

END OF THE BLAIR ERA

Ten more years of hard labour?

Tony Blair may be gone but there will be little change with Gordon Brown. Mark Hoskisson looks back on ten years under Labour



TONY BLAIR'S announcement in May 2007 that he was leaving Number Ten Downing Street lacked drama. The master of spin was unable to turn his own resignation into a historic event. Everyone knew he was going and everyone knew when. No one pushed him. There was no conspiracy in the corridors of power. His successor, Gordon Brown, sat patiently, like a good schoolboy, waiting for the bell to ring and the lesson to end.

Then for weeks on end young Mr Brown carried on waiting while Blair turned his six week departure programme into a Michael Palin-esque travelogue. Governing the country was put on hold as Blair donned tribal robes in Africa, military fatigues in Iraq and furrowed eyebrows in Heiligendamm.

With the left in the Parliamentary Labour Party too weak to get John McDonnell on the ballot paper to challenge Brown, the past and future leaders were able to turn the succession period into an extended half term break. The contest for deputy leadership was played out by the would-be heirs to John Prescott – earnestly pretending that the outcome was important. But no one was really bothered. No drama, no upsets, nothing to stand in the way of Gordon Brown's coronation at the special Labour conference at the end of June.

But despite this stage-managed cast change in the government and Labour Party, Blair's achievements both as a party leader and a prime minister are considerable and – from the point of view of the working class – considerably bad. Brown's principal aim is to carry on where Blair left off. The style will be different, but the substance will be the same.

Union leaders back Brown

This needs to be hammered home inside the workers' movement because many trade unionists are having their ears bent by trade union bureaucrats who claim that things will be much better now that Gordon Brown is at Number 10. In particular the general secretary duet which runs Unite, Tony Woodley and Derek Simpson, are making the

beds and sprinkling the rose petals for Brown's post-succession honeymoon.

Unite is the result of a merger between Woodley's TGWU and Simpson's Amicus and, if you believe the hype, the biggest and best union in the known universe. What is more, both of its leaders won election to the top office of their unions on tickets that were seriously critical of Blair. Their victories were heralded as hopeful signs of a major shift leftwards in the trade union movement.

When life is grim hope springs eternal but disappointment is a constant companion. And so it proved with the Woodley/Simpson axis. Instead of shaking things up they cooled things down. Hostility to Blair was channelled away from the organisation of action against him – notably at Gate Gourmet in 2005 when a battle against the anti-union laws was on the cards and Woodley stopped it – into building up a belief that Gordon Brown would be a whole lot better for the working class.

The "Warwick Agreement", in which Labour promised marginal reforms to the union leaders, was cited as proof that New Labour was now listening and that Gordon Brown would honour the pledges made. Woodley and Simpson blocked their unions from supporting McDonnell, effectively ending any hopes of a democratic election in the party and guaranteeing a safe passage for Brown.

The Spring 2007 issue of Amicus' magazine contained an offer for Gordon Ramsay's latest recipe book and a DVD of "Breakfast at Tiffany's" amongst other things. But it avoided any mention of the future leadership of the party of which it is so integral a part.

For 18 years of Tory rule most of Britain's union leaders donned tin hats and hid in their bunkers while Thatcher and Major blanket bombed the mines, factories, services and communities where their members worked, lived and died. But they broadcast regular messages to keep up the morale of the troops: "Wait for Labour" they said. For the first eight years of Blair's reign they accepted regular

slaps in the face from the Labour government in return for minor reforms. Their broadcasts continued, only with the message altered to: "Don't rock the boat or the Tories will come back." And, for the last two years it has changed again to "wait for Brown."

Gordon Brown the neoliberal

Gordon Brown is implicated in every single New Labour betrayal. His pledge is to carry on building a Britain fit for bosses and fat with profits. On 15 May 2007, the day before his confirmation as leader, Brown addressed the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) annual dinner. He said:

"I have been always aware of the enormous contributions that you, the best of British businesses, make to this country. Indeed, you are our engines of wealth and prosperity. So, here at the CBI, I want to start by thanking all of you, the representatives and leaders of British business. And having had the privilege over ten years as Chancellor of meeting many of you and working with you on many projects of national importance, learning, I hope, from you all the time in a world that is not standing still, I want to thank you for your expertise and dynamism which means Britain leads the world in some of the most modern and most innovative sectors of the global economy."

The entire theme of his speech, which should be rammed down the throats of Woodley and Simpson, is that he will be a champion of neoliberal economics: free trade, less regulation of companies, low taxes for the corporations, a flexible workforce, a fully privatised economy and so on and so forth. Nor is this some sort of secret manifesto that Brown is pursuing behind the backs of the labour movement. Still less is it a clever trick to dupe the bosses while he gets on with introducing socialism on the quiet. No, this has been the driving force of Brown's policies for the ten years he has been Chancellor:

"There is a real question about what is the destiny of Britain in a world where globalisation means you can buy almost any service anywhere. My passion is that Britain will become the great globalisation success story of this century."

This was Gordon Brown speaking to the conference of the CBI in late 2006. His passion for globalisation – by which both he, and we, mean unbridled international imperialist capitalism in its post-cold war phase – was matched by his commitment to act for the bosses.

Within Europe he promised Britain would be at the forefront of the struggle to free business from state regulation. Brown stated:

"We will continue to resist removing the opt-out from European working hours legislation, as well as promoting greater deregulation across Europe. We will stand up for an approach that is pro-Britain, pro-business and pro-European single market, for a Europe which is outward-looking, reforming, liberalising and lighter touch in its regulation."

Brown has been the driving force behind the economic policies of the Blair government. The drive to privatise the NHS and education are Treasury policies, as was the disastrous PFI scheme forced upon London's Underground. Brown's taxation regime has done huge favours for his

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friends in the CBI and the City of London. He cut Corporation tax from the 33% level set by the Tories to 30% by 1999 and then to 28% by 2007. At the same time, according to the calculations of the think tank the Centre for Policy Studies, the poorest one fifth of the country have seen their tax burden increase and their share of income from benefits cut. This is why under Brown the gap between the richest and the poorest has grown.

These are not the policies of an opponent of Blairism. They are the policies of a neoliberal, and we can expect to see more of them being hurled at us by the new prime minister. Our task is to organise resistance to Brown, not big him up as a friend of the labour movement in the way Woodley and Simpson are doing.

Brown is part of Blair's legacy, not a break from it. In 1991, in *Permanent Revolution* No.9 (first series) we wrote an analysis of Labour's electoral decline. We said:

"... it is clear today that were Labour to win back enough of the 'middle ground' to secure a majority in Parliament it would be achieved at the price of diluting everything distinctively 'Labourite' in its policies to the point where the party's programme is almost indistinguishable from that of the post-Thatcher Tory Party."

This, and more, is what Blair, with Brown at his side, achieved. They recovered electoral credibility by ditching Labourism. They even re-named the party New Labour to hammer this point home. John Smith, the leader of the party prior to Blair, was a right winger. But he was not New Labour. So his sudden death was a gift to the clique around Blair and Brown. The two made a pact over their pasta at the Granita restaurant that Brown would not stand, and Blair captured the leadership of the party on 21 July 1994.

As a party leader Blair set out to rid Labour of any remaining vestiges of socialism. Of course Labour's brand of socialism was always reformist, always the socialism of what Britain's bosses would accept, always pro-capitalist. But even the harmless symbols of the left were regarded as dangerous by Blair and his followers. The red flag was torn down, the term "social justice" was invented to stop people mentioning the "S" word. Above all Clause Four – a jumbled statement of intent that the left clung to as proof that Labour wanted socialism – was abolished.

At the October 1994 Labour conference Blair announced that he wanted Clause Four re-written to get rid of any doubt that Labour was in any sense "socialist" or anti-business. This was his first ever speech as leader and it demonstrated that he was serious about the changes he felt were necessary to "modernise" the party. By April 1995 he had succeeded and Clause Four was no more. As the BBC said:

"The rewriting of this key tenet of the Labour constitution was part of Blair's modernisation programme. He was determined to make New Labour, as the party was now being called, more receptive to the free market and the middle classes."

And when Arthur Scargill, the leader of the Great Miners' Strike of 1984/85, left the party on the back of this decision, Blair was delighted. He had not only got rid of a symbol, he had got rid of a man who was used as the bogey man by *Daily Mail* readers up and down the country

to frighten their children. Blair had "stood up to him". The middle class children could at last sleep easy.

The left of the Labour Party had already suffered countless defeats at the hands of Kinnock. It was weak, reeling and incapable of mounting any fight back when Blair won the leadership. His massacre of the symbols was just his way of finishing the job off so that the more affluent middle classes and the bosses could be certain that a Labour Government would pose no threat to them or their social order. It was like a university-bound respectable lad throwing away the hoodie that he had been wearing to keep in with the rough boys at school.

But it was important nevertheless, because it foretold the way Blair would behave in office. The silly old party and its sentimental socialist inclinations would have no bearing whatsoever on his decade of rule. He ruled for the bosses, as all Labour governments have done. But he ruled for them so openly, so brashly and with so little regard for Labour's working class and trade union base that even the old right wing of the party – men like Peter Kilfoyle, Frank Dobson and even Roy Hattersley – turned against him and became his enemies.

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ment in 1931 through to Wilson and Callaghan's wage cutting under the Social Contract in the 1970s. Blair will be remembered because his entire ten years of office were one long festival of betrayal.

The labour movement had been told to wait for Labour. By 1997, after so many defeats, the call had been heeded by many. And, with the middle classes now pouring into the New Labour Party a grand coalition of voters delivered Blair a massive victory in the election held in the spring of that year. "Things can only get better" – a suitably rubbish song – summed up the mood of the country. Of course the Labour leader had been open about his plans to govern in a new way. In his victory speech at the Royal Festival Hall on 2 May 1997 he promised:

"We have been elected as New Labour and we will govern as New Labour."

And this is exactly what he did.

Wealth gap widens

The wealth gap in Britain has widened under New Labour. After six years in office Labour could boast a country in which the richest 1,000 people in Britain had assets totalling £159,699 billion. The richest one per cent of the population had seen their share of wealth rise from 17 per cent to 23 per cent under New Labour. Between 1994

and 2001 average pay for directors grew by 107 per cent (to £416,073 a year). The equivalent increase for workers in the same companies was 31 per cent.

At Brown's prompting, the first two years of New Labour were marked by repeated attacks on public services. People who voted to get rid of the Tories were taken aback when they were told that Labour would stick by the Tories' two year public spending plan – a plan that involved cutbacks in everything from schools to hospitals, social services to benefits. The idea was to avoid any boom in public spend-

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ing that would threaten Labour's plans to reduce the tax burden on the corporations and the middle classes. It would demonstrate that in matters of public finance Labour was even more strict (i.e. neoliberal) than the Tories.

It would also give Brown time to plan his own increases in public spending – the ones that led to the increase in school and hospital building – on an entirely new basis. The new round of expanded public spending, when it came, was tied to privatisation, public-private partnerships and private finance initiatives. It gave Labour time to shape a programme of privatisation in the public services, especially the NHS and education, which was more extensive than anything Thatcher had dared to consider, let alone implement.

Neoliberal jamboree

Air traffic control, which Labour had promised not to privatise, was sold off to the highest bidder. Council estates followed, leaving Britain increasingly bereft of any significant social housing sector. Brown has recently indicated that his plans to tackle the housing shortage in Britain will involve opening up areas of provision – such as shared ownership schemes – that have hitherto been the preserve of either councils or registered social landlords – to private builders and developers.

The trade unions were quickly put in their place. The anti-union laws, said Blair, were here for good. Not one of the Tory laws has been repealed. And the few sops given to the unions – the right to recognition, the pathetically low minimum wage, working family tax credits – have all been fashioned according to what the bosses were prepared to tolerate, not according to what workers really need. Unions have to jump through endless hoops in order to complete a recognition deal, giving the bosses plenty of time to weaken and undermine any eventual agreement reached.

And, as for the minimum wage, it isn't hurting the bosses too much. If they choose not to pay it Labour doesn't seem too keen in enforcing it. The number of people being

paid less than the minimum wage has jumped by nearly ten per cent. Official government figures for spring 2006 showed that an estimated 336,000 workers were receiving less than the statutory minimum pay.

Not only are workers suffering from a derisory minimum wage but the hours they are working are getting longer in Blair and Brown's flexible Britain. In total 16 per cent of the workforce work more than 60 hours, while 75 per cent work overtime (with only one third of these workers getting extra pay for their efforts). The average working week in the UK is 43.6 hours, compared with an EU average of 40.3. This is why Brown so steadfastly rejects union demands for the UK to opt in to EU legislation limiting the working week, on the grounds that Britain's attractiveness to business is its “flexible workforce”.

Throughout this neoliberal New Labour jamboree Labour had the chance to indulge in one of its favourite games: find and blame a scapegoat. While asylum seekers, east European migrants and muslims have become the targets, in the early days it was work-shy single mothers and lead-swinging disability benefit claimants. A programme of benefit cuts for both were developed leading to the first ever bench revolt when, in December of 1997, 47 Labour MPs voted against the government's plan to cut benefits to single mothers.

At a time when tax dodging goes unpunished and has replaced fox hunting as a sport of choice for the idle rich, a relentless war on “benefit cheats” is still being waged, in the hope of terrorising and criminalising some of the poorest and most vulnerable people in society. Incapacity benefit, paid to people who are too ill to work, is currently in line for a radical overhaul.

New Labour is pushing through many repressive and anti-democratic policies that even Thatcher was too fearful to implement. Trial by jury is under attack, the anti-terror laws are an affront to civil liberties and ID cards are on their way. All of this – with the wars against Iraq and Afghanistan raging – has been accompanied by wave after wave of official racism from the government. Asylum seekers and muslims have been singled out for government abuse and repressive legislation. The BNP fascists are laughing all the way to the polling booth as they pick up votes on the back of Labour inspired racist hysteria.

And back in 1997, against a background of cuts and attacks on “scroungers” the first sign that Blair's promise of clean government was hollow came with the Ecclestone affair. Bernie Ecclestone, the multi-millionaire Formula One racing magnate, gave Labour a huge cash donation. Suddenly the ban that was introduced on tobacco advertising by Labour was lifted for Formula One events (which relied heavily on such adverts and sponsorship). At the height of the Ecclestone affair Blair said:

“I think most people who have dealt with me, think I'm a pretty straight sort of guy and I am.”

New Labour sleaze

The events that followed this, from the minor – Mandelson's mortgages to Blunkett's favours to his mistresses – through to the major – the almighty cesspit of peerages for sale and monumental bribery and corruption

around arms sales to the Saudi's – has proved beyond doubt that Blair is a liar. Millionaire donors to the party, sitting in their ermine shawls on the velvet seats of the House of Lords are living proof.

But sleaze is part and parcel of the capitalist system of government. It is endemic. This makes the calls from the recent G8 summit on African nations to put a stop to corruption sound like the warnings the mafia dish out to petty crooks.

So, Blair will be remembered as the man who took the privatisation of the NHS and education further than any Tory could have dreamed of. He will be remembered as the man who presided over a massive growth in the disparity of wealth in Britain, with child poverty increasing as he leaves office. He will be remembered for introducing tuition fees that deter working class youth from entering higher education. His racist war on vulnerable asylum seekers and refugees will live in the memory. His determination to defend Thatcher's barrage of anti-union laws – every last one of them – for use against any workers that dare to fight back will likewise remain a memorable part of his legacy.

Blair finished the reshaping of Britain that Thatcher started. He turned it into a neoliberal haven for the world's biggest corporations. He created a cheap, flexible workforce, a tax regime to help the very richest and a massively deregulated economy in Britain. And he backed the bosses to the full against any workers – against the firefighters in the FBU fighting for a decent wage for a dangerous job, against the PCS fighting job cuts and low wages, against the Gate Gourmet workers at Heathrow fighting a ruthless employer destroying conditions and jobs.

Tory Blair is not an insult. It is an accurate description of what Blair achieved in his ten years of office. As Blair's Italian ally, the corrupt, right wing Berlusconi put it, "Tony Blair is doing well because he has essentially followed Thatcher's path." Naturally Blair did not contradict him.

But he did not achieve this – as some on the left, like the Socialist Party, argue – because Labour ceased to be a workers' party (one dominated by and ruling for the bosses). He achieved it because he was able to use Labour's working class connection – via the union leaders – to keep the peace. And he was able to persuade them to help do this because his ten years were ones of economic boom, ones in which just enough could be done to buy social peace as the neoliberal measures were rammed through.

Thousands of workers do, of course, see through this and hate Blair with a passion. But no force was able to organise to stop him once during his ten years. And if the economy and the union leaders were two of Blair's aces, his other was the fact that he came to the leadership of the party at a time when the British working class had just suffered over a decade of devastating defeats.

Those defeats – in the 1980s and early 1990s – weakened the unions in general. But they weakened the organised militants in the unions even more. Thousands of activists fell victim to Thatcher's wars on the miners, the dockers, the printers, the seafarers and so on. The balance of class forces that Thatcher created allowed Blair to achieve a decade of neoliberal rule via the Labour Party.

War on terror

One thing Blair will be remembered for above all else, of course, is his support for US imperialism and its war on terror – or to be precise its war for global domination. By committing Britain totally to Bush's wars without end, by pouring troops into Iraq and Afghanistan – not to mention his earlier sorties in Africa and the Balkans – Blair will be remembered as the most warlike prime minister since Churchill.

Blair lied and cheated his way into the war on Iraq. But in so doing he called forth one of the most amazing movements against war that Britain has ever seen. Millions took to the streets against Blair and his bloody war. Millions opposed him in an unprecedented show of anger against the invasion of Iraq and millions saw through the lies and propaganda, increasingly making Blair a liability when it came to elections.

Blair got the taste for blood alongside Bush's predecessor, Bill Clinton, in the Balkans. The early commitment to an "ethical foreign policy" was quickly ditched, first at the behest of the arms dealers – as the scandalous suspension of the enquiry into BAE arms sales to Saudi Arabia revealed – and then, more importantly, at the behest of George Bush. The guise of "humanitarian interventionism" was quickly torn off and discredited.

Post 9/11, Tony Blair became Bush's principal ally in waging the "war on terror". The US administration has always regarded the "war on terror" as a pretext for launching its "Project for a New American Century". Its determination to invade Iraq was clear proof of this, given that there were no connections at all between that country and Al Qaida. Rather, conquering Iraq was part of a plan to establish US military control over the oil-rich Gulf.

Afghanistan was regarded as a base of operations for the US in the Near East, enabling it to establish it to establish a strong military presence on the very borders of both

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Russia and China. The war on terror is in fact a war to make US global dominance absolute.

Blair decided that British imperialism's best interest lay in supporting this war no matter what. Going back to what Brown told the CBI, you cannot hope to become a globalisation "success story" unless you are prepared to fight for it and Blair was prepared to fight for it. He lied and cheated over weapons of mass destruction, over the legal basis of the invasion of Iraq, over intelligence reports. He still lies to justify the terrible invasions that have cost hundreds of thousands of Iraqi lives and that have brought turmoil and terror to the daily lives of millions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine and Lebanon. He lies

when he says that his aggressive imperialist policies are not the cause of terrorist attacks in Britain itself.

Blair set out his justification for this aggression in a major speech to the Foreign Policy Centre in March 2006. It was not widely reported, but it fully backs our view that for Blair, like Bush, the current war on terror is a war for globalisation:

“The basic thesis is that the defining characteristic of today's world is its interdependence; that whereas the economics of globalisation are well matured, the politics of globalisation are not; and that unless we articulate a common global policy based on common values, we risk chaos threatening our stability, economic and political, through letting extremism, conflict or injustice go unchecked. The consequence of this thesis is a policy of engagement not isolation; and one that is active not reactive . . . This is not a clash between civilisations. It is a clash about civilisation. It is the age-old battle between progress and reaction, between those who embrace and see opportunity in the modern world and those who reject its existence; between optimism and hope on the one hand; and pessimism and fear on the other. And in the era of globalisation where nations depend on each other and where our security is held in common or not at all, the outcome of this clash

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between extremism and progress is utterly determinative of our future here in Britain.”

All of Blair's military adventures are linked. He says so. The reason they are linked is because they are battles to match the economics of globalisation to the politics of globalisation – the power of the principal world economies must be matched by the political power. To achieve this we need to identify the enemy – radical Islam (it is the one and only form of extremism he speaks of in the entire speech) – and destroy it. To destroy it we need to engage – that is, attack countries or targets that may (not do, but may) support extremism.

This is as much a “pre-emptive strike” doctrine as the one outlined by Bush. It is an excuse for war without end – or at least war until the end of US global dominance is secured. In fact in each of these wars the enemy has been quite different. Only in Afghanistan could an argument be made that the war was one directed against radical Islam. In the Balkans Christian Serbian nationalists were the target. In Sierra Leone it was anti-government rebels who threatened imperialist stability. In Iraq the target was Saddam Hussein, clearing up the “unfinished business” of the first Gulf war as Rumsfeld once put it.

What really unites this foreign policy, then, is not Blair's pseudo philosophical “age-old battle between progress and reaction”. It is, rather, a policy based on taking out

each and every regime that stands in the way of globalisation – so called rogue states. That is why elsewhere Blair talks about the need to consider, longer term “engagement” with Sudan, Zimbabwe, North Korea, and Burma. The “war on terror” is a war for terror, the terror of the poverty, misery and insecurity that globalisation inflicts on countless millions.

This is also why the Labour lefts' demands for an “independent foreign policy based on peace and justice” is a complete utopia. As long as Britain continues to be one of the major imperialist powers its policies will never be based on “peace and justice”. Imperialist wars come with the territory, the only way to end them is to overthrow imperialist capitalism.

This commitment to war, however, is not matched by an ability to win. US imperialism and its British lackey have run into very serious difficulties. The grumbling of the generals, the grim findings of the political inquiries and the anger of the masses opposed to the war all underline the severe problems of the imperialists. The bombs and bullets of the resistance and the body bags returning to the US and UK are daily reminders that victory is nowhere in sight and defeat is a real possibility.

Some legacy! It is one which, combined with his attacks on public services, on civil liberties and on trade unions has – amazingly – allowed the Tories to reinvent themselves, under David Cameron, as a caring social liberal political party. It is a legacy that has given these political deadbeats a route map out of the wilderness. Tony Blair has helped the Tories recreate themselves as a viable candidate for government once again. Thanks Tony.

On 30 September 2003, with the Iraq “victory” behind him, Tony Blair told the Labour Party conference, “I can only go one way, I've not got a reverse gear.” This should have been greeted by uproar. It should have been the signal to even the most supine trade union leader or Labour doubter to demand his resignation there and then. The impudent public schoolboy was paying homage to his heroine, Thatcher, and her remark “this lady is not for turning”, and insulting everyone who had worked to get a Labour vote out at the previous two elections.

The opportunity to defeat Blair and drive him from office existed in 2003 on the eve of the war with Iraq. Indeed the crisis of his regime continued up to 2005. In the general election of that year Labour lost votes by the bucketful, mainly to apathy, as thousands decided that any vote was a wasted vote, especially one to the party of broken dreams. There was mass disillusion with official politics. There still is, which is why Brown is banging on about “re-engaging” with the people. If he doesn't his chances of retaining his new-found tenure of Number 10 will be much reduced.

But the chance to bring Blair to his knees was not taken. And this was the result of one other aspect of Blair's legacy: the shift to the right by the left itself. From the Labour left to the far left, the impact of the defeats that preceded the Labour government combined with the reshaping of the political map by Blair himself from 1994 onwards had been substantial. Left reformism was good, as it always is, at spinning out radical verbiage at small meetings of the faithful. But when action was needed

it demonstrated that it is actually tied to the right and cannot exist without it.

Firefighters' strike – a missed opportunity

Two things revealed this. The first was the strike by the Fire Brigade Union (FBU) on the eve of the war with Iraq. The firefighters' cause – for better pay – was universally popular. Their job is dangerous, their pay is poor. After months of fruitless campaigning they decided that a strike was necessary to win their demand for £30,000 a year. They voted overwhelmingly for action and a series of strikes commenced.

Not only did the strikes get popular support. They also got serious pledges of solidarity, especially from the rail workers' union, the RMT. The chance for a showdown with Labour that could have spread to other unions – all in the context of the mass anti-war movement hitting the streets – was there. And victory was a real possibility because Labour would have faced real problems putting troops on the streets to fight fire in Britain at the same time as putting them on the streets of Iraq to start fires. The link was clear.

Indeed, it was so clear that many Labour politicians went into overdrive, with one even denouncing the FBU as fascist. But behind the scenes people were going into overdrive in another direction. The FBU was led by a left reformist, Andy Gilchrist, who was one of the original "awkward squad" – a group of anti-Blair militant union leaders. He was a darling of the Labour left, ran his union in time honoured Stalinist style and talked as though he was up for the fight. But he was also a reformist, and was wide open to the arguments that both the TUC and the Labour leadership put to him about the importance of "uniting behind the country" on the eve of war and calling off the strikes.

He gave in to this pressure, to the fury of the FBU rank and file who, despite returning to work in a disciplined fashion (and suffering attacks on a local basis ever since), voted him out at the earliest opportunity, replacing him with an opponent of the sell out (Matt Wrack) and voting to disaffiliate from Labour. But those consequences came too late to save the strike but in plenty of time to save Blair.

Gilchrist threw away the chance to combine a mass, popular strike with the anti-war movement and spread it to other sections. But even if it had been another left reformist, the chance would have been lost. This is because left reformism will always bow to the pressure of national unity. This became clear the following year when the war was still hugely unpopular and when it had become ever clearer that Blair had lied and when the ranks of the unions and his own party felt that he had become a liability.

All it needed was to mount a challenge, force the issue of his leadership out into the open and bring him down. After all, we are talking about a time when literally millions had been mobilised on the streets against him. The left in the unions and the party refused to mount such a challenge and Blair survived the crisis, bouncing back and regaining the initiative so that he was able to set the agenda for the next election in 2005 and then set the time-

table for his own orderly departure from office.

But it was not only left reformism that had been pushed so far to the right that it was too timid to take the action needed to bring Blair down. The Socialist Workers Party, the largest far left group in Britain, must take a share of responsibility too.

It had played a central role in building the mass anti-war movement. Its effort in that regard cannot be faulted. But it built the movement on the basis of a non-aggression pact with its partners. In particular it decided that to keep the union leaders supporting Stop the War it would not mobilise inside the working class for action beyond that which the union leaders were prepared to take. This was seen at the People's Assembly, called on the eve of war, when the SWP blocked calls for industrial strike action against the war.

In particular in the lead up to the launch of war it did not fight for widespread direct action and strike action as a means of turning the mass protest movement into an all out rebellion against the war. It drew back from calling for a revolt of the rank and file, leaving a tiny handful of militants to carry the torch for militancy – including we are proud to say – teacher supporters of Permanent Revolution who, against all odds, brought their schools out on strike on the day the war was launched.

This failure to fight for the movement to take the course of direct action – strikes, blockades, mass disruption and so on – let Blair off the hook. Millions marched against the war. But then they went home until the next demo. They did not join a mass direct action-based revolt against the war that could have brought down the British Butcher of Baghdad.

This was a shocking error on the part of the SWP. The fact that the movement failed to initiate mass disobedience and industrial action against the war gave Blair the chance to carry on. More importantly it gave him the chance to end his decade by making sure that his successor would be someone who would carry on where he left off.

New generation of fighters

But even as Brown readies himself for the highest office of government the factors that favoured Blair – the decline and defeat of the workers' movement, the pact with the cowardly union leaders and the economic boom – are all changing. A vote by the postal workers for a national strike over pay is one harbinger of this. The simmering anger across the public sector at Brown's policy of pay restraint is another.

A new generation of workers is emerging and they will be less weighed down by past defeats. The bureaucrats will find themselves challenged by class fighters emerging from the ranks organising to defend themselves against the new attacks.

That is why as we say good riddance to Blair we must prepare to say get lost to Brown if he thinks he is going to get away with another ten years of war, privatisation, poverty and racism. We must realise the potential that lies in the coming struggles by building a powerful revolutionary force, one that can sweep away Labour reformism and imperialism altogether.