

A letter on the political career of British Labour “left” Michael Foot

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I would like to add some further points to those already made in the article on the death of the British Labour Party reformist leader Michael Foot. (See: “Former British Labour Party leader Michael Foot dies”)

The British media has given it almost as much attention as it normally reserves for royalty, heads of state and other “national treasures.” I’m afraid this letter is rather long, but Foot played a significant role in the British labour movement for more than 70 years until his death last week.

Foot’s family background had been in English bourgeois politics, and his family boasts strong establishment connections. As well as his father, the solicitor Liberal MP, one of his brothers became a peer and the other was knighted, although Foot himself declined official honours. At university in the 1930s, he became president of the Oxford Union and joined the Labour Party in the aftermath of the fall of the coalition National Government.

A deepening capitalist economic crisis and intensified imperialist rivalry were exposing the full depth of British imperialism’s historical decline. It was being squeezed in its traditional colonial trade markets by US imperialism and within Europe itself by Germany, where the ruling class had turned to fascism in a desperate attempt to revitalise its economy by brutally suppressing its own working class and those in the east European countries.

After its reactionary part in the National Government, the reformist Labour Party needed the cover of the left centrist and Stalinist groups. Foot became a journalist at the *Tribune* newspaper, which had been specifically set up as a Unity Campaign vehicle to organise the anti-fascist United Front between the Labour Party and those parties to its left—the Socialist League, the Independent Labour Party, and the Communist Party.

But the CP pulled the rug from underneath this manoeuvre by changing its policy and calling instead for a broader alliance that included the main bourgeois political parties. This was at the behest of the Kremlin, which sought to defend its bureaucratic national interests through an orientation to the Western parties of “democratic imperialism.” In 1939, these same reactionary motives of bureaucratic self-preservation drove a terrified Kremlin even further to the right and the signing of the Hitler-Stalin Pact.

In 1940, after the onset of war, Foot resigned from the *Tribune* and, on the recommendation of Aneurin Bevan, joined the staff of the *Evening Standard*. This was one of a number of newspapers owned by the press magnate Lord Beaverbrook, the former Max Aitkin. Born a Canadian, Beaverbrook, a demagogic empire loyalist, had come to England in 1910 and used his newspapers to campaign for “imperialist preference”—an attempt to protect British imperialism’s trade interests within the countries of the British Commonwealth.

It was from this right-wing nationalist standpoint that Beaverbrook

and a section of the British bourgeoisie opposed Neville Chamberlain’s appeasement towards Hitler. This Tory grandee was to have a powerful influence on the young Foot.

Foot had abandoned his former unilateral disarmament stance. This playing of fast and loose with disarmament was something that was to occur again and again throughout his long political career. Although he was continuously portrayed in the capitalist press as a peace-lover, he was always prepared to relinquish this pose whenever he felt British imperialism’s national interests were threatened.

Guilty Men, which attacked appeasement and was co-written by Foot and two other Beaverbrook journalists, represented a classic piece of Beaverbrook propaganda. After the fall of Chamberlain and the establishment of Churchill’s war-time coalition, the *Evening Standard*’s proprietor was handed several high-profile ministerial posts. Beaverbrook made Foot editor of the *Evening Standard* in 1942, and it was claimed by his later biographers that the Fleet Street press baron “was Foot’s mentor,” who looked upon him as “a second son.”

The end of the war in 1945 signalled the end of the coalition. Churchill was swept from power by the working class in an election landslide for a Labour government. Foot left the *Evening Standard* to join the *Daily Herald*, a newspaper jointly owned by the TUC and Oldham’s that propagandised the reformist policies of the Labour Party.

Workers were moving to the left and demanding a radical programme of social reforms, and the ruling class knew it faced a working class strengthened by its role in the defeat of fascism and trained in the use of arms. To contain this movement, the Labour government developed a corporatist strategy that leaned heavily on its left apologists, trade union bureaucrats and Stalinists.

Although making certain social reforms, most notably the National Health Service, Attlee’s Labour government also implemented the post-war austerity measures being demanded by the bourgeois US financial backers. A critical part was played by the trade union bureaucrats who were brought onto the boards of the newly nationalised strategic industries to act as firefighters and quell any worker unrest. Mainly as a result of disillusionment among layers of the middle class towards Labour’s austerity policies, a Churchill-led Tory government was elected in 1951.

The *Daily Herald* acted as a crucial mouthpiece for the Labour bureaucracy by encouraging workers to believe that its capitalist corporatist strategy represented a form of socialism. In 1947, Foot had brought out the pamphlet *Keep Left*, which he co-wrote with two other Labourites, Richard Crossman and Ian Mikardo. It claimed to outline an independent “third way” for Europe between US imperialism and the Soviet Union.

In reality, it was far from independent. Instead, it reflected the position of a section within British ruling class circles that feared the

rearming of post-war Germany and was smarting from the price being extracted by the US for its financial underpinning of a ruined British state. This group sought to defend British imperialism's national interests and exert greater influence by balancing between the two major power blocks.

The onset of the Cold War undermined this strategy. In 1948, Foot returned to the *Tribune* as editor until 1952, and again from 1955 to 1960, a time when it continued its shift to the right.

An upsurge of the colonial masses led British imperialism into the Suez debacle of 1956. This strengthened the hand of US imperialism in what had until then been an area dominated by the British and French. Once again, the historical decline of British imperialism was laid bare. Within Britain itself, a genuine movement developed among layers of workers, the middle class and youth opposed to the increased threat of nuclear war and the policies of the main political parties.

When the Labour leader Nye Bevan reacted to these events by ditching his own unilateralist position in 1957, Foot publicly distanced himself from his great friend and fellow reformist. A year later, he co-founded the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) with Canon John Collins of St. Paul's Cathedral. The CND channelled a potential mass movement that threatened British imperialism's pro-NATO policy down the safe path of middle class protest politics and the annual Easter CND Aldermaston marches.

Despite the protest politics of its leaders, the CND movement initially had powerful support among sections of working class youth, a reflection of an important political development beginning to take place among this social layer. The most class conscious of these were won to Trotskyism through the intervention of the Socialist Labour League (SLL).

The SLL had been strengthened through a struggle led by James P. Cannon of the American Socialist Workers Party (SWP) within the Fourth International to defend the historical principles of the movement founded by Leon Trotsky against Pabloite revisionism. This enabled the SLL, which carried out an entrust tactic inside the Labour Party, to win the leadership of the editorial board of Labour's youth paper, *Keep Left*, in 1960.

The Labour leadership expelled the SLL supporters and shut down *Keep Left*, re-opening it after a year after installing Peter Taffe as its editor. Taffe, later to become leader of the Militant Tendency, pursued a centrist line. He claimed the reformist Labour Party could be forced into carrying out revolutionary policies under the pressure of the spontaneous leftward movement of the working class. In advancing this position, Taffe played his part in helping to re-sow illusions in Labour reformism by encouraging support for left-talkers like Foot.

Foot's rather old-fashioned style of dress and unkempt hair gave him the appearance of an eccentric history professor—a persona he consciously utilised to belie a real talent for backstage political manoeuvring. His editorship of the various newspapers had given him a wide circle of contacts, which he used to forge numerous temporary tactical alliances—with Labour leaders and union bureaucrats, churchmen and even extreme right-wing figures like Enoch Powell. Foot's conference platform style bordered on demagoguery, and although he felt very much at home and full of convivial *bon homie* among union bosses, he appeared awkward and forced in the presence of workers.

The three Wilson governments came under increasing militant pressure from the working class, and this continued to grow throughout the 1960s and 1970s, as did the political influence of the SLL and its newspaper, the *Workers Press*. Foot was drawn into a

more central governmental role. His left credentials were needed to help the Labour and union bureaucrats impose wage restraint, his experience to head off any further leftward political development and conceal the enormous intensification of state attacks against the workers' movement and democratic rights.

These included the setting up of and attacks carried out by the Special Patrol Group (SPG), the frame-up of innocent workers convicted of the Birmingham bombing, and the raid on the Workers Revolutionary Party's education centre in Derbyshire, which constituted the biggest post-war police raid on a political organisation in Britain.

The WRP had been founded in 1973 by the SLL. It was as a result of its political retreat that the first beneficiary of Foot's and Benn's refusal to fight the right wing during the Winter of Discontent was the Militant Tendency. It grew rapidly as workers and youth moving through centrism towards revolutionary politics were trapped by Militant and redirected once again behind Labour's "left wing." This was a critical element in preparing the way for Thatcher coming to power.

In 1995, Oleg Gordievsky, a high-ranking KGB officer who had defected from the Soviet Union to Britain in 1985, alleged in his memoirs that Foot had been in the pay of the KGB for many years. Gordievsky wrote that Foot was an "agent of influence" with the codename "Boot." The *Sunday Times* paid an undisclosed but "substantial" amount of damages to Foot for reporting Gordievsky's claims.

This writer has no way of knowing whether the claims were true or not, but while these issues are not unimportant in themselves, the vital lesson for workers to understand is that Foot's reformism allied him politically to the counter-revolutionary policies of the Stalinist bureaucracy. It was because of his class outlook and national reformist political perspective that Foot had an abiding hostility to revolutionary politics and Trotskyism.

Michael Foot's death coincides with a new and explosive stage in social relations in Britain. World events are driving forward the class struggle, leading to unprecedented political upheaval and change.

There is no longer the material basis for the type of reformist politics advocated in the past by "left" leaders like Foot who have led British workers into the present political *cul de sac*. Despite this, there are those such as the Militant Tendency and Arthur Scargill's Socialist Labour Party that are still desperately trying to breathe new illusions into the bankrupt national reformist perspective.

To prevent a capitalist-created catastrophe, workers are confronted with the necessity of drawing all the political lessons from their own history, adopting the international proletarian revolutionary perspective advanced by the ICFI, and building its British section, the Socialist Equality Party.

Fraternally,
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