

# Bolsheviks in King Arthur's Court

## SLP: a Postmortem

In early 1996 British mineworkers' leader Arthur Scargill launched the Socialist Labour Party (SLP) in a revolt against the overtly pro-capitalist policies embraced by Tony Blair's New Labour Party. From the beginning, the SLP contained a contradiction between the left-Labourism of its initiators and the more radically socialist aspirations of the militants it attracted. At its birth, the SLP could have been the catalyst for a major regroupment of the most class-conscious sections of Labour's traditional working-class base and hundreds of subjective revolutionaries from the British left. But by its second conference, in December 1997, it was evident that the SLP had hardened into a dead-end reformist sect.

British supporters of the International Bolshevik Tendency (IBT) spent two years inside the SLP, from its inception until shortly after its second conference. They joined the SLP without illusions, knowing that the break with Blair's New Labour represented a serious step to the left for the SLP's small working-class base, but that many illusions in Labourite parliamentarianism remained. Our comrades were seriously committed to building the SLP into a party with enough leverage to split New Labour. In the course of the political struggles required to carry out such a perspective, they hoped to expand the influence of revolutionary Marxist ideas within the British working class.

We consider this intervention in a real movement of a section of the British working class to have been a valuable experience which helped establish the IBT as a small, but serious, component of the left, with a reputation for combining unity in action with programmatic clarity. Unfortunately, the SLP as a whole did not achieve any degree of success in breaking a broader layer of British workers from Labour. Nevertheless, an evaluation of the rise and fall of the SLP, and the intervention of Marxists inside it, can provide valuable lessons for the future.

During most of this century the Labour Party served as a "socialist" insurance policy for Britain's capitalist rulers against the sort of revolutionary catastrophe that befell their Russian cousins in 1917. But the triumph of counter-revolution in the USSR in 1991, widely interpreted by bourgeois ideologues as signaling the "end of communism," radically altered the rules of the game. Having decided that they no longer face any danger from revolutionary upheavals, the bourgeoisie is now intent on revoking many of the concessions made to working people in the past.

In the imperialist countries today, the mass social democratic parties, which have always served as the political agents of the bourgeoisie within the workers' movement, no longer even pretend to fight for improvements. Instead they vie openly with the capitalist parties for the job of dismantling the social gains won by previous generations.

### Origins of the SLP

Tony Blair represents those in the Labour Party who want to sever the remaining links with the unions and emerge as the liberal party of British imperialism. One of Blair's first acts as Labour leader in 1995 was to formally re-



Tony Blair's New Labour: breaking with the unions

pudiate the platonic commitment to socialism codified in Clause IV of the party's constitution.

Arthur Scargill, a prominent Labour "left," declared that Blair's victory on Clause IV meant that it was necessary to launch a new party—a *socialist* labor party. Assisting Scargill in this venture were a few officials of the oncemighty National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), a handful of veteran British Stalinists, and a small circle of cadres who were once connected to the "United Secretariat of the Fourth International."

Scargill's reputation was by far the SLP's most important asset. His role as the leader of the heroic, year-long NUM strike of 1984-85 provided the SLP with instant recognition and ready access to the capitalist media—assets which no other British left group possessed. Scargill's radical image, and the SLP's initial rhetorical appeal to all "socialists and communists" to join, attracted both experienced "far left" activists and a layer of trade unionists from Labour's "hard left."

Many of those who initially rallied to the SLP had vivid memories of the miners' valiant struggle and bitterly recalled the cowardly betrayals of their strike by the Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress bureaucrats. Had Scargill chosen to launch a new party a decade earlier, he could very likely have gathered many more supporters than he was able to by the time Blair had taken over. Yet, despite Arthur Scargill's reputation as a fearsome "red" and his courageous defense of the Soviet Union at the height of the Thatcher/Reagan Cold War hysteria of the early 1980s, his politics never transcended left-Labourism.

In launching the SLP, Scargill and his coterie were inordinately concerned with maintaining a tight grip on their new venture. They demanded that anyone joining the SLP renounce all previous organizational affiliations and frowned on anything which smacked of "factional" activity. Such requirements naturally repelled many potential affiliates, including the thousand-odd members of Militant Labour (now the Socialist Party) whose leaders had initially shown interest.

Despite these ill omens, in its formative period the SLP bubbled with internal political life. In March 1996, two months before the founding conference, members were invited to a one-day policy meeting during which workshops met to draft policy papers on topics including economics, anti-racism, women, youth, international relations, Ireland, European Union, healthcare and education. The papers produced by the workshops were discussed and amended in a round of subsequent meetings and then sent out to the branches for consideration prior to the May founding conference.

All views were supposedly welcome, but it was clear from the outset that the leadership was anxious to curb the expression of views contrary to its own left-reformist political framework. At one point during the March 1996 meeting, Arthur Scargill himself rushed from the economic policy workshop to squelch a suggestion in the European Union workshop that the SLP declare itself opposed to British imperialism—whether in *or* out of Europe. While Arthur was busy combating such "ultra-left" sentiments on European unity, participants in the economics workshop proposed that the SLP commit itself to a policy of expropriation of capitalist property and the institution of workers' management of production as necessary preconditions for the construction of a socialized economy. These proposals, which reflected the views of many SLP members, were rejected by the group's founders as too far to the left of traditional Labourite "socialism."

### SLP's Founding Conference

At the SLP's founding conference, the leadership got its way on most issues. But on the question of British troops in Ireland it was forced to bow to pressure from the left, when it became clear that a large majority of the 500 conference attendees supported the immediate withdrawal of all troops. This was an important break from the Labour Party's social-chauvinist record on Ireland. The SLP conference also came close to dumping the leadership's proposed "anti-racist immigration policy" for British imperialism in favor of scrapping controls altogether. Several other leftist amendments received respectable votes at the conference.

Despite the fact that many of the workers who had broken with Labour to join Scargill's venture were open to

arguments that went beyond traditional Labourism, it became clear the Scargill leadership retained sufficient political authority among its base to ensure that the SLP's program remained within the framework of militant reformism.

In the early days, many SLP branches had several dozen members and their own active internal political life. But one of the features of the blatantly undemocratic constitution imposed by the leadership at the founding conference (without any discussion) was the stipulation that branches must be based on parliamentary constituencies. This took some time to actually implement in the face of resistance in many localities. This measure, copied from the Labour Party, was designed to prevent the bigger and more dynamic branches emerging as a potential counterweight to the national leadership. The leadership also used the dubious authority of the constitution and its ban on dual membership to arbitrarily exclude individual members, groupings and, in some cases, whole branches, with little explanation and no right of appeal.

Instead of seeking to expand its influence among revolutionary minded youth and shop-floor unionists, the leadership spent its time pursuing left-posturing union bureaucrats and disaffected Labourite parliamentary careerists. Scargill was continually hinting about imminent breakthroughs in this field, but little ever came of it.

Barbara D., a prominent IBT supporter in Britain, stood for election to the National Executive Committee (NEC) at the SLP's founding conference as part of a hastily improvised slate from the March 1996 economics workshop. The slate was comprised of those who had wanted to include the call for the expropriation of the bourgeoisie in the SLP program. This leftist bloc made a good showing with Barbara, its top vote-getter, coming within a single vote of being elected. The various members of this slate represented a considerable spectrum of leftist opinion, and debates on related issues continued for some time after the conference. In a major contribution to this discussion, Barbara argued that the SLP should seek to connect the economic and political interests of working people:

"Socialist Labour's economic policy should be about two inextricably linked objectives—meeting the immediate needs of the working class today and setting up an economic system for the future that will fundamentally meet the needs of all. Capitalism does neither. We need to smash it and replace it with a system run by the working class, a centrally planned, collectively-owned economy that manages the resources of society in the interests of all. "We don't need to wait until the SLP achieves political office. We can begin, even as a small, new party, in fighting for the things we need now. And we should do this regardless of the impact it will have on the capitalist system. Capitalism can only meet basic needs partially and temporarily, if at all. By fighting for our needs, we have no choice but to challenge capitalism.

"We can begin with fighting unemployment, through measures like those outlined in the policy document—a four-day working week with no loss of pay, a ban on all non-essential overtime and voluntary retirement on full pay at age 55....

"The ruling class will not take kindly to this kind of economics....

"Workers need to take control of economic concerns—the industries in which they work, the utilities, the banks. We cannot just talk about nationalisation. The question is

who will run them once they are nationalised and who will benefit from them. This is why we have to talk about nationalisation without compensation—clearly taking these businesses, and their financial rewards, out of the hands of the capitalists and into the hands of the workers. We must fight for workers control of the economy, so that workers benefit from the economy.

“And again the forces of the state will be used against us. ‘Without compensation’ will leave the ruling class fighting for their lives. Be in no doubt that they will be willing to use physical violence against us. We must be prepared to defend ourselves. The picket line is the first level of this defence, but it will ultimately be necessary to build our own state to defend the new economic system we want to set up. This is why the needs of today are inseparable from the type of society we need for the future.”

—“SLP Economic Policy: A Discussion Document,”  
June 1996

## SLP Marxist Bulletin Launched

The differences within the leftist NEC slate were too serious and too deeply held for there to be any prospect that the bloc might develop into a long-term programmatically-based opposition to the SLP leadership. A few months after the conference, Barbara, her former IBT comrades and several other left-wingers collaborated in the production of “A Marxist Programme for the SLP,” and subsequently, in early 1997, launched the *SLP Marxist Bulletin (MB)*.

While the Marxist Programme advocated “the immediate and unconditional withdrawal” of British troops from Northern Ireland and called for defending the oppressed Catholics from Orange terrorism, it did not endorse the SLP leadership’s call for a “united Ireland” on the grounds that such a call implied support for the forcible incorporation of the Protestant minority within a unitary (Catholic-dominated) state. Such a policy would tend to reinforce the grip of the Orange bigots on Protestant workers.

On the question of European integration, the *SLP Marxist Bulletin* counterposed socialist internationalism to the Scargill leadership’s little-Englandism. The *MB* program rejected “the Maastricht plan for a European imperialist super-state as well as the Eurosceptics’ alternative, which points to an autarkic, protectionist Britain,” and proclaimed that, “Workers’ struggle across national lines—not nationalist poison—must be our reply to capitalist attacks.”

Supporters of the *MB* openly challenged the SLP leadership’s tendency to focus exclusively on immediate demands, thereby tacitly treating the socialist objective as something unreal or impractical:

“The major weakness [of the SLP program]...is the yawning chasm between the programme of immediate demands, which is explicitly posed as a series of *reforms* to the existing system, and the final goal of ‘creating a socialist society’.

“We should be aware that this kind of division, between ‘immediate demands’ and the ‘final goal’ (also known as the ‘minimum’ and ‘maximum’ programmes) is a characteristic hallmark of social democratic politics. The Labour Party, right through the days of Ramsay MacDonald through to Wilson/Callaghan, could tolerate airy talk of its ‘final goal’ as expressed in the old Labour Party Clause IV, as long as its programme of immediate demands were kept *completely separate* from anything that pointed to the necessity to go beyond capitalism. To the Labour Party, any demands that pointed *concretely* to the need to de-

stroy capitalism itself constituted ‘extremism’ and were to be avoided like the plague.”

—“Where are we going?,” reprinted in  
*SLP Marxist Bulletin* No. 1

## SLP Work Among Women & Youth

*Marxist Bulletin* supporters actively participated in the SLP women’s section. One of the more animated political controversies that took place in the women’s section arose when an *MB* comrade proposed that the SLP come out against all state censorship. Some women activists supported this, but others, particularly those who identified more strongly with feminism, took the view that the thing to do was pressure the capitalist state to act in an anti-sexist manner.

Several *Marxist Bulletin* supporters played key roles in laying the groundwork for a Socialist Labour youth conference in late 1996 that was supposed to launch a youth group. *MB* comrades produced a draft “Youth Charter,” which provoked considerable discussion particularly around its proposals for decriminalizing drugs, abolishing the age of consent and reasserting the traditional Marxist view that police and volunteer soldiers are not part of the workers’ movement. *MB* supporters argued vigorously against the reformist notion that the armed thugs of the capitalist state are just “workers in uniform,” who should be admitted to the trade-union movement.

The young SLPers who participated in the initial preparations for a youth group were committed to building an organization that could make substantial gains for the SLP among young people. But the SLP leadership was concerned that a vibrant youth wing could end up as an organizing center for leftist opposition. So the NEC aborted the whole initiative by arbitrarily lowering the age limit from 30 to 25, thereby disqualifying most of the members of the interim committee.

## The SLP and the Elections

As the May 1997 general election approached, it became evident that New Labour, despite its overtly pro-capitalist policies, would retain most of its traditional working-class support on the grounds that it alone could rout the discredited Tories, creating an uphill struggle for the 63 SLPers who contested seats. The energy and effectiveness of *SLP Marxist Bulletin* supporters during the campaign was widely respected and added weight to their critique of the leadership’s political vacillations and bureaucratism.

In theory, local SLP branches were free to choose their own candidates, but in several cases, the leadership rigged the selection process. When the Brent East SLP branch decided to stand against Blair’s candidate, former Greater London Council leader Ken Livingstone, Scargill publicly disowned them, and declared that the SLP had “never intended” to run against Livingstone (*Morning Star*, 3 February 1997).

Throughout the campaign, the SLP leadership remained silent on the question of voting for New Labour where the SLP was not running. The opportunist desire to stay friendly with New Labour’s “lefts,” which lay at the bottom of this, blurred the SLP’s image, confused its supporters, and undercut its ability to pose a serious alternative to the Blairites.

The *Marxist Bulletin*, which was acknowledged as “the main voice of the [SLP’s] Trotskyist left” by the *Weekly*



**Arthur Scargill: big frog in a little pond**

*Worker* (13 December 1997), argued against voting for New Labour, and proposed that SLP branches not running candidates should be allowed to choose between abstention and critically supporting other leftist candidates. This, the only policy consistent with the break with New Labour in the first place, was opposed by many self-proclaimed Marxists in the SLP (mostly former “Trotskyist” Labour Party entrists), who wanted to vote for the Blairites where the SLP was not contesting the seat.

### **Scargill and the ‘Red Menace’**

From the founding conference onward, the Scargill leadership imagined that the best way to consolidate the SLP (and ensure their control) was to eliminate all leftist critics. This effort absorbed an inordinate amount of the time and attention of the leadership and, in the end, proved entirely counterproductive. The crude methods employed to purge suspected oppositionists (typically the more active and effective SLP members) poisoned the internal atmosphere and discredited Scargill and his coterie among many members who recalled all too well how witchhunts against the Labour left had paved the way for Blair in the first place.

While more politically savvy SLP members recognized the leadership’s arguments for proscribing members of “outside” organizations as bogus and self-serving, this policy made sense to many members who resented people who claimed membership in the SLP, but refused to take the organization seriously. This indignation was directed particularly at sympathizers of the Communist Party of

Great Britain (CPGB), the most leftist remnant of British Stalinism. The CPGB’s *Weekly Worker* regularly published reports of internal developments in the SLP, which frequently included well-founded criticisms. But their refusal to respect the SLP’s right to any kind of an internal life made it easy for Scargill to get rid of anyone identified as a CPGB sympathizer.

Supporters of the IBT, on the other hand, acceded to the SLP leadership’s demands, and dissolved their separate public organization, without abandoning their political views. In September 1997, Arthur Scargill made a feeble attempt to intimidate *MB* activists with a letter in which he disingenuously inquired:

“Could I ask you why you are connected with ‘Marxist Bulletin’ and have endorsed the ‘Statement to the NEC on the question of party democracy’ when you know these actions are in conflict with the Socialist Labour Party’s constitution?”

The *MB* comrades responded by flatly asserting their intention to continue to argue for their policies within the SLP, and Scargill backed off.

### **The Fight for Democracy in the SLP**

The “statement on party democracy,” to which Scargill referred in his letter to the *Marxist Bulletin*, had been drafted by a group of SLP comrades who met regularly in Reading during 1997. The Reading statement (which was endorsed by 15 branches and 80 individual members, in addition to the *Marxist Bulletin*), represented the Scargill leadership’s most serious challenge.

Previously, a handful of SLP members, including several sympathetic to the CPGB and the Workers Power group (WP), had launched their own "Campaign for a Democratic SLP" (CDSLP). Unlike the Reading bloc, which took care to keep its activities strictly internal, the CDSLP made its criticism public, in one case, at the London press conference called by the SLP to launch its national election campaign. The CDSLP's antics were not well received by most SLP members, many of whom were well aware that WP was advising people to vote for Blair's candidates rather than the SLP. The CDSLP, whose influence in the SLP, was negligible, provided the bourgeois press with a chance to poke fun at the left, and gave the SLP leadership an excuse to smear all their left critics as agents of Blair.

Unlike Workers Power, the CPGB was broadly supportive of the SLP initiative, yet their participation in the CDSLP gave most SLP members the impression they didn't take membership in the SLP very seriously. The *Marxist Bulletin*, like most of the Reading bloc, completely dissociated themselves from the CDSLP, but firmly opposed the leadership's attempts to drive out suspected WP or CPGB supporters.

The majority of the Reading bloc decided to run a "democracy" slate for the NEC at the SLP's upcoming congress. *Marxist Bulletin* supporters explained why they chose not to participate in this venture in a 27 October 1997 letter:

"We believe that the production of lowest common denominator joint propaganda for the NEC elections, even with the right to produce our own separate propaganda, would be detrimental to the necessary struggle for political clarity at the Congress. We believe such a slate implies a much higher level of political agreement than in fact exists.

"The Congress is the highest body of the SLP and to have argued for more democracy and discussion, as our united front has done, and yet then not to take full advantage of those opportunities that do exist seems more than a little contradictory."

—reprinted in *SLP Marxist Bulletin* No. 5,  
December 1997

While most other participants in the Reading bloc took the view that internal democracy took priority over all other questions, the *Marxist Bulletin* insisted, that to effectively oppose the bureaucratization of the SLP, it was also necessary to challenge the leadership's Labourite political appetites. To this end, *MB* supporters put forward resolutions in their branches on Ireland, the European Union, censorship and immigration controls; a special conference issue of the *SLP Marxist Bulletin* included a detailed analysis of most of the conference resolutions. Five *MB* comrades ran as a slate on the "Marxist Programme for the SLP."

*Marxist Bulletin* supporters addressed the question of internal democracy with a constitutional amendment which included the following:

"Members of the Party have the constitutional right to advocate changes of Party policy on any question, and to combine together in tendencies or factions to change Party policy or the Party leadership, subject only to their abiding by the Rules, Constitution and Objectives of the Party."

This simple statement of elementary democratic principle was supported by a substantial portion of the member-

ship, and picked up by a number of SLP branches, including several where the *Marxist Bulletin* had no direct connections.

At the founding conference, where the leadership had initially imposed its constitution, Arthur Scargill had assured everyone that it could be discussed and amended at the next conference. But at the second conference, almost every attempt to propose a constitutional amendment was ruled out of order on the grounds that it contradicted the constitution. To give some semblance of legality to their dubious use of the constitution, the leadership handed out copies of a lengthy and complicated disciplinary code, which they then insisted on putting to an immediate vote, without giving delegates a chance to read it. The lowest point in this whole farce was undoubtedly the discovery by the membership, part way through the first day of the conference, that three Scargill loyalists (supposedly representing a society of retired miners) had been awarded a bloc vote greater than the combined total of all the regularly elected delegates from local branches! The leadership's ability to get away with such measures signaled that the SLP's transformation into a Stalinoid shell was qualitatively complete.

The grotesque bureaucratic manipulations at the December 1997 congress guaranteed victory for the leadership over its critics, but the price was high. Most of the SLP's more talented and active members were driven out and the morale and enthusiasm of those who remained was sapped. The supporters of the *Marxist Bulletin*, and hundreds of others, walked out in the weeks following the conference. In London, three-quarters of the members, including most of the activists, have left. And the purging continues as various erstwhile leadership allies, including the grouping around Patrick Sikorski, formerly associated with the United Secretariat of the Fourth International, and the neo-Stalinist homophobes associated with Royston Bull's *Economic & Philosophical Science Review*, have themselves fallen out of favor with King Arthur.

## An Opportunity Squandered

Many of the ostensible revolutionaries who were originally attracted to the SLP imagined that they were helping launch a new all-inclusive (reformist) workers' party (sometimes referred to as a "communist-labour party," or a "party of recomposition"), within which they could find a home as a loyal left wing. The *Marxist Bulletin* comrades took a different approach. While opposing the proscription on dual membership in other leftist organizations, they rejected the attempt to recreate a "party of the whole class." From the outset, the comrades who went on to found the *Marxist Bulletin* saw the SLP as an opportunity to win some of the more politically conscious worker militants to revolutionary socialism.

"In political life there can be no guarantees. It is of course possible that bureaucratic manoeuvres or political purges could turn the SLP into a lifeless shell and wreck the whole project. It is also conceivable that even with the most exemplary leadership and the most vigorous and active membership the SLP will still not be able to establish itself as a viable player in national politics in the near future. It is impossible to know unless we try. But the possibility exists that the SLP will develop a sufficiently hard-hitting set of politics and be able to project them effectively enough to attract thousands of working-class youth and union militants disgusted by Blair & Co. And if

the SLP retains a sufficiently open and democratic internal régime it could educate and politically develop this new layer into socialist activists and organisers who are able to reach tens of thousands of others."

—"The Socialist Labour Party—Why Bob Pitt is Wrong," *What Next*, No. 2, 1996

The SLP began as a politically contradictory and unstable formation breaking to the left from New Labour. At times of heightened activity, political developments can be very swift, and Marxists must be alert to both the direction and speed of motion if opportunities for revolutionary breakthroughs are to be seized. It is also necessary to know when it is time to move on. In announcing their resignation from the SLP, supporters of the *Marxist Bulletin* wrote the following:

"We say to those militants that remain in the SLP: comrades, you are wasting your time. The party was worth something once, but that potential has been destroyed. We have a better chance of building a mass working-class party that can fight for our interests if we are outside the

straitjacket of the SLP.

"Many past and present members of the SLP will play an important part in the future of the British workers' movement. But the SLP is no longer the arena in which they can do so. Marxists, and all those committed to a socialist future, must look elsewhere for joint activity, discussion and debate.

"The need for a working-class alternative to Blair's Labour Party is stronger than ever. The need for a party with a Marxist programme that can lead the working class to victory is an absolute necessity. The Socialist Labour Party is neither.

"Supporters of the *Marxist Bulletin* will be establishing a group outside the SLP. We will be working for the same objectives and arguing for the same programme as we did inside the SLP. We look forward to continued work with any comrades who wish to build a real, revolutionary, alternative to Labourism, and with broad layers of individuals and groups on specific issues where we have agreement. We will engage in and encourage the process of political debate the SLP has stifled—the programmatic struggle necessary for the future of our class." ■

## ICL Debates IBT



On 13 February, the Trotskyist League (Canadian affiliate of the International Communist League, headed by the Spartacist League/U.S.) debated the International Bolshevik Tendency on the national question in Quebec. The event was sponsored by the Brock Socialists, a student group at Brock University, in St. Catharines, Ontario. The entire transcript of the debate has been posted on our web site ([www.bolshevik.org](http://www.bolshevik.org)). It will also be available in the forthcoming *Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 7.