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Britain

Left Unity conference – some important steps forward and challenges still ahead

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Four hundred members attended Left Unity's Conference in London over the weekend of 15-16 November 2014, marking a further positive stage in the evolution of the party into a serious challenge to Labour and the building of a broad left party. [1]

In his TV interview on Russia Today's 'Going Underground' programme, Left Unity Principal Speaker Pete Green summed up the Left Unity conference this past weekend, by rightly situating the discussions there in the context of the Tory claims of a recovery – a recovery which is for the few not the many.

The fact that Labour, despite the occasional commitment with which the left agrees, goes into the election campaign committed to carrying through a policy of austerity and cuts emphasizes the reasons why Left Unity was founded last year, why it has succeeded in winning 2000 people to membership and establishing more than 70 branches across Britain.

Supporting campaigns such as those against the privatisation of the NHS [2], for decent affordable homes for all, against tests created to deprive disabled people of their benefits and standing alongside those survivors of sexual abuse who are demanding their voices are heard in the enquiry into organised abuse by the elite, are part of the life blood of Left Unity.

Internationalism is a key part of the stance of an organisation which took much of its inspiration from the struggles of people across Europe against the austerity of the Troika, Conference listened in rapt attention to Marina Prentoulis from Syriza bringing greetings and explaining the likelihood that her organisation will form the next government in Greece. Left Unity is well aware that in that event, solidarity from across Europe against the bosses and the bankers will be absolutely necessary – and we are committed to mobilizing that solidarity. After the successful speaking tour last month organised by LU and attended by over 1,000 people, Conference was also inspired to hear that Podemos is at the top of the election polling in Spain.

Left Unity members with our banners and our leaflets were on the streets of London and other towns and cities across Britain over the summer demanding an end to the siege of Gaza and to Israel's murderous assaults on the Palestinian people. Conference complemented that activity on the streets by overwhelmingly passing a motion from Waltham Forest LU supporting boycott divestment and sanctions (BDS) actions in support of the Palestinian people.

Left Unity is an environmental party and agreed a strong policy statement from the environmental commission which commits us to continued campaigns against fracking but also to a serious mobilization for the March 7 demonstration on climate change and for COP21 in Paris in December 2015.

Policy commitments are vital for a socialist, feminist and environmental party such as Left Unity – but they need to be matched by activity on the streets, in the communities and in the workplaces. By combining these two approaches we create a vibrant, sometimes chaotic, internal life

Policy debates

This second policy conference followed earlier debates in Manchester in March and focused on completing policy

discussions to allow the new party to elaborate a coherent manifesto for the General Election in 2015 – and to agree a strategy for the election itself.

A packed agenda saw policies adopted on the Environment, Education, Equalities, Crime and Justice, Internationalism and Social Security which now sit alongside those agreed earlier on the Economy, Europe, Health, Housing, Migration and Trade Unions.

In a generally good -humoured discussion, Left Unity members worked their way through more than 100 pages of policy commission reports, motions and amendments – not to mention a supplementary report from the hard working standing orders' committee of 35 pages, across two days of deliberations. The conference was open to all with only members being allowed to speak and vote – and was live streamed on the internet and recorded, to allow those who were not able to attend in person to follow it.

Inevitably there were moments of contention. Conference remitted the social security policy and its amendments, while passing a lengthy campaigning motion on the same topic which deals with many of the key issues we need to address both on the ground and in our manifesto. While the Education policy commission text was passed a long amendment dealing with a myriad of different questions was remitted – not least because many delegates could not work out how they all fitted together in the time allowed.

In terms of policy, it was in the inevitably wide-ranging international discussion that the sharpest differences existed and were expressed. The strong statement from the International policy commission was overwhelmingly passed, but amendments on the European Union were not agreed.

On the European Union, the issue of contention was not whether Left Unity should campaign now to leave the European Union – the Manchester conference had agreed this was not our stance – but what attitude it should take were a referendum to be called in 2017. Motivating an amendment from Lambeth, Stuart King argued for an abstention, while Fred Leplat from Barnet argued that LU would need to discuss the political context in which a referendum was being called at a conference closer to the actual date. While neither amendment was carried, it seems inconceivable that this issue will not be raised again.

On the situation in the Middle East conference agreed motions which called for the decriminalization of the PKK, opposed UK military intervention in both Iraq and Syria while opposing the Assad regime and supporting Rojava. They commit Left Unity to campaign for material solidarity for the PYD.

One motion which was agreed further argues that: "The people of Kurdistan and anywhere that is in the path of the IS have every right to resist IS incursion and use whatever means available in order to protect their homes and communities from them". This clearly includes the right to demand arms but conference did not agree that this could also include the right to close air support as one of the defeated amendments had argued.

Internal matters

In its founding statement adopted last November, Left Unity declared itself a socialist, feminist and environmental party. One of the ways in which we have sought to "do politics differently" has been to make the new party one which is genuinely habitable for women – and well as for black people, disabled people, LGBTQ people and for young people.

Within this context there has been a long discussion on the need to adopt ways of organising but also procedures which make clear that the fight against prejudice and discrimination within the organisation is central to how we build the party.

This is a complex task given that no one wants to put up barriers to recruiting new members or to act in moralistic or judgmental ways. At the same time without clear rules and procedures, we are much less likely to be able to create an organisation in which the most oppressed and exploited are supported; including through being able to take on leadership positions at every level of the organisation.

The discussion around Left Unity's proposed 'Safe Spaces' policy which attempts to put such an approach into practice has involved many people and countless changes to both the motivation, the suggested code of conduct and the proposed processes to deal with breaches.

The Communist Platform (the name under which the 'Weekly Worker' grouping operate within Left Unity together with a small number of fellow travellers) has been arguing against the approach outlined here for some months and wrote an alternative motion to conference deleting any political understanding and putting forward an ineffective 'Code of Conduct'.

The Communist Platform motivation on conference floor was extraordinary – arguing, for example, that heckling in meetings was completely acceptable and that people just had to get used to it while suggesting that any problem rests with the complainant rather than the person who they are complaining about. They referred to the people arguing for the Safe Spaces approach as "the safe spaces police" and sought to trivialize the issues that were being raised.

In retrospect perhaps it was a mistake not to ensure more prior discussion, particularly about the aims of the policy, at both leadership and branch level. Further a very late attempt to composite two very similar documents, one of which had initially not been allowed onto the conference agenda which was then accepted through a successful challenge to the Standing Orders Committee report on Saturday, though done with the best of intentions actually ended up muddying the waters rather than clarifying things.

In the end the proposals put forward by the Communist Platform received slightly more votes than the Safe Spaces composite in an eliminating vote, though it was then defeated by vote of the conference. The National Council in December will need to consider how to continue this discussion at every level of the organisation in the future

Conference went on to agree the report and proposals from the LU Disputes Committee. This was also a contentious issue with some, including the Communist Platform, arguing that the Disputes Committee was wrong to have suspended members pending investigation and undermining essential commitments to confidentiality.

Process

The original proposal from the National Council had been that like the two previous Left Unity conferences this would be a one day event which would be entirely devoted to completing discussions on the manifesto topics – with the single addition of the Safe Spaces discussion. Looking back it would never have been possible to complete this business in a single day.

Two things made the last National Council in September change its mind.

Firstly it has become clear that there were some problems in practice with Left Unity's existing constitution. In particular the composition of the Executive Committee is not currently fixed but apart from the officers and caucus representatives includes a rotating portion of both the nationally elected members of the National Council and the regional representatives. Such a fluctuating membership both undermines the political continuity of the EC and also the likelihood of non-officers taking on practical work and so building a broader leadership team. There were additional constitutional issues of concern to different people but this was the core issue.

Secondly in the wake of the referendum campaign in Scotland [3] more members of the National Council had become aware of the progressive dynamic behind the Yes campaign, particularly that exemplified by the Radical Independence Convention. The National Council not only agreed to send a delegation to the RIC conference this coming weekend in Glasgow but also agreed to re-establish the commission on the British constitution and to bring proposals on this question to conference.

It further agreed to extend Left Unity's conference to two days in order to deal with these additional questions. Looking back, it was an error not to consider the conference agenda in more detail. Even with two days, the objectives we were setting ourselves were extremely challenging. This was compounded by the fact that there were a small number of motions submitted on questions which the National Council had not put on the agenda – on Austerity and Equalities for example and also on Housing (which had already been discussed at the Manchester policy conference in March).

What actually happened was problematic. The LU constitutional amendments were not reached.

On the question of British constitution, the new commission had produced only a draft report and this was in the end also not taken – though the emergency motion from Wigan on the imposition of an undemocratic bilateral deal by the Tories and Labour on Greater Manchester which would give lots of power to a directly-elected Mayor [4] (which had previously been rejected by local people) rather than devolving any real power to local people, was overwhelmingly agreed. The National Council in December will discuss and hopefully agree a proposal for a special National Council in January which will debate the questions of British constitution and democracy. It is essential that this is a well-prepared discussion and Socialist Resistance will carry material on this question over the weeks and months ahead.

Conference also remitted a number of motions in the International section that were not reached; on Ukraine, on Latin America, on Zionism and on general questions of international solidarity.

While the standing orders committee, who did a prodigious job, has the authority to make proposals as to how the conference agenda is structured, in future more work needs to be done by the National Council to shape this in advance. Consideration also needs to be given as to whether there should be some mechanism for prioritisation as there is in many other comparable conferences.

General Election

For the General Election itself, Left Unity had already agreed to aim to stand a small number of candidates under its own banner. It had sought discussions with other parties with which it has agreement on key questions to seek to develop at least non-aggression pacts and hopefully more developed collaboration. In the run up to conference national discussions had already happened with the Greens, Respect and the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC).

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Discussions were already planned with the relatively new National Health Action Party. [\[Founded in 2012 the NHAP is a party devoted to reversing the privatisation and cuts of the NHS \]](#) On the question of the NHS, Left Unity has strong agreement with that organisation about the need not only to defend the National Health Service against further ravages but to reverse the cuts and privatisations that have already taken place. Conference strengthened that stance by passing motions calling for stronger electoral collaboration but also for support by Left Unity for the NHS Reinstatement Bill 2015, which has the backing of NHS campaign groups.

In terms of the Green Party, the situation is contradictory. On environmental issues and on some other questions, there is a strong degree of agreement between Left Unity and that party, which has grown rapidly over the last year and moved to the left. But there is a major problem as shown by the experience on the ground in Brighton, the one city in Britain where the Greens run a local authority. Caroline Lucas, the local Green Party MP is a valiant tribune of the exploited and oppressed, but the Green Party leader on Brighton council Jason Kitkat is completely the opposite. Since it came to office Kitkat's administration has attacked the terms and conditions of council workers, particular those in the refuse department who have taken strike action; while Lucas supported the strikers.

That's the context in which Brighton Left Unity have agreed to support Lucas' re-election campaign but are also discussing standing Left Unity candidates for the council elections in 2015. This was the context too in which the Left Unity conference did not support seeking a closer working relationship with the Green Party.

But it is relationships with TUSC which have been most contentious for Left Unity since its inception. TUSC is an organisation which brings together two organisations of the far left; the Socialist Party and the Socialist Worker's Party with the RMT union and a small number of independent socialists (some of whom are also members of Left Unity. TUSC is not a political party and in most areas of the country doesn't have any existence on the ground outside standing candidates in elections. Each member organisation has a right of veto within TUSC and the right to select their own candidates and choose where they stand, so it doesn't provide a political home for those who want to campaign and elaborate policies on an ongoing basis. On a number of key policies areas Left Unity has strong disagreements with the positions put forward by TUSC, for instance on immigration.

Left Unity has consistently passed motions to seek discussions and collaboration with TUSC and at least try and agree non-aggression pacts in terms of electoral contests. On the ground in some localities there has been more consistent collaboration. But this has not been sufficient for a small number of Left Unity members who believe that there should be greater collaboration involving subsuming LU within TUSC at a national level. A motion came forward to conference making this proposal which, after a relatively lengthy debate, received scant support.

At the same time, conference did strongly agree a proposal to endorse local collaboration which had not been universally supported by the existing LU officers' group.

The proposal arose from a particular situation in the Hackney South constituency in East London, where the secretary of Hackney Left Unity Terry Stewart has received local support both within Left Unity and TUSC locally to stand as a candidate on a joint Left Unity and TUSC name against the sitting Blairite, Meg Hillier. Terry has a long record of campaigning activity in the area – against police harassment, against cuts and privatisations, for decent homes for all and in support of LGBTQ rights. His nomination was seconded by a well-known local Kurdish activist – a key community in the constituency. Socialist Resistance has also supported this process and outcome.

Some key activists in Left Unity are concerned that by agreeing this proposal Left Unity is diluting its own potential profile in the election campaign. But with a Left Unity candidate and the provision that we can put out our own election materials on questions such as migration where we have policies which are far stronger – in terms of recognizing the many positive contributions of migrants and therefore supporting a stance of open borders – than TUSC's rather mealy-mouthed 'opposition to racist immigration controls', these fears are in the end misplaced.

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What remains for Left Unity to do coming out of the conference, which will be a key feature of the December 13 National Council meeting, is to endorse the list of constituencies in which Left Unity will mount an electoral challenge at the General Election in its own name. At the same time we know that in many areas, branches don't yet feel ready to stand a parliamentary candidate but are proposing to stand for the local council elections on the same day.

It is equally vital that the National Council gives a sense of shape to an election campaign where in some towns and cities there will be no Left Unity candidates – and where in others there are not yet any Left Unity branches. Building on the excellent policies that have been adopted on a whole range of questions, Left Unity needs to work out how to profile our views on each of these campaigns at both a national and local level simultaneously. Acting in concert will gain us a wider audience for our political ideas and allow us to strengthen our organisation throughout Britain.

While Left Unity has rightly never seen itself as a purely electoral organisation, a General Election gives a political party a unique opportunity to reach out to the widest possible audience – to people who rightly feel that those doing politics in the same old way have nothing to offer. Doing politics differently doesn't mean not contesting elections – but doing so in order to give a voice to the voiceless, to champion all those fighting for survival on so many fronts in neoliberal Britain.

The next General Election is likely to be the closest fought for many decades and will be a key political battleground for ideas and an opportunity to build Left Unity amongst a wider audience. The decisions of this conference in the main will take this vital work forward.

[1] Left Unity came to public attention in Spring 2013 when film director Ken Loach along with a number of others launched a call for a political alternative to new Labour. Left Unity's founding conference took place in November 2013

[2] Activists marched 300 miles across England this summer to bring the issue to greater public attention.

[4] In local government in Britain traditionally there is a titular mayor in the localities nominated by the biggest party with a ceremonial function. Over the last 20 years power has been taken from local government by Westminster and within local government itself concentrated in fewer and fewer hands but with the introduction of more powerful mayors, sometimes standing on a non-party ticket in some cities on a US model