

THE LOCAL STATE.

Big Flame has in the past had a clear line about the role of the local state as part of the structures that capitalism uses to keep control. Although offering services these, though they have for the working class some real values, are also, in their administration and organisation, ways themselves of limiting us, and gaining more control over daily life. The struggle for services, then has traditionally been seen as having to go hand in hand with struggles for control over these services to be given to those who use them and work in them.

Traditionally this has left a gap between us and many other socialists. Recently the Labour Party has seen the seizure of Town Hall structures as one of the main ways of its strategy, and as a way of redressing the ways of the old guard in the party. How does this change our relationship to the new LP and what are the problems of dealing with the 'new left' councils.

In the BF Election special a short piece appeared on this subject. To try to see if anyone else has any other ideas here is the longer version of the article. The conclusion would appear to be that while there are more times now than before when we will find ourselves struggling alongside and with activists from the LP, there will be times when this alliance will be one in which we find we are on opposite sides as well as the same.....an unfriendly alliance.

The piece concerns events which have taken place recently in the London Borough of Southwark, where recently one of the new left councils has come to power. What differences has this made to local people?

THE BUILD UP.

In the south London Borough of Southwark the Labour Party was in difficulties. They had been in power for some considerable time, but with the party dominated by the right, much of their policy making was a long way from the actual aspirations of the people of the Borough. In the period leading up to the election this was highlighted by the decision of the tenants movement to stand candidates against leading lights in the LP.. The massive failure to be able to deal effectively with the problems of housing in a Borough which has the highest proportion of municipal housing of any London Borough was key in the rembling dissatisfaction which threatened the safe majority held. But it wasn't only housing. The Borough has long had a reputation of one of the worst employers around. Wages are not comparable with other London Boroughs, and the work load for staff very high. Coupled with the run down of the Direct Labour service, the handing over of the building works division into private hands, cooperation with the land speculators over the valuable sites in the north of the Borough against the opposition of strong locally based campaigns, the now famous social workers strike, and the dust strikes were all hallmarks of the Council's term of office.

LABOUR TAKES CONTROL.

The response of the party was fairly typical. The 'new left' decided to take over the machinery of power. This was done with quite an effective campaign inside the party itself. One key thing to remember about such a process is that it starts from the presumption that change inside the Labour Party is enough and neglects to examine the wide rift that has developed between the party and the class movements as a whole.

A radical new manifesto was developed in conjunction with the trade union and tenants movements and with other groups from the community as a preparation, and at the elections the new left was rewarded by a larger majority than at any time in Southwark's history as the almost entirely new slate of candidates swept the board. So was all well for the big leap forwards? Not quite as we shall see. Since the arrival of the new left wing council there has been little change for local people. Instead a new set of problems are being faced and the key issues remain to be solved by the people themselves acting through their various organisations and groups.

WORSE FOR SOME GROUPS.

There are certain sectors of the progressive movement that we in BF take as key to the development of an effective revolutionary movement. Two of these movements are the women's movement and the movement of black people. In the new dawn for Southwark neither have had major problems solved, though these could have been dealt with, even with an unfriendly central government. For women the question of housing is a central one and the Council have ducked some key issues here. Presently the Womens Aid Federation are having to campaign hard to see if they can get the council to agree to fund their remaining refuges in the area after the failure of their Urban Aid applications.

More serious for them is the fact that the Council has still not reformed its policy of using refuges as dumping grounds for women who apply to them as homeless, despite the fact that a recent High Court ruling that councils should not use refuges as long term accommodation, and that while a woman was in a refuge, she was still officially homeless and the council's duty to rehouse, under the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977 would not be discharged until a permanent home had been found for her. In spite of this the Council still has no clear guidelines on rehousing women from the refuges.

Black groups have similar problems. The council didn't list a single black project in its priorities for Urban Aid, and the blatant racism uncovered at one of the District Offices, where black people were being asked to show their passports before being allowed to register on the waiting list, while getting the obligatory denunciation from the Council resulted in no one being disciplined and the black communities demand for an enquiry being ignored.

NOT JUST LACK OF VISION.

The point here seems to be that even the new left of the Labour Party seems to lack more than just any understanding of the fact that for most people their experiences of the so called services provided are extremely alienating and oppressive. The whole structure and organisation of the services is wrong and needs a total taking apart and rebuilding, from the bottom upwards, involving both workers and users in new forms which put control into their hands, so that services can truly begin to be remoulded to meet needs.

If this lack of vision leads the Labour Council to find itself trapped between a hostile government on the one hand and its own people on the other, without the means to mobilise the support it needs from those people if there is to be developed the kind of resistance that would be necessary to begin on such a path of revolutionary change, then that would be bad enough. What's worse is that even in the areas where it appears that the local authority has some power to change things, then there doesn't seem enough understanding to even support the progressive movements.

Instead these groups find themselves under attack and that they have to fight both Tory and Labour (and SDP/Lib if they are around!) to get anywhere near the things they basically need.

THE LEFT IN THE LABOUR PARTY.

This is not to say that there are not any people in the Labour Party who themselves would want to work more closely with the progressive movements, but ~~there~~ it does seem to me that not only does the Labour Party not have any real relationship with the progressive movement, but also it is either incapable of or doesn't understand how to go about building that relationship. For the Labour Party to even start to become as concerned and related to these movements as some of us would hope is only likely to come about as a result of a long struggle..... we aren't there yet! Its therefore very dangerous to suppose that people can depend on the LP to deliver the goods, and the main message has to be that people will have to struggle against both Tory and Labour to win what they want, and need.

In this respect while it is possible for us in specific campaigns to make alliances with the Labour left...and in these troubled times I might even go so far as to say its necessary to do that, we have to remember that the alliance between us is always likely to be an uneasy one and one which is filled with conflicts of interest..... not an alliance of natural allies but an unfriendly alliance in which we will have to argue and fight for the right of people, even the need of people to organise autonomously, and to point out all the time the ground on which the contradictions are present.

The problematic of this is great, but one in which we will have to retain and argue for a real revolutionary alternative if its going to work.

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SECRET