

UK General Election: Green Party offers no real alternative to austerity and militarism

By Chris Marsden
24 April 2015

The Green Party has achieved a new level of public prominence in the UK, held up by the media as a left alternative to Labour.

The Scottish National Party (SNP) praise it as the English arm of a potential “progressive alliance,” which, together with Plaid Cymru (the Party of Wales), can form an anti-Conservative bloc with Labour that will push Ed Miliband’s party to the left. The party itself speaks of a “Green surge” of new members, while its leader Natalie Bennett has been included in all the official televised debates as a measure of its growing influence.

This is designed to cause confusion as to what the party truly represents.

Its claims to a “left” agenda, even when taken on their face, are thin. The key measures advocated touch on the concerns of broad layers of working people, but they offer very little of substance.

Its manifesto “for the common good” promises an end to austerity, to “close the gap between the rich and the poor” and bring about a more equal, democratic and humane society. It contains a pledge to protect the National Health Service from “creeping privatisation,” initially increasing the NHS budget by £12 billion a year to overcome its funding crisis and then by 1.2 percent in real terms. It promises to renationalise the railways, decommission Trident nuclear weapons, abolish the “bedroom tax,” increase the minimum wage to £10 an hour, build 500,000 social housing units, cap rents, de-stigmatise benefits by introducing a “citizen’s income” payable to everyone, crackdown on tax evasion and avoidance and create 1 million public sector jobs, etc.

However, having made its electoral pitch to the millions of people suffering from increasing hardship, the party stresses that everything is “fully costed.” This guarantee is designed to fend off attacks from the right, but unintentionally exposes how limited the Green’s measures are in the face of the assault waged on the working class.

A £10 an hour minimum wage will only be achieved by 2020 and is offset by cuts to tax credits (state-funded subsidises to low paid workers). The “citizen’s income,” available to all and supposedly “enough to meet the basic needs of everyone,” is set at £72 a week—nice as a top-up, but not so great if you are unemployed and reliant on such a paltry sum.

In similar fashion, measures to be taken against the rich are exceedingly modest—a top rate of income tax of 60 pence on the pound above £150,000 and a wealth tax of “up to 2 percent” on the assets of the country’s richest 1 percent—300,000 people who

are worth more than £3 million. There is in addition a promise to “curb boardroom excesses” by limiting salaries at the top of companies to 10 times those at the bottom.

No solution under capitalism

The problem for the Greens is that this measure, under capitalism, is just as much pie in the sky as its ludicrous proposal to reduce electricity consumption by a third by 2020, by half by 2030 and two-thirds by 2050!

It knows this, hence the manifesto’s final chapter makes clear that the Greens’ limited additional fundraising measures must be accompanied by multi-billion-pound cuts. An appendix entitled “It does all add up” admits to £16.7 billion in government spending “efficiency savings,” as well as a massive and unrealisable £15 billion cut on spending on major roads. The two figures are equivalent to the £30 billion cuts agreed by the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and Labour before the general election.

The Greens in reality are a pro-capitalist party which, on all fundamental questions and with a few verbal caveats, defends the existing system based on brutal class exploitation, militarism and violence.

The party pledges a “policy of ‘defensive defence’, which threatens no one”, before adding that this policy “makes it clear that threats and attacks will be resisted.”

Significantly, the manifesto omits any mention of NATO. The Greens have previously said they were in favour of withdrawal from the nuclear bloc. It commits to maintaining existing levels of military spending at 2 percent of GDP, a central demand of the US-led NATO alliance. The manifesto even speaks of “enhancing the UK’s well-respected role in genuine peacekeeping and the protection of non-combatant communities”—the type of “human rights” jargon that has been used again and again to sanction predatory wars of imperial conquest.

The Green Party is also a firm defender of the European Union, which, together with the International Monetary Fund, is imposing savage cuts that have had a devastating impact on the working class in Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Spain and elsewhere. The manifesto “recognises that the UK is part of Europe and that we cannot cut ourselves off from our geography or its political realities. ... Much EU action has been progressive: safeguarding basic rights, peace and security achieved through mutual understanding, environmental protection, the spread of culture and ideas, and *regulation of the financial system*” (emphasis added).

The picture can be extended to any progressive pose adopted by the Green Party. Naturally it does not oppose immigration per se, but what it describes as “involuntary migration”—by which it means the millions dispossessed by war and colonial-style economic subjugation. But after a lot of high-sounding phrases about ending such scourges, the manifesto reassures its readers, “We accept that these policies will take time to work and that we must address immigration as it is here and now. Some controls on immigration will be needed for the foreseeable future ...”

The class basis of the Greens

The Green Party’s “left” turn is of recent vintage. It has its origins in a group called PEOPLE, before becoming the Ecology Party. Its founders in 1973 were Conservatives, who adopted the Malthusian outlook blaming overpopulation for the world’s ills that still exist to this day, without dressing this up in left phrases. It advocated slower economic growth “or better still no growth at all,” anticipating the end of civilisation within 20 years.

The presentation of its underlying ideology has undergone various changes since then, but it has remained at all times a party of an upper-middle-class layer. These are sometimes horrified at the worst excesses of the profit system and the impact this has on their own lives, but from the standpoint of blaming “people,” “consumerism,” technology and economic growth for society’s failing—and always from a position of bitter hostility to the working class and socialism, which are seen as a threat to their privileged existence under the existing social order.

Not once do the Greens oppose the right of the bourgeoisie and its corporations and banks to control society and misuse and plunder its assets. Indeed their philistinism and prostration before the unchallengeable edifice of the profit system is exemplified in the manifesto statement, “So it’s not the economy, stupid. Or at least not one that grows forever. The Green Party believes that equality is much more important than growth. And growth doesn’t bring equality; in fact it helps to justify inequality.”

The party first began to grow in size in the 1980s at the same time as other formations such as the Greens in Germany, finally taking the name Green Party in 1985.

From the late 1990s, the Green Party sought to emulate its more successful German counterpart by becoming more professional—epitomised by the ascendancy of the media-savvy Caroline Lucas to head the party. However, it did so just at the time when the ability of Greens everywhere to pose as an alternative was being undermined by the experience of millions with such parties when they took office. This was especially the case in Ireland and Germany, where Greens have imposed austerity and signed up to military interventionism.

With the onset of the economic crisis in 2008, and the collapse of the Liberal Democrats in the UK due to their joining with the Conservatives in coalition, the Green Party is trying to tack to the left. It now routinely stresses how “different” it is to other Green organisations and even boasts of being the most left-wing of all European Green formations.

However, in the one place where they have run a council in the UK, Brighton, they have acted exactly as their Irish and German counterparts. Lucas was elected MP for Brighton Pavillion in 2010

and Jason Kitcat was the Green Party leader of the council. The Greens presided over cuts of £25 million in their second Brighton budget and imposed wage cuts of up to £4,000 for refuse workers and street cleaners, provoking a bitter strike. Millions were cut from adult social care and children’s services.

As to how the Green Party would perform on the national stage, it is instructive that the one party in Europe they have been anxious to solidarise themselves with is Syriza in Greece. They praised its election victory as proof of the need for similar movements to stand against the “discredited economic model and failing Governments across Europe.”

Within a matter of weeks, Syriza has been revealed as a pliant tool of the EU and the IMF—ready to betray every one of its election promises as it prepares to implement a fresh round of savage austerity measures to funnel yet more billions of euros into the coffers of the banks. Should the Green Party ever be in a position of power, it would have no qualms in doing the same.

Bennett launched her party’s manifesto by urging voters to “create a peaceful political revolution” by voting Green. But this feeble rhetoric is framed solely as an argument against the actual social revolution that is required in order to end the domination of society by a ruthless financial oligarchy. That requires the independent political mobilisation of the working class on a socialist and internationalist programme to take power and form its own government—the programme advanced by the Socialist Equality Party and our sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International.

For further details visit www.socialequality.org.uk

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>