



A proposal for left unity

The letter below has been sent to SWP, SP, Left Unity, ISN, ACI, Counterfire, Socialist Resistance, Workers' Power, and Weekly Worker.

Hi comrades: We believe that the best way to get a good result from the current discussions about left unity would be to start talks for the establishment of a transitional organisation - a coalition of organisations and individuals, organised both nationally and in each locality, which worked together on advocating the main ideas of socialism, working-class struggle, democracy, and welfare provision; in support of working-class struggles; and in such campaigns as it could agree on (against bedroom tax? against cuts?), while also giving space to debate differences. We've written the explanation below, and invite your comment and response.

The political situation makes a strong case for left unity.

Since 2008 global capitalism has been lurching through a long depression, with some countries in outright slump, and no end in sight. Millions of workers have lost their jobs or their homes.

In 2008 even governments like George W Bush's in the USA felt obliged to impose large measures of "socialism" to avert chaos. It was socialism for the rich. Banks and insurance companies were nationalised, but left to bankers to run, on the same old criteria of private profit.

Taking control

Vast sums of public money and credit were poured into the financial system to "socialise losses", and governments have organised things since then to "privatise gains" yielded by the patches and flurries of economic recovery.

The economic tumult makes visible to all the need for social regulation of economic life; and also visible to all, the fact that the present system is regulated only in the interests of the wealthy.

The workings of capitalism itself are providing ample evidence why we need a different social regulation of economic life — a democratic social regulation exercised through public ownership of the main concentrations of productive wealth, workers'

control, and a thoroughgoing, flexible, responsive democracy in government.

But to go from evidence to conclusions requires argument. Argument in the teeth of the consensus which has dominated political life for the last two decades or more. Argument in defiance of the daily barrage from the mass media. And the argument requires people to argue it: socialists.

There are several thousand socialists and class-struggle anarchists active in Britain, quite a few in influential positions in trade unions. And yet advocacy for socialism is only a thin bleat in political life, often drowned out by the noise surrounding it.

Too much of our energy is absorbed in duplicated efforts, in unnecessary conflict, and in tawdry schemes and fronts which are supposed to provide short-cuts to socialism but in fact mostly serve competition between groups.

Consensus is not enough

This problem cannot be resolved by a flabby search for consensus — that is, by the left trying to find a few points we agree on and leaving all else aside. The whittled-down consensus policy will probably not be socialist in any coherent way. The Left Unity project launched by Andrew Burgin and Kate Hudson, and backed by Ken Loach, so far sets its basis only as being "against austerity and war", and the TUSC electoral front run by the Socialist Party and the SWP says little more to explain the "socialist" label in its name than that it is against cuts, against British troops being in Afghanistan, and for trade unions.

There are real differences between the different groupings on the left, about real and important issues. For the labour movement to be able to win socialism, we will need to thrash out those issues and develop a coherent strategy.

Transitional organisation

We need a framework which allows unity in action where we agree, and honest and serious debate where we disagree. The best way would be to establish a transitional organisation.

This would be a coalition of organisations and individuals, organised both nationally and in each locality, which worked together on advocating the main ideas of socialism, working-class struggle, democracy, and welfare provision; in support of working-class struggles; and in such campaigns as it could

agree on (against bedroom tax? against cuts?), while also giving space to debate differences.

It would have a newspaper, a website, and leaflets, based on the ideas its components agreed on, but would allow for debates in the newspaper and website, and for groupings within it to publish their own journals and websites.

It would deliberately allow its components to continue their own special activities — some in the Labour Party, and some not; some in this campaign, some in that — but also provide for debate on those choices.

It would seek links and practical political collaboration with anarchist and left libertarian groupings and individuals.

It would be “transitional”; it would recognise the aim of deepening the cooperation, and discussing through the differences, sufficiently to cohere into a fully-united, fully-coordinated party. In a fully-united party there would still be space for minorities to express themselves, including publicly; but there would be enough coherence for the party to have a defined, majority-agreed, adequately-discussed policy on every major question.

Dialogue based on joint work

That coherence would be impossible in the initial coalition. But many differences on the left today appear fixed and rigid in large part because there is no dialogue about them, only an occasional exchange of curses between hostile groups when we meet. Real discussion between activists engaged in joint work, and seeing the benefits of cooperation, could budge many of those differences.

Not all groupings would agree to join the initial coalition or “transitional” organisation. Not all who engaged in the “transitional” organisation would stay with it. But the cooperation and debate would be valuable even if they failed entirely in creating a fully-united party.

How it's been done or tried before

The British left has one great example of unity in its history, the bringing together of at least five major groupings previously at odds with each other, and many individuals and smaller groups, to form the then-revolutionary Communist Party in the early 1920s.

Not all the would-be revolutionary socialists joined the CP. It was at first a ramshackle organisation, quite different in tone and trend from one area to another. Significant numbers dropped away as it became fully unified. But then, for a while, until Stalinism killed it, it united almost all revolutionary socialists in coherent action, achieving much more with only a few thousand members than much bigger groups have at other times.

Other attempts in history “failed”, but after having made contributions. The First International in which Karl Marx was active in 1864-72 had its central organisation in Britain, and here it was a composite of socialistic or anarchistic exiles from other European countries; British socialist trends like the Owenites and O’Brienites; and cautious trade unionists, some of whom later became outright Liberals.

Between 1893 and 1897 William Morris and others made a drive to unite all socialists in Britain — the SDF, the ILP, the Fabians, and smaller groups. There were joint manifestos and meetings, and much local cooperation, for a while.

Between about 2000 and 2003 the Socialist Alliance brought together almost all the revolutionary socialist groups, and a fair number of unaligned people. The effort was too narrowly focused on electoral activity, and prevented from getting very far on cooperation in other activity by the SWP, which dominated it excessively and eventually broke it up. But for a while, in many areas at least, there was real cooperation and real dialogue.

Learning from unity efforts which failed

Just in the last 10 years, there have been eight or nine left unity projects which have got as far as organising meetings, conferences, websites, and yielded almost no result. All of them, however, were based on unviable schemes of one sort or another — to unite just by finding some points of agreement and sidelining all other issues, or to unite by rallying to a predefined project, usually electoral, of one group or another.

No miracle will result just from proposing a good formula for unity. But it is the first step. We invite all other groupings and individuals on the left to discuss our proposal.

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