

Britain: Socialist Alliance vows political loyalty to the trade union bureaucracy

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The Socialist Alliance March 16 conference, called under the slogan “democratise the trade union political funds”, was a strange affair. Outside the London venue, paper sellers from those groups professing allegiance to socialist and even revolutionary politics affiliated to the SA, campaigned on a number of issues—from the threatened war against Iraq to the sale of local authority housing. Passing into the hall for conference business, however, was like entering into a parallel universe. Bar references to the organising body, socialism was barely mentioned. Instead the onlooker was treated to a grotesque parody shaped by what Britain’s middle class radical groups consider to be the behaviour and outlook of the “ordinary trade unionist”.

None of the featured speakers—all political activists—mentioned their party affiliations, only their trade union position. Each of them condemned the Blair government for its right-wing policies, and one or two even made some mild criticisms of the trade union bureaucracy. Numerous speakers complained, “The party built by the trade unions, is now attacking the unions”, but there was no discussion about how this state of affairs had arisen, much less the historical lessons that should be drawn.

Instead everything was focussed on a call for the trade unions to withhold part of their financial backing from Labour. Charlie Balsh, from the postal union CWU, for example, approvingly quoted a letter from a Labour Party Assembly member in Wales, supporting unions withholding the political fund until such a time that Labour came to its senses and changed tack. Greg Tucker, a member of the rail union RMT, said it was necessary to review the “whole relationship with Labour”. But, he continued, “It is a mistake to look at total separation from the Labour Party. We are not at the stage where we can pose as an alternative to Labour. We have to earn our spurs over the next years.”

The significance of this remark should not be underestimated. Some four years after its formation, one of the SA’s leading public figures declares that it does not constitute a political alternative to the Labour Party. Why then any worker should support the SA, vote for its candidates, and campaign for others to support it was never explained. Nor was Tucker under any pressure to do so. Amongst the audience of some 1,000 radicals, this disavowal of any leadership role for the Socialist Alliance was not unusual. Such a stance was not an expression of false modesty, but an accurate indication of the grouping’s politics.

The Socialist Alliance was formed in 1998 as an electoral bloc of a number of middle class radical groups, including the Socialist Workers Party and the Socialist Party, possibly more well-known in its former incarnation as the Militant Tendency within the Labour Party. Despite tactical differences between the groups, they share a common political perspective. According to the SA, whilst many workers have become disillusioned in Labour, they must still, of necessity, pass through a centrist stage before arriving at a revolutionary standpoint. All attempts to short-circuit this process, they claim, by pressing for a complete break with the old organisations and the building of a genuine socialist party, is

sectarianism of the worst sort and is doomed to failure. Thus, for example, a Communist Party of Great Britain leaflet argued that calls to break with Labour are “frustrated” and “shortsighted”, representing a “flip from auto-Labourism to auto-anti-Labourism”, which is “a mechanical and easy substitute for a real political struggle”.

Such claims are nothing but a political justification for maintaining the labour bureaucracy’s domination over the working class.

The SA’s statement of principle to the conference, if such a word can be used in this context, proudly cited the opinion of the right wing *Daily Mail*, that the “Socialist Alliance...has taken over from the old Labour as the authentic voice of the left”. But stripped bare, the SA’s perspective is to try and channel workers anger at the Blair government into a campaign to pressurise a section of the bureaucracy to the left and so revive “traditional” reformist Labour policies. The SA is as yet undecided as to how this should take place—whether it should take the form of a fight-back by ordinary members within the Labour Party to oust Blair, or whether it will be necessary at some point to split and form a new organisation, along the lines of “real” Labour. But what all its constituent groups agree on is that whatever happens will be determined by the actions of the trade union bureaucracy.

It is this fawning before the trade unions that runs as a red thread throughout the SA’s politics. No matter how right-wing the Blair government, so long as it has the support of the trade unions the SA argues that it remains fundamentally a workers’ party. Moreover, for any future party to present itself as the leadership of the working class, it must first enjoy significant trade union support as did Labour when it was formed at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The SA never attempt to explain what it considers to be intrinsically “socialist” about the trade unions, nor why the working class must repeat its political experiment of some 100 years ago, especially when it has ended so ignominiously. Whilst correctly citing Labour’s origins as the political representative of the trade unions in parliament, the SA refuses to acknowledge that the trade unions have any political responsibility for Labour’s subsequent evolution. Instead it contrasts the trade unions to Labour, claiming that all would be resolved if only the party would implement “union policy”.

Writing in the SA pamphlet, *Whose money is it anyway? The case for democratising the trade union political funds*, Matt Wrack protests, “why should union members pay to sponsor an MP who ignores union policy in every vote? The unions should draw up a set of criteria, based on the policies of each union, to decide who to support. Candidates for election should only receive support if they meet this criteria.”

This is just a political snow job on behalf of the union bureaucracy. Just what exactly is the union policy championed by Wrack and company? The trade unions have matched Labour’s rightward trajectory every step of the way—indeed Blair’s pro-business policies were first piloted by the union bureaucracy as it sought to develop its corporatist relations with management. Over the last 20 years, the unions have sabotaged any

industrial offensive by workers in defence of their jobs and working conditions on the grounds that the “free market” cannot be bucked, and that the interests of workers and their employers, are in all essentials one and the same. Herein lies the root of Blair’s “New Labour” policies.

Similarly, like Labour, the trade unions today function largely as empty shells, manned by overpaid functionaries with little or no interest in—much less any social connection to—the concerns of working people. Most union branch meetings are inquorate, whilst even the most high-profile elections for leading posts held recently, in transport for example, recorded a mere 30 percent turn-out.

Having effectively ruled out any political break with Labour for the foreseeable future, what then lies behind the SA’s campaign to “democratise” the trade union political fund?

In the first instance, the SA sense a change in mood, reflected in the growing number of disputes in the public sector—from transport, to the civil service, education, and social services. Although the number of strikes is still at an all-time low, the fact that they are rising, and impacting on virtually every area of public services has sent the political establishment into apoplexy. They are concerned that Prime Minister Tony Blair’s extended “honeymoon” period, which rested on widespread hostility to the Conservative Party, is coming to an end.

The political repercussions of this have caused even the trade union bureaucracy to criticise Blair. Earlier in the month, TUC leader John Monks complained that Blair was making an alliance with Italy’s far-right leader, Silvio Berlusconi, to undermine the wages and conditions of workers across Europe. The bureaucracy has interpreted the ability of several SA members to win leading positions in the trade unions—including most recently Bob Crowe in the RMT rail union—as the precursor to a political movement in the working class against Labour’s policies.

Their fear of such a development, coupled with their anger at the prime minister for not giving them their due respect—even attacking union leaders as “wreckers”—has led some unions to cut the amount of finance paid to the Labour Party. Writing in the SWP’s *Socialist Review*, in his capacity as an “RMT activist”, Tucker explained, “faced with the reality of New Labour in government it has been increasingly difficult for the union bureaucracy to defend our links with a Labour Party that is not listening”.

It is these tensions between Labour and the unions that have energised the radical groups, rather than the growing disaffection of the working class with Labour. Their aim is not to mobilise ordinary trade union members against the Blair government, or the trade union leaders who still provide Labour with the lion’s share of its funds, but to offer themselves up as a vital left prop through which the bureaucracy can seek to protect itself against such a rank-and-file rebellion.

During the rail workshop, one SA member after another explained how they were forced to fight with others in their workplace to keep them paying the political levy. One woman said that she was “constantly having to argue against people” saying that they wanted to pull out of the political levy. Most people don’t even know the political levy existed, another said, and were outraged when they found out their money was going to finance the Labour government. “Most people in the workplace say Labour shouldn’t get their money”, said another. “As they see it, they are in a fight with Labour and don’t want to give money to them.”

In contrast to the oppositional mood of many workers, the SA conference at all times had its eye set towards proving its political loyalty to the Labour Party and trade union bureaucracy. Speaking from the floor, an “FBU representative” (the fire brigades union) made this most explicit. “This campaign is not about disaffiliating from the Labour Party. We want to take a chunk of the Labour left with us. The union bureaucracy argues that our campaign is really about arguing for disaffiliation from Labour. We must make clear it is not.”

In keeping with this, the SA’s model resolution on the political levy—to be tabled at upcoming trade union conferences—spells out that nothing must be done without the say so of the union leaders. Only those candidates supportive of “union policy” should be considered for union funds, it states, before stipulating that any such requests for assistance should be carefully examined by “the national union and its local and regional committees” whilst the NEC prepares any necessary rule change. Just to make absolutely clear that the union tops should maintain their power of veto, Wrack writes in his pamphlet, “Each union has its own structure and traditions and it is not possible or even desirable to tell each union how it should run its political fund.”

Put crudely, the SA’s campaign over the political fund is all about getting its hands on a slice of the funding pie. As the aforementioned “FBU speaker” said, “The issue is not about disaffiliation or affiliation. It’s more fundamental than that. It’s about where the money goes”. The SA has been frustrated by union rules that ensure the political fund raised from workers, via their pay packets, goes *only* to the Labour Party. One speaker after another complained that, when they had run as SA candidates in the last general election, they had been prevented from receiving the financial backing of their union branch by this rule.

As long as they are given limited access to members’ contributions, then in return they will loyally uphold the right of the trade union tops to keep funding Blair and company. At an earlier point, radical groups such as the SWP were always careful to present themselves as representatives of the rank-and-file. Now, the demand for rank and file control over the trade unions has been abandoned in favour of the much more modest appeal for an element of democracy in the allocation of the political fund! The political root of this change is not hard to find. The hollowing out of the unions has at this stage benefited the radical groups, which now constitute a significant section of the trade union bureaucracy, not only of its lower rungs but of its top layers as well—capturing the positions of general secretary in the RMT rail union and the PCS civil service union in recent months for example. Today, the SA are hostile to the development of a genuine rank-and-file opposition movement because it would threaten their relations with their fellow bureaucrats on the right, whose acquiescence is required if they are to be allowed to get their own snouts in the union trough.



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