

Workers' Liberty

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SWP wreck unity in Socialist Alliance

Where now for the left?

IN June the Socialist Workers Party packed a meeting of Birmingham Socialist Alliance with newly signed-up SWP members to remove the entire executive of the local Alliance — including the chair, victimised FBU militant Steve Godward — and replace them with SWP members and fellow travellers. In Birmingham the SWP want to see a “Peace and Justice” candidate — mounted jointly with the leaders of local mosques — that is an alliance with a religious hierarchy. Comrades in Birmingham rightly fear that such an alliance would be a betrayal of independent working-class politics and full civil equality for lesbian and gay people and for women. Those comrades had to go.

On Saturday 21 July, at the National Council of the Socialist Alliance, SWP delegates, along with its fast disappearing allies, voted down (by a narrow margin) a motion which “regretted the moves of the Socialist Workers Party to politically dominate the committee of Birmingham Socialist Alliance and exclude so-called minority viewpoints from that committee...”

“This stands in stark contrast to the Socialist Alliance constitution which states: ‘We also recognise the desirability of balance and inclusiveness for political trends within the Socialist Alliance at all levels of the organisation’.”

For the SWP’s leading SA Executive member, John Rees, minority rights now only hold for “big” political differences such as that of “reform versus revolution”. Nothing like this is written in the constitution. It is the interpretation of the leadership of the SWP. It transparent bull-shit to cover their “coup”.

Of course the political difference here is of profound importance and have immense implications. The “peace and justice” candidacy in Birmingham will be a test run for the SWP’s central project for the SA — a “broader” alignment, projected to include such as the Green Party, the Welsh nationalists of Plaid Cymru and the Islamist Muslim Association of Britain (MAB is the political front of the Muslim Brotherhood, the oldest, largest and most politically sophisticated Islamist organisation in existence) and Saddam Hussein’s friend George Galloway MP. Marxists long ago defined such cross-class alliances in politics as a “popular front”.

The Socialist Alliance has now split. Its time as a genuine alliance of the class struggle left is over. Groups and individuals are falling away.

Some want to “stay and fight” but most recognise it is only a matter of time before they have to leave.

Soon only people who are prepared to play stooge — like the SA chair Nick Wrack and some of the International Socialist Group — will be left. SWP leaders will dismiss those hiving off as “sectarians”, but these developments must cause many SWP members disquiet.

The breaking point has come on two issues: the SWP’s intolerance for dissent; and the pronounced turn to cross class popular frontism.

Democracy

THE idea that the SWP would always tolerate dissent in the SA was illusory. For a while a “consensus” on most issues could be found inside the SA. Now a controversial and opportunist change in policy has been made and the SWP can tolerate no dissent at all. They have used their built-in majority in the SA to take over the Executive and put in place their own unprincipled political strategy.

All that was, unfortunately, predictable. Why would the SWP give more tolerance for minorities in the SA than there is in the SWP itself. Especially as it might lead to awkward questions about the anti-democratic authoritarian internal structures of the SWP. One only has to look at the large number of expulsions from the SWP’s international organisation — dominated by the British SWP — in recent years to see SWP authoritari-

anism in practice.

Unfortunately some on the left have been starry-eyed about the SWP. Some, the ISG, but also the CPGB (*Weekly Worker*), have adapted to the SWP’s politics, turning themselves inside out where necessary. They joined in the denunciation of WL as “Islamophobic” for opposing alliances with religious/political bigotry. Now they are finding out that their adaptation has won them no favours, has not shielded them from SWP hostility to everyone outside their own ranks. On 11 July 2003, outside “Marxism” a sizeable group of SWPers — organised it seems by an SWP leader, Chris Banbury — surrounded two members of the CPGB and tried by snatching leaflets critical of the SWP and papers from them, to provoke a fight. The ISG are still a useful satellite for the SWP, although that did not stop them removing the ISG member in Birmingham from the local Executive. Under the new regime they will find their “usefulness” is greatly reduced.

If you don’t believe us on these things then the words of someone who worked for a long time as a loyal friend of the SWP are worth pondering.

In an article in *New Statesman* on 21 July, Nick Cohen quotes a recent speech by Mike Marqusee the former press officer of the Stop the War Coalition and former leading member of the Socialist Alliance. SWP members will dismiss Cohen as a “pro-imperialist” media hack (he supported the Iraq war) but they cannot so easily dismiss Marqusee.

Marqusee says, “The SWP is constitutionally incapable of working with others on an equal, honest and transparent basis. In the end, their aim is dominance, and anything that threatens or undermines that dominance will always, in their eyes, be suspect.... Truth is reified in the form of jargon — and any nuance that cannot be expressed in that jargon is ruled out of consideration. In the end, the SWP is imbued with an authoritarian ethic - most recently confirmed by their readiness to dub as ‘divisive’ or ‘disruptive’ anyone who voices political preferences contrary to theirs.”

(It is a pity that Marqusee slunk away from the SA, when disabused of his own pretenses. Saying this and fighting for democracy in the SA would have shown him to be a serious militant.)

Popular Fronts

ON the SWP’s popular frontism Cohen has written a truth.

“The SWP wins a seat on Preston City Council... The Socialist Alliance took the seat because 12 local mosques put their support behind its candidate. You mull on the reasons for your success, and reflect that socialism with priestly allies isn’t new for you. The Stop the War Coalition had, after all, invited the Muslim Association of Britain to co-host its demonstrations... Why not win more than a seat in Preston by seeking an arrangement with the only people who can deliver the votes?”

The SWP’s defining method here is what it has always been — what “works”, what is a “success” is always good. They are prepared to sacrifice every political principle in order to get this bandwagon rolling. The means condition and shape the ends, even when they directly contradict each other.

The principle of expediency shapes basic policy: so much so that Lindsey German said in a meeting at Marxism 2003 “I’m in favour of defending gay rights... But I am not prepared to have it as a shibboleth”*.

* She went on to note that this shibboleth (!) had been created by “people who . . . regard the state of Israel as somehow a viable presence”. Thus she managed to combine — in her own inimitable stream of consciousness style — two reactionary political attitudes: compromise with sexual liberty and the desire to see the destruction of the state of Israel. Of course those people who defend the right of Hebrew-speaking Israelis to a state (WL and others) also support the right of the Palestinians to a state just as much as they support full sexual freedom!

On allying with Muslims we need to separate out two issues. Socialists who do not combat anti-Muslim racism and counter the Islamophobic hysteria and scapegoating encouraged by the so-called “war on terror”, are traitors to socialism. But accepting reactionary Islamist ideas, or to facilitate alliances with non-working-class organisations, with the priests, bourgeois and petit bourgeois of the Muslim communities, is something else again.

In the Stop the War Coalition the SWP courted MAB, an organisation which supports the creation of a religious dictatorship; its place on the political spectrum can be judged from the fact that MAB thinks Muslims who abandon their faith should either be killed or jailed for treason.

This is not a question of marching alongside those you disagree with in a good common cause. By actively promoting the MAB as part of the anti-war movement’s leadership, the SWP has helped open up thousands of young Muslims to the influence of fundamentalist bigots.

Equality for women and for lesbian, gay and bi-sexual people is often the point on which our conflicts with religious hierarchies and political Islamists arise. For serious socialists, such equality is no more negotiable than is opposition to racism and support for Muslim and all other workers in struggle with their employer.

Those in Britain now who are most in need of the same rights and freedoms — for their sexuality for instance — and are most distant from them in their daily lives, are sections of the Islamic communities. No compromise on gay rights!

If criticism of religious bigotry is “racist” or “Islamophobic” ask yourself why socialists from countries such as Algeria, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and Indonesia — many of whom have to fight for their lives against the Muslim Brotherhood and organisations like it — are among the most vehement opponents of Islamism.

It is the left leaning, non-religious, secular workers and youth from a Muslim background that the SWP will now repel and exclude. On 20 July, at the SA National Council, SWP stooge, Nick Wrack refused to let a Muslim comrade from Birmingham speak in the debate on “Peace and Justice”, and relations with the “Muslim community”. This despite the fact that the comrade was the only person from a Muslim background in the room (he is an ex-SWPer who is very critical of their turn to the Mosques).

Where do we go from here?

THE destruction of the SA by the SWP is likely to dismay and demoralise hundreds of socialist activists who had responded positively to the left unity the SA seemed to represent. That is why we need to quickly work out the lessons of this SA and move on.

First and foremost we have to be clear about the politics of the break in the SA.

The basic orientation of the SWP — and those who went along with them — to the Socialist Alliance was always limited and wrong in more ways than one. The SA was originally set up to have an orientation to the labour movement, that is to organise workers — of all religions, colours and backgrounds — looking for an alternative to Blairism. The SWP took the Alliance away from this orientation.

Wider left unity brought many activists together but still our electoral results were not good. Why? The problem was one of rebuilding a socialist culture in the working class. That required doing more than “advertising ourselves” to voters with a jumble of popular left-wing slogans. We needed to put down roots in working class communities. We needed to organise consistently and long-term around issues that were most affecting workers and working class communities. We still need to do that.

For anyone thinking that the “popular frontism” of the SWP will be limited to this or that alliance with a local religious hierarchy, think again. At the 10 May conference the SWP also voted down an amendment to say that socialists should oppose the BNP independently, and not in blocs with the Lib-Dems and Tories.

The basic socialist effort to rouse the working class to constitute itself as an independent force, to rely only on its own forces to defeat fascism, to obey no rules other than the logic of its own struggle, can for the SWP be left to a later “stage”.

We will not achieve left unity easily. A viable “new SA” regrouping cannot be built on the basis of anti-SWP negativism. When it comes to positive politics those who oppose the SWP are not in agreement on many key questions.

To “unite” for working class politics against popular-frontism in general, while ducking the question of what the popular front enterprise means in practice — that’s what happened on the issue of “solidarity” with

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Galloway, an apologist for a fascist dictator — would be like “uniting” against war in general on the basis of saying nothing about Iraq.

The question is whether people will learn from the unfolding logic of the SWP’s “Islamicising” popular front politics and see that they were wrong to accommodate its earlier, lesser manifestations.

Of course no one would want people to go away from this experience sour and sore and just give up. WL believes absolutely that the class struggle fraction of the Socialist Alliance needs to remain organised.

A conference of the class struggle opposition is to be organised in the autumn. We think it should be an open conference where all the issues are put up for discussion. It should aim to re-found the Socialist Alliance. To do that we need to get back to the founding principles of the Socialist Alliance, and we need to debate the following issues.

- Our efforts to re-create working class independent political representation should be done by:

- encouraging local labour movements to act on that principle — by way of political campaigning as well as backing electoral candidates

- and by arguing for trade union affiliates to Labour to use the strength they still have to fight for their politics within the New Labour structures.

- Socialists need to agree on how to recreate a socialist culture in working class communities.

- We need socialist unity, but unity based on a commitment to political clarification not on uniting on and submitting to the lowest common denominator, “the consensus”. Where there is disagreement there should be full rights for minority opinion.

- The project of a “workers party” which many activists see as central has at least two distinct meanings: restoration of a trade union based organisation, like Old Labour was, and the building of a Marxist combat party. That needs clarification. While “new socialist parties” such as the Scottish Socialist Party can play a leading role in the fight to shape a workers’ party that represents independent political representation, these parties will not be built by by-passing the existing labour movement.

- The need for independent working class candidates in elections is now as urgent as when we started the SA to satisfy it. There will be opportunities in the future for organising independent socialist and working class candidates, based on the labour movement and working class communities. We need new structures and a “new Socialist Alliance” to ensure we do not miss those opportunities.

- Comrades in the WL have helped set up a political platform to promote ideas about political representation. The statement of the Network for Working-Class Representation can be found at: www.independentsocialistalliance.net