

CWI: What kind of workers party?

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An exchange of letters between the Socialist Party (CWI) and Workers Power, British section of the League for the Fifth International, around the issue of the campaign for the new workers party that had recently been launched.

From the Socialist Party Executive Committee

To Workers Power

13th January 2006

Dear Comrades,

We apologise in the delay in replying to your email.

As you know we have consistently raised the need for a new mass workers' party over the last decade and have a record in supporting any genuine steps in the direction of the formation of a new party. We welcome the RMT conference on 'working class political representation?', despite its limitations, and will use it as an opportunity to argue the case for a new workers' party.

The Campaign for a New Workers' Party that we have recently initiated aims to build support for the idea of a party within the trade unions, in community campaigns and amongst wider sections of the working class and young people. We envisage the CNWP as being an open, democratic campaign within which all currents and individuals who support the foundation of a new mass party are welcome. Workers Power would, therefore, be welcome to take part in the campaign.

However, we do not see the benefit of a meeting to discuss specific joint initiatives by our two organisations. Whilst we both raise the need for a new workers' party we have different concepts of how such a party is likely to be formed in the next period. On your website you say of a new workers' party: 'Workers Power believes that a working class party that is anti-capitalist and internationalist will also need to be revolutionary.'

Whilst we also believe that the building of a mass revolutionary party is necessary to transform society, we believe that, for the mass of workers, as Engels said, it will take 'their own experience' of struggle for them 'to blunt their noses up against theory' and to draw this conclusion. In other words we do not expect that the mass of the working class will go immediately from the current position, where they have no party, to building a party with a rounded-out revolutionary programme.

We will argue for our programme within a new formation but recognise that, even if it is not fully adopted, particularly in the initial phases, a new party will represent an important step forward provided that it brings together important sections of anti-capitalist young people, trade unionists and broader sections of the working class to fight against the attacks of the capitalist system.

Given the differences in our approaches we believe it is better that both our parties concentrate on working

independently for the formation of a new mass workers' party. No doubt, in the course of doing so, we will discuss these issues further.

Yours comradely,
Hannah Sell
On behalf of the SP EC

Reply from Workers Power

Workers Power
To the Socialist Party
26 January 2006

Dear comrades,

In response to the political points you raised in your letter of Friday 13 January, we are very pleased indeed that you envisage the CNWP as being an open, democratic campaign within which all currents and individuals who support the foundation of a new mass party are welcome and that specifically Workers Power will be welcome to take part in the campaign.

As we have already notified you, we will indeed take part in it and seek to build it on the broadest possible basis, both locally and nationally. We recognise the considerable merit of the SP in launching such a campaign, in mobilising strongly for the RMT conference and holding a well attended fringe meeting to publicise the Campaign for a New Workers Party (CNWP).

If you do not see the need to discuss with us how it can best be built at a national and local level that of course is your absolute right. But your reasons for doing so seem to be based on a misunderstanding. You say, 'We have different concepts of how such a party is likely to be formed in the next period.' We are not at all sure what you mean by this. We believe that it is essential that trade unions - at both national and local level, both their leaders and rank and file - be drawn into this process on a major scale. That is why our comrade in Bristol Rail RMT drafted a resolution calling for a conference on political representation for the RMT's Annual General Meeting in 2004 and in 2005.

We do not, as you suggest, believe either that a revolutionary programme is a pre-requisite for starting the campaign or for actually beginning the building of a new workers party. Certainly we will argue for a revolutionary (i.e. a transitional) programme to be debated as the basis of the new party. But we are sufficiently realistic to recognise that - given the balance of forces in Britain today - we may well not be successful in convincing the majority in one fell swoop. Indeed, were it possible to do so, it would hardly be necessary to undertake the building a revolutionary party in this way at all.

Providing a new party is thoroughly democratic, giving no entrenched privileges to MPs, councillors or union leaders, providing it agrees to fight on the key issues facing workers today (privatisation, war, democratic rights, anti-racism, jobs, housing, etc.) and, vitally, providing it really draws in masses of workers, then whatever its initial basis it will be a step forward. It would be one we would welcome and continue to fight and argue for a revolutionary programme within.

However, so long as such a party lacked a clear anticapitalist goal, the structure of a combat party fighting in all aspects of the class struggle, a clear understanding the role of parliament and the need to smash capitalist state by revolution, these would be great - and ultimately fatal - weaknesses. No historic process or 'experience' of the workers themselves can, on their own, overcome this weakness. For that, the determined intervention of revolutionaries, fighting openly and honestly for their programme is

indispensable.

You quote Engels as saying correctly that the workers have to learn from their own experience and 'to blunt their noses up against theory'. True, but this is not all that Engels said. As with Marx, the originator of the labour party tactic, he emphasised the importance of the struggle for a platform or programme.

'The next step is to find the common remedy for these common grievances, and to embody it in the platform of the new Labor Party... A new party must have a distinct positive platform; a platform which may vary in details as circumstances vary and as the party itself develops, but still one upon which the party, for the time being, is agreed. So long as such a platform has not been worked out, or exists but in a rudimentary form, so long the new party, too, will have but a rudimentary existence; it may exist locally but not yet nationally, it will be a party potentially but not actually. It will proclaim, as the ultimate end, the conquest of political supremacy by the working class, in order to effect the direct appropriation of all means of production - land, railways, mines, machinery, etc. - by society at large, to be worked in common by all for the account and benefit of all.' The Labor Movement in America, Frederick Engels, London, January 26, 1887

Trotsky too repeatedly makes the same point, but with all the experience of reformism behind him.

'Are we in favour of the creation of a reformist labor party? No. Are we in favour of a policy which can give to the trade unions the possibility to put its weight upon the balance of the forces? Yes. It can become a reformist party - it depends upon the development. Here the question of programme comes in. I mentioned yesterday and I will underline it today - we must have a programme of transitional demands, the most complete of them being a workers' and farmers' government. We are for a party, for an independent party of the toiling masses who will take power in the state.' (Leon Trotsky On the Labor Party in the United States)

Trotsky again makes it clear that revolutionaries can never become advocates of a reformist programme or a reformist party.

'A long period of confusion in the Comintern led many people to forget a very simple but absolutely irrevocable principle: that a Marxist, a proletarian revolutionist, cannot present himself before the working class with two banners. He cannot say at a workers' meeting: 'I have a ticket for a first-class party and another, cheaper ticket for the backward workers.' (Trotsky, from the same article)

Trotsky is here plainly talking about the programme (banner) revolutionaries will be fighting for.

So it is a little curious that you think you have put your finger on the differences you have with us when you say the following.

'We will argue for our programme within a new formation but recognise that, even if it is not fully adopted, particularly in the initial phases, a new party will represent an important step forward provided that it brings together important sections of anti-capitalist young people, trade unionists and broader sections of the working class to fight against the attacks of the capitalist system.'

We can agree with every word of this, providing 'your programme' is of the revolutionary, transitional type, and you do intend to fight for it throughout the process, and not create an artificial stage - first a left reformist party and programme, and then a revolutionary one.

Thus we hope that the differences we have with you are not so much differences as to 'how a mass workers party may be built in the next period' - especially the next few months. More likely they will be

over what sort programme revolutionaries should advance during the longer process of formation. Time will tell.

What we actually wanted to discuss with you was the need for:

- (a) Local, union and workplace based reports back from the London conference, which could be an important way to launch the Campaign for a New Workers Party at these levels and start campaigning for the conference
- (b) Initiatives at local level via the trades councils and appropriate union bodies to boost the CNWP
- (c) Fringe meetings at all the union conferences to do likewise
- (d) A campaign aimed at building the maximum support for the campaign amongst youth, antiracist and asylum seekers organisations
- (e) Concerted action in the RMT and FBU to bring about another and bigger conference in the autumn
- (f) How the CNWP and its 19th March conference should be structured and organised at local and national level.

As you can see all these ideas are for practical, common actions, not all any suggestions that we should blur our political differences.

We repeat that we would like to discuss these with you but in any case we can and will discuss them with SP members in the unions, in the localities and at the conference on 19th March

Fraternally yours

Jeremy Dewar

Workers Power

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