

2011 Labour Party conference - a debate:

CAN LABOUR BE RECLAIMED?

As public sector workers prepare for the planned 30 November one-day strike, the question of a political voice of opposition to cuts, along with their strength in the union, is posed.

Here we reflect some of the debates that take place by reproducing correspondence between a reader of the Socialist, Tim Hayward, and Peter Taaffe, Socialist Party general secretary.

Dear comrades,
Please find enclosed a direct debit for £5 a month, as payment for the Socialist and Socialist Today magazine.

I have subscribed before, but cancelled, partly out of frustration with the Socialist Party stance towards the Labour Party. I still have those disagreements - I think that stance should be more friendly and comradely towards Labour, bearing in mind there are still many good socialists who remain in the Labour Party.

In the labour movement generally, our numbers are not nearly as great as we would all like them to be, so we should strive, as much as possible, to keep as much unity and common ground as we can. That doesn't stop heated debate, but as far as possible, nothing we do should be to the detriment of others, working in other parts of the labour movement.

The idea of TUSC standing candidates in elections draws ridicule and anger from many in the labour movement, but that could be partly because of the way the arguments are pitched. Some things are better left unsaid, we don't have to be seen to be writing off Labour as a lost cause - we can't be certain that a revival of socialist ideas in the Labour Party won't materialise at some point in the future.

I would think it is sufficient to say that as the Labour Party currently stands, it is not really possible to openly campaign for socialist policies, and even if we could, it wouldn't sound plausible to the electorate, bearing in mind the policies carried out over the 13 years of the previous Labour governments. So we see the clear need to independently put socialist policies before the electorate, and try to build a pole of attraction around which the unions can organise politically.

TUSC and the Socialist Party could and should be playing the part of exerting a gravitational pull on the labour movement (and party) towards socialism. But to be able to do that requires a medium (field) of comradely debate and approach.

Nevertheless, having said all that, I cannot

escape the feeling that we should work and engage where we feel most comfortable and energised. I can honestly say that I felt the most energised and enthusiastic during the No2EU campaign and those initial meetings I attended - as a natural progression from No2EU - when TUSC was set up (see box on right).

However, then, the wind left my sails, when I heard chants on a demonstration of 'Labour out' (to be plausibly replaced by what?). To anyone watching, who had little knowledge of the political intricacies of the situation it would have looked like the demonstration was in league with the Tories and Liberals!

We have to think things through a bit more surely?

Having said all that, I only have so much time available, and as the events in various parts of the world are showing things may possibly eventually move too quickly to allow the necessary time to turn around the Labour Party (those wasted efforts may well always be one or more steps behind where they would need to be! But, as I intimated earlier, we have to be careful not to be marginalised ourselves, by the way things may turn out).

Quite frankly, even though the last Labour election campaign I helped out with was very worthwhile, due to there being a really good candidate from the Labour Representation Committee, I fear that will be the exception to the rule (but I would willingly commit time to supporting such a candidate in the future, even though I won't be a member of the Labour Party).

But apart from such exceptions, I've spent too much time in the past delivering Blairite dross. Trouble is such activity would be seen as a necessity to earn 'credibility' within the ranks of Labour, as it stands, and I just haven't got time for that.

So, in spite of my tedious reservations outlined here, I want to join TUSC.

Yours fraternally,
Tim Hayward

We welcome Tim Hayward's letter. Although he has arrived at the correct destination in the end, by joining the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC), along the way he nevertheless expresses criticism of the Socialist Party's perceived approach to the key question of the political alternative to the Labour Party, which we believe is a new mass workers' party.

He expresses his views in a straightforward and honest fashion, as we will seek to do in this reply. It is better where vital issues affecting the working class are concerned to avoid false hypocritical 'diplomacy' in favour of the maxim: 'say what needs to be said and do what needs to be done'.

In asking for a "comradely" approach "towards Labour" and especially to the "still good socialists who remain in the Labour Party", he is pushing at an open door. Insults and jeering at opponents, even right-wing trade union and Labour leaders, is no substitute for seeking to convince workers through argument, no matter what their political affiliations are.

On the other hand, we do believe that the few socialists who are labouring away to change the Labour Party are pursuing a futile task. Never in its history has the left been so weak both in the Parliamentary Labour Party and among the rank and file.

We have pointed out many times that they are like prisoners smuggling the occasional note between the bars to workers outside. Very few workers participate in what is increasingly an empty shell. In fact even the 'shell' may no longer exist if Miliband gets his way and further dissolves the party, particularly the influence of the trade unions within it.

Heated debate

Small cabals - who have no connection with the radical and heroic projects of Labour - run a machine totally alien to working class people. Any socialist - inside or outside the Labour Party, and it is mostly the latter - is bound to come into collision with them.

As Tim concedes this does not preclude "heated debate", not just with the Con-Dems but also with and against Labour councillors and the majority of Labour MPs who are doing the dirty work of the government in justifying cuts and carrying them out at local level.

It is unrealistic to think that workers who are losing their jobs - some of them never to work again - and many seeing vital services destroyed should engage in polite exchanges with 'Labour... Yes Labour councils and councillors.' It is legitimate to express anger and, yes, rage - not just against the Tories and Liberals but against a Labour caste at local level which is inflicting terrible punishment on working people.

It is also necessary to forcefully take up and oppose those who seek to excuse Labour sell-outs. Some on the left refused to endorse the Socialist Party's implacable opposition to 'all cuts'. But we were at one with those like Mark Serwotka, general secretary of the PCS civil servants union, and Bob Crow, leader of the RMT transport workers union.

Those who are prepared to accept 'some cuts' are acting as a left flank, apologists for Labour councillors and coun-



Union members on the 26 March trade union demo photo Paul Mattsson

cils who are betraying everything which the Labour Party originally stood for.

For instance, Waltham Forest council - controlled by Labour - has inflicted £3 million of cuts to wages and conditions of its workers yet £18 million has been paid to 'consultants' whose main job is to make these cuts to jobs and services! And this is as typical of 'Labour' councils as Tory or Lib Dem ones.

Will local government emerge at the end of the 'cuts programme' in the absurd position of the NHS where "in 2006, Accountancy Age reported that the NHS was spending more on consultants than all Britain's manufacturers put together"? [London Review of Books.]

This scandal was pushed through by the likes of New Labour health ministers Alan Milburn and Patricia Hewitt, who then got cushy, well-paid jobs in the health private sector!

Character of the party

However, the central point in Tim's letter is on the character of the Labour Party at present and whether it is possible to reclaim it in the future. We can never say never where politics are concerned. Nor is it theoretically excluded that if a mass workers' party is not urgently built, the impulse for a new party could come from within even a capitalist party.

Such is the depth of the present economic and social crisis that, in time, this can find an expression even in such a party leading to a left split, out of which could come the basis of a radical or even a new mass workers' party.

Something like this happened in Greece where the 'left-wing' of the liberal capitalist party the Centre Union - led

by the late Andreas Papandreu - came out of that party following the overthrow of the Greek military junta in 1974.

Such was the sweep of the revolution in the post-1974 period and the colossal changes in consciousness which this evoked that the objective basis for the new mass socialist party Pasok was created. The present 'Pasok' is a million miles removed from its socialist origins.

But we do not think that it is likely that Labour could be transformed in Britain in the next period. We cannot just 'wait' for future events to hopefully change the Labour Party, while in the meantime the working class goes to hell in a handcart.

We have to seek to exert pressure now through a new workers' party, no matter how small initially. The Labour party has been transformed under the New Labour counter-revolution carried out first by Blair, then by Brown and today by Miliband into a capitalist formation.

In fact, Tony Blair recognised this when he declared that New Labour was an entirely 'new party'. Conversely if Labour is to be 'transformed', as some still hope, then this would effectively mean setting up a new party, which by standing on clear socialist policies would represent a clear break.

Labour's current policies are a continuation of Blair's pro-capitalist agenda. This is expressed in terms of policy; witness Miliband's completely pro-capitalist assault on the trade unions at the TUC. It is reflected also in the internal organisation and character of the Labour Party, which is fundamentally different from what existed in the past.

The old Labour Party, of which we were a significant force (through Militant - now the Socialist Party), involved



Tony Blair was known as George Bush's poodle photo Socialist Party

the participation of the working class and the trade unions. It was a 'capitalist workers' party - with a pro-capitalist leadership at the top but a base among workers below. But it was also relatively open and democratic, and the leadership was forced to take account of the rank-and-file and its views.

Those who seek to argue that 'nothing has fundamentally changed' in the character of the Labour Party are mistaken. Compare the present situation in the Labour Party to the 1960s. Harold Wilson, supported by Barbara Castle the Labour minister at the time, tried to push through anti-union legislation.

This was massively opposed by the rank-and-file of the party and the majority of the National Executive Committee. If Wilson had not retreated he would have been compelled to resign. Neither could he militarily support US imperialism on the Vietnam War - despite the urgings of the then US President Johnson - for the same reason.

A 'different' party?

Tony Blair, however, got the support of Labour's conference delegates - who in the past were solidly to the left of the leadership - for the obscene and criminal Iraq war.

Some object that to describe New Labour as 'capitalist' is an 'exaggeration', because workers are still voting Labour. This, it is argued, indicates that Labour - 'warts and all' - is 'different' from the other two capitalist parties.

Yes, Labour is 'different', in the same way as the Democratic Party in the US differs from the right-wing Republican Party. The Democrats are more 'liberal' but are still a pronounced capitalist party.

So also was the Liberal Party in the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century. Sections of the working class and the trade unions in Britain saw it as an alternative until mighty events - the decline of British imperialism and its inability to continue to grant concessions to the working class - undermined this. This prepared the way for the rise of the Labour Party itself as a mass political expression of the trade unions.

Those who furnished the mass basis for the Labour Party were the sons and daughters of workers who previously voted Liberal. This will happen with the building of a new party. Those who have voted Labour and still do can be won to a new mass workers' party.

Even to those who hope that Labour can be changed, we pose the questions:

What do we do now in the political and electoral arenas? How does the labour movement exert pressure on Labour in order to defeat and change its present craven capitulation to big business, which is disheartening its former and present supporters? By propaganda or vague hopes for the future alone? The bureaucratic caste which dominates Labour is totally impervious to this.

New party

But Labour's reaction could be different if a new party was formed, with a solid base among trade unionists. Electoral success for such a party could force change in the current anti-working class, anti-union stance of New Labour. More importantly, it would provide a political voice to millions who are effectively disenfranchised.

The basis of such a party must be built now. However, Tim writes: "The idea of TUSC standing candidates in elections draws ridicule and anger from many in the labour movement, but that could be partly because of the way the arguments are pitched."

But Keir Hardie in Britain and James Connolly in Ireland - who were pioneers, like we are today for workers' parties - were also ridiculed. They got very small votes initially (Hardie gained 8% of the vote in his first parliamentary election in the Lanarkshire coalfields). They were proven to be correct and their critics silenced by the development of the kind of parties they campaigned for.

Tim concedes this point when he writes: "So we see the clear need to independently put socialist policies before the electorate, and try to build a pole of attraction around which the unions can organise politically."

But then he states: "TUSC and the Socialist Party could and should be playing the part of exerting a gravitational pull on the labour movement (and Party) towards socialism. But to be able to do that requires a medium (field) of comradely debate and approach." But this is precisely what Socialist Party members do at union conferences, in debates and in articles.

The wheel of history has been turned back. The mass workers' party, which the Labour Party was at its base, has been destroyed. We have no alternative but to fight for a new mass socialist pole of attraction. Moreover, Tim agrees with us and we welcome this. We hope many others will follow suit and build TUSC and take the arguments for it to all corners of the labour movement.

What is TUSC?

The Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) was set-up last year to enable trade unionists, community campaigners and socialists who wanted to resist the pro-consensus of the establishment parties to stand candidates in the 2010 general election.

By registering TUSC with the electoral commission, candidates could appear on the ballot paper as Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition rather than as 'Independent' which they would otherwise have to do under electoral law.

TUSC came out of a series of discussions by participants in the No2EU-Yes to Democracy coalition, which contested the 2009 European elections with the official support of the RMT transport workers' union, the Socialist Party, and others - the first time a trade union had officially backed a national electoral challenge to Labour since the party's foundation.

TUSC is a coalition with a steering committee which includes, in a personal capacity, the RMT general secretary Bob Crow, and fellow executive member Owen Herbert; the assistant general secretary of the PCS civil servants union, Chris Baugh, and the union's vice-president, John McNally; the president of the National Union of Teachers, Nina Franklin; and the recently retired general secretary of the Prison Officers Association, Brian Caton. The Socialist Party and the Socialist Workers Party are also represented on the committee.

TUSC is a federal 'umbrella' coalition, with agreed core policies endorsed by all its candidates but with participating organisations accountable for their own campaigns. Its core policies include, among others, opposition to public spending cuts and privatisation, student grants not fees, and the repeal of the anti-trade union laws.

It makes a clear socialist commitment to "bringing into democratic public ownership the major companies and banks that dominate the economy, so that production and services can be planned to meet the needs of all and to protect the environment".

See www.tusc.org.uk

- Oppose all cuts to council jobs, services, pay and conditions - we reject the claim that 'some cuts' are necessary to our services.

- Reject above inflation increases in council tax, rent and service charges to compensate for government cuts.

- Vote against the privatisation of council services, or the transfer of council services to 'social enterprises' or 'arms-length' management organisations, which are first steps to privatisation.

- Use all the legal powers available to councils, including powers to refer local NHS decisions, initiate referenda and organise public commissions and consultations, to oppose both the cuts and government policies which centrally impose the transfer of public services to private bodies.

- When faced with government cuts to council funding, councils should refuse to implement the cuts. We will support councils which in the first instance use their reserves and prudent borrowing powers to avoid passing them on - while arguing that the best way to mobilise the mass campaign that is necessary to defeat the cuts is to set a budget that meets the needs of the local community and demands that the government makes up the shortfall.

We welcome contributions to this debate in the pages of the Socialist.
Email: editors@socialistparty.org.uk



Labour councils spend millions on privatisation and consultants photo Socialist Party

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