

Foundation for Proportional Representation-based Socialism

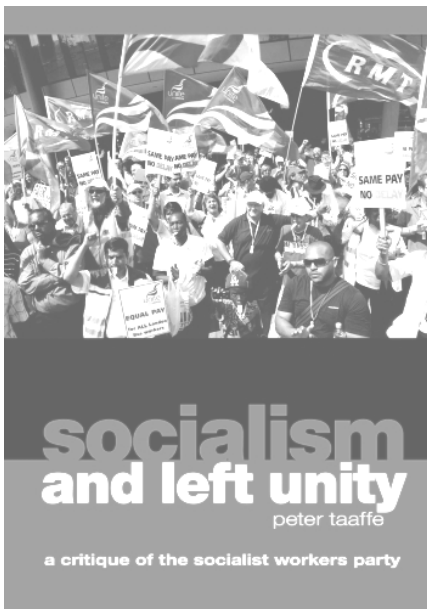
Website: www.PRsocialism.org Forum: tinyurl.com/PRsocialismforum Newsletter 6 (1 July 2009)

Editor's note: I, Steve Wallis, have written all the articles in this newsletter. I would welcome replies to points in this newsletter and articles/letters for future newsletters, posted to the forum (with the web address above) or emailed to me personally at revolutionarysocialiststeve@yahoo.co.uk. Since the date of the last newsletter, various socialist organisations in Britain (Respect, the Socialist Party, the CPGB and CPB) and Alex Callinicos of the SWP have come out in favour of PR, and I'd welcome the involvement of members of those organisations in the Foundation.

As with previous Foundation newsletters, anyone who agrees with the politics in it can download it from the website (with the web address above) in Word or PDF format, print it out and distribute it anywhere in the world.

Review of Peter Taaffe's critique of the British SWP

An extended version of this review of "Socialism and left unity: a critique of the Socialist Workers Party" by Peter Taaffe (the general secretary of the Socialist Party of England and Wales), reviewed by Steve Wallis, will appear in the first edition of DSA Voice, the bulletin of the Democratic Socialist Alliance (www.sademocracy.org.uk). The extended review will take into account views expressed at the SWP's Marxism 2009 event, at which this newsletter will be distributed.



The most striking thing about this critique is the mutual loathing between the Socialist Party (SP) and the SWP. The book is filled with snippets of ammunition against the SWP on this issue and that, which are presumably designed to be used by SP members to try to win over or demoralise members of the SWP. In the preface (page v), Taaffe quotes Leon Trotsky as saying in a letter "Without the smallest exaggeration one can confirm that from 1923 (for Britain especially from 1925) had the Comintern not existed, we would have today in Britain an incomparably more important revolutionary party" and adds "Unfortunately, on a smaller scale, the same conclusion can be drawn from the role of the SWP in the 1990s and since."

Taaffe alleges (page 2): "In every collaboration they have been involved in, it is a question of 'rule or ruin' – they must exercise a dominating influence, not through political argument but organisationally, or they would seek to undermine or bypass those organisations if they do not get their way." The book contains a number of examples where this has been the case, including the demise of the Socialist Alliance and the Respect split, but it is rather an exaggeration.

I have found in Manchester that SWP members tend to be committed and non-sectarian, while the SP nowadays avoids getting involved in joint campaigns and only sends along its most committed members (cadres) on demonstrations, presumably because its newer members and contacts would instantly notice how

much bigger the SWP is and quite possibly defect. This is a big problem for the SP, and a major motivation for setting up a large number of front organisations, some with more democratic legitimacy than others, with the main aim being recruitment to their own party rather than furthering the struggle and trying to achieve victories. I was a member of the SP from 1990-98 (through its transition from the Militant Tendency and Militant Labour) and I noticed a shift of emphasis from winning struggles to recruitment, aping the approach of the SWP. Perhaps Taaffe was hoping that this book would inoculate members against the SWP and lessen this problem. He cheekily starts the introduction (page 1) by saying the SP and SWP "are the two largest organisations on the 'Marxist left' in Britain", implying that the SP is bigger!

The biggest weakness of the book is that it concentrates so much on ways in which the SWP has allegedly been sectarian towards the SP that it fails to point out the biggest 'mistakes' of the SWP (which are in my view sometimes deliberate ones by infiltrators on the side of big business). For example, (on page 23) Taaffe criticises the organisers of the two million-strong anti-war demo in London for denying the SP's Youth Against the War front a speaker, ignoring the main reason it failed to stop the war in my opinion – that the SWP and Stop the War Coalition mainly argued on grounds of pacifism and no weapons of mass destruction, not mentioning oil (as the SP and I did at the time independently). [I now think that the divide-and-rule strategy of US imperialism, perhaps changing under Obama, was more to blame.]

It is clear that uniting the SWP and the SP in a new formation won't be easy, never mind the two Respect splinters, unless it is a loose federation (at first anyway). The SP ridiculously left the Socialist Alliance due to not having a veto (and never built it seriously so the SWP didn't stay dominant) and refused to join Respect for the same reason. A democratic revolutionary socialist party, calling for both proportional representation (PR) and "participatory democracy", should be part of the federation (see overleaf). Adding PR to Marxist forms of democracy would make it popular!

Reconciling proportional representation with Marxism

The following is a letter Steve Wallis submitted to the Weekly Worker, the newspaper of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB: www.cpgb.org.uk), for publication in the 2 July issue. The letter this responds to was a reply to an article in favour of proportional representation by the CPGB's Mike Macnair, which appeared in the 4 June issue.

John Robinson (“Kill them”, Letters, 25 June) said that Lenin argued that “the fundamental principles of communism” are “soviet power and the dictatorship of the proletariat”, with the latter phrase meaning rule just by the working class. Lenin did indeed call for “all power to the soviets” when he returned from exile to Russia in 1917 contradicting the position of his party (the Bolsheviks) in calling for a Constituent Assembly, and he played a key role in persuading the party to abolish the Assembly after they lost the elections to it following the October revolution. Rather than basing our positions on what Lenin said, after which there have been 90 years of world capitalism, surely it is time to reassess, and it is good that the CPGB is doing that and has adopted something I have been plugging for a while, including in letters to this paper – proportional representation (PR).

The CPGB is not the only Marxist party to adopt PR – two Socialist Party editorials (*The Socialist*, 14 May and 28 May) and the Socialist Workers Party’s (SWP’s) Alex Callinicos (*Socialist Worker*, 6 June) have done so, and I have heard that the *Morning Star*’s Communist Party of Britain supports the single transferable vote (STV) form of PR.

STV is the fairest form of PR because it avoids the need for tactical voting and allows voters to choose between candidates of the same party rather than giving enormous power to party machines (in constructing party lists for the recent European elections for example). STV is used in the Republic of Ireland, and transfers enabled the Socialist Party’s Joe Higgins to win one of the three Dublin Euro seats; the same system enabled that party and the People Before Profit Alliance (involving the SWP) to win some council seats on the same day. STV would not be as conducive to the fortunes of the British National Party (BNP) since they would receive few transfers and there would no longer be a dilemma of who to vote for to keep that party out. The leading Labour politicians including Gordon Brown who are plugging alternative vote (AV), which requires a candidate to get 50% after transfers, arguing for it on the basis of keeping the BNP out, are trying to con us into accepting a very unproportional system that would massively favour the mainstream parties (and would have given Labour an even bigger landslide in 1997).

John complains about the prospect of “all members of the capitalist class and their counterrevolutionary hangers-on each (having) a vote equal to that of revolutionary workers”. What’s he worried about? Either there’s so few of them that they can easily be out-voted or there’s so many of them that a revolution is not practicable at that time and attempting an insurrection would be doomed to almost certain failure. He argues that “the capitalist class will, as at present, have total control of newspapers and the mass media”. He is wrong – what about the role of the left press including the *Weekly Worker* and the internet? He is also confusing a pre-revolutionary situation (in which those who control the mass media may try to exclude left-wing voices) with the situation after a revolution in which the masses coming to power can control the media irrespective of whether a “dictatorship of the proletariat” is established (but doing so suggests that dictatorship would try to keep dissenting voices completely out of the media leading to the opposite problem – giving parties access to the media according to their level of support would be preferable). Although John says that “the task of communists is not to hold polite conversations with fascists” but “to shoot them”, I suspect he considers that the same fate should await anybody who objects to all power being in the hands of the working class.

I will attend the SWP’s upcoming event Marxism 2009, and call for a democratic revolutionary socialist party, which stands for proportional representation and what is sometimes called “participatory democracy” (involving some degree of workers’ control: soviets), in contrast to the wishy-washy “half-way houses” (as you have called them in your paper) – broad formations like Respect, the Scottish Socialist Party, Solidarity and No2EU that blur divisions between revolution and reform. Such broad formations were in my view a good idea before the current economic crisis, but it would have been better if revolutionaries within such parties had put forward their views more rather than such parties almost entirely putting forward reformist lowest common denominator politics. However, now that capitalism is self-destructing and with the mainstream parties set to all stand for massive public spending cuts and/or tax rises at the next general election, we need to point out the need for a sudden thorough change of society, whether or not we use the word “revolution”. A reply to the SWP’s open letter to the left by Michael Rosen (*Socialist Worker*, 20 June) suggests “a federation or umbrella” of cooperating groups/parties that don’t stand against each other as the way forward, and this is probably the best that can be achieved in the short term bearing in mind the hostility and sectarianism between different left groups in Britain. It would be a crying shame if such a federation was constructed and none of its participants put forward such a revolutionary programme, to determine which sort of party is most effective in practice.

The New Good Intentions Manifesto

Written by Steve Wallis, Version 2, 22 June 2009

This manifesto argues that whether somebody has mainly good intentions (and is caring) or mainly bad ones (and is selfish) is a better guide to whether he or she is an ally in the struggle for a better world than his or her class. Go to socialiststeve.me.uk/good-intentions-manifesto.html or socialiststeve.in/good-intentions-manifesto.html.