

Socialist Equality Party in Britain holds meetings: A socialist programme against mass austerity

Our correspondent
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The Socialist Equality Party in Britain held two meetings last week, part of a series advancing a socialist programme to oppose the massive austerity cuts outlined by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government.

The meetings, held in Manchester on August 10 and London on August 11, were called under the heading, "A socialist policy against mass unemployment and cuts". The meeting in Manchester was addressed by longstanding Socialist Equality Party member Chris Talbot and the London meeting by David O'Sullivan, the SEP's candidate for Oxford East in the May General Election.

Speaking in Manchester, Chris Talbot said, "As the advert for our meetings says, the coalition has announced the most savage public spending cuts in Europe. Every day some new attack is announced. As I am sure you are all aware of them, I'll just summarize some of the main features.

"As much as £100 billion will be cut by 2015. There will be a three-year public sector pay freeze, pay cuts, tax rises, and attack on pensions. As many as 1.3 million jobs will be lost. Official unemployment will soar to between 3 and 4 million. One in four graduates will end up without jobs.

"Local authorities could lose at least a third of central government funding over the next five years. The previous Labour government's school building programme has been axed. Thousands are now being taught in temporary buildings and prefabs. Some 500,000 primary school children will be taught in class sizes above 30 from September".

Talbot explained that although the government claimed that the National Health Service would be safe from cuts, "The *Times* announced last Friday that it had totalled up 11,000 NHS job losses that are confirmed this year, with a possible total of 40,000 NHS job losses. Royal Berkshire NHS Foundation Trust said it would cut 600 jobs out of a total of 4,500 over the next 3 years to make £60 million savings. Similar cuts have been announced in West London, Yorkshire, Greater Manchester, Nottinghamshire and Oxfordshire.

"These are job losses resulting from the previous Labour government cuts," Talbot explained.

Talbot detailed the origins of the austerity measures that are underway in Britain and internationally. "The Conservative-Liberal austerity measures are part of a global process that began in September 2008 with the sudden failure of leading banks on Wall Street and in the City of London. The financial turmoil has grown like cancer into a global economic breakdown. The world capitalist system is caught up in its greatest crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s. There is widespread talk that the world economy is plunging into a second round of recession deeper than that in 2008".

Talbot insisted that whilst the cuts were being carried out by the

Conservative-Liberal coalition government, "I must stress that the responsibility for these enormous cuts rests squarely with the Labour Party and the trade unions".

He pointed out that the front-runner in Labour's ongoing leadership contest, David Miliband, stated he had no disagreement with the cuts, but that the focus should be on how these plans would be implemented.

Detailing how the previous Labour government had handed over hundreds of billions of pounds of public money to bail out the banking system beginning in the autumn of 2008, the SEP speaker said, "What has been the result? The emergency bailout has protected the wealth of rich investors but failed to contain the crisis. The bailout was meant to rescue the global economy. But instead it has brought national economies to the verge of bankruptcy".

In response to this, Talbot said the ruling elite have launched an offensive against the working class. "They have declared class war. In Britain and throughout Europe the ruling elites intend to destroy everything remaining of the welfare state measures brought in after the Second World War. A historically unprecedented redistribution of wealth from working people to the super-rich is taking place. The sort of exploitation that is usually associated with dictatorships is on the agenda".

Talbot explained that the ruling elite were utilizing the crisis in order to permanently restructure class relations, at the expense of the working class. Talbot said that when Prime Minister David Cameron had been asked by a fire-fighter in a Birmingham question-and-answer session if he could reassure everyone that once the economic crisis was over, the spending cuts would be reversed, Cameron refused.

"Instead he said that what the coalition government is doing is permanent. It will not be reversed", said Talbot.

Talbot then emphasised, "None of this would be possible if not for the Labour Party and the trade unions. They are the most faithful supporters of the financial aristocracy and are the most ardent enforcers of social inequality.

"The trade unions have proven incapable of defending even the most minimal interests of the working class. For the last 30 years, their policies have brought workers nothing but defeats. In terms of policies and aims, there is no significant distinction between them and management.

"We say the fight against the austerity measures means a fight against the Labour Party and the trade unions. It is also a fight against all those so-called 'left' parties that sow illusions that they can be pushed to the left through mass pressure. This position is aimed at preventing the working class from establishing its own independent political party—the only answer to the attacks taking place".

Expanding on the reactionary role being played by the trade unions, Talbot explained that Britain's biggest union, Unite, had made clear that it would not oppose the austerity measures. Just days earlier Unite leader

Derek Simpson had said the unions would not call any national protests against the cuts but would instead, “try and educate our members and people generally about what’s really happening”.

Simpson said that the union would not support any “Greek-style protests”, saying, “I don’t think that’s the nature of the British public. We don’t have the volatile nature of the French or the Greeks”.

Talbot noted that UNITE was continuing the role it had played in defending the corporations and big business under Labour. Unite, said Talbot, had “sold out the British Airways Cabin Crew strike immediately on the Conservative-Liberal coalition coming into office”.

The response of Unison, the biggest public sector union with 1.3 million members, was to complain that the cuts were “not part of any party manifesto and it is outrageous that [they] are being brought in without consulting the public, patients, staff and unions”.

Instead of calling for any struggle against the government Unison said, “We are reserving the right to issue urgent judicial review proceedings”.

Talbot stated, “The only people who will benefit from this legal dispute—which if it happened would drag on for years—would be the lawyers”.

The various ex-left groups who masquerade as “socialists” were also playing a critical role in derailing any struggle against the cuts through their insistence that they could be blocked, if only the Trades Union Congress took action.

The Socialist Party “makes it clear that the whole point of their approach is to pressure the TUC conference ‘to break [its] silence’, ‘get off its knees’ and ‘show real resistance’. There is of course absolutely no possibility they will do any such thing”, said Talbot.

The Socialist Workers Party seeks to sow illusions in both the TUC and the Conservative Party itself, explained Talbot. The SWP is organizing a lobby of the Conservative conference in Birmingham on October 3 and another lobby on October 20, when Chancellor George Osborne unveils the results of his spending review designed to cut billions.

Talbot explained, “The kind of opposition the SWP are proposing was spelt out by their leading member Alex Callinicos at their recent Marxism 2010 meetings”.

Speaking at that event Callinicos said, “When we organise demonstrations . . . we must have Labour figures and MPs on the platform—and not just the nice, ‘cuddly’ left Labour MPs we have seen on Stop the War rallies”. He continued, “until recently the main enemy was New Labour”.

Now, said Callinicos, the broadest coalition possible was needed against the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government and this had to include trade union leaders, Labour councillors and Members of Parliament “even those with the most compromised background”.

Talbot explained, “All the ‘left’ groups ignore the actual role of the trade unions in suppressing industrial action and collaborating with management and the government. They are involved in a conscious deception designed to disarm working people to the reality of the situation they face”.

Talbot also explained the role being played by former Labour MP Tony Benn and Rail Maritime and Transport union leader Bob Crow who have established the so-called, “coalition of resistance”, with the declared aim of building a movement “with the level of determination shown by trade unionists and social movements in Greece and other European countries”.

In exposing this fraudulent organisation Talbot said, “Events in Greece are very instructive and provide an urgent warning to workers here and elsewhere.

“The Greek working class has been involved in a series of ‘days of action’, mass demonstrations and protests against the drastic austerity measures. You couldn’t get more militant. But despite all this, the Greek government is on course to reduce real wages this year by 20-30 percent and bring in other measures exceeding its wildest expectations.

“It has been able to do this because the unions have kept opposition to the austerity measures under control. They have called a series of one-day strikes and protests, while in principle supporting the course being followed by the government”.

Most recently, Talbot explained, “Greek truck drivers have been on strike against plans to liberalise trucking and many other occupations such as taxi drivers, lawyers and accountants. The liberalisation of these jobs is one of the key conditions demanded by the EU [European Union] and the IMF [International Monetary Fund] in return for the €110 billion aid package for Greece.

“The truck drivers are fighting for their survival”, said Talbot, to oppose the abolition of the licensing system which, “not only opens up the Greek transport system to the big European haulage firms, destroying the livelihoods of the Greek truck drivers; it also destroys their pensions at a stroke.

“We say what happened to the truck drivers marks a new stage in the attacks on the Greek and European working class. Their strike posed a serious threat to the government. Unlike the actions by workers in the civil service and in industry, whose trade unions called 24-hour stoppages and then sent them back to work with nothing achieved, the truckers’ strike had a devastating effect. Petrol stations were soon without fuel. The tourist industry was in chaos”.

Talbot detailed how “the government then stepped in using a rarely used law to effectively conscript the strikers into the army and ordered them to start to work again. When they refused and continued striking, the government sent in the army to break the strike and supply airports, power stations and other facilities with fuel.

“There was not a word of protest in Greece about the use of the army, even from the supposedly left parties and trade unions. Dimitris Papadimoulis, an MP of the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA), one of the parties feted by those behind the call for a new coalition of resistance here, attacked the truck drivers. He said their strike was ‘taking the form of strangling the market . . . and does not have any social support’. Other representatives of SYRIZA and the Greek Communist Party condemned the government’s coercive measures in words, but did not raise a finger to support the truck drivers, who were also isolated by the major trade unions”, said Talbot.

Talbot concluded by outlining the programme of the Socialist Equality Party. “There is no peaceful, let alone easy, way out of the economic and social dead-end into which capitalism has led mankind. The programme of the Socialist Equality Party is not a collection of easy options and half-measures. The aim of our party and our co-thinkers in the Fourth International is not the reform of British and international capitalism. If anything is to be learned from the tragedies of the twentieth century, it is that the repetition of these horrors in the twenty-first century, on an even bloodier scale, can be prevented only through the revolutionary struggle of the international working class for socialism”.

“We say workers are faced with breaking from the straitjacket of the trade unions and their Labour accomplices, through establishing genuine rank-and-file organisations of class struggle.

“It will be a difficult struggle. Socialism is not a gift to be given to the working class. It must be fought for and won by the working class itself. Those who are not prepared to fight will never win anything. The demands of the Socialist Equality Party will play an essential role in raising the social and political consciousness of the working class, and, as a result, strengthening its ability to fight.

“We say everyone has the right to a job, a decent income, affordable housing, high-quality education and health care, a secure retirement, a healthy and safe environment and the right to culture”.

Talbot said these rights and the fight for them could not be achieved “without a fundamental reorganisation of economic power and the redistribution of wealth within the UK. The Socialist Equality Party states

openly that the realization of these rights requires a frontal assault on the hitherto unchallenged prerogatives of the corporations and the rich. The vast wealth created by the labour of generations of workers must be taken out of the hands of a privileged few and put at the disposal of the people as a whole.

“We call for nationalization of major corporations under workers’ control. We call for the defence of democratic rights and oppose militarism and war. New organizations of working class struggle have to be built in the struggle for a workers government. Above all, it means the building of the Socialist Equality Party and the Fourth International, led by the International Committee—the only genuinely revolutionary party of the working class on the planet today. We call on all those who support the fight for social equality to join the Socialist Equality Party and take up the fight for socialism”.



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