Socialism and the defence of democratic rights

A reply to an attack on the Socialist Equality Party for standing in the Haltemprice and Howden by-election

Chris Marsden
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The following email was sent by Malcolm Frame. The reply is by Chris Marsden, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (Britain).

The SEP is wrong to participate in this by-election. You will lose £1,000 and the words Socialist and Equality will be judged against a Militant Elvis, a Monster Raving Loony, a National Front and, worst of all a Conservative & Unionist [candidates in Haltemprice and Howden]. Has there ever been an occasion when a party which claims to inherit the legacy of Marx, Engels, Lenin & Trotsky has considered it necessary to measure itself against a representative of the ruling class out to promote himself by posing as a defender of rights which he and his class have trampled on for generations?

It has been ages since the SEP was actually campaigning for its programme rather than just writing articles for the WSWS, but when it actually comes forward and presents itself as a party with a perspective, it appears in a safe Tory seat campaigning on the slogan "Defend Habeas Corpus". Surely your members are not so insulated from the concerns and fears of the working class that they consider this is of greater importance than the social catastrophe that is threatened by the escalation in the price of food, fuel and accommodation.

As I understand it a transitional demand recognises the state of consciousness of the working class at a particular stage in its development and then formulates a programme which will develop it by demonstrating that its demands can only be realised through an understanding that the capitalist system stands in its way. Today, the most basic requirements of life, food, fuel, housing and peace are under threat and the attempt to discover why that should be leads us directly into the heart of global capitalism and poses the question: Is the working class ready to be pauperised rather than challenge capitalism? In fact, maybe the slogan "Peace Bread & Land" may still be appropriate today. There is no doubt that a mobilised working class would be threatened by the laws brought in at an earlier stage on the pretence of fighting terrorism, but surely that would only become evident as a struggle develops and the ruling class feels threatened. By campaigning against laws which may be used in the future, you are fighting on the basis of a possible threat when the real threat is here and now and confronts workers every single day.

Mister Frame, I do not know from what precise standpoint you choose to denounce the Socialist Equality Party for standing Chris Talbot as our candidate in the Haltemprice and Howden by-election. You do not indicate which party you are or were a member of, or which you support. Nevertheless, your views express the type of anti-Marxist political conceptions that are prevalent amongst groups such as the Socialist Workers Party in Britain, and the Socialist Party, which is affiliated to the Committee for a Workers International.

When David Davis resigned in protest at parliament passing Labour's terror bill enabling 42-days detention without charge, and forced a by-election, the SEP decided very quickly, despite our small resources, that we must stand.

Here was a situation where Labour's programme had become so right wing that even an arch-Thatcherite Conservative felt it both necessary and possible to pose as a champion of civil liberties.

You indicate that by standing, we somehow give credence to Davis's claims and his efforts at self-publicity. The reverse is true. Davis enjoys three great advantages in perpetrating what amounts to a political fraud.

Firstly, Labour is in such a state of political collapse and was so scared of putting its anti-democratic measures to a popular vote that it refused to stand its own candidate against Davis.

Secondly, none of the so-called Labour left MPs, including the 36 who ostensibly opposed 42 days and were not simply bought off by Gordon Brown, was prepared to do what Davis has done. Instead, they have either kept their heads down or, in the case of Bob Marshall-Andrews and former Labour MP Tony Benn, have joined the Liberal Democrats, a handful of *Guardian* journalists and Shami Chakrabati of Liberty, in anointing Davis as the civil liberties candidate, in some cases even campaigning on his behalf.

Thirdly, Davis has been aided by the politically unprincipled behaviour of Britain's ostensibly socialist groups. The SWP, the Socialist Party and a host of other smaller radical groups are all abstaining—in the week of the by-election, they have nothing to say to the voters of Haltemprice and Howden.

The first and only time the *Socialist Worker* wrote anything on the issue was a brief report on June 21, stating that "It is a sign of just how far to the right New Labour has moved when it can be challenged on civil liberties by the Tory shadow home secretary, the hard right David Davis MP."

The *Socialist Worker* then asks, "What if a Labour backbencher, who opposed 42-day detention, had taken the lead and resigned their seat over the issue? They could have become a rallying point for the left, the anti-war movement and civil liberty campaigners."

The Socialist Party's *Socialist News* June 17 explained correctly that Davis's resignation "shows the volatility of British politics at present; many people feel there is no alternative to the sleaze-ridden incompetence of the main political parties. But it also shows the possibility of a new right-wing populist party forming in future... Davis cannot speak for workers; he is a right-wing Tory.... It shows how far the Labour Party has moved to the right that such a politician may be seen as the only sane man in the asylum."

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Yet, far from challenging the cowardice of the Labour "lefts" and opposing Davis's attempt to channel opposition to Labour in a right-wing populist course, neither party stood a candidate. Moreover, they have not written a single word on the by-election since these solitary articles.

This is not because they feared that the election would become "a circus", as it is routinely depicted by the mass media. There were always going to be the type of crank candidates, right-wingers and self-publicists that you cite; and the left groups have stood in similar difficult circumstances—such as in Tony Blair's constituency. Neither is their silence solely due to factional hostility to the SEP, though this plays a part.

They have not stood their own candidates and have imposed a blackout in their press because challenging Davis would place them in conflict not only with "New Labour" (with Brown and the rightwing) but with the Labour and trade union "lefts" towards whom they orient. This includes those individuals who have stood silently by Labour, as well as those who have ceded leadership of the struggle to defend civil liberties to Davis, like Tony Benn.

The SWP made perfectly clear were its loyalties rest when the *Socialist Worker* complained that "by abandoning the field to Davis, the [lefts] have allowed the Tories to hijack yet another left wing issue *with which to beat New Labour*."

From the outset of our campaign, the SEP has stressed that we are standing in order to oppose not only Davis, but all sections of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy whose actions constitute a grave and, against what you claim, imminent threat to the working class.

We explained in our June 23 announcement of Chris Talbot's candidacy that 42 days detention without charge "stands at the apex of a mountain of anti-democratic legislation that, in the name of the 'war on terror,' has effectively established the apparatus of a police state in Britain."

We stated that Labour was incapable of standing a candidate "because it is the political representative of big business and the super-rich. It cannot secure a popular mandate for policies based on militarism, colonial conquest and the systematic destruction of the living standards and civil liberties of the broad mass of working people."

We have insisted, "It is vital that workers and youth reject Labour's draconian measures and mobilise against this government. But this cannot be done by lending any support to David Davis in his claim to be the champion of civil liberties. Labour and the Tories are both right-wing parties of big business... The fact that Davis can set himself up as an opponent of the government on this issue is testimony to how far to the right Labour now stands. Not a single Labourite has been prepared to break with the government on this or any other issue.

"Instead, a handful of supposed Labour 'lefts', together with the Liberal Democrats, are supporting Davis's campaign on the spurious grounds that this is an issue that stands above politics. By throwing their lot in with Davis, they have relinquished any right to speak on behalf of working people."

In what way is this aiding Davis in his attempt to promote himself? Rather, the SEP is alone in refusing to do so, either by inaction in the case of the radical groups, or by going out on the stump on his behalf like Benn.

You spend the last half of your letter opposing our standing on questions of democratic rights, when the "social catastrophe that is threatened by the escalation in the price of food, fuel and accommodation." is of greater importance. You conclude by arguing that, sometime in the future, "a mobilised working class would be threatened by the laws brought in at an earlier stage on the pretence of fighting terrorism," but only when "the ruling class feels threatened" by a developing struggle of the working class. "By campaigning against laws which may be used in the future, you are fighting on the basis of a possible threat when the real threat is here and now and confronts workers every single day."

This type of argument betrays only your ignorance of the history of the workers' movement and a dismissive approach to the political education needed to prepare the working class for the social struggles you acknowledge will unfold.

An attack on civil liberties is always, however indirectly it may appear, levelled against the working class. And the working class must respond to such an attack with utmost forcefulness. It must not only act as the defender and champion of those facing oppression by the state, but in so doing ensure its own ability to organise politically and industrially against capital.

You ridicule a defence of "Habeas Corpus" as an expression of how "insulated from the concerns and fears of the working class" the SEP is. But this testifies rather to the rarefied and unreal character of your own politics.

A defence based on habeas corpus was repeatedly used by socialists and early trade unionists, in Britain and internationally, struggling for recognition in the face of police and judicial repression. It is the cornerstone of all civil liberties presently enjoyed by working people; its undermining allows the state to arbitrarily arrest and imprison anyone, merely on the say-so of the police, the security services and the government.

The development of mass opposition to the Labour government, the employers and the profit system will unfold over weeks, months or even years; and it will grow in intensity, as the crisis now wracking world capitalism worsens. But whatever the time frame in which the class struggle unfolds, the worst possible mistake would be to fail to develop amongst workers an understanding of the need to defend democratic rights now—so as to strengthen the political position of the working class and weaken that of the bourgeoisie.

The formation of the workers' movement in Britain is bound up with a struggle for the defence and extension of democratic freedoms.

The Chartist movement in the mid-nineteenth century, a mass movement in support of the right to vote, was, as Leon Trotsky insisted, the "genuinely proletarian revolutionary tradition" in Britain, which "is immortal in that over the course of a decade it gives us in condensed and diagrammatic form the whole gamut of proletarian struggle—from petitions in parliament to armed insurrection. All the fundamental problems of the class movement of the proletariat—the inter-relation between parliamentary and extra-parliamentary activity, the role of universal suffrage, trade unions and co-operation, the significance of the general strike and its relation to armed insurrection, even the inter-relation between the proletariat and the peasantry—were not only crystallised out of the progress of the Chartist mass movement but found out their principled answer."

One of the major impulses for the formation of the Labour Party was a response not to a strike-wave, but to an attack on the democratic right to strike. The 1901 Taff Vale Case, which ruled that a railway company could force the union to pay £23,000 damages for a strike, effectively made strikes illegal and helped set the working class on the path of securing political representation in parliament.

As regards a negative example of the relationship between democratic rights and social and industrial struggles, the last great clash between the working class and big business in Britain was the 1984-85 miners' strike. Its isolation and defeat was prepared and then justified by the TUC and the Labour Party on the basis of their acceptance of the Tory anti-union laws just half a year earlier.

Notwithstanding your invocation of transitional demands, you only disarm the working class by counter-posing agitation about the economic impact of the crisis of capitalism on working people against the SEP's warnings about the preparations being made by the ruling class to deal with political dissent.

To prepare workers, students and young people to wage a struggle for socialism is not simply a case of repeating a few clever tactical demands

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and slogans. The Bolsheviks did not take power just by adopting the slogan “Peace, Bread and Land,”—hardly appropriate in today’s Britain, which lacks a peasantry —but because the party spent years educating a significant layer of workers and intellectuals as revolutionaries, who could function in Lenin’s words as the “tribune of the people, able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of people it affects.”

To conclude, the response of the SEP to the Haltemprice and Howden by-election is a revolutionary one. Your own response is not.

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