

How should socialist parties organise?

How should socialists organise? That is one of the vexed questions on the left. Arthur Scargill recently expounded the views of the leadership of the recently formed Socialist Labour Party. Here we present his views and reply to them.

Agree, or leave!

BITTER experience has taught me that no political party of the Left can succeed on the basis of a federal structure — as an 'umbrella' for separate organisations or parties, each with its own agenda, each wanting to build its own grouping, based upon its policies or strategies, within the SLP.

I believe that Socialist Labour must be one organisation, with the central aim of abolishing capitalism and establishing a Socialist system of society.

The issue of 'federalism' was hammered out before the formation of our new Party, at meetings spanning a three-month period, because it was recognised as representing a fundamental principle that must be decided upon prior to actually forming the SLP.

No Left party can build the fight for, let alone achieve the aim of, Socialism if there are fundamental disagreements of principle over its Constitution and policies.

That is a lesson I've learned in a political career spanning 45 years. I know from first-hand experience the dangers that federalism presents. If we are to build on our achievements thus far and grow into a mass political party, we must tackle these dangers head-on; unless we do, they will interfere with the development of Socialist Labour, whose impact thus far has been remarkable.

Over the past few months, Constituency Socialist Labour Parties and individual members have been bombarded with correspondence from bodies naming themselves the 'Revolutionary Platform', 'Campaign for a Democratic SLP', etc., together with 'open letters' from people who describe themselves as SLP members even though they are not members of the Party.

Conferences and meetings have been convened by these bodies. Their over-riding aim is to challenge Socialist Labour's Constitution and demand that the SLP becomes a 'federal' party, allowing other political parties and organisations to join. The groupings and individuals involved seem to be more interested in building a fight within our Party than in developing a campaigning political organisation whose central aim is to fight the ruling class.

It's important to remember that when a person joins the SLP and signs an application form, she or he undertakes to accept and abide by the Constitution and rules of the Party. Those who join also agree to accept the programme, principles and policies of the Party.

Those who are involved in campaigns against the SLP Constitution and policies formulated by our members are not only wasting time and energy needed to build a mass political party, but are diverting attention away from the specific issues upon which the SLP should be campaigning.

Our fight — in direct action and electioneering — is against capitalism, not against each other. Anyone who cannot accept the Constitution and policies of our Party should not be a member. Those involved in convening conferences and meetings, or circulating correspondence to CSLPs and members attacking our Constitution and policies, are acting against the Constitution, and must realise that their actions will have to be dealt with accordingly.

Arthur Scargill

Abbreviated from the SLP paper, Socialist News

Democracy is better

THE Socialist Labour Party did not break with the Labour Party at the end of a struggle, still less at the end of a struggle that had rallied serious working class forces. It was created in response to a call by Arthur Scargill that was arbitrary and ill-timed. Its timing probably owed more to Scargill's subjective impulse to get out of Blair's Labour Party than to any reasoned policy or worked-out strategy.

The fight is still going on in the Labour Party, and in the unions, about the Labour Party. Arthur Scargill should have stayed in that fight until it was over. His account of himself, that he could not stay once Clause 4 of the Labour Party constitution — public ownership as a goal of the Labour Party — was removed is, to speak plainly, bizarre.

Clause 4 was a symbol worth defending — and we defended it — but no one who knows Labour's history can think the Labour government would now be other than it is, had Blair kept Clause 4 in the Party's lumber room. Or that Clause 4, as such, affected the policy of any of the previous eight Labour governments.

Because it was not born out of a serious struggle, the SLP is a rag tag and bobtail affair. As well as serious people, it has attracted an impressive collection of oddballs. The SLP is a Tower of Babel.

What is of interest to non-SLPers is the issue raised in the statement of Arthur Scargill, excerpts of which are printed here.

Proclaiming that he wants to regroup the left, Scargill proposes to create in the SLP a "party" of a Stalinist type. That is not desirable, and it is probably not possible, except on a minuscule scale.

The SLP's policy and constitution is, he says, fixed. There can be no organised attempt by SLP members to change this. It is immutable. They can take it or leave it.

Scargill makes much of his 'experience'. His experience in the YCL, CP and Labour Party should have taught him that the only way to organise a healthy working class organisation is to do it democratically.

Who says, who can presume on the right to say, that party policy and party rules can't be revised? The leadership? To make it stick, they have to try — rather feebly, it seems — to run an iron dictatorship.

Such a regime will stifle and destroy any potential the SLP might have. It will certainly stop the SLP playing the role of organiser of a regrouped Labour left.

The idea that discussion and 'faction' necessarily destroy effectiveness in the class struggle is a hoary bureaucratic myth of Stalinists and, in their sphere, Blairites.

Haven't Scargill and his friends ever thought of the experience of Bolshevism in this regard? That party was so democratic that the ultra-left Bukharinites could in the middle of 1918, as civil war was breaking out, publish a daily factional paper. The Bolsheviks, Comrade Scargill, nonetheless managed to fight the class enemy.

If it is ever to prosper, the left must have done with one-faction — the "leadership" faction — organisations, and build instead consistently democratic structures. Arthur Scargill has nothing to offer here. But then what can one expect?

The SLP believes — or pretends to believe — in the old Communist Party of Great Britain dogma that there can be a peaceful socialist revolution in Britain.

It is a sad testimonial to the human capacity for confusion, to find the leader of the 1984-5 miners' strike, which was defeated by state violence, much of it extra-legal violence, telling British workers now that they can hope to overthrow wage slavery and its bourgeois beneficiaries by exclusively legal and peaceful means!

Arthur Scargill, who had the courage to lead workers to take on the power of the bourgeois state, seemingly hasn't the sense to learn the most obvious lesson from his own bitter experience.

But then why should anyone expect him to have learned the lesson of the experience of generations of Stalinist and kitsch-Trotskyist would-be socialist parties, namely that socialists must, if we are to succeed, organise ourselves democratically?

If Arthur Scargill can't learn from the Bolsheviks, and their 1917 revolution, the need to smash the state, why should he be able to learn from them the closely linked lesson that democracy is irreplaceable, in our parties now and in the socialist society we fight for?

Jack Cleary