth Immigrants Act was openly racist in its operation, denying entrance to Britain to British passport holders from Africa, and splitting families in the process.

Labour's failure to do anything to reform the corrupt Northern Ireland statelet in its first four years in office backfired spectacularly in 1968-69. Callaghan's decision to send in troops in August 1969 may have been motivated by a desire to protect nationalists from rampaging Loyalist mobs, but within a short time Britain found itself involved in a war with the Republican movement that would last for a quarter of a century.

With Labour back in office in 1974, Callaghan became foreign secretary, and Harold Wilson's third government distinguished itself by selling warships to Pinochet's Chile and conducting joint naval manoeuvres with apartheid South Africa. In the 1975 referendum campaign on Europe, Callaghan was a pillar of the pro-Common Market right.

### Beer and sandwiches at No. 10

After Wilson's surprise resignation in March 1976, Callaghan won the leadership easily. For two years, his government seemed fairly secure, and well into 1978 Labour was ahead of the Tories in the polls. Having spent his early career as a trade union official, he understood the importance of keeping the union leaders on board – to deliver wage restraint, while inflation dug into workers' pockets. The same pragmatic considerations had led him to oppose Wilson and Barbara Castle in 1969 over the white paper *In Place of Strife*. For all that, Callaghan was an early convert to monetarist economics, and it was public services and workers' living standards that would have to bail out the crisis-ridden economy.

Some tributes have tried to present Callaghan as essentially well meaning in his handling of the north of Ireland. In fact, Roy Mason's period at the Northern Irish office was a by-

word for brutality and torture on the part of the security forces, much of it conducted at the infamous Castlereagh Detention Centre.

In October 1978, with his party and the entire country expecting a general election, Callaghan made the fateful decision to postpone until the following year. Further attempts to hold down wages collapsed, and the Winter of Discontent destroyed the government's credibility. In the last days of a government now dependent on the votes of Liberals, nationalists and Ulster Unionists, Callaghan claimed it was the duty of trade unionists to cross picket lines, while foreign secretary David Owen declared the government to be 'candid friends' of the secret police regime of the Shah of Iran. There could hardly have been a more ignominious end to a government that had been elected on the strength of one of Labour's most radical-sounding manifestos.

These days almost any senior figure before Blair invites favourable comparison. But Callaghan bore the main responsibility for the debacle of 1979 that gave us 18 years of the Tories. Let's not get carried away with Old Labour nostalgia.

**WA**

## Lib Dems vote for strike ban

'Liberal Democrats believe that the state must have the right to intervene to settle industrial disputes that threaten the wider economy or the national interest,' says a document debated and passed on March 5 at the Lib Dem spring conference in Harrogate. Although the employment and trade unions policy paper entitled 'Rights and Responsibilities at Work' does not propose introducing a permanent ban on strike action for any specific section of workers, it is in favour of the government having powers to insist on binding arbitration – in effect, an *ad hoc* strike ban. Here is the relevant section:

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by May 27

Followed by 25th anniversary dinner at the Union Tavern, Farringdon Road, London WC1

'In strategic areas of the private economy we propose the following framework for ending disputes. This framework will only apply where a strike ballot has already produced an affirmative vote, and the subsequent two-week cooling-off period has expired. It is at this point, when all formal procedures have been exhausted and the workforce has clearly demonstrated an intent to strike, that the government will be in a position to consider statutory intervention. If the government decides a strike will cause far reaching damage to the economy and the national interest, they will be empowered to lay an Order before both Houses of Parliament to require both sides to go to compulsory arbitration. A majority in both Houses will be required. . . . In the public sector, as a matter of policy, a Liberal Democrat government would aim to negotiate with the trade unions a comprehensive conciliation and binding arbitration agreement.'

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## Get out and canvass!

If you live in a safe Labour seat, especially if you've got a right-wing candidate, why not go and canvass for a candidate with a principled voting record in parliament? Here's a list of the 15 most vulnerable of the 43 Labour MPs standing for re-election who voted against the war, top-up fees and foundation hospitals:

Albert Owen	Ynys Mon	800
John Cryer*	Hornchurch	1,482
Christine McCafferty	Calder Valley	3,094
Rudi Vis*	Finchley & Golders Green	3,716
Bob Marshall-Andrews	Medway	3,780
Gordon Prentice	Pendle	4,275
Desmond Turner	Brighton Kemp Town	4,922
Mike Wood	Batley & Spen	5,024
Joan Humble*	Blackpool N & Fleetwood	5,721
Ian Gibson	Norwich North	5,863
Julie Morgan*	Cardiff North	6,165
Martin Caton	Gower	7,395
Glenda Jackson	Hampstead & Highgate	7,876
Paul Flynn	Newport West	9,304
Kelvin Hopkins	Luton North	9,977

\* signifies one abstention on either top-up fees or foundation hospitals

**In addition, the following have the narrowest majorities of the anti-war Labour MPs:**

Huw Edwards	Monmouth	384
Jon Owen Jones	Cardiff Central	659
Phil Sawford	Kettering	665
Tony Clarke	Northampton South	885
Iain Coleman	Hammersmith & Fulham	2,015
Linda Perham	Ilford North	2,115
John Grogan	Selby	2,138
Helen Clark	Peterborough	2,854
Derek Wyatt	Sittingbourne & Sheppey	3,509
Tony McWalter	Hemel Hempstead	3,742

## And after the election?

As we go to press, opinion polls continue to suggest a Labour victory, albeit with a reduced majority. With large numbers of party members unwilling to campaign for Blairite MPs, even this cannot be taken for granted, such is the expected level of Labour abstentions and defections.

In the unlikely event of a Labour defeat, Blair will almost certainly resign as leader immediately. If Labour wins, Blair will go – possibly as soon as a year into the new parliament – with Gordon Brown a shoo-in as his successor. While polls strongly suggest this would strengthen Labour's electoral appeal – the Tories have unceremoniously ditched their 'vote Blair, get Brown' slogan – what difference would this make in policy terms, and within the party?

For a start, little change can be expected in economic policy. Brown is every bit as committed as Blair to the New Labour version of neo-liberalism, with little bits of redistribution round the edges. Inequality would remain fundamentally unaltered. And while many within the party would breathe a sigh of relief at Blair's departure, Brown has supported the anti-democratic New Labour project at every stage. If the substance remained largely unaltered, there might well be tactical adjustments in presentation. Brown's Labour movement background means he might well be less likely to humiliate Labour's core support quite as often as Blair. On foreign policy, Brown has remained largely silent on Iraq. He might have been less inclined to be quite as subservient to Bush after September 11, but he has supported all of Blair's wars and he supports the ongoing occupation of Iraq.

But before we run too far ahead of the game, the most important issue is what the Labour left does. It cannot sit on its hands waiting for the dubious privilege of a Brown premiership. The defeats of the Thatcher era have been compounded by a decade of Blairism. While the left has won a string of victories in the trade unions, Labour Party membership has plummeted. At the same time, no viable force – with the very partial exception of the Scottish Socialist Party – has emerged to the left of Labour, and even if George Galloway wins Bethnal Green and Bow, there is no prospect of Respect playing that role.

### The Labour left must develop a clear programme of alternative policies

For Labour to be rebuilt as a mass membership party, based on grassroots campaigning, is a tall order. Trade unionists, students, and activists in the anti-war and anti-capitalist movements need to be convinced that arguing for socialism within the Labour movement is possible. For that to happen, the Labour left must be seen to be up and fighting. It must also not be seen to be purely negative, but develop clear alternative policies. We welcome the establishment of the Labour Representation Committee as a step towards this goal.

The Labour left must remain pluralist and inclusive. But its resources, currently spread across at least half a dozen campaigns, should be pooled and coordinated, wherever possible. At the same time, we must reach out to broader forces. Such has been Blair's rightward trajectory that many who formerly considered themselves in the centre or on the right of the party now find themselves by default on its left. New Labour, despite holding the reins of power for so long, re-

mains a minority tendency among party activists. Public opinion on a range of key issues, whether it is the war, privatisation, the defence of public services, the re-nationalisation of rail, foundation hospitals or top-up fees, is to the left of the government. Alliances can and must be built with all those who want to keep a party of Labour, and establishing a co-ordinating committee of all those who support this goal would be a real step forward in the fight against a '100 per cent Blairite' third term. Finally, none of this will be possible without a struggle to restore party democracy. Large numbers of working people will only join or rejoin if they believe that the policies they support stand a chance of being adopted through democratic decision making.

**WA**

## Labour Representation Committee

### Join the LRC

The original Labour Representation Committee was formed in 1900 to fight for political representation for the Labour Movement. In Britain today we face a similar crisis of representation. The LRC has been re-formed to secure a voice for socialists within the Labour Party, the unions, and Parliament.

Never in the history of the Labour Party has the need been so great to make the case for peace and socialism. The advocates of global capitalism and war have taken control of the political agenda. The task for today's LRC, founded on 3rd July 2004, is to fight for power within the Labour Party and trade unions and to appeal to the tens of thousands who have turned away from Labour in disillusion and despair. Therefore we are calling upon all socialists, Labour Party and trade union members, constituency Labour parties and union branches to join our campaign and join or affiliate to the LRC.

### The LRC key demands for Labour's third term include:

- An end to the occupation of Iraq
- Basic state pension of £109 per week
- Public ownership of rail and postal services and an end to privatisation
- Abolition of tuition fees and selection in education
- Direct investment in council housing
- Defence of civil liberties and the rights of asylum seekers
- Restoration of full trade union rights

LRC Summer Conference / AGM  
'Time for Real Labour'  
Saturday 16th July, 10am  
TUC Congress House, London WC1

**LRC, c/o G10 Norman Shaw South, House of Commons, London SW1A 2JF**