

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article2988>



Britain

Response to 'Left Unity's modest flutter'

- Debate - Building new parties of the left -

Publication date: Monday 3 June 2013

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

I think it reflects the confidence and maturity of the forces currently building Left Unity that our website is prepared to publish such a lengthy polemic against the project. I wonder whether this 'senior figure in the trade union and labour movement' would accord Left Unity similar space in the hallowed organs which this coy figure inhabits. It says something for his/her confidence in their political positions that they remain anonymous. Indeed it probably confirms that they cannot really argue for a radical political line precisely because they have become so embedded in the institutions of the labour movement. It probably does reflect the position of the Morning Star, Socialist Action and to a much lesser extent Counterfire since these groups are approvingly mentioned in the second article. Hence it is important to respond since if LU is going to be a serious party it will have to engage with these positions.

The basis argument is that we are engaged in some sort of ultra-left repetition of the Respect/Socialist Alliance experience, not engaging seriously in the patient day to day united front work necessary to prepare the splits or developments that can build a real alternative.

A longer article would be necessary to refute all the analysis but here is a rapid response to the summary points at the end of the article:

a) "it is based on a flawed assessment of how socialist political parties can emerge and sustain themselves;"

There is no blueprint today for how socialist political parties can emerge. For a start we have the whole stalinist experience of Russia, China and elsewhere that repels working people. Similarly we are not in the 1890s where the trade unions and basic organisations of the class were rising. There has been an experience of social democracy, the communist party (both stalinist and eurocommunist) and the mainly trotskyist post68 left. Any new socialist party will emerge from people coming out of those traditions and with entirely new radicalised people. Indeed the concrete experience of the nascent LU local groups confirm that sort of mix. The writer appears to dream of another starting point that will result from successful united front struggles over a long period. He/she also tends to ignore the new ways people have become radicalised – the experience of Occupy, UK uncut, the role of the social media. I mean who would have thought a film would help propel the formation of 80 odd local groups.

b) "it prioritises "left unity" over class unity, to the detriment of the latter;"

If by class unity we mean all that activists have to do is to build the Peoples assembly or make sure the Tories are defeated then he is limiting what activists (including his beloved marxists) should be doing. Yes LU will be among the best builders of the Peoples Assembly but the other key question of class unity is to build a political alternative now to one nation Labour not to postpone it. Left unity is one of the preconditions of successfully building class unity because the class unity the one nation people, or even the better trade union leaders like McCluskey are building, is essentially one about either getting Miliband elected or reclaiming Labour, pushing it to the left. Although the writer is very strong on purely negative balance sheets of left of social democratic projects such as Respect or Rifondazione he is very reticent to analyse the historic 'success' of pushing labour to the left or CP type pressure on the LP which has nearly a century of failure behind it.

c) "misreads European experience and its applicability to the situation in Britain;"

What the European experience confirms is that the major social democratic parties no longer have unchallenged hegemony over working people's votes and even less over the more radical class struggle activists. It also reflects a rather insular approach to political analysis. The Front de Gauche just held a rally of over 100,000 in protest against Hollande's austerity policies. Rifondazione ultimately failed but few of its activists would say that it was wrong to get involved in the project and it did lead resistance for a number of years.

Where is the European experience showing showing successful 'reclaiming of left social democratic parties' through classic united front work. No doubt if our anonymous writer had been writing a few years ago he/she would have condemned the rather thin ranks of the Syriza for confusing left unity with class unity. Even formations that are not of the left like the M5S movement in Italy reflects the volatility of politics and the possibilities we have of building new formations.

d) "it fails to seriously address the Labour Party and working-class support for it;"

If LU in its statements or practice was sectarian to LP activists then this point may have some weight but no one is suggesting that we pretend the LP does not exist. We will work alongside Owen Jones and others in the Peoples Assembly and we will work in trade unions to defend workers interests. The big question though is how do you break the LP hold over the working class? Do you do it in 2013 purely through united front campaigns around the cuts, the bedroom tax, imperialist war etc or do you also begin to pose today the question of a political alternative that starts to challenge it electorally too.

e) "ignores the failures of numerous similar initiatives and, indeed, the actual problems of the left in Britain today;"

I think a big advantage of some of the people involved in LU is that precisely they have drawn some of the lessons of the weaknesses of previous initiatives. For example we think that it is no use having an electoral intervention based on a cartel of political organisations even if supported by a trade union. We believe you have to build an individual membership organisation and to build consistent local bases from which you can construct some electoral success. His/her use of the Scargill Socialist Labour Party project or the TUSC as an example of what LU is doing or will do is rather unfair since there have been numerous comments and analyses on the LU website precisely criticising the approach of those two projects. The actual problems of the left in any case apply as much to the forces supporting his/her political project as it does to LU. I mean the CP, Socialist Action or even Counterfire – are they setting the political situation ablaze? Is there much evidence of a growing fighting left wing in the Labour Party? Has the Owen Jones phenomenon, which is positive, reached anything near the impact of the Bennite movement in the late 70s or 80s? Is there any evidence that this emerging left is actually organising forces to challenge Miliband or is it an ideological or pressure group type opposition?

f) "draws a causal connection between economic crisis and political radicalism which is at best questionable;"

This is barely worth answering since I fail to see any catastrophist analysis anywhere in anything written by LU supporters. In fact the very project recognises that the subjective factor is very important. You cannot rely on events powered by economic crisis to build a socialist alternative, you have to patiently build it. I think his/her analysis is much more predicated on waiting for the big events that will unlock the situation combined with much greater illusions in the mainstream left leaders in the unions or the LP.

g)" cannot best direct the efforts and resources of socialists at the present juncture – indeed, it risks being an impediment to making the most of actual opportunities for advance and reconstruction."

This really takes the biscuit. The LU supporters, by actually raising a discussion among thousands already around

Response to 'Left Unity's modest flutter'

the need for a socialist alternative and organising action on the ground, is somehow an impediment for the advance of the movement. I fail to see how we are more of an impediment than the sort of forces that this writer is so much attached to. It is almost like the old CP/Stalinist mantra that by raising a left alternative we are effectively splitting the movement and making the building of the anti-austerity or anti-war movements more difficult. He/she fails to give one concrete example of where this is the case.

Despite the slightly patronising tone of an exceedingly long article ("modest flutter") it does show one thing. Left Unity is making an impact. People do not spend their time penning such essays if the forces emerging around the LU project present a challenge to their particular political perspectives and projects. It should revitalise the efforts of activists working to develop this political alternative to one nation labour and to the one-more-effort-to-push-Labour-to-the-left crowd.

This article is a slightly reworked version of a comment that originally appeared on www.leftunity.org