

Socialist Workers Party Left Platform resigns: now get to the root of the matter

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The resignation from the Socialist Workers Party of 42 members of the Left Platform, including leading figures such as Lindsey German and John Rees, delivers an important opportunity for SWP and Left Platform members alike to reconsider critical elements of their political tradition.

If activists can re-examine the underlying political reasons for the crisis that has culminated in these resignations, then this can be an occasion for a radical recomposition of the far left in Britain, at a time when the strengthening of the revolutionary movement is a burning necessity as the ruling class lines up for a sustained offensive across the board.

If on the other hand the Left Platform sticks to its current statement of policy, refuses to commence a critical re-examination of the SWP's fundamental politics, and fails to elaborate a new set of policies and a programme for the working class struggle today, then it will either collapse as its members drift into individual campaigning activity in the broader movement, or end up as part of a new combination with opportunist groups unable or unwilling to mount a coherent challenge to the reformist leaders of the Labour movement today.

Two key elements of the Left Platform's Resignation Statement suggest that a critical re-examination of the SWP tradition is the last thing on the Left Platform's leaders' minds.

The first is its treatment of what they say is their core difference with the SWP Majority: the application of the policy of the united front, in particular with regard to the formation of a broad front against the recession.

The second is the Left Platform's critique of the SWP's internal regime and its bureaucratic methods.

In both respects the Left Platform statement fails to get to the heart of the matter, and implies not a break with the bad methods of the past, but a continuation of them and in some respects a deepening of them.

On the question of the united front, the Left Platform has rightly castigated the SWP majority for wishing to establish, in place of straightforward agreements for action with other forces, campaigns which are from the outset under its own unchallenged and unchallengeable control. Yet the Left Platform opposes to this policy of bureaucratic commandism not the policy of the united front as developed by Lenin and Trotsky, where revolutionaries unite with reformists to achieve practical advances in the class struggle at the same time as criticising the reformists' policy and resolutely breaking with them when they obstruct what is necessary to go forward.

Instead they reassert the failed and non-revolutionary policy of the United Front of a Special Type promoted by John Rees in the mid-decade (with support at that time, it must be said, from majority leader Alex Callinicos), which involves establishing long-term campaigns with reformist leaders in which revolutionary criticism of the allies' concrete actions and omissions is all but absent. This policy was responsible for fiascos like Respect, confusing obstacles like Globalise Resistance and missed opportunities that left Stop the War unable to stop the war, and unable to maintain its momentum as the Stalinists of the CPB and the pacifists of CND increasingly stamped their outlook and policy on the coalition.

A repeat performance is clearly what Rees and German have in mind today, as the Left Platform statement makes clear:

The most glaring mistake has been the SWP's refusal to engage with others in shaping a broad left response to the recession, clearly the most pressing task facing the left. Even valuable recent initiatives, like the Right to Work campaign, have minimised the involvement of Labour MPs, union leaders and others who have the capability to mobilise beyond the traditional left.

No mention that at the same time we would need to challenge the practical obstacles that these MPs and union leaders would put in the path of broadening the struggle from below; no mention of the need to mobilise with them where possible, but without and against them where necessary!

While a united front against the capitalist crisis remains a burning necessity, it is neither party fronts nor opportunist blocs that are needed, but proposals for common action that can unite workers locally, regionally and nationally, within which revolutionaries can and must challenge the Labourites and the union leaders left and right over the burning practical questions of mounting strikes and occupation, under rank and file control, against job losses, pay freezes, pension robbery and privatisation.

The need to strike common agreements for action, and the need to know when to break these agreements, can only be correctly judged by the revolutionaries, if they have a clear action programme of their own – a programme designed not for contemplation or self identification but for the action of millions of workers and youth. The programme needs to be practical and link the steps needed to win today's struggles to the formation of new organisations capable of struggling for working class power. Without a transitional programme of this type, the socialists' approach to the united front can never be consistent with the real needs of the working class: instead socialists will either try to hold leadership by bureaucratic control of front campaigns, or will cede leadership by adapting politically to the reformist forces. Without a clear programme, socialists can't win leadership through open struggle within the united front over the question: what must we do next if the movement is to win?

Similarly, on the question of party democracy, the Left Platform's criticism of the SWP majority is totally unconvincing. The Statement says:

An authoritarian internal regime has developed as a result of this change in direction. In the run up to the recent party conference, four members of the Left Platform opposition were disciplined, three of them expelled. Since the conference, four of the remaining student comrades at the School of Oriental and African studies in London have been effectively pushed out of the party. A comrade in Newcastle was given an ultimatum to resign from a key position in the local movement in January. He resigned from the party and 10 comrades left in protest at his treatment. The use of disciplinary methods to 'win' arguments is completely foreign to the traditions of the SWP and should have no place in the socialist movement.

Now it is absolutely true that to expel people for factionalism is bureaucratic and a refusal to engage in democratic debate. But it is wholly false, as many people will recognise, to claim that this method is 'foreign to the traditions of the SWP'. These methods have been going on for years and predated John Rees' removal from the Central Committee and the new course of the current majority. To claim otherwise is put yourselves laughably at odds with reality and with the experience of hundreds of activists in the movement today - an experience they are unlikely to forget. Left Platform members must surely understand that outside of their own ranks, no-one will take this claim seriously.

But it is absolutely true - a kind of political and moral breakthrough on the part of the Left Platform leaders - to recognise that bureaucratic methods develop as a result of underlying political mistakes. But this leads to another breakthrough. If the bureaucratism pre-dates the current dispute, and if it has existed for many years, then surely the only logical conclusion to be drawn is that it was and is related to the SWP's core politics.

The SWP's ban of factions outside of its three-month pre-conference period is a bureaucratic abuse par excellence. It has no tradition in the revolutionary movement, in which bans on factions have only ever been applied in conditions of great emergency, and have always been recognised as carrying with them terrible dangers of bureaucratisation. The ban on factions applied by the Bolsheviks in 1921 was itself a terrible mistake which hugely accelerated the degeneration and bureaucratisation of the party.

Allowing factions for a set calendar period implies that the necessity to identify, confront and overcome harmful policies and theories in a revolutionary party can be managed in the manner of a suburban bus timetable. What if key class battles, key victories or defeats, new challenges, arise outside of this neat schedule?

It was in recognition of this that the original Left Faction in IS refused to shut down its faction in 1975 and was expelled, subsequently forming our organisation, Workers Power. The group quickly opened a process of re-examination of the roots of the IS tendency's politics, which led us to re-elaborate Leninist and Trotskyist politics today and in particular to develop a transitional programme focused on the realities of the modern conditions of class struggle.

We appeal to every member of the Left Platform to take the same path. Call a conference and begin the process of re-elaborating a revolutionary programme. Re-examine revolutionary tactics and break with both forms of the pseudo-united front tactic applied by the SWP over recent years.

In the meantime, work with us on projects of practical value for advancing the class struggle. Help us to activate the decision of the Right to Work Conference, which the SWP Majority only acceded to under pressure from Workers Power and the Left Platform, to build local committees of Right to Work. Help us to prevent them being little more than bureaucratically controlled SWP front campaigns, not by subordinating

them to Labour MPs and left wing union leaders, but by creating real delegate based committees of struggle combining workers from every workplace facing cuts and closures, from the youth fighting education cuts and unemployment, from the estates.

In the fight against the BNP and EDL, help us to overcome the obstacles presented by local reformist forces in some UAF campaigns by challenging them openly: stop forcing us to rally and march away from the Nazis, but make way for an organised and well-prepared Antifascist Defence League. Workers Power is approaching other organisations to set this up: we appeal to you to join with us in this desperately needed initiative.

In Stop the War, stop your leaders from increasingly acting as if they can only say things the other Coalition leaders can accept, and start attacking the occupation using direct revolutionary and anti-imperialist arguments that alone can really answer the militarist propaganda campaign that is corroding class consciousness, intimidating Muslims and dividing working class communities against themselves.

In the student sphere, the SWP has tried to create a classic party front of its own in the ill-starred Another Education is Possible campaign. Yet despite the obstruction of SWSS officials, a range of student activists including the socialist youth group REVOLUTION have succeeded in establishing a National Campaign against Fees and Cuts at a 150-strong conference comprising mainly independent student activists. The Sussex delegation to the conference went back and mounted an occupation within a few days of the conference. This model ? democratic co-ordination in which the revolutionaries win leadership through argument, not control ? must be the way forward.

In the coming general election, let?s break resolutely with the Respect tradition of cross-class politics and mount an independent working class challenge. Workers Power is standing Jeremy Drinkall in Vauxhall on a clear and uncompromising Anticapitalist ticket. The Left Platform could do the same in other areas, and fight to get the endorsement of the Trade Unionist and Socialist coalition, without agreeing to limit your programme to what Bob Crow is prepared to allow.

And let?s use this to push forward the fight for a new anticapitalist party. The model of the NPA in France of forming strong local committees, based on the fightback, for a new party must be the way forward. But at the same time we can avoid the opportunist electoral programme pushed by the Fourth International within the NPA by drawing up and fighting for a consistently revolutionary programme of our own for the new party. Again, this can?t be imposed as an ultimatum or a condition; it can only be fought for openly and honestly by the revolutionaries within any new formation.

Finally, the crisis of leadership of the working class is no British affair ? it is as international as the crisis of capital itself. The recent call by Hugo Chavez for a Fifth International provides no political programme for the working class, but has raised one key thing that is needed and has made it appear once again on the agenda of the workers of many countries. A new world party of social revolution is no impossible dream, not something for the far future ? if so, then so is the revolution. In making a fundamental reappraisal of the politics of the Cliff tradition, the Left Platform signatories should place the fight for an international programme and a new International right at the heart of their project.

We are of course willing to discuss with individuals, groups and the whole of your new organisation, while making our stance very clear from the outset. To avoid going round in circles, and merely shuffling the pack of the British Left?s opportunism and sectarianism, get to the root of the matter. Re-examine the Cliff tradition and reapply the revolutionary ideas of Leninism today.

In a further note, Dave Stockton examines the Cliff tradition's concept of party and programme. He is a founder member of Workers Power which was expelled from the IS, the forerunners of the SWP, in the 1970s

The fundamental problem here is the SWP tradition's ignorance of the importance of a programme as the heart of a party - something whose overall strategy and principles guides it through various struggles and the variety of tactics needed to win.

The founder of the Socialist Workers Party Tony Cliff constantly belittled the idea of developing a revolutionary programme. Most famously, he likened the method of the Marxist programme to giving a blueprint of a gun to someone needing a gun but the riposte Workers Power has always given is that without a blueprint you won't construct a gun that works. Instead you will have a gun that will not fire at the critical moment and will even blow up in your face. That is if you get beyond a pile of bits that will not even fit together.

A revolutionary action programme attempts to deal with all these problems by outlining the methods and tactics the working class needs to take power: how do workers fight the trade union misleaders, what does the working class do about inflation, job losses and so on? What is the attitude of the working class towards the Labour Party or popular front campaigns; how can we form workers' councils? How can we get the arms needed for a revolution and so on. These are the questions only a revolutionary programme can answer. To not have a programme is failing to provide the answer and instead leave the reformists etc to dominate.

Instead, the SWP has relied, and continues to rely on the objective fact that the struggles of workers come up against the limits of what capitalism can afford with reforms, and the hope that spontaneously they will recognise the necessity revolutionary fight for power. Then of course they will find the organisation known as the SWP ready and waiting for them. Of course SWP members will say they are far from waiting on the sidelines.

They are present in all the workers struggles, helping to raise their confidence, which is what is really needed to make the transition from reform to revolution. Certainly SWP members are amongst the best class fighters. But the task of revolutionaries cannot be reduced to being the best trade unionists, to joining in whatever the most militant workers are already struggling for. But if the working class will automatically come to revolutionary conclusions through its own experiences alone, why do we need a revolutionary party?

Indeed, as long as capitalism appears all-pervasive and there seems to be no alternative to billions then reformism will be constantly regenerated by the trade union struggle as long as the latter remains an economic struggle with the bosses and their state. To go further, to escape from this vicious circle, requires winning workers (and therefore first of all the most militant vanguard) to a programme which is at one and the same time a clear strategy for power but also with demands, methods of struggle and form of organisation which will both intersect with today's struggles, and help them to win and in the process transform them into a conflict with the whole basis of the profit system.

The roots of the problem for both minority and majority is that they have not given any serious thought to the causes of the failures of the last decade, let alone to the methodological problems of the whole Cliffite tradition. This lies fundamentally in Cliff's break in the 1950s from the method of using a system of transitional demands as developed first by the Communist International and then by Trotsky and the Leninist vanguard party. He did so in favour of a vulgarised 'Luxemburgism', -a belief that workers struggles when they reach a certain level of size and confidence spontaneously led to a socialist and

revolutionary consciousness.

At the end of the sixties the failure of the ten million strong French general strike to develop in this way convinced Cliff he had been wrong to reject the Leninist Party but when he adopted it it was seen simply as an organisation, promoting existing struggles, (raising confidence), making the case for socialism, and preparing a centralised organisation for the great day. What was missing was the programme- the core of both Lenin and Trotsky's conception. Without this all tactics become disconnected and lose their direction. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the various forms of the united front.

Revolutionaries must unite their agitation over today's struggles and their propaganda for socialism by offering a programme of demands that take workers from the now towards socialism -in short a transitional programme. For example, the RTW campaign must become more than merely a network of local support groups. Instead, if it is to play a national role, it needs to initiate and campaign for action to defeat the bosses and to offer policies to solve the crisis. That way it would offer workers a political and practical socialist alternative to Labour and the right.

The role of the party is therefore more than the SWP's (either side) combination of organising struggles and making the case for socialism but is a body of the best militants who can fight for the leadership of workers armed with a revolutionary programme to lead the working class to socialism.

For that it certainly will have to use the united front: not some sort of 'special Type' where criticisms of misleaders are put on hold, but the revolutionary concept of the united front, where revolutionaries fight for the broadest participation of workers, youth, unemployed, ethnic groups and so on and for the best policies to win. In so doing revolutionaries will win significant sections of the working class away from reformists to revolutionary programme.

So what is our advice to the comrades of the SWP majority and to the minority who have left?

To the SWP members who see RTW as a serious step forward from the campaigns of the last decade and to the ex-Left faction we say: build RTW as a genuine united front drawing in as many trade union branches, trades councils as possible. Involve the union leaders too, those who are fighting, but with no promises to shield them from criticism above all for their own members when they surrender. Build RTW sections in every town and city, getting involved in every local dispute, every defence of local services. Launch a massive campaign to organise the unemployed, especially the youth and migrant workers and immigrant communities.

Use the general election not only to challenge Labour in a few constituencies but as a tribune from which to raise the call for a new working class, anticapitalist party.

We would encourage all participants of the debate to read our literature and to discuss with us about forging a real, revolutionary party and international.

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