

Opportunism versus socialism: lessons of two “left” conferences in Britain

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Yesterday the *World Socialist Web Site* featured a detailed report of last weekend's conferences held by two "left" opportunist organizations, Britain's Socialist Workers Party and George Galloway's Respect Renewal. (See Britain: the SWP and Galloway's Respect Renewal on the economic crisis)

These conferences have a broader significance in that they can help in understanding the social interests and rightward political trajectory of similar formations all over the world, such as France's Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire or Germany's Left Party.

For all the factional heat between the SWP and Respect Renewal, what is striking is the fundamental similarity between the approaches of both parties to the economic crisis of world capitalism. Both groups are extraordinarily anxious to downplay the severity of the global crisis that has brought down many of the world's major financial institutions and threatens whole economies with bankruptcy.

These efforts are, in turn, bound up with their absolute insistence that there is no possibility that the working class can be convinced—and that no effort should be made to convince it—of the necessity for a socialist alternative to the profit system. All that is possible is to exert pressure on national bourgeois governments to implement Keynesian-style state regulation of the economy, and in this way secure a number of minimal reforms that will shield working people from the worst effects of the coming slump.

The analysis of Respect Renewal and the SWP is shallow, ahistorical, passive and thoroughly demoralized. However bad the situation may appear to be, they conclude, the economic crisis is manageable and the system will not collapse. The idea that there is anything that socialists can or should do to bring about an outcome different from that planned by the

policymakers of existing governments is dismissed out of hand. Thus Galloway rails against anyone who may speak of a "catastrophe" facing capitalism, while Chris Harman of the SWP insists that the crisis will not be "as bad as the 1930s."

It is, for Marxists, a truism that a socialist revolution can unfold only on the basis of definite objectively revolutionary conditions. But this is not a justification for political fatalism. Objective conditions must be cognized and acted upon. For Marxists, the possibility of a revolutionary development resulting from the present crisis cannot be understood outside of the active role of a socialist party in educating and organising the working class—and mobilising its most advanced representatives on a revolutionary perspective.

For the leaders of the petty-bourgeois left groups this is absolutely excluded. The only historical actor in which they have any confidence is the bourgeoisie. All political initiative must be left to the ruling class. Thus, the reason why the present economic crisis will not provoke a global crash, according to Harman, is that "the state will intervene" to prevent it.

In order to justify its passivity and political adaptation to the bourgeoisie, the SWP insists that the working class will never move beyond the perspective of reforming capitalism. The possibility that the force of objective conditions, combined with the efforts of revolutionary socialists, might change the orientation of the working class is not even to be considered. Those who fight for a revolutionary perspective are to be denounced as "sectarians."

Respect Renewal leader Galloway insists that the left must stop speaking of "dead Russians" (i.e., Lenin and Trotsky), while a participant at the SWP's conference, Robin Blackburn of the *New Left Review*, insists that the situation is not like 1917 "when no one knew what to do and Lenin put his hand up at the back of the room

and said I will take responsibility for this mess."

The issue is not whether the situation *at present* is like 1917, a year of mass revolutionary struggles in Russia. It, clearly, is not. But in the years preceding the eruption of the revolution, Lenin fought relentlessly to build a revolutionary socialist party, based on Marxist theory and principles, and in opposition to every form of political opportunism. Without that fight there would never have been a victorious socialist revolution in 1917.

And how the present crisis will develop—whether it will lead to the catastrophe of fascism (as in the 1930s) or to socialist revolution—depends to a great extent on the actions of Marxists. That is the basic point Trotsky was making when he wrote in the founding document of the Fourth International, "The crisis of mankind is the crisis of revolutionary leadership."

It should be noted that the bourgeoisie does not seek to denigrate its historical personages and their achievements. Quite the opposite. It never tires of insisting on the enduring significance of Adam Smith. But the petty-bourgeois radicals never miss an opportunity to denigrate the heritage of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky, all in the name of "speaking a language that workers understand," in order to oppose the revolutionary perspective with which the titans of socialism are forever associated.

Despite their occasional socialist rhetoric, groups such as the SWP, the various elements still gravitating around Galloway and their counterparts internationally do not articulate the historical interests of the working class. They originated within a layer of the middle class that depended heavily on the postwar welfare state and which generally occupied posts within academia, local government and the civil service. This position within society translated into various forms of protest politics—designed to place maximum pressure on the bureaucratic workers' parties and trade unions to secure the social gains of the postwar period.

The past decades have seen a lurch to the right by all these groups, whose leading personnel have long since become integrated into the apparatus of the trade unions and the general milieu of the official left. Their insistence that Keynesian-style regulation and various minimal reforms are all that is possible is bound up with the role they now seek to play on behalf of the labour bureaucracies, which have lost much of their

support within the working class.

In every country, the former radicals are presently engaged in efforts to build "broad left" parties that will offer a new political home to various reformists, Stalinists and trade union leaders left stranded by the decay and collapse of the old parties. The various "minimal" and "transitional demands" they advance are seen as a means of restoring the illusions of workers and youth in such politically discredited elements. This in turn is backed up by a proscription placed upon any discussion of the ideas of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky—and anything that might lead to the formation of a genuine socialist alternative.

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