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Quick reply to: ‘The case for an electoral party’

Mike Sabot

March 4, 2014

The only reliable and sustainable basis on which to build a left party is to orientate it towards the only democratic institutions that everyone can engage in and the only institutions that have democratic authority over society – parliamentary elections. In Scotland that means, most importantly, Holyrood.

Generally those in the parliamentary left don’t attempt to justify why they participate in elections and see it not only as a useful form of action but, in fact, the primary means of bringing about fundamental social change. It’s just what socialists do, right? Ben Wray should be thanked for elaborating on this. Nonetheless, I’d argue that his case for an electoral party is contradictory and rests on a number of unfounded assumptions. I doubt I can change his mind, but I do think it’s possible and really important that more people are brought around to libertarian communist politics. That means organising as a class where it matters, outside and against parliament.

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I'll try and keep this brief and directly respond to some of the points made.

Let's start at the very end of the piece where it's said that the broad idea is that of 'challenging the system at its point of greatest weakness: the governmental level'. It seems a bit odd that I need to make this argument, but assuming we're talking about capitalism here, surely other socialists would agree that the working class is strongest at the point of production and at work in general. It's there that we can disrupt capital, through organising we can force our demands on employers, or harm their profits through threats of collective action, and actual striking, go-slows, sabotage etc. This isn't to say that organising around unpaid labour, in our neighbourhoods and against oppressions isn't absolutely essential and isn't just as important to transform society, but we need to try to link these struggles to the strategic site of production and work.

By contrast, the influence we can have as a class at the level of government is minimal, except where our extra-parliamentary movements can 'wring' reforms out of it.

Some leftists will recoil immediately, arguing that 'parliament isn't democratic, it doesn't serve the people and the working class increasingly don't trust it and don't vote'. This is all true but it isn't a convincing argument against engaging in parliamentary elections because there are no alternative democratic institutions which possess anywhere near the same democratic legitimacy in society as parliament does.

On the one hand, it's accepted that parliament isn't 'democratic' but on the other, it still has 'democratic legitimacy' and is the only institution that 'everyone can engage in'.

In practice, the mainstream left really does accept *and endorse* parliament as democracy in action, or close enough, and that it's possible to control it for progressive ends. Otherwise, why bother?

The history of left-wing electoral parties around the world is one where the elites were not threatened by their entry into parliament. In fact, in Britain, the Labour Party was welcomed by many existing parliamentarians as a reasonable, collaborative bunch who would help to control the extremists in the labour movement and work for the national good. They were right. The working class is strong to the extent that it is autonomous and can act in its own class interests outside of the state.

Where left-wing electoral parties exist in parliament, the extra-parliamentary left should try to argue the case for class struggle politics with their grassroots, use pressure to gain concessions, and keep up a constant critique of the leadership.

But the critique of the institution isn't explored because it's seen as unrealistic to reject something which undeniably a) has real power, and b) is understood to be the political arena by the majority. This is what 'democratic legitimacy' really means here.

The communist argument would be that you don't start with what is seen as 'legitimate' or not, or where the majority are. It is axiomatic that, outside of a period of mass struggle, most people won't seriously question existing social relations. Gradualist reform and social democracy will be seen as all that's on offer. What works and how we can recreate a militant labour movement is a different question entirely.

What are some basic points against electoralism?

- Most people *can't* meaningfully engage in it. That's the point. Representation takes decision-making power away from working class people and invests it in a small minority. This order-giver versus order-taker split is an expression of the wider class society.
- If they're to be successful, electoral parties have to become 'popular' rather than 'class'-based. They seek coalitions and try not to appear too radical to attract support. The more mainstream they become the greater the chance of gaining seats.
- Often these parties are mobilised behind a dominant personality with charisma and oratory skills. How exactly do you avoid the situation where some individuals accumulate more power or importance?
- Some like to argue that it's possible to be both 'on the streets' and in parliament. In reality, parliament takes first place and tends to push out everything else. Where parties are involved in extra-parliamentary activity it's usually to its detriment, by co-opting things or exploiting them.

- Whatever the manifesto of left-wing parties, parliament and government is concerned with the political management of capitalist society. It isn't structurally possible to challenge capital through the state and it's questionable to what extent reforms can be passed without the leverage of a militant labour movement, and in this conjuncture.
- The function of electoral parties on the left, arguing the case for a better-run capitalism – whatever the radical rhetoric – is to demobilize and divert from more serious threats, like rank-and-file direct action.

Don't get me wrong, I am not for becoming like the politicians. I believe representatives should take a workers wage; I believe they should be accountable to the community they are elected from

None of these things would let the electoral party off the hook from 'becoming like the politicians'. A workers' wage doesn't challenge the hierarchical relationship of representative to represented. And politicians speak all the time about being accountable but most people know this is meaningless. Only recallable delegates are genuinely accountable.

Those who don't vote aren't setting up co-operatives to run communities or workers' councils to run workplaces. Their process of re-engagement and democratic renewal will likely pass through parliamentary elections on their way to participatory democratic control of society, if we are to ever get there.

Not voting isn't important in itself, and for the growing distrust of politicians and the electoral process to achieve anything it would have to find expression in new forms of organising. But it'd be naive to think that participatory or direct democracy is something

that will be proclaimed one day by parliament – handed down from above. Rather it needs to be prefigured in whatever struggle we're involved in.

The point is, however apparently dire our situation and despite the broad extra-parliamentary left being a small minority, it is both possible and absolutely necessary that we create new directly democratic institutions. Coming from a revolutionary unionist or syndicalist position, I see unions 'as associations of workers', rather than as representatives or service-providers, as probably the most crucial institutional forms for class struggle.¹ The fact that the trade union movement is so weak means that we actually have an opportunity to go about building a new labour movement controlled from below and rejecting collaboration with bosses.

A false dichotomy is sometimes raised by the mainstream left that you either have to accept electoralism or you're for some sort of revolutionary insurrection tomorrow. Instead, we need to take the long road of trying to spread militant rank-and-file organising, of winning small but significant victories and gaining strength. Whether it's the IWGB in the Tres Cosas Campaign, the IWW in organising service workers or in setting up rank-and-file networks in, for example, the education sector, SolFed's campaign against workfare – these are all examples of radical unions 'as associations' doing really inspiring work. I'd also add Glasgow SolNet's direct action victories for private tenants and ECAP's actions by and for claimants, as examples of union-like structures outside the workplace.

Put it this way – what do you think the capitalist elite want us to do? Leave parliament to their mates and focus on extra-parliamentary activism, or challenge for democratic control over society? The question should answer itself.

¹ For the difference, see the excellent SolFed pamphlet *Fighting for Ourselves*, pp 12–13.