

# **On Britain's general election day: workers confront the task of building their own party**

**Socialist Equality Party of Britain  
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No party in today's ballot stands for the interests of working people. The Conservative Party is justifiably hated because of its destruction of living standards and erosion of democratic rights during nearly two decades in office. In these elections it advocates an extreme rightwing programme, reeking of nationalism and xenophobia.

But the Labour Party offers no real alternative. For four years it has betrayed its promise to reverse the social devastation bequeathed by the Tories, and has presided over growing social inequality. Today, Labour is the preferred party of big business because of its abandonment of its old reformist programme and its unalloyed commitment to the self-enrichment of a privileged elite.

New Labour is indifferent to the hardships facing millions of workers and their families. It is pledged to continue the destruction of essential welfare provisions and social services through the backdoor privatisation of the National Health Service and the state education system, eliminating what remains of public housing and providing further tax breaks to big business. Its record on democratic rights is an international disgrace. Under Prime Minister Tony Blair, Britain has become one of the most illiberal countries in the developed world.

Over the last three weeks, whenever Blair has stepped out of the carefully orchestrated media events staged by his spin doctors, he has faced a well of discontent and anger—from those whose loved ones have been endangered by the undermining of health care, from students struggling with loans and tuition fees and pensioners bitter at his government's paltry 75 pence rise in the state retirement allowance.

It is a measure of the alienation of the mass of the population from official politics that all opinion polls are predicting a record low turnout in today's election.

The fact that this election has seen the type of extra-parliamentary disaffection not witnessed for the past two decades—from industrial disputes that have broken out, despite the best efforts of the trade unions to suppress them, to the riots in Oldham and Leeds generated by a witches brew of poverty, police harassment and racism—belies all the claims that this merely reflects political apathy.

The single act best epitomising the venality of the Labour government is its defence of the Tories against charges of whipping up racism and contributing to the Oldham events through its anti-asylum seeker rhetoric. Even in the midst of an occasionally bitter electoral contest, Labour was compelled to extend the hand of friendship to its rivals and call for increased police repression.

Labour's unprecedented lurch to the right has opened up a political vacuum on the left, which many parties are seeking to exploit. However, working people should place no trust in any of them.

Britain's third largest party—the Liberal Democrats—is offering a watered down version of Labour's previous reformist policies, as a sop to rising social and political discontent. But this party, originating in a right wing split from the Labour Party in the 1980s, would defend the interests of capital just as ferociously as Blair, if placed in office. Any increase in its vote will be used to strengthen its hand in ongoing negotiations with Blair over the possibility of coalition or merger.

The same is true of the nationalist parties, Plaid Cymru in Wales and the Scottish National Party. Their cynical exploitation of anti-Labour sentiment notwithstanding, their programmes are aimed at dividing Scottish, Welsh and English workers while pressing demands for a greater share of UK tax revenues for regionally based businesses and to attract

global investment.

Three parties are on the ballot advancing themselves as leftwing successors to Labour—the Socialist Alliance, the Scottish Socialist Party and the Socialist Labour Party. In each instance, they are asking workers to repeat the fundamental historical mistake of adopting a reformist programme as the basis for their struggles against capitalism and to accept the continuing domination of the trade union bureaucracy over the workers' movement.

Such a policy cannot advance the interests of the working class. Indeed Labour's evolution is the outcome of precisely the perspective now held out by the SA, SSP and SLP. Their essential function is to prevent workers making a decisive break with the organisations and national-reformist programmes that have failed.

In opposing a vote for the SA, SSP and SLP, the Socialist Equality Party is not calling for a rejection of politics. On the contrary, we appeal to working people to raise their political horizons beyond making a choice of which party represents the "lesser evil". These elections confront working people with a harsh reality. The working class has been politically disenfranchised, and faces a full frontal assault on its jobs, living standards and democratic rights whatever the final composition of the next government.

There is no alternative to the creation of a new workers' party based on a socialist and internationalist perspective. The Socialist Equality Party calls on all readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* to join us in building this leadership, by winning the best elements in the working class, the youth and intellectuals to the banner of the Fourth International.



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