

The issues of political principle in the UK general election

The Socialist Equality Party (Britain)
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The campaign in Britain's snap general election has seen a shift towards the Labour Party in opinion polls.

There is a desire among many to get rid of a despised Conservative government, coupled with sympathy for Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn elicited by the attacks of the right and support for his promise of a Labour government that will "take back the wealth" from the "tax cheats, the rip-off bosses and the greedy bankers." To this must be added the universal line-up behind Labour of Britain's nominally left groups, who now campaign without reservation for a Labour victory.

The Socialist Equality Party does not call for a Labour vote.

It has now been more than seven decades since Labour implemented any major reforms. Instead, from the late 1970s onwards it has lurched ever further to the right—imposing attacks that allowed Margaret Thatcher to come to power in 1979 and then betraying every struggle against her government, above all the 1984-85 miners' strike, while it witch-hunted anyone associated with socialist views out of the party.

Labour's evolution was just one manifestation of how profound changes, associated with transnational production and the global integration of finance and manufacturing, had dramatically undermined the viability of the old nationally based parties and trade unions and their programmes of national economic regulation of industry and of the labour market.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy in December 1991 and the re-introduction of capitalism were the highest expression of this process. But social democratic parties and trade unions the world over emerged as unalloyed advocates of the free market. The role of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy had once been to pressure the employers and the state for concessions to the workers, providing the basis for their claim to head political and industrial organisations of the working class. Now, however, these organisations dedicate themselves to pressuring the workers for concessions to the employers in order to attract and retain globally mobile capital investment.

The International Committee of the Fourth International drew far-reaching conclusions from this historic turn.

The abandonment of their old reformist programme fundamentally changed the relationship of the Labour Party, the trade unions and similar formations internationally to the working class. This required a change in the tactical approach taken by the Trotskyist movement towards them. In the past the Labour Party enjoyed the active and militant support of advanced workers looking for a socialist alternative. It was necessary to combat these illusions by calling for a critical vote for Labour, demanding that it implement socialist policies and that the party's left wing drive out the right wing opposed to such a struggle. This would create the means through which the more advanced workers could test out the socialist claims of their existing leaders and help them recognise the need to adopt a revolutionary perspective and leadership. To continue with such a tactical orientation under conditions of the renunciation of socialism by Labour would instead reinforce illusions that were being objectively

dispelled and help keep workers trapped within a party that was openly hostile to their interests.

This appraisal was vindicated by the coming to power in 1997 of the government of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, which was to preside over six wars, including Iraq in 2003, and an unprecedented transfer of wealth from the working class into the pockets of the super-rich leading to the post-2008 multibillion-pound bailout of the banks. The Labour Party became the political vehicle for some of the most right-wing forces in British political history—war criminals who declared they were "intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich" and set out to make this happen for 13 years in government.

To call for a Labour vote now has a fundamentally different significance than it had in the past because this is a fundamentally different party. Moreover, the call made by the pseudo-left groups for a Labour vote has nothing to do with a struggle for a revolutionary alternative. Its purpose is to foster illusions in Corbyn's left credentials in an effort to restore support for the Labour Party in the working class.

The Socialist Party, Socialist Workers Party and similar groups want the working class to forget the historical experiences of the past forty years with Labour. They maintain that everything has changed with the election of Corbyn in September 2015, which finally puts the left in a position of leading the party in a socialist direction. The SP, for example, declares Labour now to be "two parties in one," representing "an opportunity to create a mass party of the working class."

Labour's election manifesto is portrayed as the most left-wing since 1983 and, according to the SWP, a chance to "turn the tide against the Tories and beat back austerity." Therefore, as Socialist Resistance states, "The job of the left now is to get behind the Corbyn campaign and drum up every vote we can."

These are all lies.

Since Corbyn came to leadership, what has he done that has genuinely impacted on the character of the Labour Party from when it was led by Blair?

Corbyn won the support of hundreds of thousands of new members who joined the party to fight the Blairite right wing. But he has betrayed that mandate again and again. It is the right that still determines the key elements of Labour's policy—thanks to Corbyn allowing free votes on waging war in Syria and on renewing Trident.

The right's response was to mount a coup to get rid of him, with the support of the vast majority of Labour MPs. If Corbyn had fought this, then there may have been an argument for making a tactical adaptation to what would be seen by many workers as a genuine struggle for a socialist alternative. But he did not.

Instead, even as his supporters were targeted by the party apparatus for expulsion, Corbyn opposed all calls for the deselection of MPs and declared "party unity" to be his ultimate goal. Just as he has done since entering parliament as a backbench MP in the 1980s, instead of fighting for the socialist beliefs he claims to uphold he has spent the past two years

ensuring that the right wing remains firmly in the saddle while he registers his “personal” disagreement with this or that policy.

If Corbyn could not defeat 200 right-wing scoundrels with hundreds of thousands backing him, then he will never defeat them. The pseudo-left groups argue that none of this matters because Labour’s election manifesto provides the basis for the party’s transformation into a powerful weapon against austerity.

In reality, the manifesto is the product of all of Corbyn’s previous retreats, which now form the basis of party policy—including support for Trident, NATO, immigration controls and a promise to ensure the UK maintains access to the Single European Market. As for opposing austerity, the manifesto’s pledges still mean Labour will impose £7 billion of the £9 billion cuts pencilled in by the Tories, maintain the welfare benefit cap for three years and must submit all its spending pledges to an externally enforced “fiscal responsibility rule.”

Most important of all, whatever promises are made to safeguard the NHS, build homes, renationalise the railways, etc., are not worth the paper they are written on as long as the right wing remains in control of the party. Even now the Blairites are openly working to lose the election and have made clear they will either try once again to force Corbyn out in the event of electoral defeat, or split and create a new party if Labour wins to prevent it from governing.

The various “left” groups have responded by supporting Corbyn in his capitulation to the right wing. Declaring that a victory on June 8 overrides all other considerations, the SWP insists, “These elections will be seen as a referendum on Corbyn. It won’t matter if the candidates are right-wingers. Every loss will be blamed on the left.”

The SP writes that standing candidates against Labour in council elections is correct, but, “A general election is different—this one in particular,” as it “poses the question of how to give governmental form to local struggles,” which “means striving to put Corbyn into No. 10.”

In other words, token protests at the local level are one thing, but when it comes to securing a position within the state apparatus through a longed-for re-entry into a victorious Labour government, nothing must stand in the way.

If support for Corbyn means abandoning any struggle against the right wing in the election, then what follows afterwards?

The pseudo-left groups claim that giving expression to anti-Tory sentiment through a Labour vote will strengthen the working class and encourage it in the fight that will then be led by Corbyn against the Blairites and the Tories. In reality, those workers who vote for Corbyn will only get Blair and his cronies.

The SP, SWP et al promise a fight tomorrow only in order to excuse their refusal to fight today. But based on the overarching goal of putting Corbyn into 10 Downing Street, what would their response be when he opposes a struggle against the Blairites so as to keep Labour in office?

And what if the election ends in a hung parliament and Labour forms a coalition with the Liberal Democrats and others and Corbyn insists that he is bound by the terms of such a pact and abandons one “anti-austerity” policy after another?

This is not merely speculation. If Corbyn came to power, it would not be a question of whether he would betray those who voted for him, but only how and when. And the pseudo-left groups would support him anyway.

What has been the experience of the working class in Britain and internationally?

In 1997, Blair’s Labour government took office riding a tidal wave of anti-Tory sentiment after 18 years of Tory governments. The SWP called for a Labour vote, insisting that Labour had to be supported as a working class party. “It is true that Tony Blair occupies one of the most right-wing points on the spectrum. But he is not the most right-wing Labour leader ever,” it declared. The only choice for workers was between the Tories—“the open, unashamed representatives of big business”—and

Labour, “a party which is certainly pro-capitalist, but is funded and supported by working class people, including the majority of class-conscious workers.”

In the United States, the same line was taken on the election of the Democrats under Barack Obama in 2008, which the SWP hailed for capturing “the mood for real change.” They declared that “The left has to be part of building grassroots campaigns that can force Obama to deliver...”

The most telling experience of all is the election of Syriza in Greece on January 26, 2015. There was a far clearer argument for supporting a Syriza government than a Labour government under Corbyn. After all, this was a party supposedly united in opposing austerity in a way that Corbyn’s Labour Party is not, so that Alex Callinicos of the SWP wrote, “It’s hard to overstate the historic significance of the election victory of the radical left party Syriza in Greece last month... Revolutionary socialists should celebrate the new government’s victory and support the progressive measures it takes.”

Barely five months later, Syriza betrayed a massive two-thirds majority mandate to oppose austerity in a referendum it had organised and agreed to impose attacks worse than those agreed by its Conservative predecessors.

None of this has any impact on the “left,” who have moved seamlessly from one political debacle to another—including boosting Bernie Sanders right up until he threw his weight behind Hillary Clinton and helped hand the presidency to Donald Trump.

In the end, all that Corbyn’s apologists can fall back on is that he is the “lesser evil”—the only realistic alternative to a Tory government. But this begs the question of just what evils will flow from the election of a Labour government?

In May’s presidential elections in France, amid the near collapse of a hated Socialist Party government, the working class was presented with a “greater evil” even than May’s Tories, when Marine Le Pen of the fascist National Front’s went through to the second round. On that occasion, her opponent was the French Blair-equivalent Emmanuel Macron. Macron was so reviled that masses of workers and youth refused to back either the “banker or the fascist,” as abstentions reached 26 percent and 34 percent among those aged 18 to 24.

This did not stop the French pseudo-left either openly calling for a vote for Macron or urging a more shamefaced “Not one vote for Le Pen.” The first action taken after Macron was elected was to renew the state of emergency enforced in France since 2015, which has been used overwhelmingly against left-wing protests. He also plans to strengthen anti-labour laws, cut taxes for the wealthy, boost the number of policemen and prison beds and continue the wars in Syria, Iraq and Mali.

The political record of the pseudo-left recalls the damning critique made by Leon Trotsky in 1940 of the opposition Shachtmanite tendency in the US:

“The first general feature is the absence of a unified conception. The opposition leaders split sociology from dialectic materialism. They split politics from sociology. In the sphere of politics, they split our tasks in Poland from our experience in Spain—our tasks in Finland from our position on Poland. History becomes transformed into a series of exceptional incidents; politics becomes transformed into a series of improvisations. We have here, in the full sense of the term, the disintegration of Marxism, the disintegration of theoretical thought, the disintegration of politics into its constituent elements. Empiricism and its foster-brother, impressionism, dominate from top to bottom.”

The SEP refuses to base its politics on such “clever” tactical improvisations, determined according to the personality of Corbyn and the illusions of sections of workers in him. We do not offer a perspective only for June 8, but for June 9 and all the days that follow.

When our opponents were busy boosting Syriza as the way forward for

workers everywhere, we insisted, “But Syriza’s election victory does not express a political development, a step forward, progress or anything of the kind by or for the working class. In its origin, social composition and politics, Syriza is a bourgeois party—one of many, including the Democrats under US President Barack Obama—that come to power making promises of ‘hope’ and ‘change’ and then impose policies of austerity and war. It will inevitably betray, sooner rather than later, the aspirations for an end to social hardship and suffering that it has cynically exploited.”

Not one word needs changing regarding the character of a future Labour government.

We speak the truth to the working class, whether this is popular or not. This is of fundamental importance during an election, in which the most intense pressure is placed on workers and young people to suspend their critical judgement and vote to get the Tories out.

The crisis of leadership facing the working class cannot be resolved on the basis of a vote for Labour or any other opportunist manoeuvre. More important even than Corbyn’s political inadequacies is the fact that not just British, but world capitalism is in the midst of a breakdown that poses a further descent towards trade and military war between the rival imperialist powers.

There is no basis for a retreat by the ruling class from austerity as Corbyn claims. The working class must be made to pay by whatever means are necessary. Explosive class struggles lie immediately ahead that demand a political break with the Labour Party and the building of a new leadership, armed with a revolutionary socialist and internationalist perspective. All the work of the Socialist Equality Party is directed to preparing the advanced workers and youth to lead this political reorientation.



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