

Election manifesto of the Socialist Equality Party of Britain

27 March 2007

Below we publish the manifesto of the Socialist Equality Party of Britain for the elections to the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly on May 3. The SEP is standing a regional list in West of Scotland and South Wales Central. The election site can be accessed at "Vote SEP for a socialist alternative in Scotland and Wales".

The Socialist Equality Party calls on all working people, students and youth to support our campaign in the elections to the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly on May 3.

A vote for the SEP is a vote for the development of a new and genuinely socialist movement against a Labour government that functions as the political tool of the super-rich. The efforts of this privileged elite to accumulate ever-greater levels of personal wealth is the most destructive factor facing humanity.

We seek to unite workers throughout Britain with their brothers and sisters internationally in opposition to the eruption of US aggression, which, with Labour's support, threatens to spread the illegal wars against Iraq and Afghanistan into Iran.

The fight against war is bound up with the struggle to put an end to the capitalist profit system by reorganizing economic life to meet the social interests of the vast majority of the world's population, rather than the selfish interests of a parasitic elite.

Against imperialist war and militarism

These elections coincide with the tenth anniversary of Labour coming to power. Prime Minister Tony Blair's claims at the time that "things can only get better" and that Labour would pursue an "ethical" foreign policy and would be "purer than pure" now look like a sick joke.

The greatest single crime of the Blair government has been its role as the chief ally of the criminal clique in the White House, whose policy of unbridled military aggression has turned Iraq into a bloody nightmare.

Hundreds of thousands have lost their lives. The country's infrastructure has been largely destroyed in order to hand over its oil to the major corporations. Its people face daily repression, torture and violence at the hands of the occupation forces and their puppet government. Sectarian tensions have been deliberately inflamed to the point of civil war, as a precursor to carving up the country along religious and ethnic lines.

Even now, there is no end in sight. Instead, an additional 30,000 US troops have been sent to Baghdad in an effort to crush the insurgency and secure the right of US corporations to seize Iraq's oil.

The Bush administration and the Blair government are also planning a spring offensive in Afghanistan—a military pincer movement that would seek to consolidate a strangle-hold over the bulk of the world's oil resources located in the Middle East and Caspian Basin.

At the centre of this war for oil is the campaign to justify a military assault on Iran, including the possibility of nuclear strikes, which would

unleash a disaster of unimaginable proportions. The decision to upgrade Britain's Trident system makes clear that the main nuclear danger comes from Washington and London.

This ongoing militarist campaign takes place in defiance of mass anti-war sentiment. The Iraq war was launched despite tens of millions taking to the streets in a global protest. Bush's "surge" in Iraq comes just weeks after the American people repudiated his war-mongering in the November 2006 elections.

In Britain, Blair has made defying the will of the electorate his guiding principle. The claims by some that the slight reduction in British troop capacity in Iraq marks a breach with Washington were refuted by revelations of secret talks between Bush and Blair over the installation of the "Son of Star Wars" missile defence system.

No principled opposition to this war drive exists within the official parties. There has been no serious attempt within the Labour Party or the Opposition to hold Blair to account or demand an immediate withdrawal from Iraq. No one has taken a stand against the aggressive campaign against Iran. And in the US, the Democrats have done little more than register a token protest, while refusing to impeach Bush or deny funding for the war.

Whatever tactical disputes exist, America's ruling elite is determined to offset its declining global economic position against its rivals in Europe, Russia and China by utilising its preponderant military advantage in a renewed attempt to divide the world's vital resources and markets. Britain, whose global position since the end of the Second World War has depended on US support, is allying itself with Washington so that it can punch above its weight on the world arena.

No confidence can be placed in either the European powers or the United Nations to oppose the US war drive. Bitter experience since 2003 has confirmed the perfidious role of the UN, which rubber-stamped the occupation of Iraq and colluded in the attack on Lebanon and numerous military adventures in Africa. As for the European powers, they have continued to appease Washington while at the same time seeking to strengthen their hand militarily in order to project their own imperialist interests.

The struggle against war is above all a class question. Both the Blair government and its neo-conservative allies are the political representatives of a financial oligarchy that runs globally operating corporations and financial institutions, and whose predatory interests can be secured only by the use of force, at the expense of the broad masses of the world's peoples. Only an independent, socialist movement of the working class, uniting across national borders, is capable of halting the descent into a Third World War.

The fight against social inequality

Paralleling the turn to military conquest are the Labour government's policies of robbery and plunder at home. Blair has continued the attack on vital social provisions and the privatisation of the welfare state begun by Margaret Thatcher.

In 1997, the year Labour came to power, the wealth of the top 1,000 in Britain was just short of £100 billion. Today, this has tripled to £300 billion, thanks largely to the UK's transformation into what the *Sunday Times* described as the world's first "onshore tax haven". It is calculated that Britain's 54 billionaires pay hardly any tax on their wealth, with more than 32 of them not having paid a penny in personal taxation. In contrast, the poorest households in Britain pay a higher share of taxes and receive a lower share of state benefits than before Labour took office.

As a result, Britain is now one of the most socially polarised countries in the world. One percent of the population own 23 percent of all wealth and 62 percent of total liquid assets, whilst the poorest half of the population own just six percent of wealth and less than one percent of liquid assets.

It has become a commonplace for politicians to rail against the unemployed, the infirm and pensioners as a drain on the economy. In reality, it is this parasitic layer of the super-rich that society can no longer afford.

The ruling elite has taken on the character of the aristocracy in pre-revolutionary France. This super-rich layer contributes nothing to the economic well-being of society. Most of them have made their fortunes through speculation, the privatization of state enterprises and asset-stripping existing corporations. In the companies they head, wages are slashed, jobs are decimated and pension funds raided, whilst they award themselves record levels of pay, bonuses and share options.

This redistribution of wealth away from working people to the rich has produced appalling levels of social deprivation and economic hardship.

Universal welfare provision has been almost entirely replaced by means-tested benefits, supposedly targeted at the most needy. Nevertheless, child poverty in the UK is the worst in Europe, whilst fully 14 percent of pensioners live on less than £5,000 per annum.

The real legacy of the government's economic and welfare policies is a massive increase in the number of working poor. Half of the 3.4 million children living in poverty have a parent in paid work, and it is the drive to further depreciate wage rates that lies behind Labour's latest attack on welfare benefits, particularly directed against single mothers.

The oft-repeated mantra that those at the bottom of the social ladder have only themselves to blame for not working harder is a vile slander. In fact, the phenomenal increase in the working poor is despite Britons working the longest hours in Europe, often having to carry out unpaid overtime in order to keep their jobs.

The situation would look much worse were it not for the fact that millions have been forced to take on massive and unsustainable levels of personal debt in order to survive.

The UK's total personal debt now exceeds £125 trillion and is increasing by over £1 million every four minutes. Average household debt in the UK is approaching £9,000, excluding mortgages. Almost one-and-a-half million adults—equivalent to the combined populations of Edinburgh, Glasgow, Cardiff and Swansea—face bankruptcy, owing over £10,000 in unsecured debts (credit cards, etc). One person is declared insolvent every minute of every working day. Personal bankruptcies have increased 55.5 percent in the last year, and Individual Voluntary Arrangements (a formal agreement to pay between debtors and creditors) are rising by 118 percent per annum.

When mortgages are included, average household debt rises to around £60,000. This is constantly being pushed up, with the average house price in the UK now in excess of £200,000. Average household income in the UK, before tax, is only £30,000. Mortgage defaults are already increasing, with almost 35,000 home repossession orders initiated during the third quarter of 2006.

Such is the precarious existence facing many working people, with all the attendant anxieties, family breakdown and other social problems this brings in its wake, that UNICEF described Britain, alongside the US, as the worst place in the industrialized world to be young.

It is also one of the worst places to be old, even for those who are not forced to rely only on the miserly state pension. Millions who have paid into company schemes throughout their working lives now find that their contributions have been fleeced by their employers, or gambled away on the stock market. The total private sector pension deficit for all UK employers now stands at £150 billion. But this is dwarfed by the estimated public sector pension deficit of £700 billion.

This situation is made all the more appalling by the fact the UK once had one of the most developed welfare states in the world, and still enjoys free health care at the point of delivery and free education up until university level. Now even these provisions are under attack in the form of tuition fees, the extension of the retirement age to 68, the rationing of health care and recent proposals that some medical procedures must be paid for.

Once the privatisation of public services takes full effect, vast layers of the population will be stripped of access to the basic necessities of life. Moreover, any downturn in the economy would immediately plunge millions into abject poverty. According to research by Combined Insurance, more than half the population would be unable to survive financially for longer than 17 days if they suffered an unexpected loss of income.

Defend democratic rights

When Blair declares that Britain is on a war footing, necessitating a permanent state of emergency, he is not simply referring to a supposed "war on terror". A society of such class extremes cannot be organized along democratic lines.

It is impossible for the government to secure a popular mandate for measures that lead to the impoverishment of the broad mass of the population. This provides the initial impulse for the constant demands from government and the media for law-and-order measures and the overturning of legal protections which have for generations safeguarded the rights of citizens against state power.

Moreover, the assault on democratic rights is the inevitable product of the drive to carve up the world's resources through colonial-style wars of conquest and the militarization of British society that must accompany this.

The fact that Britain faces a terror threat is entirely the responsibility of the government. By joining the illegal war against Iraq, it has destabilised the Middle East and inflamed ethnic and religious tensions within the UK. The measures the government is employing to supposedly fight this threat can only further endanger the security of the British people by fuelling the sense of injustice that is exploited by the Islamic fundamentalists.

In turn, the terror threat is invoked to justify coercive powers more akin to a police state. It is this which constitutes the gravest threat to the life and liberty of the British people.

Time and again, the government has demonstrated its contempt for the rule of law. Habeas corpus—freedom from arbitrary arrest and imprisonment—has been undermined, the right to jury trial curtailed, freedom of speech and expression restricted and the presumption of innocence jettisoned. Asylum rights and the provisions of the Geneva Conventions that were the outcome of the universal revulsion generated by the crimes of Nazism have been gutted.

Britain is now a country in which minority communities can be raided

by the police on the flimsiest of pretexts; people are imprisoned without charge for months at a time, and the innocent gunned down in broad daylight by armed police. The government has even granted itself the right to declare a state of emergency and rule by executive fiat, without recourse to parliament.

Scare-mongering over the terror threat is accompanied by tirades against Muslims and immigrants. The aim is to justify repressive measures and to divide working people by creating a scapegoat for the social problems caused by capitalism.

The defence of democratic rights means fighting not only to preserve existing civil liberties, but to expand them—beginning with the complete restructuring of the political system. The abolition of the monarchy and the House of Lords would be an initial step in ending class privilege. This is integral to the creation of governmental institutions that allow the genuine control of society by working people, rather than the parliamentary institutions of the capitalist state at Westminster, Holyrood and Cardiff.

Above all, the struggle for democratic rights is bound up with a fundamental change in the economic and social order. There can be no democracy worthy of the name while grotesque levels of private wealth are wielded as a weapon against society, and while millions have no say over how their workplaces are run and a handful of corporate chiefs or city speculators can strip them of their livelihoods.

No return to “Old Labour”

The corruption and sleaze that have characterized New Labour are the inevitable outcome of government by a kleptocracy.

The “loans for peerages” scandal arises out of the party’s drive to divorce itself from its former social base amongst working people and to remove official politics from any form of popular control. The Labour Party has been reduced to a bureaucratic rump, whose function is to translate the interests of millionaires and billionaires, such as Rupert Murdoch, into government policy.

The trade unions no longer defend even the most basic interests of their members and have presided over an unbroken series of defeats stretching back to the miners’ strike of 1984-85. On every occasion when their members have been attacked, whether through the announcement of mass redundancies, factory closures or the looting of pension provisions, the trade unions have stepped forward to prevent any fight back and to act as a force for order on behalf of capital.

Immediately prior to the outbreak of the war against Iraq in 2003, the Trades Union Congress rejected support for the anti-war movement and issued a statement insisting that “parliament is committed to this course” and that Britain’s armed forces “must receive the support of the British people”.

Such an unbroken record of treachery cannot be answered by a change of leadership from Blair to Gordon Brown, or by the calls for a return to “Old Labour” now being voiced by a handful of lefts within the Parliamentary Labour Party, who, after years of dutiful service to Number 10, fear electoral oblivion.

Labour’s agenda is set by the demands of the major corporations and financial institutions, which will not tolerate any retreat from the attacks on the working class. The International Monetary Fund is insisting that public expenditure be slashed even more ruthlessly, regardless of who wins the elections.

New Labour was never simply the brainchild of Blair and Brown. To the extent that Labour and the trade unions ever held out the prospect of socialism, it was to be achieved through a process of gradual reforms

based on national economic regulation.

But the unprecedented globalization that has taken place over the past three decades, facilitated by the vast developments in science and technology, means that the nation state is no longer the essential unit of economic life. Capital roams the world in search of the cheapest production costs, wage rates, taxes and raw materials. Massive sums are given over to speculation that is increasingly divorced from the actual process of production and which can create runs on the financial and share markets that devastate national economies overnight.

Proclaiming that all resistance is futile, the Labour Party and the trade unions organize the elimination of the previous social gains won by working people and the removal of all restrictions on corporate profits in the name of global competitiveness.

Their actions underscore the bankruptcy of all nationally based organizations and programmes. As has been revealed on countless occasions, and most recently in the lay-offs at Airbus, this pits workers in one country against workers in another.

The global expansion and unification of the productive forces has the potential to vastly improve living standards for the world’s people. But capitalism prevents this by subordinating production to the private profit interests of the ruling classes in competing national states.

For the unity of the British, European and international working class

The SEP insists that the problems facing working people in Britain are the same as those faced by workers all over the world. Together with our international co-thinkers, we fight for the unification of the working class against all forms of nationalism, racism, and other forms of ethnic and religious chauvinism.

We oppose all those who portray Scottish or Welsh nationalism as the basis for the construction of a new workers’ party, and who support the efforts of the Scottish National Party (SNP) and Plaid Cymru to attribute the problems in these countries to “English” rule.

Such claims glorify the Scottish parliament and Welsh assembly as being somehow more democratic than Westminster, and seek to obscure the essential social interests that dictate policy in these devolved bodies.

The Scottish Socialist Party and the Solidarity movement led by Tommy Sheridan are competing to prove that they are more consistently nationalist than the SNP. They claim that the most important issue facing workers in Scotland is the need for a referendum on independence. In Wales, the Socialist Alternative and George Galloway’s Respect coalition also flirt with nationalism.

National separatism has nothing to do with socialism. It expresses the interests of a layer of the aspiring middle class who are seeking to make their own relations with local capital, the transnational corporations and the European Union. The experience of the working class with such movements has been catastrophic. It has plunged the former Yugoslavia into bloody fratricidal conflict and provided the basis for the development of numerous right-wing movements such as the Northern League in Italy and the Vlaams Belang in Belgium.

We are equally hostile to the efforts of the Conservative Party and sections of the media to whip up “Little Englander” nationalism, based on demands for an end to the supposed subsidies and other alleged privileges enjoyed by Scotland and Wales.

There are no common interests between working people and their oppressors, whatever flag they wave. The Socialist Equality Party fights against all efforts to divide the working class. We seek to unite workers throughout Britain with their brothers and sisters on the Continent through the establishment of the United Socialist States of Europe.

This requires a struggle against the European Union, which functions as a big business club dedicated to the construction of a trade and military bloc against its main competitors. To this end, it is engaged in the wholesale restructuring of Europe's economies and social provisions through deregulation and privatization. Central to this agenda is the utilization of Eastern and Central Europe as a low-cost assembly platform, whilst many of its impoverished peoples are forced into the position of a super-exploited émigré labour force.

Only by ending the domination of the capitalist class over Europe is it possible to prevent its fracturing into antagonistic national states and utilize its vast wealth and productive forces for the benefit of society. The continent would then become a powerful ally to the oppressed masses all over the world, rather than the historic centre of colonial oppression.

The establishment of a United Socialist States of Europe would be a major blow against US imperialism, enormously strengthening the American working class in its struggle against the warmongers in the White House.

A programme of socialist policies

Against militarism and war: The SEP stands for a socialist foreign policy, based on international working class solidarity. We demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all British and foreign troops from Iraq and Afghanistan. Billions of dollars must be paid to the peoples of both countries for compensation and reconstruction. The architects of the war—in London and Washington—must be placed on trial for war crimes.

We call for an end to the military exploits of British imperialism around the globe; the immediate dismantling of NATO and the closure of all American bases in Europe; the cancellation of Trident and other nuclear weapons programmes; and the conversion of Britain's vast arms industry to socially useful production. The armed forces and security services must be replaced by defence organizations answerable to the democratic will of the people.

Defend democratic rights: The SEP calls for the rescinding of all anti-terror legislation and other measures that have curtailed individual liberties, undermining the presumption of innocence and habeas corpus. We call for the closure of Guantánamo and similar institutions such as Belmarsh Prison in London.

The entire legal system must be democratically overhauled. The prisons are full of people—including children—who have been locked up for petty offences or because of problems of mental ill-health or addiction. These people must be provided instead with the social and medical assistance they require.

We call for the overturning of all anti-trade union and anti-strike legislation, and the enactment of measures designed to ensure the democratic control of the unions by their members.

We defend the right of all women to have free access to abortion, and call for full legal equality for gay people, including the right to same-sex marriage. All discriminatory measures against immigrants and asylum seekers must be repealed and workers guaranteed the right to study, live and work wherever they choose.

Social ownership of the means of production: The anarchy and wastefulness of the profit system are increasingly incompatible with the complex needs of modern civilization. All large industrial, service, pharmaceutical and agricultural corporations must be converted into publicly owned enterprises, together with the banking and financial institutions and the privatized utilities. Full compensation must be paid to small shareholders. All Private Finance Initiative contracts must be

cancelled and the debts resulting from them repudiated. Small and medium-sized businesses must be given ready access to credit, so long as they provide decent wages and working conditions.

For a major programme of public works: The undermining of public services, with its devastating impact on education, health care and other vital social infrastructure must be reversed. Billions must be poured into the public services to provide quality education, free of charge, to expand health and social care provision, and end the scandalous shortage of vital technological equipment and staff.

Such a programme would provide decent, well-paying and full-time jobs for all those who need them. To create additional employment, and to allow all workers to fully participate in political and cultural life, the working week should be reduced to 30 hours, with no loss of pay, and the minimum wage doubled as an initial measure to alleviate poverty. All workers should receive six weeks annual paid leave.

Guaranteed living standards for all: Everyone must be guaranteed an income that allows him or her to live a decent and secure life. Equally, those unable to work—the disabled, elderly, and full-time parents and carers—must be provided with the equivalent of a living wage. All punitive and degrading welfare reviews and assessments must be abolished, including the work schemes associated with the New Deal programme, which have nothing to do with providing the unemployed with useful education and training.

The state pension must be raised to the level of the average wage and a voluntary retirement age of 55 set. Compensation must be provided for those whose company pension has been looted. To end the financial hardship facing working families, a cap must be placed on all interest repayments and unsustainable debts written off.

Students and youth: The future well-being of society demands that urgent action be taken to remedy the plight of the younger generation. More and more young people are going on to higher education as the prerequisite for any hope of finding a job. For this and the cultural and technological development of society, education must be fully funded and free of charge, with the abolition of student loans and the restoration of grants so as to provide a living income. All attempts to introduce tuition fees, as in England, must be rejected. Public funding of private and religious schools should be abolished. Young workers must have access to job training and apprenticeships to guarantee them decent, full-time employment at adult rates of pay.

Housing and Health: The appalling levels of debt facing homeowners must be ended by capping repayments at no more than 20 percent of income, and a ban imposed on house reposessions. A massive social housing programme must be implemented to provide comfortable, secure and affordable accommodation for students, workers, the unemployed and pensioners.

The deliberate undermining of the National Health Service to facilitate the growth of private medicine must be ended. The NHS must be re-established as a fully-funded and quality provider of free universal health care, including access to GPs, medicines and dental surgeries.

Culture and Science: All working people must be able to actively participate in cultural and artistic life. Funds should be poured into libraries, museums, theatres, orchestras, public television and radio. Broadband access must be made available to all households. The subordination of artistic expression to the accumulation of profit must be replaced by an environment conducive to the development of a new, humane, and international culture.

Humanity has already made immense scientific advances, which provide the objective basis for a rational and progressive social order. Instead, technological achievements are monopolised by a handful of giant corporations, while scientific thought is under relentless attack by those seeking to create an atmosphere more conducive to their right-wing social nostrums. The encouragement of scientific education and the freeing of

research and development from corporate control are essential for the raising of the cultural level of society as a whole.

Environment: Global warming, pollution and other forms of environmental destruction can be addressed only on the basis of an internationally coordinated plan, placing the interests of the world's population ahead of the profit margins of the major corporations of the world's dominant capitalist powers. The SEP calls for a programme of publicly funded research and development in clean energy technologies including nuclear fusion, and a moratorium on the building of nuclear power stations until a safe means of disposal is established. The public transport network must be expanded and upgraded so as end the reliance on cars, which is choking Britain's cities.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

For a socialist alternative

None of the measures outlined here can be achieved without making deep inroads into the vast reserves of private wealth held by a few. These measures must be financed through a system of progressive taxation aimed at promoting social equality. Taxes should be reduced for the vast majority of the population and sharply increased for the major corporations and the super-rich.

This can be realized only through the political mobilisation of working people in the struggle for socialism. The SEP advocates the establishment of a workers' government, which will represent the social and economic interests of the vast majority of the population and create conditions in which working people gain full democratic control over all decisions affecting their lives.

The SEP's intervention in these elections is a vital step towards this end, seeking to raise the political consciousness of workers, students and youth and lay the necessary foundations for the building of a mass socialist party.

The Socialist Equality Party is the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International. It embodies the critical lessons of the decades-long struggle by the most courageous and far-sighted representatives of the working class for socialism against all forms of political opportunism. Together with our sister parties in Europe, North America, Australia and Asia we seek to take forward the struggle for a socialist world through the medium of the daily news and analysis provided by the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Central to our political work is the repudiation of the lie that Stalinism equals socialism. The military-police dictatorship that arose in Russia was not the inheritor of the egalitarian and internationalist perspective of the 1917 October Revolution, but its bitterest enemy. Stalin's policy of "socialism in a single country" articulated the interests of a bureaucracy that secured its control of the state apparatus in a bloody campaign of repression directed against the genuine representatives of the October Revolution, led by Leon Trotsky.

Our party originated in the struggle of the Left Opposition, formed by Trotsky in defence of the perspective of world socialist revolution, and the Fourth International which he founded in 1938. The political lessons of that struggle are critical to the re-forging of an international movement of the working class.

We call on all those who oppose war and militarism and the assault on democratic rights, and who support the fight for social equality, to contact the Socialist Equality Party and participate in our election campaign. We make a particular appeal to students to sign up to the International Students for Social Equality and build its influence on the campuses.

Join the SEP and help fight for a socialist alternative!