

Foundation for Proportional Representation-based Socialism

Website: www.PRsocialism.org Forum: tinyurl.com/PRsocialismforum Newsletter 7 (5 November 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. Various socialist organisations in Britain (Respect, the Socialist Party, CPGB, CPB and Democratic Socialist Alliance) 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 (although much is specific to the UK). It focuses on how a socialist society should operate, in Britain and internationally, with the final section on strategy for the UK general election due in 2010 at which socialists could make a breakthrough.

No cuts – nationalise banks and use bailout money

The enormous amount of borrowing undertaken by the New Labour government (even during the boom and with an estimated £175 billion this year excluding the bank bailout) has made it very difficult to get anywhere near balancing the books assuming the capitalist economic system is maintained. If the incoming government after the upcoming general election doesn't make massive spending cuts and/or tax rises, investors may lose confidence that they will ever get their money back, hitting the value of the pound and its ability to continue borrowing. If it does, that would probably tip the economy back into recession and provoke massive opposition including demonstrations and strikes, particularly if it was dishonest about the scale of attacks on the jobs and living standards of ordinary people during the election campaign.

The scale of the economic crisis in Britain, in which there has been a longer recession than any other Western country despite the massive stimulus package, is so severe due to previous Tory governments decimating manufacturing and industries like coal and steel to try to smash the trade unions, with the economy now relying on services largely based in the City of London. After the run on Northern Rock and subsequent nationalisation of it and other banks exposed the failure of banking regulation, that looks foolhardy. This provides big opportunities for the left, and the right if we fail to take advantage of them, providing we put across our ideas skilfully, particularly with respect to where we suggest the money should come from to avoid the cuts planned by the mainstream parties. Whereas most socialists oppose wars, Trident and ID cards, the scale of the economic problems is too great for such savings to be sufficient.

Around £1.3 trillion (i.e. £1,300,000,000,000) of our money has been spent by Labour on bailing out the banks. Socialists should argue strongly for nationalising all the banks, but this would cost money the government doesn't have unless we only compensate pension schemes. This would allow whatever's left of the bank bailout money to be used for the benefit of all, avoiding cuts. We should also argue for all banks, whether currently nationalised, part-nationalised or private, to be run democratically from below with most control in the hands of borrowers and savers plus representatives on the boards of trade unions and the government. Maybe this goes against the traditional Marxist position of workers' control, but it seems clear that those whose money is at stake should have more control than those who happen to work at a particular bank. Now the European Union is forcing the government to spend another £45 billion privatising the better parts of the nationalised banks, probably at knock-down prices – that capitalist club would never allow the above measures so a socialist government would need to withdraw (unless socialists come to power across Europe at once).

Socialist carbon trading to tackle global warming

The upcoming summit in Copenhagen from 7-18 December 2009 (COP15) has been billed as "the last best hope" to do something globally about climate change. We should encourage our governments to take real action, particularly to invest in renewable sources of energy such as concentrating solar power (CSP) plants in deserts and tidal and wind power, to both reduce the level of global warming and cut across the divide-and-rule agenda whereby our rulers divide those deeply concerned about climate change and those who put their own living standards first and are sceptical about scientific claims. However, it would be extremely naïve to expect them to cobble together an adequate solution and the European Union's estimate of €100 billion a year to fund poorer nations by 2020 (with the EU contributing a mere €7-10 billion with £1 billion from the UK and its planned start date of 2013) does not appear to be adequate – and is chicken feed compared to the UK deficit and bank bailout figures mentioned above!

However, a People's Summit for Climate Justice in Copenhagen at the same time will bring together activists, NGOs and indigenous people from the global south. We should not limit ourselves to making demands on capitalist leaders but suggest what we would do in power, as part of the argument for changing society. Under capitalism, carbon trading is a licence to pollute but in a mainly socialist world we would need some mechanism to prevent escalating living standards threatening the future of the planet. Then, allocating the same amount of carbon per person anywhere in the world but allowing it to be traded would be a good way for richer countries to subsidise green development in poorer ones.

Alternative Vote – Labour’s con-trick not PR

The ‘alternative vote’ (AV) system has been proposed by the Labour Party for electing members to the House of Commons. With AV, voters specify as many candidates as they like for their vote to be transferred to if their earlier preferences are eliminated, until one candidate gets over 50%.

New Labour politicians have justified it on the grounds that it would make electoral successes more difficult for the British National Party (BNP) due to the necessity of reaching 50% after transfers. AV favours moderate parties and the left would suffer as well as the right. Though sometimes called a form of proportional representation (PR), it is not at all proportional; a study showed an even bigger Labour landslide at the 1997 general election if conducted under AV!

Like the Electoral Reform Society and Liberal Democrats, I favour the ‘single transferable vote’ (STV) system. With it, there are multi-member constituencies and votes are transferred if earlier preferences are eliminated or get more votes than required to be elected. As well as being fairer it gives voters the opportunity to choose between candidates of the same party, removing power from party machines. No need for the ‘primaries’ that the Tories have started introducing.

Under STV, Joe Higgins was elected in the Irish Republic, twice to the Dáil and this year to the European Parliament, despite being in a fairly small party (the Socialist Party), and other candidates to the left of the mainstream parties achieved victories in local elections across Ireland this year too. Keeping the left out is surely a motivation of New Labour politicians rather than just the BNP.

A *Daily Telegraph* poll suggested that 22% of the electorate would “seriously consider” voting BNP in the wake of BNP leader Nick Griffin’s appearance on *Question time*. However, we need to keep a sense of proportion. The same poll showed that only 3% would vote BNP if there was an election tomorrow! Media bias can of course give a boost to fascism, and the ITV News the day after Griffin’s appearance only gave the large figure, and even more blatantly the following day’s *Sun* suggested that it was a setback for the BNP that two thirds wouldn’t vote for the BNP “under any circumstances” (the discrepancy explained by don’t knows) again without giving the 3% figure.

Due to the advantage a genuine form of PR such as STV gives to both extremes, left and right, it looks very unlikely that the capitalist parties will introduce it. Although STV remains a policy of the Liberal Democrats, leader Nick Clegg has indicated he would not insist on PR as a condition of entering a coalition government. We advocate STV more as a policy that should be introduced after a socialist revolution (alongside participatory democracy and internet referenda) than a demand socialists can expect to win under capitalism.

Countering BNP arguments on immigration

Part of our strategy to defeat the BNP has to be countering their arguments on immigration. Unfortunately, the left has usually only made points without justifying them (like the SWP slogan “asylum seekers welcome here”) or used moral arguments (like “capital can move anywhere in the world so why shouldn’t workers”) – good up to a point but we need to think strategically about how to achieve our goals as well.

It would be electoral suicide to call for ‘open borders’ on an election leaflet without justifying such a position, and I would suggest that people coming to the UK from all over the world with their wealth of experiences helps radicalise people and, after helping us foment revolution here, they can return and overthrow their leaders back home! Once again, capitalist politicians are not going to implement such a policy, so perhaps we should focus discussion and arguments on what a socialist government should do in a mainly capitalist world or a mainly or fully socialist world. Clearly we would want visitors from overseas to experience socialism and learn from us, but there remain questions I’m posing for debate.

Should immigrants receive benefits, even if they aren’t granted British citizenship? Arguably the inability of Eastern Europeans from countries now in the EU to claim them has led to many returning home when they can no longer find work, and if a government changed policy on this it could give the BNP a big boost. It would of course be inhuman to not give asylum seekers benefits, especially considering they can’t work legally. Should all residents (over a certain age which I’d argue should be 16) be allowed to vote and stand for election? I’d say yes.

Support call for new anti-capitalist party in Britain

The next general election (in June 2010 at the latest) is a great opportunity for the left. We should take advantage of the hatred of mainstream parties (saying our candidates would live on an average constituent’s wage would be popular in the wake of the expenses scandal), bankers and the capitalist economic system generally. If we argue socialist politics skilfully (with some ideas on this presented above), we can win seats and maybe even hold the balance of power.

I have previously argued for a Democratic Revolutionary Socialist Party (possibly with that name), advocating socialism with proportional representation as well as participatory democracy and possibly on-line referenda. Since this idea has not been taken up (with most others less keen on PR and preferring broader initiatives) but something similar to my suggestion of a revolutionary anti-capitalist party (inspired by such a party in France) is taking off – see www.anticapitalistparty.org.uk for details, including a Facebook group which has attracted over 450 people and a rally on 14 November. It should be discussed whether the party is to be openly revolutionary, but it would be best with a fairly minimal programme, encouraging individual candidates to put forward their own views and vote according to what they really believe if elected, like independents. The momentum against MPs lying and following party lines is good!

Divisions on the left are unfortunate but unavoidable. Maybe this initiative can bring in other significant forces, but we should seek electoral pacts with the rest of the left including the Green Party to avoid standing against each other.