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Britain

The SWP makes a welcome turn

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"The Socialist Workers Party is experiencing a massive break from the experiences which have shaped our members over the last two decades," writes Chris Bambery in the latest issue of Socialist Review. He argues that a new radicalisation means that it is necessary for the SWP to break with its relatively isolated branch and paper sale method and turn outward - to build the Socialist Alliance, harking back to the IS/SWP experience of the 1970s.

It is clear that over the last two years a slow change has been taking place at the top of the SWP, first tentatively with the campaign against the war in the Balkans, picking up confidence with the turn to the London Socialist Alliance last year and now finding full expression with the Socialist Alliance general election campaign. A wholesale attempt to change the practice of the SWP is now underway.

The political basis of this development has been given clear expression in two recent keynote articles, by John Rees in *International Socialism* and in a piece on the SWP website from Alex Callinicos.

For them both, Seattle is the key, a turning point in the class struggle, legitimising direct action and providing a new language - anti-capitalism.

Whilst the Fourth International might want to highlight some of the precursors to Seattle, and the role that revolutionaries had in starting the process - with the Euro-marches in Amsterdam and Cologne, the growth of ATTAC etc., nevertheless we can agree that a new cycle of protest has clearly broken out.

In turn a new anti-capitalist mood is developing. John Rees makes the valid point that the current wave of demonstrations and campaigns are new in identifying the capitalist system as the enemy - rather than fighting in isolation around specific issues, those issues have become starting points from which to rapidly move on to identifying the real source of the problem.

Alex Callinicos identifies two further developments - the growth of new political milieus such as the ATTAC movement and the development of new critiques of capitalism from such as Naomi Klein, Susan George and Walden Bello.

That they have recognised these developments is to be welcomed. What makes it more important is that almost alone with the Fourth International amongst the revolutionary left they want to fight to win this broad contradictory current to develop a more coherent socialist consciousness.

At the same time John Rees understands that, as social democratic leaderships adopt the neo-liberal economic orthodoxy the space for traditional reformist consciousness narrows - and an increasing minority of left reformists are forced to draw more left wing conclusions - and turn to the anti-capitalist movement. Thus the anti-capitalist movement takes on an importance far greater than its current size would suggest - "as a house where those breaking from reformism to the left and revolutionaries can co-operate".

Both Rees and Callinicos promote this argument subtly. For them it is the movements' potential and symbolic role that is important. But it is already apparent that for others in the SWP real numbers have to be involved. Bending the stick some have sought to imagine into being a movement that is not actually there. In the late 70s' the "downturn" theory was used to explain away the SWP's inability to politically overcome the hold of left reformist Stalinism inside

the trade union movement. For some it is clear that the "upturn" theory is now to be used to reorient the SWP without the need to critically examine the errors of analysis of the past.

If New Labour is now neo-liberal, has the Labour Party fundamentally changed its nature? Here John Rees shows how much more advanced his analysis is compared to those in, for instance, the Socialist Party who argue that Labour is now irredeemably bourgeois. He points out that, however right wing Blair is he is no worse than his political ancestors; that the Labour government, however more naked it may be in its espousal of capitalist policies, is no different to any previous Labour government in practice; and that despite all the business donations now flowing into Labour's coffers Labour is still reliant on its financial links with the trade unions. While perhaps we would go further in believing that Blair intends ultimately to break with Labour's working class base we would agree with Rees' conclusion that New Labour is still as Lenin described it a "capitalist workers party" and that therefore our electoral slogan must be "Vote socialist where you can, vote Labour where you must".

That said, Labour in government has pushed forward an agenda that has left many working people worse off than they were under the Tories. Its programme has included elements, like tube privatisation, that even Margaret Thatcher balked at. With a worsening economic situation developing the crisis in reformism will deepen. How should revolutionaries react? John Rees points out that there are no quick fixes. It will take a long time to erode the influence of reformism - but the possibilities are stronger than for a long time.

Firstly in the trade unions the issue of independence of action is vital. The union bureaucracies have so far been able to turn back what developing mood exists, closing ranks behind "their government". But there is a growing politicised left in the trade union movement. Rees correctly identifies the need to build a new rank and file movement independent of ties to Labour. But whilst he is right to stress that socialists, revolutionary or not, must be at the core of this movement he fails to spell out what forms of organisation are necessary. In the past the SWP's view of rank and file organisation has led to them building "party" controlled currents in opposition to genuine broad left movements. They were right to attack the rotten electoral blocs run by the Stalinists and others but independent activists were rightly suspicious of movements that appeared to be subordinate to the whims of specific parties. Part of the recent development of the SWP has been for their trade union militants to become involved with other broad left currents. Whilst this has varied from union to union there are positive signs of a new approach. We need to build truly inclusive organisations that are not in the control of one or another faction, where all experiences are respected. The collaboration in the Socialist Alliance has shown such inclusivity is possible.

Secondly, Rees calls for joint work with the new activists moving into political activity in order to rebuild the left. Employing the notion of the united front is essential for this we are told. The united front is not some manoeuvre to expose the vacillation of reformism. It is not through differentiation inside the united front that revolutionaries will win recruits. Rees calls on revolutionaries to "show in practice that their methods of struggle are superior". But that said, the frame of reference is still unclear. Callinicos in his article talks of the "systematic use of the united front approach" having been "stumbled on...more or less empirically" by the SWP during the Balkan War campaign and then developed in the London Socialist Alliance GLA election campaign.

Callinicos argues that "the success of initiatives such as Globalise Resistance have depended critically on the diverse range of political views represented both in building for them and in the actual conferences themselves". It is true that the SWP has changed dramatically in its relations to the rest of the left. But this has been partial and contradictory. Some campaigns have remained as SWP-led affairs where other organised currents are only barely tolerated. That this is no longer the norm is to be welcomed. Whilst, of course, the SWP and other revolutionaries are entitled to feel that their strategy is the best line of march in any campaign, this has to be fought for through a real exchange of ideas. Only through open democratic structures and full collaboration can lessons actually be learnt and these new forces won over. Of course, this leaves campaigns open to factional intervention by others. And it is clear that in the past the SWP has not been alone in wanting to close off "their" campaigns for fear of disruptive intervention from sectarians. But these problems have to be fought politically rather than through bureaucratic

manoeuvre.

The third area of work is on the electoral terrain, with the Socialist Alliance. It is clear that the SWP view on the Alliance is going through a long process of development. Having decided to support the LSA GLA campaign the SWP through its full weight behind the project. But at that stage it still appeared that the intervention could as easily be stopped after the election if things were not an immediate success. In the Rees article the Alliance is described as a "united front of a particular kind...uniting left reformist activists and revolutionaries in a common campaign around a minimum programme". Whilst this is now seen as a long-term structure, it is not a "party". But in recent issues of Socialist Review a debate has been opened which discusses the possibility of allowing the Alliance to develop into a working class party in which revolutionaries would be a minority. The possibility would exist of the SWP operating as a tendency inside such a party as they are proposing to do with the Scottish Socialist Party.

These ideas all represent a potential break with past practice. Certainly the experience of the last year has confounded those who assumed that the LSA project would be a rapid raid on the left. Allied to these developments the SWP must develop its own organisation. To this end Rees raises the Gramscian concept of the party member as "organic intellectual". Instead of paper-sellers, maintaining "the verities of socialist politics to relatively small audiences" he calls on revolutionaries to agitate and organise on a wider scale, building "an organic relationship to the best militants in the class, whether or not we expect them to become SWP members".

Talking to ordinary SWP members it is clear that the organisation is serious about making a change. But at the same time, for many, this is entering uncharted waters. It remains to be seen whether this can develop beyond a set of basic formulations used to centralise the organisation around a specific leadership team. That is the charge of the ISO, the SWP's US co-thinkers from whom the SWP have recently broken.

Callinicos makes great play of the need to be prepared to fundamentally turn an organisation when it is deemed necessary. "Adapt or die" is the message. He accuses the ISO of failing to react quickly and thoroughly enough to the new line. Despite being the most important other member of the International Socialist Tendency, the SWP's loose international current, it seems that the SWP would rather lose comrades than allow them to drag back the movement.

And herein lies two fundamental problems. On the one hand Callinicos argues that the SWP should not be prepared to allow the development of permanent destructive factionalism, which he claims was the fate of the Fourth International in the 1970s. On the other hand he continues to argue that it is premature to "launch an international organisation with its own leadership and discipline before the development of the kind of mass working class radicalisation that made it possible for the Bolsheviks to make the Communist International a major pole of attraction".

For all the problems of the 1970s, and the subsequent degeneration of the American SWP in the 1980s, it is just not true to say that the FI ceased to be an effective political forum. On the contrary, without freedom of debate it would have been impossible to correct such mistakes that were made. Full freedom of criticism and internal organisation are the only guarantee of the long-term survival of revolutionary organisation - in national parties and internationally.

And though clearly the conditions that produced the Communist International will lead to the formation of new international relations superseding the Fourth International as currently organised, the attempt to build an International in the here and now is the only way to ensure the development of the revolutionary movement. The FI has always believed that it is necessary for our individual sections to have full freedom to develop their own line of march, tailored to the specific conditions of their own local political situation. But international collaboration and debate are vital for the healthiness of those sections. It is ironic that the SWP's loose tendency seems to have a heavier hand than the FI world party.

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Despite these caveats the turn by the SWP outlined by Callinicos and Rees has to be welcomed. The experience of collaboration in the Socialist Alliance has been a positive one. In campaigns and in the trade unions there are the beginnings of new healthier joint activity. At an international level, despite the odd jibe, the work, for instance in Nice between the SWP and the LCR, and now in building for Genoa indicates new possibilities opening up. The turn by the SWP is an opportunity which must be embraced.