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If only for reasons of self-preservation, Labour was obliged to draw some young people into the party so they could eventually replace its elderly stalwarts.¹ Electoral logic also dictated that Labour had to ensure the support of at least a respectable proportion of what was an expanding number of voters. Consequently, the 1955 Wilson report on party organisation (see Chapter 2) expressed particular concern about the consequences of Labour’s inability to interest youngsters in the party.² Many members were, however, uncertain about the purpose, manner and even merit of making a special appeal to the young. The 1960s began with commentators asserting that most young adults were materially satisfied and so inclined to Conservatism, but the decade ended with the impression that many young people had become alienated from society and embraced far-left causes. This shift in perceptions did not exactly help clarify thinking.

Those who have analysed Labour’s attempt to win over the young tend to blame the party’s apparent refusal to take their concerns seriously for its failure to do so.³ They consider Labour’s prescriptive notions of how the young should think and act inhibited its efforts. In particular, at the start of the decade the party’s ‘residual puritanism’ is supposed to have prevented it evoking a positive response among purportedly hedonistic proletarians.⁴ At the end of the 1960s, many believed the government’s political caution had estranged middle-class students.⁵ This chapter questions the exclusively ‘supply-side’ explanation of Labour’s failure evident in such accounts. In fact, the party’s various attempts to evoke a positive response among the young were usually based on a desire to engage with what was generally thought to be their interests. Before the 1959 general election, Labour established a Youth Commission, composed of progressive celebrities of the day like the footballer Jimmy Hill, which drafted proposals to meet the changing needs of the young. If this was principally meant to create favourable publicity, the creation of the Young Socialists in 1960 and the government’s reduction of the voting age were more substantive
initiatives. If neither made the party any more attractive to late adolescents and those in their twenties, it is unclear how far this was due to their flawed character or to the particular – and contradictory – inclinations of the young themselves. Both initiatives were certainly underpinned by the party’s desire to instil ‘responsibility’ in the young, by which was meant their acceptance of Labour’s own political assumptions. However, it is also true that most young people had long disparaged political activity of whatever kind; and those few who followed the path of budding revolutionaries, such as Tariq Ali, were implacably hostile to social democratic parties like Labour, whatever such parties said or did.

Labour’s perception of youth

Towards the end of Clement Attlee’s period in office, some of the party’s leading younger members claimed Labour’s ‘most urgent’ domestic problem was its deteriorating relationship with the country’s youth. Most were judged ‘unpolitical’ and so biased ‘towards the existing order … and therefore towards conservatism’.8 The reason for this was, a speaker at the 1948 Labour Party conference claimed, their lack of a memory of inter-war conditions. This meant, according to a later delegate, that to them ‘the dole queue is not a reality but a historical fact’ – and facts did convince as much as experience.7 As already noted, many activists’ personal familiarity with the inter-war years was critical to their appreciation of Labour’s merits. When a Young Socialist told the 1964 national conference of Labour women that her generation ‘did not want to hear about what went on in the thirties, they wanted to know what could be done now’, she was rebuffed by a mature delegate from the North East, who stated, ‘it was because of their experience in the thirties that many people had joined the Labour Party and fought so hard – a matter which ought not to be forgotten’.9

If the young lacked the necessary memory, their supposedly unthinking acceptance of full employment further distinguished them from activists. Hence, by the time of the 1959 Labour Party conference, it was a commonplace that, as one speaker put it, ‘whether you like it or not’, young people:

have ‘never had it so good.’ Back in the thirties when we were young and fighting to get a job, at any hours, at any pay, we had something to strive and fight for. Today they get it easy: good wages, regular hours…. They have never had it so good, my friends, and it is not a damn bit of good telling them what we had to do in the twenties and thirties: they will either not believe it or tell you it is a dead duck.9

According to Vauxhall’s agent, the widespread availability of well remunerated unskilled work had other implications that further detached
adolescents from their parents’ generation. In particular, the former were no longer ‘subjected to discipline’ at work, as they could easily find alternative employment, while the family had ceased to ensure conformity, because mothers were increasingly taking up part-time work outside the home.10

It was widely believed that, so far as working-class youngsters were concerned, the consequence of these changes was their weakening attachment to Labour; so dire was the problem, members in London reported that even their own children voted Conservative in 1959.11 Affluence was thought to have affected younger members of the middle class in a rather different way. In 1955 the former Cabinet minister Hugh Dalton met with the MP Kenneth Younger and during their conversation Dalton spoke of their greater interest in ‘Africans, Indians, etc’. Younger replied that, ‘having done away with gross poverty’ at home, the underdeveloped world was where their ‘emotions now went’.12

Because of such changes in the outlook of some young people, a few activists believed greater regard should be shown to them. In 1962, the secretary of Brixton’s Stockwell ward declared there was ‘the BIG QUESTION for us to try and answer’: How can we get the young people of today interested in politics. One part of the answer I think is for us to get interested in them, not keep on reliving the past, but to look forward to the future…. Let us listen to them and their ideas … but at the same time point out where they are wrong and why without getting impatient with them because remember if we can encourage them to join the Party, as they get older they will be doing the same as we are trying to do today and that is to keep the party ALIVE.13

As Robert Sheldon, the defeated candidate for Manchester Withington, indicated to Labour’s post-1959 election conference, the ‘old methods’ were no longer enough. He reported the establishment of a coffee-house – an innovation also favoured by the non-aligned Marxist New Left – in the centre of Manchester. The aim was to create an amenable venue for young people of vaguely left-wing sympathies to discuss the issues of the day, as the first step towards Labour membership.14 In charge of the coffee-house was Paul Rose, who was later elected MP for Manchester Blackley in 1964 at the unusually young age of twenty-nine. He saw it as a means of sidestepping the party’s unattractive wards and those older activists who, he claimed, resented ‘the supposed ingratitude of the younger generation’ and objected to ‘the sense of fun, the healthy iconoclasm and apparent self-confidence of the modern teenager’.15 Rose, however, believed Labour had to do more than offer the young a chance to chat over a coffee. It needed to demonstrate its relevance by asserting that:
the world of football, cinema, skiffle, hiking, art and the Hallé Orchestra, is our world. The ‘social hedgehogs’ on the left who see no place for these things in the struggle for a better life are ill-equipped to represent youth... There is no place for socialist ‘squares’ in the age of Humphrey Lyttleton, Aldermaston marches and Manchester United.\textsuperscript{16}

This was something many were unwilling to do: they looked on what the MP Horace King described as ‘cheap capitalist culture’ as one of the means by which youngsters were corrupted.\textsuperscript{17} As one 1956 pamphlet aimed at young people stated, spending money on clothes, going to football matches or having a drink were a ‘kind of dope’ that ‘only keep you from thinking’.\textsuperscript{18} Indeed, in the mid-1960s Tribune’s television critic identified a common assumption on the left that ‘all pop music is trivial, decadent and in some undefined way – dangerous’.\textsuperscript{19}

Even when trying to relate to the young’s concerns, Labour often simply reiterated their need to adhere to its approach to politics. In time for the 1959 election, Transport House published 250,000 copies of \textit{Hi!}, a broadsheet aimed at young workers, and employed in its production the popular writer Keith Waterhouse, to convince them of the importance of politics to their lives. Waterhouse claimed he came to appreciate that point after breaking his wrist, for the National Health Service was founded by ‘those somewhat ridiculous, slightly pompous, earnest, plodding figures we call politicians’. Thus, Waterhouse asserted, ‘politics is something that happens to everybody’.\textsuperscript{20} On such occasions, especially when trying to communicate in what it imagined was the idiom of the young, Labour only reinforced its worthy image. As part of a regular ‘Teenage Beat’ column, the \textit{East Ham South Citizen} stated that, in contrast to the Conservatives’ ‘old, dreary world of money-grabbing’, Labour offered youth a ‘clean, wholesome world’.\textsuperscript{21}

Labour’s problems became more acute later in the 1960s with the emergence of the ‘counter-culture’. If young affluent workers passively rejected Labour, middle-class students at this time apparently took a more conscious leave of the party and society in general. Even the left-leaning Judith Hart, when Minister for Social Security, complained of the growing number of those refusing to take paid employment. This was, she claimed, ‘causing me a very great deal of concern, as there were many, often from middle-class families, who ‘say they are writers or disc jockeys – they pick themselves all sorts of esoteric occupations – and seem to think it quite right that they spend a considerable time without work’.\textsuperscript{22}

The junior minister Shirley Williams thought the violent student protests that broke out across the West during 1968 meant irrational students threatened Labour’s reformist strategy, based at it was on the application of reason.\textsuperscript{23} Others, such as Doris Young, who chaired the
1970 women’s conference, thought the young had something more positive to contribute. Yet, while praising the rising generation for its ‘more direct, more impatient and more positive attitude to war and social equality’, she feared this might lead them to abandon conventional politics. Young was also unsure whether their ‘new protesting spirit’ was the modern expression of Labour’s own fight against social injustice or just ‘materialistic and self-seeking’. Whatever its nature, she believed the party should acquire a ‘deeper understanding and appreciation’ of the young.24 The revisionist MP John Mackintosh was similarly unclear what the generation gap represented. He thought those who joined Oxfam or War on Want shared his values, as they believed in steady ‘progress’. However, he looked on the ‘flower people and the freak outs’ with despair because they rejected gradual improvement and established politics. If he did not condemn their values, Mackintosh admitted he could not understand them.25

Finally, and in complete contrast, were those, like the revisionist Cabinet minister Anthony Crosland, who questioned the reality of a significant generation gap, believing the concept was associated with a ‘self-abusing attitude towards youth as a class’. If it did exist, he did not think it very wide, for various surveys suggested that, a few disgruntled students apart, the great majority of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds held political opinions very similar to those of their parents.26 Crosland’s colleague Richard Marsh was even more peremptory, feeling he could dismiss the violent demonstrations of 1968 because, as students ‘just liked making trouble’, their protests amounted to no more than ‘intellectual masturbation’.27

The purpose of youth organisation

In 1935, the Labour League of Youth (LOY) claimed a membership of 25,000; it also enjoyed a fair degree of autonomy, having its own conference, an elected national committee and representation on the National Executive Committee (NEC). However, after falling victim to Communist ‘entryism’, in which members of that party masqueraded as Labour loyalists to promote their own programme, expulsions followed and the LOY was brought under strict NEC control. The LOY never recovered its inter-war position and by 1955 was moribund, at which point the NEC wound it up as a national body, although 200 or so constituency youth branches remained.

To ensure youth recruitment was still taken seriously, the NEC’s Organisation Sub-committee formed a Youth Sub-committee and called on constituency Labour parties (CLPs) to appoint youth officers. This had little impact, even though for much of the 1960s nearly two-thirds
Many activists looked on youth organisation with considerable scepticism, partly due to memories of Communist infiltration, but mainly because they felt it would waste their limited time and money. Most local parties simply lacked suitable accommodation and adequate resources, and so could not compete with the better-placed Young Conservatives, let alone commercial leisure pursuits. In addition, those few young people who could be recruited were often associated with problems such as damaging property or misusing funds. In addition, the majority of activists were themselves parents or even grandparents and did not sympathise with the preoccupations of youth. Such local gerontocracies were often irritated of CLPs claimed to have filled such a post (see Table 7.1). Many activists

Table 7.1 Labour’s youth and student organisations: numbers of branches, members and officers, 1955–70

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Youth</th>
<th>University students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Branches&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Members&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>275</td>
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<td>1958</td>
<td>268</td>
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<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>572</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>721</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>772</td>
<td>22,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>769</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>722</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>605</td>
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<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>571</td>
<td>12,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>576</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>533</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>386</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>457</td>
<td>6,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>Number of constituency youth branches, 1955–9, and branches of the Young Socialists, 1960 on.

<sup>b</sup>Estimated numbers – available for selected years only.

<sup>c</sup>After 1966 the National Executive Committee terminated its relationship with the National Association of Labour Student Organisations.

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when young members played records on party premises and sometimes viewed their presence in the street as requiring police intervention.29 Even those who saw merit in supporting the organisation of youth disagreed over what form it should take: in particular, as early as 1946 there was what was described as the 'old problem of social versus political activities'.30 This in turn was underpinned by the hoary question of whether Labour should aim to build an elite or a mass youth movement. Officially, Transport House wanted local branches to satisfy political and recreative interests, so they might generate both a small group of future activists and a greater number of firm Labour voters. The problem, however, was that the few youngsters who took party activity at all seriously wanted to take it in an elitist – and overtly political – direction while the majority favoured social activities. Officers of the Bethnal Green LOY even disbanded their own branch in disgust at how little interest fellow members showed in political events.32

Those supporting the idea of a youth wing were at least united in the belief that its overall purpose should be, as George Brinham (chair of the Youth Sub-committee) confirmed, to 'train' the young 'to perform their civic responsibilities'.33 Youth sections were described as 'chiefly for the purpose of developing the character and experience of their members to fit them for service in the Party'.34 A corollary was that the young should subordinate themselves to their elders and betters: NEC member Percy Knight told the LOY they were 'enjoying the machine created by the pioneers', men such as himself, and it was their responsibility to leave it as they found it.35 As Reg Underhill stated when Labour's Chief Youth Officer, if a branch did not see its 'real purpose to be that of strengthening the Labour Party', it was 'pointless'.36

While some thought the young would learn the Labour way simply by doing what they were told, others considered they required autonomy to develop a sense of 'responsibility'. Given Communist infiltration and the post-war threat of Trotskyist entryism, the NEC was reluctant to concede too much freedom. Indeed, some of those who argued for greater independence were actually entryists, who believed it would allow them to manipulate the organisation better.37 Nonetheless, most who campaigned for greater freedom did so from legitimate conviction, although they conceded that, if they were given a conference free of NEC control, young members would pass extremely radical resolutions. However, such 'a platform for ideas, a channel for grievances, would increase the responsibility of the younger members' because 'the only way to train for responsibility is to give opportunity for exercising responsibility'.38 As the MP Richard Marsh (who was not at all left-wing) stated in 1959, a worthwhile youth movement would 'pass resolutions of no confidence in everybody on the platform, tell us what is wrong with the leadership of the Party and inform us how we can have the
Socialist revolution in the next 24 hours’. He was confident such angry young members would nonetheless conform in the end.  

The Young Socialists

The NEC decided to rescue Labour’s youth movement from the limbo into which it had fallen and in April 1959 formed a working party to recommend action. This reported just after the party’s performance at the general election had apparently illustrated its lack of appeal to younger voters. Members gathered information from an eclectic range of sources, including other European social democratic parties and Stuart Hall of the New Left. In an indication of how resistant it feared the young had become to Labour, the committee thought that if the new body too closely identified with the party it would not attract many recruits. Members therefore favoured sponsoring an organisation with no direct ties to Labour but that was nonetheless committed to its ‘progressive ideals’. This option was, however, abandoned, largely on grounds of cost, as it would have required a substantial professional staff. The revived movement – known as the Young Socialists (YS) and launched at the start of 1960 – had to operate from Transport House and be supervised by officials already overburdened with other responsibilities.

The working party believed that if the YS was to attract more young people than the LOY, it had to undertake social much more than political activities. While literature designed to appeal to prospective members indicated that one reason to join was the chance to express political views, most stress was put on the assertion that members knew how to have a good time. Companionship, especially with those of the opposite sex, was mentioned, as was the chance to join in team sports and a variety of other groups, including ‘let’s-just-sit-in-the-sun groups’.

According to a series of internal surveys, the YS initially enjoyed some limited popular success but it quickly fell to levels that would have embarrassed the post-war LOY. While YS membership stood at about 22,000 two years after its formation, by 1966 numbers had declined to 12,000 and by 1970 there were only 6,000. The number of local YS branches also fell, from a peak of nearly 800 in 1962 to under 400 by 1969 (see Table 7.1). Most members were men: in 1962, 62 per cent of branches reported having a majority of males while the 1970 survey suggested females accounted for only one-third of the total, appreciably less than in the adult party. According to an academic investigation in the early 1960s, like their Conservative and Liberal equivalents, most Young Socialists were the children of party supporters. Yet the YS appealed disproportionately to the offspring of middle-class Labour
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partisans, as members were equally divided between those whose parents were employed in manual and professional occupations. Indeed, the organiser for the Northern Home Counties Region noted in 1967 that the YS had ‘completely failed to bring any manual-type of workers to the fore’. This failure was probably due to two main factors. First, few working-class youngsters questioned the status quo to the extent that political activity of any type appeared a sensible pastime. Secondly, even had many young workers been so inclined, given the desultory state of Labour’s machine in proletarian districts, few would have had the opportunity of joining a section. In the organisational black hole that was Glasgow, for example, it is unlikely that at any one time there were ever many more than fifty Young Socialists.

In any case, right from the start, as one YS member from Surrey complained, most of those attracted to the movement belonged to the ‘local left intelligentsia’, who were unwilling to attract those not already immersed in political debate. Those most active in the YS were characterised as opposed to music being played at meetings, disgusted at the very mention of television and generally bearing a ‘hatred of anything for the masses’. As YS activists in Twickenham put it in 1967, theirs should be a mainly political movement: it ‘would be worse than useless to have a mass membership based primarily on social activities’, because the party needed to combat apathy, not accommodate it. To make things worse, commitment often went hand in hand with equally unpopular cultural aspirations: YS members in Bristol South East were forced to listen to classical records supplied by their secretary, who hoped to ‘entertain and/or educate’ them. Such efforts were rarely appreciated and officials did their best to curb the zeal of their young improvers.

The St Ives YS had a relatively healthy membership of twenty-nine, sixteen of whom normally attended its weekly meetings. However, its secretary – a grammar school sixth-former headed for Oxbridge – worried its gatherings were purely social, so held a discussion meeting, to which only five turned up. While the South West Region’s organiser sympathised with this young man’s ambition, he made it clear that the first duty of the YS was to build a large membership – and that meant putting on social activities.

The consequences of entryism

Despite arguments in favour of giving youngsters the freedom to become ‘responsible’, the YS was kept under firm NEC scrutiny through Bessie Braddock’s chairing of the Youth Sub-committee, a woman described by Tony Benn as ‘brutal and tactless and as out of touch as anyone could be’ when it came to the young. The YS was granted an
annual conference with the right to discuss policy and elect a national committee, but Braddock’s main concern was to prevent it falling into entryist hands. This did not, however, mean that officials demanded unquestioning loyalty: some claimed to welcome criticism, so long as it was the product of the ‘honest opinions of loyal young Party members’.52

Despite Braddock, the YS was soon infiltrated by a variety of Trotskyist groups, pre-eminently Young Guard and Keep Left. They demanded greater autonomy for the YS, and in particular full editorial control of its journal, New Advance. These tactics were popular with many non-Trotskyists who wanted to be free of adult interference and helped leftists win representation at regional and national level, which, along with a noisy presence at conference, they used to promote their policies. Proscriptions, suspensions and expulsions as well as the disbanding of local YS branches followed, as the NEC tried to stem the tide. In 1965 it assumed even greater control and had to rename the YS the Labour Party Young Socialists (LPYS), owing to the appropriation of the former title by the Socialist Labour League. Many legitimate LPYS members complained that, after this, the atmosphere was infused with ‘disillusion and disgust’: without the return of some autonomy it was predicted that Labour’s youth membership would continue to decline.53 For a time, at least, the LPYS appeared clear of entryism, if only because most Trotskyists temporarily convinced themselves Labour was no longer worth taking over. This allowed the NEC to relax its grip and in 1968 the LPYS national committee was given control of Left, its renamed journal. The collapse of membership nonetheless continued apace.

One reason why entryists gained such a prominent position within the YS was that few others took its political role seriously. According to Labour’s own surveys, no more than half its members attended section gatherings. Moreover, although every constituency section was part of an area federation that was meant to co-ordinate activity, if the Bristol area federation was typical, only a tiny handful attended federation meetings.54 In addition, at the peak of its popularity, in 1961, only half of branches sent delegates to the YS conference, a proportion that fell during the decade.55 Journals supposed to appeal to a YS audience also failed to generate readers: in 1961 New Advance reached its zenith when monthly circulation totalled 9,500; Left only ever enjoyed a maximum circulation of 6,000. In fact, the position was worse than the figures indicate, as many copies were bought by trade unions and CLPs to subsidise production costs.56

Only partly because of its Trotskyist cuckoos, YS members attending conferences quickly gained a reputation for far-leftism, although probably few rivalled the member who, when asked what item of news from 1963 made them really happy, replied: ‘The death of Hugh Gaitskell’.57 At its inaugural conference, only Gaitskell’s resignation was demanded,
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albeit by two-thirds of delegates, while a motion calling for the nationalisation of six major industries and the biggest 500 companies was carried almost unanimously.\textsuperscript{58}

Entryism was especially developed in London: the region’s 1963 youth conference was described by the capital’s youth officer as ‘mainly a battle between Young Guard and Keep Left, with the \textit{bona fide} Young Socialist element wondering what the H— was going on’.\textsuperscript{59} While assiduous in gaining national posts – six out of the eleven members of the YS national committee elected in 1964 were subsequently expelled – Trotskyists also enjoyed a significant local presence in the metropolis. During the mid-1960s, Hackney’s YS was run for the benefit of entryists, whose main concern was to prevent it being taken over by other far-left factions. There, meetings would dispute arcane matters such as whether the Soviet Union was a ‘degenerate workers’ state’ or ‘state capitalist’. Not surprisingly, they were no more successful at recruiting working-class youngsters than were sections led by those embracing more mainstream views.\textsuperscript{60}

In 1964, the National Agent, Sara Barker, blamed the spread of Trotskyism on older members’ reluctance to supervise sections properly.\textsuperscript{61} Whether through indolence or deliberate liberalism, some did let their youngsters run free. While not the victim of entryism, when the NEC investigated Putney in 1963, it discovered the YS was out of control. Of its sixty-one members, less than half were party members. It also published a journal, for which substantial sums were owed to the general management committee (GMC); according to investigators, this journal contained only articles that were critical of party policy and promoted views incompatible with Labour membership.\textsuperscript{62}

Gaitskell loyalists briefly tried to counter leftist influence but nationally, at least, their efforts came to little. Locally, however, there were occasional instances in which Young Socialists challenged their older – and more radical – counterparts, often over unilateralism, an issue that saw the YS in Bristol South East and Stockport support the parliamentary leadership and oppose their GMCs.\textsuperscript{63} Indeed, at the 1966 YS Eastern Region conference, one-third of delegates walked out when the left-wing MP and vocal critic of the Wilson government Stan Newens addressed the meeting.\textsuperscript{64}

Other problems

Labour’s attempt to establish a popular youth movement faced other problems, more mundane but no less intractable than entryism, pre-eminent among which was a high turnover of members. In Stroud, the constituency agent noted the existence of a two-year cycle in the life of
Fielding a section, which began when it was formed by like-minded contemporaries studying for their ‘A’ levels and ended as they left the area to go to university or find work. Sections were consequently formed and reformed at a rapid rate; for example, during 1964 the South West Region reported an overall decline of four sections to forty-five, but ten of these had been established in the previous twelve months.

Some felt this instability was due to the inexperience of Young Socialists. The NEC had fixed the upper age limit at twenty-five years, compared with thirty for the Young Conservatives and thirty-five for the supposedly Young Liberals. Some called for those in their late twenties to be allowed to remain, as they feared that in their absence the YS would be ‘a kind of tight trousered rock-club’. Officials argued against raising the limit because it would prevent teenagers from gaining know-how, as older members would inevitably dominate proceedings. Some also believed that maintaining the age limit at twenty-five would keep out the ‘more experienced disruptionists’ in the Trotskyist left, although others thought a higher limit would prevent ‘green’ members from being ‘easy prey to outside influence’.

Possibly because of the lack of more mature influences, there were many instances of youthful excess. In Warwick, the agent corroborated damaging local press reports that YS members had scratched ‘ban-the-bomb’ and other slogans on walls and furniture in their meeting place. Other sections were a constant source of concern, such as the one established in Salford West during 1963 but suspended by the executive committee (EC) soon after the 1964 general election. Youngsters fell foul of that local party owing to their allegedly noisy meetings, disorderly conduct, ‘illegal literature’ and unpaid bills, as well as the belief that meetings were ‘nothing more than an evening for dancing’. During the campaign there were reports that ‘hand bills were thrown all over the streets and youths were running round and shouting and ranting in a Riotous Manner’. At the meeting that suspended the organisation, twenty YS members, practically its entire complement, refused to leave the room and became abusive when asked to do so. It was to avoid such problems that the South West Region’s youth organiser discouraged one applicant joining the YS after the boy’s own father had highlighted his ‘restlessness and irresponsibility’.

Even when they adhered to the prescribed form of activity, some YS members behaved in what can only be described as a puerile manner, one that unconsciously parodied the adult party’s often pompous proceedings. The minutes for Bedford’s youth section recorded the following exchange during July 1968:

The secretary was asked if he had informed Mr Bayliss about the meeting. When he answered to the negative Mr Luft called him a
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Steaming Great Nellie. After considerable discussion Mr Luft reduced this to Steaming Little Nellie. Mr Harding still would not accept this and asked for the statement to be withdrawn. Mr Luft refused. Mr Harding threatened to resign but Mr Luft still refused. After the chairman pleading [sic] with Mr Luft he withdrew the remark verbally. We then went on to ordinary business.

By no means was all YS activity so troublesome or juvenile. The section in the south London constituency of Merton and Morden was something of a success, at least for a few years in the early 1960s, and gives an insight into the assumptions of those few non-Trotskyists who took youth organisation seriously. Members picketed shops selling South African goods; supported Oxfam; and were keen unilateralists. Visits were proposed to the Farnborough air show, London airport, the Daily Herald printing works, the House of Commons, the Royal Mint, a Cadbury’s factory, the Mermaid theatre, a planetarium and Sadler’s Wells theatre. Talks by outside speakers tackled an eclectic range of subjects, including spiritualism (which involved a demonstration by a clairvoyant), humanism, road safety and the probation service. Members also participated in folk singing, rambling and listening to pop records. Numbers were small, however – speakers sometimes had an audience of only six. Moreover, members’ lack of commitment to everyday party work was illustrated when the section executive held a ‘surprise evening’ to entice more than the usual number to attend a gathering. The ‘surprise’, it turned out, was a night of canvassing, a ruse that aroused much resentment among those who had turned up expecting something rather more exciting.

The student revolt

If members’ attitude to maintaining formal links with the young was at best unresolved, they were even more diffident about university students – not least because, according to one observer, most regarded ‘student politics as merely a youthful game’ in which participants were still ‘groping their way’ to socialism. In 1947 the NEC supported the formation of the National Association of Labour Student Organisations (NALSO) only after intensive lobbying from established university Labour clubs. The NEC resisted student proposals to build a closer relationship and restricted itself to giving NALSO financial support on the condition that its officers, and those of its affiliates, belonged to the party.

While NALSO boosted the political careers of a few individuals, such as Roy Hattersley, the extent to which it helped the party is moot. Even a generous estimate suggests no more – and probably far fewer – than
5 per cent of students ever belonged to a Labour club, which by 1965 meant about 7,000 (see Table 7.1).\textsuperscript{77} By the mid-1960s these clubs were swamped by far-left students, who voted at NALSO’s 1966 conference to free officers from the obligation of Labour membership. In response, the NEC terminated its relationship, although links with clubs still loyal to Transport House were maintained. The key issue behind this estrangement was Wilson’s reluctance to criticise the escalating US intervention in South Vietnam. The Vietnam War both lent credibility to revolutionaries like Tariq Ali, who was prominent in the campaign to oppose it, and afforded at least some coherence to their otherwise disparate critique of the status quo. Student disgust at Labour’s failure to condemn US actions also led to numerous encounters between ministers and protestors on campus: at best the former were mocked or pointedly disregarded by their tormentors; at worst a variety of objects were hurled in their general direction.\textsuperscript{78} Labour politicians were unused to such behaviour. The party’s candidate in the 1967 Cambridge by-election even welcomed the absence of undergraduates at one of his meetings because ‘they make such a row’.\textsuperscript{79}

Unlike affluent working-class teenagers, student radicals at least had an overt political perspective, albeit one articulated in a form many found disturbing. Some leading members of the Labour Party reflected on the questions posed by the student revolt of the late 1960s, thinking it indicative of a widespread discontent with authority. Even so, along with the thirty-three-year-old MP Paul Rose, the Cabinet Minister Richard Crossman remained bemused, sensing an insuperable barrier between those up to their mid-twenties and others just a few years older.\textsuperscript{80} Hart spoke of her ‘immense approval’ of the greater involvement of students in universities, colleges and sixth forms in the administration of their affairs. While student participation shocked some, their participation in curriculum development and teaching she believed ‘must surely be right’.\textsuperscript{81} Not surprisingly, given the number of young university staff sitting on it, Bristol West’s GMC discussed student power with some sympathy, one speaker indicating that the very purpose of higher education should be radically re-examined.\textsuperscript{82} Even venerable figures like the newly elevated peer Reginald Sorenson considered the student rebellion to be ‘stimulated by a vital search for finer values’. Sorenson nonetheless wanted them to articulate their case with a greater sense of ‘responsibility’, which meant working through the existing political system.\textsuperscript{83} The writer of an editorial for the Socialist Commentary was particularly disturbed by the reluctance of ‘practical idealists’ to identify with the party.\textsuperscript{84} The author believed they would once have joined Labour and helped it reform the established order, but their alienation from parliamentary democracy was such that they now looked on violent methods with favour. While the editorial...
considered Labour’s basic social democratic outlook as relevant as ever, its writer believed the party still needed to address some of the issues students raised, in particular the remoteness of decision-making and the pointlessness of much political activity.

The students’ lack of ‘responsibility’ upset Cabinet ministers, and led Wilson and colleagues to view their protests as primarily a law and order issue. Crossman feared democracy was coming to an end, and concluded: ‘we should have no hesitation in dealing with these people who were destroying free speech’. This approach depressed the likes of Benn and Barbara Castle, although even the latter referred to the existence of ‘thugs’ among a majority who expressed genuine grievances. This reaction did not derive just from generational differences. Labour loyalists at King’s College, London, stated the party differed from student revolutionaries, as it believed in reform from within, not destruction from without. To students still committed to Labour’s way of thinking, 1968 was a disastrous year, in which ‘frustrations exploded into violence and irresponsible language’ and challenged the legitimacy of existing political structures.

Even the most apparently conservative of voices, the Home Secretary, James Callaghan, took student opinions seriously. Callaghan was clearly irritated by the extremes of the protest movement, and he described Ali as a ‘spoilt, rich, playboy’. When faced with the prospect of a violent anti-Vietnam War march through London in October 1968, to follow up the Govenor Square riot earlier in the year, he still sought to balance the need to thwart the ‘hooligans’ intent on violence and the need to protect the right to demonstrate in peace. Callaghan later allowed the controversial German student leader Rudi Dutschke into the country and arranged a meeting, during which he tried to persuade Dutschke of the merits of the reformist politics practised by Labour.

Events at the London School of Economics (LSE) during the early part of 1969 seemed to bring student problems to a head. The director of the LSE, Walter Adams, was a former Rhodesian official whose links with apartheid did him no favours; nor did his refusal to reform the LSE’s system of governance, which denied students a voice. After a series of disruptions, Adams took the unprecedented step of temporarily closing down the institution. Edward Short, the Secretary of State for Education, was assured that only a small minority of LSE students wanted to end academic freedom and establish a revolutionary base. Thus he considered deporting those American students said to be at the heart of the problem and thought about dismissing up to 300 students. Short was particularly worried about the ‘great impatience’ with students evident among party members and the public at large, and was ‘deeply concerned’ about the possibility of a right-wing ‘anti-student anti-intellectual backlash’. He did not, however, endorse LSE
Fielding officials unreservedly and – unlike some hard-line administrators – saw merit in students winning representation on decision-making bodies. To that end, he wanted an inquiry into how the LSE should modernise its constitution after matters had calmed down.

When he spoke in a Commons debate on the universities in January 1969, Short nonetheless wanted to make a ‘hard hitting attack’ that would verbally ‘clobber’ those causing trouble at the LSE. He did this with Wilson’s full backing, for the Prime Minister ‘was getting a bit fed up with this troublesome minority’ and had also noted the public’s annoyance with those upon whom large amounts of their taxes were spent. If he was consequently cast as an authoritarian, Short noted that the ‘chaos and violence of student protest, rightly understood and rightly used, could raise the whole quality of our democracy’. ‘Schools and universities must’, he asserted, ‘get young people to take the responsibilities of citizenship by abandoning authoritarianism and involving them in government and decision-making’.

The student protests put ministers in an uncomfortable position, one many believed was analogous to that experienced by 1920s Weimar social democrats, caught between reactionary defenders of the status quo and revolutionaries intent on tearing the system down. As the Labour chair of the LSE students’ union pointed out, while the authorities had been provocative, the existence of ‘dedicated American agitators’ was undoubted. In proposing that both sides negotiate a settlement, Labour found itself preaching reason to two extremes uninterested in compromise.

**Tribune and the revolutionaries**

Although Wilson’s Cabinet was unwilling openly to criticise US actions in Vietnam, the same was not true of the Labour left, who, on the face of it, were in a good position to appeal to student radicals. *Tribune* welcomed the Parisian May events as ‘the greatest achievement of any west European labour movement since the war’ and criticised Short’s intervention in the LSE dispute as indicative of a ‘plain, old-fashioned fear of the unknown’. In the wider party, while Chelsea’s left-inclined GMC described Wilson’s administration as ‘semi-socialist’, it thought students only a ‘little irresponsible’ in their methods. Like the revisionist *Socialist Commentary*, the GMC believed the students’ desire to be more directly involved in decision-making should be emulated rather than condemned. Bedford GMC even passed a resolution in support of the Sorbonne students, although the secretary was unable to pass on news of this vote, as he did not have their address.

By the time of Labour’s 1966 re-election there was, moreover, a sense that if it was to exert real pressure on the leadership, the *Tribune Group*
of MPs should look beyond the Commons. David Kerr noted the 'widespread evangelical mood which today finds expression through CND or OXFAM or Voluntary Service Organisation', wherein lie 'an untapped well of Socialism'. To access this latent support, Kerr believed MPs should focus on policies that promised to bridge the gap between the West and less developed nations.\textsuperscript{99} \textit{Tribune} correspondent Illtyd Harrington even thought the 'gentle anarchism' evident at a 'happening love-in' held in London's Roundhouse was at least preferable to the 'commercially stimulated viscous antagonism of Mods and Rockers' of a few years earlier. If the young had moved away from conventional politics, he stated, it was still possible to enthuse them with new ventures like community work. If this suggested that some at least were open to the concerns preoccupying young radicals, most remained convinced the young were estranged from Labour for a familiar reason: the government's failure to transform society through greater state control of the economy.\textsuperscript{100} If their analysis was antiquated, so was the proposed solution. In June 1968 an array of union leaders and dissident MPs launched the Socialist Charter, which aimed to strengthen their perspective within the party, establish links with those outside and so encourage Wilson to 'return to [the] socialist principles' from which he had departed after 1964.\textsuperscript{101} As some commented at the time, the Charter bore the hallmarks of the earlier Keep Left, Bevanite and Victory for Socialism campaigns – which was not surprising, as the personnel were much the same.\textsuperscript{102}

Even those who believed the political situation in the late 1960s was drastically different to that of the recent past did not figure they should change their tactics. Towards the end of 1968, Eric Heffer told a gathering of Tribune MPs that the new-found influence of the revolutionary left meant the 'whole tone and flavour of the protest movement has changed'. In particular, they should not think the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC) comparable to the old Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND).\textsuperscript{103} Most of those who formed CND were long-standing left-liberal figures; they saw their purpose as influencing Labour policy, a disposition reinforced by the presence of prominent members of the Labour left on unilateralist demonstrations. This culminated in the 1960 Labour conference voting for a unilateral policy, although that proved a short-lived triumph as Gaitskell won the support of delegates at the 1961 conference to reverse the decision.\textsuperscript{104} Heffer recognised that the young revolutionaries did not want to influence Labour to achieve their ends – as one of their aims was to destroy the party. He nonetheless proposed meeting with VSC leaders to encourage them to put their energies into changing, not attacking, Labour. While even some left-wing MPs believed their party was finished as a radical force, most believed socialism could come only through a Labour government, so it
was pointless trying to replace it with an ideologically purer alternative. Not all Tribune MPs believed they should engage with the radicals. For example, like many in the Cabinet, Sid Bidwell thought the VSC needed to be told in no uncertain terms that it was ‘idiotic to advocate violence’; others feared their clashes with authority would only create a right-wing backlash. Hence, while Michael Foot supported establishing links with the VSC he also proposed going out to the universities and ‘putting the view that young people should come inside the Party’. 105

*Tribune* subsequently gave a platform to New Left figures, like John Saville, who had some influence over young radicals, in the hope of opening a dialogue. In January 1969 Foot and Heffer even participated in what was grandiloquently described as the ‘debate of the decade’ with Bob Rowthorne and Tariq Ali of the revolutionary bi-monthly *Black Dwarf*. During the course of an evening in which debate gave way to the acrimonious assertion of mutually contradictory positions, Foot tried to persuade his detractors that Labour was not an enemy of socialism. Echoing the analogies of his more mainstream parliamentary colleagues, Foot warned that this sort of outlook had led to Fascism in Germany. There was, he argued, merit in seeing Labour as ‘one of the arenas’ in which socialism could be advanced, as it remained possible the party would be finally transformed into an organisation fully committed to radical change. Citing the CND marches of the late 1950s, Foot claimed extra-parliamentary action had its place but needed to be directed towards achieving change within parliament and through Labour. 106 In its essentials, his argument was no different to the one advanced by the likes of Callaghan and it persuaded few (if any) revolutionaries, who saw CND as less a prototypical example of extra-parliamentary action and more a pathetic failure. 107 Ali, in particular, continued to view the Labour left as a well meaning but ineffectual force wholly incapable of transforming the party into a truly anti-capitalist body. 108

**Enfranchising the young**

During 1967 and 1968 the Cabinet minister Lord Longford surveyed those services national and local government provided for young people to see how they might be improved. Longford subsequently resigned, in protest at the post-devaluation delay to raising the school-leaving age from fifteen to sixteen. Longford’s idiosyncratic approach in any case meant his investigations were unlikely to generate a coherent set of proposals. A brief report was nonetheless produced after he left government, its main points being that youth services should be the responsibility of a senior Cabinet minister and a public inquiry be established with the aim of producing a ‘new charter for young people’. 109
Longford’s investigations were one of a number of initiatives undertaken by the government to ensure ministers at least appeared to take the interests of the young seriously. As one civil servant noted, although it was ‘amorphous and diffuse’, the report on the peer’s researches indicated that, at a time when the young population is ‘growing, is armed with much financial power and is very assertive’, more serious attention had to be given to their needs.\textsuperscript{110} To further signify that, Wilson made Judith Hart responsible for tackling ‘all problems of youth’ when he promoted her to Paymaster General in 1968.\textsuperscript{111} Hart tried to make sense of Longford’s work, although she found it ‘very disappointing’.\textsuperscript{112} She at least brought to her task a positive disposition, even if it bordered on the patronising – she declared at one point that all young people were ‘absolutely marvellous’. Hart optimistically believed generational conflict was largely a problem of ‘communication’ and thought her task was to open a ‘channel’ between the young and authority. As she considered that a good place to start in her endeavours would be to consult the eminently respectable members of the British Youth Council, it is no wonder Hart achieved little.\textsuperscript{113} Her senior officials approached the subject with great reserve: one, taking his cue from surveys that suggested nearly 80 per cent of students were ‘satisfied with life’, rejected the very existence of a ‘youth problem’. Hart, finally, was also confronted by the Education Department, which thought it had primary responsibility for youth-related matters. It is no wonder that when Peter Shore succeeded Hart as Paymaster General he prudently refused to accept the youth brief.\textsuperscript{114}

The most significant piece of legislation to affect young people introduced during 1964–70 had nothing to do with Hart: it was the reduction of the voting age from twenty-one to eighteen. This originated in Labour’s desire to remain relevant to the affluent society but was passed in the hope of domesticating the student revolt. Lowering the voting age was not unprecedented, as in the wake of the First World War anybody serving in uniform was allowed to exercise the franchise. A 1944 Speaker’s conference had, however, rejected permanently reducing the voting age to eighteen and, when two Communist MPs revived the proposal four years later, Chuter Ede, Attlee’s Home Secretary, demurred.

By the late 1950s Labour opinion was more open to reform. The 1959 Youth Commission supported lowering the voting age, on the basis that it was possible to be married with children and living in a home of one’s home by eighteen. Increasing the representation of young people, the Commission asserted, also meant democracy would benefit from their ‘vigour and impatience’ while – possibly more importantly – they should acquire a greater sense of responsibility.\textsuperscript{115} Labour’s 1959 manifesto nonetheless remained shy of the matter, and stated only that a Gaitskell government would consider lowering the voting age after
consulting with other parties. The party’s election defeat gave the issue more impetus; for example, the revisionist Douglas Jay thought Labour’s support for votes at eighteen would help identify it as ‘modern’. Even so, Labour leaders did not wish to take up the matter during the run-up to the 1964 election, so that when the YS national committee wanted a commitment placed in the manifesto, the NEC refused.\textsuperscript{116}

Once in power, Labour established the Latey Commission to consider reducing the legal age of majority, which also stood at twenty-one. In addition, ministers invoked a Speaker’s conference to look into various matters, including the voting age. Neither body had reported by the time Labour stood for re-election, but the party’s submission to the latter made its position absolutely clear. It echoed the Youth Commission’s conclusion that lowering the voting age to eighteen would be ‘just and logical’, something underlined in the 1966 manifesto.\textsuperscript{117}

Latey published his findings in the summer of 1967. He recommended that the age of majority should fall to eighteen, and this was a popular proposal; the Lord Chancellor consequently recommended that Cabinet accept his report and proceed to legislation.\textsuperscript{118} In discussion, Michael Stewart noted that, if ministers accepted Latey’s proposals, ‘it would be difficult to resist the conclusion that the voting age should be similarly reduced’, a view echoed by others round the Cabinet table. Not everybody agreed; some even questioned Latey’s own proposals, although in the end Cabinet accepted them.\textsuperscript{119} In any case, ministers could not alter the voting age until the Speaker’s conference had concluded its business and precedent suggested that, as it reflected opinion at Westminster, they had to accept its recommendations.\textsuperscript{120} When the conference voted decisively to reduce the voting age – but only to twenty – ministers were therefore faced with a dilemma.

Cabinet discussed the matter in May 1968 – an interesting month to debate votes for students.\textsuperscript{121} Ministers were divided, as there was no compelling evidence of a public demand for change: even many of those due to be enfranchised did not appear over-keen. A Gallup poll taken in 1967 showed that 30 per cent of eighteen- to twenty-year-olds opposed lowering the voting age, although 56 per cent did support it.\textsuperscript{122} It was the Cabinet’s youngest member, Richard Marsh, who took the strongest position against change, arguing ministers ‘must have gone absolutely mad’ if they thought ‘the working class wanted students to be enfranchised’. Marsh’s position was echoed by the Welsh and Scottish Secretaries, who worried that reducing the voting age would help the nationalists. Others suggested the revolutionary left would also benefit. Stewart nonetheless adhered to his earlier view that the young had literally ‘grown into’ the legal rights conceded by Latey and it was therefore only logical they should be granted their political equivalent. Indeed, said one minister, ‘to accept that they were capable of responsible
political behaviour should do much to correct the growing sense of social alienation which undoubtedly lay at the root of some of the more extreme manifestations of youthful insubordination which had recently attracted public attention. Some hoped reduction ‘would widen the field for political pressures to be put on the student population’. So intense was the disagreement that the Prime Minister was forced to defer a final decision to a later meeting. By then, clear evidence had been produced that the public supported votes for eighteen-year-olds. Some now claimed events in Paris meant it was even more important to ‘give young people an increased sense of responsibility’.

In finally agreeing to support reduction to eighteen the Cabinet took something of an electoral leap in the dark, one – as the likes of Marsh suggested – not universally supported in the party. The veteran MP George Strauss was certainly an opponent, as he feared the measure would ‘inject into elections an immature, unstable and irresponsible element’. Labour’s Assistant National Agent Reg Underhill thought the new voters constituted an unknown factor, given that large numbers would probably abstain at elections. The Chief Whip reported that only two-thirds of MPs favoured reduction: he had hoped the issue could have been made subject to a free vote but such was MPs’ antipathy that he proposed placing it under a ‘firm’ two-line whip. Accordingly, legislation was passed in time for eighteen-year-olds to vote in the 1970 election.

**Conclusion**

By the time Labour sought re-election in 1970 the student revolt had died down. Comparisons with Weimar Germany were no longer aired and Crossman could give vent to his relief that such an ‘infantile’ movement, one ‘imbecile in its anarchism and bogus leftism’, had apparently bitten the dust. This did not mean the ‘youth problem’ had disappeared. In 1970, Labour’s candidate for Kingston stated that the young still needed to be made to see that they were ‘enjoying a false freedom, namely the freedom of doing what they like’. He went on to state that:

> Instead of youth’s exploitation and perversion by entrepreneurs and the mass media what they require is firm but loving guidance. They need to be subjected to positive direction, to learn the value of self-discipline, to be shown the heights which a human spirit can reach, to be taught to appreciate the excellence of our heritage, the opportunities of service to the community.

With only 6,000 members, the LPYS was in no position to exert an influence. Some nonetheless hoped that, by extending the franchise,
Labour had, in the words of a broadsheet aimed at new voters, enabled them to take their ‘full place in politics’. As Les Huckfield, at twenty-seven years old the party’s youngest MP, wrote: “youngsters currently formed ‘the most articulate, idealistic and educated generation the world has ever had’, one hitherto ‘forced to express itself in the language of protest, on the streets’. By lowering the voting age, Huckfield concluded, Labour had ‘brought them into the legislative process’.128

It is questionable how many wanted to be incorporated into the political system. The record of the LPYS and earlier LOY suggested a small and declining minority wanted to adhere to Labour’s own model of participation. As outlined at the start of the chapter, the party’s failure to establish a viable youth wing has been blamed on its own lack of consideration for the interests of young people. The chapter went on to outline how members addressed the need to evoke a more positive response and the assumptions that underpinned their perceptions of the problem. The party broadly wanted to induce the young into what was considered appropriate political conduct. While some viewed the young’s concerns as worthy of serious consideration, Labour’s general approach implied they required its guidance before they could become political actors in their own right. The extent to which this outlook was embedded in ideology as much as generational experience should have come as little surprise to readers of earlier chapters.

Notes

The place of publication is London unless otherwise specified.

1 Some of the material contained in this chapter has appeared in ‘The Labour Party and the recruitment of the young, 1945–70’, in G. Orsina and G. Quaglariello (eds), La Formazione della classe politica in Europa (1945–1956) (Rome, 2000).
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10 London Metropolitan Archive (LMA), London News, April 1954.
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14 Fifty-Eighth Annual Conference of Labour, p. 92.
19 Tribune, 9 September 1966.
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33 Fifty-Eighth Annual Conference of Labour, pp. 90, 97–8.
37 Fifty-Second Annual Conference of Labour, p. 196. The speaker, Pat Wall, was a prominent Militant member in the 1980s.
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