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Britain

The significance of Left Unity

- Debate - Building new parties of the left -

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There have been very significant developments towards the building of a new broad left party in Britain over the last year with the formal launch of Left Unity as a new political party in November 2013.

While some work had been done previously, the key catalyst for the success of this initiative was the appeal for a new party issued by Ken Loach on the occasion of the launch of his film *The Spirit of 45'* – which is a big defence of socialist and collectivist ideas and in particular public ownership and public services.

The film was launched simultaneously in 50 cinemas (many full to capacity) in mid-March 2013 followed by a question and answer session in one cinema which was relayed to many of the others during which Ken Loach made the appeal. This appeal was then carried by a website which had recently been set up to argue for a new party – called Left Unity, which Socialist Resistance has been involved in from the outset. Within a few days 6,000 people had signed up to the appeal – and over a period of months almost 11,000 signed.

The challenge is to turn that level of interest into more ongoing engagement. 11,000 people were saying that they wanted to see a new party of the left – not that they were convinced that it would happen and happen in a way that gave a voice to the issues they think are important and work in a way that was accessible to them.

Given the propensity of the left in Britain to squander previous such opportunities and the legacy which has been left by the previous failures – particularly by the actions of the big far-left organisations, (see the book chapter from Alan Thornett and John Lister) this is not a straightforward job.

The fact that Miliband-led Labour Party opposition only promises an austerity-lite alternative to the massive attacks being pushed through by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition if it manages to win the 2015 general election. In the here and now it offers only some verbal denunciation of the worst effects of these policies and a promise that it will respect the budgetary constraints laid down by the present government for the first two years of its own mandate. The Labour Party does not even support strike action by public sector unions in defence of jobs and pension rights. It refuses to support popular calls for taking privatised public services such as the Royal Mail or the railways back into common ownership.

Consequently Labour does not provide a home for most activists wanting to fight now against the government and for a political alternative to the social liberalism of labour. That's why we have seen some people who had been Labour Party activists for many years resigning and joining Left Unity – something which has been promoted prominently on the Left Unity website - where they are visible to people who haven't yet made the leap.

But at the same time while Labour's betrayals are crucial to creating the space for a new party such as Left Unity, there is an increasing pressure especially within the trade unions to support the least bad option ie New Labour as the 2015 General Election comes increasingly into sight.

In that context it is no surprise that there are a significant number of people who signed the Loach appeal but won't commit to Left Unity in the current context. There is a smaller, but never the less noticeable, number who have joined over the last year but then returned to Labour as the pressure became greater.

The significance of Left Unity

But the urgent need is there and it is the best chance for a very long time. More than 1450 people have joined the new party which only set up a membership system in August last year. It is organized in 69 geographic areas of Britain with around 50 fully functioning branches.

600 people registered for the founding conference which was also live streamed to thousands. The founding conference adopted by a majority of 2:1 an amended version of a policy statement initially put forward by the Left Party platform, a current within Left Unity. (See Appendix 1)

One of the things that completely differentiates Left Unity from its predecessors in Britain is that it does not have a big charismatic leader. There is no George Galloway or Tommy Sheridan (who split the SSP in Scotland) type figures for example. This can be a disadvantage when it comes to elections but it also has a positive side given the havoc which such figures have wreaked in the recent past. Ken Loach's support is important and was critical in getting early publicity but such a role is anathema to him – quite apart from the fact that his workload and travelling would at any rate debar it. That means that the party itself will have to establish its own reputation by its work and its record.

One of the other ways in which Left Unity is also different from previous left of Labour formations in England and Wales is the commitment to feminism of its central protagonists. Particularly in the context of the crisis of the SWP over the last year this was seen as a key aspect of the politics of the new party – and clearly one which Socialist Resistance strongly supported. This was however not an uncontentious stand to take as the rather fractious debates on these issues at the founding conference in November showed.

There was overwhelming support for the right of women (and other oppressed groups) to organize through caucuses in Left Unity and for these to have input into the decision making structures of Left Unity. There was also support for the principal that there should be at least fifty per cent women at all the leadership levels in Left Unity. But the debate around these questions was sullied by very negative comments which illustrated that many of the gains won by second wave feminists, who won support from large sections of the Labour movement have been pushed back in the context of the defeats since the 1980s.

There will be a great deal of work for feminists inside Left Unity – and working with women outside- to do to recover some of those victories. The production of a women's broadsheet for International Women's day and the decision that there should be a page on the Left Unity website written/commissioned by the women's caucus are important initial steps in this direction.

On the question of the environment and Ecosocialism those of us, including obviously Socialist Resistance have so far had an easier time. Left Unity members and branches have been central to a number of local campaigns against fracking. Left Unity issued a press release during the height of the recent floods clearly linking these extreme weather events to climate change and will debate these issues at more length at its second conference at the end of March.

In terms of the far left, neither of the two largest groups the SWP or the SP are involved – other than a few people at local level. For the SP this is a sustained political position as they are the key political force involved in the Trade Union and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) which is referred to in other material for this item. They don't support the formation of an individual membership party but insist on formations where left groups can veto what happens even if the majority disagrees. In many areas they parachute in just before an election and leave again afterwards – having achieved a miserly vote. In others they stand and campaign in the name of the Socialist Party. Only in a very few areas is there a genuine local groups which exist on an ongoing basis, involve independents and campaign on local and national issues.

The SWP is also involved in TUSC but with rather less enthusiasm. And over the last year the internal crisis of that

organisation during which they have lost around 50% of their active membership has been completely dominant. In so far as they have responded to general political developments it has been in a very reactive way – projecting only the need to build their own organisation in most instances.

Socialist Resistance has seen and does see the building of Left Unity as a central political priority over the last year. We are involved in every level of the organisation; in building local groups and in developing the new leadership. At the same time we have been involved in regroupment discussions with other groups on the far left – with the International Socialist Network who split from the SWP a year ago and with the Anticapitalist Initiative - a group of mainly young people who mostly came from a split with Worker's Power (League for the Fifth International). Both these groups have been fairly heavily involved in Left Unity – though some have been on a trajectory that I would argue is somewhat ultraleft.

While some of them have argued that the job of revolutionaries is to win the most left wing position possible, our view is that we need to maintain the ability of this new political party to attract those just breaking with social democracy as well as those new to political activity and more seasoned activists joining a political party for the first time from the unions and single issue campaigns.

In practice we think that with the best of these militants these difficulties will be broken down in so far as Left Unity begins to build itself in a consistent way in the localities, campaigning on the key issues that are mobilising people. As people build up a loyalty and sense of identification with Left Unity as an organisation through collective activity, these more ideological debates will become less dominant.

The most recent split from the SWP, RS21 who left at the end of last year, has not taken a formal position on Left Unity. Some individuals had already joined before they left the SWP and have begun to get more involved since. We are trying to encourage this dynamic at a local level as well as seeking discussions with them at a national level – within which the question of Left Unity will be central for it.

A number of other small groups on the radical are also involved in Left Unity but in a way that in general seems to be instrumentalist ie in order to find a wider audience for their own (sectarian) ideas rather than from a real commitment to the project. While they are undoubtedly an irritant especially at national events (or in particular localities where they have some weight) the only way to defeat them is to build Left Unity into a stronger organisation in which they will become more marginalised.

In conclusion, while we cannot say that Left Unity will definitely succeed and it remains fragile and in need of a great deal of nurturing, it has made remarkable strides forward over the last year and is in a much stronger position now than any of us thought would be possible within such a short period of time, particularly one in which attacks by the Tory led government continue to rain down on people with very few victories on our side.

The two following statements were passed by Left Unity's founding conference on 30th November

Statement one

1. Left Unity stands for equality and justice. It is socialist, feminist, environmentalist and against all forms of

discrimination. We stand against capitalism, imperialism, war, racism, Islamophobia and fascism. Our goal is to transform society: to achieve the full democratisation of state and political institutions, society and the economy, by and for the people.

2. Our immediate tasks are to oppose austerity policies designed to destroy the social and economic gains working people have made over many decades; to oppose the scapegoating which accompanies them; to defend the welfare state and those worst affected by the onslaught; to fight to take back into public ownership those industries and utilities privatised over the last three decades; to fight to restore workers' rights; and to advance alternative social and economic policies, redistributing wealth to the working class.

3. We are socialist because our aim is to end capitalism. We will pursue a society where the meeting of human needs is paramount, not one which is driven by the quest for private profit and the enrichment of a few. The natural wealth, and the means of production, distribution and exchange will be owned in common and democratically run by and for the people as a whole, rather than being owned and controlled by a small minority to enrich themselves. The reversal of the gains made in this direction after 1945 has been catastrophic and underlines the urgency of halting and reversing the neo-liberal onslaught.

4. We are feminist because our vision of society is one without the gender oppression and exploitation which blights the lives of women and girls and makes full human emancipation impossible. We specify our feminism because historical experience shows that the full liberation of women does not automatically follow the nationalisation of productive forces or the reordering of the economy.

5. We are environmentalist because we recognise that if humankind is to survive, it has to establish a sustainable relationship with the rest of the natural world – of which it is part and on which it depends. We recognise that an economy based on achieving maximum profits at the lowest cost in the shortest possible time is destroying our planet. The current operation of industry and economy is totally incompatible with the maintenance of the ecosystem through the growing loss of bio and agro diversity, the depletion of resources and increasing climate change. The future of the planet can only be secured through a sustainable, low carbon industrial base designed to meet people's needs on a global basis.

6. We are opposed to all forms of discrimination, whether on the basis of class, gender, race, impairment, sexual orientation, gender identity, nationality, religion, age or politics. The current economic onslaught disproportionately affects already disadvantaged groups and we oppose their persecution and oppression. We support the introduction of legislation and social provision to make this intention a reality. No society is just and equal while some people remain without the support needed to achieve their full potential.

7. We work for and support strong, effective, democratic trade unions to fight for full employment, better wages and salaries, for improved living standards, for better working conditions and stronger, more favourable, contracts of employment. We believe that the strength of the union is the people in the workplace; that what each person does at work matters – to make the job better, to make the service provided more effective, to persuade workers to combine for greater strength. Going on strike (including mass/general strikes), occupying workplaces and solidarity between workers (in different unions and/or workplaces) can be effective tactics in winning individual disputes and changing society.

8. Our political practice is democratic, diverse and inclusive, organising amongst working class communities with no interests apart from theirs, committed to open dialogue and new ways of working. We will campaign, mobilise and support struggles on a day to day basis, recognising the need for self-organisation in working class communities. We recognise that support for our party and its electoral success will only advance to the extent that it is genuinely representative of working class communities, has no interests separate from theirs, and is an organic part of the

campaigns and movements which they generate and support.

9. We will engage in elections offering voters a left alternative – where any elected representatives will take an average wage and be accountable to the party membership – while understanding that elections are not the only arena or even the most important arena in which political struggles are fought. We aim to win political power, not to manage it. We will not participate in governmental coalitions with capitalist parties at a local or national level.

10. We are an internationalist party. There are no national solutions to the problems that humanity faces. Capitalism is an international system, highly organised and globalised and its defeat requires not only international solidarity but the linking up and coordination of struggles across Europe and the world. We will work with left organisations and movements in Europe and internationally that share our aims. We will also seek to learn from the experience of those parties in Latin America which have challenged and rejected neo-liberal economic policies and are establishing a social and economic alternative in the interests of the majority of their people. We stand against imperialist wars and military intervention, against the exploitation of other countries for economic gain, and for a drastic reduction of military expenditure for the benefit of social spending, and for a foreign policy based on peace and equality.

(Statement from the Left Party Platform amended by the founding conference)

Statement two

The Ken Loach appeal launched in association with his film *The Spirit of 45* and calling for a new left party has resulted in over 8000 responses nationally. The film informs us that in 1945 the Labour Party pledged to put an end to the social evils of disease, idleness (mass unemployment), ignorance, squalor (slum housing) and want (poverty) and, despite the legacy of wartime debts, achieved significant reforms. Britain today, along with the rest of Europe and North America, is far wealthier in human and technological resources than it was in 1945. Yet as a result of over 30 years of so-called free-market policies, culminating in a chronic economic and financial crisis since 2007, all those evils have returned.

Our most urgent task is to defend and reclaim the gains won by the labour movement during more than a century of struggles. We believe that there is no prospect of the Labour Party today doing that effectively. Elsewhere in Europe left parties such as Syriza in Greece are winning mass support for resistance to austerity. In Britain we also need to create a new Left Party founded on the following political principles and policy commitments:

1. On the Immediate Economic Crisis

– We are against austerity programmes which make the mass of working people, the old, the young and the sick, pay for a systemic crisis of capitalism.

– We are for policies to restore full employment through measures such as reduced working hours for all; spending on public housing, infrastructure and services; and the public ownership of, and democratic collective control over, basic utilities, transport systems and the financial sector.

2. On Public Services

– We are against the creeping privatisation of the NHS and Education, the sell-off of the Royal Mail and the

marketization of the public sector as a whole.

– We are for free provision of education (from nurseries to adult and higher education), the arts and all forms of healthcare.

3. On The Environment

– We are against an economic system which prioritises short-term profit over the future of the planet, and which is responsible for accelerated climate change and ecological crisis.

– We are for sustainable development, an end to energy and transport policies which contribute to global warming and for an agricultural system which is committed to animal welfare and environmental protection.

4. On Employment

– We are against the casualization of employment conditions and laws which restrict the right of workers to organise effectively and take industrial action.

– We are for the ‘living wage’ as a minimum for all, an extension of employment rights for all workers and support for workers’ cooperatives.

5. On Tax and Welfare

– We are against cuts in benefits and measures such as the bedroom tax, changes to disability allowance and cuts in legal aid, hurting the poorest.

– We are for a tax and welfare system based on the principles of social justice, universal benefits and steeply progressive and effective taxation.

6. On Equalities

– We are against all forms of discrimination and oppression whether on the basis of gender, race, religion, sexuality, (dis)ability or national identity.

– We are for an inclusive society with equal citizenship rights for all, including asylum-seekers and refugees, and support for all those in need.

7. On Internationalism

– We are against fascism, war, imperialism and an international economic system dominated by the wealthy and militarily powerful nations.

– We are for the right of national self-determination for oppressed nationalities such as the Kurds and Palestinians and solidarity with all those resisting austerity and oppression. We are for ‘fair trade’ and recognise the necessity

for global solutions to global problems such as climate change.

8. On Anti-Capitalism

– We are against a system whose benefits go disproportionately to 1% of the population and which is responsible for devastating economic and ecological crises across the planet.

– We are ultimately for a radical social transformation based on the principle of ‘people not profit’ and drawing on the best of the cooperative, radical democratic, feminist, green, and socialist traditions (although we may disagree on how such a transformation can eventually be achieved).

9. On a New Party

– We are against the bureaucratic centralism, corruption and sexism to be found in many existing political parties.

– We are for a mass, democratic and inclusive party which unites campaigners and trade union activists, supports collective direct action and self-organisation, and has close links with similar parties or movements resisting austerity and ‘freemarket’ policies across Europe and elsewhere.

(Statement from Hackney/Tower Hamlets Left Unity amended by the founding conference)