

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article8743>



Britain

Debate on the Left in Britain – towards a new broad party?

- Features -

Publication date: Sunday 17 November 2024

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Historically strategic and tactical discussion among revolutionaries in Britain has been dominated by how you relate to the Labour Party. Unlike in France, Italy or the Spanish state the British Communist Party, despite a boost following the Second World War, has been a much weaker political force. Unlike in Europe it has never had an alliance with the Labour Party leading to government coalitions.

Why the Labour Party has been central to political strategy

The trade unions in Britain have nearly all been affiliated to the Labour Party. They vote and decide on policy at Labour Party conferences and have a number of seats on the National Executive Committee. Local trade unions can send delegates to local Labour parties who then have a vote on the local leadership committees. The trade unions are not divided between confederations historically led by Socialist parties, Communists or Christian democrats. Although in the past the British CP had a significant influence inside the trade unions they never controlled their own confederations in the way for example the French CP controlled the CGT.

Britain has an electoral system that is extremely undemocratic. Members of Parliament (MPs) are elected on a first past the post system. This means that an MP can be elected on even 34% of the electorate. The recent July general election reflected this. Labour won a landslide 163 seat majority with a lower vote (33%) than Jeremy Corbyn received in his 2017 election defeat. Parties like the Greens got 4 MPs but won 6.7% of the popular vote, if it was a proportional representation system like in Portugal it would have over 40 seats. The far right Faragist party, Reform, got 5 seats on a 14.3% vote share. Consequently it is extremely difficult for a new party to establish itself and win seats. Both the electoral rules and the mass media are not obliged to give time and space to parties that do not have pre-existing parliamentary representation. So debates that we saw in France between the presidential candidates on TV, which included revolutionaries like car worker, Philippe Poutou, for the New Anticapitalist Party, are not really possible here.

A political space to the left of Labour exists

Nevertheless British politics has become much more volatile and the hold of the two mainstream parties, Labour and the Conservatives, over the electorate has become weaker. For example the Scottish National Party controls the devolved parliament and until the last election had an overwhelming majority of Scottish MPs in the House of Commons. Both the Greens and Reform have small parliamentary groups and a significant vote share, the Greens have over 800 councillors and have become the main challenger to the Labour Party in 40 seats. Reform is challenging Labour as the second party in 89 seats. The impact of the pro-Brexit, anti-migrant Reform have led to a sizeable Tory party majority in 2019 when Reform's predecessor stood down in many Tory seats after doing a deal with Boris Johnson. On the other hand in 2024 its intervention resulted in a bigger Labour majority when it stood against the Tories everywhere and opened the door to Labour gains. People are more open to voting for parties other than the Conservatives, Labour or the Liberals. The restructuring and decline of British industries have meant working class communities are disaggregated and the tribal adherence to always voting Labour has much diminished. Social media plays a much greater role too in disrupting traditional voting patterns. Voters have a more individualistic and transactional attitude

The Labour party under Tony Blair, who governed from 1997 to 2010, decisively broke even with its tepid social democratic posturing. Indeed he insisted that the aims of Labour, written on every membership card that talked about common ownership, were removed. He failed to roll back nearly all of Margaret Thatcher's anti working class policies – the anti-trade union laws, the privatisation of practically all the publicly owned sectors of the economy like telecoms, energy, water, transport and so on and the destruction local authority services, particularly housing.

Rise and fall of Corbynism...and the Palestine effect

Following the huge opposition to Blair's war in Iraq and the failure of new leader Miliband to oppose Tory austerity there was a mass campaign of support for a real left social democratic leader like Jeremy Corbyn. Corbyn's victory was ensured by thousands of activists and others joining the Labour Party to vote for him in the leadership campaign. After a vicious counter attack by the establishment, the right and centre of the Labour Party that included most of its MPs and the divisive issue of Brexit and antisemitism, Corbyn lost. Starmer, the current Labour Prime minister, completed the clean out of the Corbyn left supporters and won the recent election on a very moderate programme. Well over 250 thousand members have left the party in disgust and internal democracy has been crushed. The left caucus of Labour MPs (Socialist Campaign Group) is a shadow of its former self and very few of them are really standing up against the leadership. When they do they are expelled from the Parliamentary Labour Party –seven suffered this fate for voting against a cut in welfare benefits.

Outside parliament we have seen the biggest movement of solidarity with the Palestinian people anywhere in the world. There have been 21 national demonstrations since October 7th 2023 and the police have estimated 2700 protests have taken place. The national demonstrations oscillate between a 100,000 and 500,000. Local initiatives are still taking place all over the country. The people mobilising are coming from way beyond the normal audience of the radical left. In particular the Muslim communities have come out – particularly the youth but whole families attend these protests. Four independent MPs were elected from these communities who mostly mobilised their vote around solidarity with Palestine. Other left pro Palestine candidates also got some very respectable votes, much greater than left candidates in the past. The increase in the Green vote, resulting in a group of 4 MPs compared to their previous single one, was also in part due to their consistent support for Palestine. Remember that Starmer has throughout stood side by side with Biden and notoriously agreed in a radio interview that it was fine for Israel to besiege the Gaza Strip. Labour only called for a conditional ceasefire when it got the green light from the US.

Another feature of the last election was the success of Jeremy Corbyn in retaining his seat in London. He appears now to acknowledge, belatedly, that there is no way back for him into Labour. He has set up his Peace and Justice Campaign and has started to organise local meetings of his supporters. In response to Labour's first big budget in October he organised a critical statement signed by the independent pro-Palestine MPs, the Greens, some Welsh nationalists and hundreds of local left councillors. A minority left/Green parliamentary opposition is emerging.

Marxists in and out of Labour

Revolutionary Marxists have been in and out of Labour at least since the 1930s. Given the difficulty of building small new parties under the first past the post system, the fact that the trade union movement is integrated inside Labour and the relative absence of mass social upheavals then different forms of entryism were a productive tactic. At least two Trotskyist organisations - the SLL/WRP led by Gerry Healey and the Militant led by Ted Grant - built up parties of several thousands. At one stage the Militant controlled Liverpool City Council, the Labour youth organisation and had 3 or 4 MPs.. The student and workers' struggles after 1968 and through the 1970s led to most radical activists

turning away from Labour and forming independent revolutionary organisations such as the International Socialists (later Socialists Workers Party) and the International Marxist Group (part of Fourth International). Both of these won radical youth and some of the newly radicalised shop stewards. The SWP, which continues today, organises several thousand members. Later in the 1980s there was a revival of working in Labour around the radical figure of Tony Benn and the left wing led Greater London Council.

Again this cycle ended and the way Starmer had cleaned out the left and also changed the rules on leadership elections now means it is highly unlikely that there will be a repeat of the Corbyn surge. Not many radical left activists think that a socialist alternative will emerge from inside Labour. Some groups like Momentum are staying in Labour and think that they can patiently rebuild the left through training socialist councillors and working with the left MPs that remain but their base has shrunk dramatically. Momentum still has some influence and a profile through the small apparatus it has retained but it has lost leading cadre and does not have organised local groups. Today the relationship of forces between left activists inside Labour and outside Labour has shifted towards the latter.

In this political situation there has been a growing discussion about setting up a new left party. The debate is currently mostly dominated by people who were closely involved in the Corbyn project. Other organisations such as Transform which set itself up to promote the idea of a new left party are involved as well as some of the established left groups who regularly stand candidates like the Socialist Party (ex-Militant). It is unclear exactly where Jeremy Corbyn stands on setting up a new party and whether the left pro-Palestine MPs would be involved. Corbyn is notoriously indecisive and not a great strategist, his strength was always as a campaigner and tribune. Some of the left candidates who got good votes in the July election are discussing, as well as the now hundreds of local left councillors, most of whom have left Labour over Palestine or their pro-business growth strategy.

What are the key considerations about setting up a new left party?

We have some lessons we have learnt from the experience of Podemos, Bloco, Rifondazione, Respect, Left Unity and the French NPA.

1. A top down party directed by personalities or a cartel of existing left currents is not a recipe for success. Here the points about the Revenge of the Network Left made by Harry Holmes in the article published by Viento Sur recently are correct. Any new party must be formed of members based in their communities, those members must be the people who decide policy and elect the leadership – this accountability should not be postponed while a personality group or currents embed themselves in the leadership. We had a negative experience with Respect in Britain where despite winning an MP it degenerated through a combination of a toxic personality, George Galloway and the actions of the main left group that ran it with him.
2. Any fake democratic structure where leaders use internet /referendum systems should be avoided. This is what Iglesias did in Podemos to sideline critical currents like the Anticapitalistas. Those leaders with the greatest media profile should not be allowed to manipulate the members.
3. Caucus rights for LGBTQT and Black, Women and disabled members should be recognized. A false counter-position of identity versus class politics needs to be avoided. A party which is not inclusive will fail.
4. The programme and policies of the new party should reflect a broad class struggle party and not a revolutionary Marxist one. I think the lack of definition of this status caused the French NPA to stall as well as the British experience of Left Unity. In my opinion Transform's ten principles are an excellent programmatic basis for a broad

party. There is no need for everyone to agree on the need to destroy the state and replace it with council democracy or for the need for armed workers to defend gains against the bosses. It does not need to be explicitly Marxist or insist on being part of an International. Transform's ten principles skillfully leaves these questions to one side while remaining clearly to the left of Labour and directly antagonistic to our ruling class. I think Harry Holmes' article tends to conflate a new broad mass party with the revolutionary Marxist one. His rather negative comments on the French New Popular Front reflect this too. The NPF is not just a carbon copy of the 1930s experience. Its successful creation stopped a neo-fascist victory in France and mobilized thousands of new activists on the streets and workplaces. While we should be aware of all the dangers of the Network Left its weaknesses should not paralyse us from working with them to try and set up a new left party.

5. However a broad acceptance of eco socialism – integrating the class struggle with the ecological one is necessary. There can be no socialism on a dead planet. The rise of the Green party in Britain reflects the radicalization around ecological issues. Not only would a new party need to be participating alongside the Just Stop Oil or Extinction Rebellion activists but it should be looking for joint action with Green party activists locally and nationally.

6. A flexible approach to international issues like Ukraine or Palestine will be necessary if we want to be broad based. Solidarity with Palestine against the Israeli state and a right to resistance, an end of occupation and the right to return would need to be the minimum basis. But a new party could remain open about a two state or one state solution. On Ukraine we would need to agree on Russia withdrawal, a ceasefire and self-determination but leaving the arms issue for further debate

7. Any new party should allow tendencies to exist and have the right to express their opinions openly, including in any press. However we would have to encourage currents to not pre-caucus every decision and policy. Once the basic principles were agreed debate going beyond that - the sort of discussions a revolutionary Marxist party would have needs to be set aside. Otherwise you have a continual debate like we had in Left Unity around programme and workers militias. This is one of the most difficult things to manage. If you have an open democratic party it is difficult to stop revolutionary currents joining but how do you stop their 'raids' and endless propagandizing? I think you have to make sure there is enough of a genuine mass base and healthy local groups that have a majority who are not already members of organized groups.

8. Whatever happens we need to be modest and cautious. Setting up a new broad party is not a guarantee of future success – the experience of Podemos, Respect or Syriza shows this. The danger of leaders and cadre being captured by the mass media halo and the institutions is very, very real. As we have seen if these parties achieve some success there are lots of jobs and even careers available for activists to take up. Constitutional mechanisms need to be in place to help prevent this by agreeing what to do about councilors or MP salaries, how the organization is staffed and of course the overall accountability of the leadership.

9. While the strategy of a new broad party means confronting Labour in elections this does not mean taking a sectarian line against the remaining Labour left MPs such as John McDonnell, Diane Abbott or Zarah Sultana. Any new mass party will need to win thousands of socialists currently in the LP if it is really going to become a contender for power. So a new party needs to work creatively with any Labour lefts in united actions. It should not stand against active left people like McDonnell or Abbott. We cannot exclude entirely future splits or radicalization inside Labour even if a repeat of Corybnism where the left won the leadership looks very unlikely.

10. For a new left party to have mass impact it has to win support inside the trade unions. Antagonism between the unions and Starmer's Labour is more likely than a re-emergence of Corbynism. So building class struggle currents inside unions should be a priority for any new party.

11. One of the difficulties for a new party will be the fact that most of its instigators will not be from a younger

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demographic. The leadership of the radical left in Britain today is much older than what we had in the 1970s. So having a focus on winning younger people is a big task. Measures should be taken to bring them into the leadership. Propaganda and agitational material needs to be accessible for young people too.

12. A new party should be intervening culturally too – this may be one way of reaching a younger demographic but a new party needs to reject a narrow, over politicized look, it should relate to all of life – culture and sport. It should be joyful and fun to be a member. Party life and culture should prefigure to some extent the sort of socialist society we wish to build

17 November 2024

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