

Once more on the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition

Chris Marsden
20 May 2010

Below we publish a complaint by a supporter of the Socialist Party of England and Wales regarding the Socialist Equality Party statement "After the General Election: The task facing British workers," followed by a reply.

Peter Playdon writes:

"The General Election saw these organisations grouped in the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition pledge their support for the re-election of the Labour government." This statement is entirely false, and I don't believe you could offer any quotations from TUSC candidates to support it. TUSC & the Socialist Party have consistently argued that workers need a new party to represent them and have offered working-class voters an alternative to Labour.

Our position on any change back towards socialism within the Labour Party is that it is highly unlikely (McDonnell couldn't even get on the ballot last time due to the tiny number of left Labour MPs), but that IF it happened, it would of course be a positive step, and yes, if the Labour party re-constituted itself as a pro-workers party we might seek to re-enter it in order to work within it. This is no way equals supporting the re-election of New Labour or its pro-capitalist policies, and for you to say so is false and misleading.

Your group should be working within TUSC in order to build contact with real working class voters and moreover, to get involved with actual class struggles in the UK, instead of sniping from ultra-left positions with no roots in the lives of ordinary people. You have a good website with fresh socialist news every day, but where are you otherwise?

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Chris Marsden replies:

Your letter makes two accusations regarding supposed inaccuracies in what the Socialist Equality Party has written about the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition and the Socialist Party of England and Wales, which you support.

Firstly, you object to our statement that those grouped in the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition pledged "their support for the re-election of the Labour government".

This, you say, "is entirely false and I don't believe you could offer any quotations from TUSC candidates to support it. TUSC & the Socialist Party have consistently argued that workers need a new party to represent them and have offered working-class voters an alternative to Labour".

TUSC's 40 or so candidates—the SP accounts for half of them—come from a coalition of organisations that explicitly campaigned for a vote for Labour. Five were from the Socialist Workers Party, which our statement on the election refers to. In statements made during the

election, the SWP called repeatedly for a Labour vote, insisting that, "Our first electoral priority should be to make sure left of Labour candidates at the election do as well as possible. But we will also vote Labour against the Tories where there is no serious left of Labour candidate".

And there are others in TUSC that were actively working for a Labour victory, including the candidates of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT).

The SP bears political responsibility for its alliance with these forces and the terms and political line on which it was agreed. TUSC has its origins in an earlier electoral coalition, No2EU, formed by the SP and the Communist Party of Britain (CPB), the Stalinist group that publishes the *Morning Star*. Its leading figure was RMT head Bob Crow, a former member of the CPB.

But neither the CPB, nor the RMT, was prepared to stand against Labour in a general election and would not back TUSC. Despite this, Crow and a few other union bureaucrats who have personally endorsed TUSC were given a veto on who could be accepted as a candidate. Meanwhile the RMT gave its official national backing to Labour members of the RMT parliamentary group and, at the TUSC founding conference, pride of place was given to John McDonnell, the leader of the dozen or so members of the Campaign Group of Labour MPs who are sponsored by the RMT.

TUSC candidates could not stand against these Labour MPs. This was enforced by a steering committee in which the SP was heavily represented. According to the Workers Power group that sought to stand under the TUSC umbrella in Vauxhall, London, "We were politely informed that this was not possible because the Labour MP for Vauxhall Kate Hoey is a member of the RMT's parliamentary group. Despite its general secretary Bob Crow's support for TUSC, the rail union is not officially supporting a challenge to Labour".

You also provided a political apologia for this arrangement, centred on the assertion that the trade unions must be brought on board no matter what the cost, because they should be regarded as the fundamental organisational form and leadership of the working class.

The significance of the TUSC was measured by the degree to which it can win the backing of the union leaders. The SP insisted, "Trade unions are still the basic organisations of the working class.... For the Socialist Party the importance of TUSC lies above all in its potential as a catalyst in the trade unions, both in the structures and below, for the idea of working class political representation".

Talk of "below" aside, the TUSC steering committee is dominated by trade union bureaucrats, including Bob Crow and Craig Johnson of the RMT National Executive, who sat alongside others who are leading members of the SP, such as Brian Caton, the Prison

Officers Association general secretary, and Chris Baugh and John McNally of the Public and Commercial Services union NEC.

The SP stated in its argument for TUSC that though it nominally holds the position that Labour is no longer a reformist party and needs to be replaced, “We also recognise that there are different strategic views about the way forward for the left in Britain, whether the Labour Party can be reclaimed by the labour movement, or whether a new workers’ party needs to be established”.

You extended your own backing to Labour candidates, stating that, “We recognise that there will be Labour and non-Labour candidates standing in the general election who agree with our policies, who share our socialist aspirations and who will be supported by left and labour movement organisations participating in our coalition”.

The TUSC platform drawn up by the SP also portrayed it as the “lesser evil”, stating, “The likelihood is that a Tory government will make earlier and deeper cuts in public spending than a New Labour one. A Labour government may also be more vulnerable to trade union pressure not to outlaw industrial action in ‘essential’ services”.

Finally, in the *Socialist*, November 11 last year, the SP wrote that immediately following the RMT “conference on political representation” that was to give birth to TUSC, its own Socialism 2009 event held “a forum on political representation attended by 200 people, with invited speakers from the Green Party, Respect, the Labour Representation Committee, the RMT and the Alliance for Green Socialism”.

This was in order for “Dave Nellist and other Socialist Party members” to argue for “a coalition of general election candidates standing in the interests of working class people” that clearly was meant to include McDonnell and other supposed “lefts” in the Labour Representation Committee.

The report added, “The Socialist Party is campaigning for the building of a mass workers’ party which would, in fighting for a national profile, attempt to stand in every seat. When such a party exists, or to help with the process of building it, some of the remaining left Labour MPs may leave Labour to participate in it, which would be welcome”.

Lest the SP be accused of opposing continued support for Labour by McDonnell and company, it continued, “The question of exactly when they should break with Labour is a tactical question though, linked to gaining maximum support from workers, and clearly the months before a general election might not be the best time”.

Your second complaint is that we misrepresent the SP’s position in continuing to support Labour, alongside the SWP and others. We wrote that, “The General Election saw these organisations grouped in the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition pledge their support for the re-election of the Labour government. Its aftermath has seen a strengthening of their orientation to the bureaucracy.

“While ritually restating its position that Labour is a capitalist party, the Socialist Party has declared that a campaign to ‘reclaim’ New Labour by the trade unions would be a ‘huge step forward’ and that ‘we would turn towards such a development’. It has registered its own backing for Labour MP John McDonnell if he contests the Labour leadership election as “the only candidate that stands in defence of workers’ interests”.

Your words only confirm what we wrote. You say, “Our position on any change back towards socialism within the Labour Party is that it is highly unlikely (McDonnell couldn’t even get on the ballot last time due to the tiny number of left Labour MPs), but that IF it happened, it would of course be a positive step, and yes, if the Labour party re-

constituted itself as a pro-workers party we might seek to re-enter it in order to work within it”.

This begs the question as to why the SP has spent so much time elaborating on such an impossible (not “highly unlikely”) scenario as a left-wing evolution of Labour—the party that you have acknowledged for a decade to be capitalist through and through.

Just who is the audience being targeted by such fantastically detailed speculation as the article by the SP’s Deputy General Secretary Hannah Sell posted May 14: “Time for the fight of our lives”?

Sell writes at length of something she does not think is even “on the agenda”, “to stand a chance of reclaiming capitalist New Labour for the working class it would take a mass influx into the party—of trade unionists and young people—determined to rebuild the democratic structures which have long been destroyed”.

What really motivates the SP is, as Sell reports, the fact that “Len McCluskey, general secretary candidate for Unite the union, has said that Unite would launch a major campaign to reclaim the Labour Party under his leadership”.

This unswerving loyalty to the trade union bureaucracy is what accounts for Sell’s statement that “a serious campaign to reclaim New Labour by affiliated trade unions would be a huge step forward”, and her advice given on how this should be done that includes calling on “all affiliated trade unions” to “mandate their sponsored MPs” to back John McDonnell as Labour leader.

The SP orients to the trade union bureaucracy, the trade union bureaucracy maintains its loyalty to Labour: This is what accounts for the weasel formulations it employed during the general election and beyond.

This orientation is determined by the SP’s class character. Having broken from Trotskyism more than 60 years ago, the SP and its forerunner, the Militant Tendency, adapted itself wholesale to the trade union and Labour Party bureaucracy, working for fully 35 years inside the Labour Party itself. Like similar formations such as the SWP, the SP articulates the interest of a petty bourgeois stratum that finds its most finished form in the trade union bureaucracy as a whole. It works loyally within the structures of the unions in order to advocate limited protests against cuts in the public sector on which its own members depend. But it is far more determined to preserve the authority and control of the trade union apparatus, in which many of its own members are ensconced. They do so by opposing the real threat “from below”—of a rebellion by the working class against these corrupt representatives of big business interests and “their party”, Labour.



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