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Britain

Trade unions and the left

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Patrick Sikorski is Assistant General Secretary of the rail union RMT, one of the unions that has been at the forefront of the debate on the links between British trade unions and the Labour Party. He spoke to Alan Thornett in March. This interview is reprinted from the April issue of Socialist Resistance.

AT: *So Blair stands alongside George Bush in an invasion of Iraq, and we have had resignations of Labour ministers including Robin Cook. What do you think the implications of all this are for New Labour? How deep a crisis do you think they are in?*

PS: I think it is the biggest political crisis Labour has been in since the last world war.

What I think is open to debate in the movement is exactly how this is going to work out organizationally. What has happened is that the neo-liberal and imperialist project of the Blair faction has come brutally out into the open, and it has dragged the Labour Party into an international far right coalition.

The problem is that this project has taken place on the back of so many defeats for the labour movement that whilst there have been heavy hearts in some quarters there has been absolutely no success in halting its progress.

I believe that we can contrast this crisis with the crisis in the Labour Party back in the 1930s, over the introduction by Ramsay MacDonald of means testing for the dole.

Labour split. But MacDonald only took a very small minority of the party with him into the national government. However, in the current context, it seems to me to be certain that Blair will continue to lead the vast majority of the party; and that it's very much an open question as to whether or not the small socialist current that remains in the party at Westminster and in the country, will make the necessary break with Labour, or will continue to insist on its line of 'reclaiming the party'. That, by the way, is a forlorn hope.

The radicalization which is taking place now around the anti-war movement and in the unions is outside of the confines of the Labour Party, is not being structured by the Party. Neither is it being structured by the TUC. There is no national lead whatsoever on any of the key questions facing the labour movement today.

This is the problem that those wishing to re-found the socialist alternative are facing at the moment.

AT: *Do you think that the huge radicalization which is taking place around the anti-war movement and the new generation which is coming onto the streets opens up a new opportunity for something new to be built to the left of Labour?*

PS: Well of course it does open up that opportunity. The clearest example of this is the impact of the movement on the prospects for the Scottish Socialist Party in the May elections.

Because the SSP have already made the crucial breakthrough by achieving the election of Tommy Sheridan as an MSP, they now have a realistic chance of gaining enough seats to form their own group inside the Scottish Parliament. They are polling support in double figures.

In England we are somewhat behind these developments. The Socialist Alliance could benefit from the explosion of the mass movement but it is an open question whether they can convert this into any electoral breakthrough.

I don't think the Alliance is seen as being anything like the SSP, not just because the SSP has an MSP, but there is something about the Socialist Alliance which conveys a narrowness which is not conducive to achieving an electoral breakthrough.

The SSP got it right by setting itself up as an individual membership party campaigning consistently in the housing schemes and the communities: on bread and butter economic issues, as well as on the issue of the Faslane nuclear installation - all of which have allowed it to benefit politically and organizationally from the present anti-war movement.

The Socialist Alliance is not able to relate directly to the new movement. It is a federation of far left groups, which of course is de facto dominated by the SWP - by far the largest among them. But it is quite rightly the broad-based Stop the War Coalition that is seen by millions as organizing the mass movement. It is not clear to me where the Socialist Alliance is in all this.

This is very important for all those wanting to see something bigger and more stable to emerge, because the most energetic supporters of the movement are massive numbers of young people, who couldn't give a fig for the trade unions or Labour or indeed any other political party. I mean what have we done for them over the last years?

In that and in many other ways they clearly are most heavily influenced by the anti - globalization movement.

In my view the Socialist Alliance is a very important development but it does not see itself as the final answer to the problem of a left alternative. How can a new development come about which can go beyond where the Alliance is at the present time?

AT: *Do you see any way that the parts of the 'awkward squad' in the unions could be a part of a new development at the political level? Something which maybe could link up with the Alliance at some stage?*

PS: Here's my view. The situation we have got is that there is going to have to be a response from the unions to what is a major crisis of political representation.

At the same time there is a radicalizing constituency out there in the unions which has been shown in certain unions through the election of left-wing general secretaries.

They have been elected on a platform which is clearly anti-new Labour and anti-Blair. In fact you could not get elected now as a general secretary if you were identified as a Blairite. That's going to be even more the case after this war, there is no doubt about that.

The awkward squad spoke against the war in the TUC debate on the war. In fact most of them spoke definitively against any war at all, UN resolution or not. It was the right-wing who used the UN card to try and stop the anti-war amendment going through.

Then of course there are issues like privatization and the long-standing issues of the anti union laws which define the left /right divide in the unions at the moment.

All this is now going to have to be taken to its logical conclusion and the unions are going to have to start breaking Labour's monopoly hold. The unions are going to have to support those who support our policies.

They will emerge from the SSP in Scotland, the Socialist Alliance in England, members of Plaid Cymru in Wales, and others who will be to the left of Labour. Also it will involve socialists still inside Labour.

For instance in the RMT, we have annual conference decisions from last year which have mandated the EC to bring forward rule changes this year, to allow the union to support socialist candidates outside of Labour. This has led logically to the need to get rid of the rule that stipulates that all branches must affiliate to the constituency LP in their area.

This only recognizes the reality, which is that the vast majority of branches long since ceased to affiliate to Labour.

What is being done here is the working out of a new method of political representation for the unions. This will include the unions looking in their own ranks for people to put up as candidates, as was the case at the time of the founding of the LP.

At the moment the debate can easily get bogged down by the view that in seeking alternatives to Labour there has to be a ready made party out there to which we must affiliate immediately. That's wrong. For now there has to be a mixed approach to find the best candidates.

But the thing about the early years is that the issue of labour representation and union backed labour candidates - with a small I - led to the formation of a party.

AT: *Yes that's right, that will be posed. That is the process which we think will emerge. But such a process would need a catalyst at some stage to move towards a party. Do you think there are those on the left of the unions who would come forward to propose a new Party?*

PS: Yes. But I think the experience of the Socialist Labour Party is a warning that you can't jump straight from a trade union base to forming a ready-made socialist party.

The new radicalizing forces won't automatically join a political party. The new young people for example won't go straight to a political party because they see political parties in the light of the traditional parties - and they see those parties as part of the problem and not part of the solution.

The RMT, for example, has dumped all our previous group of MPs and have a new group of Labour MPs who support the policies of the RMT.

We told them they had to support rail re-nationalization, oppose the privatization of the Underground, be opposed to all the anti-union laws, and they had to take a stand against the effects of flagging out on our seafarers.

We will also support candidates of our own union. For example there is a long-standing militant of our union in Motherwell, John Milligan, whom we will support. We will be campaigning for Tommy Sheridan.

AT: *Whatever view you have about what happened to the SLP in terms of its politics, the fact is that we are now in a situation far more advanced than when the SLP emerged. None of this debate on the political fund, for example,*

existed at that time when Scargill called for the SLP. So we are in a much more fertile situation than was the case then.

PS: Yes. There are many more radicalizing forces, and not only against the war. It would not have happened without the World Social Forum, the European Social Forum, and the whole anti-globalization movement - which has taken up new ways of doing politics and projecting politics on big broad issues.

In fact it is very interesting because they are not writing detailed manifestos, they are posing big broad issues which are in many ways the building blocks of the movement. In other words we are talking about refounding working class political representation. This therefore dictates a certain approach which cannot be pushed too fast and which has to be all inclusive.

Specifically I believe it's just plain wrong to propose for example that the next step for socialists in the European Social Forum is to wage a big fight to clear out the social democrats.

AT: *Let's go back to the issue of process, and obviously there is a process. But there is also the danger of missing the boat. The essence of politics is to grasp the opportunity when it presents itself. We have this huge movement now and if this subsides and nothing new has been built this will be a big problem.*

PS: Yes, that's always true Alan. But look at the Italian situation. There Rifondazione - the Party of Communist Re-foundation - is pretty powerful. They have a daily newspaper, many local councillors and some deputies. Yet they do not confuse building the party with building the movement. They don't believe they can do either by 'driving out' or 'defeating' other political currents in the mass movement. They do not approach the mass movement seeking to 'clarify' it.

Their leader, Bertinotti, says the line of the socialists should not be to try and hegemonize the movement, rather they should ensure that the movement hegemonizes society - that is, to create the conditions for the building of equality and to effectively prevent wars and barbarism.

The problem is, I don't know whether or not the SA is up to doing something creative about this massive new movement when it is so overwhelmingly dominated by the SWP. Do the SWP want to open up the SA to this opportunity as opposed to recruiting directly to itself?

AT: *It is true that the SWP is numerically dominant in the Alliance, and it is true that some people are cautious in relating to it, but it does mean that they bring a lot to the Alliance as well.*

The only way around this situation, however, is for new forces to emerge either as a part of the Alliance or as a part of a new initiative of which the Alliance would be a part which would create a new relationship of forces inside it.

PS: Everyone wants this in the Alliances as far as I can see, but I don't see that coming at the present time other than from the left sections of the unions. It would create a much more attractive situation, people would have more confidence in it, and it could more effectively take advantage of the situation.

I would say this about the process at the moment - this has not yet been decided on inside the RMT so of course it is a personal view: if a branch wishes the union to support a socialist candidate in a particular area, then they would make the proposal to the national centre and that would be looked at by the Council of Executives - the national leadership.

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If the candidate agreed with the union's basic principles, then a consultation process would be started in the region concerned, to decide which candidate the union was going to support in that, and indeed in other, constituencies.

If there was agreement amongst the branches then it would not be a problem if that person was a member of the SSP, the SA, the Labour Party, Plaid Cymru, or no party - or simply a member of the union.

It would be important in this process to be sure that the person was well known and represented the struggle in their area. It would not be sufficient for someone to have a Socialist Alliance - or of course any other party - political label.

I think that is the practical way that we are looking to move forward within the next year or so.

Whether that would then lead to the union actually supporting another party, or taking a new initiative with other existing parties and with other unions involved - all that is some way off down the road. At the moment we are looking to broaden out who we support in elections, because Labour clearly no longer represents us.

Clearly any future involvement of unions in the Alliance or in any other of the smaller parties like the SSP, would open up a massive number of issues as to how that could be achieved constitutionally.

AT: *Yes, I'm sure the Alliance would be very interested in such a discussion.*