

In defence of the Left Unity project

The Left Unity conference on 21 November will take a critical decision about the survival of the whole party project. Motion 48 is for us to continue, though reviewing our electoral strategy. Motion 23 is about becoming a network as opposed to a party:

<http://leftunity.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/motions-for-ballot.pdf>.

This contribution is a defence of our party project at this time, albeit with a changed strategy.

The Corbynista change

The election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour party is an historic game changer. It places the Labour leadership almost in the political position and space we aimed to occupy but, critically, not entirely. This consequently has to have huge implications for our political strategy and practice, but, in that hackneyed phrase 'we should be careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater'. We have achieved a great deal as Left Unity in a very short period of time. These achievements should be recognised and built upon whilst coming to terms with a dynamic and fast moving political context.

Such an argument depends on there being a membership in the first place, If large numbers leave and we are left with say, a hundred or so enthusiasts, then a party structure becomes questionable: we should not become the sect that some fear. Based upon my experience in Wales and what I believe is the current UK membership position I would suggest we are not yet down to this rock bottom situation.

One final caveat, this contribution will suggest that as Left Unity we have actually taken forward socialist political practice in a way that remains relevant beyond the life of our current structures, we do not sufficiently recognise this and should take it into account.

The achievements of Left Unity so far

Socialist vision - our founding statements agreed in November 2013, emphasis the importance and interconnection between the major challenges to our society and the need for socialism. This represents an important advance for the left in the UK as these challenges are not seen as 'add ons' but central to the project of international social transformation: <http://leftunity.org/founding-conference-decisions-1/>

Constitution and democracy - as will be argued later, despite its faults, it is possibly unique among socialist organisations in the UK in its openness to all and its internal processes of democracy and accountability:

<http://leftunity.org/left-unity-constitution-final-agreed-30-november-founding-conference/>

Policy and manifesto - the detailed policies agreed in 2014 and their translation into a manifesto was another major achievement for a new socialist organisation in the UK, especially one drawing upon a wide range of left traditions. The manifesto remains as a

major campaigning document in the new period but needs Left Unity to continue as a party to be effectively updated: <http://leftunity.org/manifesto/>

Working alliance of left traditions - as has been alluded to, it is nothing short of a political miracle that Left Unity has produced, in practice, unity across the left as an organisation. The left - possibly as all political movements do - find it difficult to work together effectively. It has been an historical achievement for Left Unity to survive and develop whilst drawing upon a rich history of UK radical and socialist politics. We should be very wary of failing to recognise and sustain this achievement.

Over 2000 members, supporters and genuine contacts - not bad going in just two years. Although we hoped for more, given the circumstances and left movements in other parties, we've done well to arrive at this point, with branches in most of the main urban areas. Clearly, whether people stay as members is critical. It is argued here that they should as the best way of taking forward our socialist vision and practice. Based upon our social network support and local email connections it is clear that we have around another 4-5000 people who are wish to keep in touch.

How this is relevant to the new situation.

We have an agreed position on many of Corbyn's aspirations and policies. We know what areas we can support but can also consequently and constructively propose priorities and additions that take the agenda of a socialist alternative forward. We have a democracy in place to not just to discuss and suggest but also take decisions on how demands, actions, policy and strategy should develop.

We can intervene locally and nationally in political debates in all these areas without being members of the Labour Party as well as work across the left. Momentum could be one organisational model and the People's Assembly provides another example. In Wales we have related to these debates through a critique of Welsh Labour's draft manifesto <http://chwithunedigcymru.blogspot.co.uk/2015/10/wales-labour-ignores-corbyns-politics.html>. Being able to intervene independently and across the organisational boundaries and bureaucratic conventions of the Labour Party without fear of future expulsion has many benefits.

Being able to relate across the left will require building trust and confidence in engagement and relationships and our current electoral policy will get in the way. Essential at this stage of Corbyn's leadership focus should be on defending his policies and actions where they overlap with ours; proposing and arguing for others where we think they take the case of the socialist and anti austerity case forward; working with those many new and old members of the Labour Party who wish to challenge policies and actions of the right who tend to dominate the party machine. It is important that this challenge is not about seizing positions by 'good eggs' but a policy challenge, such as defying cuts budgets at all levels and opposing new wars.

Remaining as a party enables us to act independently and collectively. Our constitution provides an agreed way of working together supporting debate and decision making so that

coordinated action can take place. It is not clear what the network proposal means in this regard but it will mean a step back from linking decisions with action, particularly as the constitution is effectively wound up.

Transitional demands and actions

Consciously or not much of our manifesto can be seen as a transitional programme for the current context.

The debate around transitional demands has a fraught and ossified history on the left, see Trotsky: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/tp/tp-text.htm#mt>. What is proposed here is the key importance of placing an emphasis the process of developing transitional demands that relate to the changing contexts and balance of class forces, not particular demands as proposed by people such as Trotsky in entirely different historical situations. This process, of course relates back to the importance of being able to make collective decisions constitutionally, as mentioned above.

Agreeing transitional demands as a political process was one of the outcomes of the third and fourth conferences of the third international <https://www.marxists.org/archive/thalheimer/works/strategy.htm> and <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/transprog/wa01.htm>. The initial post WW1 revolutionary potential was seen to be waning yet taking state power internationally remained central to the socialist and communist project. It was recognised that state power could not be taken without the active and democratic support of the majority of the working class. In the interim the problem to be addressed was how to bridge the gap between the revolutionary step of taking state power and the current situation where this may not be possible. Delegates to the conferences were also aware of the change of slipping back into reformism, when the third international was a clear break from that second international tradition that had failed so miserably to act internationally and challenge the start of WW1.

Transitional demands were seen as a way of winning workers to the parties of the third international. First, by relating to the issues of most concern by showing how these were at source derived from the attempts of capital to save themselves at cost to workers, and second, developing demands that workers could accept were legitimate, yet at the same time directly challenged the aims of capital. Thus, by so doing, start to lay the foundation of the need to take state power directly challenging the way capital works through a socialist programme.

It can be seen that many of the policies we have developed can be seen as transitional demands within this tradition. So, for example, our opposition to austerity is legitimately about social justice and inequality but also about challenging the attempt of capital to solve the problems of their financial crisis at the expense of workers social and real wages. The demand that councillors and members of devolved governments vote against cuts budgets is about defending gains already made, whilst at the same time challenging state power. Moreover, arguing for such a challenge opens up meaningfully, in terms of daily experience, a political challenge to the neo-liberal rationale behind austerity that, in turn, poses the question of an alternative. Which we would argue has to be socialist and requires the state

taking back control over key parts of the economy such as the, essential public services and utilities.

It feels that this is a statement of the bleeding obvious: isn't this just what has happened with the People's Assembly and now the election of Corbyn? Well it is a good demonstration of how the process works; in part. The critical issue is to engage with this process consciously as a political party, developing demands that are rooted in legitimate problems and grievances and, at the same time ensuring that the demands challenge the aims of capital, pointing to the need for a socialist alternative. Hence, the People's Assembly is limited by emphasising opposition to austerity by saying no, and whilst much in our manifesto points to an alternative society that overlaps with Corbyn's vision, we make the argument that a real challenge to the power of capital is required if the problems are to be solved not just patched up, so our demands, quite defensibly to further.

Perhaps the most contentious area is the idea of 'transitional actions'. It will not be possible to find references to this in the literature as it is a term I've developed myself! Basically the intention was to further develop the idea of 'building the future in the present' into the political practice of challenging capital and developing a socialist alternative: more technically known as I believe, as 'prefigurative' politics. It is about demonstrating that socialism is possible by recognising that elements do exist in our society currently and this experience can be built upon. Of course the argument that they are 'islands in a sea of capitalism' and will inevitably fail is usually thrown up and it is not really the place to go into a detailed defence.

However, as Left Unity, I would argue we have started to develop transitional actions. First, in our constitution, despite all its problems, at core is about being completely open to the world and internally democratically accountable, thus attempting to demonstrate that it is possible to come to decisions and coordinate actions on the basis of debate and democracy: one of the key pillars of what a socialist society is about. Second, we have started to raise the question of alternative ownership and control through cooperatives in our policy discussions and manifesto. This is a small start, but recognising transitional actions as part of our political practice could lay the foundation for further development.

Conclusion

Left Unity has remarkably achieved much in terms of socialist vision, demands, action, campaigning and organisationally in a short period of time. We should be very careful about losing these achievements. As an independent organisation it leaves us free to continue to act. Of course if members vote with their feet - there is little left to organise!

Corbyn's election is a game changer for socialists in the UK and we have to both defend and help take forward this success. We can engage in this process without being members of the Labour Party in many ways and at all levels, such as through Momentum or as we have done in Wales. An overlap of members and supporters is also one of the ways as well as not standing in elections at the current time. However, if we retreat to a loose network based around a discussion journal with members joining the Labour Party, action or campaigning

will inevitably be restricted by Labour Party processes endangering all that we have achieved.

Finally, it is not clear what will be the outcome of the tensions within the Labour Party, and an organisation like Left Unity may still be very much needed.