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Britain

British left mounts historic electoral challenge

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The left across Europe is under challenge to reshape itself for the new political conditions which are emerging. The fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of the USSR at the beginning of the 1990s and the emergence of higher levels of class struggle in the mid 1990s, in particular the mass strikes in France at the end of 1995, have put this challenge firmly on the agenda. Then the rise of the anti-globalisation movement at the end of the 1990s culminating in Seattle raised it to a new level.

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As a result of the pressure from these events we have seen the emergence of Rifondazione Communist in Italy, the United Left in Spain and more recently the Left Bloc in Portugal.

At the electoral level we have seen the LCR/LO election intervention in France resulting in the election of five MEPs to the European Parliament. And in Britain we have seen, first, the emergence of the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) and then the Socialist Alliances in England and Wales.

Spectacular

The most recent of these developments has been the spectacular rise of the Socialist Alliance in England - which will be standing candidates in the forthcoming general election alongside the Scottish Socialist Party in Scotland and the Socialist Alliance in Wales.

This remarkable development was triggered by the success of the London Socialist Alliance in the elections for the London Assembly last year (at the time of Livingstones's challenge for mayor) - which were themselves the best results the far-left had achieved in Britain for many years - and the decision of the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) to fully commit itself to the Alliances.

Tony Blair's decision to postpone the date of the poll from May 3rd until June 7th (almost certainly the new date) is a welcome development for the Alliance. It is an opportunity to complete its preparations. Whilst the Alliance could have stood, and fought a credible campaign, for May 3rd, it will undoubtedly be better prepared for June 7th and will field more candidates.

This is not only because the growth of the Alliance has exceeded the expectations of most of those involved, but because this growth had not reached its potential by the deadline for nominations for a May 3rd poll.

The recently adopted target of 88 candidates - the number needed to qualify for an election broadcast - has already been reached without any of the token candidacies which, it seemed, at the time, might have been necessary. In fact candidates are still being selected in constituencies where there will be viable campaigns on the ground. The final figure is likely to be between 90 and 100 candidates - far in excess of the 50 envisaged when the all-England Alliance was launched seven months ago.

Ninety-plus candidates in England alongside the 72 the SSP is standing in Scotland (which is every constituency), and the 6 the Welsh Socialist Alliance is standing in Wales, will represent by far the biggest electoral challenge

mounted by the left in a general election in Britain in the post-war period.

Driving force

The driving force behind these developments is the sense of betrayal and deepening hostility felt by traditional Labour voters towards new Labour as it has moved to the right and become the principal vehicle for neo-liberalism - not only in Britain but across Europe. Whilst new Labour is a part of a rightward shift of Social Democracy across Europe, it has gone further than any other Social Democratic party in Europe with the aim of turning the LP into a straight capitalist party like the US Democrats.

On privatisation and on a range of social issues from welfare to asylum new Labour is to the right of its Tory predecessor. It has developed a new relationship to the employers and a large part of its funding now comes from the super-rich who are increasingly giving it support.

The Livingstone campaign and victory for London mayor last year was a part of this disaffection of Labour's traditional base, even though Livingstone himself has created a cross class administration involving Tories and Liberal Democrats, and failed to build anything political out of his triumph.

New Labour is still set to win the election, however, and with a big majority, since the votes it is losing amongst its traditional supporters are more than replaced by Tory voters going over to it. New Labour now occupies the ground previously held by the Tories, who have moved to the xenophobic right and are now in deep crisis and more or less unelectable. There is likely to be a bitter battle over the leadership of the Tory Party after the election.

Development

The strong development of the Alliance in England, however, cannot be measured simply in the number of candidates to be fielded in the general election. Equally important is the way the Alliance has developed organisationally and politically over recent months.

New Alliances are still being formed in places where one didn't previously exist. People are being reinvigorated, and coming back into political activity, as they see a new unity being forged by the left and the possibility of building something serious as an alternative to the forward march of Blairism.

The decision of Labour left activist Liz Davies to leave the Labour Party, after two years on its National Executive Committee as a member of the loose left grouping the Grass-roots Alliance, and endorse the Socialist Alliance, is causing many others to think about following her. They recognise that the Labour left is not going to revive in the short term and that the main opposition to Blairism is going to be built outside of the LP through the mass campaigns like the anti-capitalist mobilisations and the social movements.

Individual activists and groups of current and ex-LP members and trade unionists are increasingly coming towards the Alliances. Louise Christian, a prominent human rights lawyer, is an Alliance candidate. Mark Serwotka, the new general secretary of the civil service union the PCS, is a strong supporter of the Alliance as is Dave Toomer, the president of the journalists union, the NUJ.

The decision of the workers involved in the long-running strike action in opposition to privatisation (Private Public Partnership) at Dudley hospital in the West Midlands to put forward one of their number as a Socialist Alliance candidate points to the way the idea of the Alliance, and an electoral challenge to new Labour, is developing amongst those who are in struggles against the policies of the Blairites.

Local Alliances are becoming more structured and are developing as campaigning organisations rooted in local campaigns around issues such as, housing, immigration, education and pensions and are mobilising for national initiatives and demonstrations and for the increasingly important international anti-capitalist protests such as Genoa.

The Alliance is also having an increasing impact in the trade unions, as debates develop around whether the unions should continue to give money only to the Labour party in the traditional way or begin to give to other political formations such as the Alliance - given the role of new Labour on employment issues and its support for the Tory anti-union laws.

The Alliance is having a major profile around many of this years trade union conferences, with a big fringe meeting and high profile at the recent NUT (teachers union) conference. The existence of the Alliance is also creating a strong pressure towards unity in unions where the left has been divided for many years.

At the same time the Labour left has gone into sharp decline, and the Communist Party, in the past an effective opponent of both the far left and militant trade unionism has broken up and become irrelevant. It will stand a few candidates in the election - as will Arthur Scargill's Stalinoid and sectarian Socialist Labour Party (SLP) - but will be eclipsed on the left by the Alliance.

Undemocratic

Despite the rise and success of the Alliance its vote will still be squeezed by the grotesquely undemocratic first-past-the-post electoral system in Britain which puts small and even medium sized parties at a severe disadvantage. In many ways, however, the important thing is not so much what the Alliance does on the day of the election, but what it does on the day after the election and how it is going to organise itself on an ongoing basis outside of an election campaign.

The most important political step yet taken by the Alliance came at its national conference held in Birmingham on March 10th. This conference, itself an historic event since it embraced virtually the whole of the far left in Britain, adopted an extensive (3,000 word) election manifesto which will take the Alliance not just through the election, and be the basis of its campaign, but through the next stage of its development.

The manifesto was the product of a day long debate - conducted chiefly by the political organisations involved in the Alliance: the SWP, the Socialist Party (SP), the International Socialist Group (ISG), Workers Power, Alliance for Workers Liberty (AWL), the Communist Party of Great Britain (a splinter of the old Stalinist CPGB which is moving in a Trotskyist direction) and the Revolutionary Democratic Group (RDG - an ex-SWP splinter obsessed with the constitution of the British state) - which adopted the manifesto clause by clause.

The over-arching political issue behind the debate on the manifesto was the political character of the Alliance itself.

Some organisations - Workers' Power, the CPGB and RDG in particular - argued (from an ultra-left propagandist standpoint) that the Socialist Alliance should immediately adopt a full revolutionary programme including soviets and

armed workers defence squads. For them the Alliance must immediately become a revolutionary party - anything less than the full programme of social revolution therefore represented a capitulation to reformism.

The majority, including ourselves (the International Socialist group), the SWP and AWL argued that to take this road would cut us off from our most important audience at this time - people who are rejecting Blairism but are not yet revolutionaries. We all want to see the emergence of a new bigger and broadly based revolutionary party in Britain, but this cannot be achieved by prematurely forcing the Alliance down that road. What the Alliance needs is an action programme, including a number of transitional demands, which reflect its present stage of development and represented a clear alternative to Blairism.

Maturity

This was the approach which was adopted, but it was a difficult debate given that the majority of those present at Birmingham - indeed probably the majority of those currently active in the Alliance at any level - are revolutionary socialists. But given the long history of sectarianism on the British left the degree of maturity with which the Birmingham conference managed to address these issues was remarkable. And the commitment of those who had argued for a different approach was also shown by the fact that when the full manifesto was put to the vote at the end of the day only one person voted against it.

It was important that this battle was won since, although the Alliance was initiated by a coming together of a group of far left organisations, it is already far more than that.

The Alliance is not an electoral arrangement or an electoral bloc on the lines of the LCR/LO list in France, it is already shaping itself into a political alliance involving a broad range of people who are rejecting Blairism. The political organisations are at the core of it and play an absolutely crucial role in its leadership and organisation, but it is already more than the sum total of what they represent.

Increasing alienation

The only negative factor reflected at the conference the increasing alienation of the Socialist Party (previously the Militant), which had less than 20 members at the conference. At the previous conference, last September which agreed the constitution of the Alliance, they had had 150.

The approach of the SP is to insist that the Alliance is not a political formation but an electoral arrangement between the organisations involved. While Socialist Party member and national chair of the Alliance, Dave Nellist, played a full and positive role, the SP itself intervened from the sidelines on its own esoteric points of policy and was not a part of the main debate - although all SP members voted for the manifesto at the end. At local level, although SP members are standing as Alliance candidates, they are conducting their own campaigns rather than integrating them into the Alliance as a whole.

This however does not detract from the remarkable success of the Alliance up to this time. The plan is to launch the manifesto as a pamphlet which can be sold by activists on the door steps, in campaigns and workplaces, and from street stalls - and hopefully will be distributed by newsagents. This will give us the opportunity to get across the breadth of issues on which we have something to say and present a vision of a society which is fundamentally different from the profit hungry, poverty-ridden Britain which new Labour presides over.

This will go alongside the election broadcast which is being made by the well known film director Ken Loach along with a small team from the Alliance. The aim is that the broadcast will bring into people's living rooms a picture of the breadth of experience, talent and ideas represented by our candidates up and down the country and the priority issues of the campaign.

Profound change

There continues to be discussion within the Alliances on the level of commitment the SWP has to it as a long term project. But those who doubt the SWP's commitment at this stage to the continuation of the Alliance beyond the election ignore the profound change which the SWP has already undergone. The degree of collaboration which the SWP now has with most of the rest of the left would have been unimaginable two or three years ago.

This could change if there were serious negative developments within the Alliance, but short of that the signs are that it will not. Most importantly the SWP in Scotland is joining the SSP on Mayday, something which is a major step forward for the SSP and a direct result of the emergence of the Alliance in England.

The SWP rightly see that there are two factors which are reshaping the left in Britain. There is the emergence of a militant anti-capitalist movement at the international level which is responding to the ravages of the neo-liberal globalised market. It is a movement which is here to stay and which is attracting large numbers of young people to its ranks and making anti-capitalism a part of the popular vocabulary. Its next mobilisation in Genoa is expected to exceed 100,000 people.

The Globalise Resistance initiative, which was launched by the SWP but on a broad and open basis, continues to attract large numbers to its mobilisations and events and is itself a new factor in British politics shifting the centre of gravity of the anti-globalisation movement from the anarchist fringe towards the mainstream left.

And alongside Globalise Resistance there is the Socialist Alliance which is bringing people back into activity and building a broad alternative to Blairism. These two developments have the capacity to bring about a fundamental reshaping of the left in Britain. The old reference points are losing their validity and new ones are taking their place.

True, the SWP do not share our own vision that the Socialist Alliance in England should, in the medium term, seek to turn itself into a new party of the left similar to the SSP in Scotland. But they are moving in that direction. They are committed to the full continuation of the Alliance after the election. In fact they are for strengthening its structures towards those more akin to a party. They argue, however, that to call it a party, and present it as a party at this stage would to some extent curtail its development by making it more difficult for those breaking from new Labour to join it.

Legitimate

This is in our view a legitimate concern, but a misplaced one - as the experience of the SSP clearly shows. In fact if the Alliance continues to develop in a positive direction the structure as an alliance, even one with a bias towards a party structure, will no longer meet the needs of exactly the people the SWP are concerned about.

This also raises the issue of the impact the Alliance is having on the left itself - and the separate but related issue of revolutionary regroupment. Already the existence of the Socialist Alliance in England and the SSP in Scotland is

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reshaping the left in Britain and dissolving old boundaries which have been in place for a long time.

Revolutionary regroupment is a difficulty and complicated process, but it is objectively posed by the broader regroupment which is taking place. How can the left be the driving force of a broad anti-Blairite regroupment if it remains unable, within that, to address its own damaging divisions.

In any case the art of politics is to seize the opportunity when it arises, and if it is not seized now the next opportunity might be a long time coming.