

The Socialist Labour Party: Scargill seeks to resurrect Stalinism under a flag of convenience

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In the 2001 British general election, the Socialist Labour Party (SLP) polled 57,288 votes. As its name suggests, it stood on a platform which advanced the party as the continuator of old-style Labour reformism. It sought to make political capital from Scargill's other job as President of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and his record as leader of the 1984-85 national miners strike, appealing for a return to the type of trade union militancy prevalent during the early 1970s.

Measured against the millions who abstained in the election, the vote for the SLP shows that he did not succeed in inspiring confidence in the SLP as a political alternative to the Labour Party. Nevertheless, this does not indicate a conscious understanding of the true political character of Scargill's party. Given the burning necessity of constructing a genuine socialist party in opposition to the Labour Party, Scargill's attempt to advance the SLP as such a formation can only engender confusion, political disorientation and even antipathy. Hence we arrive at the need to educate workers, youth and socialist-minded intellectuals by calling things by their right name.

Scargill launched the SLP in 1996, after a high-profile break with the Labour Party following its abandonment of Clause Four of its constitution, which pledged to bring the commanding heights of the economy into public ownership. What emerged under his tutelage, however, was not simply a confused attempt at rebuilding a reformist party, but a Stalinist rump under the leadership of a man who defends the worst crimes of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the former Soviet Union and internationally.

Scargill's political career began in the youth movement of the Communist Party of Great Britain, the Young Communist League (YCL), which he joined in March 1955. His father, Harold, was a lifelong member of the CP. As a long time NUM activist, Scargill senior was one of the first people contacted by Frank Watters when he was transferred by the CP from Scotland to Yorkshire in October 1953, with a view to building a CP faction within the NUM. Watters saw potential in Scargill junior and before long he was to be speaking alongside CP general secretary Harry Pollitt at a public meeting in Barnsley. He was elected to the YCL National Committee at its 1956 Congress, where he remained for four years.

Scargill was part of a YCL delegation visiting Moscow in 1957 in the wake of Khrushchev's "secret speech" at the 20th Congress of the CPSU, which criticised some of the crimes of Stalin in the aftermath of the Hungarian uprising. Many of Scargill's contemporaries were to leave the CPGB in the next period, expressing revulsion at the crimes of Stalin, the best of whom were to join the Trotskyist movement.

Scargill's response was entirely opposed. Saying that he met Khrushchev and Bulganin at the 1957 Congress, Scargill claims to have told them, "You can't get rid of him [Stalin] by removing his body from the mausoleum, you know. You can't rewrite history and he did play a

valuable part during World War Two." [Quoted in *Scargill and the Miners* Michael Crick, Penguin, p32] Refusing to even accept the limited criticisms offered by Khrushchev, Scargill remained inside the CP for at least another five years. In 1960 he stood as the Communist Party candidate for the North Ward of Worsbrough District Council in South Yorkshire.

The exact circumstances under which he eventually left the CP are cloudy to say the least, but it seems to have coincided with his rise through the ranks of the National Union of Mineworkers. By early 1963 at the latest (there is no exact record when), he was officially out of the party. In 1977 Scargill claimed in an interview with the *Daily Mail* that he had been expelled from the CP "because I wouldn't stick to any rigid party line". On other occasions, he says he resigned. Speaking to John Mortimer, author of *In Character* (a collection of biographical essays published in 1984), he gives the following political account:

"I disagreed with the Russians not allowing dissidents to leave the country... I also objected to the moving of Stalin's body outside the mausoleum and changing the name of Stalingrad. It would be like us trying to pretend Churchill never existed. It was distorting history. And I didn't like the personal discipline of the party. They wanted me to sell the *Daily Worker* on Fridays, but I had union business to look after on a Friday so I joined the Co-operative Party." [J. Mortimer, *In Character*, p66, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1984.]

Earlier, in 1975, Scargill had said he disagreed with the Soviet Union's censorship of artists, sportsmen and Jewish people, which had "nothing in common with socialism."

Scargill clearly felt a conflict between CP membership and his rise through the ranks of the NUM. He told *The Observer* magazine in 1979, "the CP insisted I should work in a certain way when I became a trade union official. They wanted me to sell the *Daily Worker* and promote the CP ideals through the pit branch of the NUM. I resented this. It meant I wouldn't be exercising all my efforts for the men as miners."

For Scargill to join the Cooperative Party was a classic means for a Stalinist to enter the Labour Party, to which it was affiliated.

Even after he broke officially with the CP, Scargill maintained close relations with it and relied on CP support within the NUM's broad left for his continued rise to prominence.

Whatever his disagreements, none of them amounted to a political break with Stalinism. Indeed as subsequent events have proved, the most important for Scargill was the attempt by the party to distance itself from Stalin's crimes and his belief that party discipline could hamper his own career.

When he left the Labour Party in 1996 to form the SLP, Scargill was embarking on the project of building a Stalinist party at precisely the point where Stalinism, at least in the advanced countries, had been discredited.

He could not, therefore, openly proclaim the SLP's political pedigree. Instead he insisted that there be no discussion of questions relating to Trotskyism or Stalinism, no factions and no circulation of material not authorised by the party's leading bodies (Scargill and his immediate coterie). In the following two years or so, most of the middle class radical groups or their former members who identified themselves to some extent with Trotskyism and had responded to Scargill's call for a new party were expelled or forced out of the SLP.

In consequence, though its public persona remained that of a new edition of the old Labour Party, behind closed doors the rump of hardline Stalinists that now constitute the party's membership have become ever-more vocal in their praise for the man whom Trotsky so aptly characterised as "the gravedigger of the revolution".

In November last year, Scargill addressed a meeting organised by the Stalin Society, ostensibly to celebrate the October 1917 revolution but in reality dedicated to praising Stalin's police state that was erected on the corpses of Lenin's Bolshevik party.

Scargill devoted his own speech to a defence of the Soviet Union's role in the defeat of Nazism in the Second World War. He painted a picture of an ever-vigilante Stalin leading the revolutionary masses to victory. Having chosen to ignore the historical record with regard to the purge of the Red Army generals and Stalin's initial pact with Hitler, he declared: "I am sick and tired of listening to the so-called 'experts' who today still criticise the Soviet Union and its leadership—and in particular, Stalin—at that time for not being ready, not having enough resources nor having the military strength necessary to withstand or stop the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union."

Were it not for Stalin, he went on, "Britain as other countries would today have been under the yoke of a fascist Europe, rather than a Germany-dominated European Union."

His eulogies for Stalin reach a crescendo, with his insistence that "above all we should remember Stalingrad. Hitler had declared that it was at this city—that bore the name of Joseph Stalin—that the Nazi Army would triumph and the Red Army would be vanquished. The battle both militarily and ideologically was won for Socialism and lost for fascism at Stalingrad. The city which bore Stalin's name had become, and remains, a symbol for both sides."

Scargill goes so far as to assert that it was the supposed abandonment of Stalin's legacy that led to the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union. He states, "Following the death of Stalin in 1953, new forces seized control in the Soviet Union, and a so-called 'new realism' began to take the place of Socialist planning. Khrushchev, Breznev, later Andropov, Chernenko, but above all, Gorbachev did what the might of the Nazi army had failed to do—they ripped the heart out of the Soviet Union and destroyed its Socialist system. They opened the door to the 'free market' which has produced mass unemployment, poverty, a life expectancy of 46 (compared with 76 under Soviet Socialism)..."

Scargill defends the Soviet Union not in spite of but because of the crimes of Joseph Stalin. He is attracted to Stalinism not because of a misidentification with revolution, but its nationalist perspective and the bureaucratic domination over the working class on which it rested.

The period since 1991 has witnessed not only the collapse of Stalinism, but that of Labour-style reformism. Both ultimately represent the failure of programmes based on the national regulation of economic life, under conditions of profound changes in world economy brought about by the development of the microcomputer process and the global integration of production and commerce this facilitated.

Scargill has no answer to this failure other than a yearning for a supposed golden age when the Stalinist and reformist organisations still acted as a check on the worst excesses of the profit system. For him, globalisation is the enemy that must be combated by strengthening the apparatus of the state. Far from advancing a socialist program, Scargill

lines workers up behind a witches brew of minimal reformist demands, anti-European and anti-American rhetoric and calls for the defence of British industry and national sovereignty. This was precisely the programme on which Scargill led the year-long miners' strike of 1984-85 to defeat, with his demand for a return to the "Plan for Coal"—a corporatist agreement negotiated between the government and the unions in the 1970s based on national protectionism—and refusal to wage a political struggle against the isolation of the miners by the union leaders and the Labour Party.

There are those within the SLP who are even less guarded than Scargill in their adulation of Stalinism and all its works. Chief amongst these are the hangers on of the Stalin Society of Harpal Brar, leader of the Indian Workers Association and London Regional President of the SLP.

Just prior to the election, Brar spoke at a meeting devoted to a celebration of the Moscow Trials in the 1930s, the means by which Stalin wiped out the generation of revolutionaries who led the October 1917 Revolution and consolidated the rule of the bureaucracy.

The publicity for the meeting promised to dispel, "Misinformation concerning the Moscow trials [which] abounds in the bourgeois media and in the papers of various Trotskyite outfits who sought then, as now, to undermine the achievements of the USSR".

In his report Brar described the Moscow Trials as "a revolutionary purge... against those who... collaborated with imperialist powers in order to bring about the restoration of capitalism in the USSR".

Declaring that the trials culminated in the execution of 62 "prominent traitors", Brar claimed that the trials had nothing in common with "purges" but went on to say that purges "are a quite justifiable means for the removal of rotten elements in the party such as careerists."

Heaping praise upon the chief prosecutor Vyshinsky, Brar declared, "it would be lovely to conduct a Moscow trial myself."

An indication of the political make up of the audience is given in the following passage from a report in the *Weekly Worker*, published by a group of reconstructed Stalinists:

"A comrade called Wilf caused a frisson of excitement in the meeting when he pointed out that purges would always and must always have a place as a means of cleansing the party. Yes, degenerates and traitors would have to be shot, and 'tired' party activists would have to be removed. It was a pity that Khrushchev, another degenerate and coward, had not been unmasked as a revisionist traitor and given a bullet before he initiated the process that logically led to the ultimate treachery of Gorbachev."

Brar makes no secret of the fact that his support for the SLP is conditional upon their defense of Stalin and Stalinism. In a lengthy paper presented to a gathering of hardline Stalinists and Maoists in 1998 in Brussels, Brar states, "Our decision to join the SLP, notwithstanding its weaknesses... has been proven correct by the second Congress of the SLP. Many of the noisy and fractious Trotskyist groups, who had joined the SLP with the purpose of hijacking it, suffered serious defeat at the Congress. Their entrists plans in ruins, they left the SLP, shouting abuse at the 'Stalinist' Scargill."

Clearly envisioning himself standing in Vyshinsky's shoes, he adds, "Their departure gave added strength to the SLP, cleansed as it was of the filthy scum whose constant endeavour is to sap the vitality and self-confidence of the working class; to keep working-class struggle within the boundaries of the capitalist system by slandering the all-encompassing and earth-shattering achievements of socialism."

Brar concludes, "unlike the revisionists and Trotskyists, the SLP honours and cherishes the great achievements of socialism in the USSR. It refuses to denounce that legendary communist, Joseph Stalin. For that reason, deservedly in my view, Comrade Scargill has been denounced by the counter-revolutionary Trots and revisionist liquidators as a dictatorial 'Stalinist'—a badge that I have told him he ought to wear with honour."

Scargill and his party should by all rights be viewed by the working class as a political pariah, rather than the representative of “old-style socialism” he claims to be. That he is not seen in such terms is due in large part to the services rendered by the very radical groupings denounced so vociferously by Mr Brar, whose own attitude to Stalinism is epitomised by their constant appeals for a common electoral front between the SLP and their own Socialist Alliance. Indeed Scargill has been able to make limited political capital from his leadership of the 1984-5 miners’ strike and a false identification with the militant struggle of the working class during the 1970s only because the radical groups have generally treated his Stalinist politics as one would a minor character defect such as picking one’s nose in public.

A particularly venal role was played in this regard by the leadership of the Workers Revolutionary Party, Gerry Healy, Michael Banda and Cliff Slaughter, who were expelled from the International Committee of the Fourth International in 1986. While they were still its British section, they prostituted the considerable support they had won amongst the miners by lending their seal of approval to Scargill’s leadership of the strike.

Times have changed, however. A politically reawakened working class will not be attracted to the decaying remnants of Stalinism, no matter how it is repackaged or how carefully its true pedigree is concealed.



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