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Liverpool, Local Elections, Low Turnout

Burn Shit

May 15, 2012

Last week, Tony Mulhearn, of the Trade Union and Socialist Coalition, polled 4.8% of the vote in Liverpool's mayoral election. *The Guardian* told us that, 'The result marks a clear political shift in the political makeup of the city, with Tony Mulhearn, who along with Derek Hatton led the city's resistance to Margaret Thatcher, getting less than 5% of the vote...' as if the poll somehow reveals a more mature Liverpool, grown-up from its rebellious adolescent phase and shuffled back into the politics of the centre with a shiny new city centre mall, a Capital of Culture win and its tail between its legs.

From 1983 to 1987, Liverpool was run by Militant Tendency entryists in the District Labour Party. While we're no cheerleaders for the vanguardist politics of the Trotskyist left, the modern day lickspittle Labour Party should take note as they 'hold their noses' and full of regret and with painful sorrow, vote through local budget cuts on behalf of the Conservative-Liberal coalition. When Newham council recently sought to move 500 families 170 miles north to Stoke, apparently for lack of funds left over for housing, this was not part of a sinister

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Tory social cleansing plot – it was far worse – the policy of a *Labour* council. No doubt there was more than a little pre-election cloak-and-dagger maneuverings from Labour’s media and campaign strategists lurking beneath this whole despicable episode: Float a bad policy, leak the story, blame the Tories in a Tuckeresque manipulation.

The Liverpool Labour party of the 80s refused to carry through cuts and instead opted to set an illegal ‘needs budget’ to finance their massive social housing drive. They scrapped 1200 redundancies planned by the previous administration and creating 1000 new council jobs, as well as building new sports centres, nurseries and parks. This in a city that two years before had seen perhaps the most devastating riots in living memory in one of the most deprived areas in Europe by any social indicator.

Notwithstanding the usual pitfalls of Trot realpolitik, the Liverpool Council of the 80s maintained a deliberate policy of non-compliance with Tory attacks on working people – a far cry from the tacit approval of today’s Labour party for the Cameron-Clegg swindle. With all their lamentation and phony disdain, Labour councils today implement the central government’s Thatcherite reforms with a small whimper of protest.

Where are the glimmers of hope? The lefty old-timer George Galloway won his Bradford by-election, so at least we can be comforted by the fact that Britain’s most lovable Ba’athist, demagogue and Hamas lobbyist now sits in the commons. In Liverpool, the TUSC won more votes than the Conservatives, who have long been relegated to the status of a fringe party in this solidly working class city. And the far-right nationalists who stood; BNP, English Democrats, the National Front with Peter Tierney the New Age Nazi, pulled less votes combined than the TUSC, no doubt in part due to the street presence and organising of Liverpool’s antifascists who have frustrated the far-right’s efforts at every turn. This is not an endorsement of electoral socialism or the statist left, but if we have to find consola-

tion somewhere, then why not that more people felt compelled to support a 'revolutionary socialist' than three fascist thugs and a party in government? But we know electoral politics is a dead end.

Some have linked the nationwide low turnout to an all-round rejection of party politics in whatever form. There may be some truth in this – the 'none of the above' party has consistently won every local and European election for a long time. However, the abysmal showing at polling stations is not matched by an increase in other forms of political mobilisation. Near-universal apathy (or even anger) does not correlate to an escalation in resistance or a heightened state of political awareness. People do not register consent in polling stations, but nor do they register dissent in the streets. Should we be enthused and parade as some sort of perverse victory the fact that only 30% of people voted last week? The "None of the Above" party wins again by a landslide! Excellent. The people of Britain voiced their anger by staying at home and scrolling down facebook newsfeeds, for they know that their dreams can never be realised at the ballot box. Their non-attendance is a bloody nose for the political establishment! A sign that no-one has faith in the spectacle of representative politics! Of course! It is an awakening of class consciousness!

Let's not get ahead of ourselves. There is no trust in the political aristocracy or established parties. The poorly-disguised collusion and overlap between the political classes and business and media moguls equals a total breakdown in respect for 'our betters' in the Palace of Westminster, but not in an awareness of an alternative to representative government or the growth of a movement to establish alternative structures of power. Before we start prematurely declaring that 70% of people (those who didn't vote) endorse an anti-authoritarian politics, the widespread frustration and disgruntlement needs to be translated into visible and organised resistance on the streets, in the workplace and in communities.

Although it's not to be recommended, voting is only a small hypocrisy when compared with the countless compromises we make on a daily basis. The idea that we can somehow embody a set of communist principles by boycotting an election, buying Fair Trade, offsetting our carbon emissions and wearing hemp hoodies is a complete fallacy. It's impossible to be 'ethical' or consistent when capitalism has established itself as *The* axiomatic and ubiquitous machine, demanding participation at all ends of the earth. "Don't Vote, Organise!" is still the watchword of the anarchists when it comes to election time – and so it should be – but it is ridiculous to celebrate the fulfillment of the "Don't Vote", when it isn't accompanied by the operative part... "Organise."

And while we're waiting for the negation of state power by the federated people's councils and assemblies (don't hold your breath), do we hold our noses and vote for the least worst option? It's of little consequence whether people do or don't. But now there is no 'radical left' tendency in the Labour Party. Some of the old tankies in the CPB, Socialist Party (old Militant Tendency), CPGB and the heebiejeebies talk of 'reclaiming the Labour Party' – as if nostalgic for a era when Labour once was a party of *labour* rather than, at best, a very bourgeois band of social-democratic reformers and Keynesians.

The Dennis Skinners, John McDonnells or Michael Meachers of this world can do little but bluster from the backbenches, sounding off with accustomed and habitual taunts about posh boys and coked-up bankers, becoming part of the furniture as the awkward squad, patronisingly cherished by the front-benchers on both sides of the house as well-respected and honourable members. Even the Greens, in areas where they are part of local council coalitions, have a habit of voting through Conservative policy. The Militant Tendency of the 1980s eventually collapsed – ejected from the Labour Party conference after 'tactically sacking' every public sector worker in Liverpool in an ill-judged game of bluff over the

central government rebate. Militant's incumbent parliamentary candidate, Terry Fields, 'the MP on a workers' wage', having been expelled from the Labour Party, lost at the 1992 election – perhaps the city sided with Labour for fear of a Tory win nationally, or maybe they were just sick of the Trotskyist posturing. Leading Militant and full time Comrade, Derek Hatton, went on to feather his own nest as a media personality, businessman and professional arsehole. What else did we expect? He's a politician. Just like the rest of them.