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Britain

Meltdown for Labour

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There were three elections on June 10, 2004 in Britain. In addition to the election for the European Parliament there were local elections in some parts of the country, and elections in London for the assembly and mayor.

For the first time ever a majority of those who voted supported fringe parties, or parties other than the three main parties: the Labour Party, the Conservatives, and the Liberal Democrats (traditionally the third party in British politics).

With the exception of the London mayor - which the ruling Labour Party retained with Ken Livingstone as its candidate (newly back in the Labour Party following his expulsion four years ago) - the results for Labour were a disaster. It was punished for the role it has played in Iraq along with George Bush and its increasingly right-wing social policy - which has increasingly alienated its traditional base for a number of years.

In the local elections Labour was the first ruling party ever to be pushed into third place behind both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats - winning just 26% of the vote. In the European elections it polled its lowest share of the vote in a national election since 1918. In the London Assembly Labour lost two seats and even where they held seats they were with heavily reduced majorities.

The Liberal Democrats failed to make significant gains because, while they presented themselves (falsely) as an anti-war party, they are also strongly pro-EU - a factor which kept their vote down in an election which saw a surge of anti-EU sentiment.

The elections were also a major problem for the Tories since they were split wide open by their historic divisions over Europe. This was reflected in the huge gains for the UK Independence Party (UKIP) which increased its vote from 7% in 1999 to 16% this time. This was on a right-wing racist platform which called for withdrawal from the EU and a drastic curb in immigration and asylum. It was led by Robert Kilroy Silk a Pym Fortun type figure who was previously a TV personality and before that a Labour MP.

The rise of UKIP is a dangerous development since it has a substantial political over-lap with the fascist British National Party (BNP) - which did not make the breakthrough it hoped for due to the swing to UKIP. They maintained their small base in local government but failed to win positions in the European Parliament or the London Assembly.

The Greens held their two MEPs, lost a member of the London Assembly, and made some gains in the local elections. Overall it was a modest improvement. They stood on a left anti-war platform - including opposition to the EU constitution - but since the election have entered into a coalition with the Tories and the Liberal Democrats on Leeds City Council.

The election results were very good for the newly created left coalition "Respect", given the short period of time it had to establish its identity and hostile media coverage. It did not win any positions, but it came close in several instances. It scored 4.7% for the London Assembly narrowly missing a seat. The Respect candidate came fifth in the ballot for mayor - beating both the Greens and the BNP.

In the European elections Respect stood in all ten constituencies scoring an average of 1.7% - or 252,000 votes. This average figure, however, does not reflect the strength of the Respect vote in the working class inner-city areas with

big immigrant populations.

George Galloway scored 4.8% in London for the European Parliament - 91,000 votes. In the London Assembly election Respect scored 15% in the City and East constituency. In the London Borough of Tower Hamlets Respect came top of the poll - beating all three establishment parties.

Nor was it just London. In Birmingham Respect scored 7.4% across the city and up to 18% in the highest scoring parts. Scores of up to 10% were won in a number of other cities including Leicester and Bradford. At the heart of these votes were the votes of a range of ethnic minority people, most significantly, but not only Muslim people.

Muslims, in the form of national minority communities, have been traditional Labour voters but this election saw the Muslim vote for Labour in meltdown over the war and the way they have been demonized in the course of it. This is a unique development. The left has never won the support of sections of the ethnic minorities to this extent before, a development which came directly out of the stop the war movement, and the unity it forged. This could change the face of the left if it can be consolidated for the future.

What was new for the socialist left in England in these elections is that most of the old electoral divisions were absent. Respect was the only left party with a presence at the national level - something which has never happened before in England. Arthur Scargill's Socialist Labour Party, which stood nationally in 1999 has broken up and was hardly involved. The Socialist Party (CWI) only stood in the local elections and one London constituency for the London Assembly. They did not do well in London and lost one of their three councillors in the West Midlands.

The challenge now for Respect is to translate the support it has generated in the course of the campaign into an organization on the ground. The need is to bring the many new members and supporters into an inclusive and democratic party structure which can both prepare for the general election, which is likely to be next year, and to establish itself as a campaigning and active organization.