

Marxism and electoral tactics

Letter to the Weekly Worker by Steve Wallis (www.socialiststeve.me.uk), 24th May 2011
Published in edited form, 26th May 2011 at www.cpgb.org.uk.

Mike Macnair ('Propaganda and agitation', April 28) pointed out "there is very little in Marx and Engels' writings on electoral tactics". He went on "Engels says that Keir Hardie 'publicly declares that [Irish nationalist Charles Stewart] Parnell's experiment, which compelled Gladstone to give in, ought to be repeated at the next election and, where it is impossible to nominate a Labour candidate, one should vote for the Conservatives, in order to show the Liberals the power of the party. Now this is a policy which under definite circumstances I myself recommended to the English...'"

This is a massive revelation - that Engels actually supported a vote for the Tories under certain circumstances! He warns, however, that "if at the very outset one does not announce it as a possible tactical move but proclaims it as tactics to be followed under any circumstances."

The biggest lesson to draw is that electoral strategy and tactics that is correct at one time may not be correct at another. I was a member of the Militant Tendency, now the Socialist Party in England and Wales, from 1990-98. I fully supported the Scottish turn – establishing Scottish Militant Labour, an extremely successful strategy leading to Tommy Sheridan getting elected from his prison cell (for defying the poll tax) to Glasgow City Council in 1992, after coming second to Labour in the general election. This led on to a few more electoral victories for SML, the establishment of the Scottish Socialist Alliance (it would have been sectarian to carry on alone) and the later formation of the Scottish Socialist Party.

I left the Socialist Party when it failed to support the establishment of the SSP (also to reveal the high degree of state infiltration I believed present in the CWI to a wider audience, preferring to resign than be disloyal and get expelled) in 1998. The SSP was a very successful project, winning one seat (Sheridan's) in 1999 and six seats in 2003 (including over 15% in Glasgow, with Rosie Kane joining Tommy at Holyrood).

Contrary to how it is expressed in the Weekly Worker, this was not a failure despite the disintegration of the SSP after the Sheridan affair. The best tactics to adopt now are very different - there is a need for a Scottish Revolutionary Socialist Party, as well a broad socialist party like the SSP and Solidarity. Revolutionary platforms of broad socialist parties, including Labour, would also be a massive step forward.

We, in the Foundation for PR-based Socialism, have put forward different tactics at different times. In the era of New Labour, the headline "Vote Socialist, Green or Liberal Democrat – and prepare for a Greece-style revolt!" in www.prsocialism.org/newsletter8.pdf was, on balance, correct. Even within the same election, different tactics can be apt at different times. Thus newsletter 10 argued for a vote for Socialist, Green or Labour candidates, which was useful for distribution in Manchester and Liverpool. However, I spoke to Phil Kent at the CPGB centre on election day and he persuaded me to adopt a "Vote Socialist/Anti-Cuts and prepare for a Greece-style revolt!" headline (www.prsocialism.org/newsletter11.pdf) – much better for distribution in Preston to help Michael Lavalette get 860 votes, nearly beating Labour (who incidentally cheated – I am prepared to testify in court that they distributed leaflets with reasons to vote Labour within polling stations, to get the result overturned).

A final question – was the Foundation correct in arguing for a vote for Barack Obama?

Steve Wallis
Foundation for PR-based Socialism