

REPORT FROM THE RMT CONFERENCE JAN 21 2006

The Conference began promptly at 12 midday, with 350 people crammed into a rather small hall, and a further 100 locked outside. As a result, we could not do much leafleting before conference, instead giving out both SA leaflets at the end of the conference.

All the speakers on the platform denounced the Labour Party for turning so far to the right. RMT Secretary Bob Crow set things off by saying "We need a debate". He said that anyone who thought that New Labour could be reclaimed should explain how. Although he reminded comrades this was not a conference to start a new party, and said that the issue of working class representation was wider than just the party question, he called for a new national shop stewards movement and stated that he did not believe the Labour Party could be reclaimed. He asked what the new strategy should be, and asked where the other trade union leaders were politically.

This sort of anti Labour view was echoed by other speakers. Colin Fox from the SSP described how they were fighting Labour in Scotland to abolish prescription charges, re-introduce free school meals and replace the council tax with a local income tax. The working class were turning away from Labour, hence the need for a new left party south of the border. The SSP would continue working with Respect and the Socialist Alliance in the meantime. The Chair of the Labour Representation Committee, John McDonnell MP, argued that there were real opportunities today to rebuild the left, building on the massive protests against globalisation. The left was establishing itself in the trade unions. There was a strong potential for a united front on specific issues which could then be linked. The left needed to work together in non sectarian ways. New organisational forms will emerge from the struggle, he concluded, without actually calling for the formation of a new party.

Former Labour MP and Socialist councillor Dave Nellist clearly did the make the call for a new Workers' Party, and announced that the SP would be calling a follow up conference on March 19th at ULU in London as part of their campaign for a new Workers' Party. He spoke about the massive inequalities in society and described how a new left party would challenge that. The party must be open, democratic and socialist, committed to ending the occupation of Iraq and overturning privatisation, as well promoting wealth redistribution. A theme could be Public Funding of Public Services under Public Control.

Green Party MEP Jean Lambert understood why the left needed a new party. She called for reform of the electoral system to enable more greens and socialists to be elected, as had happened in Scotland and Europe. She also argued that action outside of parliament was just as important, and she called on trade unions to work with both Green and Left MPs and councillors. The final speaker, Liz Green from the SLP spoke of the need to be positive rather than just attacking Labour. She argued that the SLP was broad and socialist, but members were unfairly labelled as pariahs by both the right and the left.

The following points were made from the floor:

- There is a serious need to avoid electoral clashes
- Labour's move to the right makes the formation of a new left party that much more urgent
- Today's meeting should be the start of the process of building a new party
- We have a wealth of experience between us
- The SSP began as the SSA – a new Party can not simply be declared
- We need a further meeting to push forward the idea of a new party, and this process should involve the Socialist Alliance and Respect
- Respect has come from nowhere to demonstrate the potential that exists for left success
- A central theme for any new party must be accountability
- Trade Unions must be represented at the heart of any new political project

The Chair informed the Conference that the RMT Executive will receive a full report of the Conference and then decide on the next step

SOCIALIST PARTY FRINGE MEETING

Over 100 of those at the RMT Conference stayed in the building for a further two hours for the SP Fringe Meeting, chaired by Dave Nellist. The Meeting was addressed by UNISON's Roger Bannister, Mick Barry, SP Councillor from Ireland, and SP NEC Member Hannah Sell. The main purpose of the meeting was for the SP to outline their Campaign for a New Workers' Party. Dave Nellist made it clear that the Conference which had been called to progress the Campaign for March 19th at ULU would be open and democratic. A Campaign Committee would be elected to pursue the project. It was also made clear that, although the SP was keen to recruit and build the SP, the New Workers' Party needed to go well beyond the ranks of the SP. When Peter Taffe spoke from the floor, he echoed Hannah Sell's call for the new Party to be federal in structure to encourage groups to retain their identity whilst becoming part of the new project. Other speakers from the floor included Steve Freeman, who spoke on behalf of the Socialist Alliance. He reminded the audience that many of them including Dave Nellist had been members of the SA. The new SA was promoting the traditional SA policy of socialist unity and co-operation between socialist organisations, and was also taking up the party question. The SP's Clive Heemskirk had already been to the Council of Socialist Organisations to speak about the SP campaign and it was to be recommended to the SA executive that we affiliate. There was already much interest within the SA for a new type of party. Steve concluded by pointing to a dangerous crisis of democracy in Britain because of the over-centralisation of power in the hands of Blair and the attack on civil liberties.

Pete McLaren
National Secretary, SA