



Alliance for Workers' Liberty

Discussion Bulletin 276

October 2007

After Bournemouth 2

From SW

From MR

Still a workers' party if Bournemouth is consolidated? - MT

Six notes - MT

Please read other contributions to this debate in the paper and at www.workersliberty.org/node/9269

FROM SW

"The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to the other working-class parties"

In response to discussion bulletin 275, we - SW and CM - take issue with both the EC's motion on the Labour party, as well as other contributions raised by other comrades.

Firstly, we principally disagree with the orientation this document proposes for the group. We do not believe, as it would seem the majority of the group does, that our position on the Labour Party 'needs' to change. Electorally, The Labour Party retains the support of the Working Class in Britain, in the widest of definitions; it is therefore still a bourgeois workers party. Regardless of whether or not you view the decisions made at Bournemouth this October as significant - we for two do not - there is still no reasonable argument for further breaking away to become involved in some ultra-left orgy.

We also disagree with the ridiculous practise of standing single candidates, a policy that's only arguable virtue is that it's a 'novelty' propaganda exercise`. Why waste money on election deposits that could go on Industrial propaganda and our own publications? Our work in the Labour party is integral to representation of our ideas in the Labour movement. The Labour party has more working class activists than all other "left" organisations put together. To be the vanguard of the working class means being in the Labour Party. Groups like the LRC are a fundamental part of this work, the momentum gained from the John4Leader campaign has been partially lost, but significant numbers of new activists were energised by such a campaign. We need to harness the enthusiasm and dedication that has been built up but remains in

limbo. How can we operate fully within the LRC and its pool of new supporters if we are to leave the, Labour party, what influence can we realistically have? Our position within the unions also suffers.

As of yet we have heard no practical policy on what our position should be. What do we demand of the union leaders? Should we push for disaffiliations, argue the unions remain politically independent, or affiliation to another crock-of-shit left alliance? We need to completely ignore a return to the Socialist Alliance, or entertain any ideas to enter the Campaign for a New Workers Party, Campaign for a Marxist Party, The Bob Crow Party etc. These are/will all be failures and end up costing the group loads more money and political credibility than is necessary. The Labour Party is the best method within Britain of communicating with people on the doorstep. Through meetings, and when the election comes, with an ever resurgent Tory party, the crunch will come. If this policy is passed and comrades continue to support independent candidates, we shall be pushed into the position where we shall have to support the Labour candidate over that of independents.

"By the strengths of our common endeavour we achieve more than we achieve alone."

FROM MR

First of all, it's good that this discussion is being taken seriously. At the open NC session last weekend it became clear that there are many opinions and not a little confusion within the group on the Labour Party and I hope everyone in the group will write something about it on this list, and everyone will read everything everyone else has to say (political culture and the clogging of inboxes

being, alas, inseparable in this day and age!) In the spirit of that I'll proceed to give my twopenn'orth in response to the below. First of all, I agree with Stephen and Chris that active membership of the Labour Party still provides a good platform for communicating with working-class people, trade unionists and even students. I've often heard it said within the group that the glaring contradictions of the position of a socialist within the LP make it next to impossible to communicate effectively with working-class people. Let me say that in my experience that is absolute nonsense. It may be the case in some places with Tory New Labour councils that make constant cuts - and in those places community campaigns against those cuts are the best way of approaching people. But we should be doing that anyway. Even in Oxford - where there are four "Independent Working-Class" councillors elected due to the local LP's lack of engagement with certain estates - this has been my experience. It is not the people interested in socialist ideas, or organising as workers or anything else, who vote for the IWCA but the apathetic and the frankly racist. Not a single active trade unionist here is a member or active supporter of the IWCA, although numerous trades council delegates and branch officers are members of parties that most working-class people have never heard of! (One of the best all round socialist-feminist union activists in Oxford stands every time for Blackbird Leys as a Green candidate. Last time she got 19 votes). I am also unable to see that there has been a qualitative change in the relationship of the union leaders to the Labour Party. They have abandoned the unions' right to submit contemporary resolutions to Conference - resolutions they were never prepared to lift a finger for in any case, even when there members were on strike against the government. What matters is the relationship between the rank and file and the leadership in both unions and party - to quote Humpty Dumpty (!) "who is to be master - that's all". We all know how deeply complicit the union leaderships, whether right or "left" have been in the rise of New Labour, and their latest abject surrender is an extreme _expression_ of that tendency. The "disaffiliationist" (or "stay out") union leaders are equally guilty of complicity in the rise of New Labour through their "we're outside the LP, we're all right, let's sit back and do nothing" attitude - or does anyone believe that Mark Serwotka has made a serious contribution to working-class political self-assertion?! Is the union leaders' surrender reversible? Who knows. When the union grassroots become anything like politicised enough for a real mass workers' voice in politics to be on the practical immediate agenda, whether it claims descent from today's Labour Party will become a secondary question. But we have to base out day-to-day politics on the situation now; a perspective has to stand on today whatever the possibilities in the future. I would say that it has now become a bit more likely that the supersession of the Labour Party will prove a

necessity for the labour movement in the medium to long term (though we know it's nowhere near this in the short term). But even we are still very much feeling our way. For this reason I have to disagree with Stephen and Chris' bald statement that independent socialist candidacies are a waste of time and resources. Even before September's LP conference we have done this with no harm and at least some good to our political work. I canvassed for Janine the last time she stood in Hackney and certainly didn't get the impression that I was wasting my time. Where it is possible to stand independent candidates (i.e. someone like Janine who is very well-known and respected in the particular area, and incidentally has a link to a union considering standing candidates) why should we not do so? Acknowledging the great importance of the Labour Party, which I think we should continue to do as before (indeed more seriously and consistently) doesn't mean fetishising it. There will undoubtedly be more pressure in some unions, e.g. the CWU, to disaffiliate, and our argument against this is that it is likely to involve a new form of political passivity, not that we should stick with the current political passivity of the leadership. The agenda we want to advance is that of working-class political representation, and it strikes me that independent candidacies represent, in the right combination of circumstances, an important pressure point that can be used by a small group like ours. It is right, therefore, that the group should devote resources to it. I agree, of course, that the LRC must be a major priority for us. Stephen and Chris ask how we can operate within it if we are to leave the LP. Well, quite so, but I don't think anyone is proposing this - at least not yet. Proposing such a thing would be manifestly silly. However, the fact that Janine stood against Labour, and other AWL comrades previously have, has done our work in and around the LRC no harm. Although I have said that working-class people in general and union activists in particular don't have a negative reaction if you approach them as (among other things) a LP activist, neither is there a negative reaction to anti-Labour candidates. With the right candidate there can be a very positive reaction. As long as it is "among other things": I'm sure no-one in the group would sink into electoralism of either the Labour or independent working-class variety. There are actually more important things than elections in the life of the labour movement and remembering that is important to keep the debate in proportion. Standing in elections, whether as Labour or as an independent socialist candidate, has to be justified in terms which include areas not confined to the election campaign.

STILL A WORKERS' PARTY IF BOURNEMOUTH IS CONSOLIDATED?

[MT]

Elsewhere we've presented the arguments on why we should not foreclose immediately and declare Bournemouth an already consolidated transformation; and why even if and when Bournemouth is consolidated, Labour will probably still have certain peculiarities as a bourgeois party. But here I want to deal with the claim that Labour will still be a workers' party (in any sense meaningful for us) if Bournemouth is consolidated. Only two arguments have been - or can be - produced for this thesis.

One is that the trade unions are still attached to Labour in some way. But it matters which way! If they are attached in a way which allows no real political input from the union memberships - in the same sort of way, essentially, that unions have been attached to populist parties in Latin America; the British unions were attached to the Liberal Party before the rise of Labour; the US unions are attached to the Democratic Party; or the biggest Italian union federation is attached to the Democratic Party (fusion on 14 October 2007 of the main body of the old Italian Communist Party with the ex-Christian-Democrat Margherita party) - if they are attached in that way, it just makes the unions clients of bourgeois politics, not the party any sort of workers' party.

The second is that most workers vote Labour. The factual basis of this claim is a bit thin: see below. But it is true that Labour is electorally the most successful party among workers.

That says nothing about Labour being a "workers' party". If workers have a choice (in terms of parties likely to be able to form governments) between different bourgeois parties, they will tend to choose the one that seems slightly more "social" and "leftish" (even if the "leftishness" is just a matter of name, old tradition, or the vaguest demagoguery). Usually it takes social tumult to break electoral inertia and enable minority parties to break through. That does not mean that one of the well-established bourgeois parties has to be dubbed a "workers' party".

For example, the US Democratic Party is not a workers' party. Doubtless the new Democratic Party in Italy will inherit a lot of the working-class electoral base of the old Italian CP, and a fair bit of the not-negligible working-class electoral base of the old Christian Democrats. That does not make it a workers' party.

In India (The Hindu, 20/05/04), "The BJP and most of its allies represent a confluence of social and economic privileges. The higher the economic status, the higher the vote for the BJP... The Congress alliance on the other hand does worst among the well-to-do and improves its vote share

as we go down the economic hierarchy... In States that witness a direct Congress-BJP contest, the class profile of the two parties is extreme and opposite". But who doubts that Congress is not a "workers' party"?

The real question is whether the vote Labour receives from workers can be categorised as a "class vote" - a vote of class allegiance, a vote for a party perceived as "ours", for "our" people - or it is just a lesser-evil vote. As I've written elsewhere, in my reply to M, the evidence is that the Labour vote is less and less a "class vote", more and more just a lesser-evil vote.

When the fact that Labour is electorally the most successful party among workers is taken to prove that Labour is a "workers' party", and that in turn is taken to prove that it is wrong to run socialist election candidates, the argument becomes *reductio ad absurdum*.

On those criteria, Marxists in 1900 would have had to dub the Liberals "the workers' party", and not support the newly-formed Labour Party, which only had minority electoral support from workers (and only minority support from unions, too). Indeed, the Labour Party would never have been founded, because the Marxists would have been repeating year after year: "No. Got to stay with the Liberals! They get most workers' votes".

In any case, there is nothing at all wrong in principle with running revolutionary candidates against reformist workers' parties which really are workers' parties. On the contrary, that is the obvious, normal thing to do. The cases where revolutionaries do not take part in elections with our own candidates and under our own colours are the cases due to special circumstances - generally the small numbers of the revolutionaries and a relativeness openness, looseness, and democracy in the reformist party which makes not running our own candidates a reasonable price to pay for the sake of getting a better intervention in that reformist party.

The German Communist Party in its revolutionary years, the biggest revolutionary workers' party ever built in an advanced capitalist country, always got fewer votes than the Social Democratic Party. Should it not have stood?

A minority socialist movement can use elections to promote itself while still a minority. Indeed, in general, it must and should. If we can't use the electoral arena until we already command a majority in the working class, then we never will command a majority. The electoral avenue is not a miracle route to winning the majority - the French Trotskyists had over 20 years of fairly marginal scores before they started getting even a sizeable minority vote, in 1995 - but we use every avenue we can.

As for the facts: in 2005 just 24% of DE (unskilled manual worker) voters backed Labour. 76% did not.

Even among those DE who voted, Labour polled fewer (45%) than the Tories and Lib Dems combined (47%). If the Tories and Lib Dems were

to merge, would these figures make the merged party "the workers' party"?

The available figures are not classified in Marxist terms, but they give some picture. The Labour vote among ABs (managerial and professional) was 23%, just one per cent smaller than among the DEs. It was 25% among the C2s and 22% among the C1s. Labour-voting is as common among the well-off (if maybe not yet among the top bourgeoisie: there are no figures that distinguish that finely) as among the working class. In all the broadly-speaking working-class categories (C1, C2, DE), Labour got fewer votes than the total of Tories and Lib Dems. These figures sum up various trends. Between 1997 and 2005, the Labour vote among ABs increased, while the Labour vote among less well-off categories decreased, and especially sharply among DEs. Turnout decreased sharply among the less well-off, while it remained fairly high among the well-off ABs. Labour's vote among the DEs was a sharply-decreased proportion of a sharply-decreased turnout.

It is unlikely that Labour's vote among the worst-off will continue to fall smoothly and uninterruptedly. There will be ups and downs. Elections may come in which Labour once again gets more DE voters than the Tories and Lib Dems combined. But on the figures it is not possible to argue that Labour commands a strong class allegiance - rather than a reluctant and fickle "what-else-is-there?" electoral support - among working-class voters.

SIX NOTES

[MT]

1. COUP AND COUP DE GRACE

M writes: "I do not think these formulas - of a Blair coup or Blairite/Brownite repression - are correct [because] they do not fit in with what I have observed, that is, the unions voluntarily giving up their power".

MR writes: "I am also unable to see that there has been a qualitative change in the relationship of the union leaders to the Labour Party. They have abandoned the unions' right to submit contemporary resolutions to Conference - resolutions they were never prepared to lift a finger for in any case..."

In the National Committee discussion (13/10/07), K said, according to the minutes: "You cannot avoid the fact that all the structural changes have been slid through on wheels greased by the union leadership. No coup, because there has been nothing for the coup to fight against. So how can we say our side is defeated?"

When I responded to the thought expressed in K's contribution as minuted (and as I heard it), K replied that she didn't mean that at all. If so, fine. I do not wish to attribute to K what she does not

believe, and I hope she'll put down in writing what the thought was which we misheard as above. Here, however, I want to state the fundamental objection to the argument of M, of MR, and of K-as-minuted. Namely, that a defeat without a fight is still a defeat! In fact, it is a worse defeat than a defeat after a fight.

The same sort of argument was propounded by M and Tom R in our debates three or four years ago, the form of claiming that because the structural changes in the Labour Party had not been "tested" by strong trade-union resistance, therefore they were not a real factor.

Three or four years ago, at least, the structural changes were not so dramatic. Now they are dramatic. In the period between when Brown's structural changes were mooted, at the end of June, to their adoption, we were all saying that the changes would "finally destroy the Labour Party as a democratic political organisation... [reduce] Labour to a US-style political party... nothing more than a narrow political machine populated by members of the professional political elite... The only input that the labour movement will have... a junior lobbying role".

Neither M nor MR said then: "Oh no. That's exaggerated. It's not so bad. Even if Brown wins, it won't be a big change". Certainly neither they - nor anyone else in AWL or on the left more generally - said: "Well, it won't be so bad - so long as the unions don't resist it! If the unions fight and lose, that could be serious. But as long as the unions don't fight, we'll be fine. The change won't be real. Coup? It could be a coup if the unions fight. But as long as the unions don't fight, there can't be a coup! We're safe!"

Ridiculous? Indeed. But that is what they would have had to say to be consistent with the assessments of where we are now quoted above from M, MR, and K-as-minuted.

MR's argument, in particular, is just an addled version of the excuse used by GMB secretary Paul Kenny for capitulation. Oh, he said at a Labour Party conference fringe meeting, he could see there might be some objections to voting to ban motions from unions. But no, the objections really didn't have any weight, because the motions never meant anything anyway.

In other words, a ban on working-class political input to the Labour Party doesn't matter, is no significant change - because the previous input was weak. Because union leaders never took it seriously anyway! Since things were hopeless and completely blocked before, there's been no change, so everything's OK and we should just carry on as usual...

The coup de grace very often is made without resistance, coming as it does after other coups. Bournemouth was the coup de grace.

2. TRADES COUNCILS AND "ECONOMISM"

The proposal about an orientation to Trades Councils (DB 275 or Solidarity 3/120) is not a

proposal to make Trades Councils the be-all-and-end-all of our work, or to believe that simply building strong Trades Councils regardless of politics (or on trade-unionist politics) would resolve the political impasse.

It is no more so than the call we have made over the last ten or more years, for the unions to fight against Blair and Brown, within the Labour structures, for union policies, was an expression of belief that the unions as such can ever be an adequate political vehicle for the working class, or that current union policies are adequate. That call was a specific demand aimed at a first point of leverage to open up things, not a self-sufficient programme.

Now that point of leverage has been effectively removed - or will have been removed if Bournemouth is consolidated. We need to look closer to the base to find points of leverage in the union movement. Thus, the Trades Councils. The orientation proposed is one of fighting to win hegemony for AWL politics in Trades Councils at the same time as fighting to build them up into stronger, more representative, livelier bodies.

3. TRADES COUNCILS AND "DIGGING DOWN"

Union branches are generally not thriving these days. A Marxist organisation which limited its orientation to the "trade-union branch activist" layer would be applying a strong conservative drag to itself. We need also to turn out to younger people, with No Sweat work, student work, Feminist Fightback work, and so on; and turn out to workers beyond the "trade-union branch activist" layer through ventures like the Tubeworker bulletin.

Trades Councils are by definition based on union branch activists. Thus an orientation to Trades Councils cannot encompass the whole of our activity. But it is an important part of our activity, just as union work in general is an important part of our activity but not the whole of it.

If we cannot "go round" the official union structures in general, still less can we "go round" them at local level. There may be freak exceptions, but in general there is no way that we can rally the working class of a city, a borough, or a constituency to act independently of politics without rally the lowest-level cross-union structure of that area, namely the Trades Council.

To repeat once again: we do not fetishise Trades Councils. We do not argue that socialists in any area should wait until they have "conquered" the Trades Council before using the electoral arena to build their forces. In fact the relationship may be the other way round: electoral activity may help the socialists build the membership and the political profile which in due course allows their influence to work through the relatively sluggish channels of the union branches and enables them to revive and win hegemony in the Trades Council.

4. THE "TWO-CLASS PARTY"

In the 6 October AWL dayschool on the Labour Party, in connection with the discussion point about Socialist Unity in 1979, TU asked what analysis the IMG in the 1970s made of the Labour Party.

The IMG, the main force in Socialist Unity, was the forerunner of today's ISG/Socialist Resistance; but in the early and mid 70s it was a relatively active and dynamic force. At its peak it had, I think, about 800 members, and those were 800 1970s-activists, generally far more active than the leftists of this decade. What it said was of some weight in the discourse of the left.

What did it say? From 1973 up to about 1976 (I'm writing from memory) it pushed a particular version of the "bourgeois workers' party" analysis which defined Labour as a "two-class party".

According to that version - originated in the 1920s by Zinoviev - the Labour Party was an uneasy alliance of two class forces. The unions represented the working-class element. Parliamentarians at the top of the party represented the bourgeois element. The task was to assert the working-class element and clear out the bourgeois element.

The IMG's scheme was based (as, I guess, Zinoviev's in the 1920s had been) on a period when, by way of exception, the unions sided with the left inside the Labour Party. It was based more specifically on the polarisation in the Labour Party in the early 1970s on the issue of the European Union (Common Market). The unions, and the Labour left, were against British entry and then for British withdrawal. The strong advocates of EU membership were the obvious bourgeois-politician types among the Labour MPs, people like Roy Jenkins.

Basing themselves on this analysis, the IMG for a considerable period centred their agitation round the slogan, "Unite the Left against Wilson".

We responded: (1) left unity on specific issues was desirable, but Marxists should also differentiate from the dominant politics of the left, the Alternative Economic Strategy; (2) specifically on Europe, the "left" was not in fact left but more reactionary than the Jenkins right; (3) the trade unions did not represent a clear working-class principle in the Labour Party. Historically, the unions had almost always been the bulwarks of the bourgeois Labour right; the brief period in the early 1970s of the unions siding with the Labour left was an exception (as it proved to be); in any case, the unions could never be an adequate political vehicle for the working class; trade-unionist politics are characteristically, and endemically, bourgeois politics.

To be more concise, you could say that the "two-class party" line was an eclectic ("on the one hand this, on the other hand that") rather than a dialectical (interpenetration of opposites) version of the "bourgeois workers' party" idea.

The IMG's enthusiasm for the "two-class party" idea waned after the main union leaders dramatically went over to Wilson in August 1975

(the £6 wage limit), and they drifted into the Socialist Unity venture as an empirical, untheorised rebound.

Possibly the necessary (but unusual, and in a way "one-sided") emphasis in our agitation over the last decade on making the unions fight for union policies within the Labour structures has bred in some of our minds a new version of that old "two-class party" scheme. Where the IMG had a "manic" version of the scheme - with a good push, the trade-union element in the Labour Party might oust the bourgeois element - we could fall into a "depressed" version - so long as the unions are incorporated somehow into the Labour structure, it remains a "workers' party" in some way.

But it doesn't. A union-based party with open channels for working-class input may be adjudged a "workers' party" of sorts even with bourgeois politics. A party which simply incorporates the unions into a client or lobbying role within bourgeois politics is not a workers' party in any sense. It is a mechanism for anchoring the unions to bourgeois politics.

5. CAN YOU "BUILD THE PARTY" WITHOUT BUILDING THE PARTY?

A new workers' party can be built in Britain only by... building a party, that is, by building an organisation of working-class activists strong enough and influential enough to rank as a "party", with working-class politics, i.e. a future expanded AWL or AWL-plus.

There is no other way. The party-building will not necessarily all be by one-by-one recruitment. In fact, almost certainly it won't be. There will also be processes of splits, fusions, regroupments.

In 1900 the small workers' proto-parties then existing, the ILP and SDF, managed to lever an important regroupment, bringing the unions into a broad federally-structured party within which the socialists had openings to win hegemony. In fact, the ILP did win hegemony within the Labour Party as it grew, only meanwhile the ILP's political weaknesses took more and more of a toll.

In the 1920s Trotsky speculated that the growth of communism to a mass force in the British labour movement might come through the then-revolutionary Communist Party displacing the ILP from its hegemonic role in the Labour Party.

What made the Labour Party a "workers' party", albeit "bourgeois workers' party", of interest to Marxists was the potentiality it had of a Marxist core like the 1920s Communist Party transforming it into a real workers' party. A "workers' party" where working-class politics and working-class interests can have no input is not a workers' party, however much money the trade unions pay into it! To make such abstract things as trade-union affiliation (but affiliation without political input!) define a Labour Party with Bournemouth consolidated would be as aberrant as the old "orthodox-Trotskyist" definition of the Stalinist USSR as a "workers' state" regardless of working-

class political input. It is to postulate that a "workers' party" can be sustained - without working-class activists actually building the party. It is a sort of Labourite inverse of those like the Socialist Party who look to political progress from appealing to the public at large to "build a new workers' party" or "campaign for a new workers' party". Or, worse than the SP, it is like the ex-Socialist-Alliance types who shy away from all actual revolutionary organisations (proto-parties) but appeal to the left-wing public at large to create a "workers' party" big and broad enough that they can join it while bypassing the tiresome business of building up an actual party from tiny, to small, to big.

6. "BUILD A NEW WORKERS' PARTY"

In the Socialist Alliance, circa 2003, some used to argue that there were only three possible political perspectives for the left: popular-frontism as per Respect, reclaim the Labour Party, or "build a new workers' party".

Fortunately, as yet, no-one in the AWL has concluded from Bournemouth that we should raise the catchcry "build a new workers' party". Obviously we want a new workers' party. We're for "build a new workers' party" as we are for "win socialism". But to make "win socialism" an immediate slogan would be to mislead, by suggesting that "socialism" can be an immediate available answer without a working class ready to fight for it. In fact, our job is to work to help the working class make itself ready to fight for socialism.

To make "build a new workers' party" an immediate slogan is to mislead by suggesting that "a workers' party" can emerge without either an adequate organised core of Marxist working-class political activists, or the broad layer of combative class-conscious workers necessary to give it a base. In fact, our job is to build that adequate organised core, and to help that broad layer emerge and organise.

Below is what I wrote on this issue in *Solidarity* 3/49, 8 April 2004.

As far as I know, the catchphrase "Build the revolutionary party!" or "Build the party!" was first used as a regular slogan, directed at the general public, by French Trotskyists in the mid-1940s. Similar phrases will have been used by Marxists before then, as exhortations to their own activists or sympathisers, or as occasional rhetoric; but that was, I think, the first time the slogan "build the party" was offered to the public at large as instruction on what they should do to better their lot.

In the 1970s the catchphrase was revived by Gerry Healy's Workers' Revolutionary Party (now defunct, but until 1975 the biggest group on the activist left) and then by the Socialist Workers Party. The SWP have continued to use it, with variants such as "Build the socialist alternative", until recently.

Today, "build the party" agitation is being revived, as "build a new workers' party", or "campaign for a workers' party". In a strange twist, these slogans are pushed mostly not by the organisations which do work to "build a party" - as the AWL, the SWP, and so on, do, in different ways because we have different ideas of the politics needed - but by activists who once were members of "party-building" organisations, but quit for various reasons, and now operate through looser or ad hoc groupings. The non-party-builders tell the party-builders that we should should "build the party"! What party? At least it was clear what the WRP and SWP meant: "Join our organisation". The problem was that the slogan covered up absence or poverty of wider political perspectives. But now what? A broad party! The Scottish Socialist Party, we are told, is one good model of how to do it; Rifondazione in Italy is another. The AWL, the SWP, and so on, are all just factions. Something much broader is needed, and possible. It is possible because the crisis of capitalism has extinguished the possibilities of reformism, and the consequent reformist collapse has left a vacuum in working-class politics, waiting to be filled. The old arguments - reform and revolution, and so on - should not detain us. Now, neither the SSP nor Rifondazione was created by people distributing leaflets broadcast, in Scotland or in Italy, to "campaign for a workers' party". Each was launched by a core of activists - the Scottish Militant, or the left of the old Italian Communist Party - building up a position sufficiently "hegemonic" on the left that it could take an initiative to reach out. [And their future depended on that core being politically good enough, or being replaced by a different core which was good enough. In fact the cores were not good enough, and were not replaced. Hence both SSP and Rifondazione have gone belly-up, in different ways, since 2004. "Broadness" does not automatically bring virtue]. How do we get the strong core? Or do we rely on someone else (the SWP?) becoming strong enough, and then kindly agreeing to form a new party catholic enough for the smaller groups and the scattered activists to join? Does it not matter what the politics of the core are? There is no magic leapfrog over the difficulties and battles of the existing activist left factions. Where there really is a "vacuum on the left", at present - and it is a difficulty, not an opportunity - is in theoretical and political life... Marxist organisations can grow - but only by actively convincing people, working on the contradictions and diverging impulses in their thinking, not by regarding them as vacuum-heads who can be instantly corralled into a "broad" party if only we deliberately make our message ambiguous enough.