

# Britain: SEP candidate Chris Talbot speaks at eve-of-poll meeting

Our reporters  
11 July 2008

The Socialist Equality held an eve-of-poll meeting at Cottingham Civic Hall on July 9, as part of its campaign in the Haltemprice and Howden by-election. The election was forced by the resignation of the Conservative MP David Davis, so he could mount a protest campaign at the passage of legislation extending detention without trial to 42 days.

Cottingham is the largest village in the constituency of Haltemprice and Howden with a population of just over 17,000 people. The SEP has campaigned extensively there during the campaign, speaking to voters at the party's campaign stalls as well as while canvassing door-to-door on local estates.

Nearly fifty thousand pieces of campaign literature were distributed, with a copy of the SEP election communication going to every household in the constituency. In addition, thousands of copies of the SEP election statement were distributed while campaigning, including in the villages of Willerby, Anlaby, Brough and Howden.

At the eve-of-poll meeting, SEP candidate Chris Talbot addressed an audience of local residents, which included pensioners, trade unionists and young people. He detailed the party's consistent opposition to the attacks on democratic rights under the present Labour government and outlined the socialist policies advocated by the SEP.

Following Talbot's speech a lively discussion ensued, with many audience members asking questions.

A supporter of the Green Party asked, "What is the role of ecology in all this? Also, in Latin America there have been huge grass roots movements. What can we learn from the Latin American left?"

Talbot answered, "We are keen to point to environmental issues being huge issues, global warming, climate change, and so on. The measures proposed by the G8 are a joke, but there are major questions. We agree with you on that. But these are international questions and need the building of an international movement. If you look at, for example the Hugo Chavez government in Venezuela, this is not a socialist government."

At this point the questioner interjected, stating, "These

Latin American movements can mobilise millions. I think that we have to show some modesty about what they have achieved. We can learn a lot from them."

Talbot replied, "We are told that Chavez movement was a left movement, but what we've seen is that the leaderships were not opposed to capitalism at all. They have not brought in socialist measures; they have established new relations with the capitalists. If you look at Cuba and Venezuela, they might have made some social concessions but this is not a socialist movement."

Following Talbot's answer, the Green Party supporter said he did not agree and walked out of the meeting.

Another audience member asked about the role of the media in the election and why there had been a virtual blackout of the Socialist Equality Party's campaign.

Talbot replied, "Well on this question, an interesting meeting took place yesterday with David Davis, Shami Chakrabati, the director of the human rights group Liberty, and Labour MP Bob Marshall-Andrews. We wanted to attend the meeting and when we arrived we were prevented from going into it. We were told by some stewards we were disruptive. This is a lie. We have attended several public meetings in the course of the campaign, and everyone knows we are not disruptive."

Another member of the audience asked, "Where do you stand on the trade unions, they are linked to the Labour Party."

Talbot said, "There are no real divisions between Labour Party and the trade unions. The unions have now largely confined themselves to organising credit cards for members and so on, but are very limited in terms of organising wage rises and defending working conditions. They are generally involved in collaborating with management. These are not workers' organisations. There has been one betrayal after another."

Addressing this question, Richard Turner, the election agent for Chris Talbot, said, "Look at the recent auto-workers strike in the United States. It ended in an ignoble defeat for the workers at American Axle—and this was

organised by the union. The management wanted a pay cut and they got it. Today the unions restrict themselves to negotiating the size of the pay cut. Many recent pay rises are really pay cuts. Look at Germany, where under the Social Democratic Party-Green Party government the unions sat in the government and were at the helm in pushing through massive welfare cuts. Today, the unions see their role as being 'co-managers', a part of the management."

An audience member then said, "We live in a period when the trade unions are weak, but we owe a lot to the trade unions for what they have achieved." And another said that he still thought there was an important role for trade unions in the struggles of the working class.

Talbot responded, "We have to distinguish between millions of trade union members who took action and the union leadership. Look at the miners' strike in 1984-85. Millions of workers supported the miners, but National Union of Mineworkers President Arthur Scargill refused to challenge the TUC and its unions and demand their industrial support. Thatcher could not have got away with anything without this.

"The trade unions are very limited. Always the trade unions turn away from deeper political questions. They are very national organisations. At one time they could have said they were dealing with British Leyland, the National Coal Board etc. Now all companies are global, and can only be opposed on a global basis."

The same questioner then stated, "I can see that the Labour Party has moved, but I can't see that about the unions. Wouldn't a mass upsurge be expressed within the unions? There has been a change, but the public sector is still massive and there is a big public sector strike next week. I think it is wrong to say that joining a trade union is no big deal. There are socialists in the unions and the best representatives in the unions are good people."

Talbot said in reply, "The vast majority of workers are not in unions. Even in sectors where there are unions, our advice is to build organisations independent of this leadership. We say, do not rely on the public sector union bureaucracy. Why encourage people to work through them? Workers have to be independent of the union bureaucracy. Tens of thousands of jobs are to go in the public sector—this is what the government wants. The unions will sell them off, and make a deal over redundancy terms. That is what they are going to do. That's what they'll continue to do."

A member of the Socialist Equality Party, speaking from the floor, questioned the attitude of the trade unions towards the government's 42-days detention legislation. He said, "Not a single trade union has campaigned against this legislation. And history shows that such anti-democratic legislation will be used in time against the labour

movement."

He added, "Workers have suffered a series of defeats following the miners' strike of 84/85 and the unions are in lockstep with the Labour Party. We have to draw up a balance sheet of experiences with these organisations in order to go forward."

Another questioner was concerned with the "power of the media," saying "I've been involved with politics now since I was 16. How do we cope with Rupert Murdoch and the media and TV?"

Talbot answered, "We are not denying that this is a serious question. But Labour and the unions were built by the working class in the teeth of a vicious right wing press. If the working class starts to move, then newspapers alone will not be able to stop it. There are limits to the strength of these media outlets.

"The real problem is that working people in Britain have been tied to the Labour Party, and have illusions in the trade unions and Labour. This is coming to an end. I wouldn't be surprised if the government vote collapses completely in the forthcoming Glasgow by-election. Labour is falling apart. For decades, workers have kept faith with Labour, but not any more."

Talbot then spoke about the role of the Internet and its importance in the campaign waged by the SEP in the election campaign in Haltemprice and Howden. "The Internet has made a big difference. Everyone gets their news from the Internet. Murdoch cannot control it, much as he would like to."

Richard Turner added, "There may have been a news blackout in Haltemprice and Howden, but working people in Britain, Detroit, Tokyo, Johannesburg, etc. have been able to follow this campaign. Tens of thousands of people in Britain and around the world are reading our international news website every day, the *World Socialist Web Site*."

In conclusion, Talbot thanked everyone for attending the meeting and urged all those who were voters in Haltemprice and Howden to cast their ballot for the Socialist Equality Party, and consider joining and building the SEP.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**