Britain's general election: The Socialist Alliance and Socialist Labour Party—No alternative to Blair's New Labour

By Socialist Equality Party of Britain
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Growing disillusionment with the Blair government in the working class has led to a number of parties standing in the June 7 general election in what has been billed as the “largest left-wing electoral challenge” to Labour since the Second World War. More than 300 candidates are standing, drawn primarily from the Socialist Labour Party (SLP), the Socialist Alliance (SA) and the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP).

These organisations do not offer a viable basis for the necessary construction of a new workers party. Notwithstanding their tactical differences, they all share a common perspective. In calling for the building of a new workers party, they reject the possibility of this being based on a Marxist programme. Denouncing the Blair government for its betrayal of “traditional” labour values, they stand for a return to old-style reformist policies.

National Union of Mineworkers President Arthur Scargill founded the SLP in 1996, following Labour's junking of its formal commitment to public ownership, when it abandoned “Clause 4” of its constitution. Scargill appeals for workers to support the SLP based on his leadership of the 1984/85 miners strike, one of the worst industrial defeats ever inflicted on the working class in Britain. Scargill has been a Stalinist since his youth, and his party is largely made up of the detritus from the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), along with a handful of Maoists from the Indian Workers Association, the Stalin society and a few members of the smaller radical groupings.

Aside from appeals to militant trade unionism, the SLP's programme is modelled on the “British Road to Socialism,” drafted by the CPGB in 1951 under the tutelage of Stalin. This abandoned the CPGB's formal commitment to revolutionary politics, in favour of an exclusively parliamentary road to socialism, along the reformist lines advanced by the Labour Party.

The Socialist Alliance/Scottish Socialist Party are comprised mainly of organisations claiming an adherence to Trotskyism, and are standing a joint slate in England, Wales and Scotland. The Socialist Party (formerly the Militant Tendency) first launched the SA in Scotland in 1996 in response to Scargill's decision to break from the Labour Party and launch the SLP. However, with Scargill's politically embarrassing pro-Stalinism and personal megalomania preventing efforts towards a more universal regroupment, the Scottish Socialist Party was formed in September 1998, incorporating several radical organisations. The SSP officially split from its parent organisation, the SP, and its Committee for a Workers International earlier this year.

In England and Wales the grouping remains at the level of an electoral alliance. The formation of the London Socialist Alliance (LSA) in February 1998 brought together a number of middle class radical organisations, including the Socialist Party and the Socialist Workers Party, to contest several local and parliamentary by-elections in the capital. And in March 1999 the Socialist Alliance throughout England was formed at a meeting in Birmingham. In May 2000, the LSA had its first major political outing, contesting seats to the newly created Greater London Authority, the all-London body set up by the Labour government.

Whilst the decision of the Socialist Workers Party, the largest radical grouping in England, to join the SA has encouraged sections of the alliance to press for its transformation into a party after the general election, tensions remain within the organisation. Having initiated the Socialist Alliance, the SP is reluctant to move immediately to form a party, under conditions in which it would effectively mean ceding organisational control to the SWP. For its part, the SWP is taking a “wait and see” attitude on whether to form a united party, depending on the degree of success in the election.

The Alliance's failure to find a political compromise with the SLP means that in several seats the two organisations are competing directly against one another.

The SA/SSP claim that the formation of a Marxist party is not possible while the majority of workers maintain illusions in the possibility of reforming the profit system. They acknowledge that Labour's right-wing evolution has severely dented its support amongst workers, and that this has opened up a vacuum on the left. But they argue that it is still not possible to openly advance a revolutionary perspective, because workers must necessarily pass through a centrist stage of development, between reform and revolution.

According to the radicals that make up the SA/SSP, all efforts to skip over this stage are doomed to isolation and defeat. Instead, the task of Marxists is to build a “broad church” of leftist tendencies, which will provide a milieu in which, over a protracted period of time, the “revolutionaries” can convince reformist workers of the correctness of their policy.

This is the age-old rationale offered by opportunist tendencies seeking to adapt themselves to the political agencies of the ruling class within the workers' movement. They justify the domination of the old bureaucratic organisations with reference to the existing reformist ideas of working people. But the essential task of socialists is to raise the consciousness of the working class to the historic tasks objectively posed by history.

Throughout the post-war period, these tendencies functioned on the left fringes of the Labour Party, either within its ranks or, in the case of the SWP, as an external pressure group. They also occupied positions within the lower ranks of the trade union apparatus. Their perspective has always been to mobilise rank-and-file pressure in order to force the old workers organisations in a leftward direction, and as late as 1997 they still called for a vote for Labour. In the case of the Militant Tendency, after being expelled from the Labour Party in 1995, it still stated its intention to rejoin at a future point when militant action by the trade unions had forced

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Labour back on its reformist course.

The radical groups have been forced to stand against Labour because its dramatic lurch to the right—implementing workfare, promoting privatisation and attacking democratic rights—has made it impossible to square support for Blair's party with advocacy of the reformist measures upheld by the radical groups. But they still hold out the possibility of pressurising Labour, or at least a section of the party, to the left.

Guardian journalist and leading SWP member Paul Foot explains that the SA is “an electoral alternative for Labour people who have had enough.” Its objective is to teach “Blair's cronies ... a lesson: that a great army of traditional Labour voters want them to change direction”.

Whilst the SA raises the possibility of the formation of a new workers party, in the longer term, such a party would also have to have a section of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy at its head.

The SA took as its initial model Italy's Communist Refoundation (Rifondazione Comunista), which emerged out of a split in the Communist Party—once the country's largest left party. The RC has acted as a left apologist for various coalitions dominated by its former comrades in the renamed Democratic Left, paving the way for the most significant erosion of welfare rights in Italy's post-war history. Their years of support for the “centre-left” were crucial in politically disorienting the working class. Though they withdrew their backing prior to the election, it was the absence of any principled opposition to the Democratic Left's Olive Tree coalition that enabled the right-wing media magnate Silvio Berlusconi to exploit social grievances and come to power in May alongside the neo-fascist National Alliance.

The difficulty for the SA is that no party of the RC's type has emerged from within the ranks of the Labour Party or the trade union bureaucracy. They had hoped that Scargill's SLP would be the beginning of such a break, but this has proved abortive. This has left the radical groups with the sole option of sinking their differences, and clinging together in a common front in the hope that in future they will be joined by some of the political big boys.

To this end, the SA has launched a fishing operation, calling on any disillusioned ex-Labour Party functionaries and trade union bureaucrats to join them in opposing Labour, based on an agreed minimum program of social reforms. Their web site boasts a special section listing such recruits, although the majority are their own members or ex-radicals who have either decamped from the Labour Party or who hold positions within the trade union apparatus.

But such a regroupment depends upon the various radical organisations suppressing any discussion on what has happened to the old workers organisations. To the extent that any explanation is offered of Labour's transformation into the favoured party of big business, this is attributed to the party leaders' subjective failings and their embrace of the Thatcherite orthodoxy.

However, Labour's present trajectory is testimony not simply to a failed leadership but a failed perspective. The Labour Party was formed as a political vehicle to represent the trade unions in parliament. Though it included in its ranks groups professing socialism, its programme reflected the interests of the trade union bureaucracy. It drew its main ideological inspiration from the Fabian Society, which opposed any revolutionary challenge to the profit system and advocated limited social reforms within the framework of capitalism.

The social reforms won throughout the previous century by the working class were achieved as a by-product of militant class struggles. Though the Labour Party and the trade unions were the mediums through which many of these struggles took place, the fundamental aim of the bureaucracy was always to limit and contain the independent actions of the working class within channels that did not threaten the existing social order. For the first part of its existence, the Labour Party could therefore be defined as a “bourgeois workers' party”—it was built by the working class, but under the political leadership of the bureaucracy it defended the capitalist order.

The ability of Labourism's narrow reformist outlook to dominate the workers' movement for an entire historical period was essentially the result of two factors. Firstly, the efforts to construct a genuinely socialist alternative to Labour had been dealt a body blow by the emergence of Stalinism within the Soviet Union in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The October Revolution of 1917 became the rallying point for all those around the world seeking to build a genuine socialist party. Therefore the bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet Union and of the Communist parties of the Third International, together with the physical liquidation of Stalin's Marxist opponents, was used by the social democratic parties to rubbish any idea of an alternative to their reformist political perspective.

Secondly, under conditions in which the ruling class was willing and able to grant concessions in order to maintain social peace, reformism appeared to work.

In the aftermath of World War Two, the Great Powers, led by the United States, had set in place a complex system of monetary and trade regulations in an effort to ameliorate national and social antagonisms and ensure the growth of world trade and commerce. This laid the foundations for what became reformism's heyday. Within the advanced imperialist countries such as Britain, it enabled the bourgeoisie to exploit the world's resources and peoples, while insulating their home market through national economic regulation, and implementing reforms such as the creation of the National Health Service. A political consensus was established among all the mainstream parties—Conservative, Liberal and Labour—on the need for such policies, in order to safeguard against the growth of class struggles that could threaten the survival of the profit system.

Between 1968 and 1975, however, world capitalism was gripped by a profound economic and political crisis. Those tumultuous years saw the emergence of mass movements of the working class throughout the world, at a time when the post-war economic order based on the pre-eminent position of the US dollar was unravelling.

Although the ruling class was able to rely on the old workers organisations to restabilise class relations, it could not restore the economic order established at Bretton Woods, with the dollar underwriting the entire system of world trade. The ruling class used the defeats suffered by the working class to advance a new world order—abandoning previous forms of national regulation in favour of the international organisation of all aspects of economic life. The epoch of what has become known as “globalisation” had arrived. New technological developments associated with advances in computerisation and telecommunications, and the emergence of massive transnational corporations, led to the reorganisation of production, distribution and exchange on a global scale, without respect for national borders. The economic fate of every country became ever more directly bound up with success or failure on the world's markets.

The constant striving for international competitiveness was incompatible with the preservation of national welfare state policies, which the corporations considered an unpardonable drain on their profit and the enrichment of a privileged layer of the super rich. Both Thatcher's policies of economic deregulation and Labour's abandonment of its old reformist programme were the outcome of these fundamental changes within world economy. Labour could no longer reconcile its defence of the profit system with an advocacy of social reform. Its defence of British capitalism now depends upon subordinating the working class completely to the requirements of global capital, and it is this that accounts for the venality of Blair and company.

Although they still encompass millions of workers, the trade unions do not offer an alternative to Labour's big business agenda, let alone provide the basis for a new workers party. Labour's programme continues to

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express the interests and politics of the union bureaucracy. Like the party they created, the trade union leaders have abandoned any defence of their members' interests, becoming the extended arm of corporate management. Their previous efforts to ameliorate the class struggle have been largely replaced by measures to prevent any form of industrial action and provide the rationale for workers to accept constant appeals for greater levels of productivity, lower wages and the inevitability of company downsizing.

The SA/SSP/SLP embrace of “Old Labour values” epitomises their essentially national-reformist perspective. The social reforms they advocate are bound up with demands for measures to strengthen the nation state and to rebuild the bureaucratic workers organisations. Though they present this as a means of protecting the working class from the depredations of global capitalism, it can only mean fostering national divisions, aligning workers with sections of their own ruling class against working people in other countries who face the same attacks.

In its open embrace of nationalism, the Scottish Socialist Party has blazed a trail for all the groups within the SA. The SSP exists as a separate party only because it champions self-determination for Scotland as its first principle. Its eventual aim is to become a junior partner of the Scottish National Party in the Edinburgh parliament, in order to secure control by Holyrood over Scotland's economy, welfare system and defence forces, and supposedly “stand up to the forces of globalisation”.

The SSP's position reproduces the bankrupt Stalinist perspective of “building socialism in one country,” only applied to Scotland. In arguing that Scotland can chart a self-sustaining path to socialism, the SSP manifesto states that it “has an abundance of resources including thousands of miles of coastline; vast expanses of uninhabited land; an endless supply of clean water; colossal reserves of oil; a highly skilled and well-educated workforce; a rich cultural heritage; and a talented artistic community which includes some of Europe's top writers, musicians and film-makers.

“The raw material exists to build a radical new Scotland which will stand up to the forces of globalisation, capitalism and become an international symbol of resistance to free market exploitation.”

The political logic of such a programme is most crudely expressed in Scargill's glorification of Stalin, Mao Zedong and other despotic, national autarkic regimes that have done so much to discredit the concept of socialism.

The actual content of the SSP's call for independence is not dissimilar from that advanced by the Scottish National Party in its slogan for an “independent Scotland within Europe”. The SNP seeks to develop Scotland as a production platform for the European transnationals by offering the Scottish workforce as a reservoir of cheap, skilled labour, with suitable corporate tax concessions to encourage inward investment. Though the SSP formally calls for a “united socialist Europe”, it refuses to take a position on the question of Labour's proposed referendum on British adoption of the European single currency, the euro, so leaving the door open to future cooperation with the SNP.

The essential foundation for establishing a genuine socialist party throughout Britain is the recognition that the social, democratic and political interests of the working class cannot be defended through a retreat back into the economic confines of the nation. The internationalisation of production and the tremendous advances in technique associated with it have, for the first time in history, created the objective means for satisfying all of humanity's physical and cultural needs.

But for this possibility to be actualised demands the liberation of the productive forces from the fetters of the profit system and an end to the system of competing nation states on which capitalism is based. This essential task directly shapes the type of party required by the working class. Globally organised capital can only be successfully combated through the unification of the working people of all countries in a common international organisation—a worldwide socialist party. This is the programme advanced by the Socialist Equality Party in Britain, as a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

In contrast, every section of the old reformist and Stalinist bureaucracy has historically demonstrated its hostility towards the strivings of the working class for international unity and political independence from the bourgeoisie and its national state structures. The building of a new socialist party, therefore, presupposes the development of an independent movement of working people, in opposition to all representatives of the labour and trade union bureaucracy, and those radical groups who would seek to reinvigorate their declining influence within the workers' movement.

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