

Ralph Miliband Programme: movement, protest and social change

The Labour Movement and Protest: a working-class politics for the 21st century

Lecture given by [Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey](#)

London School of Economics and Political Science

Tuesday 15 January 2013

Check against delivery

Let me start by expressing my gratitude to all of you for attending tonight.

I am humbled to have been asked to contribute to this prestigious lecture series.

For me personally, the three strands of this lecture: working class politics; the labour movement; and protest; are subjects that have been clear defining features of my life – from my upbringing in Liverpool and throughout my adult social and working life.

Indeed for people of my generation working class politics was instilled as a birth right.

In the same way that birth determines your sex, it determines your class, often your career, your financial prospects as well as a great many other things.

Therefore politics, protest and the labour movement were the only vehicles by which you could affect change.

Let me congratulate the LSE for their role in remembering Ralph Miliband's work.

Ralph Miliband may not have been brought up in the movement in Britain, but he did all his political work here, addressing the history and controversies of British labour, so I think it is fair enough for us to claim him – the more so since his two sons have risen to such eminence in the Labour Party today.

Indeed, it is sometimes said that there is a common thread linking the generations of Milibands – the father spent his life trying to convince our movement that there was no possibility of a parliamentary road to socialism, while his sons have been loyally putting theory into practice, and proving Ralph right! So let me start on my subject, working-class politics in the contemporary world, with a quote from Ralph Miliband:

“All concepts of politics, of whatever kind, are about conflict—how to contain it, or abolish it.”

That is how I understand politics based on my own experiences, and on my own reading of our history. I say that not to celebrate conflict – still less violence – but merely to state a fact.

Politics is about struggle, about the clash of interests and, for me, ultimately about how to create a society and a world where there really are common interests.

So let's take a contemporary example straight away – “One Nation”. I applaud Ed Miliband for the way he has raised this idea – or perhaps re-raised it – and for the content he is trying to give it.

But let's not pretend that we are “one nation”, or that we will become one without the conflict that Ralph Miliband placed at the heart of politics.

Remember Disraeli talked of “one nation” to reconcile the working-class to Empire, and more recently Tony Blair claimed that New Labour was “the political wing of the British people”, when it too often turned out to be the mouthpiece of the City of London and even the Pentagon.

So if we are on a march towards “one nation” and ultimately “one world”, it is a road that leads through struggle and conflict.

We cannot create common interests across a society that is now more unequal than for generations simply by wishing for it.

So how do we get to “one nation” and what part does working-class politics play?

One thing that is certain, as the Swedish sociologist [Goran Therborn](#) has written:

“While there are a number of plausible labels that might be attached to the 20th century, in terms of social history it was clearly the age of the working class”.

For me, the labour movement has been the backbone to political change and progress for generations; if the 20th century was the century of the working class, it was so because of organised labour and the trade union movement.

The trade union movement is the child of conflict – the conflict between wage workers and employers over pay, hours, employment conditions, safety in the workplace – in short, over who should benefit in what proportion from the wealth generated by industrial capitalism.

And that is why the ruling class was so keen to keep trade unions in legal shackles for so long.

Britain was the first country of trade unionism – a point I was pleased to see reflected in Danny Boyle's inspirational opening ceremony at the Olympics.

In the History of Trade Unionism written in 1894 by the founders of Fabianism (Sidney and Beatrice Webb) trade unions were described as “a continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their employment”.

And trade unions were initially opposed to 'state intervention' or 'interference' in their relationship with employers.

It was only when the entire existence of trade unions was challenged at the turn of the last century, with adverse decisions in the Courts, particularly Taff Vale, that unions found themselves fighting for their survival on the national political stage.

Rising out of these turbulent times was a new agenda. Trade unions had to extend their reach into parliament and government.

The labour movement needed a political voice to fight for the interests of organised labour on the national political stage.

The labour movement had to obtain influence on the machinery of government.

The British trade union movement was unique in establishing its only socialist political party.

This was a step towards politics in its thinking, but still a long way short of socialism, as Ralph Miliband would certainly point out if he were with us today.

The limited objective was to protect the rights of organised labour and trade union action through legislation. Moving beyond this, to using legislation to win universal rights for working people and go on to take control of the means of production, distribution and exchange, was not a step taken until after capitalism had passed through the great economic crisis of 1910-11 and the far far greater disaster of the First World War.

This is a reminder that socialism is placed on the agenda not so much by the admirable work of socialist propaganda groups, but instead by people's actual experiences of capitalist society.

But working-class politics, defined as broadly as it should be, has been about more than "politics" as conventionally understood (what goes on in Westminster and at election time). It has been rooted in a sense of community too.

Prior to the creation of welfare it was the labour movement that established the first elements of social provision. No-one thought to call it the "Big Society" in those days.

Whole communities, often only established around the sinking of a mine or the building of a mill – or a dock – became microcosms of what would become our nation's welfare state.

Before any national Government had the foresight to create a National Health Service or social insurance systems, there was a proud tradition of self-reliance and widespread community provision.

In mining communities there was socialised medicine and health care; homes were built for retired miners or their widows.

Funeral arrangements were made and paid for by trade union committees.

And before universal education was secured, trade unions were the bodies that wanted to educate working class communities – the Workers Education Association was established in 1903 and provided working men and women with the opportunity to get an education.

The slogan 'Educate – Agitate – Organise' encapsulated how workers could improve their lives.

If we measure the success of the labour movement as the extent to which it re-shaped the behaviour and responsibilities of government, the 20th Century saw victories on an unimaginable scale, albeit victories achieved at the price of great suffering and almost exclusively through conflict.

It is a remarkable feat that – at the height of industrial power, at a time when wealth was accumulated at the top and poverty imposed for working people who lived 'hand to mouth' – the labour movement (the arm of the working classes) was able to secure such radical change and take control of high office, influencing government through the Labour Party.

The working classes, against all odds, transformed society.

If you were to have a Monty Python moment and say "what has the trade union movement ever done for us" some would of course talk about better pay and improved conditions at work.

I would go much further, and say that the political activity of the working class has secured or guaranteed almost everything we value today:

Let me list some:

Democracy – there has never been any strong democracy based on universal suffrage without a powerful working-class movement. And it was the working-class which was the backbone of the fight to defeat fascism when much of the European elite was flirting with Hitler, Franco and Mussolini.

Peace – the working-class has always led the opposition to war time and again.

Equality – inside and outside the workplace, it is working-class politics which has established the right of men and women of all races and backgrounds to be treated equally.

Welfare – education, the NHS and insurance against hardship in old age or unemployment are products of working-class agitation and struggle.

The idea that capitalism or the ruling elite would have introduced democracy or social equality or welfare on their own is entirely fanciful.

Such civilisation as we have today we owe to generations of working-class activists who organised collectively to benefit their own class and thereby society as a whole.

And if much of this is under pressure today, it is a consequence of the deliberate drive to destroy the trade union movement and working-class politics which the elite has embarked on over the last generation or so.

Eric Hobsbawm makes the great descriptive point that if we had a long 19th century, from the French Revolution to the Russian Revolution, then we had a short 20th century, from the First World War to the fall of the Soviet Union.

For the working class in the west, the century was even shorter than Hobsbawm's insightful analysis describes.

For everything that was achieved in the 20th Century, there was to be a radical backlash from the mid-1970s onwards.

Let's recall the situation in the 1970s, that much-reviled decade: Trade union membership was at an all-time high; public ownership of major industries and services secured and there was full employment.

It certainly wasn't perfect, but it did offer working-class people something we had never had before – security and growing horizons.

In the words of my fellow trade union leader and Liverpudlian Billy Hayes – “the 1960s were great. Everyone in Liverpool was living in a better house at the end of the 1960s than at the beginning, and we had the Beatles on top.”

That is what the elite couldn't abide – working-class people who did not know their place, who interfered with management's sacred “right to manage” who assumed the right to the same quality of life at work and in their communities that middle class people had long enjoyed.

The neo-liberal offensive which began in the mid-1970s was not mainly about economics. In fact, growth rates in Britain got worse as a result of its imposition.

It was about restoring what our rulers regarded as the proper social hierarchy, including getting the working-class out of politics.

The neo-liberal attack has lasted until today and despite the great crash of 2008 it is still un-dead, as they say of vampires, as the policies and priorities of Cameron and Osborne prove.

Its main front was, and has always been, attacking trade union power, destroying the main organisations through which the working-class has found social expression.

If Thatcher held that private companies should operate without any interference from government; she demonstrated dramatically the extent to which government could obstruct the freedom of workers to organise.

The rhetoric of de-regulation was reversed when it came to trade unions.

Decades on, New Labour did little or nothing to change this situation, and today of course some Tories are wanting to go still further with fresh laws.

It is not just trade unions as collective bodies that have paid a price for this offensive. Society has suffered.

The neo-liberal “Washington Consensus” on which every government since Thatcher has based its policies, requiring trade unions to be shackled, can now clearly be seen to have failed the majority in this country.

The downward trend in support for collective bargaining agreements nationally and across sectors has been a key factor in increasing inequality, now a matter of broad concern. Between 1975 and today, the share of our national income used to pay the wages of ordinary people fell from 65% to 53%, an astonishing figure.

Other, associated indicators of growing inequality in the Anglo-American world have of course been set out in great detail by Wilkinson and Pickett in their revealing book, the ‘Spirit Level’.

Public support for privatisation has quickly diminished, and individual shareholding, once trumpeted as the great alternative to trade unionism, is now scarcely greater than it was before the whole exercise started.

Instead of creating an army of wealth-creators across communities, it established enormous private corporations that amassed power and money in rapid time

- Instead of creating mass individual share ownership, it handed power to pension funds and insurance companies, all effectively controlled by the City.
- Instead of creating competition to improve services, it created monopolies which have abused their power –most notably in the energy and rail sectors.

WORKING CLASS POLITICS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

So much for the past.

When we look to the future what type of politics can we imagine?

First of all, as I have outlined, we need working-class politics.

Democracy itself dies when it becomes the preserve of a small elite, as we are seeing today.

Working class life and politics were relatively easy to comprehend and define when I was growing up.

The demarcation lines between them and us; the exploiter and the exploited, was clear for all to see.

I grew up in vibrant and politicised communities – life was centred on the Liverpool docks. Around work were formed the circles of working-class life – trade unionism, community, the Labour Party.

Today, we cannot simply start from there. We cannot build a future working-class politics on a basis which has long eroded.

Perhaps the more significant change is the decline in secure and stable employment. This more than anything else makes today's working class different from that I grew up amongst.

In many communities where there was a large industrial working class population that may have existed for a century or more, today there may exist a new population. Descended from the old – but depressed, economically inactive and demonized by the media and the better-off.

Take mining communities such as Easington in the North East or Merthyr Tydfil in South Wales: two of the most economically inactive and poorest communities in the UK. These were once the capitals of British industry in mining, powering the country for over 100 years and through two world wars.

Now these are the communities that are economically barren – smashed by the neo-liberal experiment that sent 'old' industries elsewhere in the world and offered only a bloated financial sector and a housing bubble as replacements.

Not all communities have suffered as much. But none are unchanged.

People often have to move to find work and that link between work and communities was broken.

Communities that were once proud, hard-working and thriving became hit by the surges of unemployment – depression, drug abuse and alcoholism.

Research from IPPR tells us that the long-term 'out of work' are more often concentrated in the same disadvantaged communities that have weak local economies with little chance of finding work.

A working class without any prospect of work.

Whilst our communities have changed and the economic model has been transformed, the demarcation lines between them and us remain: the concept of the exploiter and the exploited still exists.

And these people share another key attribute in common with their working class predecessors: both were demonized by press and politicians.

Let me read an extract from George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 1937:

"In his early boyhood George Orwell thought that 'to nearly all children of families like mine, 'common' people seemed almost sub-human. They had coarse faces, hideous accents, and gross manners, they hated everyone who was not like themselves, and if they got half a chance they would insult you in brutal ways. That was our view of them, and though it was false it was understandable. For one must remember that before the war there was much more overt class-hatred in England than there is now."

Today's media-hyped demonization of the unemployed and those on benefits bears a stark resemblance.

'Wayne and Waynetta Slob', 'Vicky Pollard' and television series like Shameless are the fictional portrayals of the feckless, criminalized and ignorant 'new-working class'.

For the Daily Mail if you're not middle class and if you're not in work, they have the right to demonize you and attack you and your communities.

I have a different view. Capitalism is the only system which has normalised unemployment.

It is the responsibility of any system to offer work to people, and if it fails in this basic obligation, don't blame the victims.

In the last two weeks 11,000 jobs have been lost – HMV, Jessops, Honda to name a few.

Today's hard working poor; tomorrow's benefit scroungers – if you listen to the right wing press.

So how do we reorganise and rebuild in today's environment, with the working class as it is, not as it was.

If we consider that the condition of the working class improved during the 20th Century; it did so because the working class – through the trade union and labour movement – learned and fought together as a class.

We must, today, focus on the starting point of this progress.

Marx's distinction between a "class in itself", which capitalism creates and recreates spontaneously, and a "class for itself" which expresses its own interests in the public arena through its organisations and culture, is a valid one.

Rebuilding a "class for itself" presents challenges, but they are not entirely new ones.

At the turn of the 20th century the trade unions had to undertake the job of recruiting members from the working men and women of new industry, of building "general unions" and establishing a Labour Party in parliament and the country. It was a long struggle.

Today, we must first confront the crisis of confidence born of a generation of defeats and increasing marginalisation.

We have to say that we speak for the working class, that the working class speaks for a better world for all, and we have to organise and fight on that basis – not as a special interest or as a lobbying group, but as the motivators of the only real alternative to the crisis of capitalism and the multiple failures of the present ruling elite.

As unions, our first job is to organise workers and secure a better deal for them at work.

Simple objectives – but again, fraught with conflict when you face so many exploitative and anti-union companies.

But working-class politics must go further. My union Unite is leading the way with an ambitious new programme to recruit, organise and educate across the whole of our communities:

The unemployed, the disabled, carers, the elderly, the voluntary and charity sector – it is time for these people to be organised and to be given a voice. Who better to do this than the trade union movement?

Unions cannot continue to watch on idly as successive governments leave so many on the scrapheap – a scrapheap which will grow ever larger as the so-called “welfare reforms” kick in.

We need to reconnect unions with the wider community, and rebuild a bond which has been frayed as a result of the changing nature of work – or its complete absence.

Our aim is to get communities to act together. This sits comfortably within our traditions.

Trade unions have always provided social spaces (the working man’s clubs is one example) where communities got together over a drink and organised social and political events.

It is these roots we must return to, in a modernised form.

Too many people in our country are being pushed to the margins of society.

They deserve to be heard; they too deserve the support to organise collectively.

It is with this in mind that Unite has founded its community membership scheme.

Those not in work aged 16 to 116 can join our family for 50 pence a week.

That is why we now have community branches springing up across the country, and community organisers working in every part of the country.

We offer training to individuals who want to become community activists.

Our activists go into their communities and build groups, empowering people to do something for themselves.

In Leeds community groups are campaigning against workfare and organising regular demonstrations against employers like Argos who are using this modern day slavery.

In London they have organised ‘benefit buddying’ – linking the unemployed with people in work.

In Sheffield they have set up a phone tree to protect their members in case of eviction.

In Glasgow our community members are working with our industrial members to save a much loved community café.

We have seen Community Members demonstrating their support for our industrial members in their disputes by supporting pickets and protests.

And Unite is working to meet the needs of our members through the creation of a new credit union.

High-street and internet loan companies say they provide a much needed service which would otherwise be out of reach.

My union says they have no place in our society profiting off the misery of people on poverty pay.

A trade union cannot stand idly by as its members are preyed upon by capitalist vultures.

So our members will be able to obtain credit without having to resort to the ruinous interest rates of the pay-day loan companies.

The people today who say there is nothing left to fight for – that the trade union and labour movement is now irrelevant – are the ideological grandchildren and great-grandchildren of those that fought every progressive gain achieved for working people in the last century.

This is the reason the right wing seek to divide the working poor from the out-of-work poor; the public sector worker from the private sector worker; those in the north from those in the south.

Their tactics have not changed. And neither must ours.

The 21st Century is not ringing out the death knell of the labour movement; it is sending out a call to arms. The apparently endless economic crisis which began in 2008 is seeing to that.

In 1992 Margaret Thatcher claimed, after the election of another Conservative Government, 'It is a great night. It is the end of Socialism.'

A few years later Tony Blair declared 'that the Class war is over' . No doubt from the boardroom of JP Morgan or wherever he is now, it may look that way.

John Prescott claimed "We're all middle class now!"

Of course, the entire evolutionary human history of socialism and class was not eradicated by New Labour.

Would anyone – two and a half years into this Bullingdon Club Coalition – have the pomposity to claim that class has ceased to be an issue in politics today?

Of course this is not political reality; it is a tactic; it is political posturing.

It is used as false evidence that we have nothing left to fight for. It is part of the rhetoric fed to us that says we should not challenge the decisions taken by our elites.

We are taught to believe that democracy is the cornerstone of a modern civilised society; but our Lords and Masters want to define democracy, limiting us to an 'X' on a Ballot Paper every 5 years.

This is not my definition of democracy.

They tell us strike action, civil disobedience, direct action and protest are all somehow unpatriotic.

Our history tells us they are not.

That is because our rulers are deeply afraid of Ralph Miliband's assertion that politics is about conflict.

They believe that, for example, those without hope, without jobs, now looking at cuts in their meagre welfare, that families being shunted out of London because of housing benefit changes should simply put up with it.

Wait for the next general election – that's if they are registered to vote.

Well I note that some council leaders from our major cities have warned that people might respond with anger and civil disorder.

I would not be surprised. The one thing worse than suffering is suffering alone and in silence.

We have seen remarkable local protests in recent years: from 20,000 defending a hospital in Eastbourne; 15,000 on the streets in Lewisham to 350 people protesting against a library closure.

Look at the 2011 riots in England they exposed the growing 'disconnect' in a broken society.

But it was not without reason.

Young people spoke of their frustration at not being able to find employment.

They were excluded from society in the first instance, so what was there to lose?

Those events showed that at a certain level of inequality, the whole concept of "society" starts to be drained of meaning.

The labour movement, protest and working-class politics will continue far beyond the 21st century.

Protest is alive and well.

Protest against inequality is already alive and well – look at the work done by UKuncut to challenge outrageous tax avoidance by Vodafone and other giant corporations.

Their message is – if you want to trade in Britain and benefit from our infrastructure and skilled workforce, then pay your taxes.

Last year protests focused on Starbucks.

Initially, of course, protestors faced hostility, vilification and attacks by the media.

But the truth is these tactics work.

When the right-wing media realised that these protestors were on to something, their attention then focused on Starbucks and what followed has been a remarkable public boycott of the company.

It takes courage to risk unpopularity and vilification. But the truth does prevail.

The labour movement's message must be one of 'hope'.

It must talk more about its victories and the positive future that it aspires to.

Britain is broken. But it is the system that is broken, not the people.

Trade unions and the labour movement must continue to give hope for a better way of doing things.

They must work to 'educate – agitate – organise'.

I am proud to associate Unite with these initiatives, and to hope to form a longer-lasting alliance between organised labour and radical protest, even if it comes from outside our traditional movement.

And, as I have made clear before in relation to the trade union laws, while I do not ever advocate violence, nor do I preach worship of the law at all costs.

So my message to capitalism – if you can send a message to a system – is this: Mend your ways or risk mounting social breakdown and disorder.

Whatever the upshot of electoral politics, working-class politics must grow and develop, based on the socialist education Ralph Miliband called for.

There will be those here tonight waiting to hear my message to the Labour Party.

Well I won't disappoint. Here it is:

People need a political voice now. As the working-class reasserts itself, Labour is the natural, historic, vehicle for their voice. Not to the exclusion of others in society wanting a better future.

Every Labour victory has been based on an alliance. And that is the alliance I see delivering a victory for Labour in 2015.

But let me be clear – if in the future there is any return to the discredited recipes of Blairism the Labour Party will be over for me and I believe millions more besides.

Put simply, workers need a voice, and they should not be taken for granted.

Whatever the upshot of electoral politics, working-class politics must grow and develop, based on the socialist education Ralph Miliband called for.

In the midst of an unending economic crisis, with what Ralph would have called a discredited ruling class at the helm, it is past time for the working class to step forward with its own vision and alternative.

Our values are eternal.

We need to be courageous like those that have gone before us.

To seek a brave new world.