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Britain

Left Unity's 'modest flutter'

- Debate - Building new parties of the left -

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Left unity is the motherhood-and-apple-pie of socialists. The unspoken (and sometimes spoken) assumption is that if only the left could crack the unity problem – the Rubik's Cube of political intervention – then anything is possible, up to and including the relevance that has long eluded most of the left for many years.

As a result, there is from time to time a modest flutter around the issue, and this is one of those times. The reasons for this renewed interest in Left Unity include the reasonable and the nonsensical. In the former category comes the agonising but inescapable fact that, five years into an enormous capitalist crisis, the left in Britain has made negligible political impact. This is allied to a widespread and understandable disgust at Labour's record during its 13 years in government until 2010, and at its continued hesitancy in moving away from New Labour positions, most obviously in relation to issues like welfare and privatisation, on which the old Blairite positioning still predominates. There is an argument that Labour no longer represents the broad progressive coalition that it once did to at least a limited extent, having become both less democratic and more bourgeois over the last generation. That is not an argument that should be dismissed.

Among the bad reasons we would have to place all the over-excitement generated by the incremental implosion of the Socialist Workers Party, a group with small and shrinking influence on the course of events whose recent travails have surely by-passed most of the world at large. Nevertheless, whether it is grappling with New Labour or picking up the pieces of the SWP, left unity is now presented as the answer.

Here it will be argued that this project – not so much "left unity" per se, but founding yet another new Left Party to fight elections – is founded on a flawed analysis, is misguided, and, to whatever extent it makes progress, in any case irrelevant to the actual political situation and what the left should be focussing on. A more fruitful course of action for socialists will be suggested. Our "text" is the most recent proposal advanced by the founders of the Left Unity website, Andrew Burgin and Kate Hudson, by Nick Wrack of the "independent socialist network" and by the film director Ken Loach – their founding document and various articles written in support of their proposal. These are far from the least capable comrades to embark on this road, and for that reason – as well as the fact that theirs is the variation on "left unity" presently on the table – it is worth unpacking their proposals.

The idea that the time is now ripe for socialists to prioritise another unity project, leading to the creation of a new party to the left of Labour, rests on three connected propositions. First, that the experience of New Labour has vacated a considerable political space on the left which no-one is filling and that many voters feel deprived of any party expressing their views and values in society in general or on election day in particular. Second, there is a European-wide revival of such a left, which Britain is missing out on – we should not, in the words of the Left Unity draft statement, "remain outside... the political developments in Europe and beyond." Finally, the continuing economic crisis demands a fresh, and united, left response since existing political responses have been inadequate.

We should consider each of these in turn, bearing in mind that together they form a political package. Before doing so, we need only note two things. First that the proposal is, for the launch of a new political party, a modest one: There is no grand vision, or call for revolution, or even broad realignment. Essentially, it is about bringing together those people who want more done to challenge austerity and feel politically homeless at present. Second, there is no explicit recognition of the fact that several such Left electoral parties already exist in Britain today – Respect, the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition and the Socialist Labour Party on the electoral side of things; with Solidarity and the Scottish Socialist Party in Scotland, as well as a variety of other far left parties, and not forgetting the Green Party which many people would certainly regard as "left". So this is not a call for an occupation of presently empty territory.

Political Space

It is beyond dispute that the main working-class political parties internationally have moved well to the right over the last generation. The mass social-democratic parties have embraced neo-liberalism, and none more luridly than the Labour Party in Britain, to the extent that classical social democracy could be said to scarcely exist as a major political force. Communist Parties have disappeared or been reduced to the margins (with a few exceptions) and, in the case of many of the former ruling parties, openly converted to social-democracy and, hence, variants of neo-liberalism.

All this is true, but it only of itself creates "political space" if one takes an entirely mechanical view of politics, in which opinion is ranged on a left-to-right spectrum in more-or-less non-variable quantities and in which, therefore, a shift to the right by a large party must automatically leave a compensating space to the left unrepresented. Clearly, this is a perspective which could only hold true if nothing else were changing in the world, if classes were not rising, falling, recomposing and decomposing; if ideological propositions were not being tested, adopted and discarded by the masses in the light of their experience; if capitalist society were an endless assembly line which might break down but never develop or mutate.

In relation to Britain, this misjudgement was first given a public viewing courtesy of the Socialist Labour Party, which assumed that Tony Blair's abandonment of Clause Four would mean masses of socialists, their Party snatched from them, would flock to the old standard. All the SLP proved was that even the greatest working-class leaders, in whose number Arthur Scargill should surely be counted, can mistake their own views for being the mood of the masses, which at the time would have regarded any Labour government as a relief, and were living through a "post-socialist"/"end of history" phase.

Nearly twenty years later, the same show is being played, to an even thinner audience, by the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition, which fails to attract more than the smallest number of either to its standard, never mind appeal to the class itself. Its existence is predicated on the belief that such is the disgust with New Labour, even in opposition, that the working-class will rally to stentorian champions of a sort of Old Labour-Plus. No amount of raspberries blown by the voters have shaken this belief so far, and perhaps they never will, since those who argue the case for an electoral alternative have adequately immured themselves behind arguments through which reality cannot penetrate. Essentially, the masses are being offered what they need, and if they are rejecting it, it can only be for some contingent reason or other.

If that sounds too harsh, read the rationalisations for poor election results offered by, say, the Socialist Party throughout its post-Militant years. If they fail to breakthrough (in spite of, naturally, tremendous electoral campaigns) when Labour is in office, it is because at the last moment working-class voters are seized by an unexpected determination not to let the Tories back in. When results do not improve under a Tory or Tory-led government, it is because the same voters believe their interests are served by voting to get the Tories out and hence vote Labour. Clearly, the beauty of this argument is it covers all contingencies, and can be used on each isolated occasion until one considers the slightly longer *duree* and joins the dots.

It is not that comrades do not reflect on these experiences and analyse them (although the present project is definitely light on self-reflection), it is that they draw the wrong conclusions. This was expressed by Ken Loach at a meeting recently. He announced that "we all bear the scars of previous attempts" and must learn the lessons of past abortive efforts. Of these there were two, apparently – don't let a single group dominate, and beware charismatic leaders.

So far, so good for the new Left Unity campaign it could be said (although inevitably some far-left fragments are already sniffing around the project). But Loach's warnings seem perverse. Any party needs committed activists, and

the idea of "left unity" seems to presuppose bringing together people who are at present likely to be in existing organisations. And charismatic leaders are generally a political asset, although not the be-all and end-all. The problem is that where left initiatives have had any charismatic leaders, they have only had one, which is clearly a position fraught with difficulties. Having several would be very helpful for drawing masses of people to its side, as well as averting any tendency towards a monopoly of political authority. Respect with George Galloway has fallen short of an electoral breakthrough on a significant scale, but Respect without Galloway would not detain anyone's attention for a minute.

However, it is true that neither the adhesion of existing groups, nor charismatic leaders, nor even the leadership of a trade union the size of RMT (in the case of TUSC), impart any significant social ballast to an electoral initiative. That point seems incontestable in the light of experience, and it cannot be overcome by rallying calls, appeals to goodwill, nor even the online adhesion of thousands of the well-meaning. The Left Party has a fine mass leader among its protagonists in Kate Hudson, rightly highly-regarded. But the reluctance of the NUM to follow Arthur Scargill into the Socialist Labour Party in 1995 or subsequently – not to mention the long experience of Communist Party members whose overwhelming support from workers in the factories evaporated when they stood in local or parliamentary elections – shows that having such individuals in membership, or even leadership, is not sufficient to turn base political material into electoral gold.

Social weight – deep roots in society – is the missing element which has sunk every previous initiative of its kind (SLP, Socialist Alliance, SSP, Respect, TUSC) generally sooner rather than later, and which Left Unity does not address. The fact is that despite these varied appeals over the last twenty-odd years to desert Labour at the ballot box, the masses and their organisations have not moved, and have held true to their previous engagements, even with a diminished enthusiasm reflected in an increasing rate of electoral abstention.

Actual political space does not necessarily continue to exist simply because it was once clearly populated. It is brought into being by factors quite other than the wishes of potential occupiers of it. And it is always in flux. It is determined above all by the emergence or disappearance of classes and other social formations as political actors. Its scope and duration can be shaped by purposeful intervention, but it cannot be invented by propaganda. For example, the war against Iraq launched by a Labour government and the vast scale of the mass movement against it clearly opened up a "political space" which Respect was temporarily and partially able to fill more successfully than any other left electoral initiative (although the Liberal Democrats were the major beneficiary overall), electing an MP and several councillors in east London and Birmingham. However, even Respect did not endure as a serious electoral force outside, presently, Bradford. To state the obvious, Respect would not have come into being without the mass anti-war movement, and no comparable movement exists today. It could further be argued that the anti-war movement created a "space" which was itself not capable of being filled, absent the durable support of any actual class-based organisations which could underpin an electoral intervention once the immediate war crisis receded.

Political space is ultimately generated by social weight, the sort of thing that comes from the adhesion of mass organisations or mass movements rooted in important social classes. Social weight does not step into a declared political space by kind external invitation from its self-anointed gate-keepers. Electorally, the space to the left of Labour is presently filled by...the Labour Party. The elephant in the Left Unity parlour is the fact that many people whose views are to the left of the Labour leadership still vote for the Labour Party. That was true when the Labour leader was Tony Blair, and it is also true when it is Ed Miliband, about whom people on the left generally feel a good deal more comfortable, his having apologised for the Iraq war and moved on in some measure from the bewitched-by-bankers economic strategy of Brown. The obvious question is: if that "space" could not be filled by a left alternative under the most ideal circumstances imaginable – a widely reviled war-mongering Labour government under a discredited leader – why on earth should it be expected to do any better today, when those circumstances no longer apply, when most people on the left see the enemy as the Tory-led government, and view the possibility of a Miliband-led Labour government with moderate optimism?

Naturally, that does not exhaust a discussion about the Labour Party today – but that is the discussion that is needed. It would encompass a realistic assessment as to the roots sunk by the “New Labour” clique in the Party, the extent to which the changes wrought by Blair and Brown are irreversible, or to what extent they were contingent on the neo-liberal “Edwardian summer” which ended in 2008; the remaining importance of trade union involvement in the Party, and the possibilities of their influence being extended and deepened; the direction of the Miliband leadership and so on. These are not just questions for debate, they are questions of the class struggle today. One can certainly argue a view that the Labour Party on its own will never secure a socialist society; likewise one can certainly argue that the Blair-Brown government was a government of imperialism and the City of London. It is another thing to simply seek to bypass or ignore a Party which is evidently the only alternative government to the Con-Dems at present, which retains the affiliation of the main working-class organisations in Britain today, which includes more socialists than all those grouped in the parties further to the left aggregated, which controls (with variable results) many local authorities, and whose level of electoral support runs at perhaps forty times that of the further-left. To in effect dismiss all that with the observation (quoting the Loach/Hudson/Achcar article on the Guardian website) that “its achievements are in the past” is scarcely serious. All achievements of which we can be certain are in the past, and no achievements in the future will be secured by ruminating on electoral fantasies as opposed to addressing the difficult tasks of the present.

European Dimension

As already noted, much of the case for a new Left Party seems to rest on the observation that we are in the midst of a continent-wide economic crisis which is leading to similar parties existing and prospering elsewhere. Clearly, there is nothing wrong with learning from abroad and, indeed, an international perspective is not an add-on but a starting point for socialist politics. However, the envious gaze cast at the left in other European countries needs to be tempered with realism. What is there to be envious of?

First of all, there is the generic nature of these parties. One must generalise, acknowledging that not all points apply to all European left parties with equal force. The euro-Left parties stand to the left of contemporary social democracy in advocating more radical measures, in varying degrees, to tackle the economic crisis. They are, on the other hand, constitutional and electoral parties – they do not aim at revolution. Their measure is electoral support which they seek to secure through advocating pro-welfare and egalitarian policies which broadly mitigate the effects of the slump on the working-class. Their ultimate aim may be a socialist society (although this is not always clear), but it is to be attained primarily by parliamentary means. Broadly they disown the record of socialism and revolutionary politics in the twentieth century. To some extent, they could be described as “two-and-a-half parties” in the manner of the left parties which positioned themselves between the second and third internationals, between revolution and counter-revolution within the workers’ movement after World War One, before speedily retreating back to the embrace of social democracy.

The present-day two-and-a-half parties make no claim, as the centrists of 1919-21 did, to stand for revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat. They are explicitly reformist. Their attraction as a new left model derives from the absence of a revolutionary international and major revolutionary parties in almost all European countries.

Two-and-a-half looks sweet when there is no Three. But that does not make it necessarily the answer to the crisis of working-class political representation. In practice (with the exception of the Greek situation, which will be considered shortly) the summit of the ambitions of the Left parties Europe-wide at present is to secure enough parliamentary seats to be considered a coalition partner in a government which would be dominated by the “old” social democratic parties, perhaps with the addition of Greens, or of centre-ground bourgeois parties. As the Left Unity Draft Statement accurately notes, these parties challenge “the capitulation of social democracy to neo-liberalism”. Implicit in this formulation is the demand – make social democracy social-democratic again! The spirit of 2013 is to be the “spirit of 45” indeed.

That project is most advanced in the catastrophic situation pertaining in Greece, where Syriza, originally an amalgam of left factions of varying ideological provenance, has effectively displaced PASOK as the main party of the left (also apparently securing votes from the communist KKE). The scale of the economic calamity in Greece, of a different order (so far) to almost anywhere else, and the fact of PASOK's deep and corrupt implication in the management of it, have conditioned this development. Syriza has not merely won over many voters from mainstream social-democracy, it has also acquired chunks of the erstwhile PASOK apparatus, as the latter party crumbles. Syriza secured a huge increase in its votes in the two general elections of 2012, but in neither did it secure anything like the support won by PASOK in its prime, and in neither did it secure enough parliamentary seats, even if those won by Democratic Left and the KKE were added, to form a government. Nor does it begin to match the influence of the KKE (or PASOK for that matter) in the trade union movement in Greece.

It is possible that Syriza could do better next time the opinion of Greek voters is sought (which may not be for three years). Indeed, under Greek electoral procedures, if Syriza were to secure the greatest share of the vote in a future election it would possibly be able to govern in its own right. Then the essential contradiction in its politics – opposition to austerity while supporting Greece's continued membership of the EU and the single currency will move centre-stage. There is limited value in speculating as to what may happen then, beyond noting the studied ambiguity of Tsipras, the Syriza leader, as to whether he stands for socialism or a "non-austerity" capitalism. The KKE says that the situation in Greece demands a "systemic rupture" – that is the overthrow of capitalism and an exit from its imperialist international alliances. That sounds far from unreasonable, since Greece is a country in which the decomposition of capitalism and its conventional methods of rule are most advanced, but that is not to say it is actually possible with the present correlation of forces. If politics ultimately polarises between Syriza and the neo-nazi Golden Dawn, which is no more than a possibility but which cannot be dismissed, it should not be assumed that the entire Greek and European bourgeoisie will line up behind the fascists.

At any event, what does this mean for the British left (beyond the obvious necessity of solidarity with Greek working people in their struggle)? Some will be enthused at the prospect of British Eurocommunists, Trotskyists and Maoists joining together in a similar common electoral front. Others would rather spend a week at the dentists. An obvious conclusion is that the British working-class will support a British Syriza when they regard the British Labour Party in the same way as the Greek working-class regards PASOK. That is far from where we are at present.

Beyond Greece, what is the record of these parties of the European left? It would be wearisome to examine every European country in turn, so I will limit the review to the three largest, most decisive states in the EU, which are that respect are most comparable to Britain. A reality check is in order.

In France, despite the optimism attending the powerful presidential candidacy of Jean-Luc Melenchon, the Left Front polls less than half of the vote secured a generation or so ago by the PCF, on whose shrunken but tenacious local electoral base it still largely rests. And of course Melenchon himself was convincingly beaten for a parliamentary seat in an industrial constituency by the leader of France's far right, a sober indication that the left's hegemony over the working-class vote in France cannot be taken for granted. The Left Front scarcely appears to be exercising a big influence over President Hollande's administration. The PCF has recently decided to abandon the hammer-and-sickle from its membership cards, no doubt in pursuit of more votes. And the once-feted Nouvelle Partie Anticapitaliste has shrivelled to near-vanishing point.

In Italy, Rifondazione Comunista, much celebrated throughout the euro-left a decade ago, has disappeared from the lower house of parliament (a process triggered by its embrace of the NATO Afghan occupation) and the left – in a country where the Italian Communist Party secured more than thirty per cent of the vote less than thirty years ago – has disappeared from parliament. The left's franchise is now divided between the tired post-social democratic Democrats (notably lacking a charismatic leader) and the MS5 movement of Pepe Grillo.

As for Germany Die Linke rests, for electoral purposes, mainly on the legacy of the former SED in the eastern part of the country. Its main hope (government it clearly not on the cards) seems to be to keep ahead of the five per cent threshold which determines representation in the Bundestag, and the largest threat to that modest ambition is a new Party of Pirates. It has been riven by divisions in recent years, in part consequential of its ambivalent role in local and state government.

On the basis of this short summary, we can say that the euro-left is hardly decisive outside Greece, that it polls less in general than when it was explicitly Communist in times gone by, and that it risks being outflanked both by the far right and by a gallimaufry of clowns and "pirates" whose advance signifies the contemporary decay of both bourgeois politics and of the labour movement. And all these are parties which have arisen on the basis of either the influence of a pre-existing mass Communist party, or a serious split in social-democracy, or a prolonged regroupment of far-left organisations, or some combination of all three. None have arisen as a consequence of a Facebook appeal, so if the new Left Party succeeds, it will certainly represent a sociological first.

If this all seems a bit post-modern, it is because it is, and it strikes to the consideration at the heart of the contemporary situation and, indeed, the speculations about "political space". That is the decline of the working-class movement in Europe along almost every axis over the last generation, to the point where its constitution on a new basis is the only question which need really detain anyone serious about creating an alternative to capitalism which exists anywhere outside blogs and leaflets alone. This is both at the core of a critique of the existing left, unity initiatives included, and the heart of a positive programme of work for socialists.

In this space, we can address this in relation to the situation in Britain alone, for the most part, although the problem is clearly international. A full survey of the world situation is beyond our scope here, and setting out tasks for the left in overcoming this common problem in each particular country would be of very limited value. We should only note that the differences over the last century – mass Communist parties (France/Italy/Greece); a socialist regime over part of the country introduced via the entirely unforeseen medium of cataclysmic military defeat (Germany); partisan and resistance struggles (Italy/France/Greece); a crushed revolution (Germany); civil war (Greece); fascist dictatorship (Italy/Germany/Greece) divided trade union movements (France/Italy/Greece); the lack of a full-throated Anglo-Saxon neo-liberal offensive (all four) – mean that any perspective overly-based on events in those countries is likely to be flawed. It is an error to take the Brussels assumption of a very high degree of pan-European political homogeneity at its own valuation.

"Why should Britain go without?" a blog comment on the Socialist Unity website asked, debating this issue. If the appropriate reply is not "go without what exactly?" then it must be because Britain has also "gone without" so many of the phenomena listed above, from a divided TUC to partisan warfare. This is not meant in any spirit of self-satisfied isolation. The traditions of the British labour movement are in many respects worse than those in the countries listed. That can be debated, but they are unarguably enormously different.

Impact of the Crisis

However, it could well be argued that the economic crisis changes the calculations and has, or will shortly, create the elusive "political space" for a new party of the left. In a sense the answer to this has already been supplied. The strength of the left in all countries in Europe is less than it was in easier times a generation ago, as measured by election results. It is, of course, a reconfigured left with some of the old polarities superseded. But the old saw that economic crisis favours the right before the left appears to have some merit still.

In fact, the assumption that economic slump equals a boom for socialism has little historical evidence to support it.

The last crisis of this severity in Britain saw off, *inter alia*, the last party of substance which remotely corresponded to the two-and-a-half initiative Left Unity is championing – the Independent Labour Party. Squeezed between the Labour Party, with no socialist head but a substantial trade union body at the time, and the Communist Party advocating revolution, it incrementally disintegrated.

Crises impact variably on politics, depending on the state of the political landscape at the time. The oil price slump of the early 1970 was met by a united and fairly self-confident labour movement, which was able to defend its own organisations and working-class living standards and, politically, secure the re-election of a Labour government, but which ended by capitulating before the demand of the International Monetary Fund. That unity and confidence was already crumbling (as a result) by the time the Thatcher offensive opened up, coinciding with the big economic slump of the early 1980s. The left, within the Labour Party and without, believed the space was opening up for a radical left programme; but the main political consequence of the crisis was the breakaway of a considerable chunk of the Labour right to form the Social Democratic Party. This split had the support of more than 30 sitting Labour MPs, the covert backing of some trade union leaders and the overt support of significant sections of a panicky establishment, of course. That is worth remembering as constituting the sort of “weight” required to get a new party off the ground as a serious force. By contrast, not a single Labour MP left over the Iraq War, despite 142 voting against it (Galloway was expelled); and no MP is contemplating such a departure now. As for Britain today, the Labour Party has, as already described, recognised the possibility of space opening up to its left and has moved to close it, to an admittedly limited and timorous extent, by shuffling leftwards.

But the “crisis” argument also reflects more profound political weaknesses, a sort of bastardisation of the view that politics is nothing but concentrated economics. This leads much of the left to be almost overcome with excitement when a crisis hits, at the same moment that most working-class people (and even their organisations) risk being overcome with anxiety. It is a close relation to the view that strikes and mobilisations against poverty are “real” class struggle, while anti-war or other “democratic” campaigning is all very well for filling in time until a slump bites but not the real work of socialists; and to the view that revolution emerges from economic misery.

Other views have been advanced, of course. “We cannot tell...how soon a real proletarian revolution will flare up [in Great Britain] and what immediate cause will most serve to rouse, kindle and impel into the struggle the very wide masses who are at present dormant...It is possible that the ‘breach’ will be forced, ‘the ice broken’ by a parliamentary crisis, or by a crisis arising out of the colonial and imperialist contradictions...”

Thus Lenin in 1920. Not a word about slumps or strikes, but in a time when the two political issues which have gripped the masses over the last ten years are a “parliamentary crisis” (MPs expenses) and an “imperialist crisis” (the Iraq War) he may not have been so wide of the mark. And certainly he saw the masses making their own political space.

Lenin is all very well, it could be argued, and he certainly doesn't figure in the Left Unity scheme of things. But the rigorous focus on anti-austerity politics as the gateway to electoral rewards does not seem to me self-evidently correct. What is right is Left Unity's critique of the feeble nature of the Labour response to the crisis to date, and the requirement for it to stand far more clearly and unequivocally on the side of the poor in the face of this onslaught, allied to developing an alternative around which the movement can rally.

It is far from certain, given the prevailing level of combat in the movement, that any of these things will happen, and raising the level of struggle is the aim of the People's Assembly against austerity, uniting trade unions and activists fighting on a range of issues, and the campaign it needs to generate around the country. Introducing a new Left Party into that struggle as an attempted electoral vehicle, when no mass organisation is calling for it and the voters are not flocking to others offering it (TUSC, Respect, SSP etc) risks not only being merely irrelevant but also almost (well-intentioned) sabotage through division. There is no need – indeed, no possibility – to make the People's

Assembly a pro-Labour vehicle, but to turn it into an anti-Labour one, as Ken Loach at least appears to desire, is the route to undermining the developing movement. It is a mass campaign to unite people locally and nationally in opposition to austerity, and the present indications are that it will be a big step forward towards providing the united front against the politics of ruling class social aggression that is sorely needed. The Left Party project will be used – is in fact being used – to inhibit the formation of that front.

What sort of Left Unity

The next and final issue to be considered before turning to directly positive proposals is the particular nature of the new Left Party being proposed, beyond the points already made. This would appear to still be in formation. Some of its defining parameters are explicitly negative – the Loach remarks cited above, an attack on the “brutal” structures of the existing left – and some of it is implicitly negative: it is not Respect, TUSC, the Socialist Alliance etc. Obviously some of those left organisations are presently still available to be joined, and indeed most of Left Unity’s promoters have been in one or other of them fairly recently and some have been in all of them. So we can assume that they are all regarded as inadequate vehicles for Left Unity’s ambitions, because of charismatic leaders, the affiliation of existing far left groups etc.

Other proposals could be described as inconsistently positive. Opposition to war is by some way the most important political issue of this century to date, so the Left Unity Draft Statement’s rejection of imperialism and war is right and essential. However, it can only be vitiated by the fact that the Comment is Free (Guardian) piece which has been the project’s most significant public statement to date does not mention a word about the issue, doubtless because it is co-authored by Gilbert Achcar, a supporter of “humanitarian intervention” and NATO’s mission to protect. A diplomatic silence on the most important issue in order to form an expedient alliance marks a retreat from the politics of Respect and TUSC etc.

Other negatives: as in the tradition of all two-and-a-half formations, the Left Party will be non- or even anti-Leninist. One may infer that this is designed to make it easier for the new Party to scoop up those refugees from the Socialist Workers Party who believe that their party’s problems are due to a “Leninist” regime. The “brutality and distortions of traditional left structures” are rejected without qualification as, more justifiably, is the “reproduction of...gender domination” within the left. Presumably this is a nod towards the drama within the SWP over the handling of an allegation of rape against one of its leading members.

This is ridiculous. The experience of Leninism is the story of the world’s first successful socialist revolution, of working-class state power, of the construction, defence and ultimate disintegration of world socialism in the twentieth century, of parties which led masses in the struggle against capitalism, fascism and imperialism, and of millions who died on the battlefields and in the dungeons of the bourgeoisie as partisans of a world movement for a communist future, all with its historic achievements and imposing crimes and errors. To imagine that anything can be added to the analysis of this experience (essential for any serious socialist organisation) by studying the goings-on in small and marginal groups mainly peopled by the petty-bourgeois is merely testimony to the capacity of some of the left to depart from the real world into their own self-referential Truman Show. Pace Professor Callinicos, there is absolutely nothing that can be adduced for or against Leninism from the arguments inside the SWP, any more than the results obtained by the Large Hadron Collider need verifying by observing the Duracell Bunny.

Marxism fares a little better in the Draft Statement – it is to “inform” the Party but not “define” it, presumably meaning membership is open to Marxists and non-Marxists alike, which is curious since more people are now turning to a Marxist analysis of society in the wake of the slump than has been the case for many years. Its actual centre of ideological gravity will be considerably lower – opposition to austerity, support for welfare; opposition to racism, support for equality; democratic, pluralist, green etc. “Normal” social democracy in effect.

Now, if we acknowledge a great deal of truth in Left Unity's founding premise that the left is feeble and atrophied in Britain today, we still need to ask whether this sort of Party, with the experience of Leninism discarded, and that of Marxism muted, is the solution to this incapacity. And can it be woven out of the existing left-of-Labour left?

That left is an agglomeration of organised groups, some of which style themselves "parties" and which range from the small through the very small to the miniscule and a number of individual "independent socialists" who have mostly passed through one or several of the aforementioned organisations and have suffered thereby. Beyond that, the project aims to appeal to a much larger diaspora of people of progressive views who feel disenfranchised by the present parliamentary parties – mainly, of course, the Labour Party.

This left (individuals and 'parties' both) reflects several pathologies which have in part conditioned not only its failure to make much of the economic crisis but its effective abstention from serious political intervention (with some significant exceptions) for the last generation or more. One of the most obvious is the obsessive identification with the symbols, structures and strategies of the past (be it 1917, 1968, 1971-74 or all of them); to the point where the Jacobins of the Paris Commune appear as futuristic speculators. We know that "the traditions of all the generations of the dead weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living", but even Marx could not have envisaged the brain of the British left of 2013.

Second, and connected, is the treatment of the idea of socialism as if it were unproblematic for the mass of people today. Experience and opinion polling does indeed indicate broad support for what might be termed socialist values and sometimes policies, but the systemic socialism that has been advocated by the left does not properly account for the widely-held belief that it has been tried and, in both the main variants understood as socialism by most people (Soviet socialism and Labourite social democracy), failed. The left generally addresses that problem by disassociating itself from the consequences of the past even as it perseveringly seeks to replicate that same past in its own proceedings. "That wasn't socialism" it is argued (in relation to the USSR and Harold Wilson alike) by comrades who then seek to establish organisations replicating in detail those which created and presided over this "non-socialism", whether it is to be a new revolutionary party or a new trade union party.

The product of this contradiction is an "offer" to the working people of the 21st century which amounts to "we want to re-run the twentieth century but this time get it right." The appeal of this pitch is unsurprisingly negligible, since no-one can take seriously the proposition that if the Soviet Union and/or Labour governments were indeed disasters, it was only because Peter Taaffe/Ken Loach/"comrade Delta" were not in charge. Nostalgia for 1945 (imperialist-funded social democracy in essence) is no basis for a 21st century political intervention, that much is clear

Third, the contemporary left is almost entirely isolated from the working-class it seeks to speak for. More prosaically, it has limited engagement with "ordinary people" in general. The Left and the working-class have never been the same thing of course, but the divergence has only widened over the last generation as the working-class has seen its institutions and organisations reduced to near-rubble, and the political left has retreated into a self-referential sub-culture from which it only emerges to address the class through propaganda, rather than as a living part of the whole. Every failure sends it not deeper into society but back into the garage to further fine-tune its ideological principles and proposals. Next time we will get it right! As the Arabs say, the dogs may bark, but the caravan has moved on...

Any left project has to address these problems. The list of them could be extended. Left organisations tend to be heavily male-dominated and to have only barely absorbed the insights of feminism. They can be uncomfortable in working across cultural differences in an increasingly diverse working class. They obsess about maintaining the "tradition" appropriate to their own group, apparently oblivious to the historic irrelevance of most of them and their very slight impact on the course of events over the last fifty years or so. And so on. These shortcomings apply pretty

much equally to those organisations of the Left which operate within the Labour Party as to those outside. Some of them apply to the new Left Party project with greater force than others, but they all need to be explicitly addressed if there is to be the remotest chance of progress.

Making something straight of this crooked timber is challenging. However, the negatives point towards a positive. What left politics today lacks is that union of socialism with the mass movement which can be the only real foundation of a social transformation. That is to say serious campaigning and propaganda within the working-class, first of all for an alternative to capitalism, and an explanation of the means of struggle needed to achieve that objective. That must include both an attractive, 21st century, presentation of socialism, and work within the existing organisations of the working class in a persevering way, learning as well as lecturing. The estrangement of the left from the "agency" it has historically prioritised cannot be overcome by creating yet another external organisation offering itself as a solution to their problems – at least not if the aim is to politically organise and mobilise the working-class as the vanguard of human emancipation.

If on the other hand the crying need is to establish a new more-reformist-than-Labour party, then the assistance of socialists is scarcely essential. Indeed, the whole "Left Unity Draft Statement" reads like a putative manifesto for a trade union party. More-or-less the whole of it could be passed at a Unite policy conference without anyone batting an eyelid. To be fair, the points outlined by Nick Wrack in the speeches he has been making on the subject do include an explicit recognition of the need to engage in mass struggles and to raise the aim of socialism alongside an emphasis on electoral work by this new "working class party". This on its own does not overcome the problems identified above, not least the fact that this is a project relying on the organisation of fractious groups mainly or entirely external to the working-class movement intent on bringing a gift (better electoral representation) that the latter shows no signs of desiring. Nick's prospectus is close to a call for the reconstitution of a Communist party of the 1960s/1970s, without addressing the reasons for that party's collapse, or the insufficiency of the forces available for its recreation. That would have to include a reflection on the failure of the many efforts to set up such a Party, or some variation on it, over the last fifteen years.

It would seem, in summary, that the Left Party proposed will be a gathering of well-meaning individuals, some Marxist, others not, organised primarily around electoral interventions on a fairly broad common-denominator of anti-austerity pro-equality policies. It will have very limited working-class support. It will almost certainly not secure significant support at the ballot box, and it will absolutely certainly not achieve socialist revolution, because it will not be organised for that. It will likely hover between being another left electoral alternative to Labour and being another attempt at far-left regroupment, while succeeding at neither. "What right has anyone got to say that such a political formation cannot or should not be built?", its promoters have asked. No-one at all, of course, but we should also pause to consider the possibility of a better use of the left's time and energy.

Working-Class Politics

The centre of any strategy for socialism has to be the working class – not an abstract working class assigned a particular political role because that is what it ought to perform, but the concrete, actual working class of today, in Britain and internationally. Only the working class can emancipate itself, and thereby open up better prospects for the world. The sober fact, already briefly argued above, is that the labour movement in Britain, and to varying degrees in other countries, has been reduced over the last generation to the point where it scarcely articulates an independent political project. It has degenerated to the point of being perceived as simply one interest group among many in a sociologically spliced-and-diced society that is unquestionably capitalist but where the class struggle has been at a very low level for a fairly long time. It has to a certain extent internalised that perception as self-perception. That has both caused and further conditioned the state of the trade unions and other working class organisations, and of course its historic vehicle for electoral intervention, the Labour Party. A class for itself? Not so much right

now.

It is trite to observe that the working-class has changed. Women have always constituted around half the working-class, but no longer can they be treated as a sort of auxiliary detachment in the struggle, backing up the main industrial army. Likewise, heavy manual work, or employment in manufacturing of any sort, are now fairly small minority occupations. Globalisation has given further impetus to the migration of labour and the consequent transnationalisation of the working class, a historically progressive but politically challenging development. In a nutshell, surplus value is created by a greater diversity of people working in a wider diversity of situations across all remaining boundaries. These changes make it all the more essential that socialists engage with the actual organisations of the working class, rather than simply invoking the class as an abstraction as if nothing had changed. Thousands of individual online socialists are no substitute, however well-intentioned.

Reconstituting the labour movement so that it becomes a powerful expression of the working-class interest, and thereby a means of the working class giving a lead to everyone interested in a new and better society, is therefore the main task for socialists to address. Without it, there is no prospect for advancing beyond specific and limited single-issue interventions, with at best local/partial successes that cannot change the fundamentals of the prevailing system.

What does this reconstitution mean? Not going back to the labour movement of the past, obviously, since that is neither possible nor, as that movement never achieved socialism, necessarily desirable. But some of the objectives that have to be set include the strengthening of trade union organisation numerically, in the workplace and ideologically; the reconnection of organised workers with the wider working-class community, where the links of work-union-community have atrophied or disappeared; the elaboration of campaign goals and policies which prioritise the capacity for the working-class to stabilise and strengthen itself (in the fields of employment, housing etc); the fighting and winning of strikes which build collective confidence; the creation of unity between British-born workers of various ethnicities and immigrant workers; special attention to reaching out to the young and connecting with campaigns which already mobilise youth (anti-war, students, UK Uncut etc) and the reassertion of socialism as the only real solution to society's crises, with a fresh elaboration as to what such a system would look like.

The labour movement then (and in parallel, these tasks cannot be sequential) has to use its immense potential capacities to lead struggles which point towards an alternative society across the board – that is anti-war/anti-imperialist struggles and democratic struggles for social equality. It is a fact that the ruling elite in Britain is more discredited than it has been since 1940 perhaps, there is a growing sense of the unfitness of the ruling class to rule – yet there is no (or little) confidence in the capacity of ordinary people to take over the running of society themselves. Only a revived labour movement can give the leadership to fill that political space as it expands.

The role of socialists in all this is clearly essential. There have been examples in the last few years of the left making a big impact in society – the Stop the War Coalition in one way, and Ken Livingstone's Mayoralty in London, in another. Neither was perfect but lessons can be learned from both as to how to intervene in a purposeful and effective way, as well as from their shortcomings. The main limiting factor, which affected both in different ways, it could plausibly be argued, is the very weakness of a strong labour movement able to take the fight to a higher level. Socialists who intervene in the movement with a view to raising its political capacity (definitely not just a question of building bigger organisations alone) are playing a central role in developing the only force able to challenge and overturn capitalism. In different ways, and with their common and different limitations, the Communist Party, Counterfire, Socialist Action and of course individuals in other groups can be found playing that sort of role – building the movement, seeking to shape it politically, setting new challenges for the organisations of the class and then working to meet them. Greater unity among such forces would really be a "left unity" worth having. And there may indeed be scope for the creation, not of new competing groups, but of new campaigning organisations which can help and strengthen the movement politically and ideologically. Of course, this cannot be left to trade unions alone with their own limitations. The key element is the orientation towards the labour movement, which is to say towards

the working class and its organisations, rather than a form of substitutionism which, while acknowledging the role of the working-class in the abstract, avoids engagement with it in practice and instead exalts the role of individual progressives.

It is in this context that we should return to the question of the Labour Party. Under circumstances of a stronger and developing working-class movement, can it be turned into an instrument of deeper social advance – not a revolutionary party but one which can contribute towards opening up the way to socialism? The only honest answer at the moment is – who can say for sure? The main working-class organisations have set it as their task to try to accomplish that transformation after the disastrous New Labour episode – the first, and successful, step, being to work for the election of the best of the possible leaders on offer, Ed Miliband. Since then, some progress has been made away from the worst positions of New Labour but it has undeniably been uneven and incomplete – pretending New Labour is dead is as wrong as pretending nothing has changed since 2010 (the Left Party position in effect). No-one can assert that it is likely that a 2015 Labour government will master the economic crisis in the interests of ordinary people, although it could certainly be an arena of struggle over its direction which could bring benefits in itself in terms of strengthening the movement, and could create circumstances for the working-class to recover a measure of confidence. That is the task that the major organisations of the class (Unite, Unison, GMB etc) have democratically set themselves and the chances of them now abandoning it in favour of a new Left Party are zero. That can only be held as inconsequential if one regards the working-class and its organisations as mere fingerbowls at the great socialist buffet. The fact that almost no individual socialists presently in the Labour Party (still far greater than the number outside) and absolutely no Labour MPs, even among the 44 who recently revolted over the front bench's workfare capitulation for example, are prepared to sign on for the Left Party merely underlines the point. And any "UKIP of the Left" (unattractive formulation!) would need to reckon with the fact that it is much easier to cut with the grain of bourgeois ideology and media prejudice to secure electoral success than it is to fight against it, particularly if one does not have the trade unions alongside one.

It is certainly possible that the working class will learn through experience, over the next few years, that the struggle to "reclaim Labour" (not a great formulation, I would agree) is not going to work. If it doesn't then that will be because of one of two factors – the working-class itself lacks the "social weight" in the here-and-now to sustain its own political project, at least on that scale, in which case the necessity for socialists to redouble their efforts to rebuild the strength of the class is obvious (and a new mass socialist party, resting on a serious and durable foundation, may eventually come out of such an endeavour) but we would be in for a definite period of bourgeois political domination at the parliamentary level at any event. Or, the effort will be thwarted by establishment manoeuvres, with what has been termed the "Blairite undead", supported by a frightened elite, obstructing democratic and constitutional efforts to transform Labour. Under those circumstances, the creation of a new class Party might be higher up the agenda, because the class is already fighting for it, although it would not look very much like the Left Party we are presently discussing. Time will tell, and probably before very long, but in the meantime to stand outside the general objective of electing a Labour government as the only alternative to the Coalition by engaging in separate and marginal electoral interventions is profoundly self-defeating.

It is not the case that trade unionism should therefore be the sole focus of socialists' work, still less that unions alone can achieve a socialist society. Indeed, the feebleness of the trade union political intervention during the Blair-Brown years will have given rise to an understandable skepticism about their capacity or willingness to confront the weaknesses in the Labour Party. But that is clearly starting to change, and it also remains the fact that the unions are far deeper-rooted in society, and the working class in particular, than the socialist left, and that they alone have the heft to rebuild the labour movement as a plausible alternative to capitalist class rule. Any left political intervention which does not partake of that strength and those roots is either very narrowly focused (ie aimed at attaining some specific short-term objective) or it is inconsequential. Nor is it necessary (luckily, because it is clearly not possible) for all socialists to join the Labour Party to take part in the work of reformation of the class "for itself". Most of what is needed does not require a Labour Party card to be delivered, but it does require a focus on the matter in hand rather than speculative political ventures. Homes can be created for the "politically homeless" in movements and non-electoral interventions which bring people together rather than dividing them.

Left Unity's 'modest flutter'

Socialists and the unions need to reach out to each other more, integrate their work more closely where possible and elaborate common projects, of which the People's Assembly is an example. Certainly, only Socialists can set out "the line of march", but they can only do so if they are themselves marching with the body of the troops. Engage with the movement as it is in order to make it something better! That may not arouse the excitement of setting up yet another new Party, but winning five per cent of the vote a few years down the line (I am being extremely generous here) should no more be the stuff of socialist dreams than it would be of bourgeoisie nightmares.

In summary, the project for a new Left Party

- a) is based on a flawed assessment of how socialist political parties can emerge and sustain themselves;
- b) prioritises "left unity" over class unity, to the detriment of the latter;
- c) misreads European experience and its applicability to the situation in Britain;
- d) fails to seriously address the Labour Party and working-class support for it;
- e) ignores the failures of numerous similar initiatives and, indeed, the actual problems of the left in Britain today;
- f) draws a causal connection between economic crisis and political radicalism which is at best questionable;

and therefore

g) cannot best direct the efforts and resources of socialists at the present juncture – indeed, it risks being an impediment to making the most of actual opportunities for advance and reconstruction.

I hope the comrades involved will address these points and consider the possibility that they may be wrong.

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