

The left and the election

THE urge to reject and spurn the New Labour Party is understandable. The socialist who does not feel that now has some vital part missing. It is an impulse we profoundly share. But people who call themselves Marxists should *think* as well as *emote*.

A refusal to vote Labour in this election amounts to a premature abandonment of mass working-class politics. It implies, or may imply, an abandonment of the perspective of restoring mass working-class politics if in the end the Thatcher-Blair project is triumphant.

That, it seems to us, is what Arthur Scargill's Socialist Labour Party and the renamed Militant — now called the Socialist Party — are doing: they are prematurely admitting defeat; they are anticipating that which threatens but has not yet happened and against which it is the duty of socialists to fight for as long as possible *if only to rally the labour movement forces to build a new mass trade-union-based political labour movement*.

Anything else is sectarianism. Despite all the differences it has in its nature and in its concerns, sectarianism produces the same result as Blairism — it divorces the socialists from the working class in politics. It cuts them off from or at least erects barriers against, the fundamental work that needs to be done should the Blairites clinch their victory: patient propaganda for a new mass trade-union based working class political party, this time with better politics. The minus-



cule electoral activity of small self-isolating groups can neither substitute for, nor help, this work.

Militant/the Socialist Party, which is standing 19 candidates, and is part of the Scottish Socialist Alliance which has a slate of 16, is here simply ridiculous. It will refuse to call for a Labour vote even where there is no socialist candidate standing! For many decades this group immersed itself in the Labour Party, confining itself mostly to making abstract dried-out propaganda for "nationalisation" — indeed, Fabian-socialist propaganda, that was not in any sense Marxist propaganda: Marxists are concerned with class rule and see "nationalisation" as but a means to an

end, not as an end in itself.

They were mesmerised for decades by a strange vulgar-evolutionist scenario which pictured the Labour Party as slowly and organically evolving towards a point where the right wing would hive off, the "broad left" take over and, soon, "the Marxists" — Militant — would become the Labour Party. They were passive citizens of the Labour Party, like the man who gets on a train and believes all that has to be done is stay on the train long enough for it to reach its destination, chatting to the other passengers about the pleasant place they are trundling to.

When they found themselves in the leadership of the Labour-controlled Liverpool council, at a crucial point in recent labour movement history — the great miners' strike of 1984-5 — they made much noise and great boastings, but *behaved* like any other social democrats would: ignoring the great regulator of what Marxists do, the class struggle and the logic of the class struggle, they avoided confrontation with the government. They did a deal with the Tories instead of joining the miners — then on strike — in a confrontation with the government *for which tens of thousands of Liverpool workers were ready and eager*. They could have taken a large part of the Labour Party with them into battle and discredited Labour leaders such as Neil Kinnock, who refused to back the miners or fight the Tories. If the Labour

What the Socialist Party say

"WE are standing 19 Socialist Party candidates in England and Wales and we have a number of comrades standing as part of the Socialist Alliance in Scotland (which is standing 16).

We are standing to put the case for a socialist alternative to Labour. The issues our candidates are concentrating on are: health cuts, opposition to the Job Seekers Allowance and Council cuts and for a minimum wage.

We are not expecting particularly high votes because we understand that this election will be very polarised. Our candidates are making a marker for the future.

We expect that big struggles will begin after the election because of the attacks a Labour government will make

on the working class. We think these struggles will give rise to new, interesting political formations — both single issue campaigns and more general movements. We have changed our name [from Militant Labour] to the Socialist Party to prepare for this period.

We understand why people will vote Labour. In many places workers will have no alternative. But our printed material does not call for a Labour vote in constituencies where we are not standing.

We now categorise the Labour Party as a capitalist — not a bourgeois-workers — party. There are still, obviously, differences between the US Democrats and Labour — the union link still exists. However Blair's model is clearly the Democratic Party. We believe that Labour has crossed the line from being a bourgeois-workers party to becoming a straightforward capitalist party."

Party had then split, as it might, it would have been a big left-wing split with serious backing in the trade unions. It would have been, or maybe have become, a viable governmental alternative to the right-wing Labour Party; especially if the miners had won, as, with solidarity, they might.

Instead of that, they bottled out, leaving the miners in the lurch. Then with the miners defeated, the Tories and the Labour leaders cut Liverpool Militant to ribbons and isolated them. They finally left the Labour Party, a defeated rump with their tail between their legs. Now they sulk, giving up prematurely on the mass political labour movement, shouting "it's all over", when it is not all over — when, in any case, the work of socialists is to fight to preserve or restore mass working class politics. If the Labour Party is "over" then we must build a new Labour Representation Committee to prepare and build a new mass party. That will not be done by those who prematurely abandon the trade unions in politics.

What the Socialist Labour Party say

THE Wirral South by-election result was predictable. Tony Blair's New Labour is almost identical to Ted Heath's Old Tories, and Blair was able to convince Tory voters to switch on the basis that New Labour's policies (on taxation, accepting privatisation, cuts in the NHS and education services) signal virtually 'no change' if New Labour wins the General Election.

Whatever the outcome of the 1997 General Election, the next government will be committed to capitalism and the free market, which means there will be no fundamental changes in our ravaged, battered society.

We must contest elections wherever finances and resources allow; it is fundamental to show our fellow citizens that there is an alternative to the free market capitalism now espoused by New Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Tories — the alternative is embodied in the SLP, whose policies can create the conditions necessary for establishing a Socialist Britain based on common ownership.

The SLP was born because of New Labour's irreversible constitutional and policy changes. It is clear that New Labour is no longer a party that socialists can be members of or support.

Arthur Scargill, SLP General Secretary in the SLP paper, Socialist News, March 1997

Militant/the Socialist Party is as unbalanced, mechanical and undialectical now as it was in the days of its delusion-fixated, placid citizenship in the Labour Party.

Arthur Scargill's Socialist Labour Party, which is running 50 candidates is merely a small, a very small, leftish, socialist-in-a-general-way version of the Labour Party as it was around 1980. A sizeable part of its membership of 1,000 or 2,000 seem to be "Marxists" doing one or other sort of "entry" work — but they won't change anything! The SLP might have been expected in some one-time mining areas to be able to mobilise a symbolic old-style Labour-socialist working class protest against New Labour. That would not have offered the working class a governmental alternative to either the Tories or New Labour, but it would have been something worthwhile nonetheless. Despite his political limitations and his shameful long-time links with the anti-working class police state regimes of the now defunct USSR and Stalinist Eastern Europe, Arthur Scargill did lead the greatest single post World War 2 working class battle, the miners' strike of 1984-5. But the SLP's by-election showings have been extremely poor; their general election results will almost certainly be much worse. Although some SLP members differ, Scargill's line on Labour is the same as the Socialist Party's: no backing for Labour even where the SLP is not standing.

Neither the Militant/Socialist Party nor the SLP candidates will be socialist candidates in general, but candidates of particular, narrow sects, standing essentially in order to help build those sects. Instead of making an agreement to share out target seats and support each other, the Socialist Party and the SLP are competing in some seats and make no call to support each other elsewhere. They will certainly attract socialist protest voters; but thinking socialists will back them only if they want to build those organisations. *None* of this is *serious* electoral activity.

Both the SLP and the Militant/Socialist Party are more respectable than the SWP, which claims to be the biggest socialist organisation in Britain. Between elections, the SWP pours scorn on the Labour Party and, indeed, on Parliament. For three decades they have pretended that the Labour Party was irrelevant to the working class — except at elections! Then in stark defiance of both the emotional and common-sensical logic of what they have said for the previous five years, they back Labour. This time round, they do it shame-facedly, calling for an anti-

What the SWP say

TONY Blair has spend his energies sucking up to the rich few who have gained the most from the past 20 years, instead of offering real hope to the millions who have lost out.

The Liberal Democrats present no alternative to those seeking change, as those who have to live under Liberal-run councils will testify.

In a handful of constituencies voters will be able to support candidates who are offering a genuine left-wing alternative to New Labour, such as Arthur Scargill's SLP.

Socialist Worker will be urging a vote for those candidates.

But what really counts at the end of the day is not a cross on a piece of paper. What is decisive is whether people engage in the kind of struggles that fundamentally challenge the system.

Tory vote.

Why? Because they are canny enough to know that if they were consistent and advocated abstention, that would cut them off from the labour movement. If they stood candidates they would not only perform disastrously but worse than, for example, the Militant/Socialist Party.

The between-elections hostility to politics preached by the SWP does not prepare their supporters to be good vote-gatherers. They discovered that painfully in the late '70s, when they stood a few candidates, and have steered clear of such activities ever since.

On the level of political ideas, though they sport a certain academic pretentiousness, the SWP is simply not serious.

If the Blair group succeeds in destroying the working-class character of the Labour Party and (possibly, or) some variant of PR exists in the next general election, then socialists will be faced with the task of mounting a serious independent election campaign. That could only be done by the sort of united socialist activity that has sometimes been mounted by the groups of the so-called far-left in France. But no serious person will determine what to do now, in this election, by what may be appropriate or possible in an election five years hence. Now, together with the vast majority of the politically conscious workers, we say *vote Labour!*