

Whatever Happened to the ULA?

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The United Left Alliance is in a comatose state from which recovery, at the moment, appears unlikely. Its steering committee has not met since December and some of its participants have left. At a time when thousands of people are looking for an alternative to the political establishment, the radical left has proved unable to forge a viable, broad organisation that could win their allegiance. Its demise has allowed the mainstream media to structure political debate in terms of the government versus the Fianna Fail-Sinn Fein opposition. It was not always like this. The United Left Alliance was formed in the run up to the 2011 General election and was composed of three organisations the People Before Profit Alliance, the Socialist Party and the Tipperary Workers and Unemployed Action Group. Discussions on left unity had been underway for some years previously but the approaching election was the decisive event that moved some of the more reluctant elements forward. After the election when five TDs were elected, a series of public meetings were organised which drew in over one thousand people. However, two key problems quickly emerged.

First, there was an inherent conservatism in some sections of the alliance and

a failure to grasp the significance of what had occurred. A proposal to move the project forward towards creating a fully fledged party was shot down. The aim of the proposal was to create an opportunity for the many more to join and transform it from an organisation that was still rooted in the traditions of Irish Trotskyism to one which embraced other currents of opinion. Such a party, it was argued, could still give 'tendency rights' to individual groupings to promote their distinctive positions. This argument was, however, rejected by the Socialist Party. They argued that the 'objective conditions' were not ripe for such a development and that more emphasis needed to be placed developing the 'correct programme'.

Second, and linked to the first, the ULA was organised as a three block alliance where each component had a veto. Even if a majority on the Steering Committee or at a national meeting voted in a particular way, a minority block could veto the development. The People Before Profit Alliance strongly objected to this approach as it was fundamentally undemocratic and gave ULA members who were not in any block fewer rights to participate than they even received in their union. The veto structure also created a framework whereby different factions tended to frame political discussion around their entrenched positions.

The underlying tensions within the ULA came to a head around the Wallace affair. The Wexford TD, Mick Wallace, had not paid his VAT taxes for a company he controlled, M.J, Wallace Ltd. Wallace was a classic populist who talked left in the Dail but took his role as a capitalist seriously - even to the extent of en-

tering disputes with SIPTU. As soon as the affair broke out, the People Before Profit representatives called for an emergency meeting of the ULA steering Committee and pressed the ULA to call for Wallace's resignation from the Dail. It argued that the left could not be associated with any hypocrisy when it came to attacking the tax dodging techniques of capitalists. However, while every other component of the ULA supported this view, the Socialist Party vetoed the call for his resignation. It later transpired that there were major difficulties inside their own ranks, as one of their TDs - Clare Daly - was supportive of Wallace.

The manoeuvre, however, did not work as Clare Daly eventually left the SP. She then sought a more active engagement in the ULA but this in turn provoked the Socialist Party to lay down stringent conditions about her role. When the ULA branch council voted down the SP's conditions, they decided to leave the ULA. Shortly beforehand the Tipperary Workers and Unemployed Action Group also left, citing the Wallace affair and the 'recruiting' activities of both the SP and SWP. In reality, there was no justification for these resignations and both, in their different ways, showed a myopic political approach that is unhelpful for constructing a broad left alliance or a new party. The Workers and Unemployed Action group had a troublesome relationship with the alliance from the very start. They opposed, for example, every demand to increase corporation profits tax and even vetoed a proposal for the ULA to support a Financial Transaction Tax on speculation. Instead of helping to construct an open broad based campaign around household charges in Tipperary, they centred all activity on their TD, Seamus Healy. The WUAG were the most right wing force in the ULA and had a highly localist hostility to the 'Dublin

Left'. Their departure at the time of the Wallace affair was really about seizing an opportune moment to leave.

The Socialist Party's position was more influential within the alliance and their departure shook other elements. The SP argued that Clare Daly's activities in maintaining a political connection with Mick Wallace and the specific manner in which she fought on the abortion issue in the Dail represented a form of political opportunism. They claimed that the failure of others to condemn her activities meant that 'ULA is compromised and cannot now be seen as an independent, principled Left alliance'. In departing, the SP suggested that another vehicle could be found for their electoral ambitions. Their aim was to transform the Campaign Against Household and Water Taxes into a quasi political party that would run candidates in elections and thus create the basis for a 'mass workers party'.

Almost everything about this statement represented the worst elements of sectarianism on the Irish left. Other activists also had concerns about a political association between Daly and Wallace, particularly as it led to a split on the household charges campaign in Wexford. But while disagreeing with Clare Daly's stance on this issue, we have accepted that she is a socialist with every right to be part of the ULA. Attacking her stance on the abortion struggle represented the worst form of political posturing. If a broad party cannot accommodate a Clare Daly, then it will never accommodate hundreds of workers who have not yet drawn fully revolutionary conclusions. A broad party or alliance has to allow for difference and disagreements precisely because it must be a space where people are allowed to develop. It needs to focus on the 90% agreement between socialists of different tendencies in order to

draw in the thousands of workers who have started to question capitalism. Departing from the ULA on the basis of hostility to Clare Daly revealed a total irresponsibility towards wider working class politics.

Moreover, the attempt to transform the CAHWT into a quasi political formation will create even more problems. Many joined a single issue campaign against the household tax and have started to generalise their anger against austerity. But it does not follow that they will take a clear, 'principled' position on travellers' rights or a woman's right to choose if they were elected to parliament. Some may indeed be a good deal less principled on these issues than the aforementioned Clare Daly.

The unravelling of the ULA is undoubtedly a blow to the Irish left. There are growing signs that Sinn Fein is preparing itself to enter a government with Fianna Fail after the next election and many activists already sense this. They want a real left alternative. The departure of the ULA from the scene opens the road for other forces to fill that gap - including, unfortunately, right wing elements who can pose as a more militant opposition to the establishment. Over the next period, the SWP will concentrate on building up the People Before Profit Alliance as a more open, inclusive project that unites all who want to fight. Our experience over the past few months has indicated that this project can attain a high level of local success and we therefore see no need to fall into a sort of navel gazing about 'what is wrong with the left'. Nevertheless some key lessons can be learnt from the ULA experience. They can be summarised under four main headings.

1. An ounce of struggle is worth a ton of political programmes. The ULA spent a lot of time discussing a 'principled socialist programme' and far less time in actually campaign-

ing. An internalised atmosphere pervaded many of its gatherings because of this emphasis. The assumption was that if agreement could be reached on an extensive socialist programme, this would inoculate the ULA against any reformist deviations. In reality, a broad left party needs a fairly minimal programme that rules out coalition with the right and centres its work on promoting struggle. Bonds forged with workers in real struggles create a far better dynamic than arid discussions of who is more socialist than others. The tragedy of the ULA was that it did not engage in any real joint campaign. Even when its participant groups helped to initiate the CAHWT, there was no shared discussion on strategy. Bizarrely, this led elements of the ULA to argue against an emphasis on demonstrations at the start of the household charges campaign - counter-posing it to a boycott. A modest proposal to end sectarian bickering between ULA elements within that campaign was even voted down by those who thought that 'principled' arguments were necessary to advance the campaign.

2. Elections are not the end goal of socialists. Traditionally key elements of the Irish far left have combined a terrible history of sectarianism with an obsession with elections. Winning an extra seat becomes the focal point of 'real politics' and campaigns are often fought with this objective in mind. However a Dail seat is only useful when it provides a platform to encourage people to struggle for themselves. The failure of the ULA to initiate real joint campaigns was

linked to this obsessive electoralism. Much of the suspicion and jockeying for positions arose from the same source.

3. Revolutionaries are not the problem - TDs need to be answerable. After the demise of the ULA a storyline appeared that the problem was revolutionary organisations like the SWP. These organisations either put people off or put too much emphasis on their own organisations. This attack on revolutionary organisation has become a European wide phenomenon and has its own distinct agenda - to clear the field so that a left reformist option like Syriza becomes the model form of left organisation. However the storyline is not credible. The effort put in by the SWP and other revolutionaries into building the ULA vastly outweighed that of many critics. Moreover, no matter how much more 'effort' was put in, it could not rectify internal problems e.g. the veto system within the ULA. The narrative that the 'revolutionaries are to blame' is intended to re-construct a left unity project on a more conventional left social democratic ground. Revolution is off the agenda for the 21st century, it is claimed, and so a drive to a left reformist party is the only practical possibility.

This approach is invariably linked to giving TDs more autonomy and centring a party around their activities. Far from being only the voice of the party in a hostile Dail, they become the 'personalities' around which a party is built. The logic of this approach is already becoming evident in parties like the Red-Green Alliance in Denmark and indeed Syriza

itself in Greece. As they move closer to government, the parliamentary representatives seek to pull these formations to the right. The Red-Green Alliance has begun to vote for austerity measures while Syriza has begun to court elements of the Right with a view to possible governmental partnership.

4. Political modesty and an acceptance of difference are key to left unity. Marxist politics has never given anyone the power of prophecy and so no one faction on the left can claim to be 100 percent right on everything. Moreover, the genuine liberatory content of Marxism is premised on the self activity of workers. Political activists have to both argue with workers and learn from workers. Activists have a duty to stand up against sexism or homophobia and challenge ideas that are promoted by the right wing press. But they also have to learn from the creative energies of workers and not presume that they know exactly how the wider working class will move into action. This elementary modesty is also a key to left unity. There needs to be a genuine spirit of engagement, willingness to learn and, where there are disagreements, accepting them as part of the diversity of the left.

All of which raises a more fundamental question: what is the point of left unity? After all if individual left wing revolutionary organisations are growing - and the SWP is - why bother with a troublesome radical left?

The answer is that it provides a mechanism for tens of thousands of new activists to carry through a transition from a reformist consciousness which seeks to humanise capitalism to one which decisively

challenges it. Of necessity, this means that a radical left must include left reformist elements as well as revolutionaries. But if these can work together in joint struggles it can create a dynamic that assists the wider construction of a mass party of the working class. The People Before Profit Al-

liance argued for many of the above points during the discussions on the future of the ULA. Both PBPA, and the SWP, are still willing, indeed keen, to engage with others who wish to re-awaken the comatose patient of left unity.