

WHY SOCIALISM?

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"There is no essential conflict between capitalism and the interest of the majority"



IT HAS LONG BEEN a theory that as members of the working class become more affluent their traditional support for the Labour Party weakens; that they begin to equate themselves with the haves rather than with the have-nots, and start voting Liberal or Conservative. The research recorded in this monograph*—one of a series on the attitudes of the affluent worker—does not bear out this theory, but shows that the two strongest influences are middle-class associations and trade union membership. Other factors, such as income and house ownership seem to be much less important.

The workers interviewed were employees of three firms in the prosperous and expanding town of Luton. They were asked about their political allegiance and the reasons for it, and a number of other questions, including what they thought of the close relationship between the Labour Party and the trade unions. The replies were then analysed extensively by reference to the personal characteristics of those in the sample.

The major conclusion was that those manual workers whose own family background was middle class, who had themselves previously held white-collar jobs, or whose wives or fathers-in-law were of middle-class origin or had white collar jobs, were much less likely to vote Labour than their colleagues who had no such associations. In addition, it was found that membership, particularly long-standing membership, of a trade union was

connected with solid Labour voting, both among those who had middle-class associations and those who had not. Surprisingly, however, almost a quarter of the trade unionists who voted Labour had contracted out of the political levy, and an even higher proportion—getting on for half—thought that the trade union movement should be kept separate from the Labour Party.

The Labour Party may draw some comfort from these observations in that it need not face the prospect of annihilation as success is achieved in raising living standards; increasing prosperity alone will not make members of the working class change their customary vote. But the discovery that family or job associations with the middle-class tends to bring about this defection can scarcely be good news for Labour politicians of the old school. It is likely that, particularly in what the authors call the new working class (people not confined to relatively isolated working communities), contact with the middle class is increasing. More enlightened policies by management, the breakdown of class consciousness among the younger generations, and especially the policy of comprehensive education, must blur class divisions and strongly increase the exposure of members of the working class to middle-class attitudes. This may not lead to the extinction of the Labour Party, but it will

It is one of the significant accidents of British politics that the party of the working class has also been the party of socialism. There is no reason why it should be. A political party formed to fight the exploitation of the working class might have, and more logically should have, sought the immediate cause of that exploitation, and would have found it in the land enclosures that created the working class and without which the "wickedness" of capitalist employers need never have been tolerated. Not only is there no essential conflict between capitalism and the interest of the majority of the population, but, provided always that rights to land are restored, capitalism would be far more beneficial to the ordinary man than ever socialism will be. Capitalism is superior not only in efficiency of production, but also in giving freedom of opportunity and choice to individuals.

It will be a sign of maturity in British politics when the dividing lines of class cease to matter and political parties are supported for intellectual reasons. No party will then be able to rely on a massive automatic vote, and this will certainly improve the quality of political debate.



mean that, if Labour survives as one party, it will be supported for its policies and not out of vague ideas of class loyalty. The independence of the trade unions from the party would be a parallel development.

**The Affluent Worker: Political Attitudes and Behaviour* by John M. Goldthorpe, David Lockwood, Frank Bechhofer and Jennifer Platt. Studies in Sociology 2. Cambridge University Press.