

Vote Simon Walker, Socialist Equality Party for Walkley, Sheffield

A socialist alternative to Labour and the Liberal Democrats

Simon Walker
18 April 2011

I am proud to be the candidate of the Socialist Equality Party in the Walkley ward of Sheffield, England, in the forthcoming local council elections. The SEP offers the working class a socialist alternative to the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties.

Faced with a devastating and unprecedented assault on living standards, workers must build a new socialist party that will represent their interests just as aggressively as Labour and Liberal Democrats represent the financial elite. To this end, the SEP fights for the political independence of the working class from all the parties of big business. We fight for the international unity of working people, and for a workers' government where the economy functions to provide for social needs, not private profit.

Working people in Sheffield cannot continue alternating between two equally right-wing parties—voting out first Labour then the Liberal Democrats. Over recent years, at both the local and national level, Labour and the Liberal Democrats have provided ample evidence of their anti-working class character.

Labour governments under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown carried out pro-business policies that led to a historically unprecedented shift of wealth from working people to the super-rich—surpassing even the shift under Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s. It is Labour's bailout of the banks with £1 trillion of public money that is now to be paid for in the £100 billion plus public spending cuts being imposed by the Liberal Democrats as junior partners with the Conservatives—of which £16 billion were already set in place by Labour before the general election.

The decimation of vital services, jobs and pay will

plunge workers into conditions last witnessed in the hungry 1930s.

Make no mistake, if Labour were in power they would be doing exactly the same.

Sheffield and the Walkley Ward itself are currently controlled by the Liberal Democrats. The city council, once known as the Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire, first went Liberal Democrat in 1999, in response to the rightward lurch of the Labour Party under Blair. Many thought the Liberal Democrats were a more leftward alternative to Labour, but were disabused at the local level by the Liberal Democrats' own pro-business policies. Labour again narrowly held office between 2002 and 2008, often as a minority administration, before losing Sheffield to the Liberals once again.

This has all ended with the Liberal Democrats joining with the Tories in a common assault on working people. Party leader Nick Clegg is deservedly a hate figure thanks to his renegeing on every single one of his pre-election pledges—particularly on no student fees—in which he positioned his party ever so slightly to the left of both Labour and the Tories. Once elected to office, whether at local council level or central government, the Liberal Democrats rapidly reveal their true face.

That cannot mean turning once again to Labour.

The Labour Party is naturally campaigning to win the Walkley ward and control of Sheffield by reminding residents of the wretched record of the Liberal Democrat Sheffield council. But workers should remember who put the Liberal Democrats in power and just how rotten Labour's own record in office is.

Whether a Labour or Liberal Democrat-controlled council exists in Sheffield, the upshot will be exactly the same: enormous cuts to vital services on which people rely to make their lives bearable. A recent survey

suggested that as many as 53,000 jobs could be at risk across Yorkshire because of public spending cuts. Sheffield council is making £84 million in cuts to jobs and services, which will lead to 270 jobs being cut and a further 600 vacancies going unfilled. In total the number of jobs lost at the local authority since last summer is 731. The figures are in reality far higher as successive administrations in the city contracted out large sections of public services to the private sector. Jobs losses and cuts in wages and conditions are already underway at these privately owned “public providers”.

Those retaining work will be required to do more. In February refuse workers were told they would have to work Saturdays and start two hours earlier every day. Some will have to do two jobs. It has even been suggested that meals on wheels staff should start delivering library books. Library opening hours are being cut, while leisure centres are being handed over entirely to the private sector. Popular facilities, such as Woodbourn Road athletics track, face closure.

Together, Labour and the Liberal Democrats have created a situation where almost one third of Sheffield’s unemployed are aged between 18 and 24. In total, those who are out of work and claiming Job Seekers’ Allowance in Sheffield leapt by 1,071 in a month—up from 14,855 in December to 15,926 in January of this year. A total of 4,835 of claimants, or 30 percent, are under 24. The rest of South Yorkshire fared even worse than Sheffield. In Doncaster there are 2,955 young people claiming jobless benefits, 31.4 percent of the total claimant count.

An entire generation is being abandoned. In Sheffield the Connexions job service for young people is facing an enormous cut in funding of £2.4 million during 2011/12. The funding for Sure Start children’s centres is to be cut by 15 percent.

Those hoping to get into university will have to face exorbitant fees levied by universities. Sheffield University has followed the herd, announcing tuition fees of £9,000 a year. Sheffield Hallam is likely to do the same in the coming weeks.

Every aspect of social life shows the impact of decades of Labour and Liberal Democrat policy. Few areas show this as clearly as housing. Sheffield was once home to a number of the most pioneering social housing projects in Britain. Housing estates such as the famous Park Hill have either been privatised, demolished or much reduced. Today, the average purchase price of a private house is £127,248, which requires a wage of at least £33,137

annually to be affordable and excludes most of Sheffield’s working population, for whom the average wage is only £20,523.

As many as 97,374 people are on waiting lists for council and housing association accommodation. Of these, 946 households are accepted as currently homeless and 226 are in temporary accommodation; 2.6 in every 1,000 houses were repossessed in 2010. In response to this crying need, in 2009/10, just 10 houses were built by social landlords in the Sheffield area.

Instead, to the extent that major initiatives have been taken, they have been business and investment oriented projects such as the disastrous World Student Games and Sheffield Airport, as well as vast shopping centres such as Meadowhall that have only benefited the narrow privileged layer close to both Labour and the Liberal Democrats. They have been paid for at the expense of basic housing needs and social services.

This orientation to big business will continue regardless of which party runs the council after May 5. Julie Dore, the leader of the Labour group, promised that one of her first actions on taking office would be to “have a business summit as soon as possible, so they can tell us what they want from the local authority”.

Paul Scriven, leader of Liberal Democrats, told the press, “Sheffield’s next five to ten years is not public sector growth, it is private sector growth that’s going to bring wealth and jobs”.

The SEP calls for working people to take a stand against these rotten parties. Sheffield has a long history of working class militancy and a belief in socialist ideals that today can only find political expression in our party. I urge you to vote for the SEP, take part in our campaign and join its ranks.



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