

Labour in Sheffield: Cuts worse than under Thatcher

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

This was the warning made by the Socialist Equality Party during its campaign in the May 5 local authority elections. Its prescience was confirmed within moments of Labour retaking control of Sheffield City council, after voters threw out the ruling Liberal Democrats.

In national coalition with the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats are helping force through the largest cuts in public spending since the 1930s. This has earned Nick Clegg and his party the enmity of voters who mistakenly believed his claim to be a more progressive alternative to Labour.

Foremost amongst these were students who had supported the Liberal Democrats’ pledge to scrap tuition fees. Large numbers amongst Sheffield’s 50,000 student population had turned out to back Clegg in his home constituency in Hallam, Sheffield, at the general election. On coming to power, however, the Liberal Democrats scrapped their promise and the coalition government tripled fees.

The Liberal Democrats lost control of Sheffield—their flagship council—as a result. “Clegg” has become a byword for speaking with a forked tongue. Having correctly punished the Liberal Democrats, however, working people face a Labour administration intent on imposing similar cutbacks.

Without the result having even been officially declared, David Blunkett MP, the former government minister and Sheffield council leader, made clear a Labour victory would have no effect on the imposition of savage cuts to budgets, services and jobs.

As Labour candidates cheered each victory over their Liberal Democrat counterparts ever more loudly, Blunkett was at pains to point out that it was Labour that would now be tasked with responsibility for enforcing the cuts. “The incoming Labour administration will have lots of problems to face,” he cautioned.

Sheffield Labour Council will have to make worse cuts in the coming weeks than he had pushed through following his capitulation to the Conservative Thatcher government during the mid-1980s, Blunkett said.

Labour “will be celebrating tonight, but they will be having to make some very tough decisions in the morning”, he continued. “They will be worse than the decisions we had to make in the 1980s. I think they will have to hold an emergency budget.”

Even while acknowledging that it will be Labour who will now incur the hatred of voters, Blunkett tried to portray the defeat of the Liberal Democrats as a victory. “We are very happy that Nick Clegg has got his comeuppance” he said. “This time last year it was Cleggmania; now it’s Clegg pneumonia.”

Sheffield Central MP Paul Blomfield blamed Central government and the Liberal Democrats for the spending cuts Labour intends to implement:

“I’m delighted that the people of Sheffield have put their confidence in Labour and sent a message to Nick Clegg’s Liberal Democrats. But we must remember there are big challenges ahead. Sheffield, along with other Northern cities, has received far larger cuts in comparison to councils like Dorset. In addition, the Liberal Democrats have put off many of the big decisions on the assumption Labour would win and would have to make them later.”

Such statements underline the correctness of the SEP’s campaign in the council election. Standing as

the party's candidate in Walkley, I urged workers to reject the electoral merry-go-round whereby one bunch of political scoundrels are ejected only for their place to be taken by an equally right-wing, big business party.

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. Now, faced with a devastating and unprecedented assault on living standards, workers, young people, students and intellectuals need to draw up a balance sheet of their experiences with the official parties. This was especially the case with the Labour Party and the trade unions, whose adherence to the requirements of the financial oligarchy meant the smashing up of workers' jobs, living standards and rights.

The ruling elite and their parties are attempting a social counterrevolution, the SEP stressed, aimed at finally reversing all the gains won by the working class. In opposition to this, it was necessary to build a new socialist party that would tackle the economic crisis at its source—by establishing a workers government that would abolish the capitalist profit system and reorganise society according to human need.

Such a movement can be built only through a political rebellion against the Labour Party and trade unions, we insisted, warning that these rotten bureaucratic apparatuses were the main block to a successful struggle in defence of jobs, living standards and democratic rights.

The SEP campaign was in sharp contrast to that of the Trade Union and Socialist Coalition (TUSC), comprising the pseudo-left Socialist Party and the Socialist Workers Party. At an election hustings in Sheffield, TUSC members had kept silent when the Labour candidate made clear her party would impose major cutbacks. Five of the candidates TUSC stood nationally are members of the Labour Party.

Working people will now pay the price for this rotten political alliance, framed against their essential interests.



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