

Should Labour worry about Trotskyists in the Party?



John Kelly explains the development, resilience and influence of Trotskyist groups within the Labour Party. He concludes that the movement has fared badly in recent years, despite a decade of austerity and growing inequality, issues that might have been expected to stimulate left radicalism.

Press coverage of the contemporary Labour Party and of Momentum has often implied, and occasionally asserted, that there is substantial Trotskyist activity and influence in both organizations. In relation to the Labour Party, this contention is seriously wide of the mark because the number of party members who also belong to a Trotskyist organization is [miniscule](#). The largest group is Socialist Appeal, whose 300 or so members promote its eponymous newspaper and which represents the continuation of Ted Grant's Militant Tendency.

Militant operated as a secret faction inside the Labour Party and its influence peaked in the 1980s before a split in 1991 when the majority left to form what is now the Socialist Party. Grant and around 200 supporters chose to remain inside the Labour Party but in the intervening 26 years they have managed a [net annual growth rate of just four!](#) They have now been joined by the 100-strong Alliance for Workers Liberty which responded to Corbyn's first election victory by instructing all of its members to join their local Labour Party branch.

In addition there is a set of smaller groups, active inside Labour for varying periods of time, including Socialist Action, Socialist Fight and Workers Power which bring the combined forces of organized Trotskyism within the Labour Party to approximately 500. Contrast this figure with Labour's total membership of around 564,000 and it is clear that Trotskyist militants have their work cut out to exert any significant influence over Labour policy.

That said, there are three caveats to this story which suggests it may underestimate Trotskyist influence. In the first place we should recall Lenin's remark that revolutionaries make up in organization and commitment what they lack in numbers. Most members of small Trotskyist groups are highly committed and seasoned activists, approximating in many cases to Lenin's ideal of the 'professional revolutionary'. In contrast the majority of Labour party members are relatively inactive and rarely attend branch or constituency meetings. Consequently, the disparity in numbers between organized Trotskyists and their mainstream Labour critics is not quite what it seems.

Secondly, the figure of 500 members of Trotskyist groups takes no account of the (probably small) numbers of Labour Party individuals who would self-identify as Trotskyists despite the absence of any formal revolutionary affiliation. Finally, we should also consider the larger number of radical Labour left-wingers who will occasionally vote for Trotskyist-inspired motions on issues such as racism, austerity or mandatory reselection of MPs. Yet to count support for such motions as evidence of growing Trotskyist influence is extremely dubious, neglecting the fact that people may vote for such motions despite rather than because of their Trotskyist provenance.

Nonetheless there will be critics who object that the argument so far merely comprises a snapshot of the current situation and indicates nothing about the possibility of a rapid change in the fortunes of the Trotskyist left. After all, the total membership of Trotskyist groups in the mid-1950s was no more than a few hundred and yet by the mid-1980s their ranks had swelled to almost 20,000. The main group active inside the Labour Party was the Militant Tendency whose membership peaked at around 8,000 in the late 1980s and whose influence was reflected in their control of Liverpool City Council and by the existence of three MPs who made no secret of their Militant Tendency support.

A revival of Trotskyist membership and influence within the Labour Party certainly cannot be ruled out but there are two reasons for regarding such a scenario as very unlikely. The Militant Tendency became influential in a very specific period, marked by a massive decline in Labour membership. When Militant first published its newspaper of the same name in 1964, the Labour Party reported a total membership of 830,000 but by 1984 it had slumped to just 323,000 (and would [continue falling](#) for the next ten years).

Dwindling membership led to the rise of inactive and moribund branches which Tendency activists [assiduously targeted](#) and in which they quickly secured leadership positions. Moreover, the rapid expansion of Militant was part of a wider growth in British Trotskyism. During its 'Golden Age' from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s the Trotskyist movement grew from around 1,500 members to almost 20,000.

In 2018 the environment for Trotskyist influence within the Labour Party is radically different and far less propitious. Individual membership has soared under Corbyn's leadership, growing from less than 200,000 in 2014 to 540,000 today and local branches across the country have been rejuvenated as a consequence. The Trotskyist movement itself however has fared badly in recent years, even before Corbyn's emergence as Labour leader. On the threshold of the financial crash of 2008 its total membership stood at around 8,500. After ten years of spending cuts, wage stagnation and growing inequality, issues that might have been expected to stimulate left radicalism, its membership remains almost exactly the same. The failure to capitalize on capitalism's failings suggests a movement whose best days are behind it.

Note: the above draws on the author's latest book [Contemporary Trotskyism](#) (Routledge, 2018).

About the Author



[John Kelly](#) is Professor of Industrial Relations at Birkbeck, University of London. For a full list of publications see [here](#).

All articles posted on this blog give the views of the author(s), and not the position of LSE British Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science. Featured image credit: [The Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Library](#).