

# (1) Beauty and the Beast:

— The Politics of Youth and Class in Britain — by Robert Tresselt

On March 17, 1969, some 75,000 people marched through the streets of London on a demonstration in support of the struggle of the Vietnamese people. Some of these demonstrators had been amongst those who attacked the US Embassy in October 1968. On both occasions, the mass of the participants were identifiably sons and daughters of middle-class Britain.

Earlier this year, when Robin Blackburn of the *New Left Review* was dismissed from his post at the London School of Economics, some 14 campuses in Britain were the subject of student protest action. Again, the vast majority of participants were decidedly middle-class in origin, in life-style, and, in many cases, in social destination.

To many North American readers, the class origin of these radicals may not seem surprising, and, more relevantly, may not seem important. The fact that action was inaugurated on these two issues on campus, and that it did involve so many students, may seem sufficient in itself.

There is certainly no intention here to enter into the debate over campus and off-campus alternatives that is currently bedeviling the activity of the American SDS. Rather the intention is simply to explain to North American readers that the direction of British politics, and the struggle of British student-worker movements, cannot be understood unless the class nature of Britain and contemporary politics is taken into account. If not, there will be no way of explaining why it was that British politics in 1968 (or at least politics as understood by the mass media) was student politics whilst politics in 1969 is (as often as not) the politics of working-class youth or at least of déclassés movements of youth. The politics of the street and the soccer terraces has replaced the politics of the campus in British popular consciousness.

Three 'street' groups can be identified and each of them can be seen to be the product of a social situation: the squatters, the hippies and the skinheads. Each of these can be understood — at least in part — to be the product of the situation of certain sections of the working-class, and particularly working-class youth, after five years of Labour Government. That is, the relatively unattractive and the rather ambiguously political activity of British youth movements is the product of a 'social democratic' experience.

The social democratic experience in Britain has failed the working-class in material and in cultural terms. When the Labour Party came to power in 1964, it was not expected that the Party would inaugurate socialism, but it was certainly a part of the expectation that the people would be housed much more efficiently, that they would be educated more equitably, and that they would be provided for more munificently than they had been under a regressive Tory Government. It is a comment on the British Left in that period that the expectations were so high: it is a comment on the British Left in 1969 that it has dropped its illusions about the nature of Labour Government and social democracy in general.

But the experience of Labour Government is not felt so keenly on the campus as it is on the streets of Britain. Although the reactionary posture of the Labour government vis-a-vis the European and international capitalist economy has given rise to severe cuts in educational expenditure — which has been felt on all university and college campuses — the most telling feature of Labourism is the material constraints on standards of living exemplified in the incomes policy and the new strike legislation and the continuing repression of cultural and educational opportunities within the working-class. This attack by a Labour Government on its own electors, and on its own tradition, had resulted in contradictory and confusing responses on the part of the class. It is all too easy to dismiss these responses, as does the mass media, as 'arbitrary', 'escapist' or even as 'reactionary'.

The re-emergence of 'squatting' as a form of direct action — although it has only received wide publicity in North America quite recently with the squat by 'hippies' at 144 Piccadilly — has been apparent over the last two years. Squatting is, quite simply, the occupation of unoccupied houses, be they privately or publicly owned, and the placing in them of a homeless family. There are some half a million such families in Britain at the moment, and, at the present rate of Governmental housing building, some cities will never provide houses for those families. It is perhaps no accident that the last occasion on which squatting was necessary was in 1946, one year after the disillusion experienced by working-class people

with the Labour Government elected immediately after the war. The difference is that in 1946 the squatting movement was very much under the direction of the pre-1956 Communist Party, whereas in 1969 the movement is influenced, although hardly directed, by libertarian socialists, anarchists and radicals of various complexions. The squatting that is taking place at this moment in Britain is however very much the result of spontaneous action and initiative — particularly by working-class people who take their cue from mass-media-reportage of other squats, and only marginally the consequence of specifically political agitation. Importantly, the squatting movement — for all the taunts and smears of the Associated Press and its related agencies — is not simply the work of unoccupied and idle hippies, students etc., but is a direct response on the part of the labour movement proper to the housing crisis which the Labour Government is unable, and unwilling, to resolve.

Squatting has in common with the activity of the skinheads a do-it-yourself ethic. That is, the experience of the working-class under Labourism is a bureaucratic, stifling, and constraining kind of experience: the one way out of this containment is to do it yourself. Now often of course when people are forced back onto themselves, when their representatives fail them they can take up positions and politics which may appear reactionary. And there is no denying of course that when the London dockers and meat-porters marched in support of the racist Tory spokesman Enoch Powell in 1968 they were objectively reactionary in their activity. But the rise of racism in Britain in recent months is not equivalent to the attempts of youth and workers in general to re-create some kind of identity and self-respect under a hypocritical and capitalist government. It is not to be a romantic about the working-class to assert that the working-class youth movements in Britain are no more, and no less, 'pathological' or 'meaningless' than their equivalent in the middle-class. The teddy-boys in the 1950's, the Mods and Rockers in the early 1960's and now the Skinheads represent the attempt of working-class youth to assert some control over external political and cultural restraints. What these groups have in common with the middle-class student leftist is a conflictual attitude towards the dominant culture of western capitalist society. At the lowest level, these groups, along with the leftist students, have reason to question the role of the police in our society; at a higher level, they do share some kind of perception about the unequal distribution of power in contemporary capitalism. The question of politicisation, and the potentiality of working-class youth as allies of the socialist movement, is a question that is already being subject to some trial in the streets: in Paris in 1968, in the squats in London this year, and to some extent now in North America (with the emergence of groups like the Young Patriots in Chicago).

The skinhead 'movement' has emerged out of the soccer culture of the British working-class. The hold which soccer has over popular consciousness in Britain (as well as in Europe generally and in Latin America) may be difficult to comprehend in North America. But it is certainly arguable that the 'game' of soccer is more important than religion in influencing the content of class consciousness in these areas (with the exception perhaps of Northern Ireland and certain societies in Latin America). It is sufficient to note here that each locality of any size possesses its own professional soccer team, and that around these teams there is a hard-core of extremely committed and fervent working-class supporters. For many of the kids who live in the larger conurbations and housing estates of Labour Britain, the soccer match and the 'happening' on the Saturday afternoon is the one release from the home, from the production-line, from the processed 'entertainment' on the TV screen, and from the society in general. It is 'their' day and it is 'their' team. And this is more than you can say for 'their' job or 'their' neighbourhood. What is quite clear is that this attempt to control 'their' team (in various kinds of intervention and in activity which is conventionally defined as vandalism) has been increasing in direct proportion to the extent to which young workers are repressed, increasingly under-paid, and increasingly insecure (in a period of rising unemployment). In all these senses, what appears as 'soccer hooliganism' in the world-wide press releases can be understood as intrinsically political in content, and as potentially political in outcome.

(to be continued next edition)

