

The Convention of the Left: Britain's radical groups lurch to the right

Chris Marsden
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In the weeks leading up to its five days of discussion, the Convention of the Left that met September 20-24 received the backing of nearly every tendency in Britain claiming to be socialist.

Of the larger radical groups in Britain, the Socialist Workers Party and the Socialist Party endorsed the venture. Opponents in recent splits were co-signatures, including the SWP-dominated "Left Alternative" and its estranged former allies in George Galloway's Respect, as well as the Scottish Socialist Party and Tommy Sheridan's Solidarity group. It also had the endorsement of the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain.

Pride of place, and representing what remains of the nominal left of the Labour Party, was John McDonnell MP and the octogenarian former MP Tony Benn.

Yet far from being a major political success, the CoL attracted barely 300 people. All those in attendance were either members of the various groups endorsing the project, the flotsam and jetsam left by various factional squabbles, or individuals too hostile to any form of organised politics, let alone socialism, to belong to anything.

Timed to coincide with the Labour Party conference and a Saturday lobby by the Stop the War Coalition, it could not even attract a significant number of the few thousand brought to Manchester to protest the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, even after delaying its start-time for almost an hour. It was thus made up of the dregs left behind by what can only be described as the disintegration of middle class radicalism in Britain.

Just how removed the various participants are from the essential concerns of the working class was epitomised by the near absence of discussion on the raging economic crisis gripping US and world capitalism. Indeed, on the opening day less than a handful of people even referred to it. One woman even explained that she had heaved a sigh of relief when President George Bush had proposed the \$700 billion bailout for indebted US banks because "we" of the left are so far from having any answers to the crisis. It was left to Derek Wall, grandiosely billed as the "former principal male speaker of the Green Party" and a self-professed "eco-socialist" to call for land cultivating biofuels to be turned into allotments, to insist that we "only need food" in a world of finite resources and to declare Venezuela, where oil accounts for a third of GDP, and Cuba, whose economy has all but collapsed, to be models of eco-friendly production.

The only organised discussion on the economic crisis raging through international capitalism was in a workshop that lasted one hour on Monday lunchtime.

It was the political collapse of groups such as Respect and the Scottish Socialist Party that the conference organisers, such as the magazine *Red Pepper* and the half-dozen members of the Socialist Unity Group wished to discuss--and to exploit. With McDonnell and Benn acting as outriders for the Labour and trade union bureaucracy, those radical groups who have at any time called for the building of a party independent of Labour were told to sideline their various "sectarian" projects and concentrate

instead on building networks of activists fighting on single-issue campaigns--alongside the Labour lefts and the trade unions.

What was necessary was to focus on "What unites us." And as far as the conference's organisers were concerned, that means, above all with a general election in 2010 at the latest, dropping even the semblance of a struggle against Labour for fear of alienating those still loyal to the party. At all costs the issue of a new party must only be raised as an alternative home for these disillusioned Labourites, together with Greens, Scottish and Welsh nationalists and anyone it was vaguely possible to describe as "on the left". Such a party would be able to raise only reformist policies, and only then those deemed acceptable to the left MPs and trade union bureaucrats.

McDonnell is one of less than two dozen self-designated "socialist" MPs in the Labour Party and he heads the Labour Representation Committee (LRC), dedicated to "fighting for power" within the party. He attended the entire CoL proceedings, absenting himself entirely from the Labour conference--itself testimony to his refusal to wage any serious political struggle against the right wing of the party.

He spoke during the opening session of how he had been in every "sectarian group" imaginable over the past 40 years and insisted it was now time to concentrate on the 80 percent that "we" agree on rather than the controversial 20 percent. Naturally this proscription includes whether to continue supporting Labour. Benn too expressed his pleasure that sectarianism had no place in the meeting. The "left" was after all a "mosaic", he added--providing, of course that everyone recognise that pride of place in the mosaic belongs to Labour and the trade unions.

The same message was hammered home again and again. When the occasional speaker chose to mention Marxism, Trotsky or Lenin, a collective groan went up from those present. Others clearly got the message. One man explained how he had narrowly avoided joining the Labour Party in 1984 and had since spent too many years without working alongside the wonderful socialists in its ranks.

What is extraordinary about all the denunciations of sectarianism is how they were directed in particular to one of the main platform speakers, Lindsey German of the SWP, who also acts as convenor of the Stop the War Coalition.

The SWP's venture into electoral politics alongside George Galloway in Respect was the most opportunist manoeuvre imaginable. Galloway himself is politically unsavoury, combining an association with Stalinism with his Catholicism and a long history of political relations with bourgeois figures and regimes including Saddam Hussein in Iraq. The SWP accepted all of this and oriented Respect not only to its more normal audience in the trade union apparatus, but also to the Muslim Association of Britain, Asian businessmen, and various cynical political careerists from the Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities.

Despite this the SWP has earned the enmity of forces that are to the right of even their politics. In the first instance, these layers object to the SWP's ability, by weight of numbers, to assert their organisational domination

over the rest of the petty-bourgeois left. In addition, to some of these unabashed anti-communists, the SWP's verbal invocations of Marxism are anathema. They believe essentially that both have acted as an impediment to building the type of mass-based opportunist formation that Respect was meant to be.

They blame the SWP entirely for the break-up of Respect and its inability to secure significant electoral support. Galloway, by contrast, is afforded their own continued respect as a bona fide political "big hitter."

Both German and the SWP are more than ready to eat humble pie and accept the error of their ways. German told the convention, "We can all put our hands up to what we've done wrong," she said, "but there's no point in sitting here and saying 20 years ago we fell out over this question or two years ago we fell out over that question. We have to find a method of working that unites us and doesn't divide us."

Her contrition was only a pale echo of the collective mea culpa being pronounced by the SWP. The weeks leading up to the CoL saw a factional struggle in its leadership end with the removal of John Rees as party leader.

On August 27 the SWP central committee voted by 10 to four to remove Rees from heading the party's election work. He was national secretary of the Respect coalition and led the much reduced Left Alternative SWP electoral front following the split with Galloway.

Rees was instructed to resign from the Left Alternative national council. The decision was endorsed by the party's national committee on September 14 by 42 votes to none, with three abstentions. German, who is Rees's partner, resigned her own position in protest and reportedly even threatened to resign from the SWP.

The SWP's Party Notes make clear that Rees is being targeted for a debacle for which the entire leadership is responsible. Since Rees was singled out by Galloway as his hate figure, this makes possible better relations and possible regroupment with Respect and other left groups. It is also bound up with a retreat by the SWP from mounting electoral challenges to Labour.

The leaked internal document, approved by the central committee, states that "the subjective factors are not so good. There seems little hope of any national figure breaking away from the Labour Party to help create a radical alternative. Warwick Two demonstrated that the major unions have little stomach to challenge [Labour Prime Minister Gordon] Brown... The Left Alternative is not strong enough to create a broad alternative at the moment--but can play a role in helping realign the forces on the left so long as it does not claim to be the answer. Therefore for the time being we are likely to find ourselves working around a number of different initiatives."

Of the Left Alternative's work, it states baldly, "We want to avoid if possible any bruising election contests. We should only decide to stand on a case by case basis.... It should be reduced to minimal, but still existing, role."

Thus when German sat at the front of the CoL, she did so as an embattled and disowned figure within her own party, which had charged her with the task of making friends with anyone and everyone there--even if they were crowing happily over the SWP's failures.

Their organisational crisis notwithstanding, the former radicals are being driven together by more profound political developments. All of their various efforts to form new parties were a response to the transformation of Labour into a right-wing party of big business. With millions of working people abandoning Labour, the left groups were unable any longer to maintain their previous unalloyed support for Labour as the "mass party of the working class" by dint of its being based on the trade unions. But they considered it impossible that an alternative party could ever be of a revolutionary character.

The left groups are made up in the main of social layers drawn from the public sector and academia, many of whom have secured positions within

the apparatus of the trade unions which they view as the guardians of the material and political relations on which they themselves depend. Their leftist rhetoric, including the occasional invocations of revolution, were and are always directed towards urging the working class to put pressure on the labour and trade union bureaucracy to more energetically defend wages and social conditions.

They offered themselves as political advisers to whatever might pass for a leftward section of the bureaucracy--anyone who still made noises about securing social reforms in order to maintain a level of support in the working class. Their new parties were to be an alternative home to the Labourites and trade union leaders who they anticipated would be forced to break from Labour by the "pressure from below".

The essential reason for the failure of their various initiatives is that no such break has occurred. Labour's evolution was not the product of a few bad leaders, but the impossibility of any longer combining an advocacy of social reform with the entire bureaucracy's essential function as defenders of the profit system. With the bourgeoisie everywhere seeking to claw back previous social concessions and compromises in order to compete for global investment and markets, the highly privileged strata represented by the bureaucracy translated this into a series of policies and political imperatives based on the insistence that socialism had failed and that the market could not be challenged. With a few complaints, the entire bureaucracy moved ever more firmly into alliance with big business--with the so-called lefts managing to reconcile themselves to a government just as far to the right as the Conservatives economically. Even the Iraq war and the mass opposition to it led to only one (enforced) defection from Labour's ranks by a national figure--Galloway. And despite the occasional threats to redistribute the political levy, the trade unions continue to overwhelmingly fund Labour.

Nor has the threatened electoral collapse of Labour and the ever worsening crisis of the profit system produced a shift to the left within the bureaucracy. Rather, even as the CoL was taking place, the Labour conference meeting in Manchester saw the trade unions pledging their continued loyalty to Brown and claiming that his every utterance spoke of a man who had rediscovered his "Old Labour" roots.

Another feature of the CoL was the repeated warnings that it was the Tories and even far right that is in fact benefiting from popular disillusionment with Labour. If Labour fell from office, then the Tories would be back in power. And it would be the fascist British National Party and its equivalents internationally that would successfully exploit the social anger unleashed by the onset of a global recession. The message was that the only answer to this was to echo the response of the trade union bureaucrats and make "unity" your watchword.

Thus the CoL's proceedings went on, with endless discussions on how to fight for better transport, education, opposing immigration controls, fighting the "Database State", for greater equality, opposing war, fighting fascism and combating climate change--everything on which the "left" can supposedly agree, even when it does not. And it ended with McDonnell stating that it should meet every year and that it should continue shadowing the Labour conference. This would be perfectly in line with role as an adjunct to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy.

Meanwhile the political landscape outside the rarefied environs of the Friends Meeting House is in the process of being changed forever.

What is clear is that the social movements and conflicts that will inevitably be unleashed by the sinking of capitalism into recession will find no progressive expression within these tendencies. Rather their various "unity" projects and new party initiatives will continue to provide nothing more than a last line of defence for a Labour and trade union bureaucracy that is viewed with increasing bitterness and revulsion by the vast majority of workers. Such sentiment finds no expression within the misnamed "left", which is amongst the most politically conservative forces in Britain today.



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