



The Story of Labour Youth



A Keep Left Pamphlet

By PAT SIROCKIN

Price: One Shilling



Upper photo on front cover shows a Labour official attacking the bearer of a Keep Left banner at the Labour Party Sports Day and Youth Rally held on June 27, 1959 at the Abbey Wood Sports Ground.

Lower photo shows delegates attending the Conference held at Holborn Hall, June 25, 1950, to reinstate Wandsworth League of Youth (see page 12).

HARDLY has the Young Socialist organization been formed before it has been plunged into a struggle for its democratic rights. Members should know that there is quite a history to this struggle—twice before it has blazed up, with the same result each time, in 1939 and in 1955, the dissolution by Transport House of the Labour

youth organization. In order to appreciate what they are up against and to equip themselves to wage their struggle successfully, Young Socialists need to study the history of their movement. This pamphlet is a modest contribution to that history; we hope it will prove helpful in the political education of the Labour youth.

The Beginnings

'Somehow or other, the official adult movement never caught on to the League. It was not really welcomed. Progress was made, many branches were formed, a paper, which I edited was published monthly and various conferences held. But there was constant trouble.' So writes Arthur Peacock, one of the pioneers of the Labour youth movement, in his book *Yours Fraternally*.

Peacock tells how, in the years just after the First World War, he and his friends formed a Young Labour League in Clapham, and tried to get a national organization formed on the same lines, and how for years they got no encouragement at all from Labour Party headquarters. Even when similar organizations developed in other localities, headquarters insisted that there could be no national or even regional grouping, but at the most only separate 'youth sections' of the local adult Labour Parties. Even the decision to allow the formation of youth sections (1924) seems to have been taken only out of alarm

at the growth of the Young Communist League! And it was not until the Independent Labour Party—then an important group and affiliated to the Labour Party—had built up a successful national youth organization, the I.L.P. Guild of Youth, which showed tendencies to develop to the left politically, that (in 1926), the Labour Party saw fit to reorganize the 150 youth sections then existing into the Labour League of Youth.

The LLY was for young people aged 14 to 21; those between 21 and 25 could retain their membership provided they became individual members of the Labour Party. By the end of its first year of life, the League had over 200 branches. It was supposed, according to the official literature, to be 'an organization controlled by the young people themselves.' But there was no elected national committee such as the I.L.P. Guild of Youth had, nor even any regional committees, and when a number of branches asked for these, in 1928, the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party

rejected the demand 'on financial grounds.' Nevertheless, in the following year a conference was convened and a national *advisory committee* elected with the task of co-ordinating League activities in consultation with the NEC. An official pamphlet on the League published in

1931 emphasised that, 'as it is an integral section of the Labour Party, the League does not concern itself with questions of policy. . . . The work of the League of Youth should be mainly recreational and educational.'

For Self-Government and Socialism

The years 1932 and 1933 saw a big growth in Left-wing socialist ideas and anti-'Establishment' ideas generally among young people. It was the time when unemployment ran into millions and the capitalist system was widely discredited—people spoke bitterly about 'poverty in the midst of plenty.' The old Right-wing leadership of the Labour Party, headed by MacDonald, had betrayed the movement and gone over to the Tories. Only fourteen years after the end of the First World War, Japanese imperialism had begun to attempt the conquest of China, the much-boosted World Disarmament Conference was obviously failing, Hitler's Nazis were advancing to power in Germany. Anti-war, anti-imperialist and anti-fascist feeling was very strong among the younger generation in the Labour movement and in even wider circles. It was the time when the students' union at Oxford University passed their sensational resolution: 'That this house will not fight for King and Country.'

One of the outstanding incidents in the political crisis of this period was the breakaway of the I.L.P. from the Labour Party. It looked to those who were preparing to take over as MacDonald's successors that the new Left forces arising among the socialist youth might well be attracted into the I.L.P. Guild of Youth unless they were offered something better within the confines of the Labour Party than existed up to then. Accordingly, a full-time national youth

officer was appointed to help build the League of Youth (which had 302 branches by the beginning of 1933) and there was to be a printed monthly paper, *The New Nation*, edited by Arthur Peacock. These changes were announced at a conference of the League held at Leeds in January, 1933. But when this conference instructed the National Advisory Committee to ask the NEC for the right to discuss Labour Party policy to be granted to the League, they were rebuffed.

The New Nation was a very dull paper, largely because it was kept under strict Transport House control, and this was one of those periods when Transport House was so desperately concerned to fight the 'menace of Marxism' in the Labour Party that anything lively or original was at once suspect as being probably Red-inspired. Arthur Peacock tells us that the chief of the Labour Party publicity department used to send for him and go over the proofs of each issue. 'He would take his pencil, underline a sentence or two, smile, and say: "Well, brother, we can't have that, can we?"' And out the offending pieces had to come. An active member of the LLY in those days recalls that 'selling *The New Nation* was a hopeless task, for the paper was as inspiring as yesterday's sago pudding'. As for the national youth officer (Maurice Webb) the spirit of accepting the 'lesser evil' in which he approached his task was revealed in a phrase he used in an article in *Plebs* (October, 1933), saying

of the young people who were to be mobilized for socialism: 'If we do not give them leadership they will find it elsewhere'. Also significant were the carefully restricted functions of the LLY conference and NAC as he defined them in his 1934 'Handbook on the Organisation of the LLY': conference 'considers matters relating to the development and organization of the League and makes recommendations to the NEC of the Labour Party'; it elects an NAC which meets to 'consider the administration of the League and advise the NEC'. Though the adult party should allow the young people to develop the LLY branches in their own way, this must be 'subject, of course, to the necessity of avoiding contraventions of the Party constitution and programme'.

The contradiction between the Right-wing straitjacketing of the LLY and the restless urge of the League members to fight for socialist policies resulted in the appearance of an unofficial duplicated paper called *Youth Forum*. This was edited and supported by a broad grouping of Left-wingers from London branches, including Ted Willis of Tottenham and Roma Dewar of Balham. Some of them, notably Willis, but not all, later became under-cover members of the Young Communist League. At this time the Communist Party and the YCL were still opposed to imperialist war, and their 'faction' in the LLY, together with the Marxists (Trotskyists) and other Left-wingers proved able to swing the 1934 conference of the LLY branches in London against the policy statement then just issued by Transport House, which proposed to pledge the support of British Labour to a capitalist government in a war O.K.'d by the League of Nations, the UN of those days. A resolution rejecting the new policy statement and calling for the setting-up of anti-war committees based on trade unions, Co-ops and local labour parties was passed by 90 to 17. LLY members were well to the fore in the numerous counter-actions organized at this time against Mosley's blackshirted Fascists, who were at their most provocative, and they helped the unemployed hunger-marchers who converged on London from the depressed areas.

All this worried Transport House more than

ever. A lively debate which had begun in *The New Nation*, on problems of the fight against war and fascism, was cut off in its prime with the editorial note, 'this correspondence must now cease'. Procedure at the 1935 conference was changed so as to give less scope to the branches, much time being devoted to a lecture by a representative of the NEC: but this did not stop the delegates from demanding that the maximum age limit be raised from 25 to 30, a demand which irritated and alarmed Transport House in the extreme. Their idea was to oblige members of the LLY to leave that organization at as early an age as possible, so as to deprive it of a layer of experienced members who knew the score and had learnt how to fight! The annual conference of the League was ticked off by the *Daily Herald* because of the class line it adopted on many questions, in opposition to the line of 'the community' put forward by the Party leadership. League members gave further offence in the same quarter during 1935 by their activity in counter-demonstrations to the Royal Jubilee ballyhoo organized by the Tory Government in that (election) year.

Then, in August, 1935, one of the Communist Party's sudden changes of policy, dictated by the diplomatic and other calculations of the bureaucratic rulers of the USSR, led to disruption of the Left forces in the LLY. The Communists from now on were in favour of support for a 'League of Nations war'. (The implications of this change revealed themselves in stages between 1935 and 1938.) Increasingly, they turned away from the class struggle and socialist propaganda, devoting themselves to attempts to find allies among Liberals and even Conservatives who would help them to bring pressure on the Tory Government to modify its foreign policy in the direction of 'friendship' with the Soviet Union. As was inevitable, because the allies they sought among capitalist circles would be antagonized by strikes and advocacy of socialism, they moved more and more into opposition to such activities. This meant not only a break in the LLY between those who followed the YCL's guidance and the Marxists but a growing hostility

on the part of the former against the latter, and also an attempt by them to destroy the LLY as a working-class socialist organization. At the end of 1935 the group around Willis, having broken away from *Youth Forum*, started up their own crypto-Communist paper *Advance*.

Willis and his friends connected with *Advance*, with the excellent organization of the YCL backing them, came forward in the early months of 1936 as fighters for the autonomy and democratic rights of the LLY, and in this campaign they were, of course, supported by the Marxists. At the Easter 1936 conference of the LLY, held in Manchester, the *Advance* group won control of the NAC, and the conference put forward a programme of demands for self-government of the League. They wanted to elect their own youth officer, control their own paper, and so on—and to have the right to discuss Party policy. This programme was skilfully combined by the *Advance* group with a proposal for a merger between the LLY and the YCL, which appealed to the general feeling for 'working-class unity' which was then very strong among the Socialist youth.

Stalinists at Work

That November, 1936, issue of *Advance* was notable also for the complete disappearance of every working-class and socialist note from what it contained. It wrote of 'youth of all opinions' launching a 'youth crusade for peace', and it carried an article by Kosarev, leader of the Soviet YCL which included the significant sentence: 'It is necessary to unite all sections of the youth, without political, religious or other distinctions'. The *Advance* group had decided that their task was to liquidate the LLY as a working-class and socialist organization and to draw it into their

Transport House replied by disbanding the NAC and promulgating a 'Memorandum' in which they set forth a scheme to reorganize the LLY so as to ruin it completely. The age-limit was to be brought down to 21. The chairman of the NAC, who had been allowed to attend the Labour Party's NEC was to be excluded from its meetings. *The New Nation* was to be suspended. The 1937 annual conference would not be allowed to take place. After 'reorganization', the LLY must strictly confine itself to 'recreational and educational' work and stop once and for all this nattering about the right to discuss Party policy.

At first, the *Advance* group now entrenched in the leadership of the LLY talked very big about resisting the 'Memorandum'. 'We Shall Not Surrender', was the title of Ted Willis's article in the issue of their paper for August, 1936. But very soon they changed their tune, doubtless on fresh advice from Communist Party headquarters. In the November *Advance* Willis wrote that 'any talk of a new organization, of a split from Labour, is extreme folly', and asserted that, in spite of everything, the 'Memorandum' left sufficient freedom and scope for the LLY to function adequately.

schemes for unity with Liberals, 'progressive' Conservatives and so on. This they could best do *not* by fighting for the independence of the LLY, but by accepting the 'Memorandum' (these restrictions, after all, made difficult the work of the Marxists in the LLY!), and by combining an ostentatiously loyal attitude to Transport House with utilization of the positions they had acquired in the leadership to 'colonize' the LLY discreetly for the YCL.

After the breakaway of the *Advance* group, the Marxists in the LLY had mustered their

small forces to bring out a paper of their own, which they called *Youth Militant*. Through this paper they agitated for the disbanded NAC to call an unofficial national conference of the League. They wanted the League to defy the 'Memorandum' and temporarily to withdraw from the organizational connection with the Labour Party in order that it should be able to function as a genuine self-governing and socialist youth league; it should then campaign in the working-class movement for the right to affiliate to the Labour Party as an autonomous body. Members should apply for individual membership of the Labour Party. In the meantime, the Marxists combined their criticism of Labour Party official policy with zealous work on behalf of the Party in election struggles—during the March, 1937, LCC elections, for instance, the East Islington branch of the LLY, well-known to be led by the Marxists, sold over 700 copies of the pamphlet 'What Labour Has Done For London' and was thanked by the local Party for its fine contribution to the campaign.

The *Advance* group put forward the line that the LLY should *restrict* itself to election and similar donkey-work for the adult party, and that through such service *alone* would the League recover its rights. Thus, Goldberg, of the Bermondsey branch, wrote in the February, 1937, *Advance*: 'Be active, then, be alert, and remember the words of Lenin—"Less high-falutin' phrases, more everyday deeds"', and make the League of Youth the most active and militant section of the Labour Party; a League of Youth which will be taken notice of'. They resisted the Marxists' call for a declaration of independence. The editorial in the January, 1937, *Advance* said: 'We must not admit defeat by breaking away from the Party. We must not weaken ourselves and the movement by campaigning internally against those clauses in the Party constitution which now embody the terms of the Memorandum'. And they combined these lines with an attack of unprecedented ferocity and unscrupulousness upon the Marxists. The keynote for this was sounded by John Gollan, then national secretary of the YCL, at a special

session on 'Trotskyism' at the YCL National Council meeting in January, 1937. It was at this time that the second of the three big Moscow trials (now generally agreed to have been frame-ups by Stalin) took place, at which some of the outstanding leaders of the October Revolution were accused of being 'agents of Hitler and the Mikado' and linked up with the exiled Trotsky. The Marxists in the LLY were denounced by Willis and Co. as 'fascist wreckers'. Several issues of *Advance* were devoted to frenzied smearing of the Marxists and incitements against them. For example, Ted Willis, in the March, 1937, issue, wrote: 'There is no place for Trotskyists in a live movement, just as there is no place for boils on a healthy human. . . . Turn them, lock, stock and barrel, out of the Labour movement!'

The Marxists had a hard task before them in this period, owing to the circumstance that what more than anything else dominated the minds and hearts of young socialists was the civil war raging in Spain, and this was not fully understood by many of them. Franco's fascists, backed with arms and 'volunteers' by Hitler and Mussolini and with the moral support of reactionaries everywhere, were fighting against a 'Republican' coalition in which the Communist Party was the most dynamic force and which was helped, though not very much, with arms by Soviet Russia. All Left-wingers, including the Marxists, worked to help the fighters against Franco, by sending volunteers, medical aid and so on and by agitating for their right to obtain arms freely from any source. 'Arms for Spain!' was the most popular Left slogan in those days. The Marxists, however, also pointed out that the Communist Party in Spain, acting on the instructions of the Soviet bureaucracy, was holding back the Spanish workers from carrying through socialist measures and conducting their struggle as a revolutionary war—even causing the gains which the workers had made in the early days of the struggle to be handed back to the capitalists, and striking viciously at those groups which resisted this policy. Such a line, said the Marxists, far from ensuring 'unity for victory', would



accounted for only 700 out of the 15,000 membership of 3,500 (in 1933 there had been 15,000 members in the LLY!). The London branches were mostly well controlled by the *Advance* group, and that was why London was chosen as the venue of the conference, rather than some northern city. Only resolutions put by the ex-NAC were allowed at this conference, the branches being restricted to proposing amendments. The line of the ex-NAC was explained by Willis: 'We accept the Memorandum in order to defeat it, as we accept capitalism in order to defeat it'. The conference requested the NEC of the Labour Party to call an official conference

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The League of Youth Destroyed

An official national conference, the first since Easter, 1936, was arranged for March, 1938. No resolutions were to be taken from branches. The new NAC was to consist of 10 representatives of the Labour Party NEC and 8 elected representa-

tives of the LLY. A national organizer—Ted Willis, of course!—was appointed without any consultation of the membership. *Advance* for March wrote: 'We warn the conference that there will be a small group of self-styled Trotsky-

doom the anti-Franco cause to defeat—as actually happened in 1939. To most sympathisers with the Spanish fighters against fascism this was too complicated an idea, and to voice any criticism of the Spanish Communists seemed a sort of treason. The Stalinists of the YCL and the *Advance* group worked up a tremendous emotional atmosphere for the purpose of stopping objective thought about what was going on in Spain and isolating the Marxists.

Thus, when at last a special national (unofficial) conference of the LLY was held in May, 1937, the Marxists found themselves a minority whose efforts to put their point of view were howled down, while their literature sellers were physically assaulted. The conference was held in London, and naturally the majority of the delegates (130 out of 172) came from the London area, though the London branches' membership accounted for only 700 out of the total membership of 3,500 (in 1933 there had been 15,000 members in the LLY!). The London branches were mostly well controlled by the *Advance* group, and that was why London was chosen as the venue of the conference, rather than some northern city. Only resolutions put by the ex-NAC were allowed at this conference, the branches being restricted to proposing amendments. The line of the ex-NAC was explained by Willis: 'We accept the Memorandum in order to defeat it, as we accept capitalism in order to defeat it'. The conference requested the NEC of the Labour Party to call an official conference

of the LLY, and also to prepare a suitable programme for the LLY!

In preparation for the annual conference of the Labour Party to be held at Bournemouth in the autumn, the *Advance* group, hoping that their policy of crawling before Transport House would be duly rewarded, kept the League from doing anything which might give the slightest offence in that quarter, and were quite ruthless in their methods. At the quarterly conference of the London branches in September, East Islington wanted to move a resolution calling for an international working-class embargo on the supply of war material to Japan, which had now, after absorbing Manchuria, begun to occupy 'China Proper'. Stanley Moore, the Stalinist chairman, at once moved 'next business' and so prevented this resolution being discussed. About this time dockers in Glasgow, Southampton and other ports did in fact begin to refuse to load Japanese ships with scrap-iron, and both Transport House and King Street were very anxious that this initiative should not spread!

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ists who, under cover of freedom of discussion, will put forward amendments of such a character that, if accepted, they would make the resolutions lifeless and put the stamp of impossibility on our future programme'. When the conference took place, George Dallas, a Right-wing Labour leader was in the chair, with Ted Willis at his elbow. Of the 78 amendments submitted, 63 were either ruled out of order, withdrawn at the chairman's request, or referred to the NAC. The key issues of the age-limit, bigger League representation on the NAC, etc., were ruled out of order. An amendment expressing opposition to the Government's rearmament policy and recruiting campaign for the armed forces was defeated.

The *Advance* group were rewarded for their role in bringing the LLY to heel by having their paper recognized, as from May, 1938, as the official organ of the LLY. An editorial board of 5 was set up, 3 of these being representatives of Transport House. Though Willis was over the age-limit now it was tacitly agreed to ignore this fact in his case. The Stalinists used their control of the LLY in two main ways. On the one hand, they transformed it into an essentially 'social' organization, claiming that only in this way could it hope to make recruits. (*Youth for Socialism*, a new Marxist youth paper which took up the fight that *Youth Militant* had carried on till it had had to close after the 1937 conference, commented in its first issue [September 1938] that if the sole basis for recruiting was to be the 'social' activities of the LLY, members would easily be enticed away by the superior attractions of this sort that the bosses' organizations could offer. They explained that the real motive of the *Advance* group was that they did not want to develop the political understanding of the members! It must here be said, however, that, in the opinion of some who were young Marxists in the LLY in the 1930s, while the Stalinists overstressed the 'social' side for their own ends, the Marxists on their part made the mistake of underestimating its importance in the life of any youth organization. They too often let themselves appear as excessively bookish people, prematurely old in their way of life and attitude to normal

youngsters.) On the other hand, Willis and Co. used the channels of the LLY more and more brazenly for promoting Communist Party policy, which now entered into a phase where a clash with Transport House was inevitable. King Street had decided that a Labour Government was either impossible or undesirable, and urged instead the formation of a coalition government of 'patriotic' Conservatives (Churchill!), Liberals and Labour. As *Advance* put it in the issue of June, 1938: 'Let us have a new Government, in which the voice of Labour shall be heard for Peace, Democracy and Social Advance'. The Willis leadership associated the LLY in joint meetings and demonstrations with the League of Nations Union, Young Liberals and other such groups, eliminating from their contributions everything specifically working-class or socialist.

Youth for Socialism warned in its issue of March, 1939, that Transport House, having now used the Stalinists in the LLY for its own purposes and having no intention of letting the LLY be used by them for their own distinctive aims, was preparing a new 'Memorandum' which would smash the Stalinist leadership and perhaps the LLY along with it. This duly occurred soon afterward. Transport House, itself snuggling up to the Chamberlain Government, expressed horror at the 'Popular Front' line of the LLY leadership. Willis was forced to resign on grounds of age, the NAC was disbanded, the annual conference was called off—all this on the pretext of the *Advance* group's association of the LLY with anti-Labour Party activities. In future, it was announced, there would be no national or even regional organization for Labour youth: back to 'youth sections'!

Once they realised that the game was up, Willis and his fellow-Stalinists threw off the mask. Ignoring all their talk in 1936-37 about 'no desertion', 'no break with the adult party', and so on, they openly joined the YCL in June, 1939, and called on all League members to follow them. A large number of League officers and many whole branches followed them into the YCL; and on the eve of the Second World War Labour's youth organization lay in ruins.

After the War

After the general election of 1945, which returned a massive Labour majority, in a number of places the young Labour people who had worked in the election continued to meet together, and informally the Labour youth movement started to reconstitute itself. In July, 1946, Transport House published the first number of the *Young Socialist*, as 'the organ of the Labour Party League of Youth'. 'Already', it was noted, 'quite spontaneously and without prompting from Head Office, nearly 200 branches are in full swing. . . .' It was decided to organize the League on a regional basis (no national conference or committee), with an age-limit of 21. Until 1948 the only opportunities that Labour youth had of getting together were, in the pages of the *Young Socialist* and at the national summer schools which were held. In both places the demand for raising the age-limit to 25 was repeatedly voiced. A number of branches protested against the publication in the League paper of an article calling for recruits for the RAF, also against the line of an article entitled: 'Vote at 18? No!'

An infliction which the youth movement had to endure throughout the entire period of its existence was conscription. This was supposedly a principled issue for Labour, but only until the fruits of office fell in its lap. A row broke out over the issue. In the debate in parliament some Labour MP's had the gumption to vote against conscription, but the parliamentary party, intimi-

dated by the generals, knuckled under.

However, several members of the League of Youth denounced the policy change and declared their intention of campaigning nationally against conscription. They were promptly expelled. On the demand for their re-admission going up, they were told: sign a letter withdrawing your threat to campaign nationally. In other words—think what you like by all means, but don't you dare try to act on these thoughts. It also underlined the fact that there was one law for the parliamentary party and another for the rank and file.

On another symptom of the reviving life of the Labour youth movement in this period let us quote Reg Underhill, National Agent's Department, writing in the *Young Socialist* of April, 1947: 'It is encouraging to note the development now taking place in the number of branches issuing their own journals and news-sheets.'

By 1948 the next general election was in sight, and Transport House was worried by the growth of the Young Tory organization. There were over 1,600 branches of the Young Tories, to only 300-odd of the League of Youth. Accordingly, the 1948 (Scarborough) conference of the Labour Party decided to bring the existing branches together (and it called on the constituency parties to form branches where they did not yet exist) within the framework of a national LOY 'with a democratic structure' and age-limit of 25. It turned out, however, that the

National Youth Officer was to be the Assistant National Agent, A. L. Williams. He found himself immediately up against demands from the membership that the League be allowed to have a proper elected national executive committee, with its own staff and its own press, not just a national *consultative* committee, which was what the promised 'democratic structure' turned out to amount to. Replying to these demands in the first issue of *Labour Youth*, successor to *Young Socialist*, in August, 1948, Williams directed a shrewd appeal to the careerist, jobs-for-the-boys element which played quite an important part in the LOY in this period of Labour Government.

You can't eat your cake and have it, he warned the critics: the sort of organization you want would be a separate organization, segregated from the Labour Party, and you would not have the opportunities you have now 'to be appointed to official positions'. Alice Bacon made clear what she and her colleagues saw as the scope of the LOY when, writing in *Labour Youth* for October of the same year she justified the national consultative committee's being 'selected in the regions and not elected by a League conference': this, she said, was the appropriate method for a body 'concerned with organization and education rather than political decisions'.

The League of Youth Restored

The League grew rapidly in this period. Already by the end of 1948 there were 500 branches. But parallel with this growth there grew the demand for more self-government, as in the 1930s. When the NCC held its first meeting, the paper *Labour Youth* came in for severe criticism for its dullness and remoteness from the life of the branches, and it was replaced in January, 1949, by *Socialist Advance*. Very soon its pages carried editorial replies to proposals for the democratization of the League: especially for a national conference ('the NCC gives every opportunity for full and frank discussion of the League's affairs').

So scarcely before 1948 was out, up came the spontaneous demands of the youth which crystallized around a series of demands.

Financial and editorial control of the Youth paper; officials to be elected by regional Youth Committees (as were all other Labour representatives); all officials to be under 30 years of age; the League to have direct representation at the Labour Party conference on a membership basis; the National Conference of the League of Youth to

be empowered to send resolutions to the Labour Party conference; the League of Youth to have an elected National Executive.

What might happen at a real national conference was foreshadowed by some of the regional conferences held in 1949. At the London conference, the majority of delegates expressed dissatisfaction with the official Right-wing policy statement for the 1950 election, 'Labour Believes in Britain'. The delegates felt it was a retreat from nationalization, workers' control and a socialist foreign policy.

A mass rally of the League—a sort of holiday-camp-cum-summer school—was arranged by Transport House to take place at Filey. The new generation of young Marxists, taking up the struggle waged by their predecessors of the 1930s, got busy, in alliance with other Left-wingers, to use this rally to raise and fight for a programme of demands—an annual conference to decide policy, election of a national executive committee by this conference, representation at Labour Party conference by LOY delegates, a seat for the LOY on the Party NEC, and an editorial board elected

at national conference to run the League's paper. Wandsworth League of Youth became the chief banner-bearer in the battle for this programme. It called for a preparatory campaign before Filey.

Branch meetings were to be called to discuss how to achieve the *essential* degree of autonomy within the party constitution; mandated delegates were to seek national discussion if possible; branches were to press their views in all ward and divisional parties and ventilate their grievances in the socialist press.

At the Filey Rally (September, 1949) there were about 2,000 young people present. It was not a delegate meeting and many came largely to have a good time, so perhaps the bureaucrats thought everything would go smoothly when they distributed (just 24 hours before the meeting) the NCC's report and provided an opportunity to discuss it. They got a shock. Though no resolutions or amendments were allowed, the reference back of the entire report was moved from the floor. The chairman ruled it out of order. Thereupon it was moved that the chairman leave the chair. A hurried whisper with Morgan Phillips (seated by his side) and he declared that he would not accept the motion. Speaker after speaker came forward to criticize the existing set-up and advocate the 'Wandsworth' demands. In the report of Filey in *Socialist Advance* (November) it was admitted that 'there is, rightly or wrongly, some dissatisfaction with the structure of the League as at present constituted'.

Supporters of the 'Wandsworth' programme got together and set up a provisional campaign committee of area secretaries. They were entrusted with the task of rallying support and convening early in 1950 a conference of League members to which the NCC and the Party NEC would be invited. Every supporter of this 'National Status Movement' was to subscribe 1d. per month during the campaign.

Here is the text of the National Status resolution:

'As loyal youth members of the Labour Party and recognizing the need to rally the youth for the next General Election and after, and realizing that this can be achieved

only with an autonomous and democratic League, we pledge ourselves to get all possible support in order to implement the 1948 Labour Party Conference Resolution "This conference calls on the NEC to provide money and facilities necessary to co-ordinate the League of Youth within the framework of the party into an effective national body with an upper age limit of 25, and with a democratic structure and an organizing staff" by carrying out the following:

1. For an annual League of Youth conference, delegates to be elected from League branches.
2. This conference to elect its own executive committee responsible to conference.
3. For resolutions and a League delegation to the Labour Party conference.
4. For a representative on the NEC.
5. Executive Committee of the League shall control "Socialist Advance" and other League literature.'

Transport House was alarmed and in *Socialist Advance* for January, 1950, A. L. Williams, after objecting to every one of the five points, hinted that behind them lay the ulterior motives of 'a small minority'.

The 1950 general election gave Labour a severe setback and it was clear that unless the Party made a sharp turn to the Left and roused the workers with a class and socialist programme then the Tories would soon be back in power—as duly happened in 1951. The Wandsworth League of Youth decided to lead the LOY in contributing to a revival of the movement, by putting forward a political programme for youth. This it published in May, 1950. The document spoke of the threat of war (the Korean war began soon afterwards), and of unemployment (the first post-war recession was then going on), the dead-end prospects for youth, their exploitation, and the grievance of conscription. It demanded—the vote at 18; withdrawal of all troops from the colonies and the granting of immediate and unconditional independence to them; no use of

troops for strike-breaking; full political rights for members of the armed forces; a living wage for young workers; reduction of young workers' hours and a month's holiday with pay; equal pay for equal work; technical training during working hours to be paid for by the employers; entrance to universities by examination only; adequate grants for students.

After Filey, the NCC twice (in November, 1949, and April, 1950) requested the NEC for a national delegate conference of the League of Youth, but got no reply. So in May, 1950, Wandsworth and six other Leagues sponsored a circular calling a conference at Holborn Hall on June 25. This was for the purpose of bringing to the NEC's notice the League of Youth's 'dissatisfaction with their persistent refusal to answer the recommendation made by the highest body of the League'. The reply of London Labour Party HQ was to denounce the June 25 gathering ('it

was precisely this kind of unofficial interference that led to the suspension of all Youth Advisory Committees, national and regional, some time before the war. It would be bad for the League of Youth if history were to be allowed to repeat itself').

Simultaneously, on the night of June 2nd Wandsworth League of Youth was disbanded on instructions of the Agent and Chairman (claiming to act on behalf of the officers) who also happened to have been in touch with officials of London Labour Party.

These actions proved highly unpopular with the membership, and A. L. Williams was left in no doubt about that. At the weekend of June 18 a Southern region rally was held at the Clarion Hostel, at Hoddesdon, 600 young people being present, Williams found himself unable to make himself heard, when he tried to address the crowd, for the shouts of 'Reinstate Wandsworth!' At



Hoddesdon, June 1960. Stand-up demonstration while Len Williams (obscured by hecklers) attempts to speak.

length he promised to receive a deputation on the subject, but in fact disappeared from the scene as soon as he could, without meeting the deputation!

After an angry crowd of 150 youths had picketed the house a vote of no confidence in him was carried.

Wandsworth League members put up an intense fight for reinstatement in their wards and trade union affiliates, and the local GMC reinstated the League.

The Holborn Hall conference was a great success, with over 300 present and 59 Leagues represented. There were messages of support from Fenner Brockway and 7 CLP's. Tom Braddock, representing the Left-wing paper *Socialist Outlook*, spoke on the platform. The main resolution, which expressed concern at the failure of the NEC to arrange a national conference, and set up a campaign committee of representatives of all Leagues present, was carried with only 6 votes against.

The Left had shown themselves too powerful to be ignored, and in *Socialist Advance* for September, 1950, A. L. Williams announced that a national conference of the League would be held the following Easter, adding darkly that 'it cannot be said that the pre-war national conference were of much use in this connexion, because they led not a growth of the League but to its distintegration'. The agenda of the conference

was to be confined to League organization and work, and all delegates had to be endorsed by their adult parties, likewise the resolutions they proposed to move.

So the first national conference of the League of Youth since 1938 took place at Easter, 1951, in the Beaver Hall. There were 349 delegates present. The number of Leagues in existence in November, 1950, was reported as 820, with an estimated total membership of 25,000. This represented a marked increase over the previous year's figure of 662 Leagues and gave the lie to the alleged detrimental effects of the National Status Movement.

The biggest round of applause was given to Fred Jarvis, fraternal delegate from the National Association of Labour Student Organizations, when he mentioned that his organization had the right to discuss all policy questions, and exercised it. Resolutions were passed demanding this right for the League of Youth and demanding an annual delegate conference with delegates and resolutions of the League's own unfettered choice. On the whole, however, the National Status Movement proved unable to get its programme endorsed, and *Socialist Advance* could report the occasion (June, 1951, issue) under the headline: 'National Conference Marked By The NCC's Rout of Critics'.

An important factor in the slackening of the momentum of the Left drive which was registered



View of the platform at the Holborn Hall Conference, June 25, 1950: J. Hamilton at the microphone. On the extreme left, Tom Braddock. Chairman: Y. Penfold (to left of speaker).



Agitating for the National Status Movement.

at the Beaver Hall conference was the political repercussions of the Korean War, which began in July, 1950. A number of people who had been allies of the Marxists now broke with them and took up a 'patriotic' stand on the war issue, and there was a split in the ranks of the Marxists themselves, one group announcing that they now realized that the Soviet Union was a state-

capitalist country and did not deserve to be defended by them. As defenders of the Korean people and their allies against Syngman Rhee and the American imperialists backed by the United Nations, the Marxists stood almost alone in the Labour youth movement and they suffered for a time severe isolation in all their activities.

The split in the Cominform in 1948 served to break the barrier between the socialist youth of the workers' states of Eastern Europe and of capitalist West Europe. The Social Democratic youth of Britain and the Communist Youth of Yugoslavia made common cause against unbridled bureaucracy in their respective movements.

Pioneering this solidarity was the first contingent of Labour Youth recruited unofficially in 1950 by the Left wing in the Labour League of Youth, again on the initiative of Wandsworth LOY. It was named the John Maclean Brigade (after the Scots revolutionary socialist). Collectively organized with elected officers, common cash pool, etc., it functioned on a strictly disciplined basis.

The League of Youth in Decline

This loss of allies by and internal disruption of the Marxist nucleus coincided with a general turn against Labour in the country, the Tories returning to power in the 1951 elections, and these two factors together were soon reflected in a decline in League of Youth membership. (The careerist element naturally thinned out a great deal when Labour was no longer in office.) After Beaver Hall it had been announced that there would be a similar conference the following Easter, but just before the New Year (1952)

Transport House revealed quite casually that 'in view of the spring local elections' no such conference would take place at Easter; instead, it would be held in conjunction with another rally which it was proposed to hold at Filey in the summer. The adult parties would, as before, choose the delegates—and veto the resolutions.

When the second post-war national conference met at Filey in June, 1952, it was obvious that things were going badly with the League. There were now only 666 branches, even on

paper, and membership had fallen to 5,000. One delegate (Jupp, Croydon) spoke of the League as being 'a dying organization'. The Left showed some signs of recovery at this conference, and a number of good resolutions were passed—that the League of Youth should cease to be associated with the State-Department-promoted 'European Youth Campaign'; that League branches be free in their choice of delegates and resolutions; that future conferences be not held in the frivolous atmosphere of a holiday camp; that Party policy be discussed; and that delegates and resolutions from the League of Youth be sent to Labour Party annual conference. It unanimously passed a resolution calling for a National Membership Campaign on a socialist programme. But this was not before an amendment from Streatham (now filling the rôle which Wandsworth used to play) called for this campaign to be linked to the struggle to overthrow the Tories. The amendment was lost 66-72, with 40 abstentions.

The 1953 annual conference registered a further decline in the League—down to 538 branches. Resolutions passed called for representation on the NEC and for the right to discuss policy. The Left won a notable success in its fight to associate the League more closely with young trade unionists and the struggle in industry, though not until after a battle with the platform. Three times the Standing Orders Committee had to have its report thrown out before conference was permitted to take a resolution (from North-east Leeds) expressing solidarity with the workers on strike at the Austin works. This was passed unanimously and a collection of £9 2s. 6d. telegraphed to the strikers. The Left also managed to utilize the discussion at the conference of what were called 'study group reports' to secure statements of the conference's opinion on some key political questions of the day, in spite of the formal ban on discussing policy. Thus, it was made plain that the delegates were against the idea of a mixed economy and objected to the burden of heavy compensation, that they did not consider the USSR an imperialist power, that they did not see the colonial revolution as a threat to peace (but, on the contrary, thought that any

move to suppress it would constitute such a threat) and that they wanted all troops withdrawn from the colonies.

By the conference of April, 1954, which was to be the last, the number of Leagues had declined to 384. There were only 120 delegates present. Emergency resolutions were put down opposing the newly-formed South-East Asia Treaty Organization and the rearmament of West Germany as imperialist war moves. Another called for an emergency conference of IUSY and the ICFTU to decide a socialist policy on the H-bomb. The Standing Orders Committee repeatedly refused to accept these resolutions and the NCC threatened to resign. Conference adjourned for a secret session. The Labour Party representative made it clear that if these resolutions were taken, the League of Youth would be disbanded there and then, and after bitter argument they were withdrawn under protest. Nevertheless, about 90 of the 120 delegates signed a letter to Aneurin Bevan supporting his stand against SEATO and German rearmament.

The 'hardy annual' of implementation of previous year's resolutions was repeated and forced through despite pleas from the platform.

Shortly after the conference, Transport House announced details of a campaign against conscription to be launched by the League of Youth under the slogan of 'Two Years is Too Long'. The LOY eagerly grasped this opportunity and public and open air meetings were arranged by branches and Federations. Transport House was not so enthusiastic and enquiries for promised posters and leaflets were fobbed off until a trickle of miserable literature finally appeared in late August.

But the National Executive Committee soon gave further evidence of its cynical attitude towards Labour's youth. In the midst of the LOY campaign, the NEC at the 1954 Labour Party conference opposed resolutions calling for the abolition or reduction of conscription and committed the Labour Party to support for two years conscription! Not long afterwards the Tory government announced its plans for the abolition of conscription.

The League of Youth Destroyed Again

The number of branches fell to 237 in 1955, and the bureaucrats made ready to finish off the League of Youth.

But in the League the Left wing struggled tenaciously to drive the Right wing out of its positions and smoke out the middle-of-the-road professional word-spinners. Gradually it began to make headway, taking control of the main urban areas. The resolutions drafted for the next annual conference were in strident discord with the flabby, characterless official policy.

In *Socialist Advance* for February, 1955, A. L. Williams warned anybody who did not agree that socialism must be won either by 'constitutional means' or not at all would be put out of the League, and denounced the 'infiltration of Labour organizations for subversive purposes'. When the Southern Regional conference of the League of Youth passed a resolution protesting against the banning by Transport House of the Left-wing Labour paper *Socialist Outlook* and the expulsion of members of Norwood Labour Party connected with this paper, the Regional Youth Advisory Committee was disbanded. But they continued their association by means of a joint-federation committee. Finally, the annual conference which was to have taken place at Easter, 1955, was cancelled. The NCC proved perfectly apathetic about this witch hunt.

The 1955 Margate Labour Party conference was a shambles. On the organization report no discussion on youth was possible. In the compositing committee, two regional organizers and Alice Bacon (NEC) confused the delegates by selecting two resolutions, one so vague as to be meaningless and the other very strongly critical. Despite repeated attempts from young delegates, requesting the NEC to outline its plans, no opportunity was afforded them and

the vague resolution was hurried through with the help of the chairman—Summerskill. Bacon, spoke for the NEC, indicating that they were interested in the progress of the youth movement and were going to give greater help. Delegates voted feeling they'd done the youth a good turn.

That evening, Morgan Phillips held a press conference. Here, he 'amplified' on the resolution stating the LOY was to be disbanded and that there would be no national, regional or area organization, only youth branches of Labour parties.

Then, October 19, 1955, members of the NCC received a circular from Transport House stating that conference had decided on 'new measures' to recruit more youth—these measures were: dismantle all national and regional machinery! Therefore, out with you, gentlemen of the NCC! On the 29th an identical letter went out to regions, simultaneously a circular went out to federations extending the murder act to them. It read—you are now disbanded—hand in the books, cash, etc. In case there was any doubt, 'ipso facto area committees are also abolished'. That one was signed by John Hill.

That was the end of the Labour League of Youth (second edition) and of all official organization of Labour youth on a national scale until 1960, when, after the Labour Party's defeat in the third general election running, Transport House in desperation had another go at setting up a national youth movement to help the Party. This time it was to be called the Young Socialists; but in spite of the change of name exactly the same issues as arose in the 1930s and in the 1940s have arisen in the Young Socialists, and what is essentially the same conflict as before has been joined again.

Keep Left

The question of questions around which the battle for democratic rights of the Young Socialists as a working-class socialist youth league is now being fought, is the right to continue to publish the paper *Keep Left*, which began to appear in November, 1950. Originally sponsored by the Wembley Leagues, it developed a national circulation. It is worth recalling that during the years from 1955 to 1960 *Keep Left* was this paper, then the only national Labour youth paper in existence, that, in spite of its lack of resources, linked the youth sections together and helped to maintain the basis on which since 1960 the Young Socialist organization is being erected. (*Socialist Advance* ceased with the disbandment of the LOY, and the 'youth sections' were left without even the link of an official paper such as the *Young Socialist* had provided in 1946-1948). *Keep Left* kept the Red Flag flying among the young people while Transport House turned its back on them. For the supporters of *Keep Left* the socialist youth movement is not something to

be switched on when Transport House feels the need for some extra election helpers, and switched off when it demands the right to run its own affairs and talk politics. *Keep Left* carries forward the traditions of those who fought to strengthen the League as a working-class and socialist body, making its contribution to the battle against capitalism and for victory for socialism, in the years before the war and in the post-war period. That is why all the Gaitskellites, open and concealed, hate *Keep Left*—and why all real socialists should rally to its defence. One of the weaknesses of the Left in the League of Youth during both its phases was that the Labour youth were then in some ways politically more advanced than the adult movement; today, after Scarborough 1960 and with the new wave of militancy in industry, the new situation in some formerly Right-wing trade unions, etc., that is no longer true. The prospects for a thoroughgoing and lasting triumph of the Left in the Labour youth movement are better than ever before.

Read

Keep Left

The Paper for Socialist Youth

!

I wish to subscribe to KEEP LEFT and enclose 6 shillings for 12 issues (post free) or 4d. per copy post free on bulk orders only.

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