

Clause IV

Sidney Webb

This is the first of three articles picking up on the editorial discussion of common ownership and the Labour Party. It was originally written for The Observer, to explain the thinking behind Sidney Webb's proposals for a new constitution for the Labour Party. It was published in 1917. The constitution was adopted the following year.

The proposal to reorganise the Labour Party, formulated by its National Executive, and circulated to its constituent societies for their consideration, may well prove an event of far-reaching political importance. Instead of a sectional and somewhat narrow group, what is aimed at is now a national party, open to anyone of the 16,000,000 electors agreeing with the party programme.

More important, however, than any of these changes in the constitution is the change of spirit that has inspired them. The Labour Party, which has never been formally restricted to manual-working wage-earners, is now to be publicly thrown open to all workers 'by hand or by brain'.

Its declared object is to be, not merely the improvement of the conditions of the wage-earner, but 'to secure for the producers, by hand or by brain, the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service'.*

The only persons to be excluded (and that, of course, only by inference) are the unoccupied and unproductive recipients of rents and dividends – the so-called 'idle rich' – whom it is interesting to find *The Times* editorially declaring to be of no use to the community.

The Labour Party of the future, in short, is to be a party of the producers, whether

* 'Historical Note: The 'distribution and exchange' were added to Clause IV of the Labour Party constitution in 1929. They were moved as amendments to the Constitution by the Bristol Labour Party and went through without any debate.

manual workers or brain workers, associated against the private owners of land and capital as such. Its policy of 'common ownership' brings it, as a similar evolution brought John Stuart Mill – to use his own words in the *Autobiography* – 'decidedly under the general designation of Socialist'. But it is a Socialism which is no more specific than a definite repudiation of the individualism that characterised all the political parties of the past generation and that still dominates the House of Commons.

This declaration of the Labour Party leaves it open to choose from time to time whatever forms of common ownership from the co-operative store to the nationalised railway, and whatever forms of popular administration and control of industry, from national guilds to ministries of employment and municipal management, may, in particular cases, commend themselves.

What the Labour Party at present means by its Socialism is revealed in the remarkable pamphlet which it has published on its 'After the War Programme', setting forth in a dozen detailed resolutions passed at the Manchester Party Conference exactly what it wishes done with the railways, the canals, the coal mines, the banking system, the demobilisation of the army and munition workers, the necessary rehousing of the people, the measures to be taken for preventing the occurrence of unemployment, the improvement of agriculture, the taxation to be imposed to pay for the war, the reform of our educational system, and what not.

Opinions will naturally differ as to some of these sweeping proposals, but no one of any education can safely denounce them as unpractical or despise them as ill-informed.

It is, indeed, one of the claims of the Labour Party that science is on their side; that it is their proposals, not those of the Liberals or those of the Unionists, that nowadays receive the general support of the 'orthodox' economists; and that, as a matter of fact, it is essentially their proposals to which every Minister of State, when he is brought up against a difficult problem of administration, has actually to turn – and then to lose his nerve, emasculate what would have got over his difficulties, and produce an abortion which has the advantages neither of individualism nor of collectivism!

But the programme of the Labour Party is, and will probably remain, less important (except for educating the political leaders of other parties) than the spirit underlying the programme, that spirit which gives any party its soul.

The Labour Party stands essentially for revolt against the inequality of circumstance that degrades and brutalises and disgraces our civilisation. It abhors and repudiates the unscientific and immoral doctrine that the competitive struggle for the means of life is, in human society, either inevitable or requisite for the survival of the fittest; it declares, indeed, in

full accord with science, that competition produces degradation and death, whilst it is conscious and deliberate co-operation which is productive of life and progress.

It is unreservedly democratic in its conviction – here also fortified by political science – that only by the widest possible participation in power and the most generally spread consciousness of consent can any civilised community attain either its fullest life or its utmost efficiency. But it recognises that no mere rightness of aspiration or morality or purpose can in themselves accomplish their ends; and that for the achievement of results, knowledge and the application of the scientific method is required, notably in the science of society, for the further study and endowment of which it presses.

And finally the Labour Party has faith in internationalism (as distinguished from the characteristically liberal cosmopolitanism). It repudiates all ‘Imperialism’ or desire for domination over other races. It pleads for the right of each people to live its own life, and make its own specific contribution to the world in its own way, recognising, indeed, no one ‘superior race’ but ‘reciprocal superiorities’ among all races.

It is not without significance that the National Executive of the Labour Party has included, as a fundamental object of the Party, the establishment of a Federation or League of Nations for such international legislation as may prove possible. No other political party has yet nailed this flag to its mast.

The Labour Party is, without doubt, today the party of inspiration and promise. Tomorrow it may well prove to be the party of the future, destined, perhaps, to play as large a part in the political history of the twentieth century as the Liberal Party did in that of the nineteenth.

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There follows the complete text of Clause IV of the Constitution of the Labour Party. Item 7 was added at the suggestion of Tony Benn, during the time of the Gaitskell leadership of the late 1950s. The text follows Webb’s 1917-18 draft, as changed in 1929.

1. Clause IV

The objects of the Labour Party are set out in Clause IV of the party’s constitution. It reads as follows:

National

1. To organise and maintain in parliament and in the country a political Labour Party.
2. To co-operate with the General Council of the Trades Union Congress,

or other kindred organisations, in joint political or other action in harmony with the party constitution and standing orders.

3. To give effect as far as maybe practicable to the principles from time to time approved by the party conference.
4. To secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service.
5. Generally to promote the political, social and economic emancipation of the people, and more particularly of those who depend directly upon their own exertions by hand or by brain for the means of life.

Inter-Commonwealth

6. To co-operate with the labour and socialist organisations in the Commonwealth overseas with a view to promoting the purposes of the party, and to take common action for the promotion of a higher standard of social and economic life for the working population of the respective countries.

International

7. To co-operate with the labour and socialist organisations in other countries and to support the United Nations Organisation and its various agencies and other international organisations for the promotion of peace, the adjustment and settlement of international disputes by conciliation or judicial arbitration, the establishment and defence of human rights, and the improvement of the social and economic standards and conditions of work of the people of the world.

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