

Sheffield “anti-cuts” hustings: Ex-left line up with Labour Party/TUC

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5 May 2011

Anyone straying into the election hustings organised by the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS) and the Sheffield Anti-Cuts Alliance (SACA) last week, believing it was opposed to the austerity cuts of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government, would have been quickly disabused.

Present on the platform were the chairperson Marion Lloyd from the PCS national executive, and five candidates in the upcoming local authority elections—Catherine Walsh (Labour), Jillian Creasy (Green Party), Richard Ward (Independent), Maxine Bowler (Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition-TUSC) and Simon Walker (Socialist Equality Party).

The Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives were invited, but declined to participate. Walker had not been sent an invite and was only added at the last minute when he found out the meeting was on and asked to take part. This was despite the PCS billing the meeting as a unique opportunity for local residents to hear from the unofficial parties.

The hustings was one of a number held nationally by the PCS, as part of its “Make your vote count” campaign. This is built around five “pledges” to be signed up to by candidates, such as closing the “tax gap”, supporting “the principle” of universal welfare entitlement and the need to “protect” public services and pension provision.

The amorphous character of the pledges is deliberate. They commit no one, least of all the PCS, to anything. Indeed, they provide enough wriggle room to sanction public spending cuts, so long as these pass “equality impact assessments”. They are even advanced as offering “the new government an alternative to public sector cuts”.

Just how vague the pledges are was established by the fact that everyone, except Walker, supported them—despite the majority of candidates admitting they would implement cuts if they were voted into office.

Walsh, for Labour, explained that she had lost the 2010 election—held under the Brown government—because people in the “poorest part” of the ward she was standing in would

not vote for her. Now she was standing in a safe Liberal Democrat seat “in protest” at their support for cuts. Her protest was a fraud, as Walsh readily admitted that should Labour win the city, “there will be cuts”. There might be “differences” in what was cut, she said, but there definitely would be cuts.

Creasy, a sitting Green councillor, said the government’s austerity measures were “unnecessary,” but her party would “respond in a realistic way”. One could write a “no cuts budget”, she said, but “ultimately” the Green Party had discussed that “as elected politicians” they should “make the best fist of what is being handed to us by national government”.

Subject to variations, cuts would be made under the Greens, she acknowledged.

Ward, a former Labour Party member, concurred. “Part of being an elected representative is that you have to make difficult choices and decisions. If you are dealt a bad hand, you have to make the best of it,” he said.

Walker rejected these arguments. The SEP is “opposed to every last penny of the cuts”, he insisted, arguing for a massive expansion of universal provision for working people, financed by big business and the super-rich.

The crucial issue, he stressed, was how to achieve this. Workers could not place any confidence in Labour and the trade unions, he insisted. “Workers have to organise independently of those organisations, in workplaces, in communities, to mount a struggle against those old organisations. It is the Labour Party and the unions that have got the working class into the situation it is in today. An implacable struggle against those organisations is the only way that cuts are going to be opposed.”

Walker’s indictment of Labour and the trade unions brought a furious response from Bowler.

She had begun the meeting by claiming that her candidacy was intended to “hegemonize an argument” against austerity. But she uttered not one word of condemnation against the Labour, Green and Independent candidates for stating they would make cuts. All her vitriol was directed

against Walker. According to Bowler, the advocacy of rank and file committees is “ultra-leftism” and places the SEP outside of the “workers’ organisations”, which, for the fake left groups, is the Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress.

“Some of us have spent a long period of time as socialists trying to pull people together,” she said, attacking those “who think they can go off and set themselves as some little separate group and don’t want to work with anybody else, and bring their programme from on high.”

Bowler is a Socialist Workers Party member, while the meeting’s chair, Lloyd, is a member of the Socialist Party. The SWP and SP make up the main components of the electoral front TUSC, although no one outside the pseudo-left fraternity at the hustings meeting would have known. They also supply the political line and bulk of the membership of SACA and similar “anti-cuts” fronts.

TUSC, led by Bob Crow, leader of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) and a former member of the Communist Party of Britain (CPB), acts as a political police force on behalf of the union apparatus in siphoning up discontent and directing it back along safe channels. It has its origins in the electoral coalition “No2EU” formed for the 2009 European elections by the SP and the CPB, the Stalinist group that publishes the *Morning Star*. Its leading figures notoriously played a prominent role in the Lindsey oil refinery protests in 2009, which widely advanced the slogan of “British jobs for British workers” against foreign labour until the active support of the British National Party forced the unions to distance themselves from it.

As for the union apparatus, in large part it is made up of members of the pseudo-left organisations—particularly in the public sector.

The PCS is led by General Secretary Mark Serwotka, a former member of the Alliance for Workers Liberty group, and its executive committee is dominated by the Left Unity faction, which involves the Socialist Party and the SWP. PCS President Janice Godrich, vice president John McNally and Assistant General Secretary Chris Baugh are SP members, to name only the most high-profile. PCS executive members Sue Bond, Paul Williams and Andy Reid are members of the SWP.

TUSC itself boasts that many of its candidates occupy positions in the hierarchy of various unions. In addition, at least five of the candidates it is running in local elections are current members of the Labour Party. The RMT retains the right to prevent TUSC candidates running in areas where the union is backing Labour.

The constant refrain of the pseudo-left groups is that the trade unions are the “basic” organisations of the working class. This is advanced in order to insist that under no

circumstances can socialists seek to mobilise workers independently of the trade unions. It is even considered unpardonable to raise any criticism of the trade unions when they are scabbing on the interests of their own members. At the end of March, 170,000 workers had their contracts arbitrarily replaced by local authorities across the country, without the public sector lifting a finger. In the year since the coalition came to power, the TUC has organised just one national demonstration, in which the platform was given over to Labour leader Ed Miliband to pronounce that public spending cuts *were* necessary.

In the civil service, which the PCS covers, more than 100,000 jobs are to be cut. At least one-quarter of these have already gone. The government has announced changes to public sector pensions, which will reduce their value even further, while last month it announced that it was “outsourcing” the pension scheme of Britain’s 1.5 million civil servants to a joint venture involving the private sector. In response, the unions involved have threatened a legal challenge and talked of potential national action, but little more.

According to Bowler and various SWP and SP members called on to speak from the floor, the demand for rank-and-file movements against the union leaders is not only “sectarian”—it places an organisation outside the “working class movement”. Carrying out the destruction of jobs, working conditions, living standards and waging imperialist wars of neo-colonialism, evidently, does not.

It should be noted that Prime Minister David Cameron has been more than happy to respond to the PCS’s five pledges appeal, stating that he “is pleased that government ministers are regularly engaging with the Public and Commercial Services Union and other trade unions and is sure that the points you raise in your letter will feature in these discussions.”



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