workers power
revolution against global capitalism
June 2001 Special Issue ★ Price 10p
www.workerspower.com

ELECTION ANALYSIS SPECIAL

Overleaf: What did we achieve and where do we go from here?

Blair rules for the rich

TONY BLAIR'S new government will launch a wave of attacks on the working class.

He has already taken the scalpel to what was left of old Labour in the cabinet – neutering Robin Cook and the punch-drunk Prescott. Next he will take the axe to our public services.

A report from the Institute for Public Policy Research, leaked to The Guardian, outlined the key objective for Labour's second term: accelerating the privatisation of public services.

Any new money for schools and hospitals will be tied to increased private sector involvement, in the shape of the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) or the sort of "public/private partnership" that looks set to be the future of London Underground.

PFI means multinational corporations not only designing and building facilities but managing them for 25 or more years at a hefty profit guaranteed by the taxpayer. As at Dudley in the West Midlands, where hospital workers fought for nine months, tens of thousands of ancillary and domestic staff face the prospect of transfer to private sector bosses keen on cutting the wages bill.

The cabinet reshuffle confirmed a further rightward shift in this government.

But more important than the changes in individual names and faces was the decision to abolish the Department of Social Security and replace it with a Ministry of Work and Pensions, to be headed by Alistair Darling, a man who revels in hounding people on benefits. This move heralds a fundamental attack on what remains of the welfare state.



The long-rumoured shift of David Blunkett to the Home Office finally happened. He has already pledged in pages of The Sun a harder crackdown on "asylum cheats".

Blunkett's appointment signals that the second term will be marked by even more social authoritarianism and racism than the first.

Millions of workers backed Labour - many in the belief that in his second term Blair would be "bolder" in serving Labour's traditional working class base. Blair will be bolder alright - but in the other direction.

He will complete what Thatcher started - the privatisation of services, the attack on the welfare state and the atomisation of trade union resistance.

The lowest voter turnout in more than 80 years, down 12 percentage points since 1997, reflected not only "apathy" but a deep disillusion with Labour's first term.

The Liberal Democrats' victory in Chesterfield, and their increased vote nationally, was one strong indication that large sections of the middle class as well as workers reject privatisation and mounting inequality.

Like Margaret Thatcher in 1983, Tony Blair is spoiling for a fight with the unions. His contempt for organised labour is clear. In particular he wants to break the unions' strongest base - in the public sector. The Post Office, for example, stands ready with a union-busting plan to drive through privatisation.

The anti-capitalist youth are already fighting back against Labour's commitment to globalisation.

If we are to stop Blair's blitzkrieg on the public sector and workers' rights rank and file workers should follow the example of the anti-capitalist movement: don't wait for the leaders - organise a fightback from below through indepentent networks of activists.

The millions who voted Labour will be disillusioned. The money Labour has earmarked for public spending will be used to sweeten a privatisation programme on a scale Maggie Thatcher could not have dared.

The election is over. But for the poor, the oppressed, the union activists and the anti-capitalist movement, the real fight has just begun.

★ **Where next for socialists? Page 2**

Unions must launch fightback

The leaders of unions affiliated to the Labour Party spent nearly £8 million on the election. The reward will be a hard kick in the teeth.

The Blair agenda for a second term means major attacks on key sections of the organised working class who belong to Labour affiliated unions.

There have been muffled sounds of discontent from the union leaders, including Unison leader Dave Prentis and Aslef's Mick Rix.

But only Mark Serwotka, general secretary elect of the civil service union PCS, and a Socialist Alliance supporter, has promised to mount active resistance to the New Labour onslaught.

The historic decision at the Fire Brigades Union conference to end automatic funding for Labour, and open its political fund to other parties that support union policy, shows the way forward.

The Socialist Alliance should take a lead in organising a campaign against privatisation and in solidarity with all those workers fighting it.

We must reach out to the millions of workers who voted Labour but don't want privatisation by calling for a united campaign to stop the sell off of public services.

And we need to organise action from below: leafleting commuters to explain the case for rail renationalisation; linking up the housing campaigns into a network of opposition to housing sell offs.

We should call on the union leaders to form an anti-privatisation alliance to back up union policy.

We need to commit the unions to strike action against privatisation - something that is explicitly illegal under New Labour's anti-union laws, but needed to avoid piecemeal concessions heading off a united fight to stop the sell off of our services.

Unite to smash the fascists!

THE FASCIST vote in Oldham - an average of 15% across two constituencies - has sent shockwaves through the workers' movement.

The BNP achieved its biggest election success for decades by a classic combination: it posed as a "respectable" *Daily Mail*-style racist party while its supporters, together with the National Front, launched a street war on the Asian community.

But the Asian youth fought back. On 25-26 May they organised self defence and drove the fascists off their streets - together with their police protectors.

And they were right.

The Labour establishment is wringing its hands about Oldham - saying, in effect, that the mass self-defence was what drove white workers into the hands of the Nazis.

But it was not the fault of the Asian youth for fighting back. It was the fault of the Labour Party, which has pandered to racism, attacked asylum seekers and backed racist policing to the hilt. It was the fault of the racist media, from the *Oldham Chronicle* through to the *Guardian* and Radio 4 *Today* programme who peddled the myth of "no go areas for Whites".

Oldham Council must share the blame with its policy of effectively segregated housing allocation.

The task now is to organise self-defence, take the fight to the Nazis by driving them off the streets and launch a massive, trade union-backed anti-racist demo.

Oldham Council must be forced to end its segregated housing policy and the Labour party must hang its head in shame at the state-sponsored racist rhetoric that has fuelled the Nazi disease.

The Socialist Alliance had a big impact in the communities under attack. It showed that the "no go areas" are a racist myth: there was a tremendous reception for Socialist Alliance activists, black and white, in Glodwick, Westwood, Coldhurst and other mainly Asian areas in the week after the uprising.

"This is what we want!" said an Asian taxi driver, "white people walking around to show that it's a load of rubbish that we're racist here."

The mood of Asian youth is defiant and upbeat. They have taken on the police and are in a state of rebellion.

They know they can win and beat the racists. One hundred people came to an Oldham United Against Racism meeting: about 50 white, 50 black. A local Imam was loudly cheered when he defended the actions of the youth. Speakers from the Fire Brigades' Union and the NUT called for a massive black and white demo against racism and to smash the fascists.

The next night 150 people came to a Socialist Alliance meeting which was even more militant: it agreed to set up a Drop the Charges campaign against all Asian people arrested and charged over the weekend; to support organised community self-defence; to call for a community controlled public enquiry in to policing in Oldham and community-controlled unit to monitor racist incidents and policing in Oldham.

Only socialist answers on poor housing, poverty and asylum can stop the spread of fascism among the hardest-hit white communities in Oldham.

Peddling the illusion that the police will stop the fascists and defend black people is a dead end.

There must be no flinching from a direct confrontation with the fascists and organised racists in the weeks to come. We must organise workers' defence groups to smash up their meetings, stop their marches and deny them a presence on the streets.

For an eyewitness account of the uprising see www.workerspower.com

What did we achieve?

The Socialist Alliance/Scottish Socialist Party achieved small but significant votes. There was no breakthrough, but nine Scottish candidates and two in England saved their deposits. Overall we failed to break significant numbers from the Labour Party, but our impact in working class communities and the unions was significant – and this is what points the way forward.

All across Britain the Socialist Alliance campaigned in workplaces and communities that have never seen a sustained socialist presence for decades. Millions of leaflets were distributed. But more importantly, tens of thousands of working class people had the chance to hear socialist arguments and take part in a grass-roots alternative to New Labour.

Kirstie Paton, the Workers Power supporter who stood in Greenwich, south London got 481 votes - 1.5%. "Yes, the vote is a disappointment," said Paton, "Especially because a Socialist Labour candidate, whose campaign was non-existent, took 350 votes away from us.

"But the campaign had a real impact in local communities. I visited the local hospital and met shop stewards fighting back against the conditions imposed by private finance. I visited Fire Stations, the bus depot and the postal picket lines. At a hustings organised by my union, the NUT and at another one organised by a disability charity I got good support.

The socialist vote

Socialist Alliance	56,000	1.75%
SSP	72,518	3.1%

That is: 1.75% where the SA stood. The SSP stood in all Scotland's constituencies

"We were always well received and listened to – but in the end we're a new organisation and it is clear that many Labour-voting workers took the view: we'll give Labour one last chance."

"Even at the polling booths, Labour activists were saying 'I'm here by the skin of my teeth' – there was not much hostility from the Labour rank and file. Like the trade union activists, they are watching the Socialist Alliance but not ready to jump. That's why the really important thing is what we do now, in the struggles against privatisation," said Paton.

During the election campaign, the Socialist Alliance scored a big success when the Fire Brigades union voted to decouple it's political fund from the Labour Party. A similar move in the postal workers' union CWU failed, but got a third of conference votes. These were real achievements - and were backed up by the Socialist Alliance presence within the mass, unofficial walkout that paralysed the Royal Mail two weeks before the election. The SA's achievements in the unions prompted the *Times* to run a whole page on the "left takes over the unions" scare - while London's *Evening Standard* devoted a front page lead and a whole spread to witch-hunting SA candidate Greg Tucker, who led a railway workers' strike on South West Trains.

Another achievement of the Socialist Alliance was the way it took the campaign into the parts of the working class that Labour has always ignored: to young people, those living on "sink" estates, and the asylum seekers who don't have the right to vote.

Paton says: "In Greenwich we mobilised young people to occupy the Cutty Sark – a local landmark - in protest against privatisation. We toured the walkways of estates like Ferrier and Cherry Orchard. There is real deprivation - but I was inspired by the resistance and hope working class people can muster in the face of poverty. I don't think any other party had campaigned on these estates: how could Labour show their face? The Labour council is the slum landlord here!"



Paton: mass fight against privatisation

Paton says one of the main achievements was the SA's refusal to duck the fight against racism: "In the shopping centres, on Saturday afternoons, we got a great response to our speeches on privatisation – but some hostility when we mentioned asylum seekers. An old-style Labour campaign would have said - accentuate the positive and steer clear of the difficult issues. But we took the asylum issue onto the streets: I put out 50,000 leaflets that said - in big red letters - Asylum seekers are welcome here. And the campaign has put us in touch with refugee communities."

At the election count, in Woolwich Town Hall, Paton silenced Blairite hecklers with an uncompromising concession speech. After the established parties had given their customary thanks to the returning officer and the police, Paton said:

"I thank the activists. I thank the council workers who've done this exhausting task of counting. But I won't thank the police. I will thank the Asian youth of Oldham and Leeds who have fought back against the police and the racists. Because it is very sad that, tonight, we have to report a 15% vote for fascism in Oldham. That vote was fuelled by the racism of the existing parties."

Paton continued: "The Socialist Alliance has put down a marker in this election - not just for future elections but for a working class fight against privatisation.

"The socialists who voted to give Labour another chance will be disillusioned as Labour moves to privatise the NHS and schools like John Roan where I work.

"We will organise massive resistance to Labour's privatisation plans. And I call on all socialists - both those who voted for me and those who voted Labour - to join that fight."

We need a new socialist party

THE SOCIALIST ALLIANCE must use the momentum of the election campaign to deepen and broaden socialist organisation within the working class.

But how do we do this? Many activists are engaged in a debate about the form of organisation we need: loose alliance, party or something in-between.

You can't divorce that question from the kind of politics we need. Workers Power has fought within the Socialist Alliance for a revolutionary action programme and for making the alliance into a new working class party. Today the SA is far from both objectives.

The organisational form of the SA was a disadvantage in the election. While the campaign was vigorous and energetic it was not as well co-ordinated or as nationally coherent as it could have been if we had been a party. We had no paper to sell to our audience. We had no agreed methods of carrying out election work and no way of coming to hard and fast agreements on how to work. We had no means of deciding on the allocation of national resources to weaker areas.

One example of why this was a disadvantage was in the row that blew up over canvassing.

The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) opposed canvassing in a whole number of areas. There was never any decision on this at either an executive or Liaison meeting level.

Not canvassing at all was a mistake. Workers Power was in favour of targeted canvassing on key working class estates where resources allowed for this. Not canvassing ignored the crucial component of an election - talking to people on their doorsteps about why they should vote for us and convincing them to support us, as well as listening to their concerns and relating our politics to them. The canvassing issue was not decisive to the result - but it showed that the SA lacked a way of resolving tactical disputes.

The Alliance has allowed groups and individuals who were formerly hostile to work together. This unity proved a point of attraction for many new activists who joined the campaign. That is something we should maintain and extend. To deepen our unity we need to advance towards a common party.

The leadership of the Socialist Party (SP) is currently opposed to such a move. The SP's leaders counterpose an abstract formula - "a new mass workers' party" - to the reality of an alliance that has reached out to thousands and could turn those thousands into recruits to a new party.

The SWP's leaders argue that we should deepen the alliance as a "halfway house" - less than a party, more than a sporadic united front - but not push forward to a party yet.

Behind that argument lie two different strands of emphasis: some say that the need to bring reformist workers and leaders into the Alliance precludes it turning into a party. Others suggest it is a question of "when" not "if" and that the crucial factor is numbers. The problem is that the class struggle will pose, very sharply, the need for a party.

Does this mean that we should just "declare" the SA is a party at its next conference. No. This is a caricature of the Workers Power position.

We should declare our intention to transform the SA into a party over the next twelve months. If we do this then we will establish a common goal which the organisations and non-aligned individuals can work together towards achieving. This is the logical next step. We should:

- Maintain the national election committee as an interim leadership.
- Build borough-based Socialist Alliances as local campaigning units committed to turning all of the contacts we have made into SA activists.
- Organise a conference in October of our trade union supporters to build on the historic FBU vote on political funding and to help sponsor a united union fightback against New Labour's privatisation plans.
- Launch a campaigning newspaper that can be sold to a wider audience of workers. It should be under the editorial control of the national election committee.
- Publish a discussion bulletin, open to contributions from all, to allow a debate on the future of the alliance between now and 2002.
- Launch a recruitment drive and combine this with a discussion on the programme of the new party
- Organise a national conference in January 2002 to debate the way forward. Workers Power would argue there for a new party, and set out the timetable for the formation of a party.

IDEAS TO CHANGE THE WORLD

Where next for the Socialist Alliance is just one theme at the Workers Power two-day meeting entitled: DestroyCapitalism.

Date: 23-24 June 2001
Venue: Caxton House Community Centre, 121 St John's Way, London N19 (Nearest Tube Archway)
Tickets: £10/£5
For more info phone: 07730 220 962

Reform or revolution?

The Socialist Alliance did not lose a single vote because our policies were too left wing. Part of the problem in the campaign was that in several cases we were not left wing enough.

The revolutionary programme is not a lifeless piece of paper that enshrines our principles about a future socialist society run by workers' councils. It is a guide to action in the here and now that takes us from existing struggles towards an alternative society and shows in practice why that society can only be created by a revolution that overthrows capitalism.

Revolutionary answers are needed now. Only a socialist party committed to such answers can answer the needs of those who move into struggle against their oppressors.

Look at Oldham. Calling for the "reform" of the Oldham police won't impress the Asian youth. Calling on the racist police to ban fascist marches - as the ANL has done, in Bermondsey for example - won't either. And fighting for piecemeal reforms of the system will not undermine the deadly appeal of fascism in poor white communities: they are looking for radical answers to poverty and deprivation, not platitudes.

The need for revolutionary answers is also shown by the fact that large numbers of potential supporters - the inner city poor and the anti-capitalist youth - did not turn out and vote.

We will not break down the alienation if try to emphasise our moderation. Poverty can only be fought by a root and branch transformation of the economy. The bosses will not allow us to carry through such a transformation in a piecemeal fashion. People on poverty pay and living in slum estates know this. That is why they are alienated from politicians who systematically lie to them. If we tell the truth - if we fight the system not just the symptoms - we will break down this alienation and distrust and win new fighters to our ranks.

Exactly the same applies to the anti-capitalist youth. They want to tear the system down. We can recruit them to the SA by showing we do too. As Workers Power said at the Birmingham SA programme conference: for every reformist councillor or liberal who leaves because we stand for revolution, twenty anti-capitalist youth will join.

The main argument against forming a new party on a revolutionary programme is that it will drive out reformist workers who are breaking from Labour and who see the alliance as a welcoming home.

However, the question that revolutionaries within the alliance have to ask is: how do we convince such people to break with reformism and what do we say to the thousands of reformist workers who will move into struggle against Blair's new government?

We do not want a re-run of "old Labour". Reformism has failed the working class. We need to say that openly. We need a means of convincing workers inside and outside the alliance who are still reformists that they are wrong. We have to begin this process by saying that to them openly but fraternally.

But the Socialist Alliance voted not to say it. In the Birmingham conference it blunted the revolutionary cutting edge of the programme by refusing to spell out the need for a workers government to take on and break up the capitalist state. Then the manifesto was itself reduced to a bare minimum of reforms – election "pledges".

That political compromise was engineered by the SWP - and it prevented us taking revolutionary arguments to the working class systematically. Yet revolutionary candidates like Kirstie Paton in Greenwich were able to go beyond the platitudes and spell out the need for a revolutionary workers' government – without driving away reformist workers.

Does our fight for a revolutionary programme preclude unity with reformist workers? No. The cornerstone of a new revolutionary party will be its internal democracy.

The Socialist Alliance Party should welcome workers retain a reformist perspective provided they accept the decisions of the majority.

And by the same token, if we fail to win the new party to a revolutionary programme we would take our place within it as a minority providing we have the democratic right to fight for our programme and openly criticise the actions of the leadership.

Printed and published by Workers Power, BCM box 7750 London WC1N 3XX. Phone 07730 220 962 Email: paper@workerspower.com. Website: www.workerspower.com