

Britain's general election: An historic political shift

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Whatever the outcome of the UK General Election on May 6, British political life has already undergone a tectonic shift.

The most extraordinary feature of the election campaign is the ongoing meltdown of the Labour Party. Predictions vary as to what form a coalition government—the most likely outcome of the election—will take. But the likelihood of a coalition government arises above all due to the collapse in support for Labour.

Labour secured only 33 percent of the vote in 2005. But the latest polls warn that it could slump to third place, behind the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, with the worst prediction putting Labour's share of the vote at just 18 percent. This would be the first time Labour came behind the Liberals since 1922.

To this point Labour has calculated that it might still manage to emerge as the majority party in government thanks to Britain's first-past-the-post constituency-based system, and might be able to form a coalition with the Liberal Democrats, whose support has risen mostly as a result of voter disenchantment with Labour. But talk is now of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition.

It is difficult to say more about the likely outcome of the election. Such is the degree of political volatility that no one knows how many will stay true to their declared preference. One-third of Labour voters are recorded saying they might end up backing another party.

Nor is it possible to estimate the size of what may be a massive abstention by those disgusted with the entire political set-up.

What is certain is that Labour will not recover from this electoral humiliation—and nor should it. The Socialist Equality Party in Britain and its candidates

have opposed all calls for a vote for Labour as somehow representing the “lesser evil”—the common position of all of the various middle-class fake-left groups. We have characterised Labour as a right-wing party of big business, no better than the Tories—a party of austerity, militarism and war, as proved by its 13 years in office.

Not only is this assessment politically correct, it is increasingly shared by workers and youth, who have drawn similar conclusions and have nothing but contempt for the party of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.

Labour's collapse expresses the transformed relationship between the old organisations that once constituted the workers' movement and the broad mass of the working class.

For over a decade, Labour has acted as the unalloyed representative of a global financial oligarchy confident that it faced no major challenge from the working class. The Labour government's participation in the Iraq war provoked bitterness and outrage, but this could find no political expression because Labour's political monopoly was carefully preserved by the trade unions and their pseudo-left apologists.

All this has now changed. The onset of the global economic crisis in 2008 has produced a sharp intensification of class antagonisms which can no longer be contained within the framework of official politics. Tens of millions of people who during the past decade were able to keep their head above water by taking on massive levels of debt in the form of mortgages and personal credit now face a terrible decline in their living standards.

With unemployment in danger of rising above three million, the threat of job losses, wage cuts and repossessions haunts the majority of the population.

For over a century, the Labour Party and its affiliated trade unions have been the major vehicles through which the struggles waged by the working class were confined to a perspective of securing limited reforms that did not threaten the survival of capitalism.

The calculation that lay at the heart of the New Labour project—that Labour could remain a significant political force even after abandoning its promises of reform, thanks to the backing of the financial oligarchy—now lies in ruins. The result of this strategy has been to finish off the Labour Party, once and for all.

This represents a major political crisis for the British bourgeoisie.

The past week has seen warnings from within ruling circles that the three main parties must be honest with the electorate regarding the scale and savagery of the cuts that are coming. These culminated in a report from the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) stating that the cuts planned by Labour and the Liberal Democrats compare with those imposed by Labour in the 1970s.

Those measures led to the “Winter of Discontent” in 1978-79, which brought down the Callaghan government. The IFS identifies Tory proposals for cuts in spending as being the most austere since World War II. Between 70 and 80 percent of these cuts have not yet been identified and, in reality, more are planned.

Such warnings are motivated by a concern that without securing agreement on what must be done, no party or combination of parties will have the mandate required to impose austerity measures. The problem is that securing such a popular accord is impossible. No one will agree to being deprived of a living wage, a job, a pension, even a home.

Above all, the Labour Party is no longer in a position to exploit the political loyalty of broad sections of workers in order to enforce such attacks in alliance with the trade unions.

Labour’s collapse is thus a portent of enormous class struggles to come, struggles that must inevitably give rise to a fundamental political realignment within Britain.

Its initial impact has been to destabilise the whole of bourgeois politics, by discrediting the belief once held by millions of workers that they could secure their interests through parliament. For this reason, it constitutes a necessary first step towards a new and genuinely socialist movement of the working class.

This underscores the significance of the election campaign of the Socialist Equality Party, and the urgency of building the SEP to make this nascent development conscious and provide the perspective, programme and leadership the working class needs.

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