

Debate : Building broad anti-capitalist parties

The European elections and the anti-capitalist left

Sunday 11 June 2006, by [SMITH Murray](#) (Date first published: 2005).

Following on the recent European elections, leading SWP member Alex Callinicos has written an article entitled, “The European radical left tested electorally”.* The article is interesting from two points of view. In the first place, for what it has to say about the experience of for Respect and the lessons the SWP draws from it. Secondly, for the way it approaches the “broader strategic issues” concerning the radical left in Europe.

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Callinicos writes that “it may be useful to explain why the SWP has chosen to pursue the strategy represented by Respect - not, to repeat, because it constitutes a universal model and certainly not because it is above criticism, but because the strategic analysis may have a bearing on other cases”. I will come back to this “strategic analysis” and the question of “models”.

Respect

But first of all, credit where credit is due. Respect is the most encouraging development on the English left for a long time. The overall national result it obtained, 1.7 per cent, is modest, though actually not much more modest than the early electoral results of, for example, the SSP or the Portuguese Left Bloc. But there were some very impressive results in inner-city working-class areas, in particular but not only in London and Birmingham. And following on the experience of the anti-war movement, Respect has succeeded in appealing to and involving sectors of the Muslim population. This is not only a new and welcome development in England; it is all too rare in Europe. All those involved in building Respect deserve the credit for its performance. And since the SWP is the main political force involved, it must take a large part of the credit.

The question of building a radical anti-capitalist party in Britain has been posed at least since the arrival of Blair as leader of the Labour Party and the invention of New Labour in 1994. Outside of Scotland, progress has been slow and opportunities have been missed. The SLP failed to realise its

potential of becoming a broad socialist party, essentially because of Arthur Scargill's authoritarian conception of the party and in particular his stubborn refusal of pluralism. Subsequently, having launched the Socialist Alliances, the Socialist Party proved unable to develop them as broad formations and with one or two local exceptions left them to vegetate. The SWP took them up in 2000-2001 and a national framework was established. Some encouraging electoral results were obtained. Alex Callinicos's essentially "objectivist" reasons for the failure of the Socialist Alliance are unconvincing. Of course, it is clear that the potential for Respect today is greater than the perspective was for the SA three or four years ago, because Respect emerged from the most massive anti-war movement Britain has ever seen. But the Alliance could have been built in the course of that movement, and the decision not to do so was a conscious one on the part of the SWP. [1]

However, that is past. The task now is to develop Respect from what must be considered very promising beginnings. That will depend not only on hard work on the ground but on the political and organisational perspectives that Respect adopts. There is obviously no blueprint. Respect has to find its own way forward. Certainly in the formative period its organisational forms will have to be flexible. But without forcing the pace, the question of developing its political programme will be posed. Here the terminology that Alex Callinicos uses is striking. In a brief postscript to his article he explains the concepts he has used. He makes a distinction between the "radical left" and the "revolutionary left". The term "radical left" "refers to forces that actively identify with resistance to neo-liberalism and imperialist war and that seek to develop an alternative to 'social-liberalism'". "Revolutionary left" on the other hand, "refers to those organisations and currents - in Europe today almost exclusively Trotskyist - that are committed to socialist revolution". He explains that the revolutionary left, represented by organisations such as the SWP and the LCR, is a "component of the radical left".

Anti-capitalism and anti-liberalism

What is so striking about these definitions is what is missing. There is no mention of the "anti-capitalist left". It is however in the Conferences of the European Anti-capitalist Left that the SWP, the SA and now Respect have participated since 2000. It is not a question of nit picking over terminological definitions. As a matter of fact I tend to use "radical left" and anti-capitalist left" interchangeably. But there is a real differentiation on the European left between political programmes and organisations that are anti-capitalist/socialist and those that are simply anti-liberal. Callinicos's definition of the revolutionary left is uncontroversial, factual. However his definition of the "radical left" would cover - and in France certainly does cover - forces who specifically reject the idea of building a party on an anti-capitalist programme. Indeed in the current debate in the LCR what Callinicos calls its "right wing" is often accused of counter-posing an "anti-liberal party" to an "anti-capitalist party" and of choosing its partners on the ex-plural left accordingly. [2] Politically, what is involved is the difference between having a perspective, perfectly illusory, of going back to a more humane, less liberal capitalism, and posing the question of a socialist alternative. This is no mere ideological abstraction. In France it largely determines how you relate to the dominant social-liberal Socialist Party.

In the two articles by Stathis Kouvelakis, which I will come back to, he takes up the question of the "two lefts". [3] This may seem somewhat obscure to people outside France. The majority of the LCR argues that you cannot just talk about the "left" in France today because there are in fact two lefts - the social-liberal left (essentially the Socialist Party and a part of the Greens) and the radical/anti-capitalist left. That is contested by what Kouvelakis, like Alex Callinicos, calls the "right wing" of the LCR, who say there is only one left and that we have to shift the lines of force within it. Kouvelakis basically agrees with them about that, though he doesn't endorse their general political line. Some

comrades even say that there is a “third left” which is neither anti-capitalist nor social-liberal, but is or claims to be anti-liberal. Now this left certainly exists - the Communist Party, some of the Greens, left currents in the Socialist Party. But the principal advantage of identifying it is to show that it has in fact no independent existence.

The radical anti-capitalist left - which is much broader than the “revolutionary left” - has a certain political coherence. It potentially represents a political alternative to social-liberalism. For the moment its inability to appear as a structured political force severely limits this potential. The social-liberal “left” also has a coherence; when in government, it applies neo-liberal policies with as much of a social veneer as is deemed necessary and possible. The anti-liberal left basically argues that you can oppose neo-liberalism without opposing capitalism. They explain that you do this by “getting your hands in the engine”, by going into government with the Socialist Party to influence its policies in an anti-liberal sense. They denounce the revolutionary left, and in particular the LCR, for not assuming its responsibilities and thus limiting itself to “protest politics”. This line of participation or not in social-liberal governments is a decisive dividing line on the French left. As Stathis Kouvelakis brings out, it is the fault line along which the best elements of the PCF could be won to an anti-capitalist perspective - although he also underlines the complexity of this task.

This “anti-liberal” left went into the Jospin government aiming to be a counterbalance to neo-liberalism and quickly ended up by being simply a left cover for it, and a more and more threadbare one at that. They simply shared in the shipwreck of the plural left in 2002 and many of their supporters voted Besancenot or Laguiller. They pursued the same policy in the regional elections in March and were rewarded by becoming junior partners of the SP in regional governments. They now have their eyes fixed on the perspective of a new version of the plural left government in 2007. From the point of view of the SP leadership the “plural left” operation does not just provide some extra votes in Parliament. It simultaneously provides a left cover and makes the forces to its left who fall into the trap share the discredit its policies entail, thus preventing them from appearing as an alternative. This is precisely the danger that threatens the PRC in Italy if it goes into government with the centre-left.

Of course, simply defining yourself as anti-capitalist is no guarantee against opportunism. The PRC would define itself as anti-capitalist. It is not enough to say you are anti-capitalist, it is also a question of your political practice and of your independence in relation to social-liberalism. But opposition to neo-liberalism and war is not sufficient to build what the SWP correctly defines as the aim of Respect - to build a mass alternative to New Labour. For that it is necessary to develop what Kouvelakis calls the “politics of mass anti-capitalism” or as the SSP puts it, to “rehabilitate socialism”. It is not a question of artificially imposing political norms on a developing movement. Alex Callinicos writes that the programme of Respect “is not an explicitly socialist, let alone a revolutionary programme”. I would say that its programme is implicitly socialist, a good starting-point. It covers a wide range of specific issues and includes more general objectives such as “a Europe based on need not profit. A Europe which is a clear alternative to global capital”. The point however is not where Respect is at this relatively early point in time. The point is where it is going.

Respect is indeed as Alex Callinicos says “a work in progress” and given its origins in the anti-war movement and its diversity it would be foolish to criticise it for not being explicitly socialist from the start. Even more obviously, it is clear that the extremely important development that is under way towards a new party in Germany is likely to start from quite minimal bases and that we have to proceed from that reality and not from abstract schemas. The new formations of the radical left will be products of the real situation in their countries and the political and social forces that give birth to them. How developed their programmes will be, how quickly they structure themselves, will depend on many things, on political events, the level of class struggle, the strength or weakness of the revolutionary left, its sectarianism or lack of it, the presence of significant currents from

reformist parties.

These formations can and will develop politically as they are led by their activity and the challenges of the class struggle to confront and resolve political problems. Alex Callinicos seems to recognise this when he says that “the programmatic stance of Respect...will evolve and become more specific in response to specific challenges”. Which is pretty much the way the SSP developed, indeed how real living parties do develop. In the case of the SSP, although it was explicitly socialist from the start, its programme is certainly much more developed now than it was five years ago.

New political formations can start with quite limited programmes and develop more solid ones through common activity and discussions. That is, of course, provided that no artificial ceiling is put on the process, that no brakes are applied. If Respect remains a loose coalition with minimal politics it will fail to realise its real and considerable potential. Alex Callinicos makes a distinction between the model of Respect and the “model” of the SSP - an example of a broad socialist party. Now if he is describing the present reality, that is one thing. If he is theorising this distinction, that’s another. And in spite of his repeated denials that Respect is being presented as a universal models, there does seem to be a certain amount of theorising of it, particularly when he refers to “the strategic analysis” behind Respect.

The SSP is widely seen as one of the most successful new parties in Europe and as such it has attracted some attention. The SWP leadership has always seemed to have some difficulty with that. There is often a marked tendency to reduce the success of the SSP to its electoral results. Perhaps the SWP think that the SSP has many faults. Perhaps they think they can do better. Perhaps the party that will be built in England will be different from the SSP, perhaps it will be better. [4] But if the perspective is not to build a broad socialist party, then what on earth is it? To remain as a loose coalition? As Daniel Bensaïd has written: “A politics without parties (whatever name - movement, organisation, league, party - that they are given) ends up in most cases as a politics without politics”. [5] It is not unreasonable to ask: for the SWP leadership, does Respect represent a particular tactic for building a broad socialist party, or does it represent an alternative to such a party?

The Australian Socialist Alliance

The example of Australia is perhaps worth quoting here. In issues 3 and 4 of the IST bulletin there was a polemical exchange between David Glanz of the ISO (Australian IST group) and Doug Lorimer of the DSP. [6] From a British perspective the case of Australia is not without interest - an advanced capitalist country with a Labour Party in which the trade unions play a key role. The article by David Glanz is a general broadside against the DSP and as such ranges far and wide. It includes for example the question of permanent revolution, on which I do not agree with the DSP. [7] However the main thrust of Glanz’s article is to attack the DSP’s approach to regroupment and the building of new parties. On these questions I am very largely in agreement with the DSP and with Doug Lorimer’s reply to David Glanz.

The DSP has made a considerable contribution to international regroupment through the work it has done with new and not so new parties in the Asia-Pacific region. But over the last three years they have also been engaged in building the Socialist Alliance in Australia. As the Alliance has developed it is the ISO and the other smaller groups that have tended to act as a brake on taking it from being a loose, primarily electoral coalition towards being what is now its avowed aim, a multi-tendency socialist party. [8] It is the DSP and the majority of the independents, trade unionists and others, who have taken this project forward. The idea, defended by Glanz, that the DSP wants to reduce the Alliance to a far-left group can hardly be taken seriously by anyone who reads their press and documents. They want to develop the influence of revolutionary Marxism within the Alliance, which

is perfectly normal, without forcing the pace, and their ultimate objective is a united revolutionary party. The attitude of the ISO appears to be motivated by two considerations. In the first place, to keep the Alliance organisationally loose in the name of the autonomous action of “an independent revolutionary party” i.e. themselves. And to keep the political content relatively low in order to attract Old Labour supporters. Their continuing refusal of the perspective of a broad anti-capitalist party is not an encouraging example.

Alex Callinicos writes of “building Respect, but also building the SWP - as part of Respect and as a means of making it more effective”. There is clearly no problem about the principle of the SWP maintaining its own identity within Respect and making sure that “a strong revolutionary Marxist voice is heard”. How it works out in practice may be another matter. Alan Thornett warned before the elections of the danger that the “SWP conception would mean carrying on in the old way” and vividly described how the SWP tends to swamp any major event with its own presence and material. [9] That is hardly compatible with “building Respect(...) and making it more effective”.

Respect is now faced with the task of developing its structures and having perspectives other than simply electoral. That means building through campaigning activity and not just keeping it ticking over from one by-election to another or till next year’s probable General Election. From that point of view the signs are encouraging. It seems clear that there is a will to continue building Respect and that this is shared by most of its components, including the SWP. It also seems clear that it is not simply envisaged as an electoral alliance. That comes across not only in the press of the SWP, but from reports of local Respect meetings since the June elections. Not being just an electoral coalition is one aspect of taking Respect forward. Establishing solid local branches and democratic structures from top to bottom is another. This is not incompatible with the need to develop new and innovative ways of reaching out to a wider audience, as Respect has done in the recent election campaigns. But the members of Respect have to be able to democratically control their organisation and determine its policies.

The third aspect concerns developing the programme of Respect. Now for the moment this aspect does not seem to be stressed by the SWP. Perhaps that’s just an impression. It is developed by other members of Respect. National Respect chair Nick Wrack explains that “we have to continue developing our political programme”. Ken Loach considers that “we cannot build a new party just on activism and electoral work, we need to build its political platform, get it organised”. Alan Thornett has argued the same case in detail both before and after the election. [10]

Alex Callinicos describes the SSP as “tightly controlled by the far-left grouping that created it”. The grouping in question is the International Socialist Movement (although it didn’t create the SSP on its own) and for those who know how the SSP works the idea that the ISM “tightly controls” the party will produce some amusement. Any influence the ISM and its members have is due to the strength of their arguments and to their credibility in the party, not to any “tight control”. Describing the SSP as “a successful parliamentary party with a broad socialist platform” is closer to the mark. Except of course that it is not primarily a parliamentary party. As Callinicos also says, the SSP has succeeded in “creatively combining community and electoral politics”. But the former predominates. And isn’t that what Respect should be aiming to become - at its own rhythm - a successful party with a broad socialist platform that creatively combines community (and class struggle) and electoral politics? Ken Loach poses the question, “Will it be left social democratic or Marxist?” I would say neither the one nor the other. The influence of Marxism will be strong, because many of Respect’s active members, SWP and others, are Marxists and hopefully they will spread the influence of Marxism. But to define Respect as Marxist would be to exclude those many present and future members who aren’t. Left social-democratic? There will be people who define themselves as “left Labour” or “Old Labour”, which is not a problem. But the real trap to avoid is of trying to recreate the Labour Party. The answer to New Labour is neither to try to go back to Old Labour, nor to go back to the old far

left, but to go forward to a new socialist party whose members will define its project together by discussion and action.

Alex Callinicos writes of Respect that “the programme, while principled, is relatively minimal, meaning that Respect is a pluralistic organisation in which diverse viewpoints coexist”. Elsewhere in the article, he says that Respect is “a pluralistic coalition rather than a unitary party”. Now it is an excellent thing that Respect is pluralist, it is a fact that for the moment it is a coalition with a limited programme. But what we are faced with in Europe (and not only in Europe - Callinicos aptly mentions Brazil) is to build pluralist parties on bases that are not minimal. Parties like the PRC, the SSP, the Portuguese Left Bloc, the Danish Red-Green Alliance in Europe and the P-SOL in Brazil are both pluralist and unitary. [11] And they have a developed programme because you cannot build a coherent political force without one. Now in Alex Callinicos’s discussion of Respect not only the word but the concept of “party” is entirely absent. Is this what he means when he talks about “the strategy represented by Respect” and the “strategic analysis”? Once again, is Respect being presented as another way to build a party or as a lasting alternative to a party?

Muslims

The impact that Respect has had among Muslim and immigrant communities represents a huge step forward. There is nothing to disagree with in what Alex Callinicos says there. The question of “(winning) the support of a working class that in the inner cities at least, is increasingly diverse in its colours, national origins, and religious beliefs” is one that confronts socialists not just in Britain but in just about every country of Europe. In most of them a great deal remains to be done. In France the gulf between the left and immigrant communities is considerable, a situation not helped by prevailing attitudes among many on the left to the affirmation of minority identities, especially when they are expressed through religion. There are historical reasons which explain but do not excuse the attitudes of a large part of the French left towards Islam and religion in general. It is perhaps not too much to hope that the success of Respect among Muslims in Britain might encourage some on the French left to rethink their attitudes.

Lutte Ouvrière’s position of support for the law banning the hijab in schools is of course a disgrace. On International Women’s Day (!) Arlette Laguiller demonstrated alongside not only representatives of the Socialist Party who supported the law, but also a minister in the right-wing government that has imposed it. It now appears that LO is preparing to oversee the application of the law when schools start up again in September, in an unholy alliance with sectors of the reformist left. What Alex Callinicos calls the “national reformism that is still very strong on the left wing of the French workers’ movement” is not infrequently combined with a more or less marked French chauvinism. LO’s fundamentally sectarian attitude towards religion draws it into an alliance with forces of which under just about any other circumstances it is severely critical. Unlike LO, the LCR has taken a position against the law, though the majority position does not rule out exclusions. The PCF and the Greens have also come out against the law. But none of these organisations has conducted any campaign against it.

The European elections

Callinicos starts his remarks on the European elections by saying that “in many countries the radical left did worse in the elections to the European Parliament in June 2004 than it did in 1999”. I would question that judgement. The 1999 European elections (and some national elections around the same time) saw the emergence of the radical left for the first time as a serious political force in a

number of countries. There were exceptions, and important ones, like England and Germany. But progress was made in France, Scotland, Portugal, Italy, Luxembourg and Holland.

Although less spectacular, the results of the radical left in 2004 do not actually show that in “many countries” it did worse than in 1999. First of all, how do we define the radical left? Let’s take as a criterion organisations that are members of the European Anti-Capitalist Left, or have been observers at its conferences. That covers practically all of the organisations that are neither social-democratic nor unreconstructed Stalinist. Callinicos quotes the three countries where such parties or alliances lost ground - France, Spain and Greece. Let’s leave aside France for the moment. As far as Spain is concerned, the reasons clearly lie in the now chronic crisis of the United Left (IU). Already in the European elections of 1999 IU had lost half of its votes compared to the previous elections and it repeated the feat this time round. The fundamental cause is its inability to emerge as a force independent of the social-liberal PSOE. The article in the same issue of the IST bulletin by the comrades of En Lucha (the Spanish IST group) goes into this in some detail. A further point to be made is that in an election where one of the issues was to combat the projected adoption of a neo-liberal constitution for the EU, the United Left was actually in favour of it. Synaspismos in Greece appears to be in a process of mutation that makes it difficult to draw too many conclusions.

Callinicos quotes the Italian PRC as “the most important exception”. The PRC did indeed go from 4.3 per cent to 6.1 per cent and from 4 to 5 MEPs. The only other exception he actually mentions is Respect. But there were other good results. [12] In Holland the Socialist Party went from 5 per cent to 7 per cent and from one to two seats. In Portugal the Left Bloc, which was only launched in 1999 but has since made steady progress in every election and has now three MPs, won 4.92 per cent, its best ever result, and now has its first MEP. The Bloc is now a serious challenger to the Portuguese CP in that party’s working-class strongholds. In Scotland the SSP went from 4 per cent in 1999 to 5.2 per cent. That’s less than in last year’s Scottish elections but more than in the last British General election. And there is of course the emergence and success of Respect. Even in Austria, not exactly a storm centre of the class struggle in recent decades, but where the biggest mobilisation in fifty years took place last year over pensions, a new radical left regroupment “Linke” involving forces from the CP and the revolutionary left made its first modest electoral foray. Overall, the radical left isn’t doing too badly.

Models and examples

Let’s look at the question of models in relation to the anti-capitalist left in Europe. The SSP is often accused of seeing itself as a model, or as Alex puts it “a paradigm to be copied elsewhere”. If there is a “model” or “paradigm” for the radical left it is to build parties that are anti-capitalist and pluralist, i.e. that are different from social democracy and Stalinism. And that are also different from the traditional far-left organisations in that they are broader, both politically and in their social base. That is, they take on board all those who want to fight back without imposing an ideological entry examination and they seek to conquer the space that has been abandoned by the reformists. Within this “model” there are examples, each of which arises out of national conditions and the political choices of those involved. Just to take these two examples, among the founding group of the EACL, the SSP and the Left Bloc are positive examples in the sense that they are already parties and quite successful ones. Neither the SSP nor any other national example is a model in the sense that you can say, “this is how to do it, there is no other way, just copy us”. Of course, successful examples in one country can be encouraging. Although Callinicos and other representatives of the SWP often seem to go to considerable lengths to distance themselves from the example of the SSP, its example has inspired people in a number of countries, including in England.

It is fundamentally the evolution, however you define it, of the social-democratic parties that is creating the opportunities for the radical left. It is the crisis of these parties, and between these parties and their social base that is creating a space for new parties to emerge. Not in the immediate future for mass revolutionary parties, but certainly for significant anti-capitalist formations. Alex Callinicos is right to say that this does not have to take place as the result of catastrophic splits, and in fact in the present period that is the exception rather than the rule. Callinicos uses the metaphor of the iceberg melting in relation to the Labour Party. One could also speak of these parties crumbling. Sometimes the bits that crumble off are very small, sometimes only individuals, sometimes larger groups break off.

But it is not simply a question of existing members of these parties leaving to join a new party. That will be one aspect of it. But the reality of most of the reformist parties is that over the last period, while more or less retaining their electoral base, they have steadily lost many of their active members. Many of these ex-members will be attracted by new parties. But there will also be many people, especially young people, the kind of people who would probably have been members of the Labour Party and similar parties twenty years ago but who were not attracted by New Labour and its equivalents in Europe. The experience of the SSP, the Left Bloc and the Red Green Alliance in Denmark is not only that new members quickly outnumbered the combined forces of the groups that came together to launch those parties, but that most of these new members were new to organised politics. That is even to some extent true of the PRC, where much of the present membership was never in the old PCI, though the percentage is certainly higher in the leading bodies.

Alex Callinicos also writes: "had substantial ex-Labour Party members joined, the SA would have had two poles, reformist and revolutionary". Now why should that be so? If people come together on the basis of anti-capitalism, or even in the first instance of opposition to neo-liberalism and war, why should there be "poles"? There will certainly be debate but there is no reason to think it will be polarised between revolutionaries and reformists. Callinicos talks about the need for revolutionaries to respond to "concrete forms of actual movements, not the abstractions they form in their heads". I think the idea of an inevitable polarisation between revolutionaries and reformists in the new political formations that are emerging is something of an abstraction. In the first place I think we would all agree that revolution is not immediately on the agenda - but a multitude of campaigns and struggles is. In the second place people evolve. In the present period many members and supporters of the Labour Party and similar parties do not start by breaking from reformism. It is rather the case that the reformist parties have broken with them by abandoning the defence of past reforms and the perspective of new ones and adopting the neo-liberal agenda. But these disillusioned members do not stand still. To think that they will just form a reformist pole seems a rather static view. Thinking about what has happened to the parties they supported, and having to fight to win reforms, or even just push back attacks, by class struggle methods is likely to make them evolve leftwards. How they develop depends also on how revolutionaries intervene. Revolutionaries who find themselves in a broad party will also have to evolve, not in the sense of abandoning their revolutionary politics but of sloughing off what is narrow, doctrinaire and routine in their political practice and discourse.

France - a model?

To go back to the question of models. The SSP is not a model to be followed to the letter but it is certainly an example of a new and successful anti-capitalist party. As far as building a force of the radical left, or even simply intervening in elections, is concerned, the LO-LCR electoral alliance in France is neither a model nor a positive example, but if anything a counter-model. This alliance was a reflection of the failure to build a broad anti-capitalist alliance or party, a temporary substitute for such a party, an expedient. In theory an LO-LCR axis could have been the launching pad for a new

party. That seemed to many people outside France a reasonable idea in 1999. It was certainly worth making the attempt. Callinicos says that “ideally an alliance with LO should act as a lever for dividing and disorganising the left of the ex-plural left and drawing some of its fragments along in the wake of the revolutionary left”. I’m not sure about the formulation, which seems to me a bit manipulative. But yes, ideally an LO-LCR axis should have been a pole of attraction for the best elements from the ex-plural left and particularly the Communist Party. Unfortunately “ideally” is the word. In the first place, LO is absolutely deaf to any idea of a broad radical anti-capitalist party. It’s the timeless “revolutionary communist party” or nothing.

Furthermore the conception that LO has of the party and indeed of socialism is anachronistic, sectarian and deeply unattractive to many on the left. It is clear that the image of this organisation was a factor in the bad election results, how big a factor is a subject of debate. Only a small minority of comrades in the LCR now see the road to a new party as via an alliance with LO. In passing, it has to be said that the comparison that Callinicos makes between LO and the old Militant is wide of the mark. Militant was strong in far-left terms and it was in some ways rigid. The SWP too has often appeared rigid. But neither of them is comparable to LO. It is impossible to imagine LO leading the struggle at Liverpool, or the poll tax campaign, or the anti-war movement. All far-left organisations have had some sectarian traits, some more than others, the product of being for a long time very much a minority in the working-class movement. In the new period, the best of them are trying to overcome that. With LO the traits of a sect appear to be so deeply ingrained as to be structural.

As far as an analysis of the failures of the LCR-LO lists in the regional and European elections is concerned, a wide-ranging debate has already begun in the LCR, and indeed beyond, and that will continue in the coming months. It would take much too long to go into that in detail here. But one or two comments. It is not really the case that LO and the LCR stood as “openly revolutionary socialist organisations” - neither in 2002 or in 2004. Of course they didn’t deny being revolutionary socialist organisations. And as Callinicos says, it is easier to talk about revolution in France than in most European countries. But the LCR-LO campaigns were run on radical anti-capitalist platforms, not so different from other countries. The nature of the platforms and the way the campaigns were run is also part of the present debate. Concerning the regional elections, some of the criticisms made by Stathis Kouvelakis are very pertinent. The two documents by him that are published in the bulletin raise important questions, and they circulated quite widely on the left in France after the March elections. Kouvelakis, though not a member of the LCR, in many ways situates himself within the framework of its debates. While he clearly expects nothing from LO, his criticism of the Ligue, though sometimes sharp, is constructive.

Kouvelakis says that the LCR “succumbed to the illusion of a de facto self-sufficiency, not of its organisation”, but that it had a “euphoric vision of a self-sufficient ‘radical left’”. He also talks of “a far left posing, either alone or as the dynamic component of a broader ‘radical left’ as an alternative to a governmental left”. In terms of posing an alternative to the governmental left - which is necessary - I think there is a big difference between the broader radical left and the existing far-left organisations. The problem after 2002, as indeed before, was that many comrades in the LCR saw the Ligue itself as self-sufficient, at least in the foreseeable future. The building of a broader anti-capitalist force, always affirmed, was constantly put off till the Greek calends for a variety of reasons, of which the famous “absence of partners” was only one. The need to act on the crisis of the Communist party was neglected, especially after the party’s debacle in 2002, when the PCF was practically written off as apolitical force. [13]

What produced a definite change was the movement of May-June last year, where the need for a broad anti-capitalist force was being raised by activists in the movement. That’s what ultimately led to the appeal of the LCR congress, which has been widely circulated internationally. Unfortunately this appeal remained de facto in cold storage for the duration of the two election campaigns. This

was not totally inevitable but it was certainly helped by the fact that the LCR came out of its congress and went straight into six months of joint campaigns with LO. The Ligue now finds itself in the situation where it will perhaps be less easy to take initiatives towards a new party, but all the more necessary.

Many elements have to be taken into consideration in order to explain the LCR-LO results in March and June. A now widely recognised failure to grasp the change in the political climate between the end of the May-June movement and the March elections, political weaknesses in the campaigns, the negative image of LO, the positioning in relation to the SP, will all be part of the debate. But one thing that seems clear is that the tactic of a bloc between two far-left organisations has outlived its shelf life. In 2002 many left-wing voters were looking for a way to punish the plural left, and voting for Laguiller and Besancenot was an option. In 2004, they are looking for a way to get rid of the right-wing government. That's why millions voted for the SP, many without illusions. But a certain number wanted also to express their distrust of the SP by voting for a force to its left that could pose as an alternative. From this point of view, the LCR-LO alliance had a credibility problem. Two organisations of a few thousand members cannot be an alternative, nor indeed represent the broader anti-capitalist left, the tens of thousands of activists who were the backbone of the May-June 2004 movement.

In most areas where the Communist Party stood on its own in March it won back part of the support it had lost in 2002. To do so it adopted a position of left opposition to the SP which was not always, for the mass of electors, easy to distinguish from the LO-LCR campaign. Kouvelakis gives some details and he correctly points out that the vote for the CP cannot be explained as a "tactical vote" i.e. simply a way of hitting back at the government, as the SP vote can. Many voters consciously chose to vote for the CP rather than for the LCR-LO lists as a way of expressing opposition to the left of the SP. The French CP is undoubtedly in long-term decline but it still represents a serious force, it is still a mass party, and as long as the radical left is incapable of appearing as a credible alternative (and acting on the political contradictions within the CP), it will have room for manoeuvre. In these elections, it took advantage of that.

In a kind of pernicious revenge of the dialectic, the country which in the post-1968 period had the strongest far-left organisations in Europe now seems to be having the greatest difficulty giving birth to a radical anti-capitalist party. The forces for such a party exist - it is impossible to explain the fact that things are moving forward just about everywhere but France simply by "objective" factors. The problem is political. And it is becoming more and more urgent to resolve it.

Social democracy

Alex Callinicos finishes on "two broader points". The first is the question of the "decay not disappearance" of social democracy". He criticises the "assumption (by the LCR) that the Socialist and Communist parties were in radical decline and had, in any case, gone decisively over to the side of the bourgeoisie" - the SSP having, according to him, a "more stark and one-sided" version of the same analysis. First of all, as I'm sure he would agree, the social democratic parties didn't have to go decisively over to the side of the bourgeoisie. That's where they've been since at least 1914. What they have done, and what is the source of their crisis, and of the disaffection of their social base, is to go over lock, stock and barrel to the neo-liberal agenda and in the process to destroy the gains of the post-1945 period with whose defence they had been associated. They haven't disappeared, they have changed. They won't actually disappear until they are replaced. Whether they have changed qualitatively is another question. The SWP often quote Lenin to explain that the Labour Party is a "bourgeois workers' party". He did say that; whether that definition is still appropriate is another matter. But Lenin also said, as Doug Lorimer quotes in his reply to David Glanz, that the Labour

Party was “a thoroughly bourgeois party”. And Trotsky wrote in relation to the German SPD that “the social democracy, though composed of workers, is entirely a bourgeois party”. [14]

In terms of whose class interests these parties represent, which is the essential question, those definitions are fundamental. The working class dimension of these bourgeois parties depends on the relationship of workers (as members or voters) to them. For many years workers considered these parties, which they had built, as theirs, and they joined them and voted for them. This relationship has changed over the years. So should the tactics of Marxists. At certain periods it was correct to vote for these parties and even to be members of them. There is no principle involved. To argue, as many Trotskyists still do, that we should vote for these parties on principle - or indeed that we should never under any circumstances vote for them - leads to a completely sterile debate.

Do the recent elections in Spain and France really show the “capacity of social-democratic parties(...) to rebuild working-class support in opposition by exploiting popular discontent with their conservative successors”. Well, it depends what you mean by “rebuilding working-class support”. If you mean that workers will sometimes be ready to vote for these parties against the right, yes of course they will. That’s what happened in France and Spain, and it will no doubt happen again until such times as a mass socialist alternative to these parties is built. But this electoral support for social democracy is much more fragile and volatile than previously. In France support for the Socialist Party has gone up and down like a yo-yo in every national election since 1981. And for example, the document of En Lucha points out that on the eve of the 2004 Spanish elections, up to three million former PSOE voters were intending not to vote and that Aznar’s lies about the bombings decided many of them to do so. A salutary reaction, perhaps, but hardly a sign of rebuilt positive support for the PSOE. And there is little evidence that from an organisational point of view the working-class base of these parties has been rebuilt. John Rees wrote recently that “the hold of Labourism over working people in this country is dissolving”. I think that is correct, and not only for Britain. Of course the process of dissolving the hold of social democracy will be prolonged. But it seems clear that the process is well and truly under way. And in spite of electoral ups and downs that are only ripples on the surface, I would argue that it is irreversible.

When the right is in power, workers can vote for the left parties. But when it is the left that is in power, the disaffection of its electorate can be expressed in several ways. By a vote for the radical left when it is present, by abstention, but also sometimes through a vote for parties that are not of the traditional right and that can appear more progressive than social democracy on certain questions. In Britain today, the Lib Dems are clearly the beneficiaries of this type of reaction. Such support is not likely to be lasting, but nor is the renewed support for social democracy in France and Spain.

Revolutionary left, radical left

The second point on which Callinicos concludes is the relationship between “the growth and development of the revolutionary left, on the one hand, and a broader reorganisation of the radical left, on the other”. He goes on to define the “dual task - making the radical left an increasingly powerful pole of attraction in British politics and building a stronger revolutionary left within it”. But the actual relationship between these two elements remains unclear. The very minimal definition of the “radical left” that he gives and the emphasis on Respect as a coalition could be interpreted as keeping Respect organisationally loose and politically limited in order not to obstruct the development of the SWP.

Alex Callinicos uses one of my favourite quotes from Lenin, “whoever expects a ‘pure’ social

revolution will never live to see it". One might add, "whoever expects a 'pure' revolutionary party will never live to see it". The Bolshevik Party certainly wasn't one, nor were any of the mass parties of the Third International. The building of revolutionary parties will come about not just from the growth of existing revolutionary groups but from the evolution of broader parties, an evolution on which these groups can have a key influence. In fact, in the building of new, radical, anti-capitalist parties there are two pitfalls to be avoided. The first is the danger of just being a kind of re-branded far-left group. That is what, as its first preference, the leadership of the CWI tried to convince its Scottish members to do. If they had succeeded the SSP would probably not exist today.

The second danger is much more serious. It is to see the radical left not as the beginnings of a mass alternative to social-liberalism, but as a kind of left pressure group on the traditional reformist parties. There is a strange reference in the En Lucha document to "the danger of becoming simply a left cover for the government instead of being a counterbalance that could force Zapatero to the left". Perhaps it's just a loose formulation, but the idea of forcing social-liberalism to the left is a dangerous illusion. Mass mobilisations can block its attacks, yes, but not force it to the left. The record of those in Europe who have tried to act as a left counterbalance to social-liberal domination rather than build a socialist alternative is not encouraging.

For decades small revolutionary groups defended the need to "build the revolutionary party". Some of them just reduced this perspective to the linear growth of their own group; some had a more dynamic view of splits and regroupments on the road to a mass party. But they generally had an idea of the future mass revolutionary party as really a bigger version of their own group. Today we are faced with the task of building broad formations while deepening their political content. Rosa Luxemburg posed the question very well a hundred years ago: "On the one hand, we have the mass; on the other, its historic goal, located outside of existing society. On one hand, we have the day-to-day struggle; on the other the social revolution. Such are the terms of the dialectical contradiction through which the socialist movement makes its way. It follows that this movement can best advance by tacking betwixt and between the two dangers by which it is constantly being threatened. One is the loss of its mass character; the other, the abandonment of its goal. One is the danger of sinking back into the condition of a sect: the other the danger of becoming a movement of bourgeois social reform". [15] Those are still the two dangers that threaten us, those are still the terms of the dialectical contradiction through which we must make our way.

Notes

* See on ESSF website: [The European Radical Left Tested Electorally](#)

[1] The balance sheet of the SA and the attitude of the SWP have been largely dealt with in the debate with John Rees of the SWP in recent issues of Frontline, International Socialism and Links.

[2] Not all of the partisans of this current within the LCR would accept this accusation. Precisely what these comrades are proposing is far from clear and I disagree with many of their positions. But it is more than a polemical exaggeration to talk of the "evident drift of Picquet's strategy towards liquidation into some version of (...) national reformism".

[3] Stathis Kouvelakis, "Some hypotheses on the reasons for a (not merely) electoral defeat" and "A new political cycle", in the same bulletin as Alex Callinicos's article.

[4] It has to be said that some of the SWP's criticisms of the SSP haven't aged very well. For example in an article written in the autumn of 2002, ("Regroupment and the socialist left today", published in issue 2 of the IST bulletin and in Links 23), Alex Callinicos criticises the SSP for counter-posing "bread and butter" issues to building the anti-war movement - a claim hardly borne

out by the following months, marked by the anti-war movement and the Scottish elections of May 2003, where the SSP clearly appeared as the anti-war party without neglecting “bread and butter issues. In the same article, Callinicos warns of the danger of the SSP finding itself in a situation of “unnecessary isolation from the organised working class in Scotland”. Given the subsequent affiliation to the SSP of the Scottish region of the RMT and the East of Scotland CWU and the number of FBU members who were SSP candidates in 2003, the least that can be said is that his fears were groundless.

[5] Daniel Bensaïd, “Leaps! Leaps! Leaps!”, *International Socialism* 95.

[6] David Glanz, “The Democratic Socialist Party and international realignment”; Doug Lorimer, “The Democratic Socialist Party: a response to David Glanz”.

[7] See the debate between Doug Lorimer and Phil Hearse in *Links* 16 and 17 (www.dsp.org.au/links).

[8] See Peter Boyle and Sue Bolton, “Australian Socialist Alliance takes a new step for left unity”, *Links* 24, September-December 2003.

[9] Alan Thornett, “The significance of Respect”, *Frontline* 13.

[10] See *Socialist Resistance* 17, Summer 2004.

[11] In spite of their names, both the Left Bloc and the Red-Green Alliance define themselves as parties.

[12] The July-August issue of the French-language FI magazine, *Inprecor*, contains much valuable information and analyses of the European elections, globally and country by country. Much of this has also been published in the English-language equivalent, *InternationalViewpoint*.

[13] See my article, “The LCR and the question of a workers’ party”, written just before the presidential elections in 2002 and published in issue 1 of the *IST bulletin*, accessible on the ISM web site.

[14] “What Next? Vital Questions for the German Proletariat”, in *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*, London, 1975, pp 122-123. This was written in January 1932, at a time when Trotsky was arguing for a united front between the Social Democrats and the Communists against Hitler.

[15] Rosa Luxemburg, “Organisational Questions of Social Democracy”, in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, ed. Mary-Alice Waters, New York, 1970. Quoted in Paul Le Blanc, “The revolutionary orientation of Rosa Luxemburg”, (accessible on www.marxsite.com).

P.S.

* From *International Viewpoint*. Taken from the *International Socialist Movement* website.