

Labour's strikebreaking in Coventry bin strike: Socialist Party proposes a Labour Party Mark II

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The pseudo-left Socialist Party (SP) is promoting the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) in the March 3 Erdington by-election in Birmingham as its answer to the strikebreaking operation mounted against Coventry bin workers by the Labour-controlled council. It is planning to run a slate of candidates in the upcoming UK local elections on May 5.

Presented as an alternative to the rightward careening Labour Party under Sir Keir Starmer and the basis for a new party of the working class, TUSC is a desperate attempt to politically control and neuter rising anger and a leftward movement of workers and youth.

There is nothing new in the party the SP claims to be building. It equates to a Labour Party Mark II, focussed on winning the backing of the trade union bureaucracy.

The February 23 online edition of *The Socialist* carries the statement, "The Erdington byelection and the fight for a new mass workers' party". It is an extended advert for the "Discussions... developing across the trade union movement, from the Bakers' Union's disaffiliation from Labour; Unite's announcement that funds would be withheld from all Labour politicians in the Midlands while the Coventry refuse strike continues; and the resolutions submitted to the conference of the rail union, Aslef, calling for disaffiliation from Labour". These represent, the SP claims, the beginnings of "something new, outside the confines of Labour."

TUSC's national chair David Nellist has been selected as its candidate for the Erdington by-election. He was a former Labour MP in Coventry who was expelled from the party in 1991 as part of the witch hunt against the SP's forerunner, the Militant Tendency. He was a Socialist Party elected councillor in the city between 1998-2012. The well-established relations Nellist has with the unions are presented as proof that TUSC represents the working class.

The SP's near exclusive focus on Coventry in their criticisms of the Labour Party allows them to avoid dealing with the two global issues of the day which threaten the international working class with catastrophe—the pandemic and the war drive over Ukraine.

Labour and the trade unions' support for the Johnson government's scrapping all COVID-19 emergency health measures is ignored, and a deafening silence maintained on Starmer's warmongering against Russia on behalf of British imperialism.

The second statement in the February 23 edition of *The Socialist* is from the SP-led Committee for a Workers International: "Ukraine: Workers' unity against capitalist warmongers and imperialist meddlers". It not only focuses primarily on condemnations of Russia but speaks obliquely of "Western powers" or "the West", with just one brief reference to Britain and no condemnation of the Labour Party and Starmer.

This could not be done without queering the SP's pitch to trade unions that are fully behind NATO's war drive. This includes ASLEF General

Secretary Mick Whelan who this week visited Kiev alongside Labour parliamentarians and National Union of Mineworkers leader Chris Kitchen to discuss with fascist-infested volunteer militias how the UK can best support them.

The February 7 TUSC online conference launching its election campaign presented a platform made up almost exclusively of high-level union bureaucrats, including its own members. This included SP member Jared Wood, an executive member of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT), who reportedly "drew parallels between today and the situation over 100 years ago which led to the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants (ASRS), one of the predecessors of the RMT, to take the steps which led to the creation of the Labour Party... The capitalists then were attacking the unions' ability to organise and using laws to prosecute workers who were fighting back."

Contrary to the SP's propaganda, the trade unions have undergone a parallel process of degeneration to Labour—transformed from defensive organisations of workers into the chief instrument for suppressing the class struggle and open agents of capital and the employers in enforcing their attacks. Claiming otherwise demands of the SP that it act as the most slavish defender of one union sellout after another.

An honest account of the Coventry bin dispute refutes the central fraud of the SP that the trade unions are a vehicle for workers' resistance to Starmer's Labour Party. The 70 refuse drivers who have stood up to the strikebreaking Labour council have been completely isolated by Unite—a union with a membership of more than a million.

The SP indulges in fantasy politics by invoking the distant memory of the closure of Saltley Gate coking depot when workers came out from the factories to back the miners in their 1972 strike.

Unite in contrast has continued to meet with the council spearheading the attack on its members and sworn to binding arbitration. The enforced criticism of Labour by Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham and the threat to withdraw funding was premised on a pathetic appeal to Starmer that his Thatcherite party must decide which side it is on.

The SP presents the claims by Graham to have won a string of pay victories as a tablet of faith. This not only ignores an overwhelming number of below-inflation agreements imposed by Unite but also the overall role the largest private sector union has played in suppressing a strike wave against the Johnson government.

The SP does not utter one word of criticism of Unite, hoping any union disaffiliations from Labour provide a money pot for TUSC. Its main political objective is to prevent a historical reckoning with the bankruptcy of national reformism, as if Starmer has fallen from the sky.

A party of, by and for the working class cannot be built without a principled approach to politics, drawing the necessary lessons from workers' strategic experiences and exposing those who have invoked its

name only to betray it. It means identifying the programme through which the historic interests of the working class are secured in a fight against capitalism based on an international and socialist programme.

TUSC is the exact opposite: an electoral manoeuvre based on offering a political amnesty for those who have betrayed the working-class time and again; a safe haven for the union bureaucracy to spout empty rhetoric to ward off opposition from below.

The attempt to present TUSC as a political alternative for the working class is only the latest chapter in a long and sorry saga. It was formed in 2010 through a coming together of the SP, sections of the trade union bureaucracy including most notably the RMT union under Bob Crow, and the now departed Socialist Workers Party.

Its decision to stand candidates against Labour in the general election was based on the false narrative that the rightward lurch under Blair would provoke significant opposition from within the trade unions and a split by Labour “left” MPs. In this way, TUSC served only as a pressure group on Labour. The WSWS defined the organisation in the following terms:

“There is a basic problem of political terminology when addressing the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition, an electoral front dominated by the Socialist Party led by Peter Taaffe. It stems from the impossibility of accepting the self-designation of the groups involved as being “socialist” and the claim that the trade unions are somehow the representatives of working people.

“The 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.”

This appraisal proved correct. The WSWS wrote on TUSC’s contesting the 2015 General Elections explaining that it had drawn only limited support from the trade unions, providing militant bona fides to bureaucrats who continued to betray every struggle. It decided not to stand against “left” Labour MPs, maintaining the fiction that they opposed the austerity consensus ushered in by Labour’s bailout of the banks following the 2008 financial crash.

The SP put its TUSC project into deep storage following the election of Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of the Labour Party in 2015, agreeing not to contest general elections in 2017 and 2019. It claimed that Corbyn’s election was the first step towards Labour’s possible transformation into “a democratic, socialist, anti-austerity party”, requesting to be admitted to the party to help “consolidate Jeremy Corbyn’s victory.”

The request was rejected, and the SP and others were largely blocked from even participating in the official pro-Corbyn Momentum group. Rather than usher in a new dawn for Labour, Corbyn abandoned his anti-war and anti-austerity posture and capitulated on all fronts to the right-wing while opposing all demands to drive the Blairites out. He allowed the witch-hunt of his own supporters, proclaiming as his overriding concern preserving party unity.

Corbyn handed the reins of leadership to Starmer without even a whimper. However, Starmer did not have to invent anything new in declaring Labour’s role that of de facto partner with the Johnson government. Corbyn was the originator of the “constructive criticism” only policy. His final period as Labour leader included voting through the government bailout of the corporations and remaining silent on his private discussions with government officials outlining Boris Johnson’s herd immunity agenda.

It was in the wake of this debacle that TUSC was relaunched in the 2021 local council elections, after only a token presence in council elections in 2018.

TUSC is attempting to salvage the political shipwreck of all those who falsely proclaimed the rebirth of Labour under Corbyn. This includes Left Unity, founded in 2013 promising a return to “the spirit of ’45”—meaning

the reformism of the post-war Attlee Labour Government. Several hundred of its members, led by Alan Thornett’s Pabloite Socialist Resistance and his most prominent supporter Ken Loach, rejoined the Labour Party after Corbyn’s victory, while the rest went into political semi-retirement.

Another political orphan is Chris Williamson, the former Labour MP for Derby North who was the only prominent Labourite to stand up to the Labour right’s “anti-Semitism” smears and was rewarded by Corbyn by being thrown under the bus. His vanity project “Resist” liquidated into TUSC last year.

The worst decision which could be made by workers and youth would be to entrust any fight to this collection of bankrupts, who foresaw nothing while they prostrated themselves before the Corbynites.

TUSC has also extended its embrace to the People’s Alliance of the Left (PAL), founded by the former Labour MP for Colne Valley, Thelma Walker. This includes the Northern Independence Party (NIP), which advocates the secession of the northern regions from the rest of England! The SP has already embraced Scottish and Welsh separatism and then Brexit, all in the name of a supposed “left nationalism”. It is now adding to this regressive list support for the creation of “Northumbria”—a recreation of the early medieval Anglo-Saxon kingdom.

In the Erdington by-election, TUSC have also received the backing of George Galloway and his variously named Workers Party of Britain/Great Britain. The WPB eradicates any distinction between left and right based on opposition to “global capitalism” and a commitment to a strong nation state. These admirers of Stalin’s purges have no problem with supporting the SP, whose pose of Trotskyism is a transparent fraud. What unites them is a shared nationalist agenda and hostility to building the revolutionary internationalist party the working class needs.

There is nothing remotely oppositional to capitalism, let alone socialist, in the 10 core policies of TUSC. The character of its modern-day “municipal socialism” agenda is made clear in such promises as: “TUSC councillors will support councils which in the first instance use their reserves and prudential borrowing powers to avoid making cuts,” while arguing that “the best way to mobilise the mass campaign that is necessary to defend and improve council services is to set a budget that meets the needs of the local community and demand that government funding makes up the shortfall.”

The party the working class must build is the Socialist Equality Party (SEP). There are no shortcuts to the establishment of the political independence of the working class. It must be rooted in definite principles, which are historically derived from the fight for an international and socialist perspective against national reformism and Stalinism.

Across the world, the working class is entering into decisive battles in which it finds itself pitted against the nationalist and pro-corporate trade unions and former reformist parties such as the Labour Party. For these struggles to advance means building a new leadership which consciously fights to unify the international working class, overthrow of capitalism and establish a socialist society.

The SEP, along with its sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International, is seeking to provide the organisational and political expression of a growing rebellion within the working class against the labour bureaucracies. Through the building of rank-and-file committees, the daily struggle is being unified with the fight to construct a world socialist party to mobilise the working class as the only revolutionary force which can end the pandemic, rising social inequality and the drive towards war.





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