

Britain: SEP candidate Robert Skelton speaks at Manchester Stop the War Coalition hustings

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20 April 2010

Socialist Equality Party candidate for Manchester Central, Robert Skelton, addressed a hustings meeting called by the Manchester Stop the War Coalition (STWC).

Skelton spoke against three other candidates for the May 6 General Election, Marc Ramsbottom from the Liberal Democratic Party standing in Manchester Central; Karen Reissman, of the Socialist Workers Party, who is standing for the Trades Union and Socialists Coalition in Manchester Gorton; and Brian Candeland from the Green Party, standing for Manchester Withington.

Candidates were asked to answer questions on the war in Afghanistan, the replacement of the Trident nuclear weapon system, the siege and occupation of Gaza, Islamophobia and civil liberties.

Founded in 2001 by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), the Communist Party of Great Britain, CND and the Muslim Association of Britain, the Stop the War Coalition once attracted hundreds to its meetings and nearly 2 million people to its demonstration opposing war in Iraq in February 2003. The failure of its perspective, based upon pacifist appeals to the major parties, the United Nations and the European powers to oppose war, has led to its virtual collapse. The meeting in Manchester was attended by less than a dozen people, excluding the supporters of the SEP.

The chairperson offered candidates three minutes to introduce themselves and their programme.

Ramsbottom enthused about the “political bounce” for the Liberal Democrats after its leader Nick Clegg was proclaimed as the victor in the TV debate of the three main party leaders. He used the meeting to try to

win support from the STWC, despite the Liberal Democrats’ support for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, by pointing to the party’s initial opposition to the war in Iraq and support for civil liberties in Parliament. Even this was fundamentally dishonest. Once the Iraq war began, the Liberal Democrats would have nothing to do with the STWC.

Reissman did not mention the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but explained that she was participating in the Trade Unions and Socialists Coalition (TUSC) to organise the defence of public services and provide an alternative for “all those who do not know who to vote for, because the Labour Party does not represent them”.

Skelton was the only speaker to explain the cause of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the central questions facing workers. In his opening remarks he insisted, “The prerequisite for a successful struggle on any of the five questions posed by this meeting today is a decisive break from Labourism.

“As the Socialist Equality Party says in its manifesto, we are standing to prepare an independent political movement of the working class against militarism and war abroad and austerity at home... The struggle against war necessitates a struggle against the capitalist profit system. This can only be done on the basis of a socialist programme, in opposition to the institutions of big capital, including the Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress... The fight against war means uniting the British working class on a revolutionary, socialist programme.”

On the Afghan war, Ramsbottom and Candeland were in favour of withdrawing British troops in Afghanistan—but not until there was a “peace process”. Reissman did not challenge the Liberal Democrats’

record on its support for the war.

Skelton stressed the imperialist nature of the war and that it was part of a broader agenda to carve up the world in the interests of the US and Britain. He insisted that the crucial question was how to stop the war. He took issue with the Liberal Democrats and the STWC/SWP who had in February 2003 sought to prevent the war on the basis of appeals to the United Nations. It was only possible to oppose the war by mobilising the working class on a socialist programme.

The SWP played a key role in preventing antiwar sentiment from becoming the starting point of a political movement of the working class against the Labour government. They had insisted that opposition to war must be based on a popular front appeal to all opponents of war. Pride of place going to a handful of Labourites who would still register a protest against war, provided that they were not called on to politically oppose the government or break with it. But Charles Kennedy, then the leader of the Liberal Democrats, was also provided with a platform to claim to be an opponent of war—just a matter of days before his party pledged its support to the war effort once it began.

Since 2003, the Stop the War Coalition has continued to push the same line, disillusioning tens of thousands of working people and youth in the process.

Skelton noted that the Liberal Democrat candidate claimed to oppose the war, but he and his party in fact offered “critical support” for the Afghan war.

In relation to the question on an immediate end to the siege of Gaza, Ramsbottom responded with handwringing, saying that Israel was a secular state, that some lifting of the blockade and a Palestinian state alongside Israel were necessary and how glad he was that President Obama was taking a tougher line with Israel and urged the British government to do the same. Reissman rejected a socialist answer to the oppression of the Palestinians, calling instead for the establishment of a secular state of Palestine—the bourgeois nationalist programme once associated with the PLO.

The meeting was opened to questions from the floor, in the course of which Ramsbottom made clear that he stood by his party on support for the Afghan war and evaded the issue when two questioners pointed out that the Lib Dems in fact intended to maintain Britain’s nuclear capability for the foreseeable future.

The most extraordinary aspect of the hustings was the

friendly approach taken by Reissman and others organised within the STWC to Ramsbottom. Despite the STWC’s central demand for an immediate end to the Afghan war, Ramsbottom’s pro-war position passed without challenge. It was also left to Skelton to oppose claims by Ramsbottom, Candleland from the Greens and Lib Dem supporters in the audience that a hung parliament, or some form of coalition government would be good things, enabling the Lib Dems to act as a force for electoral change and the safeguarding of civil liberties.

It is clear that many within the STWC should be numbered amongst those middle class social layers that are dazzled by the Lib Dems’ “successes” and attracted by its promise to at least moderate the excesses of either Labour or the Conservatives. Whereas Skelton and other members of the Socialist Equality Party strenuously rejected any illusions in the Lib Dems and pointed out Clegg’s pledge to implement “savage cuts”, Reissman was evasive and clearly uncomfortable.

On several occasions, Skelton directly challenged Reissman on the TUSC’s call for a Labour vote and its claim that a victory for Gordon Brown is somehow preferable to a Conservative government. She repeatedly refused to answer. Nevertheless the false claim that Labour is the “lesser evil” clearly renders it impossible to oppose the Lib Dems—given that a coalition with Clegg is the only way that Brown can realistically expect to form a government. This is the logical culmination of the petty bourgeois politics of the SWP—the Popular Frontism that characterises the Stop The War Coalition and Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition alike.



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