

Great Britain and beyond: Some Lessons of the Crisis in the SWP

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The whole of the left in Britain, from those few still in the Labour Party to far left and revolutionary groups is in crisis. For twenty-five years, since the defeat of the Miners' strike of 1984-5 we have been mostly on the defensive and the class struggle, measured in strike actions, or TU involvement in campaigns, compared to other European countries such as France, has been at a very low level. Only the anti-war mobilisation – for a time – and the growing movement against climate change have generated significant momentum, while the anti globalisation movement, or action against debt, have been a pale reflection of that in Europe. Attempts at left unity to fill the political space vacated by a right wing Labour Government, have either failed or at best found it difficult to make an impact. Most have floundered due to typical British sectarianism and bureaucratic and undemocratic manipulations of the movement

In this context, the crisis in the SWP is significant for the whole of the left. To understand and learn the lessons of this crisis we have to analyse the situation and place it in its historical context. It is not adequate to blame this or that leadership or individual.

The divisions in the SWP which led to the formation of the Left Faction – now dissolved – has not yet led to a major split and most members of the faction remain in the group. However this process is not over. The resignation of Tony Dowling after being ordered to resign his membership of the North East Shop Stewards Network followed by the resignation of eight members of Tyneside SWP shows that the crisis continues and is leading to a haemorrhaging of members. It is both a sad reflection of the politics of the SWP, but also highlights the failures of the British far left in this period when capitalism faces the unique twin crises of the collapse of the banks, severe credit restrictions triggering a general economic down turn and the accelerating effects of climate change.

The failure of the left in Britain to come together in the face of this double crisis of capitalism and its immediate failure to offer some form of united socialist alternative in the coming General Election is alarming. This needs some explanation and solutions. The two factions in the SWP, while proclaiming the need for some kind of broad unifying left party, fail to offer a serious balance sheet of their past errors in the Socialist Alliance and Respect and consequently fail to outline any credible perspective. But first we have to ask why their internal discussions have led to such extreme conflict of split proportions. It can't just be explained by clique politics but comes down to the nature of party democracy and functioning.

Tendencies and factions

The right of dissent in the SWP has always been severely curtailed with tendencies and factions only allowed in the three month period leading up to the conference. Tendencies hardly ever exist and instead differences seem to go immediately to the formation of a faction – but the right to organise around either is limited. This flawed democracy in itself creates explosive tensions. In the recent past Molyneux has taken a different position to the leadership, but failed to be integrated into the leadership. A genuine revolutionary democracy will always try to integrate loyal minorities. It would also promote the right of self organisation of youth, black people, LGBT, women, etc., in the organisation.

Whether the left faction was really a faction is questionable, the issues seem closer to those of a tendency suggesting this may be more about personal resentments than politics. The faction's claims of undemocratic practices in the election of delegates to conference, which apparently included some full-timers for example, or the fact that Rees was dropped from the leadership slate at the last conference, are disingenuous, as for many years the faction leadership was part of that same regime. There is no balance sheet of this lack of internal democracy in the faction's documents.

Why is this important? Partly because the practices of the SWP and their wrong interpretation of democratic centralism (often described as Leninism in the debates on the blogs) give these terms a very bad name indeed. As some have pointed out, you'd be very wary of such a leadership gaining power after a revolution. But more importantly in the present context the leadership (and membership) of the SWP have consistently imported these over-centralist, top-down methods into the labour movement, campaigns and recent attempts to build broad parties to the left of Labour. It is a methodology learnt inside the organisation, which they wrongly think of as combative, Leninist party building.

The need for a broad party of the working class and the oppressed

In fact both the SWP and the Socialist Party have a lot to answer for over the past decade. Without going into the ins and outs of the evolution of the Socialist Alliance and the first attempt at building Respect (let alone Scargill's SLP) the necessary attempts to build broad class struggle parties to the left of Labour have been stymied by undemocratic methods (this includes No2EU and its successor TUSC), sectarian responses to other organisations with legitimate rights to be part of the process and confused understandings by so called, or self-styled Trotskyist organisations, of the relationship between revolutionary parties and broad parties. The SWP's use of the term 'united front of a special kind' was indeed simply used to treat the Socialist Alliance and Respect in the same way they treated campaigns – to ensure they dominated and got through whatever policies they had decided on. This is not to deny some objective problems connected to their size, which meant that they numerically dominated Respect, but there was blindness to this issue as well, which was therefore not tackled.

The question of how to build a revolutionary Marxist organisation in the context of broad parties, and the importance of democratic practices both inside and outside the revolutionary current and the fundamental organic link between them are key elements in the crisis in the SWP. If there is no internal revolutionary democracy, all you can build is a top-down sect, however large, because training in undemocratic practices is inevitably taken into the movement of the class and ruins everything. This is what has happened in the recent attempts to build anything substantial. Democracy is not 'icing on the cake', but essential for the successful building of revolutionary or anti-capitalist parties.

The unitary character of the British labour movement

However, it is simplistic to blame the difficulties in building the SA or Respect solely on the crimes of this or that particular grouping. The SWP crisis and its organisational character needs to be placed in a broader political context, in particular the nationally specific unitary character of the British labour movement and the historic difficulty of the Marxist left to deal with it. Even the Communist Party in Britain was unable to build the kind of mass base it achieved in France, Italy or Spain. The character of the labour movement may be changing, but today it combines with the current economic crisis and the coming to then end of the reformist politics of the post-war settlement. We now live in a period of counter-reform. We have seen the adoption of neo-liberalism and the abject failures of New Labour (and most of the trade unions) to fight for working class interests and the rights of the oppressed, or their failure to take the necessary measures to do anything meaningful to combat the effects of climate change. This has resulted in demoralisation and disorientation in the working class and the oppressed. There is a desperate need for new political alternatives, broad class struggle, and if possible, anti-capitalist parties in England, Wales and Scotland, built in a non-sectarian and democratic way. Only the creation of such a broad party or organisation, can overcome the relative marginalisation of ALL the current forces of the 'Left', who are still confronted with the strong traditions of a unitary labour movement (reinforced by a low level of combativity) which has made this task particularly difficult in this country.

The SP/Militant current once understood the problem of 'Labourism', but chose to politically accommodate to it, before it finally broke from deep entryism and did a political flip-flop arguing that the Labour Party was a bourgeois party, while the SWP banged its head against this British phenomenon, maintaining a long term, ultra-left sectarian and 'rank and fileist' attitude to the workers' movement, for example, failing to understand the political character of the shop-stewards movement in the 1960/70s and failing to properly understand the method of the united front. This sectarianism, necessarily reinforced by a tough undemocratic regime – they always are – was not always applied consistently, for example, when the SWP built the ANL, or played a leading role in the Anti-War movement, or made the important turn to building broad parties, the Socialist Alliance/Respect. However, they have shown they could not sustain such an orientation. This is not simply due to a particular leadership but to their flawed sectarian and undemocratic tradition.

Recent history of the labour movement

The problem is, however, that the past decades – probably at least since the defeat of the great miners' strike of 1984-5 – the labour movement has been on the defensive and the vanguard increasingly dispersed and heterogeneous compared to some other European countries. In the 1980s the growth of New Realism in the trade union movement meant that the unions refused to confront Thatcher's anti-working class policies and the development of New Labour and the election of Blair – according to Thatcher, her 'greatest achievement' – has led to a halving of TU membership, bringing to an end the era of post war reformism on which traditional Labourism was based. Young people especially have been deeply affected by this process. Few are in a trade union, and few, even those radicalising over for example climate change, look to the labour movement for support or solidarity.

This is not to argue that a vanguard does not exist in Britain today, just that it does not automatically turn to trade unions for solidarity, as for example, sections of the women's liberation movement did in the 1970s. In fact there have been a series of issues which have engaged young people in particular, from the anti-road campaigners to Reclaim the Streets, from anti-globalisation protesters to climate campaigners, many young people have become actively involved in fighting what are effectively anti-capitalist struggles, but few have seen the labour movement or the ideas of socialism

as a way forward. At the same time few trade unions have gone beyond narrow sectional interests to support such campaigns. This is not to say it cannot happen, as the initial successes of the TU section of the Campaign against Climate Change shows, just that it is exceptional and unusual over the past period.

European broad parties

This history goes part of the way to explain why it has been possible to build anti-capitalist and broad left parties in other parts of Europe – the NPA in France and the Left Bloc in Portugal, The Red/Green Alliance in Denmark, even the left reformist Die Linke in Germany, while here it has been much more difficult. It can't just be reduced to British sectarianism as important a phenomenon as it is. In fact the British left has been marked by both sectarianism AND opportunism, a situation that has its roots in the material and historical conditions outlined above – not in the peculiar psychology of the British!

Although part of the same overall trend, these left parties in Europe are not all the same. They are based on different social and political conditions, forces, organisation and platforms. Clearly a plurality of tactics is needed for different national conditions. Forces of the Fourth International have been in the forefront of addressing the need in this period to organise and build broad parties, sometimes anti-capitalist/revolutionary vanguard parties like the NPA, but also in some cases politically broader formations within which they are organised tendencies. There has been a recognition that in this conjuncture, in most countries the forces of revolutionary socialism are too small and too politically narrow to hegemonise the broad vanguard at the highest political level.

Further, in some countries the conditions for anti-capitalist vanguard parties do not exist, nor are we strong enough in most European countries to organise them, except possibly in France. Here in this country we are trying to build a potentially broad, anti-imperialist but otherwise left reformist formation – Respect – quite unlike the NPA. In some ways the Left Bloc in Portugal might be more of a model for us, and if we can't achieve that or similar in the English context (and we certainly can't construct an NPA in the foreseeable future), we should rather be part of an organised left tendency inside Respect (or in Germany, Die Linke) or, speculatively, participate in the formation of a new left after the general election. But this is mostly out of our hands. All these organisations require different tactics by revolutionaries.

Today in England, in the run up to a general election, now unofficially launched, probably for May 6th, we are building Respect, 'warts and all', because it is the only broad-based, nationally organised, working class left alternative going. We have called for the left to be united, strikingly illustrated on a recent cover of Socialist Resistance, preferably behind Respect, but if that is not possible, in alliance with other initiatives, such as the recently announced platform TUSC, coming out of the No2EU current but even narrower than before, or any initiative by the SWP, or other important local initiatives, such as those in Cambridge, Wigan, Lewisham, Tyneside, Liverpool, Barrow & Salford. If there are no credible left candidacies on offer we call for a critical vote for Labour.

However the left of the labour movement is in the process of closing ranks behind the traditional lesser evil, the Labour Party, in order to stop the Tories. This is true to form for Labourism, and has put considerable pressure on trade union leaders, including those leaders on the left such as in the RMT, other TU forces in the CPB, for example, and of course active unity behind Labour is promoted by the inside/outside Socialist Action. This right wing unity is reinforced as Brown has created some detachment from the Tories. Looking both ways, Janus-like, Brown is both implementing unacceptable cuts, as demanded by international finance and their credit rating agencies, while at

the same time taking some pages from the neo-Keynesian bible. He recognises the importance of fiscal stimuli, quantitative easing, etc., in other words the importance of maintaining demand within the economy, both for stabilising the capitalist economy itself and for saving jobs. Sections of the ruling class, mainly manufacturing capital, know this and if he has the political courage to carry it through against the media barrage, it is Brown's secret weapon against the Tory policy of 'slash and burn' to balance the books. Not surprisingly things are looking bad.

Conclusion

What we are saying is that it is simplistic and apolitical to explain typical British sectarianism and democratic weaknesses by reference to bankrupt tacticians, or odd personalities. To make a serious analysis of the failure of the left, which is more than just descriptive, it is necessary to get to grips with this historic phenomenon. The leadership of the SWP – Callinicos, Rees and German, et al – are products of the SWP methodology and regime and they also reproduce it. But the SWP (and the Socialist Party) is also a peculiar product of the British labour movement and the difficulties that Marxists have always had in relating to it.

The historically determined character of the British labour movement makes it very difficult to build more than punctual united fronts with this or that section of the worker's movement. To support alternative candidates in elections means breaking from Labourism. Even in its decay, such a course of action is a very, very big decision for them, as history has shown us. Even the RMT, currently one of the most militant unions, is under huge pressure from the Labour bureaucracy, a wing of the CPB, and from sections of its membership, to fall in line behind New Labour in the general election.

We do not claim to have all the answers, but the task is to develop a flexible line or tactic. We need to sustain tactical flexibility with programmatic intransigence on the key class issues, which must involve some form of the united front method and democratic functioning. Only this approach can unlock this problem for revolutionary socialists. History shows that all leftist adventures, or rightist tail-ending of the Labour bureaucracy are doomed to failure.

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P.S.

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<http://socialistresistance.org/835/some-lessons-of-the-crisis-in-the-swp>

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