workers power

- For People's Assemblies in every city and town!
- For a new workers' party, won to a revolutionary socialist programme!
- For a new - Fifth - International!

Bring Blair down!

BY DAVE STOCKTON

With remorseless inevitability Tony Blair's case for war in Iraq disintegrates before our very eyes. Above all the claim that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction which it could deploy against its neighbours or against its US/UK "liberators" was dispelled by the war itself and by a total failure to find them afterwards.

The WMD argument is not important at all in itself. Most people know what the real reasons for the war were: Iraq's oil reserves – the second largest in the world – and its strategic importance to US plans for imposing its order on the Middle East and central Asia.

As the WMD pretext falls apart Blair is trying vainly to jump ship to the "liberation of the Iraqi people" argument. But this too is being undermined by the naked colonialism of his gigantic ally and the growing resentment and resistance of the Iraqi people.

Meanwhile the Labour MPs and union leaders who backed Blair's war have to contend with mounting domestic disillusion – over PFI and Foundation Hospitals in the NHS, over chaos in education funding, over low pay and worsening conditions, leading to wildcat strikes like those at Heathrow airport.

The election of a series of left of centre leaders, their talk of withdrawing political funds from Labour and even talk by some of a new party are all reflections of this grassroots discontent.

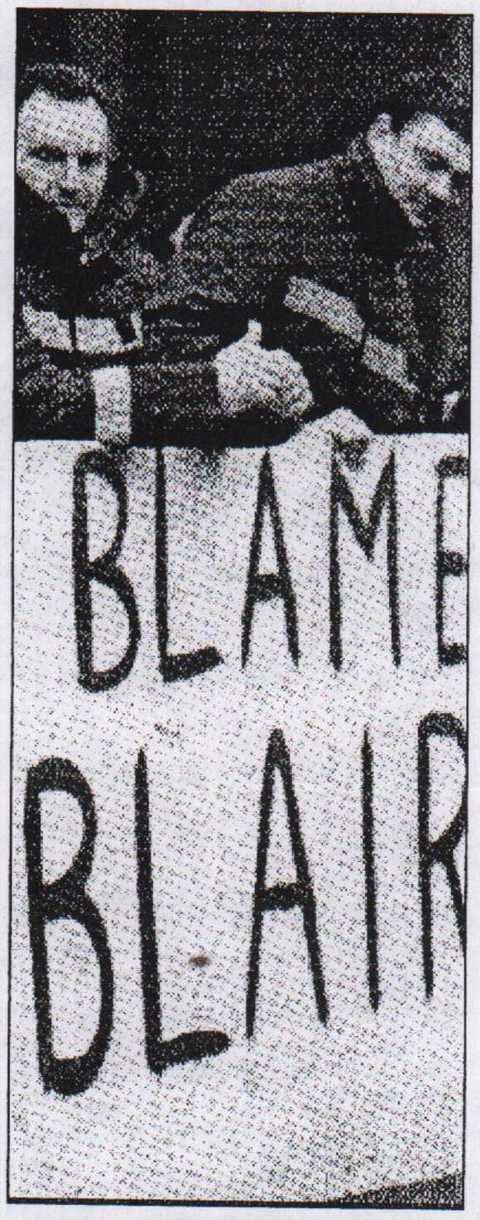
Of course the union barons and Labour backbenchers lacked the courage or principle to stop Blair's war, or halt his continuing support for George Bush on every major issue. Instead they have set themselves the task of "reclaiming our party" from the Blair clique in order to put it in the hands of... the Brown clique.

No matter that Gordon Brown is the architect of PFI. No matter that he declared his full support for Bush and Blair's war. No matter that he supports all the institutions of globalised exploitation – the IMF, the World Bank and the WTO.

The "reclaim our party" block of union leaders and MPs now wants us to wait for a year to 18 months when, we are told, Blair will retire.

In the radical days of February and March this year anything seemed possible – the downfall of Blair and New Labour, a general strike, a new workers' party. These were not just idle dreams. The massive million-strong demonstrations had the whole warmongering government on the ropes. Today's turnaround is due to the failures of the official "left" and even "far left" of the movement.

Had a real struggle for escalating direct action and strikes been launched, the war could have been prevented or turned into a huge class war on the home front. But the majority of the far left refused to say to the union leaders, "Call out your members and we will do all in our power to mobilise them." The SWP failed to call on the "reclaimers" in the Labour Party to boot out Blair and co. They dared not call Bob Crow and George Galloway's bluff and demand that they organise a conference of unions and political organisations to discuss the foundation of a new workers' party.



The firefighters took on Blair but were betrayed by their leaders.

Above all the left failed the vital task of calling for People's Assemblies in every single town and city – made up of delegates from the unions, the political parties of the labour movement (including anti-war Labour Party groups), immigrant and community organisations. Such bodies alone could have delivered mass direct action, even a general strike. They would have massively radicalised an already angry and rebellious population.

But the "awkward squad" turned out to be only too peaceable. And the SWP - despite their cries of "Blair Out!" – did not dare offend their new-found friends.

The moment was lost. Now the ebb of the tide of radicalisation is all too plain to see. The union leaders are back into plotting to replace Blair with Brown. The SWP is dumping the Socialist Alliance in favour of a non-socialist, class collaborationist "Peace and Justice" alliance with the mosques and whoever they can find. Both these "realistic ideas" will turn out to be ridiculous fantasies. Meanwhile they are dissipating the potential of the anti-war movement and the beginnings of a new militancy in the unions.

How can we stop the retreat and recommence the offensive?

The basis for a rapid return to the fight is there. The "victory in Iraq" is unravelling. The discontent and militancy of the rank and file of the labour movement, the anti-capitalist movement and the immigrant communities is also there for all to see - not just in Britain, but across Europe.

This ferment needs a focus - for formulating objectives and for building the action to realise them. The recalled People's Assembly on 30 August needs to set about building local assemblies.

Their first task is to mobilise for a huge, million-strong demonstration on 27 September:

- US and UK occupiers out of Iraq now!
- Blair and the warmongers out of power!

The second task is to launch a three-pronged mass campaign:

- against war and imperialism
- against PFI and the destruction of our public services
- against racism and the scapegoating of asylum seekers.

But all these issues point up yet again the crisis of leadership in our movement. The "official left" – whether in parliament or the unions – fails the test of action. The "unofficial left" – the SWP, the Scottish Socialist Party – dares not criticise them at the crucial moment when that criticism would strike a chord with the mass movement and drive the "leaders" forward or replace them.

This zig-zagging between radical slogans and timid deeds, between revolutionary phrases and reformist objectives has a name – centrism. Such centrism has outlived its time. The movement needs to debate and decide on the key issues for united action, but it needs to debate overall strategy too - how to replace the violence and insecurity of capitalism with socialism. Can this be done on the road of parliamentary reformism or, as we believe, only on the road of class struggle and revolution? People's Assemblies (or social forums) can launch this process.

But Britain is not the only country facing these struggles. The assault on pension rights and social gains, the mass fightback and the weakness and betrayals of the workers' leaders are common across the European Union.

Therefore the European Social Forum called in Paris in November is a golden opportunity to learn from one another's struggles and successes, to analyse common weaknesses and to assemble a new layer of rank and file militant leaders. Every trade union branch, every local anti-war and anti-capitalist organisation needs to discuss the agenda for Paris, send a strong delegation and resolve to come back with ideas to make our movement much more effective and clear as to its goals and methods of struggle.

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SWP BLOCKS ATTEMPTS TO SAVE SOCIALIST ALLIANCE

In Birmingham on Saturday 19 July a National Council meeting of the Socialist Alliance took place. The meeting marked the demise of the Socialist Alliance and the establishment of the Socialist Worker Alliance, ***writes Mark Hoskisson.***

It opened the door to the Socialist Workers Party's Peace and Justice project – a proposal to form a popular front, an electoral bloc between the Socialist Alliance and representatives of the Mosques. It also decided to sanction any and every bureaucratic manoeuvre undertaken by the Socialist Workers Party to purge the Socialist Alliance of anyone who dares to question its drive to establish a popular front.

In the light of this Workers Power decided to immediately leave the Socialist Alliance and redouble its efforts to fight for a Workers' Party.

While the SWP turned up, with their International Socialist Group lap dogs in tow, pretending everything was normal, everybody else knew full well that this meeting would determine the entire future of the alliance. There were 63 delegates – over 20 from the National Executive, the rest from local Socialist Alliances.

The two questions that dominated the meeting were:

- Should the Socialist Alliance enter a cross class election coalition with petit bourgeois or even bourgeois representatives of the Mosques within the British Muslim community?
- Should we tolerate the situation that arose in Birmingham where the SWP packed a meeting in order to oust the entire existing local leadership, including victimised firefighter and local SA chair Steve Godward and a long standing socialist from an Islamic background, Rumy Ashan, on the grounds that they stood in the way of the SWP's Peace and Justice project?

Workers Power put a resolution rejecting the popular front and urging the alliance to launch an initiative for a mass workers' party based on class struggle politics. Inevitably the SWP distorted our position in order to claim that this meant not orienting to the Muslim community. Despite a patient explanation that this was not the case the comrades steadfastly refused to listen, for the simple reason that they did not want to hear the truth.

Indeed so desperate were the SWP to stop the truth being heard that they voted not to allow Rumy to speak in favour of our resolution – because he wasn't a delegate. The vote on giving him the right to speak was lost 27 to 28! They then went on to defeat our resolution by 43 votes to 17, with many of the independent founding members of the SA, as well as the CPGB and AWL voting with us.

There was another chance to save the alliance – two resolutions dealt with the Birmingham events, one from Erdington and one from Lesley Mahmood and Steve Godward, which was widely supported in the Socialist Alliance. The Erdington resolution condemned the SWP's coup in Birmingham and called for a return to plurality. Steve and Lesley's resolution also opposed the packing of the meeting but added, quite rightly, that the Socialist Alliance should only support candidates unequivocal in their support for women's rights, lesbian and gay rights and socialism.

This, like our resolution, was designed to block the SWP's plans for a non-socialist candidate in alliance with the Mosques in Birmingham, a candidate who John Rees of the SWP had suggested might be less than unequivocal in their support for women's and lesbian and gay rights.

Very late in the day the SWP put a resolution justifying the downright Stalinist machinations they had engaged in in Birmingham. After a stormy debate in which the SWP once again blocked a key Birmingham dissident, Sue Blackwell, from speaking (she had chaired the AGM) and in which after the debate they tried (and thankfully failed) to take the section in Steve and Lesley's resolution on supporting socialist candidates separately from the rest of the resolution it came to the vote.

The ISG were all over the place. Their key leaders, like Alan Thornett, backed the SWP on everything. A leading ISG member in Birmingham who had supported Steve was publicly denounced by his own comrades for exposing John Rees' opportunism. The SWP were told by all of the independents that if they persisted with their Stalinist methods they would destroy the alliance.

But, after all of the arguments, the numbers decided. The SWP had a majority and the Erdington resolution was defeated by 33 votes to 29 with 5 abstentions, while Steve and Lesley's resolution was defeated 34 to 25 with 9 abstentions. With those three votes it became clear to all that the SWP had destroyed the Socialist Alliance.

Workers Power announced to the meeting there and then that we were walking out. Many others said they sympathised with our stance but wanted one more crack at trying to change things – a perspective that we don't share though we will of course do all we can to co-operate with the comrades in any future fights.

The lessons of the Socialist Alliance, the SWP's destruction of it and the tasks that face us in trying to build a working class alternative to New Labour will now need to be discussed if we are going to take the struggle for a new workers' party forward. As a contribution towards that debate we print overleaf the statement that we handed out explaining our view of why the alliance has failed and the strategy revolutionary socialists now need to take up.

Why we are leaving the Socialist Alliance

Statement to Socialist Alliance National Council of July 2003 from Workers Power, British section of the League for the Fifth International.



Workers Power is leaving the Socialist Alliance. The SA is no longer a vehicle for the development of the class struggle and the winning of mass forces to socialism in Britain – indeed, insofar as it continues to exist it is now an obstacle. Therefore we can no longer participate in it.

We joined the SA because the right wing, neo-liberal and imperialist policies of the New Labour government were eroding Labour's mass base. Blair's alliance with big business made it increasingly obvious to hundreds of thousands of trade unionists and labour voters that the working class needs to establish its political independence by breaking with Blair and the capitalists.

The SA, we believed, could be a magnet for Labour Party members, trade unionists, working class voters and newly radicalised anti-capitalist youth who wanted to fight Blair's government – at the polls, on the streets and in the workplaces.

Second, and in our view integrally related to this project, the SA was an opportunity for the left to take a socialist message to the workers and youth, opposing the capitalist Third Way with its only consistent alternative – a revolutionary programme.

The SA has failed on both accounts. The leading force in the SA – the Socialist Workers Party – first blocked any possibility of the Alliance advancing consistent working class policies and then most recently opposed it rallying forces for an independent working class party.

Now in a new low they are arguing for a cross-class electoral bloc with Islamic clerics.

Workers Power rejects this and is campaigning against it. While this policy lasts no further collaboration in an electoral bloc is possible with the SWP. We believe that revolutionaries can only capitalise on the immense opportunities for a revival of working class politics today OUTSIDE of the ranks of the SA and in opposition to the SWP's strategy.

For a workers' party - not class collaboration

At the last conference of the Socialist Alliance, all delegates observed that the SA had failed to attract significant forces from the labour movement and the youth. We proposed that the SA take advantage of the deep discrediting of Blair revealed by the mass anti-war movement, the firefighters' dispute and the repeated desire of trade unionists to stop funding New Labour by launching a campaign for the formation of a new Workers' Party, one that would fight for the interests of the working class just as Blair fights for the capitalists.

This call to break with Blair, we suggested, should be addressed to the left leaders as well as the rank and file - to all anti-war and anti-Blair Labour wards and constituencies, to the leaders and members of the trade unions. They should be called on to hold a conference to direct their energies and funds into the formation of a new party and open a democratic debate on its manifesto and policies.

The biggest group in the SA, the Socialist Workers Party, resisted our proposal with a variety of arguments. But their true motivation quickly became clear. Over recent weeks the SWP has been pursuing the creation not of a Workers' Party but of a new electoral bloc which is to include not only non-socialist but non-working class forces, including Islamic clerics. The political basis for this will no doubt be adapted to make it acceptable to these new and hoped for allies.

In this the SWP is not only turning its back on any attempt to influence political developments in the mass working class movement and challenge the diversionary path of the left MPs and union leaders. It is abandoning the principle of working class political independence and actively promoting an alliance with representatives of the propertied classes.

Don't get us wrong: the Stop the War Coalition was absolutely right to strike an agreement for common action with Islamic organisations on the simple basis of opposition to the war on Iraq. This mobilised hundreds of thousands of Asian and Middle Eastern workers and youth. But to strike a political agreement with the Islamic clergy to stand in elections and present to the voters a common programme for the government of Britain is a betrayal of the interests of the working class – not least of the huge numbers of low paid workers, women and youth held back and misled by the bourgeois and middle class Islamic misleaders.

The SWP want to build a new electoral alliance around the "core values" of "peace and justice". Hence, the SA must be packed with fly-by-night SWP members and won over to the new cross-class project – or destroyed. The tactics of the Socialist Workers Party over the past couple of months have angered and alienated virtually everyone else in the Alliance. However, far from marking a change of direction on their part, these tactics merely mark a quickening of tempo as they rush headlong into a get-quick-rich scheme.

Whatever "programme" these candidates will stand on, it will not include lesbian and gay equality, a woman's right to choose, secular education, self-defence against racist attack or even the nationalisation of sweatshops. As such, it will not prove a tool for Muslim women and youth to escape from the reactionary ideology of the "respectable" clerics. It will reinforce their hold by providing them with left cover.

This is opportunism in the strictest sense of the term – sacrificing fundamental interests of the working class for short-term electoral gain. We are against it – we will do nothing to assist it – we will do all we can to stop it.

We call on all organisations of the labour movement to pass resolutions rejecting this opportunist alliance and instead to rally to the call for a new Workers Party.

The programme of the Socialist Alliance

In the absence of mass support, there could only be one other justification for the Socialist Alliance – to advance consistent socialist answers to the crisis and rally workers and youth to a socialist programme. This is the only genuine expression of the interests of the working class, and means explaining to the workers that we will never be free of capitalism until we overthrow the profit system, something that cannot be done through parliament and will necessarily involve force.

This view is something that is endorsed – in writing or privately at least – by the overwhelming majority of organisations affiliated to the SA and the majority of its individual members. Yet the SWP – backed in this by the International Socialist Group and the AWL – perversely resists all attempts to get the SA to express this in its programme.

Their objection is simple. How can we attract mass forces from the reformist labour movement if we adopt a revolutionary policy? Should we not reach a more limited agreement first?

This argument, which sounds so "realistic" at first sight, is in fact a counsel of despair. It assumes that mass forces cannot be won from reformism to a revolutionary policy. It is no accident that in history mass revolutionary parties have only ever been built by rejecting this self-defeating approach. Every attempt to make headway by presenting a halfway house programme to the working class has ended up strengthening reformism.

Limited agreements can and must be struck with the mass reformist organisations for action, as in the campaign against the Iraq war. But in elections candidates and parties present policies and programmes for the government of the whole of society. Here any compromise with reformism means misleading the working class.

The SWP's conception of the SA has always been a deeply opportunistic one. Their leadership apparently believes that revolutionary socialist politics are fine for formal education at its Marxism seminars once a year but far too "advanced" to present to the millions who are desperate for an alternative to Blair's New Labour Party.

That is why initially the SWP objected to the SA developing a set of socialist policies with which to go to the working class in elections. When it became clear that this was not viable, they did everything they could to ensure that the SA's programme (People Before Profit) remained at the level of left reformism. They even objected to our proposal to include the demand to disarm the racist police... until Asian youth raised it themselves in the Northern uprisings.

We believes that revolutionaries can only capitalise on the immense opportunities for a revival of working class politics today OUTSIDE of the ranks of the SA and in opposition to the SWP's strategy

During the General Election campaign of 2001, the SWP avoided campaigning even for this programme in favour of five reformist pledges, in an attempt to water down the SA's policies still further.

The SA was a useful cover for them to approach voters as fake reformists, thinking that this would create a large pool of disaffected supporters who could then be recruited into the SWP between elections.

Integral to this schema, the SWP effectively closed down local SAs between elections so that their other front organisations could perform a similar role in other arenas of struggle (Globalise Resistance for the anti-capitalist movement, the Anti-Nazi League for the anti-fascist struggle, Stop the War for the anti-imperialist campaigns).

No more fakery - no more sterile manoeuvres

The Scottish Socialist Party is seen by some in the SA as the model we should adopt. But it is marred by fundamentally the same opportunist approach. It presents a reformist programme to the workers, holding out the illusion that socialism can be built through a majority in the Scottish Parliament. Look at Tommy Sheridan's recent comments on a "socialist" Scotland geared towards "big business" and his reassurances that Tesco and multinational companies will not be nationalised. These were not "mistakes" but of a piece with the assurance that capitalism can be overthrown peacefully and socialism built in one country.

Workers Power calls on all affiliates and members of the SA not to waste another minute on sterile manoeuvres and opportunist blocs, but instead to campaign energetically for the mass organisations of the labour movement and the anti-capitalist initiatives to unite against Blair in a Workers Party and democratic social forums.

Within this we must propose revolutionary policies – not as an ultimatum or a precondition for participation in new mass formations, but as the policy we advocate as the only true expression of the interests of our class. For we can be sure of one thing: if the Marxists do not argue for a revolutionary programme, no-one else will.

This campaign will takes place alongside the rallying of the European left in the forthcoming European Social Forum in Paris in November, in which the most determined elements of the working class and anti-capitalist movement will be debating the way forward for the movement as whole.

The fight for class independence is not occurring in Britain alone but is an integral part of a political struggle occurring world wide in response to globalisation – a struggle that can end in one of three ways: the establishment of a new global reformist alliance, a negotiated half-way house that will generalise the weaknesses of the SA on a continental scale, or a new International, a fifth World Party of Social Revolution.

We are taking the fight for the latter path into the ranks of the movement in Britain and in Europe. That is why we are leaving the Socialist Alliance. If you want an end to endless cycles of accommodation, manoeuvres and demoralisation, take the same path.