

Comment

The only good reason for voting Conservative in the forthcoming election would be if Callaghan really *could* control the unions. Since it seems obvious that the Tories can't, short of resorting to the kind of confrontation which brought them down in 1974, the one real threat to social justice in Britain would be a Labour government which had the unions in its pocket. As I write, the road haulage strike and impending teachers', council workers' and public employees' militancy suggests that this is implausible. But we don't in fact need the empirical evidence of such strikes to tell us this. To think that one can 'control the unions' is merely an illusion bred by devious stratagems of language. There is no such entity as 'the unions': what there is, is an inherently contradictory movement divided between shop-stewards on the one hand and full-time trades union officials on the other. There is no possibility that the interests of these two groups could be reconciled, and the only genuine solution to the problem would be to suppress one of them. (It isn't hard to guess which one it would be). The job of shop-stewards is to improve working-class conditions at the point of production; the job of trades union officials (though this, of course, is not their view) is to provide an internal police force within the working-class movement, to act as a repressive agency of the state within the process of production: They are there to help regulate the terms on which the selling of labour-power is conducted, to centralise and discipline the process whereby men and women are converted into commodities on the labour-market, so that the process can operate with the maximum degree of efficiency and the minimum degree of disruption. That they are consequently unable to improve their members' conditions without worsening them in the long run is a measure not of their personal obtuseness, bad faith or furtive desire for a life peerage but of the self-contradictory character of trades unionism in a class-society, which must naturally facilitate the very conditions of exploitation it fights. If only the public were fully aware of the heroic extremes to which trades union leaders are willing to go to stamp out efforts to improve their members' standards of living, it would surely have a more sympathetic estimation of these grossly misunderstood men and women.

A common mistake is to think that it is the 'grass roots' of the unions who are behaving self-contradictorily in pressing for wage-increases which will inevitably intensify inflation and so leave them worse off. But this is no more self-contradictory than the

action of someone who refuses to torture a baby even though it is clear that the upshot will be the death by torture of his or her family. It is certainly *unfortunate*, but that is a different matter. Such a person is not *responsible* for the deaths which ensue, any more than a striking worker is responsible for sending up inflation. It may be an inevitable consequence of his action, but that is not his fault, as it would indeed be his fault if people died as a result of his refusal to allow an ambulance to get to them in time. Such an action is not an unavoidable effect of industrial action, whereas there are circumstances in which a rise in the rate of inflation simply is. This is so because inflation is a device whereby the capitalist class tries to maintain its profit levels by passing on wage-increases in the form of price-increases, thus depriving the worker at the point of consumption of what it had conceded to him at the point of production. It can hardly be claimed that the deprived consumer is responsible for this absurd situation, even if his action at the point of production has helped to bring it about. It is not, in other words, self-contradictory for an individual to pursue justice in a situation whose deep contradictions inevitably cause his action to injure others. We are only tempted to believe this because we have repressed the contradictions of the whole situation and projected them upon the individual's actions.

The truth is that a wholly self-interested worker, pressing his wage-claim in blithe disregard of its ultimate effects on the nation's economy, is one of the few examples of authentic *witness* that we have around. All wage-claims are just under capitalism, since one is simply trying to claw back a little more of the wealth one has created in the first place and which is rightfully yours. To persist in this just demand, against the moral blackmail of an unjust system which draws your attention to the human suffering it may produce, demands an unusual degree of either sheer moral insensitivity or extraordinary courage. But it does not really matter which it is: the witness lies not first of all in the moral motivation but in what it objectively manifests. We have here, then, an interesting case in which dedicated self-interest, and a marked casualness about the sufferings of others, may be one of the most valuable moral gestures we have. (In reality, of course, extremely few strikers are insensitive to the suffering they may cause others: even if the capitalist media didn't constantly bludgeon them with it, their natural feelings of solidarity with other exploited groups would be sufficient to keep it well in their minds). The best way of avoiding injury to others, when pursuing justice in unjust conditions, is for others to render themselves less vulnerable to such injury by pursuing justice too. The only way to avert the damage likely to be caused by one enormous wage-claim is for everybody to press enormous wage-claims. This, indeed, is happily what is

happening as I write. If a firm responds by arguing that it can't afford to pay, then the next demand should be that it opens its books to an elected committee of workers so that they can determine whether it is lying or not. If an inspection of the books proves, improbably, that it is not lying, then the union should demand that the firm be taken into public ownership under workers' control. The simple principle behind this proposal is that if capitalism is indeed unable to run the economy in a way which ensures a decent standard of living for everyone, then it should move over and make way for an alternative arrangement which can do so. It has been evident for over a century that capitalism is in fact incapable of running the economy, but this fact has constantly to be brought to its attention.

In an earlier phase of the labour movement, the election of a Labour government was important for the working class because it was able by this means to make some significant gains. The National Health service is an obvious example, and the nationalisation of certain key industries an ambiguous one. But with the increasing power of the shop-stewards' movement throughout the 1950s, this ceased to be so obviously the case: advances which were previously achieved politically could now be effected through 'free' collective bargaining at the point of production. This made the necessity for Labour to assume power from time to time less self-evident. By and large, Labour is allowed to assume governmental power when it is in the interests of capitalism for it to do so – when failing enterprises need to be taken into public ownership, trades unions harnessed more tightly to the state apparatus to control the rank and file, 'progressive' technological notions mobilised to effect an essential 'rationalisation' of an inert economy. The election of the Wilson government of 1964 was exemplary in this respect: the historical moment demanded that a capitalism caught in painful transition between its more hide-bound and more streamlined phases should be helped out, and Wilson's 'white heat' was there to provide the essential catalyst. The story of alternative Labour and Conservative governments since then, however, has been on the whole a lesson in the fundamental irrelevance of either of them to the goals of the working-class movement. The current wave of strikes, after a relatively quiescent three years of 'incomes policy', demonstrates the proletariat's undented determination to pursue social justice whatever brand of bourgeois administration is in power.

This is not to argue, however, that there is nothing at all to choose between Labour and Conservative. There remain at least three reasons why it is vital to keep Labour in power, granted that neither party finally has the capacity to control the unions short of drastic legal coercion. The first reason is that Labour is

less likely to put that coercion into effect than the Tories. Even though it was the first with statutory anti-union measures, it is far too dependent, electorally and financially, on the unions to risk a serious rupture with them. It is thus forced to be marginally more responsive to organised working-class pressure than the Tories need to be, and although this is often no more than a nuance, it provides a margin which is worth preserving and exploiting. Labour is at present in the unenviable position of being capable neither of smashing nor seducing the unions, and their embarrassment is the labour movement's opportunity. Obviously any capitalist government will shackle the unions if it really has to – take, that's to say, the fascist road – but bourgeois governments take such a road only with the greatest reluctance, and Labour is marginally less likely to move down it than the Conservatives.

The second reason why one should keep Labour in power is to discredit them. One of the greatest ideological dangers of a Labour party in opposition is that it begins to fall into left-wing postures and so helps to persuade working-class militants that the true enemy is toryism rather than capitalism. As long as Labour is in power it will on the whole be perceived by working-class militants to operate in ways contrary to their interests, and their allegiance to it will be accordingly sceptical and provisional. What might otherwise be merely a state of confusion – Labour is our party but somehow always seems to sell us out – becomes instead a recognised contradiction: Labour will sell us out if it can but needs to secure a degree of consent from us to do so. All ruling classes naturally need to win the partial consent of the classes they dominate to *be* dominated; this is what is meant by 'hegemony', as opposed to naked coercion, which is unlikely to keep any ruling class in power for very long. What is unique and specific to bourgeois class-society is that the masses officially govern themselves. No slave or serf ever thought this, but the industrial proletariat is supposed to, and sometimes does. It is powerfully demystificatory of this notion to find oneself in a situation where the state is at once palpably working against your interests and trying to woo you; for this both makes plain the facts of domination and reveals to you the real power you possess. With Labour out of office, it is possible for the labour movement to fall back into the belief that it is oppressed, not by the state, but by Ms Thatcher.

The third reason for keeping Labour in office is a more positive one. It is that Labour is relatively enlightened on a whole range of 'social' issues, and the Conservatives extremely benighted. If the Tories are allowed back into power, the havoc they can wreak in the crucial areas of race, feminism, the judiciary, social welfare and cultural freedom is truly alarming. They are the enemies of civilised society, whereas the Labour party is still a repository of

certain decent and humane values. To support those values may soon become a considerably more radical gesture than it has been for many generations. But it is not merely by supporting those values that we shall solve the only real political question which in the long term lies before us – the threat of fascism. If I were a member of the National Front, I would feel ambiguously about the possibility of a Conservative election victory. On the one hand, a Conservative government is more likely than a Labour one to steal some of the National Front's clothes; on the other hand it is likely to prepare the legislative and ideological context which will conveniently facilitate the National Front's rise to power. The Front is doubtless banking on the fact that a Conservative government will both help to swing public opinion in their direction, and, by proving itself incapable of muzzling the unions, demonstrate the truth that only the measures proposed by the Front itself could possibly do so. In this they are not only cunning but absolutely correct. The only way in which capitalism can solve its difficulties with the unions is, ultimately, by resorting to fascism, much as it detests the idea. Otherwise we will be stuck with the contradictory situation we have now, where everybody agrees with the right to withdraw one's labour but objects to strikes. In the end, as the National Front rightly see, it is only a fascistic form of capitalism which can remove this contradiction. Or, of course, socialism.

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St Thomas Aquinas as a Dominican

Brian Davies O.P.

St Simeon the New Theologian, telling the story of a young man called George writes: "For love for what he sought separated him from the world, and creaturely things and all affairs, and made him entirely of the Spirit and light. Yet all the while he lived in the middle of a city and was responsible for a house and occupied with slaves and free men, doing and achieving all the things that pertain to the present life."¹

With only a little modification, this description applies equally well to Aquinas, at least if we accept the accounts of him handed down to us by his early biographers.² Given to rapture and relig-