

THE STUDENT MOVEMENT, LEFT UNITY AND THE COMMUNIST PARTY.

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Over the last ten years the number of full-time students in higher and further education in Britain has more than doubled, and in 1971, the last year for which complete figures are available, totalled 673,935. The membership of the National Union of Students is now approximately 650,000. However, over this period the political changes among the student population and in their mass organisations have been as striking as their numerical expansion. This article attempts to assess the role that left unity has played in these political changes, and to consider some of the problems and the potential that arise from work to unite left forces in the student movement.

Changing Relationship to the Working Class

Before the Second World War the social background of the student population was *relatively* homogeneous, with a clear majority drawn from the ruling class and the social strata which nestled against it. Although this element remains as an important constituent of the student population today, increasingly the intake into post-school education draws upon students from middle strata and, to a lesser extent, working-class backgrounds. There are two main reasons why this social base has been broadened. Firstly, and most importantly, society's expanding requirements for skilled technical and intellectual labour could not be satisfied unless recruits from new social strata were drawn upon. Secondly, political pressure both from the Labour Party and the Communist Party and from among educational opinion forced significant expansions in the provision of places—even though new ways of continuing social selection were built into the new structure. In post-school education the binary

system¹ duplicated the class divisions that the tripartite² system reflected at the secondary level, and to an important extent effectively corralled students from working-class backgrounds into certain types of colleges and on to certain types of courses.

More marked than these changes in social origin have been changes in the social *destination* of very large numbers of students. In sharp contrast to the situation before World War II when degree qualifications conferred a high income and social status, the majority of students now find employment in jobs which can no longer be considered "privileged": in teaching, in scientific work, administration, the professions, the public services, the Civil Service, social work and the media. These occupations can conveniently be grouped under the heading "middle strata". What has changed so markedly is not so much the list of jobs, all of which would certainly

¹ The Binary System is the division of post-school education between the University Sector and other sorts of college. The former has higher status and greater autonomy. It usually has first choice for suitably qualified school-leavers. In general, its staff are paid more, its students receive higher grants, facilities are better and there is more money at its disposal. There are also many divisions between other sorts of college—e.g. Polytechnics, Colleges of Education and of Art, Technical and Further Education—but that which separates the universities is the main one.

² The Tripartite System was the Secondary educational system established by the 1944 Education Act, which divided Secondary Schools (and minds) into three categories—grammar, secondary modern and technical. In fact, the third category was a non-starter, and the tripartite system was in fact as "binary" as the post-school system.

suggest an undercurrent of student resentment that stems from these contradictions and which in the future may assume an explosive potential.

The Crisis of Imperialism

These developments within the educational system have taken place against a background of intensifying crisis for world imperialism, which has detonated a succession of political charges into the student population, as they have into all sections of society.

However, because of the peculiar conditions of student existence, their impact in the colleges has often taken more pronounced forms. The fight against Apartheid, the South African cricket tour, Vietnam, Che Guevara, National Liberation Struggles, the whole rich but contradictory political infusion of 1968, the growing disenchantment with Labour Governments, the fight against the Industrial Relations Act, the miners' strikes, Chile, the issue of fascist and racist speakers—these events and many more represent a series of political influences that have pounded student consciousness in successive resonating waves. Similarly, events in the Socialist countries have made a deep impact among the left; the Sino-Soviet dispute and the 1968 intervention in Czechoslovakia as much as the solidarity the Socialist countries have given to those fighting imperialism all over the world.

It is important to recognise the unique features of student life which can magnify, and sometimes distort, the impact made by these political pressures. Because they are a section of the population in social movement and are not a social class, students in their consciousness draw upon a greater variety of pressures and influences, social, economic, political and cultural, than those more embedded in the social structure of society. The one area their consciousness draws upon most weakly is working-class experience.

Because they are removed from the direct process of production, the pressures and rhythms of their lives are determined by the educational institution and its demands. Although these differ greatly between different colleges and different courses, in general students have a much "freer" allocation of their time open to them than do workers, and are much less subject to discipline.

Students are, above all, young. Nowhere else in capitalist society are young men and women separated off and grouped together in the same way. There are no factories containing only young workers; yet increasingly the development of education concentrates growing numbers of students into relatively closed communities, isolated from the rest of the population. The isolation enables them to adopt a "life style", a morality and political attitude to an extent independent of norms their

parents, and social background, may wish them to abide by.

Now, these "peculiar conditions of student existence" can have contradictory results. On one side, they can wipe clean previously restricting attitudes and release enormous enthusiasm and lack of inhibition in adopting new political views and enable rapid progression to conclusions others may take longer to reach. On the other hand, they can lead to adventurism, élitist arrogance, and the most dangerous forms of anarchism and ultra-leftism.

The Student Movement

Over the last decade the British student population has been affected by the social changes and the political and ideological pressures which the first part of this article has so far described. These pressures have not borne down equally on all students and, at different times, have drawn very different responses from different sectors. Furthermore, the sharpening economic and political crisis leads to a left-right polarisation in all sections of society and students are no exception. Large numbers of students *still* come from backgrounds likely to be activated in an anti-working-class direction from this polarisation. However, bearing in mind that the potential for right-wing politics among students may recently have been enlarged, the fact remains that over recent years, and including the last year when the polarising results of the crisis have been at their sharpest, very many students have been won to take militant collective action both on the issues that confront them in college and in solidarity with the working class. It is in this that the real significance of these pressures so far described lie. They have created the conditions out of which the student *movement* has been built.

Considerable numbers of students were mobilised in democratic anti-fascist campaigns in the late '30s, and NUS had a "Broad Left" type leadership over some of the war years and up to 1948, when the right wing took over in the wake of the cold war build-up of that year. From 1948 until 1970, NUS had a right-wing careerist leadership, although from 1963 to 1969 their rule was increasingly challenged. National Conferences were castrated of political discussion by a "no politics" rule, and its international alignment closely bound in with CIA-financed student fronts and US cold war politics.

Beginning in 1965/66, and only successful with the election of a left-wing majority to NUS executive in 1970 for the first time since 1948, was a bitter struggle to wrest control of NUS out of the hands of this leadership. However, only since 1970 is it possible to speak of the student movement beginning to express itself through NUS. In the period 1965 to 1970, the powerful student mobilisations around overseas student fees in 1966, the wave of "sit-ins"

have featured prominently in any estimate of student employment between the First and Second World Wars, but the role and character of these jobs in State monopoly capitalist Britain. In place of relatively small professional élites, as they were in the 1930s, they are now massive employers of work forces, many hundreds of thousands strong, whose interests increasingly coincide with those of the industrial working class.

Now this change in social direction triggers off political results of great importance in the colleges. Students, whose job expectations lie within these areas, feel the impact of the buffeting these middle strata sections of the population are receiving, and all the accompanying politicisation that stems from the growth of trade union consciousness among them; albeit an impact which is one degree removed.

Attacks on the Students

Students also feel a more direct jolt from the attacks that successive Tory and Labour Governments have made upon the student population, as a group in society, as part of their attempts to switch the burden of the present crisis on to the working population as a whole. This attack has taken an economic form, as student grants have been held back while costs and fees rocket; a democratic form with the attempt by the last Conservative Government in 1971/72 to destroy the relatively high degree of autonomy student unions enjoy; and an ideological form as sections of the media have lost no opportunity to pillory student political action. One of the latest examples has been the way many papers have enthusiastically endorsed the conclusions of the Annan Report into the events at Essex University, where in time-honoured fashion the cause of the "disturbances" is attributed to a few "militants" who lead the majority of "moderates" by the nose.

These attacks on students as a group in society have mounted over the last few years. The response that student unions have made to these attacks, at both a national and a local level, through such actions as the 18-month-long Grants Campaign of 1973/74, have strengthened the unity, cohesiveness and feeling of identity of the student movement. Their reaction has paralleled the enormously more powerful defence by the trade union movement against attacks from the last Tory Government that were in some way similar, and over the same period.

Thus, the relationship of students to the working class has been transformed in two main ways. Firstly, social changes in their composition, and destination on completion of study *begin* to connect them to categories of employment where trade union organisation and militant struggle are becoming more important. Secondly, their experience under the hammer of Government policy links the reaction

of the student movement and working-class organisations in a relationship of alliance against a common enemy.

This change is more than one of positional relationship. The mass organisations of the working class themselves are changing as the left militant trends within them grow stronger. This means that the political impact exerted by working-class organisations on students is correspondingly greater than in the mid-60s, when the right-wing trend was much more securely in the ascendant.

The Position of Education in Monopoly Capitalism

A further cluster of politicising influences upon sections of the student population stem from the contradiction between what the ruling class require of post-school education and what many students want. The great monopolies and the State have continually sought to restructure the educational system so that it corresponds more closely to *their* needs for skilled personnel. For this reason, the last Tory Government's White Paper—"Higher Education: a Framework for Expansion"—designated the Polytechnic sector as a priority for expansion. With these institutions the links with the requirements of the monopolies, expressed in such ways as courses and research geared to industrial need and business representation on college governing bodies, are particularly close.

However, State monopoly capitalism does not only need generations of increasingly accomplished technical, managerial and professional workers. The system of post-school education must also play its part in recreating the social relations of production, so that each new generation of students learns its *place* in the system. How these ideological influences are permeated is an extremely complicated process, which involves consideration of the structures of teaching and study as well as the content of what is taught.

Because of its complexity, it is an area where over-simplification can lead to what boils down to a crude and mistaken assertion that education is tantamount to brainwashing. Attention must be paid to the relative autonomy of much faculty organisation and academic work and to the vigour of genuinely critical traditions of scientific enquiry which strongly resist the pressures of bourgeois ideology.

These two drives—one structural, the other ideological—to make post-school education able to more effectively serve the class that dominates society have come into conflict with the aspirations of many students for education more orientated to social relevance, education which takes a critical stance to the realities of the crisis. Important mass struggles over recent years, around issues like big business involvement in the institution, democracy in the faculty and over the nature of assessment,

in 1967, the Vietnam solidarity movement and the "Revolutionary Socialist Students' Federation" of 1968 exploded *outside* the confines of NUS politics, although their reverberations reinforced the fight of the left within the National Union.

The first serious challenge to the right in NUS was mounted in 1966/67 by the "Radical Student Alliance", a grouping of Communists, Labour and Liberal students aligned to student union activists belonging to no political organisation. The ultra-left political groups *at this stage* dismissed NUS politics, and concentrated their efforts around the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign and the RSSF, which was promoted as a "revolutionary" agency to by-pass the "reformist" NUS.

While it was correct for Communist Party students to lay the main emphasis on the fight for the unity of the left within NUS, as the precondition for the transformation of the mass organisation of the students, there was serious neglect by them of the ferment of politicisation outside of NUS politics—areas where significant numbers of students were deeply concerned with revolutionary issues, even though the immediate political expressions of that concern were often hostile to the Communist Party.

However, by 1971, when the Conservative Government launched its attack on Student Union autonomy, it was NUS which led and co-ordinated the fight back by the student movement, and it was the college and university student unions which mobilised students in their tens of thousands to action against this threat. A short-lived attempt by the International Socialist group (IS) and the International Marxist group (IMG) to build an alternative "more militant" Liaison Committee for the Defence of Student Unions, at the height of the battle against Thatcher's Consultative Document in which the Tory attack was framed, collapsed.

Central Arena of the Movement

Since 1971 the mobilisation of students in collective action has increasingly been through the agency of NUS and the local unions. Union General Meetings and NUS National Conference are the central political arenas of the movement in a way unequalled over the last decade. In all the colleges where large-scale mass action has taken place on local issues—for example, Lancaster University and Brighton College of Education in 1972, Stirling University in 1973, and at Essex and Kent Universities in 1974—the Student Union has been the crucial debating chamber where the issue has been thrashed out, and around which the action has been organised. The uneven but often impressive mobilisations of the 18 months' grants campaign in 1973/74 were achieved through the Union, and the debates over the strategy and tactics of the campaign dominated national conference agendas for two years.

It is against this background that the problems of left unity in the student movement must be seen; in the context of a greatly enlarged student population, over the last ten years subject to social, political and ideological pressures on such a scale that the potential for a mass student movement has been created. The surges of collective action, which represented the first realisations of this potential, occurred both within and around NUS with the issue of overseas student fees and the RSA; and outside it with the VSC and the RSSF. These two expressions were more interconnected than this formulation makes them appear, and both contributed to the transformation of NUS and the Student Unions, which enabled these mass organisations to emerge after 1970 as the avenue through which student collective action now largely expresses itself.

All political groups, and at a local level increasingly the right-wing ones, now fight to win support for their policies in the mass organisation, because they know how important these organisations have become in determining the political direction of the student movement.

The Right Challenge Again

Although the left-wing organisations, with the exception of the National Organisation of Labour Students (NOLS—membership approximately 8,000) are probably stronger now than at any time over the last ten years, in a number of important colleges, and to an extent at a national level, the right wing are now mounting a counter-attack. (The form that right-wing politics takes on the campus is often a relatively disguised one, of "moderates", of "democrats" or "radicals".)

What are the main reasons for this right-wing resurgence? Firstly, the severity of the political and economic crisis sets off counter pressures from precisely the opposite direction to the progressive ones so far described, and to some extent creates an objective basis among sections of the student population for a regeneration of the right. Secondly, concerned to repair the severity of the defeat of the right in the late '60s, and aware of the openings the present situation provides, the Federation of Conservative Students (who claim a membership of 15,000), backed by sections of the media, are beginning to organise, and to work to challenge, the left. Thirdly, mistakes made by the left, including Communist Party students, most notably the adoption of the now notorious Amendment 4 calling for the disruption of racist meeting by "whatever means are necessary" at the 1974 Easter Conference, have assisted the right to make an intervention.

Differing Levels of Struggle

Of course, having listed the various social,

economic and political pressures which have bombarded the student population over the last decade, it is easy to fall into what has been aptly described (by Dave Courtino) as "clunk click" determinism. Capitalism attacks the students and hey presto!—into existence springs the student movement and brigades of socialist activists ready to fight capitalism. It certainly is the case that capitalism attacks students, as it attacks the whole working population—but people fight back against these attacks at enormously different levels of understanding. They fight the effects of capitalism on them *long before* they are ready to fight against capitalism itself; before they clearly recognise the need for an alternative social system.

Two examples, one from the 1930s and one from today, illustrate this. In British colleges during the Spanish Civil War, very many students were prepared to donate to medical aid funds for Republican Spain; a much smaller number were prepared to campaign for a change in the policy of the British Government from "non-intervention" to support for the Republicans; a small minority were prepared to go and fight in Spain, and some did so in the International Brigade. Today, very many students would totally condemn racialism. Large numbers gave active support to a campaign on an ideologically relatively "simple" issue like the Stop the '70s Tour. Fewer have penetrated the "free speech" minefield to recognise the need for mass action against emerging fascist organisations.

People have different levels of rebellion against capitalism, against different aspects of its oppression.

Communists want socialist revolution, and their aim is to convince others of its necessity—but Communists are not indifferent to "lower" levels of struggle³. Lenin took time out to condemn those in the revolutionary movement who declared themselves contemptuous of individuals and organisations concerned with limited objectives.

Therefore, Communists passionately support such struggles, and their mass organisations, helping them to win victories which they believe are worthwhile and important in their own right, and not as some political manoeuvre to "capture" them, or to gain positions. Of course, communists recognise

that limited gains are no solution to the exploitation of capitalism, and try and convince those with whom they work of the need for revolutionary change; but this is completely different from an approach to work in mass organisations which is contemptuous of their "limited" objectives, and seeks only to use them to benefit the "revolutionary" objectives of another organisation.

Communists argue for left unity as the best way—indeed, as the only way—to win victories on these limited objectives. The unity Communists want is neither the manoeuvring of the caucus, nor the charade of the front. This article will now attempt to define the political basis of Broad Left Unity in more detail, and the relationship of the Communist Party to it.

The Broad Left Approach to Left Unity

The Broad Left is at present the only left *alliance* in the student movement at a national level. It is much more than unity on one specific issue; yet it is not an ideological unity around a socialist programme. Rather, it is an ongoing unity of organisations and individuals to win the student movement for policies with the objective of mobilising the *largest possible numbers of students to collective action* on both the issues that face them as students, and in solidarity with other progressive forces in society.

Nationally, the alliance unites Communist Party students (membership 1,000) and Left Labour students, many of whom are loosely connected to the "Clause Four" Group, whose political position they define as roughly corresponding to that of the "Tribune" Group ("Clause Four" do not have formal membership). Also participating is the largest of the three components, socialist students who are members of no organisation.

At a local level Broad Left support is often considerably "Broader", and can include overseas student organisations, women's movement groups, and single issue campaigning organisations like "Anti-Apartheid".

The Broad Left runs regular conferences, at which a "declaration of objectives" has been adopted, editorial boards of *The Broad Left Journal* elected, and has a growing number of local groups.

In student political terms, it has a long life. The present Broad Left can trace to lineage back to the RSA in 1966. Since 1970, it has dominated the political ground at NUS conferences (although it has often been strongly challenged by the ultra-left), and at present 13 of the 17-person NUS Executive were elected with the support of the Broad Left.

Impressive though this may appear, there are considerable problems facing the alliance. Firstly, although a section of Labour students participate in it, the official Labour student organisation, NOLS,

³ Although others on the left sometimes are. In *Red Weekly*, August 1st, 1974, the IMG describe their attempts to get the IS to reach "an agreement within the coming anti-fascist mobilisations to organise a struggle for these actions to be clearly based on a working-class united front, and against attempts to extend it to 'progressive forces'," which IMG go on to describe as "Tories, vicars, etc. . . ." Those used to such politics will recognise this as a clear rejection of the value of any struggle which is not at the most "advanced" level, and therefore by definition incapable in the present situation, of involving more than a small minority.

is dominated by the entrust (i.e. a secret organisation operating inside another) Trotskyist Group, the Revolutionary Socialist League (newspaper *Militant*) which is bitterly hostile to the Broad Left. Secondly, because both the Communist Party students and Clause Four are *organised* groupings, there is a feeling among Broad Left students who are members of neither, that decisions may be "carved up" between these two. Thirdly, there is suspicion between both organisations about each other's motives. Fourthly, precisely because NUS politics is seen as a battle arena by the whole left, politics there are usually argued out at the level of total ideological positions.

The ideological positions of the components of the Broad Left do not coincide, and thus the unity between them, which is at a more limited level, can be strained. This became clear in the debate about racist and fascist speakers at the July 1974 Emergency NUS Conference. Fifthly, there is a potential cause of friction between the two main organisational expressions of Broad Left Unity at a national level, the Broad Left Group on NUS Executive, and the Editorial Board of the *Broad Left Journal*.

In listing these internal "problem" areas for the Broad Left, no "State secrets" are being given away. All of them are the subject of intense discussion within the alliance, and have been publicly aired at Broad Left conferences. Such frank discussions between the various components of the alliance are the only way these problems can be overcome.

One particular feature of the Broad Left stands out as testimony to its significance. The main objective of the growing right wing challenge is to unseat or splinter the Broad Left. This the Federation of Conservative Students have publicly stated (and this, at the 1974 Easter NUS Conference, they tried to do), urging their supporters to vote for anyone, even ultra-leftists, who seemed to have a chance of defeating a Broad Left candidate.

Ultra-left Approaches to Left Unity

The main common feature of the various ultra-left approaches to left unity in the student movement, as in other areas, is that they fail to recognise that there are different levels of struggle. Either they dismiss these differences as unimportant, or they believe that the introduction of more "advanced" objectives into a campaign or an organisation will somehow automatically promote it up the league. Thus, left unity approaches from the ultra-left always have the smell of "capture" about them. They work to win unity not around policies that will achieve the particular objectives of the campaign, but which will involve the imposition of their own particular line. Thus the characteristic form of left unity for ultra-leftist organisations is the front —i.e. one dominant organisation in "unity" with

its own members wearing different "hats".

There are three main variants of the ultra-left approach to left unity. The first is the 4th International position, expressed in the student movement by the International Marxist Group (student membership 350, newspaper *Red Weekly*).

The IMG are not at present involved in any left unity organisation in the student movement, but desperately wish they were. Their approach, an extremely supple one, is to try and build unity on issues with any section of the left, and to introduce into that unity the tactic of the transitional demand, namely the posing of demands which "go beyond the ability of the system to satisfy" (their words). In place of their words, we would use others more blunt, i.e. demands around which it is usually impossible to mobilise more than a small minority of committed socialists and which, if adopted by the mass organisations, would divide the movement and lead it to defeat and demoralisation.

The second approach to unity are those of the RSL⁴, and the Workers' Revolutionary Party (newspaper *Workers' Press*). Their approach to unity is basically to reject it. Although both organisations detest each other, they can be linked together for two main reasons. They apply the 4th International approach of posing demands far beyond the capacity of the situation to gather mass support for. This much they share with IMG, but unlike IMG, both organisations attempt to imprison left politics within the rigid organisational frameworks within which they work. The typical WRP intervention in a Union General Meeting is to call for the Student Union to support/affiliate to/send a delegate to/send money to, the particular front/conference the WRP is calling. In other words, it is continually trying to pull socialists away from left unity and bind them to its *own* political vehicle.

The RSL achieve the same result from the opposite direction. All student politics is dismissed as irrelevant unless it is expressed through the vehicle of the Labour Party, the student expression of which they claim is NOLS.

The third approach, which also sees the Broad Left as the main enemy, is that of the International Socialism Group (student membership 6-700, newspaper *Socialist Worker*). IS are the least consistent of the ultra-left groups, perhaps because they are the least Trotskyist. In the last six years they worked in, and then discarded three "rank and file"-type unity vehicles—the RSSF, the LCDSU, and, most recently, the "Socialist Alternative".

⁴ All figures for student membership quoted are those given by the organisations themselves. The RSL are a secret organisation and therefore do not reveal their membership. The WRP operate openly, but are not prepared to reveal their student membership. A consensus estimate puts both in the very low hundreds.

Similarly, they have veered from a deep immersion in student politics (outside NUS) in 1968/69, through a "workerist" phase when students were dismissed as "petty bourgeois" and now back to a more balanced assessment. In the student movement, as in those middle strata trade unions where they have gained a foothold, IS pose the "bureaucracy" as the main enemy. This appears to be the one consistency in their approach.

However, although what they describe as "the rank and file" (and also what they describe as "the bureaucracy") are characterised by different *political* trends within them, IS have consistently found it impossible to unite with any of these trends. The concept "rank and file unity" in the hands of IS is, in fact, an extremely sectarian approach based on the exclusion of all other trends. IS appear to be taking the next logical step (for them) in the student movement, namely to construct some sort of federation of "International Socialism" Societies. This approach certainly simplifies the politics of unity. IS should not have too much of a problem in uniting with themselves. The whole direction of the organisation seems to be moving in this more sectarian direction; apparently the politics of all their much-vaunted "rank and file" papers and "rank and file" conferences are going to be built much more around the *political line of IS*.

Potential for Collective Action

The politics of IS have raised an important debate among the left about the *extent* of the potential for collective action that exists in the student movement. In their 1972 pamphlet, "Students and the Struggle for Socialism", IS contested the argument that the changes wrought in the student population by the social changes and political pressures of recent years and which continue today, justify a perspective of continued mass involvement and leftward direction for the student movement. Their pamphlet argued that, because students are socially differentiated with the majority from a "petty bourgeois" background, only a minority could be won for consistent action, with the majority presumably being lost to the right. In fact, some of the statements made by leading IS students have shown them to be indifferent to the possibilities of a split of NUS into rival political federations—provided, of course, that one of them is "Marxist" (i.e. dominated by them).

It must be recognised that right-wing social and political pressure is ever present among the student population, and in a situation of social crisis will find an expression in the student movement. What IS fail to realise is that if a united left leadership works *correctly*, it is possible to *both* maintain the leftward political direction and also preserve the unity of the organisation. There is no guarantee that this will happen, but what can be said with some

confidence is that if ultra-left policies and leadership are victorious in the mass organisation they are almost certain to speed the fracture IS envisage.

Why is it so important that both the leftward political direction *and* the unity of the student movement are maintained at the present time? Firstly, without the strength of a united campaigning NUS, students will lose. They will lose against the attacks on the democratic functioning of their unions. They will be unable to campaign to improve the quality of education. Although NUS does not wield power in any way comparable to that of the trade unions, its campaigns have contributed to important victories in recent years.

Secondly, a left united NUS, based on powerful democratic local unions, is able to concretely reinforce the trade union movement in its struggles now. A fragmented movement would be unable to provide such solidarity, and some of its "fragments" could provide an organisational basis for the sort of scabbing carried out by many students during the General Strike.

Most importantly, a militant united NUS will mean that new generations of students will pass through experiences of campaigning action, of organisation, of unity, of politics that can build their consciousness towards the left. This can exert incalculable influences on the political future of middle strata sections of the population, who now are many millions strong and are of great numerical, ideological and strategic significance for the working class and the anti-monopoly alliance that must be built around it.

Unlike the ultra-left organisations, the Communist Party does not see its advance being built upon the ruins of the mass organisation in which it participates. Its perspective is that this organisation should be strengthened, made more democratic, made better able to defend the interests of students. If this happens the mass organisation will both win victories now, and also create the conditions within which the political consciousness of many students can be transformed.

New Forces for the Broad Left

It is precisely because the Broad Left is the only approach to left unity in the student movement that has the perspective of advancing the mass involvement of students through a democratic, campaigning united NUS, that the right wing are so determined to smash it. What steps can be taken to strengthen the alliance?

Compared with its ultra-left opponents, the Broad Left is much larger and much broader, being an alliance rather than a front. Nevertheless, in terms of the *potential* unity of forces which can be won to identify with its approach, it is narrow indeed.

In his article on "The Communist Party and the

Labour Party" in *Marxism Today* (January 1974), Dave Priscott wrote: "The nearest we can come to a general definition of the left in the Labour movement is that it is made up of those who have *started* to make a break with right-wing politics and leadership—sometimes at first only on one issue—and who have *started* to move to the left, to a position where they are prepared to fight on some aspect of the capitalist system". While this definition would cover an important part of the left in the student movement, it leaves out that considerable section who most definitely have made a break with right-wing politics, many of whom would claim to have adopted revolutionary positions.

The Broad Left to an extent does, and in future must increasingly, draw towards it support as it were from both "sides" of the student left—from those "breaking" with the right, and also from those who have strong commitment to socialism. This synthesis is possible because the Broad Left is not an alliance based on deep ideological unity—but on a common approach to work in the student movement by organisations and individuals who may differ on ideological issues.

The main ultra-left organisations in the student movement contest this approach of the Broad Left, both theoretically and in their practice, so it is difficult to see anything but intransigent hostility from them. However, these organisations are small, and socialists in the student movement are many.

The extent to which the Broad Left functions in an open way, and makes a strong *political* fight for leadership, will determine how many non-affiliated socialists identify with it. What is heartening is that in a number of colleges where local Broad Left groups have recently been established, often in the teeth of bitter ultra-left opposition, this process of becoming a pole of attraction to socialist students not in the ultra-left organisations has started. The process is likely to be further strengthened by the fact that IS, the largest of the ultra-left organisations, is becoming more sectarian in its approach to unity, discarding the latest of its fronts, the "Socialist Alternative".

As educational institutions grow in size (universities like Leeds and Manchester now equal small towns in populations and geographical area), and often as inter-left debates seem irrelevant to the mass of students, grave problems of democracy face the sovereign general meeting structure of student unions. In large universities, many *thousands* of students never come into the Union building, and Union General Meetings (UGMs) are often pathetically small. A key question for the Broad Left is how can it reach beyond the inner circle of "politicos" to involve leftward-moving students *from new areas* in its activities.

There are at least five major areas outside the

traditional circles of student union activists, which contain the potential for united work with the Broad Left: the womens' movement in the colleges; work in the various sectors of post-school education (colleges of education, Polys, etc.); work in the faculties; an expansion in the size and influence of the Labour left; and, finally, the winning of greater involvement from overseas student organisations in this country. However, before some of these potential "growth" areas are examined, a note on a particular organisational form of "left unity", the college Socialist Society.

Frequently in the early '60s the "Labour Clubs" provided a left unity forum at college level. With the rapid discrediting of the right-wing Labour Government (in office after 1964) in the eyes of many socialist students, socialist societies, organisationally and politically separate from the Labour Party were established. When the wave of politicisation around Vietnam and other international issues erupted in 1968, it was only very partially expressed through NUS still at that time dominated by the right-wing. Then, NUS President Geoffrey Martin's famous advice to his members was to stay away from the big Vietnam solidarity demonstrations of that year and "shun foreign student agitators". One of the major political expressions of that wave of politicisation was through college socialist societies, which were at their heyday in 1968/69.

With the transformation of NUS, and most local unions, during and after 1969, and as bitter sectarian wrangles increasingly became the order of the day within the Socialist Societies, to some extent they have become a sort of historical relic of a previous era of student politics. In 1973 the existence of five separate "Soc Socs" at Bristol University, each the "property" of the various left-wing groups, typified the decline of this form of "left unity".

Local Expression in the Colleges

If it is to involve new forces, both from among the Socialist activists and from "new" areas, the Broad Left must have a local expression in the college. The form that this will take will depend on the situation; a fully constituted Broad Left Society; or a loose network of *Broad Left Journal* sellers, or even completely new ways of expressing the Broad Left approach to unity. It may take the form of a Socialist Society, especially in smaller colleges where the collective left presence may be too small to allow the luxury of interecine strife. Almost everywhere the local expression of Broad Left unity needs to be strengthened, given a regularised structure, and linked to the national network.

However, the form of the local Broad Left Group should also be determined by the tasks it aims to achieve. Because it plans to act, as well as passionately debate, it will involve those who agree

sufficiently on their approach to reach common ground, and not those who fundamentally oppose it. On the other hand, if its sights are raised no higher than a "caucus" approach to politics, operating merely as a union "ginger group", it is unlikely to attract from both "sides" of the student left. What is required are local Broad Left Groups that combine the strengthening and support for the left in the student Union, with a preparedness to where necessary initiate action, debate and solidarity; to set up their own study groups; to produce their own local material. Only in this way can the flair and imagination of radical students, many of whom are sadly disillusioned with union politics, be won to support the Broad Left. They will not be won if the local Broad Left is just a pressure group in the Students' Union.

The women's movement has probably made more impact on the student movement than anywhere else over the last three years (although this is more a comment on the situation elsewhere than on any particular "liberated" qualities of students). In many colleges in England (though not in Scotland or Wales!) there are groups of women's movement activists. Now it is not in any way inevitable that these groups should regard themselves as allies of the Broad Left. The women's movement contains within it contradictory political trends, and some of these are likely to coincide with ultra-left politics. However, there is one stark fact which drives many women's movement activists to be potential allies of the Broad Left.

At present, women's groups often are, and feel themselves to be, embattled enclaves. To begin to influence large numbers of students the women's movement in the colleges must seek to mobilise them in action against women's oppression, must seek to win the mass organisations of the students to action on these questions and not just committed socialists—otherwise they will remain as embattled enclaves. In other words, the realities of the situation seem likely to impel many women's movement activists to recognise the need to operate a Broad Left approach to their work—and thus to become potential allies of the Broad Left.

In the same way that UGM's have often become increasingly inaccessible and unreal to huge sections of the student population in the colleges, so too have the ever-expanding NUS National Conferences reflected the over-centralisation of the fast-growing National Union. To escape this, NUS is increasingly being organised along sectoral lines, around specialist conferences involving delegates from particular types of college; those studying Education, Art, Health students, students at Polytechnics, Universities and Technical Colleges and Further Education Colleges, and Postgraduate students to list the main ones. In each of these areas there is a big potential

for Broad Left Groups to be established.

If very large numbers of students do not participate in their student unions, where do they go? Most of them go to their faculties and departments to study, and with many of them what they find there they do not like. The contradictions between expectations and reality, between the desire for courses that are critical and challenging, as opposed to apologetics for imperialism; between the desires of the students (and many staff) and the requirements of State monopoly capitalism—have already been mentioned. Within these contradictions are located potentially explosive issues, and massive deeply involving campaigns. Of late, the British student movement has ignored these areas. Within the faculty, around questions of the content and relevance of education, democracy within the department, resistance to cuts in teaching and research staff, and the whole problem of assessment—here is a whole "new" area of politicisation in which the Broad Left should take initiatives, and draw new forces into its unity. The success of the Communist Universities shows the scale of interest generated by Marxist critiques of the content of traditional courses⁵.

Labour Student Organisation

In a sense the greatest single reinforcement of Broad Left unity that could be achieved in the near future would be if the Labour student organisation stopped bouncing between the two grindstones between which it has been repeatedly buffeted, namely the right-wing Labour Party machine and sectarian Trotskyist groups working within the Labour students' organisation. Over the last decade, all the main ultra-left organisations have at some stage worked *within* the Labour student organisation, and at the moment the leadership position is held by the RSL, the only one to still practice "entrism".

The same disillusionment with the politics of *right* wing Labour that stripped away their student support in the late '60s still operates in the student movement, although probably to a lesser extent. The only political trend which could rally increased support to NOLS is a student expression of the *left* trend within the Labour Party. This trend is reflected to differing degrees among rank and file trade union militants who are Labour Party members, many trade union branch, district and national leaderships, by many Labour Party shop stewards, in many constituency Labour Parties, and left Labour councillors, and in Parliament by the Tribune Group of MPs. It is expressed in the student movement by "Clause Four", but at present this relatively small organisation nowhere near gathers the full potential

⁵ Six hundred and thirty-two students registered for the last Communist University. Over half of them were not in the Communist Party.

that exists. The ultra-sectarian NOLS leadership are unable to provide the sort of approach which could gather it. Put quite simply, if Clause Four defeated the RSL in NOLS the Broad Left could be greatly strengthened.

A cause of bafflement to many outside the student movement (and to not a few within it) is why so much political work among the student left, ostensibly carried out in the name of unity, is nonetheless characterised by such a sectarian "style". Undoubtedly, many on the left (including a few within the Broad Left) have a tendency to regard other left groups as the main enemy! However, because of the "dual" nature of the student left, including those "making a break with the right", to use Dave Priscott's term, as well as those who consider themselves to be committed socialists—a combination not found on the same scale anywhere else; the Broad Left must fight politically to win both "sides". Inevitably, this means that it must present its politics in an extremely polemical way.

The Communist Party and the Broad Left

One of the main points of difference between the ultra-leftist approaches to unity and a Marxist-Leninist approach, which I would claim the Communist Party attempts to follow in the student movement, is around the question of *levels* of struggle. This article has distinguished four separate organisational/political levels—the student population; the mass student movement which is increasingly expressed through NUS and the student unions; the Broad Left, which I have described as a driving force for this movement. To these three must be added a fourth—the role of the revolutionary party.

An ultra-leftist approach, especially in its Trotskyist form, would tend to compress these levels together. Thus, the IS, discovering that "united" work with rival ultra-left organisations conflicts with their other objectives, are increasingly turning their "rank and file" unity vehicles into fronts, as the WRP and the RSL have continually done. Thus, in their scenario, two levels merge—the unity organisation and the "revolutionary" party.

In the demands these groups put before the student movement, and seek to win it to adopt, they attempt an even more drastic merging. Because only a small minority of socialist students will support the advanced demands their Trotskyist over-estimation of the situation leads them to pose, in effect they blur the distinction between the student movement *and the left*. This reaches its most extreme and unreal position with the WRP, who fence off their activities into political and organisational enclaves which attempt to compress *three* separate levels into one—that of revolutionary party, left unity, and mass organisation—thus in the trade union movement the "all trades union alliance" and

in the student movement the "Young Socialist Student Societies".

The relationship of the revolutionary party to genuine left unity must be the very opposite of this. It must respect, and indeed be committed to fight for, the autonomy of the Broad Left from its own existence. Its leadership should be expressed, not through packing meetings or more effective caucussing, but by winning political support for its arguments in an open and democratic way.

The Communist Party recognises both the *separateness* of these differing levels of struggle and their *interconnection*. Therefore, the policy for which the party campaigns in the student movement aims at the mobilisation, not just of committed socialists, but of the widest possible number of students. On occasions this may mean that the party argues against policies, apparently militant and left, but which it believes will make it more difficult to involve the widest possible numbers of students in collective action. It is not that the party is against these policies on principle; more clearly than anyone in the left, Communists recognise that ultimately the problems facing students will only be solved by socialist revolution.

But also, more clearly than anyone else on the left, the party realises that people are won to recognise the need for revolution, by a *combination* of two *separate* but *interconnected* elements—participation in militant collective action, that opens up (but does not make inevitable) all manner of deep political lessons—and effect of propaganda, argumentation and education that *links* the politicising experience through which people pass, to the need for a revolutionary change in society.

Thus, the other side of the coin to the party's deep involvement in the separate but interconnected levels of the student movement and the Broad Left must be a great emphasis on the revolutionary Marxism of its own analysis. Unless these two approaches are linked, the work of the revolutionary party will degenerate into either economism or impotent sectarianism. In the student movement, where the left also includes considerable numbers who would consider themselves to be Marxists, as well as the very much larger number breaking with right-wing policies, it is of particular importance that the work of the party is on *both* fronts. To win those who consider themselves Marxists, we must continually justify our work in the various levels of the student movement, in relation to our revolutionary objectives.

The Student Movement Leadership and the Broad Left

Although students cannot be considered part of the working class, and the student unions must not be equated with trade unions, there is value in

applying Lenin's analysis of conflicting right and left trends within the British Labour movement to the student movement, and to its mass organisation the NUS. Of course, it is important to recognise that because NUS is not a socially homogeneous *class* organisation, the left-right trends will take different forms. Lenin's analysis was that in the mass organisations of the working class was a political conflict between the right wing in the ascendant, and a left trend, often confused, not yet firmly anchored in Marxism, which challenged the dominant right. In the debate around the formation of the British Communist Party, Lenin's advice to British revolutionaries was that it was at the heart of this left trend that the revolutionary party should locate itself.

Lenin described the left-right conflict as a *political* one between two opposing *political* trends. This is in sharp contrast to the non-Leninist analysis of the IS, who confuse this political conflict into one between two sociological categories, "the bureaucracy" and "the rank and file".

Now it is sometimes the case that trade union (and student union) leaderships are both bureaucratic and right wing, and Lenin pointed out with vivid clarity why this combination *often* went together. He did not say that it inevitably did. What has happened in the student movement over recent years is that the left trend has won the ascendancy, and therefore it expresses itself both among the rank and file students *and among their leadership*.

Therefore, a vital role for the Broad Left is to strengthen the links between these two expressions, using the one to sustain and advance the other and, where necessary, to criticise the other. We must

never forget that the pressures which bureaucratise leaderships are very real.

In this way, the *united* strength of the student movement can be mobilised. This does not mean that the Broad Left merely coat-tail Broad Left supporters on the NUS Executive, merely rubber stamping their initiatives (NUS Executive is responsible for its mandates to NUS Conference). On the contrary—what must be achieved are structures within the Broad Left which involve all its component parts, and which facilitate discussion and criticism, so that a common approach can be agreed. This is where regular Broad Left Conferences have such an important role to play—they provide just such an arena.

In this article, I have tried to outline what I believe should be the approach of the Communist Party to left unity in the student movement. On occasions, the revolutionary party must take a critical stance to those with whom it is in alliance, although it is of great importance that these differences are expressed in an open and comradely way. On other occasions, it will unite, usually only on specific issues, with groups claiming to be to its "left".

But the central emphasis of its work in the student movement must be to strengthen the ongoing alliance of those forces which share a common perspective for the mass movement, and at the same time expand and enrich its Marxist ideological work, and to increase its size, because without this growth students involved in the militant collective action that Broad Left policies and leadership make possible are unlikely to become Marxist-Leninists.

THE LABOUR MOVEMENT AND MILITARY COUPS.

E. J. Hobsbawm.

(We print below the text of a talk given by Professor Hobsbawm in May of this year to the Birkbeck College Socialist Society)

The role of the military in politics used to be a subject discussed only by those who took an interest in such parts of the world as Latin America, where it is still, God knows, a topical subject. Today, it is clear that it concerns us all. Independent military intervention in politics is always a sign of crisis. It is a symptom of social and political failure. In developed countries it is a symptom of the break-

down of the normal process of politics, or a sign that the *status quo* can no longer contain disruptive or revolutionary pressures. In the Third World it is a fairly safe symptom of an incomplete or aborted revolution. Well, we are in such a situation of breakdown even in many developed countries, including possibly ours.

It is assumed—especially on the left—that