

Britain's Socialist Workers Party and the defence of national reformism—Part 3

A review of Alex Callinicos's *An Anti-Capitalist Manifesto*

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An Anti-Capitalist Manifesto by Alex Callinicos, Polity Press, London, 2003, ISBN 0-7456-2904-0

This concludes the three-part review

Specialist anti-Marxists

The final proof of the political role played by the World and European Social Forums is contained in its own charter.

The protests that took place against the World Trade Organisation (WTO) beginning in Seattle in 1999 certainly anticipated the development of a far broader social and political opposition to capitalism of which more will be said later. But the WSF and ESF leaders' response to the potentiality was an attempt to get control of all such social movements and to prevent them from posing a political challenge to the old parties and governments.

To this end, the WSF leaders have imposed a type of political censorship of oppositional voices that few governments in the world would be able to get away with—and which would lead them to be denounced for authoritarianism and dictatorship.

The first WSF held in 2001 in the southern Brazilian city of Porto Alegre had imposed on it by its unelected leadership a so-called “charter of principles”. This manipulates the anger felt towards the old parties of the political establishment to clamp down on anyone seeking to oppose them. Point nine of the charter insists that the WSF “brings together and interlinks only organisations and movements of civil society”. This term is never explained other than to identify that which is excluded: “Neither party representations nor military organisations shall participate in the Forum.”

To make perfectly clear which type of party the WSF is hostile to, the charter immediately adds the caveat: “Government leaders and members of legislatures who accept the commitments of this charter may be invited to participate in a personal capacity.”

To underline its point, the charter's point 10 stresses that the World Social Forum is opposed to all “reductionist views of economy, development and history”, by which is meant Marxism—whose opponents denounce it for being a type of “economic reductionism”.

This attempt to portray the WSF and ESF as standing “above politics” and representing instead “civil society” is justified as a means of ensuring that power will be held by the “social activists”. But in truth it has allowed only for the unchallenged rule of the unelected and unaccountable leadership of the WSF and ESF, who in turn are only the barely concealed representatives of the old discredited parties of social democracy,

Stalinism and numerous varieties of bourgeois nationalism.

Those who accept the WSF's political bona-fides such as the SWP and the LCR are obviously free to operate within its ranks in the role of a loyal opposition. But the injunction against political parties also serves the role of attempting to insulate any of those attracted to “the movement” from exposure to genuinely socialist politics.

Callinicos's “Transitional Demands” and the character of the SWP

It is to the “diverse anti-capitalist tendencies”, as listed by Callinicos, that he offers what he claims to be a new *Transitional Programme*—a reference to that drafted by Leon Trotsky and adopted by the Fourth International in 1938.

As with the *Communist Manifesto*, Callinicos's programme is the polar opposite of that elaborated by Trotsky.

The *Transitional Programme* took an attitude of irreconcilable political hostility to the Stalinist and social democratic organisations and their apologists. It championed the perspective of world socialist revolution against all varieties of national reformism and insisted that the realisation of this historic goal depended on the construction of the Fourth International.

In line with this strategic task, Trotsky proposed a series of transitional demands, aimed at “overcoming the contradiction between the maturity of the objective revolutionary conditions and the immaturity of the proletariat and its vanguard (the confusion and disappointment of the older generation, the inexperience of the younger generation). It is necessary to help the masses in the process of the daily struggle to find the bridge between present demands and the socialist program of revolution. This bridge should include a system of transitional demands, stemming from today's conditions and from today's consciousness of wide layers of the working class and unalterably leading to one final conclusion, the conquest of power by the proletariat” (*The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution*, Pathfinder Press, New York, 1977, pages 113-114).

In contrast, Callinicos's programme of transitional demands is not aimed at raising the political consciousness of the working class, but at appealing to the leaders of the WSF and ESF for an alliance. That is why he starts from the premise of what is acceptable to them all and includes such demands as the introduction of the Tobin tax.

Such demands reflect the interests of petty-bourgeois social layers, who are animated by a fear that the drive by the bourgeoisie to enrich itself is destroying the social fabric and threatening to unleash explosive class conflicts. Their own relatively privileged existence within academia, the

trade union hierarchy, think-tanks tied into the social democratic parties or the United Nations and the administration and management of numerous NGOs is therefore placed under threat.

The SWP's membership is itself part of this milieu, though historically it occupied its lower ranks and was consequently more radical in its rhetoric and social prescriptions. Callinicos, et al, now see new vistas opening up before them as left advisers to their social betters in their efforts to breathe fresh life in the old bureaucratic labour organisations.

What Callinicos's programme looks like in practice

Callinicos's book was published against the background of the US-led war against Iraq and the emergence of mass political opposition that produced an historic 11-million-strong international demonstration in February 2003.

This mass movement developed in large measure as a political rebellion against the old social democratic and Stalinist organisations—especially in those countries whose governments supported the war, such as Britain.

Here the politically reactionary implications of Callinicos's perspective were made manifest. The SWP was able to assume a leading position in the antiwar demonstrations, in large part thanks to the political vacuum created by the rightward lurch of the official labour movement. The Labour government was pursuing the war, there were only a handful of Labour MPs who would risk openly supporting the antiwar movement, the trade unions were largely absent from the demonstrations, while the Trades Union Congress publicly disowned it.

Organising the protests therefore fell to the SWP-led Committee to Stop War in the Gulf. Far from using the opportunity to mobilise the working class against the war and in struggle against the government on a socialist perspective, the SWP thrashed around to cobble together a coalition with supposedly progressive bourgeois and petty-bourgeois formations.

Its leading representatives ended up speaking on platforms alongside a handful of dissident Labourites, UN personages, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, the former leader of Algeria Ben Bella, as well as Charles Kennedy, leader of Britain's third party, the Liberal Democrats. The Stop the War Coalition was made up of the SWP, the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB) and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND).

MAB is a right-wing fundamentalist tendency associated with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood that supports the introduction of Sharia law, but for the SWP it is a vehicle through which it hopes to make an opportunist appeal to the many young Muslims who were opposed to the war. The CND is largely defunct, functioning as a retirement home for ageing Stalinists, Christians and a few pacifist elements in the middle class.

But this was an alliance the SWP desperately needed in order to argue against an independent political initiative by the working class, in a social movement that was overtly hostile to the old parties and organisations. The SWP insisted that a refusal to raise political differences was essential in order to maintain the heterogeneous movement against war; to keep things purely at the level of general opposition to war so as not to alienate anyone.

In reality, once again there was a block only on socialist politics, which allowed the antiwar movement to be dominated by those who advanced support for the European powers and the UN as the only realistic means of opposing US warmongering.

It was this failed perspective which prevented the antiwar movement from developing into a political threat to US and British imperialism.

Yet in the aftermath of the war, the SWP inaugurated a political project which again insisted that the construction of a new party must be

grounded on opposition to the open advocacy of socialist policies and a concentration on minimal democratic demands that would appeal to all classes.

The normally deeply pessimistic cadre of the SWP was excited by its new-found acceptance by sections of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. And they were determined to capitalise on this by abandoning their socialist baggage and building alliances with disgruntled Labourites and Stalinists and anyone else who was prepared to have them.

The proudest achievement for the SWP-inspired RESPECT-Unity coalition is that it secured the support of expelled antiwar Labour MP George Galloway—a big name who is notorious for his opportunist relations with the Arab bourgeoisie and who has publicly declared his hostility to Marxism. When the organisation fielded candidates in the European elections in June, they even ran under the official heading “RESPECT—Unity Coalition (George Galloway).”

The SWP hopes that Galloway will be the first of many such defectors from the Labour Party and the trade unions and has shaped RESPECT's programme so as to secure such support. Partially in order to make a big electoral splash, the SWP has adapted itself wholesale to Islamic religious prejudices so as to secure a vote in Asian areas. But its opportunism is such that it will happily cultivate whatever other forces it believes will support its plans to construct a non-socialist electoral vehicle.

Internationally, the SWP is trading off its influence within Britain to secure a place within what is called the European Anti-Capitalist Left.

This brings together the same left elements that gravitate around the European Social Forum (ESF). Its signatories are the SWP, the RESPECT-Unity Coalition, and the Scottish Socialist Party from Britain, the LCR from France and similar radical groups from Portugal, Denmark, Greece, Luxemburg, Spain and Catalonia.

Its efforts to include the PRC in its ranks came to nothing, when Rifondazione took its place in a rival block of Stalinist parties.

The Manifesto of the European Anti-Capitalist Left, issued for the June European elections, again claims to be the political heir of the mass antiwar movement. But it then hands over this role to the ESF by insisting, “The June 2004 European elections will be an opportunity to fight for demands and proposals that the European global justice movement has fought for unceasingly.”

Once again the SWP and its co-thinkers counterpose to the European Union a national reformist alternative.

But under the headline, “A peaceful Europe, against the European Super-State”, the manifesto actually lends legitimacy to the European bourgeoisie and directs its demands to one of Callinicos's famous states acting “in concert”, the EU.

It declares: “For the first time, the ruling classes most identified with European construction have obtained some legitimacy from the European population by opposing the US ruling class, thanks to President Bush's illegal and wild policies. However, we hold no illusions about what the European Union can do. Our position is:

“No to war! The European Union must renounce the use of war as a way to intervene in international conflicts.”

Where it opposes the EU, it is on the basis of championing the national division of Europe's peoples and upholding the rights of nation states. In the section opposing the EU constitution, the manifesto declares: “We believe that all power must be in the hands of the sovereign peoples. We recognise the right of the nations without states to determine their future, and we are in solidarity with the left forces that struggle in that direction, whatever our own political analysis may be.”

By identifying democratic rights with the preservation of national sovereignty, the manifesto once more explicitly endorses the nation state as the guarantor of the liberty of the working class as opposed to being the chief means of enforcing the dictates of the ruling classes. Its reference to “nations without states” is an embrace of various movements such as the

Basque and Catalan separatists in Spain and, of course, the nationalism of the Scottish Socialist Party. To portray such movements as left or progressive is an attempt to conceal their role in sowing divisions in the working class that only benefit regional elites seeking to establish their own relations with global corporations and to extract subsidies from the EU.

It should be stressed that the SWP and its allies never once call for the creation of the United Socialist States of Europe, but raise only a non-class demand for a “Europe from below”, which is identified with “the activists and the organisations: trade unions, peasant organisations, ecological groups, the movements of those ‘without’ (the jobless, homeless, undocumented, asylum seekers), anti-racist networks, academic and intellectual initiatives, Third World campaigns and NGOs.”

In short, it is simply a Europe shaped by the nostrums and interests of the European Social Forum, which is hailed as having created, “an extraordinary framework, democratic and unitary, a new movement of emancipation on a European scale” that must now “conquer the political field” under the guidance of the “anti-capitalist left”.

Once again the perspective advanced by Callinicos and the SWP articulates the interests of a layer of petty-bourgeois careerists, who see the possibility of ending their past exclusion from positions of power by trading off their specialist role as left-sounding defenders of the status quo and inveterate opponents of socialism.

Concluded



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