

Socialist Perspectives

For activists who are not satisfied with dogma or 'orthodoxy' but recognise the need to test all programmes and theories against real life experience



No 1 February 2010

Contributors

Martin Wicks was an RMT activist for 20 years, is secretary of **Swindon TUC** and editor of the trade union magazine [Solidarity](#). He was in the Socialist Labour Party and the Socialist Alliance.

John Nicholson is a central organiser of the [Convention of the Left](#) and has been a member of the Socialist Alliance and Respect. He is also a campaigner in support of immigrants and asylum seekers.

Gregor Gall is a member of the Scottish Socialist Party and is a well known labour movement academic, on the Editorial Board of **Solidarity** and of the [Scottish Left Review](#)

Introduction

Despite the global economic crisis which has discredited neo-liberalism and 'light regulation', socialism as an organised force has not been the beneficiary of the crisis. The left in Britain is in a state of disarray, fractious and unable to work together in a collaborative fashion. With Labour captured by Blair's 'project', with its implementation of neo-liberalism in government, there has never been a greater degree of disaffection of its traditional base of support. Yet each effort to build a political alternative to New Labour has failed to break out of the marginalisation of the far left groups. The only exception to that was the Scottish Socialist Party which succeeded in getting 6 MSP's elected to the Scottish Assembly. Yet even this advance was lost as a result of the crisis resulting from the Tommy Sheridan affair.

The reasons for this need exploring. The sectarian method of the far left groups is one of the main reasons for their failure. They place their own interests above those of the working class. These organisations have shown themselves incapable of democratic methods of working, and democratic internal functioning; to such an extent that there are many thousands of people who have been through them but could not live in them. Whilst this was a demoralising experience for many, especially in the period of working class defeats from 1980 onwards, those activists who have survived and maintained their commitment to working class activism, have continued with trade union activity or campaigning of one sort or another. Frustrated with the socialist groups and unconvinced of their usefulness, they have worked as best as they can. Sometimes they have managed to maintain local socialist groups, or they utilise Trades Union Councils as vehicles for building a labour movement, supporting workers struggles and so on.

Socialist Perspectives has been produced to attempt help promote a discussion on the crisis of the left and how it might be addressed. We start with three contributions. ***Socialist Perspectives*** is not a political grouping but a modest attempt to assist in opening up a serious discussion about the crisis of the left, in Britain in particular. The name originates from a grouping formed in the Socialist Labour Party to fight against dogmatism and for membership control – a battle lost. It refers to what it described as 'a crisis of socialist perspective'.

What passes for debate on the British left is too often a dialogue of the deaf, or posturing, often the result of sectarian arrogance from political currents who dismiss other groups as 'sects', and consider that they themselves alone are the 'genuine' revolutionary leadership in the process of formation. The fact that many of these groups have no democratic internal life is a reflection of their wooden 'orthodoxy' and the absence of self-criticism and a lack of willingness to test their perspective against real life experience. Just as individuals can only develop to the degree that they are honest with themselves so political organisations have to endeavour to be objective about what they represent and be open to learning from others in the course of struggle and debate. Failure to do so produces only a sect.

As it indicates on the cover this publication is aimed at "activists who are not satisfied with dogma or 'orthodoxy' but recognise the need to test all programmes and theories against real life experience."

Please feel free to email this to people who might be interested.

We welcome feedback and constructive criticism.

Email us at martin.wicks@btinternet.com

Down with the “priesthood” - addressing the crisis of the left

“If the balance of power in society is to be shifted in our favour then we are faced with the task of rebuilding workers' organisations from the ground up, in workplaces, on an industrial level, and in working class communities.”

The playwright Arthur Miller once wrote that any set of beliefs become institutionalised and are “administered by one or another priesthood” with a vested interest in them. Looking at the socialist organisations to the left of Labour in Britain, I am reminded of these words. As we approach the General Election the likelihood is that New Labour's tenure will come to an end. Yet despite 13 years of a government carrying out a neo-liberal programme, the socialist left has proved itself incapable of creating the foundations of a political alternative to New Labour, even on a small scale. Each attempt has foundered.

- The **Socialist Labour Party** launched by Arthur Scargill, after an initial impetus, collapsed as a result of undemocratic methods, including the scandalous use of a mythical 3,000 block vote of a “union affiliate” in the hand of one man, out-voting the rest of the conference added together.
- The **Socialist Alliance** broke up as the far left organisations showed themselves incapable of working together. The Socialist Party walked out and then the SWP presented the Alliance with a decision it had not been involved in taking – dissolve in favour of Respect.
- **Respect**, cobbled together over a weekend of discussions between the SWP and George Galloway, without consulting wider forces, likewise broke up as these rather strange bed-fellows fell out.
- The most promising development of the **Scottish Socialist Party** collapsed as a result of the Sheridan affair when a central leader put his own interests above those of the Party. The split

destroyed the electoral base of all its components, making them marginal to Scottish political life.

- **No2EU**, leave aside its political content, was organised too close to the election to make any impact. It was outscored by the SLP which barely exists as a national organisation, by the “Christian Party – Proclaiming Christ's Lordship”, and the English Democrats. The BNP scored more than six times the votes of No2EU.
- And now the **Trade Unionists and Socialist Coalition** has failed to gain the support of the RMT or the FBU and the Communist Party of Britain has decided to withdraw from it.

This ignominious record is in large part the result of the socialist organisations being dominated by a “priesthood” with a vested interest in their particular ideas and analyses; the dogma that each political current is the “authentic” voice of Marxism. Most of the far left groups in Britain are dominated by a self-selecting “priesthood” with various strains of ‘revolutionary orthodoxy’. Like all orthodoxy it destroys independent thought, and ill-trains activists to regurgitate wooden formulae, to follow every twist and turn of a leadership which is unaccountable and self-perpetuating. The “priesthood” *dominate* their organisations which are undemocratic. The members are not allowed to form groupings to challenge this or that policy, or programme, or the leadership. The ‘leadership slate’ in elections encourages conformity and keeps the supposedly ‘democratic’ process under their control.

A sect defends finished ideas, but under the bludgeon of events it can chop and change and

even abandon its previous orthodoxy, though without an accounting as to why the change has been made, or even recognising that it has ditched a previous policy or viewpoint. A “priesthood” does not admit to mistakes because it would undermine its authority as the sole interpreter of the ‘faith’. Hence its members are trained in dogma rather than recognising that all programmes and theories become lifeless unless they are tested against real life experience, amended, refined, and dumped if shown to be false. Mistakes and errors are part of life. If you don’t recognise them you can’t learn from them, which means you will probably repeat them.

Can the socialist movement face up to this series of failures and be honest enough to assess what the roots were? Here we come up against the problem of “the priesthood” and their congenital sectarianism.

As someone who has been through a number of groups, like thousands of activists, I find it difficult to see any way through the quagmire. It is certainly necessary to develop an understanding of the roots of this crisis in order to find a way out of it. Yet this cannot simply be an intellectual exercise. It has to be related to the political situation and practical activity. Even if we do not have a national political organisation, if we remain active we can test out ideas, and methods of working, in the struggles and campaigns in which we are involved.

Moreover, there are a number of examples where socialists have managed to develop groupings in this or that locality where they have even had some electoral success. But the absence of a national framework in which they can operate means that they have little contact with like-minded groups around the country. One thing we would like to do is give them the opportunity to speak about their experience to activists outside of their locality. We will see whether they take up the offer.

An alternative?

I do not believe that the failure of the various

attempts to build a socialist alternative to Labour means that the need for such an alternative has been disproved. However, in the concrete circumstances we face, I would suggest that it is unrealistic to imagine that a new party of the working class can be built currently. Why?

Firstly, because the sectarianism of the socialist organisations – by this I mean the placing of their own organisational interests above those of uniting the working class in defence of *their* interests – has created a fragmented and fractious left, in which the level of distrust currently precludes their involvement in a single organisation. An attempt to cobble together the existing left groups that want to build a new Party, even if such a thing were possible, is only likely to produce an internal life of warring sects.

It is not just that people who have been through the various attempts at building a political alternative have had their fingers burnt. The very idea has been discredited by the self-interest of the various groups that have dominated each initiative, and their undemocratic methods. Less and less people are prepared to put an effort into each succeeding initiative because they do not want to waste their time and effort, especially when they are powerless to determine the shape of an initiative, its direction. They are not going to be foot-soldiers for something which is controlled by a particular organisation.

The unions and the Labour Party

Despite the fact that the RMT and FBU found themselves outside of the Labour Party there has been no further break from it. At last year’s CWU conference, facing the prospect of the government part-privatising the Post Office, some expected that the CWU would break with Labour. The fact that it did not happen is an indication of the lack of a solid political base of support for a break with Labour, and the building of a socialist alternative. The resistance of the leadership to such a direction is a major factor, of course.

In the major unions - UNISON, UNITE and the GMB - there is no groundswell for a break. I have long been convinced that socialists in these unions should concentrate their efforts on *working for a break with those MP's who do not support the fundamentals of union policy*, such as opposition to privatisation, repeal of anti-union legislation and so on. Recent events have underlined that this is a more fruitful line to take than disaffiliation, for which there is little organised support in the major affiliated unions. The GMB had already decided that it would cut support for some of its MP's, who had done little to support the union. Much to the surprise of many, supporters and opponents alike, Prentis announced then end of the "blank cheque" for Labour and the need to examine who UNISON supported and what support they gave the union.

We may doubt Prentis's motivation since he has for so long downplayed the differences with the government, and refused to seriously mobilise his members against it. But after the electoral disaster in the local and European elections, Prentis and other union leaders must know that they can do little to prevent the return of a Tory government.

We need to press the affiliated unions to make a much more rigorous assessment of what they get for the money they pay to Labour. Those who support privatisation should be dumped. Surely even those who support a break from Labour can recognise that so long as the unions remain affiliated to Labour, they should demand that it acts in the interests of their members.

Decline in class consciousness

The second reason for the unlikelihood of a new party emerging is the decline of class consciousness which resulted from the long period of defeats from the 1980's onwards. The far left in particular has failed to make a realistic assessment of the weakness of working class organisation and the balance of power in workplaces and society overall. That balance, in my view, is still rooted in the defeats which we suffered from the time of Thatcher's offensive

against the trades unions and her assault against Council housing. We have failed to shift that balance, which remains overwhelmingly in favour of the employers, since the departure of the Iron Lady.

Despite all the talk of 'fighting back' trade unionism, partnership is still in place in many sectors: in the north sea oil industry, in the motor industry, and even in the NHS. If the trades unions and their members are not independent of the employers then, the number of people who have a socialist consciousness will inevitably be limited.

Rebuilding workers' organisations

If the balance of power in society is to be shifted in our favour then we are faced with the task of *rebuilding workers' organisations* from the ground up, in workplaces, on an industrial level, and in working class communities. Many on the left have been quick to see every dispute as a sign of an "upturn" in the class struggle. It has not made a realistic assessment of the weakness of the unions and the decline in class consciousness. Take the example of the 'single status' issue in local government. Only in one local authority area has there been strike action across the whole workforce (Birmingham). There have been a number of disputes based on single groups of workers, such as the long strike of refuse workers in Leeds. Yet the unions have been unable to stop wage cuts amongst their members, creating anger and disunity.

In the NHS trade union organisation is very weak. They are saddled with a partnership with the employers and the government despite the fact that managements are implementing government policy of commercialisation in the context of a 'health market'. The government has been able to push through its programme of opening up the NHS to private companies, and turning Trusts into semi-independent Foundation Trusts, without any trade union industrial resistance. Most of the impetus for campaigning against hospital closures and cuts in service has tended to come from community based campaigns.

Some would no doubt point to the construction engineering dispute and occupations such as Visteon but these have proved to be isolated events. The construction engineering dispute was important because it showed the importance of rank and file networks, and the possibility of acting outside the framework of employment legislation. But this was done by a group of industrial workers with some industrial muscle and a long experience of trade union activity. What they did could not be easily repeated elsewhere.

The period ahead of us

Whatever the outcome of the General Election, of one thing we can be sure: the working class will be expected to pay the price for the rescue of the financial institutions. Whatever the differences between the political parties they are all agreed on the need for cut-backs in the public sector. Even if the Tory electoral prospects melted away, and the current government was re-elected, the NHS, to take one example faces cuts in spending of the order of £15-20 billion. Each sector of the public services faces cuts of some magnitude. Yesterday we heard of over £400 million cuts in the University sector. There is also a generalised attack on conditions of service. The PCS is currently balloting for industrial action over cuts in the redundancy arrangements.

Defending jobs and public services is therefore a key job for socialists and trade union activists in the run-up to the General Election and the period immediately after it. Given the fact that the main bastion of trade unionism in Britain is in the public sector this will be a severe test of their ability to defend their members. Of course, it is the degree to which the members can be mobilised to defend their own interests and the services they provide, which will determine the outcome.

Building the party

What role can socialist play in this situation? When you think of the level of agreement that exists across the range of organisations, you wonder why they can't work together? For

instance (these are just a few examples) they have a broadly common view of the following:

- > An end to privatisation in the public sector;
- > Re-nationalisation or social ownership of the railways and the privatised public utilities;
- > A new Council House building programme;
- > A more proportional voting system in place of the undemocratic First Past the Post System;
- > A return to a progressive taxation system;
- > A break with 'partnership' by the trades unions, and campaigning for 'the right to work'
- > Campaigning for socially useful and environmentally sustainable work;
- > Opposition to new nuclear build;
- > Opposition to ID cards.

So why can't they work together in the interests of the working class, towards the victories that will be necessary to change the balance of power between the working class and the employers, and the government? The reason they have failed to do so is, I believe, connected to their conception of party building. Not only do they see themselves as the revolutionary equivalent of the elect, but they fail to see that the primary job of socialists is to build and strengthen the independent organisations of the working class.

Working class unity cannot be built by socialist organisations presenting ultimatums to the working class. The fact that the major socialist organisations are ploughing their own furrow, setting up their own campaigns, *based on their over-riding concern to build their own organisations*, means that the left has failed to combine its forces by way of collaborative work around key issues relating to the interests of the working class.

If socialists who, whatever their differences, have a great deal in common, cannot work with each other, how can they convince wide sections of the working class and the oppressed that they can offer a practical way forward?

The working class must come to us

The latest example of the left ploughing its own furrow rather than seeking to build the widest possible unity was the SWP's Right to Work conference. Despite the list of sponsors what cannot be disguised is the fact that it was an SWP initiative rather than one which was the product of collaboration with other organisations. The main purpose appears to be to "unify the struggles". By implication the working class must come to the SWP's initiative. But such an initiative does nothing to build a united fightback because it is seen as the SWP's latest wheeze for "building the party".

What is the difference between the RtW campaign and the National Shop Stewards Network in which the SWP has been participating? Why did it not propose that the NSSN organise such an event? If RtW groups are to be built in every locality will they not cut across the activity of the NSSN? Outside of the Metropolitan areas a Trades Union Council tends to take on the role of a focus for solidarity activity, strike support and so on. Are these groups to cut across their activity?

In practice where the SWP has some numerical strength such groups will be set up. In most areas it will be a dead duck because it will be seen to be a vehicle for the self-interest of the SWP. Moreover, what is the point, in towns where there are not many activists, of the same people meeting with different hats on. It simply encourages hyper-activism.

The SWP is not the only culprit. The Socialist Party has launched its own campaign Youth Fight for Jobs without discussing with anybody else. It has abstained from Keep Our NHS Public for the sake of its own activity.

If the socialist organisations concentrated their forces then campaigning activity would have far more weight. There are already existing campaigns which the left can (and in part does support) but which it has not thrown its resources into with sufficient weight. Two examples of this are the **Defend Council**

Housing Campaign(DCH) and Keep Our NHS Public (KONP).

A bright light amidst a bleak terrain

DCH has been one bright light amidst a bleak terrain. It is a campaign bringing together tenants and trades unions to resist privatisation of Council housing and to fight for a new Council house building programme. It has had the advantage, unlike the rest of the public sector, that a ballot has to be held before transfer can take place. This has provided the opportunity, even if tenant organisation is weak, to block transfer where a majority can be won in a ballot. Whilst many left organisations have supported DCH to one degree or another, it is my impression, that this has been more as a result of the involvement of individuals who are members of socialist organisations rather than as a result of a conscious decision to throw the resources of these organisations into supporting and building the campaign.

In the case of the NHS, we don't have the benefit of ballots to halt privatisation. Keep Our NHS Public (KONP) has had to organise under difficult conditions. Whilst some unions have affiliated and supported it, e.g. UNITE and GMB, UNISON has more or less boycotted it. Although some union branches have affiliated, the campaign is hampered by the lack of involvement of NHS workers in its activity. To a large extent this is because of the weakness of union organisation in the NHS. So although KONP groups have been set up in areas, some of them are small, and tend to involve retired activists, or professionals from the NHS. This is no criticism of them, of course.

Of all the nationalisations carried out by the Atlee government after the Second World War, the NHS was qualitatively different because it ended health provision as a commodity, and turned it into a service free at the point of need, irrespective of the financial circumstance of patients (dentistry and prescriptions were the exception to this).

The impact of government policy on the NHS produced a mass movement in defence of local

services, which to one degree or another bypassed the trades unions. Whilst the trades unions have criticised government policy for the NHS, their support for the government (especially the Labour affiliated ones) has meant they have not built the sort of mass movement which might have forced a change of direction. The government has rowed back to a degree in the face of electoral defeat but its market framework remains intact.

Socialists to the left of Labour have failed to mobilise their own members into building KONP to any significant degree. If they were to prioritise building the campaign then it could have a far greater impact than it has. The last AGM had only a few dozen people attending when the crisis in the NHS demands a much weightier campaign. This is not a criticism of KONP but of left organisations which should have recognised the centrality of opposing New Labour's attack on the service that they created.

What way forward?

Is it possible to crack a few heads together and somehow get the socialist groups working together? There have been calls for a new Socialist Alliance, an Alliance for Socialism, a movement built around the People's Charter. Whether or not we can take such a step remains to be seen. It is difficult to be optimistic. Were such a vehicle to emerge it should concentrate on practical activity which aims to build struggles against existing New Labour policy and against the Tories should they return, rather than electoral activity around which there are currently irreconcilable differences.

But practical collaboration does not require a formal Alliance. There is plenty on which we have agreement. *If we concentrate our forces in campaigning around those issues* it might be possible to begin to change the balance of power in society. If not, then the socialist left will remain a marginal force, unable to turn the tide, and open a practical road to an alternative to 'neo-liberalism' and capitalism.

That does not mean giving up the ghost, though. For those who believe that the interests of the working class and those oppressed by capitalism come before the interests of this or that group or party, we must try and find the means of developing a critique of their false methods, and developing a dialogue and collaboration amongst those who believe that sectarianism and dogmatism are obstacles to the struggles of the working class. We require not a "priesthood" but collaboration of equal activists based on shared experience and discussion. Leadership is necessary in any struggle. But if a leadership becomes ossified into a group based on orthodoxy which can only be correctly interpreted by these 'gifted' leaders then it becomes an obstacle to democracy and renewal.

How can workers take seriously organisations that demand the democratisation of the trades unions when they do not themselves function in a democratic way? How can you profess to lead a struggle to mobilise trade union members to take control of their organisation when your own members have no means of controlling your organisation?

Martin Wicks

Time for The Left?

"It may matter less what organisation we are in than what we are willing to do – together."

The left in this country has never been so weak. Sounds like an academic essay title. 2 pages of A4. Discuss.

And its a symptom of this weakness that the first response, to whatever blog or left publication which chooses to publish this, will be to focus on some chance remark I am about to make (whether for or against the SWP, for example, or whether because of some crime against the movement that I am personally accused of quarter of a century ago - that probably isn't true but equally no-one can remember). Rather than to engage with the point.

Perhaps its because we have always been too impatient. Perhaps we've had the luxury that it hasn't mattered enough. John McDonnell hasn't been incarcerated by an apartheid regime for 25 years in top security like Nelson Mandela. Caroline Lucas hasn't been confined to house arrest by a military junta like Aung San Suu Kyi. Indeed the people who have been victims of that type of treatment - the Irish Guildford 4 and Birmingham 6 of the 1970s and the Pakistan Student 10 this year - haven't, at the time, had the general active and unconditional support of the left as a whole. (Though it seems the same individual legal representative has managed to carry on the same patient defense of such "unpopular" causes throughout all those years.)

In the last three or four decades theres always seemed the possibility - or even probability - that huge advances were about to take place in the movement. So within the left one new venture after another has been set up, too quickly, without proper process, without the trust or involvement of the whole of the left, and then dropped again a few years, or even

months, later. And each time a few new people are attracted, by the immediacy of the moment, but a lot more people who've tried it before and been burnt by the experience don't come back. The truth is that those advances haven't come. What we've had is defeats.

The miners lost. Local government lost. The war didn't stop. The economy has even fallen apart from within but we are in no position to take it over.

Labour was elected - as New Labour. It didn't even have to change the name - as Blair said to their Conference when he won his new Clause 4. That was perhaps the biggest defeat. Having what should have been our own side elected - only to inflict on us neo-liberal economics, PFI, escalating inequalities.... and war. The dockers maintained their strike for 2 years of the Tories, and collapsed in months after Labour got in and sold them out.

Divorced from the base

With the help of the unions. The union leadership which in most cases is as divorced from the base of workers organising for themselves in their workplaces as Labour's expense-soaked MPs are from their constituents.

And now we've got fascists elected.

No question but that this is Labour's fault . Blair and Brown and a succession of Home Secretaries have gone out of their way to legitimise the BNP, in seeking the approval of the Daily Mail for increasingly racist measures before the far right had even thought of them. Playing up the so-called fears of ordinary people about immigration (thus spake Labour

immediately upon the election of the fascist in Yorkshire) is not just repeating Thatcher's "swamping" imagery but is virtually writing the BNP's website for them. No matter that any logical explanation of migration shows that its good for the economy, that the Muslim population is more loyal to this country than any other community, that jobs and houses are just as unavailable for white as for non-white people. That isn't the point. Prejudice is never removed by information alone. To change individual attitude and behaviour requires tackling the questions of power and prejudice together. What Labour has done is to encourage the prejudice and give power to those who wheel it out.

This alone is a reason for everyone to desert Labour.

Strategy for fighting the fascist threat

Of course its not just about electoral politics. Strategically there are three different strands to fighting the fascist threat. First is to fight the fascists wherever they appear, on the streets, when they try to hold events or meet in public premises. It was disgraceful to see Labour Ministers minimising the nuisance of the BNP as no more than "thoughtless" in "clashing" with football matches and describing this as merely a question of police resources.

Second we must tackle the distortions and lies that the fascists peddle, in the local communities, and work on the ground with local campaigners, to explain that we are also angry with the lack of housing and jobs, but that there is an alternative, which is not to scapegoat other communities. Racism is not the answer to the recession. And third is to consider electoral unity - which can include uniting behind one electoral flag, for particular elections, in particular places. While it may be important to get everyone to vote and reduce the proportion of the fascist numbers, it is more convincing to offer people something positive to vote for. Asking everyone to "vote for anyone else" rings hollow if that means voting Labour. Certainly that remains true in a region such as the North West, which sadly

still displays Straw, Blears, Purnell..... and Woolas. These are the people who have most of all legitimised so much of the BNP agenda, especially regarding immigration.

We have to be tough on the causes of the far right as well as on the far right themselves.

And to carry out these activities, in and out of election times, we need to develop an understanding across the left, industrially and electorally, in the interests of the environment and equality, about how we could work together, in and out of elections, against consumer capitalism, inhumane imperialism, and all the appeasement of racism and fascism and warmongering that has taken place under Labour.

A new way of working?

So we may need to define for ourselves a new way of working (reclaim the word "new"), so as to demonstrate unity in action, so as to develop our arguments through debate, and so as to create a framework of policy and action that is environmentally and socially just, inclusive, peaceful, pluralist, tolerant and one that does not rely either on "leaders" or small sectarian advantage when there is a far bigger common objective that could be shared between us all. *It may matter less what organisation we are in that what we are willing to do - together.*

Convention of the Left

That is what the Convention of The Left sought to do, as an overt and immediate alternative to the bankrupt New-Labour-fest that was going on next door. And that is why there was another Convention event September 09. And thats why we have organised "pots and pans" demonstrations against the bankers in Manchester since then - followed by a day of "Making it Public : fighting public service cuts, promoting public ownership" in February 10. And we look forward to further Convention alternative events in September.

We will not blame the recession on its victims. Racism and fascism cannot be the result of the

lack of alternatives from the mainstream. The Convention is just one example of working together. And there is a spirit of unity in the air. Calls for unity are emerging from every quarter of the left.

Our response needs to be committed and long term. It isn't unity to put a flag in the sand and say "this is our party, you must come and join it - and if you don't, you're the splitter". It isn't unity to set up an organisation and then get bored and leave when it isn't all going your way. It isn't unity to create a constitution and use the voting mechanisms to stop plural and inclusive discussion and decision making.

Consensus is key

Following the Convention of The Left last year, links between the Green Left and socialists in other organisations in the North West were developed. An agreement was discussed, within and between. At the Convention Recall event in January Peter Cranie, leading candidate on the Green Euro list, spoke about fighting the fascists. Later, the loudest applause of the day came for Kay Phillips, Chair of Respect and prospective candidate for North Manchester, who said that Respect was backing Peter in the North West, specifically at this time and in this one election, to stop the BNP. This was both logical and political. Unprompted and immediate was the response from Greens in Tower Hamlets, who said they would endeavour to reciprocate there in the Westminster election.

Many socialists doubted that this would be possible. Previous "deals" with the Greens, locally, have been frustrated by "national" decision making. Candidates haven't stood aside for each other. And the Greens are middle class, vote the wrong way in local councils, and support the EU. (Oh, so it would be ok to vote for Labour then - the party of big business, war, privatisation, racism ?)

The reality is that the doubters were wrong. The fascists could have been stopped, in the two particular regions where local left activists had identified that the arithmetic and the

politics added up to uniting in a vote for the Greens. If all left activists had used their energies not just to put out "hope not hate" literature or to go on anti-fascist bashes but to encourage, personally, individually and collectively, a vote for the Greens, then we would not have the BNP in power.

Rank and file activists and even just armchair left wingers can see this. The letters pages of the Morning Star have carried long debates on the subject. People with no explicit political affiliation have seen the sense of the left working together and simply expressed their common sense accordingly.

And the reality is that the links between the left in the Greens and in the socialist organisations involved have strengthened - in both directions - and can continue.

Consensus is key. Working together in practical action creates the trust that helps organisational development. Sticking at it is crucial. And it is worth taking some chances. Creating trust includes the risk of losing something. But a practical demonstration of unity is worth more than simply repeating the word as a mantra, as in the case of the Greens backing Salma Yaqoob of Respect in Birmingham and Respect is backing Caroline Lucas of the Greens in Brighton.

These aren't exclusive or the only possibilities. But the sort of electoral alliances that have already been made are a good omen for the future. Of course, they don't and can't add up to a new party (yet?) They don't require more than a broad understanding (though maybe we can all find a broad organisational umbrella?) There can be no preconceptions. No illusions. No impatience. No possessiveness. No blueprint.

We have to take some responsibility, as the left. We don't have the luxury of any instant fix. It is, now, too serious.

Finally we have launched the "Back the Left" initiative to try and develop collaboration in relation to the General Election. (See

<http://bit.ly/backtheleft>)

Ordinary activists have signed up in their hundreds to the initiative. Clearly stating that there IS an alternative to cuts and privatisation, war and racism, environmental destruction, we recognise that the electoral system is not of our choosing, and meanwhile call for support for a range of left candidates at the Westminster election in 2010. This is also on the basis that left candidates should not clash with each other at local level. The current list includes John McDonnell and Jeremy Corbyn, Caroline Lucas and Peter Cranie, George Galloway and Salma Yaqoob, Val Wise, Dave Nellist, Dai Davies and so on.

John Nicholson

Footnote

15 years ago Blair announced the abolition of Clause 4 part 4 of Labour's constitution. Arthur Scargill formed the Socialist Labour Party - but wouldn't let Dave Nellist join (Socialist Party / expelled Labour MP), and snubbed Tommy Sheridan and others out right from the start (Scottish Socialist Alliance / Scottish Militant Labour).

Dave Nellist went on to chair the Socialist Alliance in England - joined by almost all the left, including the Socialist Workers Party, and standing over 100 candidates in the 2001 General Election under the banner People Not Profit.

Tommy Sheridan went on to lead the Scottish Socialist Party, whose unity across the Scottish left, including some trade union affiliation, gained them 6 seats in Holyrood and

accompanying campaigns against Trident and the council tax and for free school meals and public transport.

But in England the Socialist Party moved out of the Socialist Alliance, in self-fulfilling fear of an SWP take-over, and the SWP duly took it over, closed it down and formed the electoral party, Respect, which gained George Galloway as an MP and a number of councillors notably in East London.

The SP started their own Campaign for a New Workers Party.

And Tommy Sheridan left the SSP, forming his new party, together with the SWP and CWI in Scotland, called Solidarity - and the three way split between the SLP, SSP and Solidarity ensured that almost all the left seats were lost in Scotland in May 2007.

Of course, none of this is reminiscent of the life of Brian.

Meanwhile the Greens were themselves reduced to two MSPs in Scotland, though a larger number of councillors in England and Wales; and the left wing presence within the party (including at leadership level) has not prevented the party standing against other left candidates locally.

Sound like the Life of Brian? But that was comedy. This year the vote for the Greens in the European Elections was narrowly not quite sufficient to prevent the fascists gaining the last places on the European proportional representation list in the North West and Yorkshire and Humberside. It's no longer a joke.

The Future of the Left - a future for the left

“Weakened as they are (the unions)...remain the only social agency that has the potential to positively transform the environment for the left”

Let's start from an important but simple observation. Left unity is necessary but far from sufficient to guarantee the left has some sort of greater influence over politics and the economy in Britain.

Left unity is not just about strength in (existing) numbers – important though that is – because the left also has to be credible to a large number of new, younger people. Neil Kinnock and the *Sun* might have been wrongly fond of the terms ‘toy town revolutionaries’ and the ‘loony left’ but the left is so characterised by a number of traits such as sectarian hair splitting and ultra-leftism that it lacks massive credibility.

“Ferrets fighting in a sack”

Just think of the array of different leaflets and newspapers, all promoting the one true path, that greet the uninitiated on any demonstration. It's not exactly a sober greeting - ferrets fighting in a sack. So left ideas will be more credible if there is greater organisational and political unity on the left but that cannot be on the basis of riding roughshod over some important differences and the nature of past relations. We will never achieve a year zero here. Paper unity will always come shortly undone and there can be no organisational solutions to political problems. The issue of in or out of Labour, for example, has to be addressed in a way that guarantees it is not an obstacle to action, dialogue and the like.

But just bringing the existing left together cannot be the be all and end all of our ambitions. Even if it could be done the sum of the parts would be just too small to be up to the task of exercising influence. Indeed, there are just too many differences and too much baggage that will assume the priority for

debate in any debate. The only practical way to minimise these differences is by increasing the size of the left with loads of new people who think these difference are arcane and irrelevant and have no baggage (while at the same time those that hold baggage feel now to embarrassed to even air them).

If the left can become more united, then it can increase its credibility and thus its numbers in a virtuous upward spiral. So how is this unity to come about?

There is a role for the meetings that try to bring people on the left together. The Convention of the Left was year was exactly an attempt at this – it was quite rightly a talking shop. We cannot hope to have any sort of unity until we get to know and talk to each other in a constructive way. Dialogue is needed to build trust. But in the situation where the political contours – low levels of struggle, low oppositional consciousness and so on - continue to be the same, the differences in these talking shops will continue to be important no matter people's intentions because activists will not be able to move outside what they have become habituated into.

A new way of operating

In whatever the various bits of the left do, we need a new way of operating. This means more listening and debating rather than asserting fixed and steadfast positions. It also means seeing that wider interests are more important than (small) group interests. Demands – if we are to make them – must be pitched in the right way and at the right level (militantly moderate?) in order to cast the net wide enough to catch as many people as possible. This requires a new language.

Yet what is needed, more than anything else, to square the circle or break the logjam is for the only mass organisations that workers still have – the unions, their unions, themselves as organised workers – to act in a way which stimulates, creates or constitutes struggle (and successful struggle at that). Weakened as they are by years of retreat and ruin, they remain the one social agency that has the potential to positively transform the environment for the left. The point here is that the solution to the problems of the left is not really in the hands of the left at the stage we are in at the moment. If that struggle did take place – and that is a very big ‘if’ – then it provides the left with an opportunity not only to swim in a bigger sea (so long as it acts sensibly) but to help be part of a process by which unity in thought and mind can be created or nurtured through unity in deed and act.

Consciousness is the key component

Here is the potential to establish unity though common understanding and that unity would not be of an organisational form (such as a tight one like a party or a loose one like an electoral alliance). Consciousness not affiliation is the key component here because consciousness can lead to action and further heightened consciousness. In this situation, being on the left would be defined by affiliation to radical, oppositional ideas amongst large swathes of people. Of course, the nature of that struggle could be general or sectional or a mixture of both so there is likely to be variance in the potential for generalisation from it.

The left (as it is) has a role to play in encouraging this scale of union struggle. But it cannot create it. The same can be said about the union leaderships. Left leaderships in the CWU, FBU, PCS, RMT, NUJ and so on can help encourage members to fight and they can offer them strategies by which to fight. Yet

they cannot substitute themselves for members fighting. Troops need generals but generals also need troops.

Notwithstanding the opposition of many Labour-affiliated unions to the People’s Charter, this initiative has not taken alight (so far?) not because of some deficiency of its content but, primarily, because it has little to feed into in the way of struggle. The same can be said of the RMT-inspired ‘No2EU – yes to democracy’ electoral slate for the June 2009 Euro elections. And, the same will probably be true of any similar initiative for the forthcoming general election in 2010.

Catch 22?

So we are at a frustrating point where we cannot will struggle into existence and neither can we hope or believe that it will ride over the hill like a white knight. This is something of a Catch 22 situation. This is not a good situation because it means the left will squander the best chance it has had in recent years to make an advance as a result of the ideological crisis of neo-liberalism. Thereby both patience and ambition are needed in equal measures.

There is a key assumption underlying this argument. The obvious one is that no part of the left has ‘the’ solution. But the main one is a hidden one, and it is that there is not likely to be the dawn of new left unity party anytime soon a la the original SSP or Die Linke. Social democracy is just too shrunken in Britain for this to happen and Compass is not in the frame in this equation. Neither will a new left force emerge from nowhere. The present is always pregnant with the future. We have to be sure the pregnancy is neither stillborn nor disabled or disfigured when born.

Gregor Gall