The Poll Tax struggle: No strategy to win

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We live in exciting times? Socialist Worker told its members in its party column in May 1990. True enough. But in exciting times it is the duty of revolutionary Marxists to give a sober assessment of the situation and point the way forward for the working class. The Socialist Workers Party, argues Arthur Merton, has once again proved it can do neither.

The Poll tax struggle has been at the centre of the new mood of resistance to Thatcherism. We agree with the SWP when they say that it marks a new stage in the Tory offensive because it is a generalised attack:

Now their generalised attacks have provoked a generalised response. (Socialist Worker Review, April 1990)

But the whole question boils down to this?how can we transform a generalised response into a conscious, generalised struggle against the Tories? It is a question the SWP ignores because it believes this transformation will happen spontaneously.

So at the same time as it spreads the message ?We can win? Socialist Worker (SW) consistently fails to answer the question: how?

Within the anti-Poll Tax campaign the SWP has long been aware of the limitations of a passive mass non-payment campaign. It has fought correctly for non-implementation by council workers.

But neither mass non-payment nor non-collection on their own have the power to beat the Poll Tax. If successful they will immediately come up against the courts, the police, the bailiffs.

Faced with this the workers involved will need to generalise the action by calling for mass political strike action.

But instead of a strategy to overcome the limitations of non-payment and non-collection the SWP only emphasises one over the other.

It emphasises non-collection on the basis that workers are strongest in the workplace. Correct. That means that the workplace is the place where we must aim to generalise the struggle, with demands aimed at the biggest possible mass strike action against the tax.

But the SWP?s focus on the workplace leads in the opposite direction. In place of the general strike we get a call for non-implementation by NALGO members. Instead of a generalising demand the SWP put forward the idea that a relatively small section of council workers are the key to sinking Thatcher?s flagship.

The workers who collect the Poll Tax have the power to smash it. (SW 19.5.90)

The SWP has wrongly treated council workers? action against new working conditions created by the tax as if they were struggles against the tax itself.

The Greenwich strike for better pay and conditions by Poll Tax collectors offers an excellent opportunity to argue that the workers involved should refuse to collect the tax, even if they win on pay and conditions. Instead the SWP has insisted that the strike is in fact already an anti-Poll Tax strike. But whatever the support workers are receiving from
non-payers, however much the strikers hate the tax individually the strike could be settled if managers give in to the limited demands of the Greenwich workers.

But you will find nothing in the pages of Socialist Worker warning of this danger, arguing for a strategy to turn Greenwich and other strikes into strikes against the tax itself. Instead it simply cheers on the workers: “Greenwich shows the way.”

To link the anger that exists against the Poll Tax with workers’ struggles for better wages, stimulated by big mortgage and Poll Tax bills, we need to overcome the sectional, economic limits lodged within all of these spheres of struggle.

We need to focus the anger of each into a conscious campaign against the Poll Tax itself. The SWP thinks so too:

“Take every opportunity to link wage demands with the Poll Tax, rent and mortgage rate rises.” (SW, 14.4.90)

The problem is that they consistently refuse to fight for a strategy that can bring this about.

In workplaces and union branches the spontaneous way many workers link these attacks is to say: “I’m paying my Poll Tax, my rent/mortgage has gone up so I need a pay rise?.” Up and down the country the SWP has been echoing these arguments, rather than trying to replace them with revolutionary arguments and tactics.

Concretely the way to link pay and Poll Tax struggles is to build organisations that can link workers in the workplace with those on the estates.

We need to fight for councils of action, as the means of co-ordinating and linking the separate struggles. We need to build defence squads to protect the non-payers and workers’ demonstrations from the state. We need to fuse the struggles around the demand for a general strike against the Poll Tax itself.

The SWP clearly realises the potential for a generalised counter-offensive to drive the Tories from office:

“If the anger over the Poll Tax is linked with the rising determination to fight over wages and conditions not only will workers win decent pay rises but they can sweep the Tories away.”

How? By winning decent pay rises all at once? Clearly not. The answer, as any revolutionary socialist should know, is by launching a general strike which links pay, conditions, Poll Tax, benefit cuts, unemployment together. and which brings into being delegate councils of action representing every section of the working class.

But for economism this is much too far in advance of the workers’ present consciousness. So for all the SWP’s excitement we are never told just how the potential to drive the Tories from office can be realised.

The deliberate pay off workers have been given by whole number of employers, with settlements above the rate of inflation, shoots a hole through the entire argument that fighting hard on every sectional front of struggle spontaneously leads to generalisation. And the SWP, in the face of such settlements, is left with nothing to say to power workers, rail workers, engineers, retail workers and construction workers who have all recently settled.

Finally the SWP’s economism has led them to a hopelessly one-sided view of the Tory crisis. Just as in the downturn? they thought it was impossible for workers to win major class battles, now it seems impossible for them to lose. The Tories have “no obvious way out of their immediate difficulties” claims the May issue of Socialist Worker Review.

The Tories certainly do face a severe crisis. But to suggest that it is inescapable leaves workers disoriented when the limitations of the spontaneous struggles against the Tories lead to partial retreats and reverses.

On the eve of the council elections Socialist Worker told its readers:
This week was Thatcher's worst ever, but next week will be worse. After the local elections comes the likelihood of official inflation topping 10%.

One week later Thatcher had limited the electoral damage with big Tory swings in London, staved off an immediate leadership challenge, quieted Tory calls to scrap the tax and gone on the offensive against high spending Labour councils. And inflation failed to reach 10%.

Socialist Worker urged workers 'Don't let her off the hook'. But for the moment, because of the inadequacy of the spontaneously generated tactics the misleadership of the Labour and trade union leaders struggle, they already had.

Buoyed by the certainty that Thatcher's days are numbered, the SWP has refused to advocate a strategy that could really generalise the fightback. Its revolutionary sounding calls to 'Get the Tories out' become empty rhetoric for the benefit of the SWP members, not a fighting strategy for millions of workers.

'Thatcher's policies are in ruins, her government in disarray. We don't need to wait for Kinnock to replace her. We can do that right away.' (SW, 5.5.90)

But still this begs the question?how? Socialist Worker has no coherent answer.

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