

The crisis in the Socialist Workers Party in Britain

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The British SWP is in crisis with a faction fight, expulsions and a major dispute on tactics for the period ahead. Richard Brenner surveys the dispute and examines the linked issues of party democracy, the united front, industrial policy and the fight for a new workers' party

Britain's largest socialist group - the Socialist Workers Party - is engaged in a sharp internal struggle in the run up to its national conference in the new year.

The crisis presents both a danger and an opportunity. The danger is that the dispute - accompanied as it has been so far by expulsions, threats and no small measure of political confusion - will demoralise and disorganise a significant proportion of Britain's radical left activists. As a result serious numbers of workers and youth could give up on the most important task of socialists today: building a revolutionary party.

But the opportunity is just as real. It is to use the internal struggle to clarify the political perspectives, tactics and tasks facing socialists today, strengthening the forces of revolutionary socialism in the process.

So what is the crisis about? The faction fight revolves around former central committee members Lindsey German, John Rees and Chris Nineham, who were closely associated with the failed Respect project and are still the main officers of the Stop the War Coalition (StWC). They have formed a faction called the Left Platform, which is proposing an alternative set of perspectives to the SWP's forthcoming national conference.

The majority - with key figures, such as national secretary Martin Smith and Alex Callinicos, the international secretary of the IST, at the helm - are resisting the minority's attempt to change the party's orientation. Activists associated with the Left Platform - Alex Snowden and Clare Solomon in Newcastle and London respectively - have been expelled for factionalism. Such expulsions, in the period just before a conference (the only time when factions are allowed according to the SWP constitution), are a violation of democratic centralism and an attempt to intimidate the membership.

The political content of the dispute centres on the party's application of the policy of the united front, and how the party should relate to the new situation that has opened up in Britain and internationally in the aftermath of the great financial crisis and the recession. The Left Platform argues that the SWP should launch a nationwide united front against the recession - what it tellingly calls 'a broad united left organisation on a national scale'. It criticises the majority leadership for its failure to create a campaign that could play a role similar to that undertaken by StWC during the mass opposition to the invasion of Iraq.

The majority, however, says that insufficient attention was given over the past years to recruitment to the SWP itself, and that the minority is living in the past, seeking to continue an approach the party used in an earlier situation to the new conditions today. It rejects the call for a broad nationwide political body to be formed against the recession, and is focused on recruiting workers in struggle to the SWP and building the

party's Right to Work front. In a new development, the majority accuses the minority of converting the communist policy of the united front from a tactic into a strategy.

As we shall see below, this is a charge that Workers Power has often made in the past against the SWP's general method, a charge which, until now, the entire SWP has rejected. It is to be hoped that SWP members will rethink the whole issue.

At the same time, the SWP's industrial policy is in crisis. During this autumn's postal dispute – the key industrial battle in Britain today – the SWP's leading member in the post union, CWU President Jane Loftus, broke with the party's policy and voted for the rotten interim agreement that suspended the union's national strikes without securing any significant concessions from Royal Mail.

Unlike Snowden and Solomon, who were expelled for 'factionalism', and in Solomon's case for organising what appears to have been a successful anticapitalist event called Mutiny in east London earlier this year, Loftus was not expelled. The CWU President was asked to admit her mistake publicly and correct it – refusing to do so, she resigned. The contrast between the SWP's summary expulsion of people who merely criticise the leadership within the party and the lenient treatment of a member who goes over to the side of the trade union bureaucracy and helps them call off a strike is startling.

Finally, in a positive development, a member of the SWP in Glasgow – Graham Campbell – is proposing to the SWP conference that the party take up Workers Power's call for a New Anticapitalist Party (see page 16). While Workers Power does not support everything in the comrade's document motivating his proposal – we specifically oppose his concessions to Scottish nationalism and his proposal for what would in essence be a separate Scottish party – his arguments in favour of our call are welcome and would represent a major step in the right direction by the SWP if they adopted them.

Workers Power has repeatedly urged the SWP, as the largest far left organisation, to follow the example of the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (LCR) in France and initiate a movement for a new anticapitalist party. The Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA) has rallied ten thousand militants to its ranks and can play a major role in the resistance to the crisis while debating the fundamentals of strategy. The NPA has certainly not resolved the issues of electoralism or revolutionary strategy and has not yet adopted a consistent anticapitalist programme, but it is debating such issues in the context of common action and a much wider participation by working class militants and youth. That is what the SWP could play a key role in unleashing here.

But a prerequisite is an open and honest internal debate and a democratic conference.

Party democracy and factionalism

The new SWP leadership should be aware that, if they persist with purging the supporters of the minority, it will surely mean the loss of a substantial number of members and not only the supporters of Rees and German. Such unprincipled expulsions always demoralise and dishearten many more than the present active oppositionists. But the SWP majority's leaders are certainly not initiating a new policy by trying to intimidate oppositionists in the period before the organisation's conference. It is an old habit dating back to the 1970s.

The predecessor of the SWP, the International Socialists, underwent a number of internal struggles in that decade. The response of the IS/SWP leadership then was to impose a ban on factions, except for three months before the conference. The system of elected branch and district leaderships, conferences with a substantial number of delegates, and monthly internal bulletins (IBs) open to all were abolished and replaced with a large number of full-timers, chosen by and replaceable by the Central Committee (CC)

alone. The internal debate ended in a series of splits and expulsions including of the Left Faction, which became Workers Power.

It is not true, as libertarians claim, that this is the inevitable result of democratic centralism. Such actions are a violation of democratic centralism that places great emphasis on internal democracy in the run up to a conference. Trotsky summed this up very well:

‘Democracy and centralism do not at all find themselves in an invariable ratio to one another. Before a conference, when the problem is one of formulating a political line for the next period, democracy triumphs over centralism. When the problem is political action, centralism subordinates democracy to itself. Democracy again asserts its rights when the party feels the need to examine critically its own actions.’

So to crack down on dissenters just before a conference is a bureaucratic centralist approach. It is evident that, despite the SWP’s democracy commission last year, inner-party democracy remains very weak, with few avenues for ordinary members to express their disagreements or to formulate alternative policy to the CC. In reality the only ‘faction’ allowed is the incumbent leadership. Such a system cannot train a loyal, disciplined but critical membership.

Central to the SWP’s problems remains its rejection of the very idea of having a party programme. Without such a programme, tactical turns become extremely disruptive. Britain is one of the few countries where it is necessary to ask the question: what is a programme? The Labour Party, for example, never had one. Historical SWP leader Tony Cliff used to mock calls for programme as ‘a blueprint of a machine gun when what you needed was the gun.’ A boomerang of an argument if ever there was one. Yes, in a sense a programme is indeed a blueprint – a blueprint for creating a party that leads the working class to power.

It is a concisely and clearly expressed document that not only states its final goal (workers power – socialism – a classless society), its revolutionary principles and tactical methods – it fuses all these with its perspectives for revolution and the key demands in every major field of the class struggle. Thus its strategy can be measured against those of reformists and those who zigzag between reform and revolution (centrists).

It is thus not only the basis on which people join the party, but also enables them to learn its methods of working apply and test them in daily practice. Only on the basis of this can the membership judge its leadership’s tactics – not only from the standpoint of ‘did they bring success in terms of recruits’, but did they advance the party’s influence within the working class and help workers in struggle?

Without such clear and universally understood principles, the SWP leadership has been able to lurch into a series of largely pragmatic and increasingly unprincipled political turns, rarely if ever accounting for failures and outright disasters like Respect. Every time a section of the members tried to criticise these turns, the leadership and its full-timers attacked them as ‘conservative’ and out of touch – accusations designed to minimise the actual political debate in the party over the new line. Usually these members left or were expelled.

If the new leadership had – when it set up the democracy commission – sincerely wished to turn its back on this bureaucratic method, it would not have started a wave of repression before a conference. Even now we would argue with all SWP members, whether they support the political line of the majority or the minority, that they should call on the CC to immediately reverse all the punitive measures taken against its opponents and immediately extend an open and democratic pre-conference discussion with aggregates in every area, with speakers from all viewpoints, weekly internal bulletins and open electronic forums for the members. In addition, they should ensure the election of conference representation with a ratio of

members to delegates so that it most accurately reflects the different views.

If this were done, the conference could focus on drawing up an honest balance sheet of the leadership's mistakes over the past period. This would necessarily involve those committed by majority and minority leaders ? hopefully in the form of self-criticism as advocated by Lenin and the Communist International.

Wrong conceptions and misapplication of the united front

The dispute on the issue of whether the SWP should form a broad united front against the recession reveals that both the minority and the majority hold to a deep-seated and wrong conception of the Marxist policy of the united front.

The united front is a tactic applied by revolutionaries to attempt to unite the working class in struggle. It applies principally when the revolutionaries are ? as today ? a minority of the working class, and involves a clear appeal to the reformist workers ? to their leaders as well and their rank and file ? to join with the revolutionaries in combined action against the bosses. If the reformist leaders refuse, this helps the revolutionaries to expose them to their working class supporters. If they agree ? usually under pressure from the masses ? it allows the revolutionaries to deepen their joint activity with powerful forces of reformist workers in conditions of a mounting struggle.

Key to the effective use of the tactic is that the proposal is for joint action, in which the revolutionaries maintain full independence at all times, criticise their reformist allies whenever necessary, and break the united front if the latter betray the common struggle. As Leon Trotsky summed it up: ?March separately, strike together: please, do both.?

Should socialists in Britain, therefore, have launched a call for a united front against the recession? If we understand the united front in this way, then the answer can only be, yes. But the way the new Left Platform of the SWP poses the issue reveals that what they have in mind is very far from being an effective use of the revolutionary tactic of the united front. Rather, what they are proposing is another example of what both John Rees and Alex Callinicos have theorised as ?the united front of a special type?.

Like the SWP, Workers Power has from the onset of the credit crunch and the recession argued for mass strike action and occupations to resist all job losses. The immediate obstacle to this, however, is the bureaucratic trade union leadership. The right wing leaders of Unite, Unison and the GMB are sitting on their hands and mounting no resistance to the jobs massacre, while the left union leaders zigzag between fighting talk and rotten compromises. Yet resistance struggles have burst out ? Visteon, Vestas, the post, the bins, and the buses.

A united front tactic must involve a call to bring all this action together in mutual solidarity and work to extend it to the battalions of the big unions and the millions of unemployed. It must be a call addressed to the leaders as well as the rank and file and must be completely practical, so that every reformist worker can see that what the socialists are proposing is indispensable to the success of the struggles.

Since we do not expect that the top union leaders will readily coordinate such action, the obvious way to try to unite the strikes is through local and regional committees of action. The solidarity committees that sprung up around Vestas and began to emerge around the post strikes could be extended in this way. Union leaders should be called on to back them and be exposed and strongly criticised if they refuse.

Expanding influence

The power of attraction these bodies would exert if they involved workers in action from different sectors would be enormous. And there is little doubt that, given the strikes that took place this year, the many

thousands of activists that SWP members can set in motion would have enjoyed real success in getting such local committees off the ground. Any party that initiated such action would greatly expand its influence and many of those attracted would undoubtedly join it.

But this is not what either faction in the SWP has in mind when debating the united front. The majority, for example, in its argument rejecting the idea of nationwide united front against a recession, says:

?The SWP leadership has argued that simply proclaiming a new mass united front against the recession, donning orange jackets and marching across Britain to protest against unemployment is no guarantee of success.?

It seems the majority, quite as much as the minority, cannot envisage the united front except as an individual membership campaign, organised and controlled by the SWP, with large rallies and a few friendly union leaders and Labour MPs on the platforms, and out of which the SWP can recruit.

A march across Britain against unemployment is actually a very good idea, but for a single, still relatively small party to try to control it would repeat the errors of the 1980s where the Communist Party kept the ?People?s March for Jobs? in a tight bureaucratic stranglehold and the SWP?s ?Right to Work Campaign? was not qualitatively better. As a result no mass movement of the unemployed ? like that of the early 1930s ? was created.

The majority seem to be aware of this when they say that ?any such initiative had to have real forces on board if it were to be seen as anything other than a ?party front??. And yet the ?party front? approach is very much what the majority has launched against the recession: its ?Right to Work? campaign. This has held a conference, a demonstration at the Labour Party jamboree in Brighton, and a rally after the demonstration. Union leaders, like Mark Serwotka of the PCS, have spoken on its platforms. But it has not created any actual structures that any forces other than the SWP can meaningfully join at local level to build joint action.

At the Right to Work founding conference, Workers Power members proposed that it should form local committees ? we pushed for this as part of our fight for local committees of action to fight the effects of the crisis. Now the SWP minority?s perspectives document actually mentions this and observes that our proposal was passed, but not implemented:

?... we have had to start from scratch with every new dispute, instead of having a broad organisation that could carry forward the resources and support from one campaign to the next and help generalise the resistance. To resolve this problem, some comrades campaigned for the launch of a Right to Work campaign. They were opposed in the strongest possible terms by the CC, and one leading comrade even described the idea as ?Guevarism?. The motion to establish such a campaign was defeated at the Party Council...Yet six days later at the Right to Work conference, which drew 300 people, although they were mostly SWP members, the CC instructed comrades to vote for amendments to the founding document which called for local meetings to be set up and campaigning to start on a nationwide basis. However, this turn to a real campaign has not been carried through in practice. The conference elected a steering committee but the full committee has never met, and the resolution for a nationwide series of public meetings has not been implemented. This has given the Right to Work campaign the character of a party-front, not a genuine united front.?

In fact, over the course of the recent struggles, when Workers Power and others have proposed that the Vestas? solidarity committees should be broadened into general solidarity committees for all the struggles, or that the post workers? solidarity committees should do the same, we have been opposed by SWP

members who argued that each committee should be limited to a single issue. But now in the face of the faction fight and an upcoming Right to Work conference on 30 January, the majority is executing a late and unconvincing volte face:

‘We should be organising ‘Right to Work’ meetings (that pull together key local struggles and campaigns) in every area. Organise ‘Right to Work’ activity in your area such as pickets in support of disputes, stunts over youth unemployment, protests over public sector cuts, and fundraisers for striking workers. We need to organise broad-based local ‘Right to Work’ committees in the build up to 30 January to help us mobilise for the conference and organise local activities.’

The method is clear. Assemble local activists under the auspices of a national banner of convenience already controlled and run by the SWP, without any democratic structures. This is not unity in action for common goals without preconditions – this is absolutely a front campaign. The way forward is to implement the conference resolution and establish local committees that can determine their own activity democratically and that try to knit the disputes together.

What of the minority’s approach? Is it any better? Unfortunately not.

The Left Platform’s proposal is: ‘The SWP should commit to spearheading a broad and political united front response to the economic crisis and its effects’, and it takes as its model for this past blocs that the SWP has been central to building, like Globalise Resistance (its initiative in the anticapitalist movement in the early years of this decade), StWC, and Respect.

The Left Platform is taking as its model not Lenin and Trotsky’s conception of the united front – march separately, strike together – but once again the ‘united front of a special type’. This goes beyond the notion of joint action and seeks to create a ‘broad political organisation’ within which the socialists do not criticise the politics and proposals of their allies, and end up sounding more and more like reformists themselves.

Yet in each of these initiatives, the SWP did not just unite in action with reformists, pacifists and – in the case of Respect – Muslim community leaders from the propertied classes. They tailored what they said in public to avoid criticising their allies, while seeking to secure influence within these blocs, not by politically challenging the ideas of their allies, but by manipulating the structures of the organisations.

Quasi-party

This was most obvious in Respect, in which the SWP ended up establishing a quasi-party with a programme that was devoid of socialism so as not to offend Muslim community leaders, behind whom stood the community businessmen and women.

You don’t even have to imagine what the minority’s ‘broad united left organisation’ against the recession would look like. Around the time of the collapse of Lehman Brothers, Rees and German hosted an SWP rally in central London fronted by bourgeois economist and Keynesian Graham Turner and the BBC Newsnight’s Paul Mason speaking on the crisis. No one from the platform and no SWP member from the floor advanced a Marxist analysis of the crisis. The ‘allies’ were politically in the driving seat and only Keynesian and bourgeois solutions, such as cutting interest rates and increased regulation, were advanced. This was a sign of things to come if the Rees proposal had been adopted: a ‘broad’ political organisation offering an *mélange* of Keynesian and reformist ‘solutions’ to the crisis.

The essence of the minority’s wrong approach to the united front is clearly stated in their document. They define the united front in the following way: ‘For Lenin and Trotsky the strategy of the united front was

essential to advancing the interests of the working class. A united front unites broad layers of people around shared demands and simultaneously provides the conditions for the revolutionary party to flourish and grow.?

On the contrary, Marxists believe that the united front is a tactic, to unite revolutionary and non-revolutionary workers and their organisations in struggle for common objectives. It does not and should not involve revolutionaries mixing up their political message with that of their non-revolutionary allies or issuing joint propaganda with them.

It is interesting that, in the course of arguing against the minority, the majority actually attack them for calling the united front a 'strategy': 'Strictly speaking, if one consults the classic discussions of the united front in the early Communist International and the writings of Trotsky and Gramsci, these tend to refer to the united front as a tactic (or, as Trotsky sometimes puts it, a 'policy?'). The elevation of a tactic, however important, into a strategy is an instructive slip of the keyboard on the comrades' part.?

Yet this 'slip of the keyboard?' is far from exclusive to the minority. On the contrary, the whole leadership has been arguing throughout the decade that the united front is a strategy ? and prospective CC member and majority supporter Joseph Choonara in 2007 actually opened an article in International Socialism no. 117 with those exact words: 'The united front is a strategy.?

What is needed is neither a Right to Work party front nor a Rees-German model bloc in which the revolutionaries adapt their arguments to those of Keynesian reformists.

What is needed is the genuine tactic of the united front, in which the socialists fight for joint action, joint committees to link up the struggles at every level, addressed to the whole movement, leaders and members, and brought into being wherever we can. Within such bodies revolutionaries don't try to dominate and control through organisational means, but fight for a programme of action that can take the struggles forward and win.

Crucially this means fighting to take the control of the current disputes out of the hands of the union leaders and into the hands of the rank and file.

It means criticising the union leaders if they refuse unity and, if they accept, for any backsliding from their commitments. In all cases it means being eager to work alongside and help reformist workers organise in a thoroughly democratic way with no behind the scenes manipulation which can only discredit revolutionaries in the long run. This way a revolutionary organisation can grow into a party.

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