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Repeating history, when not rewriting it

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2005 elections

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George Galloway, Tom Mann and the British May 2005
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A critique of the SWP's 2005 general election analysis, plus
reminding them that Tom Mann was a syndicalist after
becoming disgusted with the electoralism they have
embraced.

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Step, the First World War and the Russian Revolution.” Which conveniently forgets to mention the syndicalist revolt and the organised attempts by trade unionists to break away from the electioneering of the official labour movement and the various Marxist sects into a direct action based revolutionary union movement. In so doing they turned to the ideas first applied by the libertarian wing of the First International, around Bakunin, and subsequently applied by anarchists in the French Labour movement in the 1890s: revolutionary unionism.

The aim of this agitation was fundamentally different to that of the “**National Minority Movement**” these articles are an assessment of. Its aim was to bolster the Communist Party rather than bolster workers’ autonomy by creating a labour movement run by and for its members (and any subsequent SWP front will do the same). The article ponders whether “*would he have done better if he[Cook] had remained a member of the CP?*” Hardly, given the negative impact of Bolshevism in the world labour movement.

In Britain, this impact destroyed the syndicalist revolt and the potential of creating a lasting libertarian influence in the labour movement. Looking at the Russian Revolution through rose-tinted glasses, they rushed head long to embrace a left which had won. As the paper notes, “*Cook, like the early CP leaders themselves, was the product of the militant working class movement around the First World War.*” The ideas that produced that militancy go unmentioned, written out of history. Rather than build upon their own experiences, these leaders rejected them and instead followed blindly Lenin’s experiences of working in a near-feudal, backward, absolutist regime.

The question is, whether today’s radicals will do the same. How many times will the same path be treaded before people realise it takes them away from their destination (socialism) rather than towards it? Sadly, from the looks of it, some time to come.

Emma Goldman’s position of siding with the working class against the boss class (regardless of the flag it waved), preferring instead to bottle up his misgivings and keep quiet about the repressive nature of Leninism. This loyalty to the “revolution” (i.e. the Bolshevik party which monopolised and killed the real revolution) saw the promise of socialism poisoned by its association with first Leninist and then Stalinist tyranny.

The Miners Next Step

This revised version of history was not limited to Mann. They did the same in the next issue (Keith Flett, “AJ Cook – militant miner who led the workers’ struggle”, **Socialist Worker** 1953, 28 May 2005). Discussing AJ Cook, the well known miners’ leader, the paper notes that he “became familiar with the ideas of the **Miners’ Unofficial Reform Committee Movement**” which “produced a pamphlet, **The Miners’ Next Step**, in 1912 which argued that the left needed to organise from below to gain control of the leadership of the union.”

This is the famous **syndicalist** document which argued for self-managed unions, not for “control” over a hierarchical leadership. Rather than ask for better leaders or just more accountability, the pamphlet called for the workplace meeting to become the real source of power in the union. The union was to be run from the bottom-up, with the “leadership” turned into the mandated delegates of the membership. Needless to say, such ideas are anathema to Leninism which sees the need for strong leaders within a clear hierarchical and centralised body to tell the unions what to do. The pamphlet presented a libertarian vision of socialism at odds with Leninist or Labourite reality (most obviously, workers’ control of industry rather than nationalisation).

The article states that the “growth of a militant current among miners can be seen against the background of *The Miners’ Next*

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This in spite of the actual success of syndicalist activism in producing near revolutionary strikes across the country. If the first world war had not intervened, this chances are that a serious crisis would have engulfed the country. Ironically for the SWP, the ruling class quite rightly saw electioneering as a means of solving the threat of direct action (Lloyd George knew the score, stating that the parliamentary socialists were “*the best policemen for the Syndicalists*”). At the very least, if syndicalist ideas had remained influential after the war the 1926 General Strike would have taken on a more radical flavour. Instead we had the CP calling for “**all power to the General Council**”! As the syndicalists knew from bitter experience, the problem with the trade unions was that the bureaucrats already held far too much power over the union membership rather than not enough.

The paper does quote from NMM movement’s founding document, indicating that it was part of Moscow’s Red International of Labour Unions (RILU). This “*was a reminder that while the NMM was based on the experience of activists like Mann, it was also part of a wider trend based on the politics that came out of the 1917 Russian Revolution.*” Which is true, in a way. The aim of the Bolshevik’s RILU was to foster Russian inspired tactics onto the world labour movement. As such, the previous experiences of activists like Mann were rejected in favour of the policies which had apparently succeeded in Russia. Thus the syndicalist ideas which Mann, like others, had developed from his own experiences of the class war in developed capitalist nations were to be simply ignored in favour of policies developed in a different social environment and skewed in favour of the needs of Russian state capitalism and its ruling elite.

Sadly, Mann (like so many radicals) did so. As well as rejecting his own theories in light of Leninist “success,” he also refused to defend the Russian socialists, syndicalists and anarchists along with the ordinary workers and peasants who faced Bolshevik repression. He refused to take his old comrade

“I find myself not in agreement with the important matter of Parliamentary action. My experiences have driven me more and more into the non-Parliamentary position ... After the most careful reflection I am driven to the belief that the real reason why the trade unionist movement of this country is in such a deplorable state of inefficiency is to be found in fictitious importance which the workers have been encouraged to attach to Parliamentary action ... I find nearly all the serious-minded young men in the labour and socialist movement have their minds centred upon obtaining some position in public life such as local, municipal or county councillorship ... or aspiring to become an MP ... I am driven to the belief that this is entirely wrong ... that economic liberty will never be realised by such means. So I declare in favour of Direct Industrial Organisation, not as a means but as THE means whereby the workers can ultimately overthrow the capitalist system and become the actual controllers of their industrial and social destiny.”

A year later, he declared that “*political action is of no use whatsoever*” and charged himself with foolishness in the past for looking to parliament for labour’s emancipation. So it can be safely suggested that Mann would have been even less impressed with Respect and Callinicos’s stress on the need to “win” electoral battles.

As such, while the paper does note that Mann “*was the most respected trade union militant of the early 1920s*” and even mentions that his “*record of almost unparalleled militancy and activity*” it simply ignores the actual ideas which produced this respect and how he changed them as a result of his activity. Those aspects of his life which fail to fit into the Leninist schema are simply put down the memory hole.

It goes without saying that the SWP are cock-a-hoop over Galloway being elected to Parliament on the Respect ticket. That he did so only by being parachuted into an East London constituency with a large Muslim community is commented upon less. Sadly, Galloway’s previous constituent’s in Glasgow did not have the chance to pass judgement on their “representative” – for the obvious reason that he would not have won there. As such, any claim that Respect has broken the mould of British left-wing politics are still moot in the extreme.

The SWP’s analysis

SWP leader Alex Callinicos analysis of the general election betrays the limitations of any victory celebrations. (“*The general election was a bitter blow for Blairism*”, **Socialist Worker** 1952, 21 May 2005). He correctly notes that “*of themselves, elections don’t change anything*” before paraphrasing Engels with the comment that “*they act as a barometer of the deeper social forces at work.*” As such, “*the British general election ... did mark a significant stage in the history of the politics in Britain.*”

This was for two reasons. Firstly, it “*demonstrated beyond any doubt that we have moved into a multi-party system.*” Secondly, in an attempt to build up Respect’s less than glorious overall result, he argues that “*under previous Labour governments when supporters became disillusioned they stayed at home or switched to the Tories. But this time the Labour vote fragmented leftwards.*” He quotes Ken Livingstone: “*In the capital, for every vote Labour lost to the Tory right, it lost almost five to its left – Liberal Democrats, Respect and the Greens.*”

Those who were under the impression that the SWP considered the LibDems as a right-wing party are obviously mistaken. Can we expect a call for “**Vote LibDem without illusions**” to be appearing soon? Doubtful, although logically they should

be considering it — Respect are not in a position to stand everywhere yet. But a call to vote for the LibDems or Greens is not on the cards, even if the latter are more progressive than Respect. Perhaps it is a case of the LibDems being perceived as being more leftwing? Given that our comrade argues that the “*results also portend a growing crisis of legitimacy for the British political system*” and that the “*first past the post system always unfairly rewards the largest parties, but the results become particularly arbitrary when their share of the vote is relatively small*” can we expect the SWP to now come out, like the LibDems, in favour of Proportional Representation?

Any analysis of election tendencies must take into account that the result was skewed by the fact that the Tories were even more pro-war than New Labour and Howard’s campaign aimed to shore up their core vote against UKIP and Veritas rather than appeal to the general public. Blair asserting that he “*got a mandate to govern this country again... the people have made it very clear – they want to carry on with Labour and not go back to the Tory years*” was hardly a ringing endorsement, but it does express a reality of the election. It simply says that most people think the Tories would be worse. As an example of a general drift to the “left” (however defined), the result is too early to say. Needless to say, this “fragmentation” to the left does not express an actual increase in class militancy where it counts, in the form of direct action.

Alex goes on to argue that “*from a longer term perspective, the election marked a decisive step in the decline of the Labour Party as the dominant force on the left of British politics. It confirmed what has long been evident – that Blair is not the saviour but the gravedigger of Labourism.*” Perhaps, but Blairism has secured another four years of Labour rule and much of the opposition to Labour focused around him as a person (thanks, in part, to the SWP itself). If Labour got rid of Blair before the next election then the decline of Labour may stagger out a few years more. Given how the SWP have personified the issues

reformist and bureaucratic, doing little more than mouth socialist rhetoric. Eventually the rhetoric matched the reality but not before sidelining the socialist movement away from constructive self-activity in the workplace and community. Today, the SWP is repeating the process but with one key difference: the electoral party it has founded makes no attempt to proclaim itself revolutionary or even socialist.

As today, many genuine socialists saw through the farce which electioneering had turned socialism into. These people turned towards anarchist politics of direct action, solidarity and workplace and community organisation. One such person was Tom Mann. Originally a socialist, he embraced syndicalism and became its most famous and influential advocate in Britain. As such, while it may seem incredulous that someone could discuss him and fail to mention his syndicalist period, this is precisely what the SWP did (Keith Flett, “*An attempt to win the majority of workers,*” **Socialist Worker** 1952, 21 May 2005).

Discussing Mann in the context of his being president of the Communist Party’s “**National Minority Movement**” (NMM) from 1924 to 1929, they present a summary of his life. While noting his membership of “*Britain’s first Marxist party, the Social Democratic Federation (SDF)*” and well as the being general secretary of the Independent Labour Party, they fail to mention how his experiences as a trade union activist and member of these parties turned him into a syndicalist.

The paper does mention that “*he spent the years from 1901–10 organising in New Zealand and Australia. Returning to Britain he took a leading role in the huge wave of industrial agitation that swept Britain in the period 1910–14.*” Yes, but as part of an influential and growing syndicalist movement! And as a direct result of those experiences, Mann turned away from political parties and electioneering in favour of a direct action based syndicalism. It is useful to quote his 1911 resignation letter from the Marxist Social Democratic Party:

the party will hardly lose them friends. The key issue will be whether the SWP leadership can think Respect could survive in Scotland without the SSP.

Callinicos states, somewhat incredulously, that *“a left that always loses can be patronised and dismissed. A left that wins is a lot scarier.”* Which is, of course, how Kinnock’s reforms and Blairism were sold to the Labour Party membership. What was the point in being right if the Tories won elections? Far better, surely, to adjust your policies and win than to be on the margins? And so the steady slog to the right, all in the name of winning. Can we expect a similar process with the SWP and Respect?

Obviously, as the process has already started. Key socialist principles have been set aside to secure that Respect can attract support. Given that Respect does well in areas with large Muslim communities and it explicitly sees itself as a popular front between these and “the left”, this means that its programme and policies are tied to the Mosque hierarchies. Go too far to the left and support could disappear. As such, can Respect withstand the contradictory forces within it? What will the SWP hierarchy be prepared to sacrifice to ensure that it “wins”? If history is anything to go by, quite a lot.

What about history?

Now the task of the SWP is to broaden Respect’s scope and *“become fighters for social justice right across the board, offering people hope in the fight for a better world.”* Given the relative successes of the last election, the SWP’s turn towards building a reformist electoral front will continue. We have been here before. One hundred years ago, the standard Marxist line was that working class people should use “political action” to create socialism. That specific tactic quickly proved Bakunin right. The Marxist social democratic parties quickly became

onto Blair, a situation can easily arise of Blairism without Blair and, particularly if the Tories are as repulsive as last election, a continuation of office (economic woes dependent).

Noting that Labour *“won 55 percent of the seats in the house of commons with the support of just 22 percent of the British electorate”* he notes that *“this may have important political consequences. It means that Blair’s claims to have a democratic mandate to force his policies through parliament ring very hollow.”* Last election Blair received just 25% support (to put these figures in context, this year’s result was the lowest figure Labour has received at any post-war election apart from 1983 when the figure was 20.6%). How does a drop of 3% have *“important political consequences”*? Blair never had a *“democratic mandate”* in the first place. Indeed, no recent government has ever had more than 50% of the vote. That people consider our system as democratic is precisely the kind of illusion which radicals standing in elections has helped bolster. The real issue is that even the most democratically elected government is still undemocratic as it gives power to a few politicians (and necessarily a state bureaucracy) rather than the people.

Rather than wonder how such discontent can be turned into **real** people power, Alex (being a member of a political party which now needs votes) ponders *“the critical question,”* namely *“which political force will benefit from this vulnerability.”* Like Blair, he raises the Tory bogey man saying that just because they *“failed this time ... that doesn’t mean they can be discounted forever.”* But hope is at hand, *“it doesn’t have to be like this. In May 2005, the pendulum failed to swing back to the Tories. It swung left instead. This can happen again.”*

Sadly, he focuses on elections and parties rather than discussing how to increase class autonomy or militancy. This is to be expected, given the role of the party in Leninist theory and the natural role of electioneering on placing the focus onto leaders and parties rather than on working class people themselves. The Liberal Democrats, he argues, *“are unlikely to be*

the main beneficiary of any such swing left” as the actions of the party leadership “*suggests that their next move will be rightwards in order to win over Tory voters.*” Perhaps, but such is the logic of electioneering. This “*leaves Respect very well placed as the main challenger to the left of Labour.*” He quotes the “*leading election expert John Curtice*” as follows: “*Apart from George Galloway’s success, candidates of the anti-war Respect party won 6.9 percent of the vote, easily the best performance by a far-left party in British electoral history.*”

What is Respect?

Not that Respect is “*far-left,*” of course. That is one of its problems and a fatal flaw in the SWP’s analysis. While Alex tries to portray Respect’s victory as a one for the revolution, the obvious fact is that it was a victory (at best) for warmed over social democracy. A clear socialist platform was explicitly eschewed by the SWP leadership in order to gain as much support (i.e. votes) as possible. As such, the vote for Respect was a victory for (at best) old Labour values, not any new form of socialist movement. And as the aim of electioneering is to bolster that vision, any victory for Respect does not mean progress for genuine socialist ideas. Quite the reverse, as they are (yet again) linked with reformist ideology and centralised party leaderships acting for people.

Our comrade notes that people like Arthur Scargill, Tony Benn and Ken Livingstone “*were attacked when they were a threat*” as they expressed the power of the left. Of course, he places Galloway in that company: “*Galloway’s victory in Bethnal Green & Bow symbolises the power of the new left that came out of the anti-war movement.*” No, Galloway’s victory represents a specific set of circumstances which will be hard pressed to repeat elsewhere. His campaigners portrayed him as a defender of Muslims. He himself did nothing to contradict this

while arguing that the Labour Party left him, not vice versa. In other words, he stood on an old-fashioned Labour platform and values and, as such, while a break from the Labour Party it is hardly a break with Labourism.

Moreover, the attempts to get the anti-war movement into the ballot box is a sign not of its strength, but of its weakness. Like marching from A to B, voting will not stop war. Only direct action can. Consequently, rather than express the “*power*” of the movement, Galloway’s election shows its weakness. It is dependent on others to act for it as it is in no position to act for itself.

Looking at the (non-Galloway) Respect result, the SWP has little to be happy about. If we ignore those areas with a large Muslim community, then Respect’s performance is the usual 0–2% “*far-left*” parties usually get. Of Respect’s 26 candidates, 6 came at the bottom of the poll and another 9 came near the bottom (with the usual less than 1 or 2 percentage, in the main). Four, however, got between 5% and 10%, two more than 15%, two more than 20% and Galloway on over 35%. The question is, of course, whether RESPECT can gather votes outside of areas with large Muslim communities. On these results, the answer may well be no even with these areas as a base.

Callinicos implicitly acknowledges this issue by noting “*Respect has to broaden out geographically*” and “*beyond the war to take up all the issues that affect working class people in Britain.*” One area of expansion could be into Scotland. Currently the SWP are part of the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), whose vote imploded. They got around 60% of the vote they got in 2001 (a drop of 1.2% from 3.1% to 1.9% of the vote). This is, in part, explained by the SSP being wracked by internal problems and looking inwards for a year. However, will the SWP hierarchy try to take advantage of this and decide that it is time to launch Respect north of the border based on their “*success*” down south? Perhaps — they have nothing to lose as the SWP faction in the SSP is hardly popular to begin with and splitting