

Scargill Launches New Party

Left Split From Labour

In London on 4 May, 600 delegates attended the founding congress of the Socialist Labour Party (SLP), the most significant left-wing split from the Labour Party since 1931. The SLP was launched largely on the initiative of Arthur Scargill, president of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). He first floated the idea of a new party after the 1995 Labour Party conference dropped the clause in its constitution advocating "common ownership" of the "means of production, distribution and exchange." While Clause IV had always been a dead letter in terms of Labour's actions, it did express the party's historic attachment to a social-democratic version of "socialism." By getting rid of Clause IV, Tony Blair and the "New Realists" running the Labour Party signaled their commitment to the interests of British capitalism, without regard to the sensibilities of Labour's traditional working-class base.

After meeting with various left-wing trade-union officials and left Labourites (including a few putative Trotskyists), Scargill produced a draft statement, "Future Strategy for the Left," calling for a new party. He also enlisted the aid of a few leftist lawyers to produce a draft constitution. In January, Scargill resigned from the Labour Party, and within weeks the SLP was issuing membership cards. In February, the fledgling party stood Brenda Nixon (a leading activist in "Women against Pit Closures" during 1992-93) in a parliamentary by-election in Hemsworth, Yorkshire. Running for a tiny party that had not yet officially been founded, she still managed to poll 1,193 votes (5.4 per cent of the total) which, though modest, was enough to rattle the Labour Party bureaucracy.

The formation of the SLP represents a political counter-thrust by a section of militant workers, led by left wingers in the trade-union bureaucracy, to a series of betrayals by the official leadership of the workers movement during the 1980s. The decisive event was the Trades Union Congress (TUC)/Labour Party leadership's refusal to back the miners in their titanic struggle against Thatcher during 1984-85. This historic battle, waged by the most militant and class-conscious union in the country against an army of cops and strikebreakers, could have been won had the other unions come out in solidarity. Instead, the TUC and Labour Party leaders stabbed the miners in the back.

This betrayal drastically weakened the trade union movement as a whole, and was a victory for Thatcher. It was also a victory for her union-bashing legislation requiring mandatory ballots before strikes, banning solidarity action and effective picketing, and giving corporations and the state wide leeway to sue unions and seize their assets. The resulting demoralization of the working class strengthened the right wing in the Labour Party, and hardened their intention to sever the party's historic

connection to the unions.

The SLP was conceived as a reassertion of traditional left-reformist Labourism. Clause IV of the SLP's interim constitution advocates "common/social ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange," just as the Labour Party constitution used to. But the political center of gravity of the SLP is considerably to the left of the old Labour Party.

The SLP membership is chiefly composed of working-class militants who have traditionally looked to Scargill and the Labour Lefts for leadership, along with a few hundred "far-left" activists of various political persuasions. In an attempt to ensure control, the leadership inserted a bureaucratic clause in the SLP's interim constitution, which is not up for discussion until next year. The clause stipulates:

"Individuals and organisations other than bona fide trade unions which have their own programme, principles and policies, distinctive and separate propaganda, or which are engaged in the promotion of policies in opposition to those of the Party, shall be ineligible for affiliation to the Party."

This is so sweeping that it could be used to justify suppressing virtually any criticism. Attempts to enforce such measures can only paralyze the fledgling SLP. But while a few individuals accused of retaining memberships in other left groups have been targeted, the internal life of the SLP is on the whole quite open and democratic.

SLP's Founding Conference

The wide-ranging and open discussions at the May congress confounded many of the SLP's Labour-loyal "Trotskyist" critics who expected it to be run like some kind of neo-Stalinist boot camp. The congress was hurriedly prepared, and flawed by the fact that it was far too short (one day) to address many important questions. Nevertheless, there were several significant discussions. The first of these focused on a paper on economics, put forward by Scargill himself, which addressed the immediate demands of the working class, and tacked on a call for socialism.

There were several attempts to amend the economics document. The most serious was by a group of militants who had participated in earlier discussions in an SLP economics workshop. They proposed to insert a call for "nationalisation without compensation of the major capitalist concerns," and pointed out that as "the capitalist state exists to keep the ruling class in power," it could hardly be transformed into an agency for socialism. After some discussion, this amendment was defeated, but the fact that it was supported by a sizable minority indicates the strength of leftist sentiment in the SLP.

Another important controversy took place over the Irish question. The leadership's rather equivocal docu-

ment was improved by an amendment calling for the immediate withdrawal of the British Army from Northern Ireland. With the membership overwhelmingly in favor of a “Troops Out Now” position, the leadership quickly climbed on board. Such a motion would never have passed in the old Labour Party.

This is a good beginning. But to promote a class solution to the communal conflict in Ireland, the SLP must be prepared to go beyond simple opposition to British intervention. It must transcend the left Republicanism (encapsulated in the call for a “United Ireland”) common throughout the British left, and recognize that the call for “self-determination” will not solve the national question. A proletarian solution can only be achieved through political struggle to break Protestant workers from Orange bigotry. But this in turn means appealing to their common *class* interests with the oppressed Catholic proletarians—not trying to give Green nationalism a left tinge.

The third major debate at the congress arose over the policy paper on black liberation and the call for abolition of Britain’s immigration laws. An Asian woman from Birmingham gave a powerful speech explaining that she had left the Labour Party chiefly because of its support for restrictive immigration laws. Speaking for the leadership, Brian Heron argued that, just as Cuba has the right to keep out counterrevolutionaries, so too the SLP would wish to keep reactionaries out of Britain, and used as an example a flood of South African whites fleeing a workers’ revolution there. After a lengthy and sometimes confused debate, the proposal to scrap immigration laws was defeated, and the leadership’s call for reforming them passed by a vote of 182 to 114, the narrowest margin of the whole congress.

There were few surprises in the leadership elections. The SLP’s three national officers were elected unopposed: Arthur Scargill as President, NUM Vice-President Frank Cave as SLP Vice-President, and Rail, Maritime and Transport union militant Patrick Sikorsky as National Secretary. The interim steering committee put forward a list of recommended candidates for the National Executive Committee (NEC), who were duly elected. However, some of the other 70-odd candidates who stood for the NEC also received substantial support, with the closest finishing only a single vote behind the last candidate on the NEC slate.

For all the criticisms that can be made of the SLP and its leadership, the founding congress demonstrated that it is both an organization with a small but real base among militant workers, and that it is open to serious discussion and debate. As such, the SLP offers the best opportunity in decades to root genuinely revolutionary Marxist politics in the British working class.

Labour-Loyal ‘Trotskyists’ & the SLP

One would expect that most leftists would be eager to participate in building this new working-class organization and transforming it into a party with the political clarity, internal cohesion and fighting capacity to lead the British working class. This was certainly the conclusion reached by supporters of the International Bolshe-

vik Tendency (IBT) in Britain, who decided that participation in the SLP was more important than maintaining a propaganda circle. If a similar development were to take place elsewhere, our comrades would respond in the same way.

Unfortunately, only a handful of the thousands of organized leftists in Britain have drawn similar conclusions so far. In part, this is attributable to the SLP leadership’s refusal to allow organizations to affiliate directly; those wishing to participate must leave their organizations and join as individuals. But this is not the main problem. Many of Britain’s “Trotskyist” groups seem miffed that Scargill and his followers parted company with Labour at all. This sentiment is often lightly camouflaged with facile “left” criticisms of the SLP’s supposed parliamentary orientation, or the inadequacies of its initial program. Yet the angle of these objections makes it clear that they are not raised to push the SLP into becoming more than just an electoral machine, nor to sharpen its programmatic positions. Instead these “left” criticisms are raised to justify abstention from the SLP project and/or continuing electoral support to the official neo-Thatcherite leadership of the Labour Party.

The largest left group in Britain is Tony Cliff’s Socialist Workers Party (SWP). Boasting 10,000 members, and purporting to represent a socialist alternative to Labour, the SWP rarely transcends left reformism in practice. It has existed for over 40 years, but has yet to lead any significant strikes or play an important role in any of the struggles of the working class. While the SWP supported Brenda Nixon in the February by-election, it has since played down the potential importance of the SLP. The SWP leadership doubtless fears that, if the SLP takes off, it will recruit at their expense, particularly among trade unionists. Certainly the SLP’s willingness to defend Cuba against capitalist counterrevolution makes more sense than the Cliffite dogma that Cuba is a “state-capitalist” society, and that its reintegration into the American neo-colonial empire would not significantly affect most Cubans.

Following the SLP congress, *Socialist Worker* (11 May) predicted that “the main focus of SLP activity will be elections” and attacked Scargill’s remark that there is “no fundamental difference between the Conservative Party, New Labour and the Liberal Party.” In terms of political program this is a simple statement of fact. To win the loyalty of the masses of working people the SLP must indeed do a great deal more than run for office. But the SWP itself has not stood a candidate against the Labour Party for almost 20 years! The Cliffites’ counterposition of “class struggle” to “electoralism” may *appear* militant to the uninitiated, but in fact amounts to a cover for voting for Tony Blair:

“Millions of people still look to the election of a Labour government to bring at least some improvements after 17 years of the Tories.

“They will have to live through the experience of a Labour government to be convinced of the need for a socialist alternative.”

—*Socialist Worker*, 11 May

This is lesser evilism pure and simple. The “millions of people” to whom *Socialist Worker* is adapting are not

looking to the Labour Party as any kind of socialist or working-class alternative to the Tories. No one in Britain believes that Labour will lead any kind of struggle against the bosses. But still the “revolutionary” SWP perversely insists that workers must vote for the “New Realists” as a necessary step on the road to socialist consciousness.

Labour loyalism is even stronger among some of the smaller “Trotskyist” groupings. The Workers International League (WIL), for instance, simply condemns the SLP as an adventure. This theme was taken up by Al Richardson, who sometimes stands in as a theoretician for the WIL, in a recent article entitled “Scargill’s SLP in perspective.” Warning that “omens are not good” for the SLP, Richardson compares its founding to the split of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in 1931, when:

“the ostensible reason [for the ILP’s split] was over whether the ILP MPs in parliament should be bound by the policies of the ILP conference or by the standing orders of the Parliamentary Labour Party, a distinction that could not be expected to make much sense to the ordinary party member, and still less to the voter outside. Scargill’s contention that he has left the Labour Party because it has ceased to be socialist can hardly appear any more convincing, since the Labour Party has never been socialist, and you would have to be very old even to remember a time when it used socialist language to justify its actions. The working class depends upon unity for its very survival under capitalism. Splitting its institutions is a very serious matter, however necessary it may be for the building of revolutionary parties, and it has to be justified before the whole class in the clearest possible way. And the old ILP and the new SLP are far from being revolutionary parties. “The second point to note is that both splits took place at the wrong time. Labour in 1932 was moving rapidly leftwards, and the ILP would have built up a greater measure of support within its ranks if it had stayed. Blair’s government has yet to come into office, but when it does it will come into collision with a major public service union, and if, as I suspect, he seeks to cut Labour’s links with the unions by introducing state funding of political parties in proportion to the votes they gain (with or without a system of proportional representation), a major split could follow with the others. The worst calculation in politics is to mistake the first month of pregnancy for the eighth.”

—*Workers News*, May-June

Richardson’s speculation about the house-trained remnants of the 1980s Labour left suddenly rising in revolt is implausible, to say the least. There could have been a revolt over Kinnock’s role in knifing the 1984-85 miners’ strike, but there wasn’t. That would have been “comprehensible” to the mass of the working class. It was, after all, the most important struggle of the decade. But there was no split. Why not? Because of the depth of parliamentary illusions in the British working class. These illusions were shaken, but not destroyed by the experience of the miners’ strike.

It took *ten years* of further betrayals by the “New Realists,” culminating in the abandonment of Labour’s longstanding paper commitment to “socialism,” for the accumulated anger to find a political expression. Yet still the insipid Labour “Lefts” cling to Blair. Why should anyone expect them to split over measures that Blair has announced even before he gets elected? Does Richard-

son really think that Rodney Bickerstaffe, Bill Morris et al., are likely to strike out on their own when Blair introduces state funding of political parties? Similar measures have been enacted elsewhere in Europe without producing any such splits. Richardson’s fantasies about the “Lefts” suddenly developing a backbone and resisting Blair’s attempts to free himself from the connection to organized labor are based on little more than wishful thinking.

Richardson is quite right that the Labour Party has never been socialist. But it has been seen to represent some kind of socialist (or at least anti-capitalist) alternative by a large section of its base. The illusion that left Labourism somehow represents workers’ interests against the bosses has bound the more militant layers of the proletariat to Labour for decades. Such consciousness is contradictory, as it embodies an aspiration to fight the capitalists, but seeks to do so by fantastic and utopian means.

Richardson begins from the premise that maintaining the unity of the Labour Party is of vital interest to the working class. He recognizes that Labour no longer even pretends to offer an alternative to capitalism, but he does not believe that any significant section of Labour’s traditional base wishes to “abolish capitalism and replace it with a Socialist system,” as printed on the SLP membership card. His conclusion is to call for “unity” under Blair.

The SLP has not been cooked up by a handful of declassed petty-bourgeois radicals. It is a serious attempt by some of the most left-wing elements in the trade-union bureaucracy, based on the most class-conscious section of the British working class, to reassert the necessity for working people to have their *own* party in pursuit of their *class* interests. To dismiss this initiative in order to cling to the Labour Party bureaucracy, as it plunges to the right, reflects a loss of confidence in the capacity of any substantial section of the working class to recognize, at even the most basic level, its historic interests.

Workers Power: Opportunists as Confusionists

The WIL and Al Richardson represent the uniformly hostile attitude of mainstream Labour-loyal “Trotskyism” toward the SLP. The posture of the centrists of Workers Power (WP) has been less consistent. Initially they showed some enthusiasm:

“Workers Power welcomes Arthur Scargill’s call for discussions on the left to consider the establishment of a Socialist Labour Party (SLP).”

“...at the present moment, when hundreds of thousands of trade unionists and Labour supporters are deeply concerned about the right wing rampage of Blair’s New Labour, Arthur Scargill’s initiative provides an opportunity to address them with the revolutionary socialist politics, practice and arguments that can really solve the crisis of leadership in the working class movement.”

—*Workers Power*, December 1995

But they included the following escape clause:

“A revolutionary SLP would not turn its back on the millions of workers who still look to the Labour Party

through their trade unions and support it through their votes at elections. It would call for a vote for Labour in any constituency where there was no revolutionary candidate, and continue to demand that Labour acts [sic] in the interests of those workers. This is crucial to ensuring that revolutionaries in a new party are not cut off from workers who have yet to break from Labour.”

—*Ibid.*

It has been clear from the beginning that a “revolutionary SLP” was not going to spring into the world like Athena from the head of Zeus. The SLP’s initiators saw themselves as merely *reasserting* working-class politics against the Thatcherization of the Labour Party. Despite their left-reformist programmatic framework, they at least recognized that Blair’s “SDP Mark II” did not deserve any kind of support.

As it became clear that the SLP was serious about standing against Labour in elections, WP withdrew its previous lukewarm support. For these centrists, electoral support for the Labour Party is the *sine qua non* of socialist politics. Workers Power complained that Scargill’s draft constitution “would also preclude joint membership with the Labour Party” (shocking!) and issued the following warning:

“The central task remains: to break millions of workers away from Blair; to use the unions link with Labour to place demands on Labour and to organise resistance to Labour once in office. Both Scargill and Militant Labour as new converts to ‘life outside the Labour Party’ are demonstrating an alarming inclination to ignore these tasks.

“On present form Scargill may be capable of organising a bureaucratically run Stalinist sect, but not the fighting alternative to Labour the working class needs.

“The SLP has been, so far, a squandered opportunity: part of the workers movement’s past, not its future.”

—*Workers Power*, February

These criticisms parallel the Blairite attacks on Scargill. Despite their talk about “break[ing] millions of workers away from Blair,” Workers Power supported Blair’s candidate against Brenda Nixon in the Hemsworth by-election:

“Workers Power members and supporters will not be voting for the SLP in Hemsworth.

“We will vote Labour. Not because we cannot bear to vote against Labour. We have and will vote for left-wing candidates representing an ongoing struggle by a section of the working class breaking to the left.

“But in the absence of such conditions, a critical vote for Labour is the best way to put Labour to the test, exposing the illusions of millions of workers.

“Our job is not to put illusions, which the mass of the working class do not have, in the SLP.

“The Labour Party is the main obstacle. The best way to tear it down is to put it in office, demand that it act in the interests of the working class and organise to force these demands upon it.”

—*Ibid.*

This sums up WP’s methodology: Blair’s Labour Party has a mass base, so we can vote for it; the SLP doesn’t, so we can’t. The fact that Labour candidates stood on a program that was openly Thatcherite, whereas the SLP campaigned on a program defending working-class interests (albeit within a left-reformist framework), is of no consequence.

Yet the vitality shown thus far by the SLP has apparently given Workers Power second thoughts, and some long-time WP members resigned over this issue. In an article published on the eve of the SLP conference, Richard Brenner admitted that:

“Scargill’s bureaucratic plan has not prevented political debate from emerging within the party. At several pre-conference workshops centrist and even revolutionary minority positions emerged.

“In *Workers Power* 198 we said that the SLP was now ‘immune’ from a democratic internal discussion. Clearly this was premature. The Conference itself will show whether revolutionary opponents of the Scargill leadership can make their voices heard.

“SLP members at this month’s founding conference are still faced with a choice.

“They can open up debate, allowing affiliation from the thousands of socialists already organised in left groups outside the SLP. They can reject the warmed-over Stalinism on offer from the leadership. They can choose a revolutionary socialist alternative to Labour.

“Or they can follow Arthur Scargill down the road of a bureaucratic and reformist SLP.”

—*Workers Power*, May

The headline of the article beside this piece reads: “Why we still say: Vote Labour.” WP is in effect giving the SLP membership an ultimatum: if you do not adopt our “revolutionary” program wholesale (including voting for Tony Blair to “force Labour to meet workers needs”) we’ll support Tony Blair against you! It is pretty easy to imagine the rude response of workers who have joined the SLP out of hostility to Blair’s “New Realism.”

WP seems likely to face further internal turmoil and defections over the SLP in the coming period. There is a stark contradiction between its February pronouncement that the SLP was a “bureaucratically run Stalinist sect,” doomed to “either sink rapidly into obscurity, or become a confusing obstacle in the way of socialists who want to really get rid of capitalism,” and its report on the SLP conference:

“The founding conference indicated that the SLP is a party that remains in the process of formation. In its majority, it supports the policies of the man it regards as its greatest single asset—Arthur Scargill. The members are in high morale, and roared their approval when Scargill called for ‘a recruitment campaign the likes of which this country has never seen before’.

“Whether this really happens we shall see. But with a small but significant minority clearly seeking revolutionary policies and answers, one thing is certain: the struggle for the soul of the Socialist Labour Party has only just begun.”

—*Workers Power*, June

Spartacist League: Sideline Sectarianism

In a recently released “internal” memo, the Spartacist League/Britain (SL/B), the stunted and ineffectual British branch of James Robertson’s declining International Communist League (ICL), was described as being in a “precarious” situation, without a functional leadership and “chronically internally divided.” Certainly its track record in relation to major developments in the British labor movement is unimpressive. The last time there was

significant left motion in the Labour Party (in the early 1980s, as Tony Benn led the “Lefts” in challenging the Cold Warrior leadership) the Robertsonites were initially indifferent. Only after Benn’s defeat did they decide that the issues posed were substantial enough to have supported him.

In recent years, the SL/B has refused any kind of electoral support to Kinnock and Blair, and has repeatedly called for Labour’s base to break with the New Realists. Yet, despite this formally correct posture, when the SLP was formed, the SL/B deliberately abstained. While unwilling to participate in the SLP, the SL/B at least supported Brenda Nixon in February and has, on paper, acknowledged the historic significance of the SLP:

“For communists who fight to build a revolutionary internationalist party of the proletariat, breaking the stranglehold of the Labour Party over the working class is a key strategic task. Although the programme of Scargill’s SLP is simply that of ‘old’ Labour as against the ‘New’ Labour Party of Tony Blair, this split within the Labour Party offers the possibility for a fundamental realignment of the political configuration in this country out of which a genuine working-class party can be constituted.”

—*Workers Hammer*, February/March

If the formation of the SLP is an opportunity for “fundamental realignment,” why is the SL/B so determined to abstain? For Marxists the maintenance of small propaganda groups is not an end in itself. Such formations only serve as a means to preserve and promote the ideas of revolutionary socialism and to aid in introducing them into the mainstream of the labor movement. But for the Robertsonians the chief object is to preserve and extend their own separate organization. Despite their shrill insistence that they alone are the true defenders of Trotskyism, the SL/B is a peculiar kind of political organization, which is not, at bottom, cohered by agreement to a common program, but rather by unquestioning obedience to their “uniquely correct” leadership. To maintain its authority, the leadership must ensure that the ranks are isolated from sustained collaboration with other leftists. This, and not political principle, is why Robertson’s minions cannot join the SLP.

To justify abstention, *Workers Hammer* strikes a pose as a tribune of the people, and attacks the SLP leadership, who don’t have:

“a word to say in opposition to the escalating anti-immigrant racism codified in the Asylum Bill but the SLP’s constitution would prohibit membership to asylum-seekers and recent immigrants by confining membership to those who have ‘resided in Wales, Scotland, England or Ireland for more than one year’. Not a word has yet been expressed against the British Army occupation of Northern Ireland...”

—*Ibid.*

The residence clause in the SLP’s interim constitution is indeed scandalous, but it is also opposed by a large section of the membership. While the constitution was not open for discussion, according to the ground rules laid down by the leadership, the SLP congress did vote to oppose the Asylum Bill. This indicates that the residency clause could well be dropped at the next party congress. In any case, the SL/B is in no position to influence internal debates going on in the SLP, for the

simple reason that they refuse to participate in them.

The SL/B’s posture toward the SLP seems, in its own way, as contradictory as that of Workers Power. If, as they insist, the SL/B uniquely embodies the program of revolutionary Marxism, how can a “genuine working class party,” i.e., a socialist party, come out of the SLP without their assistance? Their repeated calls for breaking with the Labour traitors and forging a mass workers’ party ring hollow in light of their abstention from the most important left split from Labour in over half a century. For Marxists, organizational forms are subordinate to the advancement of the socialist program. For the SL/B it seems to be the other way around.

Thus far the Robertsonians have pursued a two-pronged tactic toward the SLP. On the one hand, they attack the SLP as, at best, indifferent to racism or British troops in Northern Ireland, and therefore unworthy of their participation. On the other hand, they run around trying to finger known leftists to the SLP leadership (which is responsible for the policies *Workers Hammer* objects to) in an attempt to get them thrown out.

As we noted above, there have been only a few relatively minor incidents to date, but a witchhunt remains at least a potential danger in the SLP. Tony Blair and his cohorts would like nothing better than to see the SLP torn apart in internecine squabbling. All members of the SLP have a duty to abide by the decisions of the majority, but it is also necessary that members have the opportunity to argue freely for their views. This is not a matter of abstract morality, but of practical necessity. Attempts to deal with political differences by fiat rather than discussion, education and debate can only prevent the development of the critical, self-confident, politically educated cadres necessary to provide leadership in the class battles ahead.

Militant Labour & Labour ‘Lefts’

A few tendencies on the British left have welcomed the SLP. Militant Labour—a group of more than a thousand, which recently surfaced after spending more than three decades in the Labour Party, initially tried to participate in the formation of the SLP. They were rebuffed when they made it clear that they wanted to affiliate openly with the new party. In recent years, Militant Labour has achieved substantial electoral success, particularly in Scotland, where their candidates have won a number of council seats. In the 1992 general election, one of their candidates, Tommy Sheridan, captured nearly 20 percent of the vote for a Glasgow parliamentary seat.

We oppose the exclusion of Militant Labour from the SLP. Yet it is clear that they are to the right of the SLP leadership on the critical question of voting for the Blairites. This was illustrated by a recent *Militant* article pointing out that Scargill’s refusal to enter into any electoral arrangements with Militant Labour could result in a situation where both groups stood candidates against a Blairite:

“Scargill made similar points when he addressed 200 people at the Nottingham SLP launch. Members of Militant Labour explained that we were considering standing in Nottingham North in the general election.

“We pointed out that the MP for Nottingham South is Alan Simpson, a left-wing member of the Socialist Campaign Group of MPs, leaving Nottingham East and other constituencies in the area for consideration by the SLP. We raised the idea of further discussion so that socialists did not stand against one another.”

—*Militant*, 26 April

Militant Labour clearly considers it wrong to run against the loyal “opposition” to the Labour leadership. Selective critical support to oppositionists in a bourgeois workers party can be an appropriate tactic when there is a clear programmatic distinction. But Alan Simpson and the rest of the Labour loyalists in the Socialist Campaign Group have made it clear that they have no intention of breaking with Labour’s “New Realists.” They therefore deserve no more support than any other candidate running on Blair’s ticket. *Militant*’s impulse to support the likes of Simpson is a sign that, despite its recent organizational separation, its worldview remains firmly within the framework of left Labourism.

CPGB: ‘Leninists’ Without a Program

Another organization taking a generally positive view of the SLP is the small group claiming the mantle of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). On the eve of the SLP Congress they wrote:

“Enormous potential exists in the formation of the Socialist Labour Party. These are exciting times for all who are committed to socialism and working class liberation.

“The drift of mainstream politics to the right has left a huge vacuum. Politicians from all the capitalist parties now treat the working class—the overwhelming majority of people in Britain—as if they simply did not exist.

“‘New’ Labour in particular simply takes the support of workers for granted. Its leaders believe it does not matter how much they are attacked, vilified, ignored or exploited: the working class has no option but to come crawling back to Labour.

“The SLP initiative has shown that a layer of workers—a thin layer, but important nevertheless—has started to break from the suffocating embrace of this treacherous party. These comrades have begun to search for a viable political alternative to Blair, an alternative that can at last start to put socialism and working class power on the agenda.

“All communists and genuine partisans of our class must welcome this development warmly. The SLP could be an important movement in the fight of our working class in Britain to form itself into a class. As Marx and Engels put it, communists have no interests separate and apart from the working class. We do not have a predefined set of sectarian principles with which to judge this movement of the class. On the contrary, communists always seek to bring to the fore the general interests, the ‘interests of the movement as a whole’.”

—*Weekly Worker*, 2 May

Given their recognition that the SLP has begun to break the stranglehold of Labour’s “New Realists” over the working class, one might expect that the CPGB, a small organization without any significant working-class base of its own, would conclude that the time, resources and energy required to maintain a separate organization and publish a weekly press could be better spent getting the SLP off the ground. Instead, the CPGB

prefers to project itself from outside the SLP as in some way the organizer and inspirer for “leftists” in the SLP.

Despite its name, the CPGB is not a party, but rather a shifting agglomeration of centrist groupuscules, Stalinist fragments, refugees from Cliffism and various other bits of political flotsam. It is, in short, a classic centrist combination. Its *modus operandi* is “freedom of criticism, unity in action,” with more emphasis on the former than the latter. This formula is lifted from the early years of the Bolsheviks, when they were in a common party with the Mensheviks. In practice, it means that every disparate fragment can say whatever it wants whenever it wants. The revolutionary Communist International, founded by Lenin and Trotsky, insisted on democratic centralism as the organizational principle for its sections and repudiated the formula, “freedom of criticism, unity in action,” as a corollary of Kautsky’s theory of the “party of the whole class.”

At the core of the CPGB is a faction known as the “Provisional Central Committee,” a grouping that published the *Leninist* magazine in the early 1980s. The key members of the *Leninist* collective, who derived from the ultra-Stalinist New Communist Party, have avoided grappling with the record of Trotsky’s Left Opposition and its struggle against the corruption of the international communist movement by Stalinism. Rather than address the world-historic issues that marked the political destruction of the Third International (e.g., the defeat of the Chinese Revolution in 1927; the German Communist Party’s capitulation to Hitler without firing a shot; the betrayal of the Spanish Revolution in the 1930s; and the social imperialism of the Western Communist Parties during World War II) the CPGB’s “Provisional Central Committee” endlessly agonizes about the need for a revolutionary program.

Lacking a coherent program, or any understanding of the historical evolution of the socialist movement, the CPGB is so amorphous that it could not possibly maintain any kind of political identity as a current within a broader working-class movement. This explains the CPGB leadership’s insistence on remaining organizationally aloof from the SLP.

Marx’s famous observation (in his 5 May 1875 letter to Wilhelm Bracke) that “Every step of a real movement is more important than a dozen programs” has long been a favorite of pseudo-leftists seeking to rationalize their opportunist maneuvers. But the formation of the SLP is exactly the sort of situation Marx was referring to: it is a development that could potentially change the whole terrain of left politics in Britain. Most left groups have been slow to grasp this, and very few have drawn the appropriate political conclusions. The task of serious socialists is to reject the false alternatives of reformism and centrism, Labour loyalism and sterile sectarianism, and to seize the opportunity represented by the formation of the SLP. The SLP not only has the potential to become a stepping-stone for the resurgence of a fighting workers’ movement in Britain, but also to provide a catalyst for similar developments internationally. The task of Marxists is to struggle to help it realize that potential. ■