

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

Part two

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This is the conclusion of a two-part series on an open letter issued by the Socialist Workers Party in Britain. The first part was posted July 28.

Even now, the Socialist Workers Party has very little to back up its claim that the future lies with a possible break from Labour by a section of the bureaucracy. During the last 12 years, the trade unions have enabled the Labour government to pursue its free market agenda by isolating every manifestation of working class resistance.

The Rail Maritime and Transport union (RMT) stood candidates against Labour in the European elections, as part of the No2EU slate formed in alliance with the Communist Party of Britain and the Socialist Party. However, this front, which the RMT said it would not repeat in a general election, was so right-wing and nationalist that the SWP balked at lending its support. But should the prospect of the Labour government being replaced by the Tories in next year's general election come to pass, then any split that took place would be on a similar perspective to that advanced by No2EU.

For the present, the open letter is reduced to citing “Mark Serwotka, the general secretary of the PCS [Public and Communication Service] civil service workers union,” who has proposed that “trade unions stand candidates.”

The SWP concludes by advocating “one simple step”—the convening of a conference “of all those committed to presenting candidates representing working class interests at the next election.” On such a formless basis, the difference between reform and revolution would not merely be “finessed.” The SWP and others would rather act as apologists and foot soldiers for a desperate attempt at rebranding by the very forces that have betrayed the working class.

The united front

Callinicos and the SWP routinely describe their call for a new electoral party dominated by the trade unions as a “united front of a special type.” This is a transparent attempt to dress up their manoeuvres in language associated with the struggle waged by Leon Trotsky in the 1930s to mobilise the working class against the growth of fascism in Germany, which represented an immediate and mortal danger to the working class.

He raised the demand for a united front against the position taken by the German Communist Party, under the Stalinist leadership of the Communist International, which rejected common action with the social

democrats, whom they denounced as “social fascist.” His aim was to break the influence of the social democratic leaders, to whom millions of workers continued to look, believing that they represented a socialist alternative.

Trotsky fought for the German Communist Party to propose a united front with the Social Democratic Party in order to organise joint action against the Nazis and in defence of workers' organisations. By this means, the Communist Party could take the lead in uniting the working class and either expose the Social Democracy for its refusal to mount common defensive action against the class enemy or prove the superiority of the leadership of the revolutionary party in such mass struggles by the working class.

However, he insisted that it was absolutely impermissible to subordinate the revolutionaries within a united front to the reformist bureaucracy or conceal programmatic differences. The antithesis of a united front is any form of electoral alliance or political combination with the reformists, let alone the development of a common party that, to quote Callinicos, seeks to “finesse the alternatives of reform or revolution.”

It was the refusal by the Third International to even discuss the Stalinist leadership's world historic betrayal that allowed Hitler to come to power that led Trotsky to call for the founding of the Fourth International. The Stalinists responded to the disaster produced by their ultra-left policies in Germany by adopting the right-opportunist policy of the Popular Front—based on the assertion that in the struggle against the greater danger of fascism, the working class had to ally itself with and accept the leadership of the democratic bourgeois parties and regimes.

This was, in fact, a counterrevolutionary policy. It meant the renunciation of any revolutionary or socialist demands as well as the struggle for workers' power. It led to one catastrophe for the working class after another—in Spain, France and the rest of Europe—and paved the way for the eruption of a second imperialist world war.

The SWP's policy—of an electoral alliance and even common party with the bureaucracy—is in line with the policies of Stalin, not Trotsky.

This is not the first time that the Socialist Workers Party has utilised the issue of fascism as a mechanism for opposing a political struggle against the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. In 1977, it set up the Anti-Nazi League (ANL), with the backing of some trade unions and the endorsement of former Young Liberal leader Peter Hain (now Prime Minister Gordon Brown's secretary of state for Wales, but then the communications officer of the postal workers' union), the deputy general secretary of the engineering union AUEW, Ernest Roberts, and one Neil Kinnock, later to become leader of the Labour Party.

The ANL sought to focus the efforts of mainly young people on the

supposed “common fight” against the National Front, the forerunner of the British National Party (BNP). This was at a time when the working class was in direct conflict with the Labour government of James Callaghan, which was imposing IMF-dictated austerity measures, culminating in the 1979 Winter of Discontent and the election of the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher.

There is, however, a significant difference between the 1970s and today. Whereas in 1977, the SWP acted with the benediction of the Labour and trade union lefts, today it speaks as the officially designated representative of the Trades Union Congress.

The SWP has over decades integrated itself into the highest echelons of the trade union bureaucracy, assuming leading positions in a number of unions to accompany the niche it has established within academia. It speaks today not merely as the bureaucracy’s apologist, but as its officially recognised spokesman on the left.

Paralleling the development of Respect, the SWP liquidated the ANL into Unite Against Fascism (UAF) in 2003 by forming an alliance with the National Assembly Against Racism, led politically by the Labour Party’s Black Section. Its sole purpose is to promote tactical voting as a way of preventing the BNP from “gaining an electoral foothold in this country.”

The UAF is endorsed by the TUC, funded by the trade unions and functions out of offices supplied by the PCS union, led by former Respect member Mark Serwotka. Its chairman is the former Labour Party mayor of London, Ken Livingstone. Weyman Bennett of the SWP is the co-chair of UAF, and Martin Smith, the SWP’s national organiser, sits on its steering committee.

The SWP has been entrusted with this position because it is now widely recognised as a party that has been fully incorporated into the structures of official politics. Its radical rhetoric and advocacy of trade union action and social reforms have not proved to be a hindrance to this cooption into the establishment, but an asset that the political elite understands can provide a useful safety valve.

In October 2008, for example, the *World Socialist Web Site* drew attention to the nomination of SWP member Sabiha Iqbal as a consultant on the 22-strong Young Muslim Advisory Group. (See “Britain: Socialist Workers Party member becomes government adviser”). YMAG was set up by the Brown government to advise it on how to combat the influence of Islamic extremism and “how best to boost the representation and participation of young Muslims in civic life.”

Then-Communities Secretary Hazel Blears said of Iqbal’s political affiliations, “If you don’t want to change the world at 17, that’s a shame.” Iqbal would become one of what Blears described as “the next generation of Muslim community leaders.”

An open defence of the state

The SWP’s open letter and its role in the UAF demonstrate just how far it has gone beyond its historic function as an apologist for the trade union apparatus to now stand as the open defender of the entire bourgeois parliamentary state apparatus.

In the immediate aftermath of the European elections, Martin Smith acted as the spokesman for the UAF and was interviewed by Channel 4 and BBC *Newsnight*. Rather than using the opportunity to indict the whole political establishment, their promotion of anti-immigration policies and attacks on workers’ livelihoods, for the growth of the BNP, he called for all parliamentarians to come together to avert the BNP threat.

He said of the BNP that “The biggest problem is giving them the air of legitimacy.”

Smith stated that every political party “has a right to speak,” except the

BNP because it does “not pursue a legitimate democratic structure (sic). They have a completely different view, really a revolutionary fascist view. They will use Parliament to put forward their views.”

These are significant statements. The BNP is denounced for being “revolutionary” and utilising Parliament to advance policies that do not fit a “legitimate democratic structure.”

A UAF statement for media workers similarly warns that “when fascist parties are allowed to worm their way into the political and media establishment...[t]hey use the platforms they are granted to consolidate their presence in the political mainstream, normalise their racist arguments, pull the political spectrum to the right and build their organisations on the ground. As they grow, *so do the pressures on people to capitulate to them*. The danger today is that the BNP breaks through the ‘cordon sanitaire’ to become a regular fixture in *our media*” (emphasis added).

Such calls for censorship and proscription of fascist tendencies and their activities, when they are responded to by the establishment, are invariably utilised primarily against the workers’ movement and the left. One only has to recall that the Public Order Act was originally enacted in 1936 on the pretext of opposing Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists. In both its original and subsequent incarnations, it has been employed to prevent political marches from going ahead, and was used extensively during the 1984-1985 miners’ strike. It prohibits any “association of persons” that seeks to usurp “the functions of the police or of the armed forces of the Crown” and bans the use of “physical force in promoting any political object.”

The SWP is indifferent to such principled considerations. Its open defence of bourgeois parliamentarianism and its denunciation of the BNP for not being part of a “legitimate democratic structure” is a constant theme. The *Socialist Worker* newspaper regularly runs articles with headlines such as “How the BNP Poses as a Respectable Party” and “BNP’s ‘Respectable’ Veneer Slips.”

This speaks volumes about the SWP’s own political concerns. They seek nothing more than acceptance into the fold of bourgeois respectability. In reality, one of the reasons for the growth in support for the BNP is that it has cast itself as an outsider and opponent of the political establishment.

If anything is guaranteed to facilitate the growth of such far-right tendencies, it is the SWP’s efforts to invoke the sanctity of Parliament and to boost the political credentials of the trade unions and the Labour left. But the SWP’s leadership of the UAF shows that it is fully prepared to ally itself with bourgeois political tendencies other than the trade union and Labour bureaucracy. Those to whom the UAF appeals to maintain a “cordon sanitaire” around the BNP include not only dozens of Labour MPs and “our media” (the *Daily Mirror* is a signatory), but all of the major parties.

In this light, it is even more striking that only after an extended warning of the dangers posed by the BNP does the SWP’s open letter turn to what it describes as the “second lesson from the European elections”—the need for “a united fightback to save jobs and services.” If Conservative Party leader David Cameron is elected, the SWP writes, “[He] will attempt to drive through policies of austerity at the expense of the vast majority of the British people.”

Even then, the SWP portrays the threat posed by the Tories as somehow less than that represented by the BNP, claiming that because the Conservative Party’s vote fell, “they are nervous about pushing through attacks.”

The SWP writes this in its own newspaper at the same time as it is in a political alliance with Cameron and the Conservatives—precisely on the basis that they are fellow democrats and thus allies in the fight against the BNP!

Cameron and other top Conservatives such as Sir Teddy Taylor, Edward

Garnier and Anthony Steen are signatories to the UAF. If Cameron comes to power in 2010, he will have done so, at least in part, thanks to the SWP portraying the Conservatives as a “legitimate” democratic force rather than the party of big capital and minimising the danger of a Tory government marshalling the full force of the state against the working class.

Concluded



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