

forum

Trade Union Resistance and Respect

— The Need for Political Trade Unionism

<u>Speaker</u> Alan Thornett



Tuesday 17th June 7.30pm

Bennetts Bar, Bennetts Hill, Birmingham City Centre. The New Labour Project is coming apart at the seams. Its local elections results were the worst in 40 years, with only 24% of the vote and coming third behind the Liberal Democrats. This was a disastrous result for Brown, and things have even deteriorated since.

Those hoping for an abandonment of the embrace of neo-liberalism and a return to "old Labour" are likely to be disappointed. The recent signing up for two new aircraft carriers, costing £4 billion, is another signal that it will be business as usual in future. The essential features will remain; war, privatisation and further neo-liberal attacks, with maybe a few minor sops to the working class as the election approaches. The Labour Party finger is still well and truly on the self-destruct button.

And while we wish John McDonnell well with his campaign to turn back the tide from within the Labour Party, we have to note that the limited democratic internal life that is necessary to see through radical changes has been all but snuffed out under Brown.

This does not mean that the Labour Party is going to disappear in the near future, but it does signal the ending of an era; it was brought into being when the need for a political voice for the emerging British trade union movement became clear, over a century ago. There are no indications today that Labour will break from the needs of an ailing capitalist economy to return to that role, irrespective of how imperfectly it performed this in the past.

In the current situation, with the unions still struggling to recover from the defeats of the 1980's, the need for a political dimension reappears, and its glaring absence cannot be overlooked. The syndicalist attitude of ceding the political arena to the ruling class and just focussing on trade union struggle has to be rejected. It just opens the door wider to the right and far right.

In the midst of the election campaign we saw the outbreak of several important industrial disputes; Council workers, teachers and refinery workers for example. Given the gloomy forecasts for the economy, there will be an enhanced prospect and need for more trade union struggles in the coming months and years.

But who will provide the political support for such actions?

Despite its recent difficulties, *Respect* has emerged from that period weakened, but intact, with some promising showings in the recent elections. It is best placed to take up the challenge. And there are some positive signs. Birmingham *Respect* gave full public support to both the recent public sector demonstrations and strikes in Birmingham, with one of its Councillors speaking from the platform at the first rally. A similar stance has been adopted in other areas.

While *Respect* is primarily based in oppressed communities and has a necessary duty to carry out activity at that level, it must also maintain and develop its work at the trade union level and start to fill the void left by New Labour.

The task would be greatly aided if serious discussions could open up between *Respect* and left trade union leaders, the left in the Green Party, the Communist Party of Britain, the McDonnell campaign and other sections of the left about forming a new mass party, but, in the meantime, *Respect* must get on with the job in hand. That job is the intersection between trade union struggle and the building of a new party to the left of Labour. At the next *Socialist Resistance* public forum, Alan

Thornett will focus on this.

(Alan is on the National Council of *Respect* and, in his younger days, was a noted trade union leader at the Cowley, Oxford car plant.)

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