



Socialist Labour Party: The shape of things to come?

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Arthur Scargill's Socialist Labour Party (SLP) has been proclaimed by some as the answer to the problems of the left in Britain. G.R.McColl, who attended the founding conference of the SLP, spells out the opportunities and the pitfalls posed for the left by the most significant organised break from Labour for decades

ON MAY 4, 1996, more than 600 delegates, observers and journalists gathered in an antiquated central London town hall for the founding conference of the Socialist Labour Party (SLP). Cynics might have scoffed that, like the building, many of those attending had seen better days, but for a few hours at least, time stood still.

Arthur Scargill, the President of the National Union of Mineworkers, addressed the conference with the rhetorical skill that made him such a powerful agitator and leader during the miners' Great Strike of 1984-85.

How significant is this new party? What does it reveal about the state of the British labour movement? Is it part of an international regroupment within the scattered forces of left reformism and Stalinism? Above all, does it provide workers in Britain with the one alternative to Blair's New Labour that they so urgently need? a revolutionary alternative?

Origins of the SLP

The first public mention of a possible split from the Labour Party was made by Scargill during Labour's annual conference in early October 1995. The left had suffered a string of defeats on policy questions after 'New Labour' had confirmed the vote of the May special conference to scrap Clause 4, the party's 1918 constitutional commitment to public ownership.

The crushing defeat at the special conference was also a personal humiliation for Scargill, who faced jeers and catcalls from Blair's sharp-suited acolytes after putting himself at the head of the campaign for 'Labour's soul'.

Within a month of the October conference, Scargill circulated a document entitled Future Strategy for the Left to the National Union of Mineworkers' Executive, in which he argued for the formation of a new party. By the end of November 1995 Scargill's discussion document had set the ball rolling and a series of invitation-only meetings had begun, involving no more than 50 people. Among them were a number of individuals prominent in the Unshackle the Unions Campaign, which had emerged from the Socialist Movement Trade Union Committee, and Tommy Sheridan, the leading spokesperson of Scottish Militant Labour.

The meetings culminated in a press conference on 13 January 1996 where Scargill announced the intention to establish the Socialist Labour Party in May, complete with a constitution drafted in advance with the assistance of left-wing barristers John Hendy and Michael Mansfield. The constitution, which is supposed to govern the SLP until at least May 1997 but has never been subjected to a membership vote, appears to offer the current leadership a free hand to block any form of overt 'Trotskyist entry'. It explicitly forbids affiliation to the party by any organisations other than trade unions. Scargill's message to all existing groups was, 'I've left my party to found the SLP, you can leave yours if you want to join it.'

This constitution was a block on Militant Labour, as well as every other group that might have affiliated, and Tommy Sheridan duly bid his farewell to the project. More to the point, it stood in sharp contradiction to Scargill's record of

defending the right of tendencies to exist in the Labour Party. As early as 1975 he went on record as being opposed to bans and proscriptions in the Labour Party and espoused the right of tendencies to exist:

?But you can change the Labour Party in the sense of pulling down the bans and proscriptions. Once you start to have influence, the co-operation and link between the left Marxist groups?all of them?and the Labour Party, you start to determine policies of a different kind.?1

It seems that what was considered right and democratic in the Labour Party is considered a potential nuisance in the SLP.

Within days of Scargill?s announcement came the embryonic organisation?s entry into electoral politics as Brenda Nixon, a leading activist in the Women Against Pit Closures (WAPC) movement in 1992-93, became the SLP?s candidate in the Hemsworth parliamentary by-election. Nixon just saved the SLP?s deposit with 5.4% of the vote in a former mining constituency with high levels of long-term unemployment. The result was hardly disastrous, but was nonetheless disappointing, given the character of the constituency.

By the time of the founding conference, the SLP had accumulated an individual membership approaching 1,300, with affiliated trade union branches accounting for another 4,3002. Launch rallies, particularly those addressed by Scargill, have packed halls in a number of cities and towns, suggesting that the SLP could still tap a rich seam of discontent at Blair?s ?New Labour? among trade unionists and disaffected Labour members.

Seven members of the national executive of the main railworkers? union, the RMT, led by Bob Crow, a deputy general secretary and long-standing activist in London Underground, joined the SLP. None of them, however, has given the slightest indication to date that they will be fighting to transfer the union?s political levy from Labour to the SLP.

The 17-strong National Executive of the party, elected at the founding conference, includes Crow, who renounced his membership of the Communist Party of Britain (CPB) to join the SLP, and at least five individuals historically associated with British outposts of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USFI). The party?s first General Secretary and Treasurer is one of those USFI-trained elements, Pat Sikorski. Like Crow, he is an RMT member and London Underground militant.

Three members of the executive, including Brenda Nixon and Ann Scargill, have come from the ranks of WAPC. Conspicuous by their absence from both the platform and the party?s current membership are the ?environmental and community activists?, whom Scargill has repeatedly described as symbolic of ?radical opposition in Britain today? 3.

The SLP leadership does not yet reflect the remnants of the Bennite Labour left that gained a number of democratic reforms and policy changes in the early 1980s only to fragment in the wake of the 1983 General Election and the miners? defeat. Militant, at that time the single largest ?Trotskyist? tendency in the party, has now withdrawn from the Labour Party to become Militant Labour, but has found its way into the SLP blocked by the ?draft? constitution. Most of the other left papers with supporters inside the Labour Party have explicitly opposed the setting up of the SLP.

Only a handful of Labour councillors have crossed over to the SLP. The leading lights of the Campaign Group of Labour MPs have all distanced themselves from the SLP, including the old guard of Tony Benn and Dennis Skinner and the most radical MP of a younger generation, Jeremy Corbyn. Though the left in the Parliamentary Labour Party has rarely been so marginalised in the post-World War II period, Ken Livingstone has been vitriolic in his denunciation of the SLP, dismissing the possibility of ever building a left alternative to Labour4 .

The SLP leadership has instead come primarily from the trade unions and, in particular, the ?hard left? of the union bureaucracy, embodied by Crow, NUM vice-president Frank Cave and Scargill himself.

The SLP and Labour

The abolition of Clause 4 prompted Scargill to conclude that a qualitative change had occurred in the Labour Party

itself.

In this document he explained:

‘Labour is now almost indistinguishable from the Democratic Party in the United States, Germany’s Social Democrat Party or, nearer home, the Liberal Democrats.’⁵

Scargill is wrong on two counts. First, his idea that Clause 4 was a proof of Labour’s socialist soul is wrong. Clause 4, which was never acted on by a single Labour government, was not a statement of socialist intent. At best, it was a vague state capitalist prescription for ameliorating the effects of free competition capitalism on the working class.

Secondly, he is wrong to believe that the ditching of Clause 4 marked a qualitative turning point for Labour. Certainly, its abolition by Blair symbolised the full extent of the right’s rampage against the progressive aspects of Labour’s policies. Nothing was sacred. But, since Clause 4 had never defined either the Labour Party or Labourism, its abolition cannot be seen as the point of qualitative change. Labour hasn’t ceased to be socialist, as Scargill believed. It never was socialist in the first place. But that does not make Labour indistinguishable from the US Democrats or the British Liberal Democrats (the German Social Democracy is a different question).

Those parties are bourgeois parties, pure and simple. That is they are the organised manifestations of factions within the ruling class and their social basis is in the bourgeoisie and middle class, not the working class. True, workers vote for them, but this electoral relationship is not a defining characteristic. If workers vote for them or not, the parties remain undisguised ruling class parties.

Labour, before Blair and, so far at least under Blair, is not a purely bourgeois party. Millions of workers vote for it because they recognise that in some sense it belongs to them.

This sense is located in Labour’s origins within, and organic links to, the organised working class in Britain, primarily the trade unions. These are part of Labour’s base. Workers vote for Labour because they can see this link for what it is—a real one that gives them some degree of political independence from the open parties of the ruling class.

Of course, like the Liberal Democrats and the US Democrats, Labour protects capitalism. In office its leaders attack the working class. Blair will do so with gusto. He is an extremist, even within the traditions of right wing Labourism. He will represent, and act for, the bourgeoisie. But unlike the leaders of open bourgeois parties, he will be doing this within the labour movement.

Blair’s project is undoubtedly to get rid of the link with the working class, specifically with the unions. But he hasn’t achieved this yet. The unions remain the bedrock of the Labour Party’s organisation, finance and apparatus, notwithstanding the influx of middle class aspirants. And because Blair hasn’t achieved the break with the unions yet, Labour remains different from the open bourgeois parties. It remains a bourgeois workers’ party.

Indeed Scargill’s own use of the term ‘almost’ is a partial recognition that Blair hasn’t yet fulfilled his long term goal. Two other leading SLP members, Pat Sikorski and Brenda Nixon, made the same admission. They wrote of the Blair leadership:

‘They’re organising to break Labour’s remaining links with the unions and planning to develop an alliance with the Liberals.’⁶

If they’re organising to do it, then they haven’t yet done it. Yet, Sikorski and Nixon draw the same wrong conclusion as Scargill, saying that Blair ‘has already crossed the ‘Ramsay MacDonald line’.’⁷

This point is not academic. It will play a key role in shaping the SLP itself. If the SLP seriously thinks that Labour is now simply an open bourgeois party, then they will be abandoning the millions of workers who remain either in Labour or tied to it through the unions or who look to it because of that real link with the organised labour movement.

They will not be able to provide such workers with a means of fighting Blair, through putting him to the test of office and through mobilising to demand of him actions in the interests of the working class. Nor can they be anything but neutral in the battles that could take place when Blair does decide to try and finally sever the link with the organised working class.

At a fundamental level, the SLP leadership's wrong understanding of Labour points to a major problem with their conception of the SLP itself. If it is to be a new party with Labour's old soul, then it is to be a reformist party, not a revolutionary one.

Lessons of Chile?

At the founding conference, discussion centred on a number of policy papers that had been worked on by groups emerging from a pre-conference members' meeting on 2 March. The discussion revealed a wide spread of opinions within the SLP. But it also revealed that the leadership were convinced that what they needed to present as the public face of the SLP was a left reformist programme.

Aspects of the proposed programme are very left wing, but taken as a whole, it does not transcend reformism. It refuses to pose, in plain English, the need for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism as the only means of paving the way for socialism.

The evidence of the conference suggests that Scargill is prepared to make some concessions on controversial policy questions. On the Irish national struggle, for instance, the platform accepted, and effectively argued for, an amendment calling for the immediate withdrawal of British troops from the six counties and the release of all Irish political prisoners.

It was the only time during debates on six policy papers that the platform gave its blessing to an amendment of any substance. Pat Sikorski declared that the SLP would not be in the business of condemning the actions of those fighting imperialism, however they saw fit to do it.

By a sizeable majority, the conference as a whole thus adopted a position well to the left of Britain's two main centrist organisations, the SWP and Militant.

The next question for the SLP, having agreed a principled position of solidarity, was its attitude to the 'peace process' in Ireland. And here its unconditional support for the IRA revealed itself as being little more than an uncritical attitude towards Sinn Fein. The conference rejected amendments warning of the fraudulence of Major's peace process and the strong possibility of Sinn Fein accommodating to imperialism as the PLO have done. Again Pat Sikorski explained that he supported the right of Irish revolutionaries to make peace on any terms they choose. Here the influence of Arthur Scargill's USec lieutenants was at its most visible.

On questions where an existing leadership position is not already in place the SLP leadership were considerably more equivocal. The radicalism on Ireland was in stark contrast to the SLP's policy document on racism, which marked a capitulation to a series of spurious liberal arguments and commonly-held racist ideas within the working class. Among the speakers was another USec veteran, Brian Heron, who depicted a fantastic scenario of white South African reactionaries fleeing an ANC government for a Scargillite Britain.

After the most impassioned debate and the closest vote of the conference, the delegates refused to call for the scrapping of all immigration controls, an amendment put in three separate forms to the platform's woolly document.

There were very few black comrades at the SLP's founding conference. Even if the SLP's youth charter includes a call for the abolition of immigration controls, an organisation that adopts a position paper with no mention of support for black self-defence, the briefest of references to police brutality and that rejected an amendment calling for 'no platform for fascists' is unlikely to prove a lightning rod for the anger of politically radicalised black youth.

On the issue of military spending, the SLP will be advancing a proposal that does not go beyond what is readily acceptable to existing Campaign Group Labour MPs, calling for one-third of the armed forces budget to remain. Do the SLP leaders not realise that this budget, however much they tinker with it, is the budget for the very armed forces occupying Ireland, the Malvinas, Bosnia etc? That these armed forces are used exclusively for the defence of British imperialism? That their contact with the organised working class is normally in the shape of strike breakers?

The SLP leadership is clearly not prepared to state that it will not be defending the realm, never mind forging workers' militias. Indeed, the question of the purpose of 'defence' expenditure is not even posed.

The policy papers go on to reveal still more about the depth of reformist confusion within the SLP's ranks about the nature of the British state. One document on 'the law' is liberal piffle that stops far short of even basic democratic demands for the election of the judiciary and the abolition of the monarchy. Instead, the policy paper calls for 'a written constitution' and 'the establishment of a Constitutional Court'. Its notion of a fundamental 'overhaul [of] the administration of justice' consists of such measures as a review of 'the basis upon which future appointments are to be made to the judiciary/Constitutional Court'.⁸

The police warrant only one mention in a parenthetical phrase that refers to 'disparate policing practices in the black communities, and more recently in targeting the young.' The section does not even issue a simple and clear pledge to the repeal of the Criminal Justice Act of 1994.

A separate section on anti-union legislation is far better, including an unequivocal call for the complete scrapping of the lengthy series of Tory measures, though it frames its call 'for a programme of positive union rights' in the context of the United Nations Charter and the conventions of the International Labour Organisation, based in that renowned bastion of trade union power, Geneva.

Predictably, for an organisation with its hopes pinned on proving attractive to union officials early in the life of a Blair government, the party leadership has spurned attempts to make the leading trade union figures in the SLP accountable to the party's members. A proposal from members of the Socialist Caucus in the largest civil service union, the CPSA, to make party policy binding on all SLP members in the unions did not form part of the conference agenda.

The SLP does not yet have agreed positions on a series of questions around which papers exist as a result of a policy conference on 2 March and subsequent meetings of various working groups. At the 2 March event Scargill declared himself a 'revolutionary' and claimed that the SLP had a foundation in 'Marxist philosophy'. Yet when the 4 May platform found itself explicitly confronted with the fundamental question of what to do about the capitalist state: reform versus revolution, it hid behind a combination of Scargill's bluster and vague formulations about the need for 'extra-parliamentary action'.

It relied on the force of Scargill's ritual denunciations to dismiss an amendment that advanced an explicit call for the working class 'to smash the bureaucratic and military apparatus'.

At best, the SLP's document is ambiguous as to how it would enact its series of radical reforms. At worst, it peddles the illusion that a socialist transformation can come through parliamentary channels. In responding to a speaker from the floor who recalled the tragedy of Allende's Popular Unity government in Chile succumbing to a military coup in 1973, Scargill intoned that 'we had learned the lessons of Chile' without ever spelling out what his understanding of those lessons was.

In 1975 his understanding did not go beyond concluding that parliamentary action would have to be combined with extra-parliamentary action. By 1995, when he had decided the time was ripe for the SLP, he argued:

'If a Socialist Labour Party is established it should commit itself to fight every Parliamentary seat' on the principle that Parliament is but one element of democracy, a body in which expression must be given to the political philosophy and issues advanced by our class.'⁹

This latter formulation is simply the most confused expression of his long held belief, shared by left reformists like Tony Benn, that parliamentary and extra-parliamentary action need to be combined in the struggle for socialism. This is the lesson of Chile that he has consistently drawn now for over twenty years. It is the wrong lesson.

The real lesson of Chile was the impossibility of combining two roads to socialism?parliamentary and extra-parliamentary. After all, in Chile between 1970 and 1973, there was hardly a shortage of extra-parliamentary action. The biggest demos and strikes the country had ever seen took place, workers? committees were formed, battles with the military began well in advance of the bloody Pinochet coup. But still the reformist combined roads did not avert disaster.

The real lesson of Chile is that there is no parliamentary road to socialism, and that when we stand for parliament we do it as a tactic, as a means of making widespread propaganda for revolution, which includes the overthrow of the elitist democracy of parliament and its replacement with the democracy of the working class, expressed through workers? councils.

The lesson of Chile is that you don?t cut the budget to the armed forces or reduce its size. You abolish it and replace it with an armed working class. If you don?t, then the armed forces, along with the police, the unelected judges and civil servants and every other cog in the machine of the capitalist state will be used to crush an unarmed working class duped by reformists into believing that socialism can come about peacefully.

Scargill hasn?t learnt these lessons. The question is, can the SLP be taught them before it is transformed from a party dominated by left reformism but still in the process of formation, into an entrenched reformist party?

Stalinism and the SLP

To prevent the SLP from becoming transformed into a fully fledged reformist sect, the influence of Stalinism and left Labourism?in many respects twins, rather than antipodes?will have to be defeated inside the party.

The 4 May edition of the Morning Star, which coincided with the SLP conference, embodied the tensions simmering within the ranks of the Communist Party of Britain. On the one hand, an editorial attacked the launch of the SLP as premature, while urging a vote for Labour at the next General Election. On another page, a much longer column authored by Arthur Scargill urged Communist Party members to join the SLP. Some of its leading members, like Crow, have already decided to join the SLP. Others could follow.

Organised British Stalinism is in a state of decay and permanent crisis. In part this is a result of the collapse of Stalinism in the USSR and Eastern Europe. Apart from anything else these regimes kept the Morning Star afloat with financial backing. In part, however, British Stalinism?s crisis pre-dates the world collapse.

In 1977 the first of many splits in its ranks occurred, between the forces moving in the direction of liberalism (the Eurocommunists as they were then called) and the forces loyal to the old USSR. Since then the Eurocommunists have completed their transformation, now calling themselves the Democratic Left.

The CPB is the biggest fragment of the remaining old style Stalinist movement. Its politics are based on its old programme: The British Road to Socialism. The essence of this programme is that the British working class can lead the struggle for socialism, by way of parliament rather than by way of revolution, in a coalition with the middle classes and even progressive, ?anti-monopoly? sections of the ruling class. In practice, the CPB has given up on such sectors of capital, but is still keen on coalitions with progressive Bishops, Liberals and anyone else it can lay its hands on. Within the unions it retains important influence, basing its work on electoral machines capturing positions and influence within the trade union bureaucracy.

The relevance of this for the SLP is that though the CPB is on the outside, the tradition it stands in and the politics it espouses have long exercised considerable influence over Scargill himself. He received his initiation in politics in the 1950s as a member of the Young Communist League, the old CPGB youth section.

Though never a member of the adult party itself (he left the YCL to concentrate on the NUM), much of its politics—its little England anti-Europeanism, its nationalist remedies for saving British industry through import controls and state capitalist nationalisations, its emphasis on capturing positions within the union bureaucracy rather than fighting to destroy it—are the politics of Scargill himself.

Scargill's militancy, his independence and his conflicts with the CP as he rose to the top in the NUM, often conceal the extent of Stalinist influence on him. But at decisive points in the class struggle that influence has manifested itself in different ways.

His leadership from the front of the miners' epic battle with Thatcher's second government and the might of the British state machine in 1984-85 was often inspirational. His rhetoric both voiced and reinforced the determination of so many of his members and their families to defend their jobs and their communities.

But just as Scargill showed that he was a far from typical trade union bureaucrat, his performance at the September 1984 TUC conference illustrated his inability to break from the trade union bureaucracy and its methods. After spending six months keeping the TUC at arms length, in September he failed to challenge their refusal to deliver solidarity and handed control of all solidarity action over to the TUC bureaucracy, opening the door to the slow strangulation of the strike by bureaucrats whose private view of the dispute was:

"How do we prevent the miners from going down to defeat, while at the same time denying Arthur a victory?"¹⁰

The overwhelming burden of blame for the miners' eventual defeat lay at the door of the TUC as a whole, but Scargill's repeated failure to appeal over the heads of his fellow trade union tops to rank and file members for generalised strike action in solidarity with the miners contributed to the NUM's fatal isolation.

In September 1992 the Tories announced plans for butchering the nationalised coal industry before privatising its remains. This triggered a wave of popular protest. The sympathy of the middle class was suddenly on the miners' side. In contrast to 1984-85 Scargill chose to rely on public opinion and play strictly according to the new realist rules of the TUC as a whole. He effectively rejected a strategy built on industrial action and pithead occupations by miners as the catalyst to a general strike.

There were serious obstacles to winning such action, not least the legacy of demoralisation among the miners themselves from the defeat of the Great Strike. But Scargill's embrace of the Stalinist tactic of building a broad alliance of classes in which the working class forfeits its independence and its specific forms of class action in the interests of preserving the alliance with sections of its class enemy, including in this case a few disgruntled Tory MPs in marginal seats, was an abysmal failure. The eventual closure of dozens of pits and the axing of thousands of jobs left the NUM a withered husk with less than 10% of the membership it had in March 1984.

Despite being cold-shouldered to date by the leaders of British Stalinism he has not freed himself from its influence. The arguments used to justify opposition to scrapping all immigration controls are the very ones the Communist Party has been using for years. The idea of a British road to socialism is lodged within the SLP's economic and political recipes for dealing with Britain's crisis. Even the idea of a coalition—although now one between the working class and radical greens active around road and animal protests instead of between workers and patriotic capitalists—persists.

These influences have shaped the SLP so far. But as the debates at the founding conference showed, they have not shaped the entire SLP membership. Organising to defeat these influences means looking to the forces that prevented Scargill himself from ever joining the Communist Party, the forces that were responsible for bringing out the very best in him—the rank and file of the working class.

Scargill was influenced by militant syndicalism as well as by Stalinism, within the NUM. His rise through the union owed as much to this militant syndicalism as it did to the Stalinist Broad Left machine, in particular to the militancy of the Yorkshire miners.

It was their strikes in the late 1960s that first brought Scargill to regional prominence. And it was their vanguard role in the flying pickets of the 1972 and 1974 national strikes that made his name a national byword for trade union militancy. Once he was president of the NUM in the 1980s, it was to this army of class fighters that he turned.

The pit closure programme of 1984 set into motion by the Coal Board gave Scargill the chance for a showdown with Thatcher. The result was the glorious, but tragically defeated great strike of 1984/85?twelve months of intense class warfare.

While this tradition is considerably healthier and more vibrant than the class collaborationism of Stalinism, in itself it is insufficient to defeat capitalism. The SLP must look to the militant rank and file, but must transcend even the best militant syndicalism, which itself proved incapable of winning the great strike of 1984-85.

It failed because militancy, without being harnessed to the pursuit of clear revolutionary socialist goals embodied in a revolutionary socialist programme, cannot answer the questions of state power and government that are posed when the class war reaches its highest pitch of intensity.

For example, the SLP should commit itself to building a rank and file movement against the trade union bureaucracy inside the unions. The aim of such a movement is to break the class collaborationist hold the bureaucrats exercise over the unions, to replace their bureaucratic methods with genuine workers? democracy at every level and to turn the unions themselves into instruments of class war against capitalism.

This is not simply a technical or organisational question. It is not simply a question of militancy versus bureaucratism. It poses point blank the question of politics.

What do we say about the bureaucracy?s tolerance of Blair, about its political philosophy of ?new realism?, about its acceptance of the rigid divide between politics and economics, about its view of the unions? role in relation to governments and political strikes?

These are political questions that only a revolutionary socialist programme can give an answer to if the class is to defeat the reformist bureaucracy.

To equip the SLP with such a programme means fighting against the mish mash of left Labourism and Stalinism, served up by Scargill and his USec and Stalinist allies alike, and transcending the syndicalism of Scargill?s natural base of support inside the rank and file of the working class.

British franchise of a new international?

The fight against Stalinism in the SLP will also require a fight for revolutionary internationalism. Scargill?s positions on a series of international questions have long betrayed the influence of his Stalinist mentors. He retained a genuine belief in the East European states and former Soviet Union as examples of ?actually existing socialism?, and he still holds a similar faith in Castro?s Cuba.

The 4 May event played host to the Cuban embassy?s political counsel, who received a rapturous reception from the delegates, many of whom had earlier applauded a crude demagogic attack on an amendment to the SLP?s policy statement that dared to criticise the absence of democratic control by workers of the Cuban state and the management of its economy.

The SLP has begun to search for allies on the European stage among those parties and organisations claiming to represent a continuity with the traditions of the pre-1989 Communist parties. The evidence to date suggests that the leadership has enjoyed some success in its quest for partners.

Scargill and the founding conference?s main organisers shared their platform with Italy?s Communist Refoundation, represented by their paper?s editor, and Spain?s United Left (IU) in the person of the secretary of their group in the

European Parliament. Such a line-up was impressive for an organisation which at this stage lacks not only MPs but any regular publication.

The IU representative extended an invitation to the SLP to send delegates to a Madrid conference on 8 June dedicated to discussing a 'democratic socialist European left perspective' and a subsequent event in Paris on mass unemployment. The IU is 'searching for partners on the European left', and in the SLP had evidently found 'a real partner in Britain'. Later in the proceedings both Brenda Nixon, parliamentary candidate and national executive member, and Scargill himself referred to the RC and IU as 'our sister parties'.

At the level of programme, the RC, IU and the SLP leadership share an implacable hostility to the European Union (EU), which they use to justify various left reformist remedies for treating national capitalist economies. Thus the SLP will be firmly on the anti-EU and pro-withdrawal bandwagon. The SLP's draft policy statement on the 'European Common Market', as the authors still insist on calling it, itself poses the question of 'why not be neutral?' on the issue of European capitalist integration, but fails to answer it. Without specifically reviving the spectre of import controls, the document goes on to uphold 'the sovereignty of member states', presumably to pursue the introduction of 'socialism in one country' once again.

Most probably, leading figures in the RC and IU see the SLP as an investment for the future. The British franchise of this loose international faces distinctive obstacles, however. Unlike its counterparts in Spain, Italy and indeed France, the British CP has never enjoyed more than a modicum of electoral credibility. In contrast to the RC, with a serious implantation among trade union militants in key industries, the British CP's industrial base has withered dramatically in the organisation's feeble response to the hammer blows of recession and the bosses' restructuring offensive.

Again, in contrast to its continental counterparts, the SLP leadership looks loathe to countenance any organised internal opposition. The RC, though dominated by hard-line Stalinists from the former PCI, has opened the door to other currents including public members of the USec, two of whom sit on the RC's national executive. Such elements do not, of course, exercise any real influence over key policy decisions, but their presence enhances the party's democratic credentials and provides more footsoldiers for its campaigns.

Prospects for growth

In his concluding speech to the founding conference, Scargill spoke of standing 100 candidates at the General Election and 'a recruitment campaign the likes of which the labour movement has never seen in this country'. These statements are very much at odds with the slow growth strategy announced on 13 January which called for a target of only 5,000 members within two years of the party's launch. If Scargill is serious about an aggressive attempt to build a mass organisation in the short-term, the SLP will need many more footsoldiers and recruiting sergeants than it currently has.

The SLP does not represent the same mass phenomena that led to the creation of the RC and IU. In both of those cases mass Stalinist parties emerged from the crisis of Stalinism and placed themselves at the centre of the regroupment of left forces in their countries. As such, they were not starting from scratch. They were the product of actual splits in the labour movements themselves. The SLP likes to think that it is a product of a similar process. Sikorski and Nixon argue that it is:

'Britain has one united labour movement, with one trade union federation and one party. Unless the initiative for a new party comes from the heart of that movement, out of a political identity crisis of Labour and the unions, then at best it could only ever temporarily unite the active 'fringes' of the left. Important as they are, they could never win the leadership of the whole of society which parties have to do.

'Socialist Labour comes from the most important fight led by the most militant section of the working class in the last 70 years. The miners' two battles united all that was best in society against all that was worst . . . That is why Socialist Labour could be formed.'¹¹

This account reveals the differences between the SLP and the RC/IU, not the similarities. The SLP has not been born as

a result of a split in the labour movement, nor does it come from the heart of the labour movement. At the moment its thousand odd members comprise an important section of the working class vanguard, but nothing approaching the masses represented by the RC/IU.

In some senses, whatever it may become in the future, Scargill's SLP is a product of the intense isolation he is suffering within a labour movement still fundamentally united around the prospect of returning a Labour government, Blair and all. And the ace up the sleeve for the bureaucrats who run the British labour movement is that they know full well this is what the overwhelming majority of the working class want too. That is why there has been so little resonance for Scargill's split.

Moreover, the idea that the party is the direct product of the miners' most recent battles is a travesty of the truth. In no sense is the SLP a product of the 1984-85 strike. In that period, when thousands of miners branded the Labour leader 'Judas Kinnock' and when Militant's leadership of Liverpool City Council enabled them to mobilise thousands of workers, would have been a far more propitious time to split.

Had the NUM issued the call for a new party then, thousands of strikers would have signed up straight away.

The ranks would have been swelled by tens of thousands of the miners' supporters. The left of the Labour Party, then in retreat, could have been won over en masse. And Militant, by their own admission, could have taken thousands of members in Liverpool into such a party.

It didn't happen. Instead there was a defeat of the strike and no organised break from Labour. The defeat was strategic. It drove the entire labour movement into a headlong retreat. More defeats followed. New realism triumphed in the unions and the right wing surged forward in the Labour Party. Thousands of activists disappeared from the scene.

Perhaps it is more accurate to see it as more a product of the second battle in 1992. For this was a battle that never took place. The armies were mobilised, in their hundreds of thousands in two huge national demonstrations and countless local ones, but apart from scattered one day strikes, they were not led into battle with the Tories. They were left standing around while a parliamentary commission defused the crisis and paved the way to the devastation of the mining industry, with privatisation and mass sackings following swiftly.

This defeat left Scargill totally isolated and with hardly any members in his union. It created a crisis for him, but not a split within the labour movement. After all he had covered up for every right wing union and Labour leader during the 1992 crisis. If the SLP was a direct result of this, then it confirms that it was the product of a very different process to the one that led to the formation of the RC/IU. It is the product of a very small minority refocusing their political horizons, not the product of a seismic shift in the British labour movement.

That isn't to belittle the importance or significance of the SLP. The very fact of a split, no matter how small, that includes a section of the militant vanguard, is of immense importance to revolutionaries. But the scale and nature of the split puts it into a very different perspective to that outlined by Sikorski and Nixon. It means that the SLP's fate could very easily be the one they decry: unity of the 'fringe'.

Whether this is so depends on events that the SLP does not entirely control. Scargill's decision to break from Labour does not just arise from a sudden realisation that the party had broken from its 'noble roots' or even an admission of error for having ever viewed Labour as a 'socialist party'¹². His perspective, if largely unstated, is that the election of a Blair-led Labour government will lay the basis for the rapid growth of the SLP.

Though the unions remain largely quiescent, Scargill assumes that the actual experience of Labour in office will fuel frustration within the unions at all levels, leaving thousands of trade union activists and even substantial layers of the bureaucracy with nowhere to turn but the SLP.

He aims to construct an organisation that can accommodate an exodus from Labour without breaking this influx of members from Labourite ideology or abolishing the damaging historical divide between the 'industrial' and 'political'.

wings of the labour movement.

Is Scargill's project utopian? He is almost certainly right to expect a measure of revival in the low level of combativity of the organised working class under Blair, after an initial 'honeymoon'. Both Kinnock and Blair did much to depress workers' expectations of what a Labour government would bring, but some expectations still persist among millions of ordinary Labour voters. Even if the conscious identification with Labour has eroded, millions believe that life will in some ways be markedly better under 'New Labour'.

However much Blair's inner circle may wish to transform the Labour Party into an organisation no longer dependent on union funding, with structures that allow no voice to the union bureaucracy, most of these advisers recognise that a Blair government may well be obliged to throw certain sops to organised labour to keep the bureaucracy on board.

Blair might be able to placate the TUC tops for some time, but even the most right wing bureaucrats, such as Alan Johnson, joint general secretary of the Communication Workers Union, are not immune to pressure from below.

Blair's party will distance itself further and faster from industrial action in the run up to a general election than Kinnock could run from the NUM in 1984. But such action would provide the SLP an opportunity to show its worth as a campaigning organisation engaged in 'extra-parliamentary' struggle and lay the basis for its growth among CWU members.

Alternatively, it could leave the field open to the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) to assist in fund raising and offering tactical advice to the strikers. Though the paper membership of the SWP remains substantially larger than the SLP's, the latter could find itself far better placed to grow under a Blair government, partly because many newly radicalised workers are likely to find a left reformist party that contests elections a more immediate pole of attraction than a self-avowed revolutionary organisation that has long abstained from the electoral arena.

The other advantage the SLP would enjoy in any competition for new recruits is Scargill and his still substantial media profile. As one militant postal worker quipped at the SLP's inaugural meeting in Bristol, 'thousands of people have heard of Peter Taaffe (leader of Militant Labour), tens of thousands will have heard of the (SWP's) Tony Cliff, but millions will have heard of Arthur Scargill.' So he explained his decision to join the fledgling party.¹³

But to actually win such members, the SLP can only rely on an objective process of disillusionment with 'New Labour' for a limited period. It needs a younger, more dynamic membership base than was evident at the founding conference. And it needs to prove itself worthy of such a membership if it is to avoid the fringe fate of both the SWP and the old Communist Party. It cannot do that with its present programme, constitution and membership. Can these be changed between now and any upsurge of struggle against Blair?

Lost for revolution?

The SLP's programme is not yet complete. The bulk of policy papers did not receive a hearing on 4 May, but the essential elements of a left reformist manifesto are in place. The SLP has broken from Labour, but has not yet broken from reformism. There is a deviation to the left on Ireland, while on the military and the police it has made no advance at all on the Labour left of the 1980s. In the short term and most probably beyond, however, the SLP is not about to adopt a revolutionary programme.

But revolutionary Marxists would be mistaken to conclude that the weakness of the party's programme absolves them from a struggle for the hearts and minds of the SLP's membership and a continuing battle around the character of the SLP itself. A number of trade union bureaucrats, with Arthur Scargill towering above them, are in the party. A small clique, dominated by the one-time USec members, is at the centre of the first national executive, but there is not yet a thoroughly consolidated bureaucracy. A sufficient source of finances to secure the material basis for an SLP bureaucracy will almost certainly not exist for some years after the next General Election.

The SLP's formation is a significant event in the life of the British labour movement. It is a truly national organisation,

though weakened in Scotland by the relative strength of Militant Labour and the persistence of nationalist sentiment on the Scottish left. Analogies have been made with the ILP, formed from a split with Labour in 1931.

The ILP, unlike the SLP of course, had a number of MPs in its ranks and thousands of more members than the SLP at this stage in its development. But the ILP broke from Labour in the context of international depression and the premiership of then Labour leader Ramsay MacDonald attacking the meagre benefits of the jobless.

The SLP cannot be dismissed as a fit of Scargill's personal pique nor can it be blithely assumed that it will share the dismal fate of the ILP in the 1930s. Its emergence prior to any Labour government headed by the party's most right-wing leader since MacDonald, is a symptom of profound unease and slow-burning anger about Blair and the nature of his project.

The release of pent-up frustration among large sections of trade unionists at some stage during a Blair administration could find the SLP well-placed to grow dramatically.

This poses the need to continue the fight with the SLP's membership for the revolutionary programme and for a party that bases itself on the rank and file of the working class.

It poses the need for revolutionaries to engage the SLP membership not merely in debate but in joint action, so that the merit of the revolutionary programme can be demonstrated in action.

It poses the need to continue the fight to change the SLP's constitution so that existing left-wing organisations, including Workers Power (Britain), can have the right to affiliate and carry on such arguments and action from within the party.

The extent to which revolutionary ideas can take root amongst the membership of the SLP will mark the extent to which the party can fulfil its self proclaimed goal of becoming a genuine mass alternative to Labour. Labour, even now, remains the strategic obstacle in the British working class movement to the building of a revolutionary party.

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