

Whither Scargill's party?

By Helen Rate

IN the general election the Socialist Labour Party stood 65 candidates. With the exception of three or four constituencies their candidates managed to get only a few hundred votes. This is a terrible result for a party which has based so much of its existence on electoral activity.

Many people joined Scargill's party because they despaired at the direction in which Blair was taking Labour and the inability of socialists to challenge Blair's ascendancy. An understandable reaction but, as we said at the time, the SLP was set up before the decisive fight — the battle to save the unions' link with Labour — had taken place, let alone been irretrievably lost.

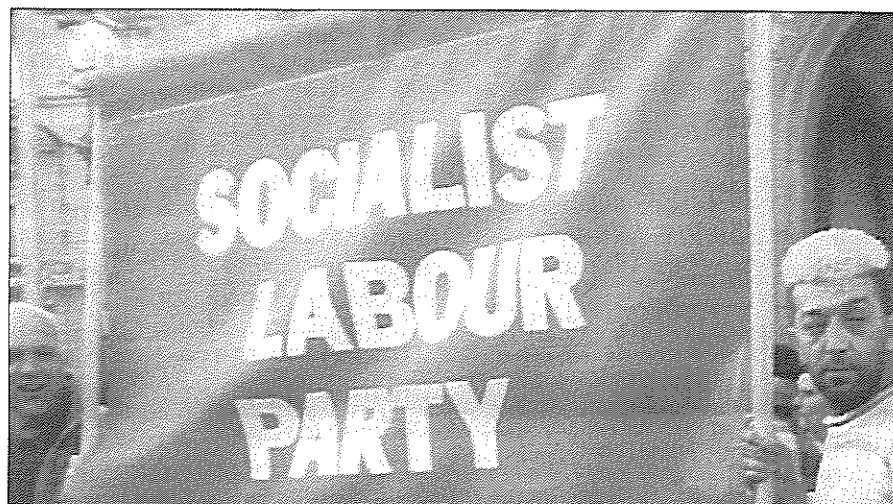
The Socialist Labour Party has not managed to win the influence Scargill surely hoped it would. It has not, for instance, managed to gain any large trade union affiliations. Why is this? No big mystery: many active trade unionists who identify with Labour but are unhappy or sceptical about the Blairites, do not think now is the time to abandon Labour either because they want to "give Blair a chance" or because they are not convinced that the fight to win back Old Labour, to preserve and remake Labour as a vehicle for working-class political representation, is over.

The visible flaws in the Socialist Labour Party cast serious doubt on its ability to stand up to the pressure which must result from its lack of a wider constituency.

First the SLP has never been clear on what kind of organisation it is. Does it aim to be a mass movement of the working class, organising and fighting to win reforms from the bosses — a workers' party based on trade union affiliation, a refoundation of the Labour Party? Its founding precept — "we are an alternative to Blair" — suggested the SLP was such a party.

Or is the Socialist Labour Party a revolutionary socialist party? Scargill has often implied that it is. The SLP mix of politics is confused and the confusion spills over into their electoral activity.

Why does the SLP stand for Parlia-



ment? To gain a platform for its ideas? Because they think they have a serious chance of electing socialist MPs? Does the SLP think socialism can be legislated through Parliament? None of this is spelled out in their propaganda. Fudging the issues did not help them in the election. Continuing lack of political clarity will not help them in the future.

The politics that shape the SLP have not been created by its rank and file but by a clique of ex-Communist Party (*Morning Star*) people, grouped around Scargill, symbiotically entwined with another weaker clique from the IMG/"Fourth International" tradition who play the role of political valets and

freely make their own propaganda inside the SLP — in other words to affiliate to the party. The Scargillites will have none of it. Scargill rules okay!

IT would be reasonable for the SLP's leadership to ask comrades to conduct debate in a disciplined way and not to disrupt the essential campaigning functions of the organisation. It cannot, however, by any democratic working-class standard, be reasonable to summarily "void" (as the SLP disciplinary parlance goes) whole branches and expel members by the unchallengeable dictats of the leadership against which the poor "voidees" have no right of appeal or redress. This has more in common with the Red Queen in Alice in Wonderland — "off with their heads!" — than it has with a healthy organisation of reds.

The leadership on the national executive take their authority from, and act in line with, the SLP's constitution. However as it is a constitution that has never been voted on by the members, the national executive's authority is questionable! Written by a barrister, the constitution was designed to stop "alien" groups from invading the SLP and to block off any legal comeback from such groups. Ironically Scargill used to argue against similar tactics when Michael Foot and Neil Kinnock used them against the left in the Labour Party.

The latest episode in this faction fight — as reported in the *Weekly Worker* — is as farcical as it is a

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bouncers for Scargill's.

One consequence of this is a fatal Stalinist lack of respect for basic democratic norms — for open debate and the right of minorities to exist and discuss. The internal life of the SLP has, since its foundation, been dominated by the fights of disparate groups, branches and individuals to establish the right to disagree with the leadership's line and the right to express differences while remaining members of the SLP. Whole groups — most recently the Communist Party of Great Britain (*Weekly Worker*) — have tried to establish a right to

depressing example of the left's apparently incurable lack of respect for or ability to establish democracy in its own ranks. On 21 June opposition branches and individuals called a conference at Conway Hall in London to launch a "Campaign for SLP democracy". Several SLP National Committee members mounted a picket outside the meeting and tried to intimidate participants by handing out a special message from Arthur Scargill: "Such meetings will not be tolerated by the party. Any member who attends such meetings or becomes involved with those coordinating these meetings/campaigns against the Socialist Labour Party must understand they are acting in violation of the party's constitution."

The SLP will hold a conference in October where there is sure to be a continuation of this kind of episode. Stories of "voidings" and heavy-handed interventions by the Scargillites have been so well publicised by now (thanks to the *Weekly Worker*) that many branches and members will rightly feel unhappy at the direction the SLP is going in. The friction may well be so great that it will split the party. Can the SLP be saved? Should socialists want to save an organisation whose leadership has proved itself so set against building the open, free-thinking organisation the left so badly needs? The political failings of the SLP could be more easily forgiven — and possibly rectified — if it were a democratic organisation. We do, however, have a common cause on a number of serious questions with the many socialists inside the SLP. We have some questions to put to those socialists.

The Socialist Labour Party says it is an alternative to the Labour Party and serious contender in the Parliamentary game. It also says it wants to abolish capitalism and establish a socialist system. Does the SLP think socialism can be brought about through Parliament? Do members of the Socialist Labour Party even know what their party thinks on this question?

The Socialist Labour Party says it is for withdrawal from the European Union and, curiously, it describes this as an internationalist policy! The "internationalism of idiots"? The situation of British workers will not be improved if British bosses withdraw from the EU. The only thing that will help the British workers is for them to organise Europe-wide, just as Europe's bosses have done.

This policy is in fact a dogma which has entered the SLP via the Communist Party. That fact does not shock or

bother some members of the SLP, but some of your comrades do strongly object to committing the party to it without party-wide discussion and debate. Do SLP comrades want the SLP to be a *Morning Star* style Communist Party mark 2?

Some members of the Socialist Labour Party — in Vauxhall and elsewhere — wanted your Party to stand on a more left-wing programme during the general election. Vauxhall branch was "voided" for daring to suggest such a thing! Right or wrong should they not have had the right to state their case?

When the Party was founded in October 1995 the constitution imposed on the party included a ban on all groups working inside the SLP. This ban

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was used to exclude Militant Labour at the outset and is being now used against the CPGB. Why is this? The Socialist Labour Party, supposedly set up to be an alternative to New Labour (or for that matter Old Labour) with its intolerance and its bans and proscriptions, winds up within 18 months as a miniscule caricature of the Labour Party! Something has gone wrong somewhere comrades!

And if you are going to have a ban on entryism should it not at least be implemented "even-handedly"? Why has the ban not been used against the Fourth International Supporters Caucus? Why is the *Economic Philosophic Science Review* [strange Stalinist/homophobic sect] tolerated? Is it because these are groupings that tolerate and indeed implement all the voiding and banning that happens? Of course it is! Democracy, in the Socialist Labour Party, is only for those people who agree with Arthur Scargill.

MANY members feel unhappy about the direction in which the Party is going. Why has none of this been debated inside the Party, or in the pages of *Socialist News*?

There is an urgent need for a large, effective, open and democratic organisation of socialists — of people committed to the abolition of wage slav-

ery, to the smashing of the capitalist state and the reorganisation of society along egalitarian lines. But that organisation cannot be built on illusory political notions such as a belief in the sufficiency of bourgeois, Parliamentary democracy. And no effective socialist movement can be built without a proper respect for tolerant, open debate where even radically differing views can be aired and where policies are not formulated *a priori* and behind closed doors.

As Lenin rightly said, the decisive question in politics is what to do next, what is the next step in the class struggle? Right now we need to fight Blair's "modernising project" — inside the Labour Party as far as we can — and inside the trade union movement. Our central, immediate goal must be to preserve intact the fact, the desire and the notion in the labour movement of political representation for the working-class. If, in the end there is a split in the movement, if we have to move towards founding a new Labour Representation Committee, it would be a step backwards — but we will engage in that task with as much vigour as we can muster.

Right now the SLP is not a fit vehicle to organise the refounding of the labour movement. The idea that it is an alternative to the Labour Party is a puerile fantasy.

Right now, we focus our fight on preserving the Labour-trade union link. This fight is inextricably linked to other battles — to force Blair to repeal the anti-trade union laws, to defend what remains of the welfare state. These are the central class struggle issues. We urge Socialist Labour Party members to help us in those tasks. In doing so they will have to rethink what the SLP is and what it has set out to do. They must also wake up to what it has become.

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