Britain: The case for a new anticapitalist party

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Since the European elections, a discussion has begun on building a powerful alternative to the Labour Party. Luke Cooper argues for a new party to have a class struggle policy against capitalism

On the postal workers’ picket lines there is one argument that more than any other gets wholehearted agreement; the Labour Party does not defend working class interests and an alternative to it is urgently needed.

This month the London region of the Communication Workers Union’s will ballot its members — in open defiance of the union’s rules — on whether it should continue to fund Labour. The results will be announced a week before the Labour Party conference. A resounding rejection of the Labour link is expected.

This is not surprising. The postal workers have been on the frontline of resistance to this government’s capitalist policies for years.

Like many sections of workers, their experience of 12 years of a Labour government is that it has not only failed to improve conditions for the majority of working people, but has even attacked historic gains that the Tories dared not touch.

Public sector spending has risen sharply under Labour. But billions were wasted on management consultants, executives’ salaries and a huge privatisation programme, bringing the profit motive into the welfare system like a cancer.

For years as chancellor Brown flattered the ‘wealth creators’ in the City, so it was hardly surprising that he bailed them out to the tune of trillions when their financial house of cards came crashing down. Then, as the world economy plunged into its most serious crisis since the 1930s, Labour refused to nationalise a single manufacturer or retailer to halt the jobs massacre.

Now the talk from all parties is that, after the next election, swingeing cuts in social services and public sector jobs will be necessary to pay for Labour’s largesse to the bankers.

At the same time Labour’s wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, both waged without majority support, its maintenance of the worst anti-union laws in the developed world and its racist scapegoating of asylum seekers and immigrants have let to a mass exodus of party members.

Resistance
A wave of resistance is growing to Labour’s attacks and the capitalist crisis.

Workplace occupations from Visteon to Vestas send a message to the whole working class — we don’t have to troop quietly to the dole offices: we can unite and fight back. A recent increase in struggle marks a
turnaround from the first six months after the recession hit, when hundreds of thousands were laid off with no resistance.

The problem wasn’t just that workers suffered ‘shock and awe’ from the sheer scale of the crisis. Their own union leaders told them nothing could be done to resist closures. Worse still, many of them urged their members to offer ‘givebacks’ to their bosses – pay cuts, ‘holidays’ and redundancies as an alternative to closures. When Woolworth’s went bust sacking its 30,000 workforce, officials from the retail workers’ union USDAW simply said job losses were ‘tragic’ – without lifting a finger to stop them.

Even in the CWU, it was only massive pressure from rank-and-file post workers that forced the union leaders to fight.

Politics

It is an age-old problem that union leaders, earning salaries several times those of their members, sit on their hands rather than fight. But there is also a specific problem right now. Many union leaders, particularly of big unions like Unison and Unite, have strong links to the Labour leadership. With Labour facing an election next year, they don’t want to rock the boat by leading struggles.

But the postal workers are taking the fight to the Royal Mail bosses. They show the way forward for everyone: if it’s a choice between fighting for your livelihood and industry or propping up an anti-working class Labour government, then it’s Labour that has to go.

We should link building resistance to the economic crisis with organising a powerful and united challenge to the Labour Party; the fight back shows the need for a new kind of radical politics. The same is true on every front of resistance. We can’t stop at defending our immediate conditions – we need to link the struggles up politically.

Since the European elections, a debate has opened up in the trade unions and among the socialist organisations about challenging Labour at the general election. It has been spurred on by an open letter to the left from the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), published shortly after the elections, calling for a common electoral platform.

The debate since has centred on two key questions. What kind of organisation should be formed – a party, an alliance, or an electoral bloc? And what sort of politics it should unite around?

What kind of politics?

At the Euro elections, Bob Crow of the RMT headed the No2EU list. A militant trade union leader, Crow is clearly on the left. But the No2EU campaign did not put forward any radical answers to the crisis. Instead it focused criticism on the European bosses when we should be fighting all the capitalists – and especially our own.

The background to the campaign was the first Lindsey oil workers’ construction strikes, which raised the dangerous and divisive slogan ‘British jobs for British workers’.

Reformists, because they don’t see the nation-state as a bosses’ weapon against us, but as something that they can take over piecemeal, try to outdo the bosses’ media, the Tories and the British National Party in nationalist flag-waving. Rather than promoting solidarity between workers of all countries they try to prove that they, not the bosses, are the real British patriots.

There is a clear danger that the nationalist outlook of the No2EU bloc and the first Lindsey strike are taken as the basis for a new political formation. It would play right into the hands of the BNP, despite its
supporters? belief that their defence of ?British workers? creates an alternative to the fascists.

Internationalism must be a starting point for our challenge to Labour at the next election.

But Union Jack-waving is not the only danger facing a united left challenge; the other is making the mistake of trying to rebuild a new reformist party, founded on ?old Labour? principles.

Particularly during a capitalist crisis, it is no good searching for a compromise that will bridge the interests of the bosses and the working class. When a company goes bankrupt, the question is sharply posed: the creditors break up the company, and sell off the assets to recover their money ? the workers, and their pension entitlements, are thrown to one side. There is only one alternative to this; the firm must be nationalised to save the jobs and run for social need, not profit. The millionaires who milked the company for decades should not be given a penny more.

There has never been a better time to expose and reject the politics of profit and ?the market? that are intrinsic to capitalism. We need to advocate democratic planning of the economy as a whole, as an alternative to the market. We should make a realistic assessment of the bosses and their state?s ability to resist and sabotage serious socialist measures. In short, revolutionaries should not be afraid to make the case for revolution.

Of course, this will mean an argument, a debate in any new left alternative between reformists and revolutionaries. But here we hit a problem. Amongst the thousands of activists wanting to build an alternative to Labour, the number of convinced reformists is probably far smaller than the number of those who believe a revolution is necessary, but also believe you cannot say so openly at election time. This is the excuse that ?revolutionaries? like the Socialist Workers Party and the Socialist Party give for always standing on reformist programmes. It is plain they want the new alliance or party to do the same.

Workers Power argues that in a period of deep capitalist crisis it is both possible and necessary to put forward an action programme to deal with mass unemployment, cuts, poverty, racism and war, that is based on expropriating the exploiters, and imposing workers? control of industry, banking and commerce; one that openly poses the need for a revolutionary overthrow of the bosses and their state. In short we believe that what is needed is an anticapitalist programme and a party to fight for it.

We also believe that if we succeed in drawing significant sections of the working class into a new political formation ? and there is a huge potential for this ? then they themselves should decide democratically and after a thorough debate between the competing strategies of the existing left organisations.

**Party or alliance?**

Another issue raised in the present discussion is whether our goal should be a new political party or just an electoral alliance. Martin Smith and Alex Callinicos, of the Socialist Workers Party, have both been prominent advocates of restricting it to being an electoral alliance, not a party fighting on the whole range of issues.

But there are many problems with this approach.

First, the broad the mass of people vote for parties, not here-today-gone-tomorrow alliances. The tragedy is that the far right have been winning support for their party ? the BNP ? for ten years while the left floundered.

Second, an alliance would be more likely simply to draw the existing left groups together, rather than draw in broader layer of working class fighters into a new, mass political organisation, i.e. a party.
Third, an alliance would inevitably be focused on elections, which come and go every few years, when we need an organisation that gives a fighting lead to workers’ struggles in the here and now.

Finally, the question of what form a new political alternative takes is not separate from the question of its politics. An alliance of the existing organisations is far more likely to succumb to the mistaken notion that we should unite around a very minimal reformist set of demands, which doesn’t offer a fighting anticapitalist alternative.

**Prospects**

The collapse of the Labour vote and the rise of the BNP give a powerful objective imperative to left unity and a new political formation. But there are lots of political problems that still need to be resolved if we are to succeed.

We have to break with opportunism, the pursuit of short term electoral gains by abandoning fundamental principles, and sectarianism, the refusal to unite in action with those who don’t share one’s political outlook.

The organisations of the socialist left have deeply ingrained bad political practices, which we should not expect to change without real pressure from a mass working class base.

That’s why it is really imperative that from the outset we have a perspective of building a party, which has the roots in the working class, and thus the size and authority to be a real challenger for power. Anything less will not be able to rise to the tasks posed by the capitalist crisis.

If the left organisations had the courage of their convictions, and confidence in the militant vanguard of the working class that is leading today’s rising struggles, then, as in France, a new anticapitalist party could be formed now. We believe that just as in France - within months it would rally several times the number of members that the present left groups have.

Of course, given the short time to the general election, it would not be able to complete a programme embodying its full strategy. But it could adopt an immediate action programme of anticapitalist demands, designed to make the bosses pay the cost of the crisis, and a list of candidates from all the political organisations and from the leaders of the present struggles.

However, a party, rather than an electoral alliance, would continue its activity on a daily basis, as an inspiring force leading resistance to a government that will try to make huge cuts. This unity in struggle will provide the best possible conditions for an open and democratic debate on the party’s full programme. Just as we believe revolutionaries will win respect and support in the forefront of the battles against the new government, so we believe they can win the arguments for a revolutionary, not a reformist programme, nor some sort of fudge between the two.

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