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Britain:

New opportunities for left realignment

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The impact of austerity has thrown politics in Britain into turmoil. Both parties of the ruling coalition government (the Tories and the Liberal Democrats) lost heavily in local elections in England last week to UKIP (the United Kingdom Independence Party) – a right wing, populist, anti-immigration party which is pulling all the main parties to the right. Labour's performance was better but poor; since its answer to austerity is its own brand of austerity and it has pandered to anti-immigrant sentiment.

The left was nowhere in the election – there was nothing to rally the left in the way UKIP rallied the right – which raised again the desperate need for a broad party of the left which can start to do what Syriza has done in Greece: provide a clear anti-austerity platform to which the working class can relate.

Syriza has demonstrated that a coalition of forces organised democratically within a single party can win mass support and break the hold of the main establishment parties including social democracy. Similar parties have been built in a number of European countries.

Just a few months ago the prospects for such a party, in England, looked extremely bleak. Socialist Resistance had continued to argue for such a party with all those on the left who would listen because we were strongly convinced of the need. We published a book and held forums and seminars on the issue and discussed with other organisations on the left. It was hard going but the space for such a party had been still there, in fact it had increased.

This grim situation, moreover, was entirely self-inflicted by the left itself. Prime opportunities to build such a party, over the past 15 years had been squandered by sectarianism. This had produced a series of damaging splits which had seriously undermined the credibility of such a project.

The key factor in each case was internal democracy, or the absence or abuse of it. It had revolved around whether these organisations could have a decision making process independent of the principal far left organisation involved, or the principal important individual. Whether they could have their own internal political life and political development.

The Socialist Labour Party, which had been launched by Scargill after Tony Blair took control of the Labour Party in 1994, was eventually torn apart by the personal top down control on which he insisted and his refusal to allow any plurality.

The Socialist Alliance (SA), which was launched in 2000, embraced, at one stage, virtually the whole of the far left, including the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the Socialist Party (SP), along with significant forces from the Labour Left, was split when the SP walked out in opposition to one member one vote at its conferences.

Respect was launched in 2004 after George Galloway was expelled from the Labour Party for his opposition to the Iraq war, and the SA dissolved into it. It had a wider appeal, particularly amongst Muslim people radicalised by the war, and was able to get Galloway elected to Parliament (the first left of Labour MP since the 1940s) and significant groups of councillors elected mainly in East London and Birmingham. It was eventually split, however (between the SWP and almost everyone else), when the SWP refused to relax its grip on the functioning of the organisation.

Respect's 'Renewal', which was formed from the split with the SWP, was also eventually destroyed when Galloway imposed his own top-down control and turned it into a support group for himself – even after spectacularly winning

the Bradford West Parliamentary by-election in March last year, which had opened up new opportunities for a broad party.

The far-left

The prospects for far-left unity had looked equally bleak only months ago. The far-left had been dominated for many years by the two big organisations (in far left terms), the SWP and the SP, with the smaller groups, including ourselves (in our current and previous forms), largely squeezed out.

The SP had broken the mould and turned outwards when it promoted the early Socialist Alliances in the 1990s. The SWP (the bigger of the two by quite a bit) turned outwards to join the SA in 2000 in quite a sharp break with its past isolationism. This did not last long in either case, however. The SWP increasingly acted in its own self-interest and after it had split Respect it went back to an isolationist position.

When it came to the struggle against the cuts in 2010, these historic divisions within the far left became replicated in a destructive way in the broader movement. Instead of a single national focus we ended up three anti-cuts campaigns: the National Shop Steward Network run by the SP, Unite the Resistance run by the SWP, and CoR which was established on an open and broad basis.

In fact the SP split the National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN) – a trade union co-ordination originally set up by the rail union the RMT – in 2011 by forcing through a resolution (against all others in the NSSN) to turn the NSSN into a new anti-cuts campaign as a rival the Coalition of Resistance (CoR).

CoR was formed after John Rees, Lindsey German and Chris Banbury led a split from the SWP in 2010 (along with 40 others) and founded Counterfire in England and the ISG in Scotland. They took the initiative in founding CoR and Counterfire became a central component within it.

Dramatic opportunities

Recent developments, however, have dramatically opened up the situation on the left – both at the level of building a broad party to the left of Labour and at the level of far left unity.

The most dramatic was an appeal for a new broad party of the left issued by Ken Loach on the occasion of the launch of his new film *The Spirit of 45'* – which is a big defence of socialist and collectivist ideas and in particular public ownership and public services.

The film was launched simultaneously in 50 cinemas (many full to capacity) in mid-March followed by a question and answer session in one cinema which was relayed to many of the others during which Ken Loach made an appeal for a new party of the left. His appeal was then carried by a website which had recently been set up to argue for a new party – called Left Unity, which we as SR had been involved from the outset. Within a few days 6,000 people had signed up to the appeal.

Since then the project has moved at a remarkable pace. There are now over 90 local groups in various stages of formation. An organising committee has been set up at an ad-hoc meeting held in London to administer these developments and support local groups. The first national meeting of reps from branches is taking place on May 11th in order to agree the next steps forward. The initial thoughts for a date for a launch conference for a new party seem to be early next year, February or March.

Not that creating a new broad party will be easy given the propensity of the left in England to squander such opportunities and the legacy which has been left by the previous failures – particularly the actions of the big far-left organisations. But the urgent need is still there and it is the best chance for a long time.

There seems to be a general consensus that a new organisation should be a broad, pluralist, left of Labour, anti-austerity party and one that is not dominated, undemocratically by a far-left organisation. Also that it should be based on individual membership, and not a federation of organisations.

Electoral strategy has not yet been discussed but it is clear that the approach of TUSC – which is to parachute into constituencies with no record on the ground and to do nothing between elections will be rejected.

Neither the SWP or the SP are involved – other than a few people at local level. Nor does it have a big charismatic leader. Ken Loach will no doubt continue to support, but such ‘big leader’ roles are anathema to him. There is no George Galloway or Tommy Sheridan (who split the SSP in Scotland) type figures for example. This can be a disadvantage when it comes to elections but it also has a positive side given the havoc which such figures have reeked in the recent past.

It means that the party itself will have to establish its own reputation by its work and its record.

Far left regroupment

The first positive development as far as far left unity is concerned started when the Anti-capitalist Initiative emerged in April last year, initially from a split of young people from Workers Power along with a previous split from Workers Power some people from autonomous backgrounds and others. By the end of the year they were making an appeal for a more open and democratic form of far left organisation. Luke Cooper and Simon Hardy published a book arguing the case for this entitled ‘Beyond capitalism? The Future of Radical Politics’.

The book was a clear break from a sectarian past and we engaged with it as strongly as we could holding discussions and joint public meetings with the ACI in London Manchester and elsewhere where our membership coincided. We worked with them in the early stages of Left Unity, before the Ken Loach initiative, and have continued to work with them in Left Unity ever since.

The second was when the crisis in the SWP (or a new stage of it) broke into the open in January this year at the SWP conference, where there was a huge dispute over the sexual harassment allegations were dealt with (or not dealt with), the main lines of which are now well known. Some SWP members had already been expelled for forming a faction.

Soon after the conference a group of around 200 SWP members resigned from the organisation over the leadership’s defence of their actions on this issue and the political methods used to do so. They formed themselves into a grouping called the IS Network which had its first national level meeting on April 13th and they invited ourselves as SR and the ACI to attend as observers and to give greetings to it.

However you view the decline of the SWP, which has long been a major force on the left, this has dramatically shaken up the landscape of the far left and has opened up a new space for far-left realignment.

In fact it was clear from the outset that this grouping had a very different approach to others who have left the SWP in recent years – in fact dramatically so. There was a remarkably non-sectarian and outward looking atmosphere in the meeting.

New opportunities for left realignment

The mood was for a far more open and democratic model for the far left. They were setting up a new organisation/coordination but with the aim of far-left regroupment and the organisations they mentioned in this regard were SR and the ACI. Several speakers said that if they have not achieved regroupment by this time next year they will have failed.

There was also strong support for Ken Loach's initiative, which was seen by most speakers as a separate but equally important development. There was a women's caucus which discussed and reported back to the meeting and which presented constitutional proposals regarding the protection of women and how to deal with the issue in a very different way to the SWP.

A steering group with 50% women were elected. One of the tasks given to the Steering Group was to organise a 'Marxism-style' political festival within the next year and to approach SR and the ACI to jointly organise it.

The crisis of the SWP is in any case ongoing and they firmly expect more groupings to emerge from the SWP under similar conditions. In fact since then the SWP's biggest student group has resigned also calling for a new kind of far left politics outside of the mould of the SWP tradition.

When I gave greetings to the meeting from SR I strongly welcomed this approach and said that as far as we were concerned we could see no reason why these three organisations, ourselves, the IS Network and the ACI should continue as separate organisations and that we were in favour of bring them together into a single organisation in the short to medium term.

Coincidentally our Socialist Resistance conference was held the following weekend of April 20th and 21st. We placed these new developments – the Ken Loach initiative and the possibilities of far-left regroupment at the centre of the conference which adopted resolutions for our full involvement in both.

Comrades talked about the possibility, if both sides of this go well – a broad party and far left regroupment – of a new regrouped far left organisation working in an organised way inside a new broad party to tackle the issue of working class representation.

Both the ACI and the IS Network attended the conference and gave greetings to it. They were very positive toward a three-way regroupment. Kate Hudson (one of the convenors) also brought greetings from Left Unity and welcomed SR's involvement in it. Regarding far left unity the mood of the conference was summed up by one comrade who said that if we still exist in a years time we will have failed.

Since the conference things have moved on further with the first meeting to discuss regroupment proposed for May 12th – the day after the first national meeting of Left Unity.

All this reflects a profound change which is taking place on the far left in England, the extent of which is not yet clear. What is clear, however, is that by this time next year things are likely to look very different on the far-left.

None of this is going to be easy, particularly creating a new broad party after the impact of recent history. SR, however, is fully committed to both projects and we will do all we can to bring them to a successful conclusion.

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