

Recent experiences in left regroupment and reconstruction

Tuesday 8 December 2009, by [McILROY Jim](#) (Date first published: 23 November 2009).

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November 23, 2009 — How do you build socialism in the First World countries right now? Of course, we are part of a world movement for socialism, including the Third World. We can learn a lot from recent and current experiences in left regroupment and party building that are happening around the world at present — with all proportions guarded, and realising that there is no direct transposition of one historical, national experience onto another.

When we talk about left regroupment and reconstruction, unlike some of the other overseas examples that I will refer to, Socialist Alliance in Australia is not at this stage a broad left party or a regroupment organisation in quite the same way as some of the other international experiences. But it is a vehicle for constructing one and it is a nucleus for building a broad-based socialist party in the future.

We know that we went through a regroupment stage, in the first period of Socialist Alliance, from 2001 to 2005 or so, when the fundamental character of Socialist Alliance was a regroupment of left organisations. And now it's another form of regroupment, between the Democratic Socialist Perspective, as a revolutionary core organisation, and various individual, independent socialists and small groups of socialists.

While there are major differences between this and many of the left regroupment processes happening in around the world, there are similar principles involved.

What are we trying to do? We are attempting to break out of the relative isolation of the socialist movement in the First World, we are trying to find a way to achieve that goal and we are trying to see how do you build Socialism of the 21st century in a very concrete way, in every country, and internationally.

So it is a change in the traditional left organisational form in the West in the direction of what could be dubbed ecosocialism. That is, in my personal opinion, the direction we will be looking in the end.

And that will eventually involve some kind of regroupment with left sections of the Greens, and some sections of the "ecosocialist" movement, and the formation of an ecosocialist party.

Revolutionaries and broad left parties

There have been some interesting articles published recently talking about some of the recent regroupment experiences in other countries. There's one in particular by Phil Hearse, from the Socialist Resistance organisation in Britain, titled *Revolutionaries and broad left parties*''', from October 25, 2009 [[See on ESSF: Socialist Resistance, [->art9560]]]. Hearse notes that in this decade there have been attempts around the world to re-build the left. But, he says, unlike 1956 and 1968 when there were also regroupment periods, "In the first decade of the 21st century, things are much more difficult objectively, with the working class mainly on the defensive. Multiple debates on orientation and strategy have started to sweep the international left toward a reconfiguration of the socialist movement in several countries. Positive aspects of this process include historic events in Venezuela and Bolivia (with all their problems), and the emergence of Die Linke (The Left) in Germany, the Left Bloc in Portugal, and new left formations in other countries." Hearse refers to a whole series of attempts and moves towards regroupment in many countries [[<http://links.org.au/taxonomy/term/88>]], and if you list them all, there is quite a lot. A debate opened up about what kind of left we need in the 21st century. "This is of course normal. Each successive stage of the international class struggle, especially after world historic events of the type we have seen" -- the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the setbacks suffered by the world working class under the impact of the capitalist neoliberal offensive. We have to pose the question of how to organise and reorganise the socialist movement once again. So Hearse talks about the issue of the relationship between revolutionary socialism and broad left parties. And, there are (at least) two ways of approaching this question: "For some on the revolutionary left, what we might call the 'clean hands and spotless banner' tendency, ... attempts at political recomposition are a waste of time. Far better to just build your organisation, sell your paper, hold your meetings, criticise everybody else, and keep a 'spotless banner'.'" That a very pervasive tendency in both the Australian and international left. Of course, there's nothing wrong with building your organisation, selling papers and holding meetings. But that can't be all you do in the current conditions, if you want to reconstruct the socialist movement today. {{{Recent international experiences}}} On the other hand, we have seen another tendency which is expressed in the German Die Linke, the Portuguese Left Bloc, the Danish Red-Green Alliance and many others. "This was the importance of the Workers' Party in Brazil and the Communist Refoundation in Italy at their height: that they articulated a significant national voice against neoliberalism that would have been impossible for the small forces of the revolutionary left"', writes Hearse. "More than that: the very existence of these forces, at various stages, had an important impact on mass mobilisations and struggles – as for example the Communist Refoundation did on mobilising the anti-war movement and the struggle against pension reform in Italy." And I would add, as the Socialist Alliance did have on the anti-Work Choices industrial campaign in Australia, especially in the early days. Socialist Alliance was able to have an actual material impact on the class struggle in Australia. "The existence of a mass political alternative raises people's horizons, remoralises them, brings socialism back onto political agendas, erects an obstacle to the domination of political discourses by

different brands of neoliberalism and promotes the struggle. It also acts as a clearing house of political ideas in which the revolutionaries put their positions", notes Hearse We don't necessarily see political regroupment or broad left formations as the end product or the final organisation that will be able to carry out a socialist revolution. As Hearse explains: "They are interim and transitional forms of organisation.... Our goal remains that of building revolutionary parties. It's just that, as against the 'clean hands and spotless banner' tendency, we have a major disagreement about what revolutionary parties, in the 21st century, will look like – and how to build them." Phil Hearse goes on to talk about the role of revolutionaries in a broader left formation: {"Inside broad left formations there has to be a real, autonomous political life in which people who are not members of an organised current can have confidence that decisions are not being made behind their backs in a disciplined caucus that will impose its views – they have to be confident that their political contribution can affect political debates."} That's a very important point that we are taking into this merger process [between the DSP and the Socialist Alliance] in Australia. The way to operate in these formations, whether it is a broad left regroupment or more of a nucleus like the Socialist Alliance, is that "revolutionaries – individuals and currents – have to demonstrate their commitment and loyalty to the broad left formation of which they are part. This means prioritising the activities and press of the broad left formation itself. Half in, half out doesn't work. We should put no a priori limits on the evolution of a broad left formation. Its evolution will be determined by how it responds to the major questions in the fight against imperialism and neoliberal capitalism." The last section of Phil Heare's article is on different conceptions of the left. He refers to a statement we ourselves in the DSP used to quote 30 or more years ago, from Leon Trotsky in 1938: "There is no revolutionary tendency worthy of the name on the face of the earth outside the Fourth [International]." There could have been some kind of argument for that proposition then. However, it probably was an overstatement even at that desperate time. But now, in post World War II circumstances, in the last 50 years, it's a really bizarre idea. And you can relate this to every form of grouping which tried to put forward that exclusivist concept in recent times. I think Trotsky himself, even though he did put forward that statement, would be revolving in his grave to see what's been done in his name in the post-war period. {{{European examples}}} So, that's a reasonable overview of how we should approach the question of left regroupment in general in the current political situation. Let's look at some recent concrete examples. There's another article, also distributed online through, {Socialist Voice}, the Canadian left publication, by Ian Angus entitled "Positive developments in the European left", October 7, 2009 [[See: [->art15786]]]. Some of these examples give us an idea of processes happening overseas, which are very different from the Australian situation, but on the other hand there is a reach-out approach which is very similar. First of all in Germany, Die Linke (The Left) is the result of a long history from the East German-based Party of Democratic Socialism, which joined up with a section of left social democrats who became disillusioned with the pro-capitalist Social Democratic Party (SPD). Together they formed this new left party, which is a fascinating example of the direction which the left can take. The opening for Die Linke was partly a result of the failure of the German Greens, which dropped the

ball by allying themselves too closely in government with the SPD. The Greens had the opportunity to become the dominant ecological and left party in Germany, but that didn't happen, for various reasons. Die Linke has gone from strength to strength, winning around 12 per cent of the vote in the late September 2009 general elections, an increase of more than 3 per cent on the previous poll. "The party now has 76 members in the Bundestag, up from 54. In most parts of the former East Germany, Die Linke is now the largest party," Ian Angus notes. {"Die Linke's election platform has resonated with the population", Duroyan Fertl, reported in Green Left Weekly, October 14, 2009. "It calls for improving social justice and public welfare, introducing a minimum wage, higher taxes for the rich, relaxing harsh unemployment laws, and cutting greenhouse gases by 90 per cent by 2050. More than 80 per cent of the population opposes the war in Afghanistan, and Die Linke is the only party pledging to pull out German troops."} That is a very important policy, clearly distinguishing Die Linke from all other parties, including the German Greens. This is a turning point in recent German politics. Of course, the right-wing Christian Democrats won the election, and support for the SPD collapsed. But the success of Die Linke reflects an increasing polarisation in German politics, with a shift to the right in overall votes matched by a turn to the left by a significant section of the working class. There is quite a tense situation in German politics at present, with the people hard hit by the global economic crisis. The potential is there for a major radicalisation of a large section of the workers and the poor in the next period. {{{Left Bloc of Portugal}}} Another interesting case is that of Portugal, where the Left Bloc has made important gains in recent times. The history of the Left Bloc is quite different from the situation in Australia, but there is one similarity in the fact that one of the components of the original Left Bloc was the Revolutionary Socialist Party, the former section of the Fourth International in Portugal. The RSP linked up with a group of former Maoists, and a wing of the Portuguese Communist Party, together with a number of independent socialists, to form the Left Bloc in 1998. The Left Bloc has gradually developed its unity and its base of support over the past decade. In the recent Portuguese elections, also held on September 27, 2009, the ruling pro-capitalist Socialist Party held on to office, but its vote fell from 45 per cent to just over 36 per cent. "At the same time, the Left Bloc increased its vote from 6 per cent to nearly 10 per cent, and doubled its representation in the Assembly from 8 to 16 members", Angus reported. In a 2007 interview, Left Bloc leader Francisco Louca, described the party as a 'pluralist party of the socialist left':

"When the Bloc was formed, eight years ago, we made a political choice which I believe is still valid: to create our party on the basis of the political confrontations which define our activity and not on the basis of a priori ideological cohesion. We thus brought together very different traditions, coming from the Communist Party, Maoist or revolutionary Marxist (Trotskyist) currents, as well as people from independent social movements. The possibility of building this regroupment, in a very defensive situation, implied that we were able to formulate political proposals and to have an impact on society. So we started not by discussing a programme of historical reference, but a programme of political intervention.

We defined ourselves as socialists shortly after our foundation, in a double sense: initially, by rejecting 'real socialism' (Stalinism, the experiences of the USSR, Eastern Europe or China), then by

identifying ourselves with the anti-capitalist struggle, against the social-democratic experience and its current social-liberal version.

In this sense, we defend the idea of collective ownership. But what is really important, in particular for the organisations which followed the path of small minority groups, is to find the means of expressing political ideas which fight to have an influence on the masses. So we translated our socialist ideas into specific proposals, very much linked to the modalities of political life in Portugal.

For example, we recently proposed the socialisation of the services of water, energy, etc., and one of our principal campaigns this year centres on the defence, the modernisation and the transformation of the national health service. That enables us to concretise our perspective of socialisation on the basis of social needs and concrete struggles.” [\[1\]](#).

On a smaller scale, this approach is not dissimilar to that which the DSP has pursued with the Socialist Alliance over a number of years. And this kind of involvement in the class struggle on the ground has the other effect of deepening the radical programmatic basis of the organisation itself.

New Anti-Capitalist Party of France

The third main example of left regroupment in Europe is in France, which is a really interesting development. And that’s another example of what can come out of the Trotskyist movement, in the right conditions and with a positive approach.

The Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire (LCR), the French section of the Fourth International, has been changed and transformed by its deep involvement in the class struggle in France. They have been open and able to see the enormous opportunities there to begin to construct a broad formation of the socialist left.

The LCR was not held back by dogmas and sectarianism from breaking from its organisational and political forms of the past.

The New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) was formed in February 2009 on the initiative of the LCR, which then dissolved itself into the new formation.

The NPA recently called on the entire “anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist left” to begin discussions about joint action in the 2010 regional French elections. It has now put together a joint declaration by six groups, aimed at uniting their efforts to combat the right-wing offensive led by President Sarkozy. “Together we can help reverse the relationship of forces between the political right, the employers and the popular classes in struggle and at the polling booths,” the statement says.

So the NPA is now pushing for united left action on all fronts, even beyond the substantial regroupment reflected in its own establishment less than a year ago. It is very ambitious about what it is trying to do in France.

But at the same time the former LCR leadership has made it very clear that the way forward was not to go into the NPA as an organised faction, but to formally dissolve the LCR and become totally immersed in the new party – still as a revolutionary current, but seeking to win the members of the NPA in an increasingly radical direction.

This is an interesting example for us in the DSP, in relation to Socialist Alliance, bearing in mind that the NPA is now a party of many thousands of members, while the Socialist Alliance is less than 1000.

Nevertheless, the LCR had many fewer members than the NPA, and has sought to widen the activist base of socialist struggle in France by moving in this direction.

Britain: Green Left

One other instructive case study in Europe is the example of Britain, as much for the negative as the positive lessons. When you look at the history of the English left over the last 60 years, it is one of the tragedies of the Western left in general.

Literally tens of thousands of young and older militants have passed through the ranks of the British left organisations over the decades, but without the establishment of a long-lasting, united left organisation – despite a number of initially promising beginnings.

(The Scottish Socialist Party is a special case here. After the great advances of the SSP in the past, the split with Tommy Sheridan's Solidarity has set back the SSP considerably in recent times. However, the SSP is gradually moving to re-establish its base again, with modest success.)

All is not lost, however. There have been positive developments in Britain recently. As we know, the original Socialist Alliance was established in England at the start of this decade, which inspired the formation of Socialist Alliance in Australia in 2001. Following the collapse of the Socialist Alliance in England, the formation of the Respect party showed considerable promise for left renewal. However, a recent article by British Socialist Workers Party leader Alex Callinicos paints a grim picture of the state of left renewal in Britain – as well as in Europe as a whole.

Ian Angus refers to this report:

"Callinicos's article is particularly scathing about Britain, where despite 'a decade's sustained efforts at socialist regroupment,' there is still no united Left electoral alternative to the Conservatives and New Labour. He describes the Respect party led by George Galloway and Salma Yaqoob as 'once the most promising product of these efforts,' but – perhaps understandably – he is silent about the role of the SWP's 2007 walkout in weakening that group.

Several British groups, including the SWP, have this year called for renewed efforts at left unity, but none of these appeals has yet produced anything resembling a practical result. The failures of previous combinations have left a legacy of distrust that will be difficult to overcome."

One significant development, which is very relevant to the Australian situation, is the formation of Green Left, the ecosocialist wing of the Green Party of England and Wales. The steering committee of Green Left, on September 30, 2009, called on the Green Party in Birmingham not to stand a candidate against Salma Yaqoob of Respect, "in order to give a strong, progressive and environmentally aware candidate the chance of taking the seat. We believe that Salma Yaqoob of Respect is the candidate most likely to do this and her victory would be a victory for all those opposing the policies of privatisation, war, greed, racism and environmental destruction." (Remember that there is no preferential voting system in Britain, so unified progressive candidatures are even more important there than in this country.)

This is perhaps just a straw in the wind, but it does give in indication of possible future directions toward unity between left Greens and the socialist left in Britain. That would be an important breakthrough for the future of the progressive movement in that country, and internationally.

Latin America: PSUV in Venezuela

To finish, we will jump right across the world to Latin America; Venezuela to be exact. The initial focus of this article was intended to be on developments with the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) and its congress at the end of November 2009, as an instance of a quite different kind of left regroupment.

Now, events in the last two days have broadened the context, not only to regroupment in Venezuela, but regroupment in Latin America and the whole world.

The situation of the PSUV is in one sense a totally incomparable to that of the Socialist Alliance in Australia. The PSUV had an initial nominal membership of nearly 7 million, with an active membership of almost 2.5 million!

However, the PSUV is a form of regroupment, because after President Hugo Chavez's call at the end of 2006 for the formation of a united party of the revolution in Venezuela, there was the beginning of a sifting-out process within the Chavista movement through the process of forming this new party. Obviously, there is a very long way to go with this process, as the PSUV continues to be dominated by bureaucratic forces overall. However, a sizeable group of well-known revolutionaries have been elected as delegates to the congress. There is a big struggle ahead to transform the PSUV into a genuine mass revolutionary and socialist party.

The push from below by the popular movement in Venezuela, propelled by the growing class polarisation inside the country, together with the pressure of increasing military threats from the US, via Colombia, creates the real possibility of sharp struggle inside and outside the PSUV, which can eventually push the new party, or significant sections of it, in a revolutionary socialist direction.

Clearly, further political clarification will likely lead to further regroupment and realignments on the Venezuelan left in the future.

New international

At the recent meeting of International Left Parties in Caracas [2], at which the Australian Socialist Alliance was represented by comrades Fred Fuentes and Kiraz Janicke, President Chavez issued a call for the formation of a new international organisation of left parties, which he dubbed the "Fifth Socialist International".

This would appear to be a most important and exciting development in the Latin American and world socialist movement. Chavez has a history of seizing the vital moment and putting out a call for action, which answers the crucial needs of the time.

Often it can be an ambit claim at first, which also catches people, including many of his friends and allies, by surprise. But he challenges people to face up to critical responsibilities, in a way which forces them to think outside the square.

The full implications of this dramatic call will only unfold in time. And we will need to discuss our attitude to it in much more detail, including all the possible consequences for international collaboration.

It is impossible to envision that any such new international, whether it comes to be called the "Fifth", or something quite different, would resemble the Third International (or Comintern), even

in its early revolutionary days under Lenin's leadership. However, it is also unlikely to bear much comparison to the Fourth International under Leon Trotsky either.

It could bear more historical analogy with the First International, under Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, in the sense of being an attempt at a new start for the world socialist and workers' movement.

Chavez's call has already galvanised the movement and has won widespread support from left parties in Latin America – where its greatest strength and initial centre would undoubtedly lie. Realistically, the initial basis of a new international would be to provide a vehicle for establishing greater collaboration between left and socialist parties in Latin America.

But it will have an impact well beyond that, including in First World countries. Chavez said during his speech to the November 19-21 Caracas conference of international left parties, "I assume responsibility before the world. I think it is time to convene the Fifth International, and I dare to make the call, which I think is a necessity. I dare to request that we create my proposal" (quoted in Kiraz Janicke, Green Left Weekly, November 25, 2009.)

He insisted that the conference of left parties should not be "just one more meeting" and invited the representatives of the organisations present to participate in a truly new project. "This socialist encounter should be of the genuine left, willing to fight against imperialism and capitalism", he said.

Chavez briefly outlined the experiences of previous "Internationals" and also stressed that any new international would have to function "without impositions" and would have to respect diversity. He also emphasised that the new international would not be confined to those organisations present at the conference, but would have to be open to drawing in other organisations from different countries.

Chavez's proposal does open a big door. Where the plan could go from here is anyone's guess. But when you think about the enormous challenge facing the world left and working class, with the ecological, economic and social crisis wracking the capitalist system, this call is incredibly timely. There is probably no one but Chavez who could realistically issue a call like this right now, and have it taken up in a serious way on a broad basis.

Even the most limited result in the short term, of the creation of an effective international network of progressive solidarity, would be a definite step forward in the current situation of world left disunity.

Next stage

So, to wind up, what we are trying to do here in Australia is rather different from the international left regroupment examples mentioned above. The experiences we have had here with Socialist Alliance has been a bumpy ride, as everyone is aware.

We are planning to enter the next logical stage of the process, with the proposed merger of the DSP and Socialist Alliance, with the idea of building a broader socialist party, as part of a process of putting the socialist movement on a stronger basis in this country. We want to put the socialist alternative back on the map of politics in Australia.

There are a variety of different experiments and processes happening around the world at present, in quite different political circumstances to our own. But now, even as we speak, there's a call out

there for much greater international collaboration. Both national left reconstruction and international collaboration are ideas whose time has come.

By Jim McIlroy

P.S.

* From Links:

<http://links.org.au/node/1388>

* This abridged article is based on a pre-conference discussion presentation given to a meeting of Sydney Central Branch Democratic Socialist Perspective of Australia on November 23, 2009.

Footnotes

[1] See: [Portugal: Where is the Left Bloc going?](#)

[2] <http://links.org.au/node/1378>