

The significance of the British Socialist Workers Party's call for a new ‘left alternative’

Part one

Tony Robson, Chris Marsden
28 July 2009

This is the first of a two-part series on an open letter issued by the Socialist Workers Party in Britain.

The Socialist Workers Party in Britain has issued an open letter under the title: “Left Must Unite to Create an Alternative.”

It published its appeal on June 9, two days after the European elections and local authority elections in the UK.

These elections certainly underscored the need for the building of an alternative political leadership for the working class. Labour's vote in the European elections collapsed to an all-time low, coming in third behind the Conservatives and the right-wing nationalist United Kingdom Independence Party. For the first time, the far-right British National Party (BNP) had two candidates elected to the European Parliament after winning more than 6 percent of the vote.

The answer required is the construction of a new socialist and internationalist party, independent of the labour and trade union bureaucracies and based on the theoretical and programmatic heritage of the Marxist movement.

The SWP is bitterly opposed to this perspective. Its aim is, rather, to utilise Labour's crisis to reiterate its longstanding demand for a regroupment of Britain's various left tendencies into a new electoral vehicle dominated by the trade union bureaucracy and whatever disaffected Labour Members of Parliament (MPs) they can attract. It hopes that an exaggerated insistence on the threat posed by the BNP can be used in the interests of furthering this project—to convince sections of the bureaucracy that a political vacuum has opened up that can be filled by other forces and to demand that its “left” rivals do whatever is necessary to make themselves acceptable to the bureaucrats they are seeking to court.

“Never before have fascists achieved such a success in Britain,” the SWP states. “History teaches us that fascism can be fought and stopped, but only if we unite to resist.”

The audience the SWP is targeting is exemplified by the letter's posing of how to respond to the European election results. “One answer to the problem is to say we should swallow everything New Labour has done and back it to keep [Conservative Party leader] David Cameron, and the BNP, out,” the SWP writes.

Who apart from the bureaucracy would make such an argument? The single most important development revealed by the European elections is the universal collapse in support for social democracy. That right-wing conservative and even fascistic parties had some degree of success is not evidence of a swing to the right. Rather, millions of workers turned their back on their old parties because they no longer believe they are in any

way different from the traditional parties of big business, but did so in the main by refusing to vote for anyone.

On average, across Europe, the social democrats, Socialist parties and Labourites received only 22 percent of the vote in a record low turnout averaging just 43 percent.

The results in Britain were the most developed expression of this process. Successive Labour governments have imposed Thatcherite economic policies of privatisation and tax cuts for the wealthy, launched deeply unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and implemented a sustained offensive against democratic rights. The belief that replacing Tony Blair with Gordon Brown as prime minister would give the party a fresh lease on life has been dashed. Instead, factional warfare and scandals over MPs' expenses have threatened the party's disintegration.

Labour has been deserted by its former social base in the working class, and faces electoral oblivion. It won just 16 percent of the vote on a 34.5 percent turnout. That only around 5 percent of the electorate voted for the party is because it is *not seen* as an alternative to the Tories. Labour's vote went down by around a quarter in London, by a third in the Northwest, and was almost halved in Yorkshire and the Northeast.

That is why, in answer to its own question, the SWP warns, “Yet it would take a miracle for Gordon Brown to be elected back into Downing Street. The danger is that by simply clinging on we would be pulled down with the wreckage of New Labour.”

The BNP managed to pass the threshold required to be elected under the proportional representation formula only because of this massive decline in support for Labour and the level of abstention. The Northwest region and the Yorkshire and Humber region were amongst those regions that witnessed the most severe collapse in Labour's vote and had the highest levels of abstention, with voter turnout at 31.9 percent and 32.51 percent respectively—a decline of 10 percent since 2004. Nationally, the BNP's share of the vote rose from 2004 by just 1.3 percent, with an increase of votes from 808,200 to 943,598.

The SWP has for many years calculated that the rightward course of the Labour government would lead to a split-off by a section of the Labour Party and the trade unions, for which it could serve as “left” adviser. But the attempt to constitute a new party on such a perspective has ended in abject failure because, to date, no significant section of the bureaucracy has broken with Labour.

The SWP-backed “Respect—the Unity Coalition” was formed to accommodate just one former Labour MP, George Galloway, who found himself without a political vehicle because he was *expelled* from Labour in October 2003 for his anti-Iraq war stance. The SWP accepted Galloway's leadership of Respect, accommodated to his opportunist

orientation to Muslim businessmen, Islamist groups and regimes in the Middle East, and tried to use this to raise its own political profile. This broke down only when Galloway decided that association with the “Trotskyists” of the SWP was playing badly with his anti-communist political backers, and he dispensed with their services.

The SWP hopes that Labour’s crisis will open the doors to the bureaucracy hitherto closed to them, and they intend to utilise the successes of the BNP to give political legitimacy to their project. The bottom line is their readiness to accept any political compromise necessary to this end, and, specifically, not to allow efforts to cling to socialist and revolutionary phrases undermine their political respectability in the eyes of the bureaucracy.

The NPA in France

The SWP is not alone in pursuing “left” regroupment. It has been placed in a poor position by the failure of Respect, when compared, in particular, with the Ligue Communiste Revolutionaire, the French affiliate to the Pabloite United Secretariat, which this year formed the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA).

The Pabloites have argued that it is necessary to maintain a rhetorical distance from the social democrats and to stress the left credentials of the NPA. They came to this conclusion not only after surveying the wreckage of Respect and the Scottish Socialist Party, but from considering the political damage they suffered due to their support for and participation in Rifondazione Comunista (PRC) in Italy and similar “dissident” Stalinist and reformist tendencies.

As part of Romano Prodi’s Union government, elected in 2006, PRC leader Fausto Bertinotti was elected president of the Chamber of Deputies. The PRC stayed in government as it imposed cuts and austerity measures and voted to continue the Italian military presence in Afghanistan and send troops to Lebanon.

The Italian Pabloites, working within the PRC, were directly implicated in this political betrayal. Among those supporting Prodi in a vote of confidence in 2007, based on agreement to a 12-point ultimatum that included support for Italy’s military intervention in Afghanistan and the “reform” of Italy’s pension system, was Senator Franco Turigliatto of the Pabloite Sinistra Critica (Critical Left).

Polemicalising against the NPA in the SWP’s theoretical journal *International Socialism*, (“Revolutionary Paths: A Reply to Panos Garganas and François Sabado,” March 31), Alex Callinicos opposed the Pabloites for their posture of opposition to collaboration with the social democrats.

“We in the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) are enthusiasts for the New Anti-Capitalist Party (Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste, NPA),” Callinicos states. But, he goes on, “there are other cases in which the most important break is by forces that reject social liberalism but have not broken with overt reformism—Die Linke [Left Party] in Germany, the Partito della Rifondazione Communist (PRC) in Italy under both its old and its new leadership, Synaspismos in Greece, and some elements in the Left Bloc in Portugal.”

After declaring that, in Britain and Germany, “social democracy has been deeply entrenched,” he continues, “This is why the emergence of Die Linke in Germany is such a historic development... for the first time in decades, the decay of social democracy has produced a serious breakaway to the left. Of course, Die Linke’s politics is left reformist: what else could it be given the balance of forces in Germany?”

Die Linke was formed in June 2007 through an alliance between the ex-Stalinists of the Party of Democratic Socialism in the former East

Germany and forces who quit the Social Democratic Party in the West, led by former German Finance Minister Oskar Lafontaine and mainly constituting trade union bureaucrats. The SWP’s co-thinkers function within Die Linke based on their acceptance of the reformist programme laid down by Lafontaine.

Callinicos insists that this is all that is possible, going so far as to claim that the development of the class struggle does not provide any possibility of winning the working class to a revolutionary perspective, but rather, “by drawing new layers of workers into class-conscious activity, will tend to expand the base of reformist politics.”

He says of the SWP’s own experience, “The continuing influence of reformism constrains us in different ways. Respect was doomed ultimately by its failure to bring about a major split in the Labour Party... a radical left party is like a united front of the classical kind in that it brings together politically heterogeneous forces. This is partly a consequence of the relatively open character of such parties’ programmes, which generally finesse the alternatives of reform or revolution.”

The lesson of Respect, for Callinicos, is that what the Labour and trade union bureaucracy demands, the left groups must deliver. In a subsequent article, “Labour Collapse, BNP Victories—Political Meltdown,” July 2009, he warns his “left” co-thinkers that “if we are brutally honest about our own strengths and weaknesses, it has to be admitted that the radical left is in pretty bad shape.”

If the BNP and other far-right parties are not to profit from Labour’s collapse, “we need to get our act together electorally. This requires, on the part of the different fragments of the radical left, an acknowledgement of our collective failure.... As long as we each harbour the illusion that we can make the breakthrough on our own, we are sunk.”

The political cynicism of the SWP is boundless. While threatening its potential electoral allies with the spectre of the right, Callinicos acknowledges in the same piece that “It’s important not to overstate” this threat. “The British National Party’s (BNP) vote actually fell in the two constituencies where it won seats. The Nazis got in thanks to massive abstentions by Labour voters” and “there is very little sign of the kind of generalised shift to the right in British society that brought Thatcher to office 30 years ago.”

In other words, the SWP is moved to issue its “open letter” not by a genuine concern over the danger of fascism—its polemic would have been largely unchanged had the BNP crashed and burned. Its essential political motivation is to outlaw any genuine socialist opposition to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy.

Callinicos even complains of the “chronic, historic weakness of the Labour left” in Britain, before insisting that this “would not matter so much if their ideas were not still supported by millions of people (as is indicated by the immense popularity Tony Benn enjoys well into his eighties).”

It should be noted that Benn, who is hardly a major force in politics today, has repeatedly declared that he will die, as he has lived, as a loyal member of the Labour Party.

To be continued



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact