

The Left Unity Project of Britain

January 14, 2015

The origins of the Left Unity project came out of the common struggle across Europe against austerity. The specific moment was the first coordinated general strike across Europe on November 14, 2012. Many of us active on the left, already working with the anti-austerity movement across Europe, saw the need for British engagement too, and from that day onwards, Left Unity has been in development.



The impact of the European economic crisis, and particularly the extreme manifestation of the neoliberal response to this in Greece, created the context for the early development of the project. 'Can't Pay, Won't Pay—solidarity with the people of Greece' was one of the first campaigning expressions of this in May 2010, with the project's first rally addressed by Tony Benn and attended by hundreds of people. The Coalition of Resistance, one wing of Britain's anti-austerity movement, was founded in the autumn of 2010, and unlike its counterparts, was particularly strongly orientated towards Europe-wide solidarity and campaigning, recognizing that austerity was not a national problem but an international one.

A turning point in the European orientation of significant parts of the anti-austerity movement was the 'Europe Against Austerity' conference held in London in October 2011. Attended by around 700 people, with around a third of them coming from Europe, this was the first major exposure in Britain of the parties of the European left, to both the movement and trade unions. The conference was addressed by Pierre Laurent, chair of the European Left Party, as well as representatives from Die Linke (the Left Party) in Germany; Bloco de Esquerda (the Left Bloc) in Portugal; the French Communist Party (PCF), Parti de Gauche (the Left Party of France), and the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) in France; Syriza in Greece; and many others. Following this event, links with the left and related movements in Greece increased, and in early 2012, the Greece Solidarity Campaign was founded and the first of many successful solidarity delegations took place, strengthening relations between Syriza and the anti-austerity movement in Britain. The message that the Greeks were the lab rats of Europe and that the same policies would in time be inflicted elsewhere if not defeated in Greece had a powerful impact on anti-austerity campaigners.

Debates about unity on the left intensified throughout 2012 as Greeks went to the polls twice. Support for Syriza increased as it opposed the imposition of European troika policies on Greece. But at the same time the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn began to appear as a political force, and the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) refused to work with Syriza against the right and far-right parties. The seeming impossibility of achieving unity on the left in the face of the rise of fascism led to discussions drawing parallels with Weimar Germany, but it was understood as a problem that afflicts the left far more widely than Greece. So the call for unity of the left in Greece impacted on the movement here in Britain, and many of us began drawing together people on the left, directly inspired both by the successes of Syriza and other left parties in Europe, and by the need to unite in the face of extreme neoliberalism and the rise of fascism across Europe. The first public expression of the Left Unity project was an appeal for left unity launched on November 14, 2012, via social media, on the day of the first Europe-wide coordinated general strike. Our goal was to work to create a party in Britain that operates on the same basis as the various left parties throughout Europe that were taking the lead on the common work against austerity.

Of course the European developments were not the only factor leading to the demand for a new party. But it was clear that while we had the same political problems as other European countries—in particular that social democracy was no longer a left force and had become the vehicle

for neoliberal economic policies—we did not have a viable mainstream party to the left of social democracy as did virtually every other country in western Europe. We had now seen the new left parties from across Europe, and were working in solidarity with many of them in our anti-austerity campaigning. With a big space vacated on the left by the rightwards movement of the Labour Party, we wanted a left party in Britain too.

We began this as a new and open project, holding meetings across the country. We were also very fortunate because Ken Loach was just in the process of bringing out his powerful new film *The Spirit of '45* in March 2013 about the origins of the National Health Service (NHS). This was a game changer for the project particularly because Loach was featured on *BBC Question Time*, the most prestigious current affairs discussion program, in February 2013, calling for a new party of the left.

The film had a fantastic reception and Loach took the opportunity to promote Left Unity as a vehicle for having a debate on “Do we need a new party of the left?” Two days after the film was launched, there was a live satellite screening of the film, shown at cinemas across the country, with a live panel discussion in which Loach called for people to sign up on the Left Unity website for a discussion about a new party. This became known as the “Ken Loach Appeal,” and within days thousands of people had signed up and Left Unity began to attract national media coverage.

From then on, we started working closely with Ken and a wide range of left-wing intellectuals, academics, and activists to engage in a debate about forming a new party. This debate was essentially the first phase of moving towards a party. Almost everyone who signed up favored the founding of a new party—although a small number felt that it would be preferable to develop as a movement instead. Critics of the project from the left tended to fall into three categories: those who thought that the project was basically correct but premature, and that nothing serious could be built without trade unions breaking from the Labour Party and helping to build a new force; those who still thought that Labour could be “reclaimed”; and related to this, those who thought that Left Unity was counterposed to the building of an effective anti-cuts movement, which could form the basis of a new party at some future point if Labour continued on its current trajectory.

Those who opted to found Left Unity were no longer willing to sit back and wait for a trade union rupture or Labour reclamation when economic and social catastrophe was confronting millions of ordinary people through Conservative policies that Labour was not willing to reverse when back in power. We also took the view that a new party was complementary to the development of the anti-austerity movement rather than competitive with it—after all, Left Unity had effectively emerged from this movement, and was amongst its strongest supporters. However, we were aware of specific factors in Britain that presented obstacles not generally present elsewhere in Europe. First, the fact that the Labour Party was founded by the trade unions and therefore retains residual loyalty from many working-class voters as it is still seen by many as the party that people need to vote for to get rid of the Conservatives. Second, the first-past-the-post electoral system, which has made it extremely difficult for smaller parties to win votes as they are seen as wasted. The crisis of the political system is such, however, that even with this system, the two-party framework has broken down, giving rise to the current coalition government, the growth of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), the breaking into Westminster and recent surge in support for the Green Party, and the occasional exceptional support for the Respect Party.

In the run-up to our founding conference, we had an open, democratic process, whereby individuals and groups could organize platforms and put forward platform statements regarding the type of party we, as a collective, would like to be founded.

There were two main political platforms put forward. The first one was the Left Party Platform, which expressed the type of policies and politics of parties like Syriza. These are socialist, feminist,

and environmentalist, and develop a new and openly democratic way of working.

The second platform was the Socialist Platform, which had a more traditional approach to socialism, seeing the ideology as something to emphasize on its own. In this way, other principles would logically follow as part of it.

These two platforms represented a debate between the traditional forms of socialism, and the more contemporary European new left party politics—the concept of a broad left party that was socialist, feminist, and environmentalist, and where, because of past inadequate practice on the left, it was felt necessary to specify these additional principles and not just make the assumption that they would flow naturally from socialism. The Left Party platform eventually won overwhelmingly at the Left Unity party conference and became the founding basis for the organization in November 2013.

The layer of activists who formed Left Unity came from diverse political backgrounds. There were many who have been active all their lives in far-left groups. For instance, I come from the communist tradition, while there were a large number of individuals from the Trotskyist traditions and many former Labour Party activists, including councillors. The former Labour Party activists, in particular, come from the layer of members who feel disenfranchised by how far to the right the party has moved, as well as its lack of organizational democracy.

At the same time, a lot of our new joiners were people who have never been in a political party, nor been political activists before. But they were inspired by the anti-austerity-cuts movement. They have wanted to fight back against policies such as the bedroom tax. Generally, the vast majority of them simply want justice, fairness, and decent lives for ordinary people.

Both main platforms dissolved once the party had been founded and the major lines of policy and direction decided upon. Still, some smaller ones continue—renamed tendencies—and new ones occasionally come into being over specific issues, for example one that was founded to support a “Yes” vote in the Scottish independence campaign when Left Unity opted not to take a position. The founding conference overwhelmingly voted that we should be an individual-membership party, rather than a coalition of different parties and groups, although some of our members are also members of other parties and groups. The Left Unity conference clearly defines us as a broad, left, anti-austerity party, rather than a revolutionary one. We include people with revolutionary politics, but we also include those who consider themselves left of Labour. Everyone who shares our politics is welcome, and if we are going to make an impact politically we need to work together on the basis of conference policy.

We see social, economic, and environmental issues as equally important. Take environment for example—the vast majority of the British left, as well as our party, recognizes that if we do not resolve the problem of climate change and sustainability, we won’t have a planet left where the fight for socialism and feminism matters. Given this, we believe that it would be impossible to separate the idea of a “red-green” economy from pursuing social equality and justice in areas like women’s rights and LGBTQ rights.

Also there is the issue of war. In September, Left Unity was active around the anti-NATO protests in Cardiff and Newport. In our founding party principles, we have a commitment to being anti-imperialist and anti-war, as well as anti-nuclear power and anti-nuclear weapons.

We also have a strong commitment to feminism within our principles. Our constitution maintains the need for an organized Women’s Caucus, as well as a number of other caucuses for oppressed groups or members of society.

We also have a disabled members' caucus, black members' caucus, and an LGBTQ caucus, which have voting rights and are entitled to automatic representation within the party.

We are also in the process of developing an online branch, particularly for those members who are geographically unable to participate in the regional branches.

We are still in the process of developing our branch structures. We are currently prioritizing development of various branches, as well as organizing members within those branches. There are now more than 50 Left Unity branches across the country, and this number is growing. We provide them with all the required organizational materials, such as leaflets, pamphlets, policy papers, and information about Left Unity, as well as regular party broadsheets for various caucuses for external uses, and we are planning an organizing day school to help branches grow.

We do not currently have an internal education program. The nearest we have to regular education are our policy conferences and the policy commissions. That means we have a process for internal dialogue and debate about policy, but we do not have centrally organized education classes. The current emphasis is on practical organization, local political activity, and ideas for involving new people in the party.

From the beginning, Left Unity has campaigned on both national and local issues. Our members have been very active in actions against the EDL, a far-right street group, as well as working against racism and in support of immigration. We also played a major part in organizing against the anti-homeless spikes in London. With the London Black Revolutionaries group and others, we succeeded in having the spikes removed. We have also been active in the campaign in defense of the National Health Service throughout the country, as well as in defense of social housing and against the bedroom tax. Anti-war work has also been prominent, as well as the recent demonstrations in support of Palestine. The range of our issues is defined mainly by our broad anti-austerity and anti-war focus.

We have sought to establish relationships with other groups on the left. We entered into dialogue with the Green Party at the time of the European Parliamentary elections. In particular, we supported the Green candidate for the North-West, Peter Cranie, to assist him in a local contest against a far-right candidate. Rather than standing our own candidate in the area, we pledged our support to Cranie in exchange for his agreement to stand as an anti-austerity candidate for the European Parliament and to support trade unions in struggle.

In the context of the current general election campaigning—towards elections in May 2015—we are engaged in discussions with a range of other parties and organizations too, including Respect, TUSC, and the National Health Action Party. Our main intention is to avoid standing against other anti-austerity candidates and to have a good range of left candidates across the country.

We have also been taking quite a few steps towards establishing a working relationship with the European Left Party, including attending a number of their meetings and conferences. At our recent national conference we agreed to apply for observer status. One of the first actions of our Women's Caucus was to organize a meeting in solidarity with the women in Spain struggling to defend abortion rights, and we made these links through the ELP's campaign on this issue. Recently we have been in dialogue over shared opposition to anti-migrant policies.

Syriza has been a great inspiration to us on the international level and has had an impact on the development of many aspects of our processes—for example, the Syriza policy commission process. We have recently hosted a national tour with Podemos, the new party in Spain, together with speakers from Syriza. The tour, which we entitled "Doing Politics Differently," was an enormous

success, with packed meetings around the country. The messages from the speakers were very well received, and although there are some differences between the development and approach of Podemos and Syriza, the combination was inspirational. We were proud to welcome our two sister parties, both of whom are on the verge of power, and to have the opportunity to locate ourselves in the same political space. Our current position is very different, in terms of British politics, but we are determined to build a party to fight for our common goals.

Footnotes