

Left Unity: Director Ken Loach fronts initiative of Britain's pseudo-left groups

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A campaign for a new “left” party has been launched by sections of Britain’s pseudo-left.

There have been innumerable attempts to effect a regroupment of various tendencies masquerading as socialists over the years, all with a pivotal role assigned to dissident left-talking Labourites, sympathisers of the Stalinist Communist Party and trade union bureaucrats.

All collapsed in ignominy.

This latest is predicated on the attempt to utilise the prestige of the film director Ken Loach and his documentary *The Spirit of 45*, which deals with the extensive programme of nationalisations and welfare state measures implemented by the British ruling class at the end of the Second World War under the Labour government of Clement Attlee.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted (see “What Ken Loach makes of *The Spirit of ’45*”), while the archival footage is of interest, the documentary is characterised by national insularity and political dishonesty on Loach’s part. In particular, it features interviews with political representatives of virtually every pseudo-left tendency in Britain—Alan Thornett (Socialist Resistance), Dot Gibson (ex-Workers Revolutionary Party), John Rees (Counterfire), Karen Reissmann (Socialist Workers Party), Tony Mulhearn (Socialist Party) and numerous Stalinists, as well as the doyen of the Labour Party left, Tony Benn. Their political affiliations are concealed, however, as they are simply portrayed as “eyewitnesses” to events.

Loach is a respected director—someone prepared to deal with important issues and historical events. But he is not only a socially concerned auteur. He came into the orbit of the Trotskyist movement in Britain, the Socialist Labour League, in the late 1960s but had distanced himself from it by the early 1970s, remaining in the Labour Party until the mid-1990s.

He has a long political association with Alan Thornett, leader of the British section of the Pabloite United Secretariat, Socialist Resistance, whom Loach named as his “hero” in 2007.

Thornett’s expulsion from the SLL’s successor organisation, the Workers Revolutionary Party, was bound up in large measure with his adaptation to popular illusions in the Labour and trade union bureaucracy at a time of the coming to power of a Labour government in 1974 (See “Alan Thornett’s denunciation of Trotskyism—Part Two”).

As the leader of Socialist Resistance, Thornett has been involved in earlier regroupment attempts, with Loach directing party political broadcasts for two of these failed projects—the Socialist Alliance and the Socialist Labour Party of Arthur Scargill. He and Loach were previously leading members of the Respect Unity coalition of former Labour MP George Galloway. *The Spirit of ’45* is also a party political broadcast, this time for a party still under construction by the same forces. It has substantial backing from the establishment, being funded by Film4, the British Film Institute and Creative England.

The “spirit” evoked in the documentary is that of the post-war class consensus built on the regulation of economic and political relations in Britain, in which the trade union bureaucracy played the main role.

According to Loach’s documentary, this consensus was broken apart by the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher. There is no mention of the mass strikes against the Labour government during the “Winter of Discontent” of 1978-1979 that prepared the way for Thatcher, and barely a reference to the 13-year Labour government under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, which continued and deepened her right-wing policies.

In an interview, Loach explained why he believes 1945 was important. The spirit of the time, he said, “was one of working together. The experience of the war was that clearly the armed forces were organised by the state, not private armies going off to fight. There wasn’t, like we have now, private contractors going off to do the work of the military; they were armies of the state. Some of the industries were taken over because they couldn’t be run by private companies, they were so inefficient, like the mines had to be taken over. And clearly the sacrifice and the bombing and the home front as well as the soldiers brought people together, people just had to be good neighbours, so that engendered a feeling of collectivity, of solidarity....”

Loach’s formulations and the choice of interviewees in his documentary articulate the political perspective of Pabloism, which emerged as a right-wing tendency within the Fourth International based on an adaptation to the post-war arrangements eulogised in *The Spirit of ’45*. The betrayals by Stalinism and social democracy of revolutionary struggles at the war’s end provided the political basis upon which the United States could economically resuscitate European capitalism, including helping fund (albeit on onerous terms) the Attlee government’s reform measures.

For Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, the founding theoreticians of the United Secretariat, the post-war settlement was proof that Trotsky’s perspective of building an independent Marxist leadership to lead the working class in the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism had been disproved.

Articulating the interests of a layer of the petty-bourgeoisie, which were both dependent on and administered the welfare state mechanisms and other concessions the bourgeoisie was forced to grant in this period, Pabloism insisted that socialism could only be realised through the medium of the Stalinist and social democratic bureaucracies and various national movements in the semi-colonial countries. The efforts of “revolutionaries” should be directed to pressuring these organisations to the “left”, as opposed to conducting a sharp struggle to break their influence in the working class.

The orthodox Trotskyists in the Fourth International conducted a principled struggle against this liquidationist tendency, forming the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) in 1953. The ICFI insisted that the post-war arrangements had by no means overcome the fundamental contradictions of capitalism, much less mitigated the counter-revolutionary role of Stalinism and social democracy. These contradictions would have to re-emerge at a higher level, in the outbreak of explosive class struggles that would inevitably come into conflict with the Stalinist and Labourite bureaucracies.

When this prognosis was confirmed in the revolutionary wave that swept Europe between 1968 and 1975, the Pabloite groups played a key role as apologists for the Stalinist, social democratic and bourgeois nationalist regimes and movements that betrayed these struggles.

The liquidation of the Soviet Union and its satellite states in 1991 saw them undertake a sharp lurch to the right, involving the explicit repudiation of socialist revolution in favour of openly advocating regroupment on a reformist agenda.

The various projects of the United Secretariat's affiliate parties—such as the New Anticapitalist Party in France and the Left Bloc in Portugal—are aimed explicitly against Trotskyism, which is denounced as “ultra-left sectarianism”, or, in the words of Thornett's *Socialist Resistance*, “sclerotic archaeotrotskyism.” *The Spirit of '45* was released in March of this year. Later that month, Loach co-authored an appeal in the *Guardian*, “The Labour party has failed us. We need a new party of the left.” Kate Hudson, a former member of the Communist Party and then briefly Respect, was another signatory. It is Hudson who together with her husband Andrew Burgin, formerly of the WRP and Stop the War Coalition, set up the Left Unity website in November of last year as the nucleus of this “new” party.

The third, and most significant signatory, is the United Secretariat's Gilbert Achcar. He is the most notorious advocate of military intervention by the Western powers into Libya and now Syria, under the guise of “humanitarianism”. The inclusion of this imperialist war-monger as the figurehead for a new “left” party makes clear the social and political role it intends to play on behalf of the British bourgeoisie.

Their appeal is short on substance. It attacks the Conservative coalition government for its “disastrous” austerity policies that are “digging us even further into an economic hole.”

While praising “Labour's past achievements” it complains that Labour “no longer” can be expected to “stand for us.”

Most notably, the word socialism is not mentioned, just the vague call for a party “that rejects neoliberal policies and improves the lives of ordinary people.”

This party, it states, should be modelled on SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) in Greece and Die Linke in Germany, which “have begun to fill the left space, offering an alternative political, social and economic vision.”

This presentation is a political fraud. The social democratic PASOK has been all but wiped out due to it being the major force in imposing brutal austerity measures against the Greek working class. SYRIZA now functions as the primary mechanism to trap a leftward movement of the working class against the bourgeoisie within a perspective based on support for capitalist property relations and the European Union.

Barely two months before the *Guardian* appeal, Alexis Tsipras, leader of SYRIZA, reassured the US State Department and the International Monetary Fund that they had nothing to fear from the party, which has “no horns on our head.” As for Die Linke, this organisation is also completely integrated into the German state—working in coalition with social democrats in various states such as Brandenburg to impose cuts. The party's “peace spokeswoman”, Christine Buchholz, a member of the German affiliates of Britain's Socialist Workers Party, sits on the parliamentary Defence Committee. Last December, Die Linke backed calls for Western intervention in Syria.

It is the key role being played by these pseudo-left parties for the bourgeoisie in their respective countries that the petty-bourgeois left in Britain hopes to emulate.

The *Guardian* appeal was at pains to avoid specifying any exact policies for the new party, but its actual perspective is set out by Ed Rooksby, of Ruskin College, on the Left Unity site under the heading “The crisis and socialist strategy.”

Rooksby repeats the criticism that “Austerity is self-defeating.” This is

because, he asserts, “The austerity mongers of today have simply disregarded one of the biggest lessons of the 1930s which is that governments need to stimulate demand in times of economic crisis, not suffocate it”.

“The situation calls, in other words, for a classically Keynesian stimulus strategy of state driven investment to boost demand and thus, in turn, to boost ‘business confidence’,” he writes.

None of this would be out of place in an article by bourgeois commentators such as Will Hutton, former editor-in-chief on the *Observer*, the sister paper of the *Guardian*, which Rooksby writes for. His “Keynesian-style” measures do not even rise to the heights of the measures advocated by Labour and that the British bourgeoisie felt compelled to implement in 1945. They are couched in the most servile and respectable terms imaginable—a call for “carefully and strategically targeted” investment to “kick-start more sustainable growth, create jobs and to reorient the economy away from its excessive reliance on the financial sector and debt-fuelled consumption toward more productive economic activity.”

This humble appeal for a slight change of course is essentially a calling card delivered to the bourgeoisie stating that Left Unity is no threat to their interests and is open for business.

Most significant in this regard is Rooksby's calls for what he describes as a return to “one of the oldest controversies in socialist thought which is the question of whether or not it is possible to reform capitalism out of existence—the classic reform/revolution debate.”

This generally dishonest passage is introduced so that he can identify what he declares to be “the major difficulty” of the revolutionary socialist perspective—“its rejection of the very idea of taking power within the political structures of capitalism.”

Not for Left Unity is the fight for a workers government based on popular organs of the working class, formed as an integral part of its struggle to overthrow capitalism and establish socialism. Instead, the “left” must make clear its preparedness to “work within state institutions”, outside of which, he writes, all talk of social change is “like an idle exercise in building castles in the air.”

Nothing could be clearer. Left Unity is conceived of as a vehicle through which the representatives of the pseudo-left in Britain hope to secure a direct governmental role as apologists for capitalism and policemen of social and political discontent. Under conditions in which austerity and economic crisis are preparing major class struggles, Left Unity's role will be to support the bourgeois state in its efforts to brutally suppress the working class.



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