

Britain: How the Socialist Workers Party rooted for Livingstone and Labour

By Chris Marsden
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In the days immediately following the May 1 contest for London mayor, the Socialist Workers Party published online a number of articles attempting to explain the poor showing of its candidates for the London Assembly and mayoral candidate Lindsay German, standing as the Left List. These were accompanied by articles on why the incumbent mayor, Labour's Ken Livingstone, was defeated by the right-wing Conservative Boris Johnson.

The mayoral contest took place at the same time as local elections in England and Wales, which witnessed a rout of Labour that mainly benefited the Conservative Party. Much of the SWP's commentary on Labour's performance nationally was a by-the-numbers description of Prime Minister Gordon Brown's right-wing policies and how the government had been punished by the electorate for this.

Its coverage of London was of greater significance. In "Right-wing Policies to Blame for Gordon Brown's Rout," the SWP states, "Ken Livingstone's defeat as London mayor was a direct result of him throwing his lot in with New Labour—both by association and by promoting policies that centred on building the capital as a centre for world finance."

The piece went on to describe the "disappointing results for the Left List, polling 0.92 percent (22,583 votes) in the London-wide assembly list and around 1.36 percent (33,438 votes) in the constituency ballots. In the mayoral election the Left List vote [for Lindsay German] came in at 0.68 percent (16,796 votes)," adding, "The recent split in Respect undoubtedly damaged the left as a whole. The combined vote of the Left List and George Galloway's Respect Renewal fell below Respect's London assembly vote in 2004."

Galloway's Respect Renewal, from which the SWP split last year, did not stand a mayoral candidate. Its list of assembly secured 59,721 votes, or 2.43 percent.

The SWP attributes its much reduced vote to the "closely fought mayoral contest between Ken Livingstone and Boris Johnson" having dominated the London elections.

The SWP also posted an article, "Ken Livingstone's Long March to the Right." After noting his "capitulation to a right-wing agenda" and describing this as a "tragedy," the article presents a potted history of how Livingstone stood as an independent candidate for mayor in 2000 and won, only to make his peace with Labour and stand once again as its candidate in 2004. "Many who had previously voted for Livingstone were stunned that he returned to Labour at precisely the time when opposition to the war in Iraq was at its height," the SWP states. Instead of explaining that this confirmed that Livingstone's break with Labour was purely opportunist and determined by consideration of how to advance his own career, the article claims that "Livingstone's strategy was to try to use his position and policies to shift Labour leftwards." But instead, "New Labour started dragging Livingstone rightwards" as he "increasingly positioned himself as a champion of the City, the financial centre of London."

The article concludes, "In the end it was Livingstone's association with the government and its assault on working people that broke both him and those on the left in London who attached themselves so closely to him."

The SWP also reports the fact that "the fascist British National Party (BNP) has managed to grab an assembly seat in London," winning "5.3 percent of the London-wide assembly vote, as compared to 4.7 percent in 2004," as well as gaining 10 council seats nationally. This is blamed on "the political and media establishment that has whipped up a storm of racism against Muslims and immigrants in recent years," with New Labour ministers cloaking themselves "in the Union Jack," joining in "the chorus of right-wing attacks on our multicultural society" and lashing out "at Muslims to find a scapegoat for their disastrous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan," etc., etc.

There are occasions when an example of naked opportunism and political duplicity can take your breath away. This is one of them. The SWP states that the Tories and the BNP did well in London and nationally because of New Labour's right-wing and even racist policies and because of Livingstone's support for this self-same pro-business agenda. This in turn "broke both [Livingstone] and those on the left in London who attached themselves so closely to him."

If one had only read the SWP's post-election analysis, one could be forgiven for thinking that they had just come out of an election campaign fought on the basis of trenchant criticism of both Labour and Livingstone—unlike their rivals in Galloway's Respect Renewal. The SWP's article "Move to the Right Punishes New Labour for 10 Wasted Years" sneers at Livingstone for having made "a side-deal with George Galloway" by supporting his election during a visit to Galloway's Bethnal Green and Bow constituency in East London.

"The problem now is that everyone is going down with the ship," they complain. "Of course the Tory tide is the main reason for all this. But the rest of the left's attachment to Livingstone has prevented them from standing out as a clear alternative to Labour around which a minority could have rallied."

In reality, the only distinction between the Left List and Respect Renewal regarding an attachment to Livingstone was Lindsay German's decision to stand for mayor, which had been declared publicly before the Galloway/SWP split. Afterwards, Respect Renewal refused to put up its own candidate, with Galloway writing in the *Guardian*, on January 25, that "for the left, Livingstone is the only viable option for the post of London's mayor." Faced with the possibility of a victory for Johnson, "it would be self-indulgence, a luxury the left can no longer afford, to stand a candidate of the left against Livingstone for mayor. The danger of his defeat by the right is too great."

But German's position and that of the SWP was only once removed from this level of obsequiousness. She not only called for a second preference vote for Livingstone from those voting for her under the supplementary voting system, but even portrayed the Left List's campaign for seats in the London Assembly as a means of increasing

Livingstone's own vote!

The SWP's post-election critique of Livingstone was made necessary because nothing was said against him in the crucial final weeks of the election campaign in the pages of the *Socialist Worker*. The last critical article posted was on April 9, "Ken Livingstone's Move to the Right is at the Root of his Crisis." But even then Chris Bamberry argued that the Left List's strategy was the best way of getting out the vote for Livingstone and Labour. Both were so openly right-wing that "simply calling for people to vote for New Labour to keep out Johnson and the BNP does not work. The reason that they may gain in the elections is because swathes of working class Londoners cannot bring themselves to vote Labour."

Bamberry finished with a pledge of loyalty noting that Livingstone has "said the second votes of those voting Left List, Green and other parties could be key to his being returned. Lindsey German has made it clear that the Left List is calling for a vote for her first and Livingstone second."

The Left List's published election platform was framed as a list of "Policy Priorities"—on housing, transport, education and health, young people, inequality, crime, the environment, the 2012 Olympics in London, work, war and civil liberties. Most of these policies focused exclusively on London, but without even mentioning Livingstone or his record in office. And even when dealing with national and international issues such as Iraq and Afghanistan, there was no mention of the Labour government. Its filmed election broadcast criticized New Labour and "the people who run London," but not Livingstone by name. An accompanying film on YouTube featuring German is substantially dedicated to explaining how her second preference vote will be transferred to "Ken."

On April 15 German was interviewed by *Pink News*. After pointing out that she was calling for a second preference vote for Livingstone, she was asked whether "he is a good mayor?" She evaded the question, stating only that he "is a lot less popular than four years ago," while insisting that "Boris Johnson would be a disaster for London and it is important to keep him out."

The pro-Labour *Guardian*, which campaigned aggressively for Livingstone, was clear about the real character of the SWP's campaign and the significance of its endorsement of Livingstone as a shame-faced endorsement of Labour. On April 22, political editor Michael White wrote a column entitled, "A matter of preferences". He noted that "Despite being highly critical of the London mayor's regime, the Left List is urging its supporters to give their second preference votes to Ken Livingstone." He continued with an injunction and a warning: "Pay attention, you non-Londoners. If Ken Livingstone loses in the capital on May 1, Gordon Brown's encircling enemies, left and right, will redouble their efforts against him."

On April 29, two days before the poll, a letter from German was published in the *Guardian*, in which she declared, "Left List candidates have consistently called on our supporters to give their second preference vote to Livingstone." She added that "We believe that our campaign will bring voters to the polls who would not otherwise vote, and we will do our best to ensure that they vote to stop the advance of the Tories under Boris Johnson."

Nothing could make clearer that fact that the SWP's campaign, far from being in any way independent of Labour and Livingstone was, just like that of Galloway, a left adjunct of Livingstone's bid for re-election. The SWP has made much of the fact that the *Guardian* edited German's letter and printed it "with all the criticism taken out." The *Guardian* is guilty as charged and should rightly be denounced for its editorial censorship. But the "criticisms" that were removed are framed as friendly advice to "Ken" to "inspire and encourage traditional left of centre voters who are a majority in London."

"We will do our best in this regard," she adds, "but *he could do so much more* if he decisively altered course and speak [sic] up for London's

workers against London's rich" (emphasis added).

The SWP's position is explicitly not only a defence of Livingstone, but of the Labour Party. In her own post-election analysis, German emphasizes that the Left List prefers "Labour to the Tories." Given that the SWP made clear that its candidates were nothing more than left critics of Livingstone and Labour, little wonder then that those who agreed with its central message of voting to keep out the Tories held their nose and put a cross next to the name of the organ grinder and not the monkey.

That is certainly one reason why the Left List and Respect Renewal were "squeezed." But this is far from the whole story. Workers did not need the SWP to tell them after the event that Labour had betrayed them, or that Livingstone is a loyal Labourite and big business politician. They know this very well and have turned away from Labour in droves. Even in London, where turnout was higher than normal, 55 percent of the electorate stayed away from the ballot box. And nationally abstentions were much higher.

The SWP now writes that "the reality is that the government's policies mean many traditional Labour supporters can no longer face voting for the party of war, privatisation and pay cuts." Yet, this hostility was not encouraged and given political leadership by the SWP. Instead of waging an implacable struggle against Labour, it continues to proclaim it as the "lesser evil" and somehow still deserving of support. Likewise Labour's man in London—someone who the SWP acknowledges waged a "campaign with its endorsements from Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, Alistair Campbell, the City of London"—was supported by them until the very day he was deservedly kicked out of office.

It is a central responsibility of socialists in Britain to insist that there is no "lesser evil" for workers. There is nothing today that fundamentally distinguishes the Labour Party from the Conservative Party. They are merely competing over who can most efficiently represent big business.

Labour has abandoned wholesale its old reformist policies and been transformed into the political representative of an international oligarchy of the super-rich, dedicated to clawing back all of the social gains made by the working class in the name of global competitiveness and pursuing colonial wars of conquest to secure the British bourgeoisie's share of oil and other vital resources. Unless working people build their own party, then they face grave dangers. So long as the working class is excluded from the political arena, so long as it remains tied to the rotting corpse of the Labour Party, then it will be unable to mount the counteroffensive that is urgently needed against the attacks being waged on its living standards and democratic rights. And the political vacuum created by Labour's collapse *will* be filled by the most reactionary forces.

German now writes of "all the left from Livingstone to the Left List" being "overwhelmed by the massive rejection of New Labour that benefited the Tories and, even more worryingly, the BNP." But the SWP also bears its share of responsibility for this situation. Its leadership has associated the "left" with Labour and Livingstone. It has offered the example of a nominally "socialist" and "revolutionary" party supporting a government that is almost universally hated by the electorate.

This gives the Tories, and even the BNP, the opportunity to exploit rising social and political discontent and channel it in a reactionary direction. The Conservatives have even attempted to portray themselves as being to the left of Labour, on its abandonment of the ten pence income tax band on the first £1,500 of taxable income and particularly in civil liberty issues. The SWP choose to portray the BNP's vote as due purely to racism and xenophobia. The far-right party certainly benefits from the anti-immigrant sentiment and nationalism whipped up by the official parties and the media. But it also wins support amongst politically disoriented sections of workers and the middle class by making populist appeals focusing on the betrayals of the Labour government and by exploiting rising hostility to Livingstone, Brown and their ilk.

The May 1 election campaign has again demonstrated that, whatever its

rhetorical denunciations of “New Labour,” the SWP continues to oppose a decisive political break with Labour and the building of a genuine socialist party in favour of boosting the left credentials of whatever Labourite or trade union bureaucrat makes a feint of opposing Brown’s more obscene policies. It thus plays a key role in politically disarming the working class and perpetuating the stranglehold of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. The SWP has now been forced to belatedly distance itself from Livingstone, but nothing else will change. It will continue to loyally call for the working class to critically support and vote for Labour—and will probably do so until the very moment that the party disintegrates.

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