

Britain: Why you should vote Socialist Equality Party on May 3

3 May 2007

On May 1, the following remarks were made by National Secretary Chris Marsden to an eve of poll meeting in Scotland held by the Socialist Equality Party to support its regional lists for the West of Scotland and South Wales Central in elections to the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly.

On Thursday, May 3, working people will deliver a vote in Scotland, Wales and parts of England with the central aim of administering a crushing rebuff to the Labour government.

All evidence suggests that Labour will suffer a humiliating defeat in Wales and Scotland. And, although it has been less widely publicised, its losses in England, particularly in what were once its northern heartlands, are expected to be just as devastating.

What is revealed above all is the extent of public hostility to Prime Minister Tony Blair's decision to take Britain to war against Iraq. It is this event, when Blair defied mass protests, which has done for him, as far as the electorate is concerned.

The war has been a bloody catastrophe that has inaugurated an even bloodier occupation that has claimed the lives of well over a half million people and destabilised the entire Middle East. It has, moreover, fuelled the growth of a vicious right-wing fundamentalism that has brought death to these shores and threatens more in future.

On Monday, five people were convicted for planning to blow up a nightclub or some other crowded venue. The case has given further rise to legitimate speculation as to how much MI5 knew about the July 7 bombings in London, given that one of the bombers, Mohammed Sidique Khan, met with the ringleader of those convicted, Omar Khayam, on four occasions and was even followed home. Fellow London bomber Shehzad Tanweer was also a contact.

Khan was taped sitting in Khyam's bugged car along with Shujah Mahmood and Tanweer as he debated whether he would say goodbye to his soon-to-be born child and was advised to do so by Khyam. Yet, he was never arrested or questioned.

What is incontrovertible is that millions took to the streets to warn that a pre-emptive war of aggression against Iraq would lead to further violence and chaos, and their voices were ignored. As a result, it is Iraq that has come to be seen as emblematic of the government's authoritarianism and lack of accountability—to anyone, that is, except its super-rich backers and the Bush White House.

On this question, too, the movement that developed against war was fuelled by and subsumed into itself the already pronounced discontent and opposition towards Labour's pro-big-business social and economic policies. Today, it is impossible to distinguish one source of hatred of the government from the other. Labour is almost universally viewed as a right-wing war-mongering enemy of working people. The fact that it is on the brink of electoral meltdown, even though Blair is busy readying his departure for the highly lucrative US lecture circuit, shows also that few have been fooled by the claim that Labour under Chancellor Gordon Brown will be somehow different.

It is with some satisfaction that one reads how upset Blair's coterie and

his media backers are at just how ungrateful the British people are when one looks "objectively" at the great man's achievements.

The *Observer* insisted, "After 10 years Blair has made Britain a better place," adding, "Since most Britons are enjoying unprecedented prosperity their impatience to punish the government is strange."

Britain "is richer, more comfortable with diversity, more tolerant, more confident and in ruder health than it was in 1997. People no longer wait days for a doctor's appointment and months for an operation. Children get better results at school, more of them go to university and go on to find a job. There has never been a recession under New Labour."

Yes, they really write this stuff. The editorial continues:

"But judging by opinion polls, these benefits are taken for granted or are insufficient to earn the government any credit...."

"Perhaps," it concludes after some mild criticism over Iraq and the enriching of the already rich, "10 years is just too long. Perhaps it is simply time for a change." But the *Observer* insists, "that means impatience for new faces, not necessarily a new direction.... On Thursday millions of voters will go to the polls intending to bury the Prime Minister. In time they will find many reasons to praise him."

Former Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock joined in the eulogy, stating, "It's a tragedy that in the short term at least all of [his] advances, some of them genuinely worthy of the name historic, will be clouded, even possibly obscured, by the association with Bush."

An unfortunate mistake, indeed.

Former Home Secretary David Blunkett added, "Tony will be appreciated and will be recognised in 10, 15, 20 years time in a way that isn't possible now. It is almost as though we can never have a prophet in our own country."

The *Observer* is right about one thing. When Blair goes, there will be a change of faces, not direction. The rightward course will continue, perhaps by addressing Blair's own stated "big regrets" on his premiership—that he did not move fast enough on "reforming" Britain's public services and that he pursued a "misguided" policy in believing that public spending on rundown areas was an answer to anti-social behaviour and problem families.

He told the *Daily Telegraph*, "About 15 years ago, I more or less made my name on changing Labour's traditional stance on law and order.... The 'tough on the causes of crime' bit was all about social investment. I regarded this as an issue about the nature of society as a whole.... The reality is that we are dealing with a very small number of highly dysfunctional families and children whose defining characteristic is that they do not represent society as a whole."

Calling for additions to the Anti-Social Behaviour Orders, he notes that this would be controversial "because it involves intervening before the child is committing criminal offences, at least serious ones, and when the families have not yet become a menace."

But this is not a problem because "talk to any teacher in a primary school, social worker or local police officer and they can identify those families easily" so they can be "made to change."

Blair is proposing to criminalise entire families for doing no more than annoying people, on the say-so of the local policeman. "Forget the general sociology. Concentrate on the facts," he concludes.

What we are seeing in Britain is a pronounced shift to the left by the working class in direct relation to the pronounced shift to the right within ruling circles as exemplified by Blair. Moreover, this shift is echoed throughout much of Europe and in the United States itself—as witnessed in the heavy losses suffered by Bush last year that anticipated those of his ally.

This only makes more apparent what must be understood as the fundamental political dilemma facing workers everywhere in the world.

Throughout the entire spectrum of official politics, there is not a single party that gives genuine voice to or provides answers for the social, economic and democratic concerns of the millions of men, women and young people looking for an alternative. Instead, the main beneficiaries of the movement against Labour are parties that also serve the interests of the corporate and financial elite.

In Scotland, it is the Scottish National Party that looks set to form the next government—in coalition with the Liberal Democrats, the Greens or some other combination of parties. In Wales, Plaid Cymru is predicted to form a coalition—possibly with the Conservatives.

The right-wing character of such a government in Holyrood or Cardiff should, under normal circumstances, be apparent to all. But there is a political campaign being waged—by sections of the media, certainly, but in particular by a number of nominally left and socialist groups—to claim that nationalism is progressive and that the election of the SNP or Plaid will bring forward the possibility of separation from England and self-determination.

With a weakening of the British state, they argue, and with it the liberation of the far more radical Scots and Welsh workers from the deadly grip of conservative "middle England," broad new socialist vistas will eventually open up.

In the meantime, at least it will be possible to implement certain reforms that would be blocked by Westminster but agreed to by the more "social democratic" SNP and Plaid. In any case, it would strengthen the movement against war because all the "nationalist" parties oppose it.

The fight to cut through such political falsehoods has been at the heart of the campaign waged by the Socialist Equality Party in these elections. We have made every effort and taken every opportunity to disprove the attempts of the likes of Solidarity, the Scottish Socialist Party, Respect and the Socialist Alternative to portray nationalism as left-wing and to sow divisions in the working class by channelling social discontent rooted in class oppression into hostility to "Westminster" or "England."

Our manifesto states:

"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....

"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."

If our manifesto did not say another word, these passages would be enough to distinguish the SEP from every other party standing.

Permit me to draw attention to something that illustrates perfectly why it is necessary for the ruling class to muddy the political waters over whether workers in Scotland and Wales face class oppression or national oppression. I refer to the *Sunday Times* Rich List, the only worthwhile thing ever to come out of the publishing empire of Mr. Rupert Murdoch.

This year's list notes that the wealth of the richest 1,000 people in Britain has more than trebled in the decade since Blair took office.

Their fortunes grew 20 percent in a year, standing at a combined £360 billion.

The paper comments, "As the prime minister prepares to leave Downing Street, one legacy is a nation that has become a haven for the international super-rich. The number of billionaires living in Britain has surged to 68, up from 54 last year. About a third are from overseas and only three of the wealthiest 10 billionaires were born here."

The richest is steel magnate Lakshmi Mittal, worth £19.25 billion, followed by Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich, at £10.8 billion.

The *Times* states, "Complex rules on residency and domicile status mean the super-rich from overseas can, as one accountancy expert put it, 'avoid paying virtually any tax in Britain apart from council tax.' "

What of Scotland and Wales? Here too, some people have managed to become very rich indeed.

Scotland—population 5 million compared with England's 50 million plus—is home to 65 of the top 1,000, including its first billionaire property magnate, Sir Tom Hunter. Their joint fortune is around £17 billion.

Wales—population 3 million—has 25 on the list.

Some nationalists will no doubt complain that the number of the super-rich is greater in England, which has also attracted more wealthy foreigners. That is, in fact, what the SNP and Plaid would like to redress—not only to cultivate more native billionaires but to attract them from London and the south east by transforming Scotland and Wales into a rather colder version of Monaco. And they intend to do so by slashing business taxes and offering up Scottish and Welsh workers as a cheap labour force to the major transnational corporations.

The claims by the SSP and Solidarity and their counterparts in Wales to the contrary amount to waving the Saltaire and the Red Dragon in people's faces in order to blind them to what is really going on.

It should be noted that under the Barnett formula, public spending in Scotland is about £1,000 per person higher than in England. Westminster allows this only because the £5 billion additional money is small change when dealing with total public spending approaching £500 billion. For an independent Scotland, it would have to go—as part of a massive cuts package.

How else could a cut in corporation tax be paid for? The SNP says out of North Sea Oil revenues, but these are declining, and who apart from the SSP and Solidarity would seriously argue that Brian Souter, Sir Tom Farmer, George Mathewson, Donald Macdonald and other multimillionaire capitalists are lining up behind the SNP because they want to spend their loot on social services? That is not naiveté, it is nonsense.

The right-wing character of the elevation of the national question is exemplified by how it has been deliberately used to sideline the issue of the Iraq war.

A poll for the *Independent* newspaper has found that 69 people believe Blair's political legacy will be Iraq, with an additional 9 percent choosing his close relationship with Bush. This only confirms that the vast majority of people wanting to see an end to rule by Labour want to punish the party for the war and occupation.

Yet, Solidarity and the SSP proclaim the election as a referendum on independence—something that the SNP will not do given the substantial and possibly majority opposition to such a demand amongst workers.

It is thanks to these parties, which built up their own support in large measure by opposing the war, that the leaders of Scottish Labour, the SNP, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives were able to finally “admit” that Iraq matters for possibly the first time during BBC Scotland's leaders' debate held only four days before the May 3 poll.

Labour's Jack McConnell pleaded with those that “have very strong views on this.... I think it's vitally important that one particular issue does not cloud our views on the economic importance of the 300-year-old Union. Nor, for that matter, the priorities of the Scottish Parliament over the next four years.”

Clearly, on this issue, his opponents agree—the main issue is what happened in 1707, not what is happening in 2007.

Whose interests are served by such efforts to sow divisions in the working class? To ask the question is to answer it.

The working class has the most to lose from the growth of separatist sentiment.

For many years, there was confusion in the working class over the issue of Scottish independence—a legacy of the earlier conflicts between England and Scotland, coupled with historically false comparisons with Ireland. But the central thrust of the development of the workers' movement has proceeded on an all-British basis and involved a rejection of a Scottish focus and theories of Scottish exceptionalism.

The two founders of the Scottish Labour Party were Robert Cunninghame-Graham, who went on to become the first leader of the Scottish National Party, and Keir Hardie, who went on to become the leader of the Labour Party.

The most significant historical figure to advocate a Scottish road to socialism was John Maclean, who opposed Willie Gallagher's call for Scotland's Communist Labour Party to join the Communist Party of Great Britain and formed the Scottish Workers Republican Party shortly before his death in 1923.

Maclean argued that workers in Scotland could develop in a revolutionary direction more swiftly than in England and Wales, and that Scotland's early clan structures provided the basis for a communist society. His party faded into oblivion, while the class struggle developed throughout Britain—culminating in the historic 1926 General Strike.

One could add so many names to the list of prominent workers' leaders from Scotland and Wales. To this day, there is a statue of Aneurin Bevan in Cardiff City Centre, proudly proclaiming him to be the father of the National Health Service.

And just to reinforce the point, for decades the leadership of our own party was led by an Irishman, Gerry Healy, who like all genuine socialists rejected nationalism in favour of internationalism.

Solidarity and the SSP and a host of other radical groups are busy rewriting the history of the workers' movement to retroactively justify the wrong-headed stance taken by Maclean—and by extension, the far less tragic or sympathetic figure of Cunninghame-Graham.

This is not simply confusion. They are responding to powerful social and political pressures that have been produced by the break-up of the nation-state system in which capitalism developed, under the impact of the development of globalised production.

Put simply, the productive forces of humanity have outgrown the division of the world into various essentially antagonistic national economies. Economic life today develops irrespective of nations and

broaders, but rival groups of capitalists must turn to the machinery of the nation state—and ultimately its armies—to secure the lion's share of the world's markets and resources.

The development of Scottish and Welsh separatism is a product of the diminished significance of even the oldest of nation states—the United Kingdom. But it is a reactionary product, involving a selfish attempt to win favours from the huge transnational corporations that now bestride the world and that control resources far greater than many of the world's nations.

At the same time, it is aimed at establishing direct political relations with imperialist powers other than Britain—whether in Europe or the United States.

In the process, all sorts of xenophobic sentiment is being deliberately cultivated—not the least of which involves the perpetration of a historic calumny on the English working class and its revolutionary potential.

It is not simply that we, the Socialist Equality Party, oppose the division of the working class in Britain. We do so because we are the advocates of the unification of the European and international working class in a socialist movement aimed at transcending the archaic nation-state system and establishing world socialism. For us Marx's call, “Workers of the World Unite!” continues to be the essential axis of our programme.

There is not a single problem confronting working people today that can be resolved within an exclusively national framework. The attack on jobs and social conditions and the elimination of welfare provisions are carried out in the interests of a global financial oligarchy and corporations that are able to relocate wherever production costs and taxation is lowest. They must be opposed by a workers' movement that can also operate on a global scale.

Most important of all, the struggle against war is the essential task facing humanity today. It demands an end to all forms of political parochialism and the dedication of their political energies by the most far-sighted and self-sacrificing workers and young people in Europe, the Americas, Asia, Africa and Australia.

We are part of a world party, the International Committee of the Fourth International. Only such a party, armed with a socialist and internationalist programme is capable of carrying out a successful struggle against capitalism. That is why I close this May Day meeting—international workers' day—by asking for your vote on May 3 and for you to consider very seriously becoming a member of the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact