

Britain's Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition offers to do Labour Party's dirty work

Julie Hyland
21 April 2012

The Socialist Party recently published a report of a meeting between the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) and the Labour Party in Southampton.

Held at the end of March, the meeting was ostensibly to discuss a campaign “against the Tory council cuts in the city and the forthcoming local elections” on May 3.

Southampton is a Conservative-controlled local authority. Last year it was among a number of councils that imposed “fire and rehire” contracts on its 4,600 employees, which included pay cuts of up to 5.5 percent as part of the Tory-Liberal Democrat government’s austerity measures.

Despite widespread opposition to these attacks, the SP reported that Labour is “not confident of winning” in the city because its own “track record has been less than impressive.”

So nervous is Labour of its electoral chances that it requested the meeting to ask TUSC to withdraw its candidates from some wards it is contesting. The SP reports that, while making a “sharp criticism” of Labour’s proposal, “TUSC however did not reject any proposals to work together against the cuts.”

Instead it proposed a conference “with the trade unions, community and party activists to discuss how best to fight the cuts”. On this basis, “we could then decide who best to stand as candidates.”

Unfortunately for TUSC, the SP reports that the suggestion that Labour stand down in certain areas in favour of other candidates was “dismissed out of hand.”

TUSC’s proposal for an electoral bloc was thwarted only by the intransigence of Labour. That such a pact was on offer exposes the pretensions of TUSC, and the

pseudo-left groups that it brings together, to be a socialist alternative to Labour.

Consisting of the Socialist Party, the Socialist Workers Party, various pseudo-lefts and “anti-cuts campaigners”, TUSC is backed by the National Executive of the Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMT) and the London Executive of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU), along with other union officials at a national and local level.

Union backing means that TUSC is able to field 132 candidates in local elections nationally, as well as a list of 17 candidates for elections to the Greater London Assembly, and a candidate in the ballot for mayor of Liverpool.

Under the slogan of “rage against austerity”, anyone can apply to run as a TUSC candidate if he signs up to a “no cuts” agenda.

Just how bogus this commitment is was made clear in Southampton, where TUSC entered talks with a Labour Party that, as it acknowledges, is fully signed up to the government’s austerity measures. Last year’s authority budget saw Conservative and Labour presenting a near identical package of spending cuts—£14 million and £13 million respectively. Labour has said it intends £34 million in cuts in the city if it is elected.

These are the circumstances in which TUSC was willing to discuss withdrawing some of its candidates to try and help Labour take control, if only Labour would throw it a bone in return.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained, “TUSC is neither socialist, nor even in any meaningful sense an oppositional tendency. It acts as a political police force on behalf of the trade union apparatus and an adjunct of the very party it claims to have rejected.”

Its origins lie in an earlier electoral coalition, No2EU, between the SP and the Communist Party of Britain (CPB), the Stalinist group that publishes the *Morning Star*. While the CPB refused participation in TUSC at the time because it opposes standing against Labour, the SP uses the coalition to build relations with the trade union bureaucracy, which it claims are the only basis on which a “new workers party” can be built.

In this way, TUSC provides a cover through which union bureaucrats—many of them members of various pseudo-left groups or dissenting former Stalinists—can posture as supposed critics of Labour’s right-wing, big business agenda, while seeking to channel working class hostility to austerity back behind its left-talking representatives.

The RMT gives official backing to Labour members of the RMT parliamentary group, with John McDonnell, leader of the dozen or so members of the Campaign Group of Labour MPs, a regular speaker at TUSC events.

A key element of TUSC’s campaign is to siphon up former Labourites who have jumped ship, sensing the wind is against them.

An example of how TUSC functions to subordinate the working class to the Labour bureaucracy is its decision not to run a candidate against Labour’s Ken Livingstone in London’s mayoral elections on May 3.

Socialist Worker reported that TUSC’s national conference in January adopted this position because the RMT and FBU “felt it would not be the best strategy.”

RMT leader Bob Crow has spoken glowingly of Livingstone’s candidacy, despite the veteran Labour opportunist’s repeated condemnation of strikes by London Underground workers and others in defence of jobs and conditions.

“I’ve never been apart from Ken. We have differences like I have with my brother and sister but overall, Ken’s a good bloke”, Crow said, offering Livingstone RMT financial backing.

While the SP tries to claim that TUSC’s decision to leave the field clear to Livingstone does not imply support for his campaign, the SWP makes no such pretence. Its national conference at the start of this year declared, “[W]e will be backing Labour’s Ken Livingstone for London mayor.”

The SP’s double-bookkeeping notwithstanding, its decision to report the Southampton talks—and the

manner of its reporting—can only be interpreted as a means of consolidating its relations with the Labour Party.

The SP does not state when exactly at the end of March the meeting took place—just some time in the week leading up to April 4. This would have been at the time Labour became aware it faced a major defeat in the Bradford West by-election, held March 29. Considered a safe constituency, Labour’s share of the vote collapsed by 20 percent as the seat was won by former Labour MP, now Respect leader, George Galloway on an anti-cuts and anti-war ticket.

With national elections imminent, the result sent shockwaves through Labour and caused its Southampton branch to send out feelers to TUSC in the hope of avoiding a repetition.

Its concerns are shared by TUSC’s leading lights. On March 31, a special conference of the CPB was convened in London to discuss how “to campaign in a more determined, planned and co-ordinated way to change the policies and if necessary the composition of the Labour Party leadership.”

In his speech to the conference, Crow, a former CPB member, warned that Labour’s defeat in Bradford West “will repeat itself 100 times over Britain because ... young people say they have had enough of the three main parties.”

Labour would never again be re-elected unless it “rolled up its sleeves”, he said.

Labour has no intention of making even the most minimal changes. Just days after the talks between Southampton Labour and TUSC, Labour leader Ed Miliband visited Southampton to bang the drum for “shared sacrifice” and law and order.

For the pseudo-left, Labour’s crisis is viewed as an opportunity to prove their loyalty to the bureaucracy. In publishing its account of the Southampton talks, the SP was sending a clear message to Labour nationally that it is open for business.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact