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Britain

Alliance adopts constitution

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England's Socialist Alliance adopted a new constitution at a conference in London on December 1, 2001 with over 700 members present. The constitution - proposed by the International Socialist Group (ISG), the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and five prominent independents - was adopted by 345 votes against 311 for all other alternatives.

The new constitution gives Socialist Alliance members full rights to determine policy, elect leadership bodies and select candidates to stand in elections.

It also enshrined rights of freedom of expression and dissent within the Alliance and the right to sell and distribute publications other than those of the Alliance.

It is a good framework for the next stage of the development of the SA. What marred the conference, however, was the carefully staged walk-out by the Socialist Party (SP - formerly the Militant Tendency) who had proposed a constitution which enshrined the scandalous principle that any six members within a constituency who formed themselves into a platform could veto any decision taken, including the selection of candidates.

A new constitution was badly needed because the existing one had been outgrown by the SA itself and no longer provided structures which best facilitated its development.

The political idea behind this was to be able to relate effectively to the break which is taking place from New Labour. Today this is not taking the form of organised blocks, but of an attrition of individuals. The SA needs to respond to this and make provision for these individual activists in its ranks. This involves showing them that they will have full rights and influence in an organisation which also contains existing far left organizations. The idea that they would come into local Alliances where minorities could veto majority decisions seems slightly unhinged.

There was not agreement amongst those proposing the successful constitution, on the longer term future of the SA, particularly the idea that the SA should have the perspective of becoming a new left party like the Scottish Socialist Party. The SWP strongly reject this idea, and it will be an ongoing debate with them. But there was agreement, including with the SWP, that the SA needed to have more of a party structure if it was to attract individual activists breaking from new Labour.

The SP strongly rejected this move towards a party structure, however. Despite their vigorous propagandising for a "new mass workers party" they wanted an alliance which was simply a loose arrangement between existing organisations. A new mass party was for some future undefined date - and would not be based on the SA. This is an irrational position, which seems to be based more on a sectarian response to the SWP than anything else.

The tactics of the Socialist Party during the conference were to demonise the SWP (as an organisation bent on total control of the SA) and to crassly misrepresent the constitution proposed by the SWP the ISG and others as highly centralised and exclusive. The SP was also able to capitalise on the fact that the SWP had not maintained the same level of involvement in the Alliance at local level in the post election period - although set against the involvement of the SP in most places this claim does not hold much water.

The sharpest issue behind the debate on the constitution was that of local democracy. In the general election last June the SP insisted on imposing their own candidates in selected constituencies, irrespective of the views of the

majority of members of the local SA.

They also produced their own election material in the name of the SP, with their own logo, raised their own independent election fund and contributed nothing at all to the central funds of the SA.

Those who proposed the constitution which was adopted (indeed those who supported all other proposed constitutions others than that of the SP) were not prepared to have that situation repeated in future elections - particularly the imposition of local candidates. The right of the members of a local SA, at a properly constituted meeting, to take decisions, including the selection of a candidate when necessary, was crucial to democratic functioning.

Equally the SP were not prepared to accept local democracy of this sort. They insisted on the right of minorities to veto majorities at local level - something they have the cheek to call "consensus". This would leave them in a position to operate in future elections as they did in the general election. The SP's position was not argued honestly, however, but couched in terms of the danger of SWP domination of the SA. Of course there is a danger of domination by the SWP since it is so much bigger than all the other far left organisations - including the SP. The principal safeguard against the domination by the SWP, however, is political. At the end of the day there is no adequate technical way, consistent with basic democracy, of preventing an organisation with a numerical majority dominating if they decide to do so.

We have to develop a culture in the SA which makes such a domination impossible, or at least, makes those responsible pay a heavy political price. There is no organisational substitute for this. Any attempt to subvert the right of majority decision at local level is unacceptable.

Whilst the adoption of the new constitution is a crucial step forward for the SA, it does not resolve the problem of its future development. - which in the view of the ISG should be towards a party in England on the lines of the SSP in Scotland. One important way of keeping the SA moving forward, short of becoming a political party, is for the SA to have a well produced and regular publication which it can use to build itself - something which was called for in a resolution tabled by the ISG which was subsequently composited. This unfortunately was defeated. Of course the SA does need to further develop its politics and make them more coherent than is currently the case. But the production of such a publication is probably the most effective way of pushing this forward. At the same time it would have been the best answer possible to the walk out of the SP.

Overall it was a successful day which took a number of key decisions which are crucial to the further development of the SA at this stage. The decision of the SP to revert to the crudest sectarianism in the worst tradition of the British far left is not the responsibility of the SA and is not a political reflection on it. The job of the SA is to continue the process of reshaping the English left and challenging its sectarianism - which has been its crucial contribution for the past few years.