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Britain

The challenge facing the left

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Big political or industrial movements can shape the conditions of struggle for the working class for a generation. This was the case, at the European level, with the mass strikes in France in 1968: a development that was taken further by the movement against the Vietnam War. In Britain, this coincided with the rising industrial militancy of the 1970s, which began to politicize the trade unions. These events radicalized a generation of activists, raised the profile of the left, and shaped the general political discourse to its advantage, right through until the mid-1980s.

Such a process can happen in reverse, of course. The defeat of the British coal miners and success of Thatcherite ideology in the 1980s depoliticized a generation and put the ideology of the ruling class in the ascendancy. The result was the hegemony of the neo-liberal agenda, and a deeply defensive period for the working class.

That period of retreat was challenged by the mass strikes in France at the end of 1995, and by the emergence of the anti-globalization movement at Seattle in 1999. This crucially important new movement united the left, environmentalists, direct actionists, and others against the advances of globalized capital, and the neo-liberal agenda, and initiated a new political movement around the idea 'think global, act local'.

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September 11, 2001 gave the American Republican right the chance they had been waiting for to strike back at these developments. The result was the US 'war against terror/'Project of a New American Century', the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, and then the invasion and recolonization of Iraq.

These brutal acts of 19th century colonialism, however, dramatically created their opposite: the emergence of an unprecedented international movement against the war. This emerged from the anti-capitalist movement itself, which was now organized around the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, and regional social forums such as Florence, in Europe, at the end of last year.

Britain, along with Spain and Italy (each with governments strongly supporting the US war drive), had the biggest and most impressive anti-war movements in Europe. In Britain this was created by: a well developed and led coalition against the war; the absolute centrality of Blair to the US led war; positive developments which were already taking place in the unions; and a pacifist tradition going back to Vietnam.

This anti-war movement enjoyed the support of the majority of the population in Britain (at least before it started). It organized three of the biggest political demonstrations in British history: September 28th 2002 with 400,000, 1.5 million on February 15th 2003 and then half a million on March 22nd after the invasion of Iraq had started.

Now, in the aftermath of the war, we can see that these were events with the potential to change the political situation and shape the future of the workers' movement for the next period, possibly on the scale of the 1970s. It is an opportunity, which must be grasped, since it may not recur for some time.

Whilst the Stop The War movement was unable to affect the overall conduct of the war (other than contributing to the extraordinary decision of Turkey not to allow a land invasion from its territory) since its course was dictated by a prearranged military agenda, it was able to increase the political price that the war mongers would have to pay and affect the political conditions which would follow the war.

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In Britain, the political fall-out and the opportunities created are clear. With the naked role of the US empire there for all to see, a new generation of school students came onto the streets, motivated at the level of international politics and with an increasingly anti-imperialist sentiment. The left has been strengthened, since it led a mass campaign, which in the past would have been led by the Labour left and by the CP. The influence of the left trade union leaders, who totally opposed the war and were an important component of the stop the war movement, has been strengthened.

The anti-war movement created an unprecedented crisis for Blair and new Labour, with the biggest revolt of MPs in a House of Commons revolt ever. Bush was prepared to go to war without Britain if necessary, although in the event - partly due to the small number of senior Labour figures prepared to defy Blair - Blair was able to hold on by a reasonably safe margin.

Blair has survived the war with his opinion poll ratings intact, but he has been damaged by the experience. His success is partly based on the continued crisis of the Conservative Party, who were reduced during the war to cheer leaders for Blair, and the fact that new Labour's voting base (and general base of support) eats ever more into the Tory areas of society.

New Labour distanced itself still further from its traditional base. Large numbers of members opposed to the war have been resigning from the party. The crisis of the Labour left - who were marginal in the Stop The War movement despite the efforts of individual MPs such as George Galloway (who has been victimized for calling on the troops to defy orders) and Jeremy Corbyn - has been increased. If a breakthrough cannot be made under conditions of the invasion of Iraq, when can it be made?

At the same time the crisis of working class political representation, which has been developing since new Labour came into government, has become more acute. As a result the debate in the trade unions on the political fund (that proportion of trade union dues which fund the Labour Party) has been sharpened and the relationship between new Labour and the unions further thrown into question. Increasing numbers of trade union members resent funding a party which attacks them at every turn, supports the US Republican right in a brutal war, and aligns himself in Europe with Aznar and Berlusconi.

This is now being debated in a number of unions in this year's conference season. One of the media unions, BECTU, has just decided to ballot its members on disaffiliation. The rail workers union, the RMT, is proposing changing its rules to allow for support to candidates other than Labour. There is huge pressure from the rank and file to go the same way in the fire fighters union, the FBU.

This new radicalized political situation was reflected in the results of the elections, which took place on May 1st for the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly, and in some local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales (only a proportion of local authorities are up for election each year).

The most spectacular was the gains made by the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) in Scotland, where a socialist alternative is most developed. The SSP increased its representation in the Scottish Parliament from 1 to 6. This spectacular result - further enhanced by the fact that four of the six new SSP representatives are women - was directly connected to the campaign against the war in which the SSP was central in Scotland - although the SSP has been increasing its influence over a longer period of time. This breakthrough opens the opportunity for the SSP to become a major force in Scottish politics. It also, of course has important implications for the left in England and Wales, and even at the European level, where it will also have an impact.

In England the Socialist Alliance won its first local council seat by getting 38% of the vote in a seat in Preston in the

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North West. The Alliance was able to draw the support gained in the stop the war campaign into the election and gain - in particular a substantial vote from Muslim anti-war activists (a local imam supported the Alliance and attended and spoke at its conference).

The Alliance also scored several results of around 20%: although its average was very much lower when the poorer results are taken into account. These results were a confirmation of the radicalization which was taking place, but which was still (particularly in England and Wales) only partially reflecting its self in a socialist vote in elections.

The Scottish Parliaments and the Welsh Assembly have proportional elements in their electoral system, whilst the local elections across Britain are on the first-past-the-post system, which puts the smaller parties at a huge disadvantage. The SSP for example only won one local authority seat - although it has to be said that they gave an almost total priority to the Parliamentary election.

Not all of the anti-war votes went to socialists, either. The Liberal Democrats benefited from their anti-war stance, winning many new seats. They opposed the war until it started, and then backed 'our boys' who were in action. (Interestingly the Liberal Democrats in Scotland have forced the Labour Party in Scotland to support proportional representation for future local authority elections in Scotland as a part of their coalition deal. This could give the SSP over 100 councillors in future elections).

The conclusion, however, is clear. The movement against the war has created the conditions for a wider left unity than has been possible until now. This cannot be done by the Stop the War Coalition, which is a single issue campaign, which should continue in opposition to the occupation of Iraq, and the wider so-called war against terror. It is an initiative, which the Socialist Alliance is best placed to take, since it is the most successful left coalition to date. This posed a sharp challenge to the Socialist Alliance - whose conference took place on March 15.

The issue at the conference, therefore, was not so much how the Alliance could be turned into a party like the SSP - which many of us have rightly been arguing for some time. The issue now posed is whether the Alliance can recognize the opportunities, which have opened up, and if so can it translate them into a new broader and stronger realignment of the left in new political conditions? The issue of the party will still be crucial, but the first task is to create a broader alignment than the Socialist Alliance represents at the present time.

With this in mind the conference adopted a resolution calling for the widest possible discussion on the need for a wider and more effective united left alternative.

The appeal is addressed to the activists of the anti-war movement, including the Muslim activists that evolved to the left during the campaign. It is addressed to those who have left the Labour Party in disgust at Blairism and the war. It is addressed to the left in the trade unions, many of whom have been responsible for the higher levels of trade union struggles over the past few years. It is addressed to the radical new trade union leaders who have been elected in recent years in a number of unions are a reflection of all this and have potentially an important role to play.

It is also addressed to the left organizations that are not currently inside the Alliance; in particular the Communist Party of Britain, the main ex-Stalinist fragment, which produces the daily newspaper 'The Morning Star'. To join such a new alignment would involve a strategic shift for them, since currently they do not support challenges to Labour in general elections. But they are divided on this and they worked successfully with the far left in the Stop the War Coalition, and may be prepared to make the break. The involvement of the CPB, however, would open doors to the left in the unions, where they still have an influence. It also involves the Socialist Party, who walked out of the Alliance on a sectarian trajectory in 2001, but could be attracted to realignment.

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This is not simply an appeal to others join the Alliance, as it is. It proposes to keep an open mind on the organizational form that could emerge from such discussions. It could be the Alliance as it is, a relaunched Alliance, or a new organization entirely. The Alliance would insist only that any new formation is open, inclusive, democratic, and of course socialist.

The idea is to shape a new left alignment around the various elections, which will be coming up over the next two years. Next year there will be the elections for the London Assembly, which has a proportional element. There are also the European elections, which have a proportional element. Then the following year there will be the next general election, which will be fought under first-past-the-post. It proposes the target of a socialist candidate in every constituency by that time.

This means opening up a period of discussion on the approach of the left to these elections. Success is not guaranteed but the opportunity is clearly there.

It is not just the war, of course, which defines the nature of new Labour and alienates its traditional support. This is the government that is prepared to use the law against the firefighters' strikes. This is the government that introduced tuition fees, that is privatizing our schools and letting profit dictate what happens in our health service. It is the government which has stoked up racism, and strengthened the far right, by its continuous and scandalous attacks on immigrants and asylum seekers and its social and industrial policies.

The young people who are joining the anti-war movement are turning towards politics, in particular anti-imperialist politics. The last thing they are going to do is join the Labour Party, the party that is carrying out this war. But an organization that puts forward a principled alternative to the policies of new Labour, which supports the anti-war movement and the struggles at home can win many of that new generation to its banner.

The situation, however, is not all one of opportunity for the left; there is a dangerous side as well. The far right British National Party increased their representation in the local elections, particularly in the Northern industrial towns. Last year it won three seats in Burnley in Lancashire. This year they took five more seats in Burnley but also added two seats in Sandwell in the West Midlands, one in nearby Dudley, one in Calderdale (Halifax), one in Stoke on Trent, and one in Broxbourne in Hertfordshire.

The door has been opened for the BNP, not only by factors like the industrial decline in Lancashire, which is a factor in Burnley, but also by New Labour's state racism as expressed in their attitude to asylum seekers.

These successes of the far right, however, only give more urgency for the left to respond to current opportunities and form a more effective coalition. The left has to make sure that they are opposed on the streets, but also opposed in the ballot box - where there is always a socialist alternative on offer and a socialist campaign which can target their politics, defend asylum seekers, and advance a working class perspective.