

Government condemned at ballot box

Hannah Sell

Deputy general secretary, Socialist Party

The general election of May 2010 seems a lifetime ago. For the thousand richest people in Britain, whose wealth has increased by 18%, the year that followed has been a resounding success. The number of billionaires increased from 53 to 73. For the rest of us the year has brought pain, with the biggest fall in family income since 1977 and cuts and privatisation of public services on an unprecedented scale.

The misery inflicted by the Con-Dem coalition has not been taken lying down. We have seen the biggest student movement in 25 years, and the biggest trade union demonstration in Britain's history. At the end of June coordinated strike action against the cuts will begin.

5 May however, was the first opportunity for voters to pass judgement on the coalition at the ballot box. As was widely predicted beforehand, the Liberal Democrats bore the brunt of the population's anger, losing 700 councillors in England and 12 members of the Scottish Parliament.

As Jonathan Freedland put it in the Guardian: "The party was not just given a bloody nose by the electorate: it was slapped, punched, kicked and finally knifed before being left for dead."

The overwhelming defeat in the AV referendum also reflected the population's fury with its main advocates, the Liberal Democrats. Some media commentators attacked the electorate for voting in the referendum on 'trivial' grounds. But given a rotten choice between two bad systems, why not vote in order to punish the Liberal Democrats?

As even Nick Clegg admitted before the election, AV was a 'dirty little compromise'

5 May was the first opportunity for voters to pass judgement on the Coalition at the ballot box. As was widely predicted beforehand, the Liberal Democrats bore the brunt of the population's anger,



The Lib Dems lost 700 councillors

which would have been no fairer or more proportional than the existing system.

The Tories, by contrast, are breathing a sigh of relief that they have, for now, escaped the electoral consequences of their brutal policies. There are several reasons for this. In the working class cities of the North the Tories are still hated for the crimes of Thatcher. As a result they had no councillors to lose!

The same is true in parts of London, where there were no elections this year. In most of England, however, Tory councils still dominate, despite some gains for Labour including in Gravesham and Ipswich. The Tories were even able to marginally increase their numbers of councillors, largely by making gains from the Liberal Democrats.

This is no surprise - after all why vote for the monkey if you can have the organ grinder? However, it would be a major error to assume the Tories will escape in future elections. A year into the coalition government, a section of society still believes the Tory propaganda that it was New Labour's policies in government that were responsible for the misery that is now being inflicted.

However, the Tories only escaped punishment because the cuts, brutal as they are, are only just beginning to bite at local level. As local services close around voters' ears, anger at the government will increase, including in the seemingly safe Tory shires.

The Tories are aware of the electoral dangers they face, as was demonstrated by their hasty retreat from Suffolk county council's plans to become an 'Easy' council and privatise virtually all of its services.

Nationally Labour gained over 800 seats. But this was despite, not because of, its policies. Millions of people in working class areas voted Labour to punish the government, hoping that Labour councils would cut less brutally than those led by the Tories or Liberal Democrats.

One consequence of this was that the BNP suffered an electoral meltdown. This does not preclude that the BNP, or other far right forces, could make an electoral comeback in the future against a background of economic crisis and rising unemployment if a mass, anti-racist workers' party has not developed.

Scotland and Wales

Workers who voted Labour did so without real enthusiasm. In Scotland, the Scottish National Party (SNP) beat Labour decisively. A major factor in this was Liberal Democrat voters switching to the SNP. However, the SNP also won in some working class inner city seats which were traditional Labour strongholds. This reflected a feeling that the SNP would be far more likely than Labour to fight in the interests of the working class in Scotland.

In reality, the SNP will attack, not defend, workers' living standards. However, the rejection of Labour for a seemingly more combative alternative is an illustration of workers' distrust of Labour, not just in Scotland but across Britain. Similarly, in Brighton, where the Green Party has its stronghold, it became the largest party on the council.

Even in Wales, where Labour made gains, it was left one seat short of a majority. Fundamentally, Labour's woeful failure to provide a combative and coherent



Campaigning for TUSC in Swansea photo Socialist Party Wales

opposition to the government flows from its support for the essence of the government's policies.

When in power Labour acted in the interests of big business, and in particular of finance capital. More privatisation of public services took place when New Labour was in office than under any previous government. The deregulation of the City, which began under the last Tory government, continued apace under New Labour.

When the economic crisis began, New Labour bailed out the banks and demanded that working class people paid the price. Just like the Tories and Lib Dems, Labour support huge cuts in public services, just at a marginally slower rate.

In the last election New Labour said it would carry out cuts equal to four-fifths of those being carried out by the current government. It is no surprise that, at local level, Labour councils are implementing government cuts without hesitation.

Weakness of Labour

Such is the weakness of the Labour leadership they do not even seem to seriously aspire to a majority Labour government. On the contrary, Ed Miliband has again appealed to the hated Lib Dems, obviously trying to prepare the ground for a future Labour/Liberal coalition.

Labour was founded a century ago because the working class was no longer prepared to back the capitalist Liberal party. The development of Labour as - at base - a mass party of the working class, albeit with a capitalist leadership, marginalised the Liberals for an historical era.

It is ironic that today Labour is chasing after the Liberal Democrats just as the Lib Dems face electoral annihilation. It confirms again that Labour today is not a mass party of the working class but is one more capitalist party.

These elections demonstrate the worthlessness of the unspoken strategy of most national trade union leaders - to defeat the cuts by voting Labour. The election results will have bought home the need for coordinated strike action against the cuts to many trade unionists.

Weakness of coalition

The weakness of the coalition government has also been graphically highlighted by the election campaign. The cracks in the coalition have become fissures. This does not mean that it is about to collapse, although the pressure of different events - in particular of a mass movement of the working class - could break the government apart within a short period of time.

However, as the attempts since the election of Cameron and Clegg to declare peace show, neither party has any interest in breaking up the coalition. For the cash-strapped and profoundly unpopular Liberal Democrats, triggering an early general election would be committing hara-kiri.

Some on the right wing of the Tory party are bleating that Cameron should take advantage of the election results and break up the coalition in the vain hope that the collapse of the Liberal Democrats would deliver a Tory majority.

The Tory party leadership know better and, given their complete dominance of the coalition, have no pressing reason to bring it to an end. However, as Philip Stevens commented in the Financial Times, "coalitions rot from the bottom up".

At the top, the coalition parties are clinging to each other and to power. For the Lib Dem activists who are watching their party being destroyed, however, it is a different story. The ousted Lib Dem leader of Nottingham city council has called for Clegg to resign immediately.

In response to the pressure of the party rank and file, Clegg has promised to be

more "independent" of the Tories and for "a louder Lib Dem voice in government". Objectively, the Lib Dem voice in government is now weaker than ever, but the pressure on Clegg and Co to stand up to the Tories over the destruction of the NHS and the scale of the cuts is enormous. To fail to do so will also be to commit hara-kiri, albeit more slowly.

So the removal of Clegg, splits in the Lib Dems, and even their withdrawal from the government are all possibilities. The Lib Dems might then back an unstable Tory minority government from outside on a 'grace and favour' basis, or perhaps trigger a general election.

There are a number of fault lines for the government, including the difficulties that could be created at a later stage by a referendum in Scotland on independence. But however it is manifested, the root of the government's weakness is the continuing profound crisis of capitalism in general and British capitalism in particular.

Economic crisis

Far from being over, the economic crisis in Britain is ongoing. According to the National Institute of Economic and Social Research Britain's output will not reach the levels of 2008 until 2013. And even this may be optimistic. The latest figures show that manufacturing, previously the part of the economy that had stuttered into growth, now has the second lowest level of new orders since the recovery began in 2009.

The fall in orders is a reflection of very weak demand in Britain, rather than reflecting the weakness of Britain's puny exports. No wonder. On average, workers are taking home £1,088 less a year than two years ago.

Their real pay has fallen by 5% since the beginning of 2009, which was half way through the recession. As the Bank of England governor Mervyn King ad-

mitted, workers are already suffering the most sustained fall in wages since the 1920s.

Bad as they are, the government's cuts have only just begun to bite, and will dramatically further depress demand. It is a pipe dream to imagine that British capitalism will be able to compensate with increased exports against a background of a profound crisis of European and world capitalism.

Mass resistance

British capitalism has no way out other than to attempt to offload the crisis on the working class. However, they are already facing mass resistance to their attempts to do so. The working class flexed its muscles on 26 March - when over half a million people marched in opposition to the cuts.

At the end of June the PCS and NUT unions, perhaps along with others, will strike together against the cuts and in defence of public sector pensions. In the other public sector unions the call for co-ordinated strike action is growing. A 24-hour public sector general strike is on the agenda for 2011. This would terrify the government.

The working class in Britain now needs its own political voice more urgently than ever. The Trade Unionists and Socialists Against Cuts candidates in the local elections, who received 25,000 votes, were a step in that direction.

Over the next year the anti-cuts movement can draw the conclusion that it is necessary to stand far more widely to offer an electoral alternative to the axe men and women.

Most importantly, faced with the barbarity of 21st century capitalism, a growing number of workers and young people are searching for socialist ideas. Our most important task in the immediate period is to reach them with a clear socialist programme.

Welsh Assembly

Labour win but socialist alternative to cuts needed

Welsh Labour won the Welsh Assembly elections, but it could not secure an overall majority, winning just 30 of the 60 seats in the Senedd. Welsh Liberals tried to present themselves as different to the Clegg Liberals in Westminster and kept their losses down to 4% of the vote. The biggest losers were the Welsh nationalists, Plaid Cymru, who lost 3% of the vote and four seats.

Labour is trying to form a government on its own. It is unlikely to be able to have a working majority on its own for the Assembly's five year term but it will still try and muddle through each issue in the short run. An agreement or coalition with the Liberals or even Plaid Cymru is possible in the long run - there is little to choose between the three parties' policies on all the key issues of public services.

Clearly, as in the English council elections, working class voters voted Labour in the hope of stopping the Westminster Con-Dem government. Welsh Labour played on this.

Peter Hain, Labour Shadow Secretary for Wales, said during the election: "Whenever someone tells me they're not sure they'll vote, I start talking about student tuition fees, the need to defend the health service and the public spending cuts. It's like a political lightning conductor".

But this is a cynical line. New Labour introduced tuition fees and trebled them, the outgoing Welsh Labour-led coalition voted to cut spending on health by 7.6% and Labour would implement enormous public spending cuts if in power in Westminster.

Plaid Cymru suffered its worst result in an Assembly election. The fault lines between its southern regions, relying on working class support, and northern regions based more on small business and farming interests are being exposed. Leader Ieuan Wyn Jones from Ynys Mon in north Wales is under intense criticism for refusing to rule out a deal with the Tories during the election campaign which undermined Plaid in the south Wales valleys.

However the Labour vote is also quite weak. Labour won 42% in the constituencies but just 37% in the regional lists. A substantial socialist alternative to the cuts could have won a lot of those votes.

Socialist Party Wales stood as part of the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) on two regional seats in South Wales Central and South Wales West. TUSC has a low profile at this stage without the resources to reach its potential supporters and with no media coverage. TUSC gained 1,639 votes, 0.5% of the vote in the two regions it stood in.

With the Socialist Labour Party and Communist Party also standing in the lists the left vote was split three ways. In South Wales Central, for example, the combined left vote was 4.1% of the vote and a united campaign would have overtaken Ukip.

Nevertheless the canvassing and street campaigning done by TUSC got an excellent response from working people. In Cardiff Central, Swansea West, Pontypridd and Cynon Valley many posters went up in windows indicating the support we received on the doorstep.

Dave Reid, Socialist Party Wales

Faced with the barbarity of 21st century capitalism, a growing number of workers and young people are searching for socialist ideas.

Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition

TUSC AGAINST CUTS

The Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition stood 143 candidates in the local elections