# **Once more on left reformism: A reply to Ed Rooksby**

#### **Paul Blackledge**

Ed Rooksby’s response to the Socialist Workers Party’s criticisms of left reformism is exemplary both in its aim and its tone.[1](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge141_1) I hope that my reply matches the standards he set. In essence, Ed suggests that the SWP’s conception of left reformism is akin to the claim that all cats are grey in the dark; it says more about our perspective than it does about the variety of political formations we criticise. Indeed, Ed accepts many of the specific criticisms we make of older left reformist political formations, but claims that we err in a sectarian direction by assuming that these criticisms can be generalised to more recent political tendencies. If true, Ed’s argument would amount to a devastating critique of our interpretation of Marxism. In what follows I’ll try to show that this analysis is in fact misconceived, and that our criticisms both of left reformism and of the kind of centrist arguments presented by Ed are indispensable to the long-term viability of the socialist left at the present conjuncture.

The core of our argument is that the term left reformism is analytically useful because it allows us to make sense of a whole range of movements that, despite their concrete differences, are united by two common threads. First, they have emerged as organisational expressions of a highly welcome leftist reaction to mainstream social democracy’s embrace of austerity and war. Second, however, these formations have not extricated themselves from the limitations that beset traditional social democratic practices. Consequently, though we welcome these initiatives and enthusiastically work alongside people involved in them and may even join coalitions with them if and when we judge this to be propitious, it would be wrong for us to liquidate ourselves into these formations.

If the validity of our criticism of the limitations of left reformism is most obvious, to take local examples, in the case of Unite leader Len McCluskey’s utopian aim of “reclaiming Labour”, it is also true of formations such as Left Unity and the People’s Assembly. Indeed Left Unity and the project to reclaim Labour can be conceived as two sides of the same coin. Both see Old Labour through rose-tinted spectacles, but disagree about how to recreate something in its mould. Though this is most apparent on Unite’s website, where the union commits itself to a project of “winning a Labour government which will govern in the interests of working people and towards a socialism for the 21st century”,[2](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge141_2) Left Unity’s project is based upon similar foundations. Thus in their original appeal for a new party of the left, Ken Loach, Kate Hudson and Gilbert Achcar operate with a simplistic contrast between “Labour’s past achievements” and its more recent “embrace [of] cuts and privatisation”.[3](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge141_3) If Loach et al at least recognise that the Labour Party isn’t ever going to be much use as a vehicle for socialist advance, like McCluskey they do not begin to address the question of why Old Labour failed and how it morphed into its present state. This is an important issue because the record of Labour in office is, notwithstanding Loach’s attempt to mythologise the 1945-51 Labour government, a history of dreams betrayed.[4](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge141_4) Meanwhile the People’s Assembly has effectively tried to tie the fortunes of the anti-austerity movement to leftist sections of the same trade union bureaucracy, including pre-eminently McCluskey, that remain the (essentially conservative) social basis of the (Old and New) Labour Party.[5](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge141_5)

These limitations begin to explain why, as the SWP, we do not liquidate ourselves into these organisations. This is not because we believe either that reforms cannot be won through parliament or that the union leaders will never lead fights. Rather it is because we recognise that alongside their positive anti-austerity politics, these new formations tend to reproduce the weaknesses that undermined traditional social democracy in the first place.

Traditional social democracy failed as a vehicle for socialism for two main reasons. First, trade unions generate bureaucracies that tend to institutionalise workers’ struggles within capitalism. Rooted in negotiations over the terms and conditions of the sale of labour power, these bureaucracies are essentially reformist in nature. This means that their vision of a better world tends to be of a better version of capitalism, and by narrowing the parameters of change in this way they tend to function as a conservative force within the labour movement. Second, social democratic parties emerged as the political expression of this type of reformism. At their best they aimed to win radical progressive change through the state. But as I pointed out in my article in *International Socialism 139*, the belief that socialism can issue from this kind of project underestimates the strength of the ties between states and capital.

Now of course, as Ed writes, reforms are possible and the class struggle mediates the exact contours of these possible reforms. But it is a big and unjustifiable leap to move from this claim to the utopian belief that a socialist transition could be executed through a strategy that has at its centre the goal of capturing parliament. This is in large part because the structural interdependence between states and capital means that states rely for their reproduction on the health of the underlying capitalist economy. What is more, their key institutions function to reproduce these structures: the Treasury, the armed forces, the judiciary, the police, etc are organisations built to maintain, not to challenge, capitalist relations of production. Taken together these considerations mean that in the event of an electoral victory, any socialist party that attempts to bring about radical social change will have to confront the fact that it will control the government, not the state. And state institutions are not only designed to maintain healthy capitalist social relations, because they rely for their continued functioning on a healthy capitalist economy it is also the case that these institutions are largely staffed by people who think that maintaining these capitalist relations is the right and proper thing to do. Indeed, when seen from the perspective of the state, politics tends to naturalise capitalist parameters of change, and this standpoint has informed generations of social democratic retreats from radical aspirations to support for austerity and war.

Unfortunately, because left reformist formations share social democracy’s orientation to change through the existing state machinery, they tend to reproduce social democracy’s naturalisation of the capitalist parameters of politics. This is reflected in the way left reformists typically operate, as I wrote in my original article, with weak accounts of the failures of social democracy. In place of deep structural analyses of these failings, left reformist currents instead tend towards various superficial and descriptive criticisms of traditional social democratic politics. A parallel weakness is evident in leading Left Unity member Kate Hudson’s *The New European Left*. Though this book includes descriptions of the failings of some previous left reformist initiatives, Hudson does not offer anything amounting to an adequate explanation of these failings.[6](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge141_6) Unfortunately, the political consequence of this type of superficial critique is a tendency to repeat past mistakes. Thus it is that recent developments with Syriza (whose leadership shares with Hudson a background in the Eurocommunist wing of the Communist movement) highlight the fact that the closer these formations come to office the more they tend to reproduce the failings of social democracy.[7](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge141_7)

In fact, the history of left reformist groups points to the conclusion that, despite emerging as expressions of popular demands for progressive change, they eventually tend to undermine their own social base. Thus from the collapse of the Second International in 1914 through the debacle of Eurosocialism and Eurocommunism in the 1970s and 1980s to the capitulation of the Unite union leadership at Grangemouth in 2013 these political forms have repeatedly undermined the social movements they once fostered.

This is not to say that we merely dismiss these movements, far from it. For instance, in the case of Len McCluskey’s leadership of Unite it is clearly true that over the last few years his leftist rhetoric has helped create a space that is more conducive to socialists and other militants agitating for action than has been the case in unions led by more conservative voices. However, as became glaringly obvious at Grangemouth, there are profound limitations to his brand of leftism. How should socialists relate to him? Plainly, if in the past we had followed those who had focused only on McCluskey’s positive leftist rhetoric we could easily have found ourselves in a situation in which we subsequently became associated with his capitulation. This would have severely undermined our attempts to offer an alternative strategy for the union. Conversely, over the last few years we might have dismissed McCluskey’s leftism by one-sidedly focusing on an expectation of betrayal. The problem with this approach is that it would have acted as a barrier to us working alongside those elements who had become enthused into activity by his leadership. Our approach, by contrast, has been to work alongside McCluskey so long as he fosters workers’ self-activity while maintaining our political independence from him so that we are better positioned to struggle to maintain and extend that self-activity as and when he acts as a brake on it.

A variation on this stance frames our relationship to left reformist groupings more generally. Be it Syriza in Greece, Die Linke in Germany, the Front de Gauche in France or Left Unity in Britain, our aim is to work alongside these formations so long as they encourage workers’ self-activity while recognising that their orientation to reforms within the system will help foster a tendency for them to move from promoting social movements towards acting as a brake on their further development. Generally speaking, our relationship to these groups involves creative applications of the united front tactic. At its heart this method requires a form of political independence that is compatible with participation in left reformist electoral coalitions but which is incompatible with sowing illusions in them.

Unfortunately, Ed’s approach is typical of a strand of leftism that risks sowing such illusions. This is the essence of centrism—the use of radical, and even revolutionary, rhetoric to cover what is effectively a (left) reformist practice. The academic end of this spectrum is characterised, as I noted in my original essay, by a revival of interest in a number of centrist political theorists including, pre-eminently, Nicos Poulantzas. For his part, Ed based the arguments of his initial essay in *Socialist Review* on related themes from the work of Boris Kagarlitsky.[8](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge141_8) However, rather than address the criticisms I made of the way that Kagarlitsky came to apologise for François Mitterrand’s attacks on the French working class in the 1980s, in his article in *International Socialism* Ed shifts the theoretical focus of his argument from Kagarlitsky to his forebear André Gorz, and in particular Gorz’s strategy of “structural reform”.

Gorz’s strategy, or something like it, became popular in the 1970s and 1980s among a layer of socialists who were looking to give some leftist theoretical weight to what was in effect their reformist practice. In essence, Gorz claimed that it was possible to use the state to institute reforms that differed from mere reformism by being irreversible while simultaneously whetting the appetite of the mass of the population for even deeper reforms.[9](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge141_9) If it had worked, this approach would have seen the local variations on the social contract implemented across Europe in the 1970s act as stepping stones to socialism.[10](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge141_10) In practice, however, quite the opposite was the case. Any significant reforms instituted by left governments immediately came under pressure from capitalist interests while workers’ movements were disempowered by labour leaders keen to maintain their side of the deal with capital. Indeed, far from acting as a stepping stone to socialism these approaches played a crucial role in weakening the workers’ movement in a way that opened the door to full-blooded neoliberalism.[11](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge141_11)

Ed not only defends Gorz’s approach, but also claims that the logical conclusion of Alex Callinicos’s discussion of “transitional demands” would lead him and the SWP to similar conclusions about the need for a left government to push for increasingly radical reforms.[12](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge141_12) This argument confuses an approach which involves making demands on the state with one that reduces socialism to a statist political project. Ed provides a left gloss to this argument by relating his claim that “the core objective of such a [workers’ or left] government would be to prepare the conditions for the revolutionary seizure of power” to debates at the fourth congress of the Communist International (Comintern).[13](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge141_13)

It is indeed true that in 1922 the Comintern came to the conclusion that “the slogan of the workers’ government flows unavoidably from the entire united front tactic”.[14](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge141_14) Unfortunately, notwithstanding differences between the latest English language translation of the Comintern debates on this issue and earlier translations used by critics of the Comintern’s policy, this argument is utterly confused. Most importantly, the Comintern resolution suggests that: “the entire state apparatus can pass over into the hands of the workers’ government, thus strengthening the power of the working class”.[15](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge141_15) Not only does this nonsense betray an utterly simplistic and instrumental conception of state power, but it completely misses the point, as Chris Harman and Tim Potter argued in a fundamental discussion of the concept of a workers’ government first published in 1977, that “the democratic principles on which the government would be based are precisely those of working within the framework laid down by the state—structures designed to make impotent ministers with radical ideas”.[16](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge141_16)

This problem was to surface when this idea was first tested in practice during the German Revolution. Against his better judgment Heinrich Brandler, the leader of the German Communist Party, was bounced by the Comintern leadership into taking a position in the government of Saxony alongside left social democrats in 1923. This government was clearly a thorn in the side of the authorities in Berlin, and Brandler aimed to turn the defence of it (and a similar government in Thuringia) into a revolutionary opportunity. His idea was that when Berlin’s troops intervened in Saxony the Communist Party would call a general strike to defend the left government and then swiftly move towards insurrection. Though a similar defence of a left government against counter-revolutionary forces had allowed the Bolsheviks to move to a position of challenging for state power in 1917, the way this approach was executed in Germany was characterised by at least three problems.

First, as Brandler himself had warned, with the entry of Communists into the government of Saxony ordinary workers tended to develop illusions in the “workers’ government” rather than rely on their own collective strength. This helped foster passivity just as more action was needed. Second, this problem was compounded by the fact that the leaders of both the Comintern and the German party were confused as to the nature of a workers’ government. Third, to maintain their position within the government the Communists had to formalise a political alliance with the left social democrats, who, despite their fine rhetoric, were not revolutionaries. These problems came to a head in October 1923 when troops loyal to Berlin moved into Saxony. Brandler expected the left social democrats to support his call for a general strike to defend the government against this military threat. But, ever the compromisers, the social democrats threatened to resign from government if Brandler made the strike call. To maintain the unity of the left government he thus called off the strike, and with it the plan for insurrection. So despite having a real possibility of a victorious revolution in their grasp, the German Communist Party gave up without a fight and the German Revolution ended not with a bang but with a whimper.[17](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge141_17)

The way the Bolsheviks had approached things in 1917 was fundamentally different. As Tony Cliff points out, though the Bolsheviks stood against Kornilov’s proto-fascist coup that threatened Kerensky’s left reformist government, they did so without actually offering any political support to the government itself. This meant that the Bolsheviks never compromised their ability to act independently.[18](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge141_18) The principles underlying this approach inform Alex Callinicos’s position that “the anti-capitalist movement should not be afraid of putting demands on states, but it should maintain its independence of them”.[19](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge141_19)

Moreover, Alex’s position is at one with Harman and Potter’s discussion of the idea of a workers’ government. In this article they denied neither that left parties could win government nor that they would never introduce significant reforms. Given that I made a similar point in *International Socialism 139*, Ed’s discussion of Fred Block and the possibility of (at least short-term) anti-capitalist reforms is beside the point. The key issue is not whether reforms are possible—of course they are; it is rather how should socialists relate to prospective and actual left governments? The problem with Ed’s formulation—”if the political executive among those state managers was made up of socialists with a transitional perspective, they would be much more likely to respond positively to demands which run counter to the interests of capital”—is that it profoundly underestimates the barriers to socialist advance through the existing state.[20](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge141_20)

The beginning of an answer to the question of how socialists should relate to a left government flows from an analysis of the dilemma that would be confronted by any government that aimed to introduce radical progressive reforms through the existing state—either cooperate with those elements of the state that demand these reforms be sacrificed, or confront and destroy these parts of the state to maintain the reforms. In this context, Harman and Potter argued convincingly that socialists would be most effective if they maintained their independence from a left government. Political independence would allow socialists to support any progressive reforms without tying them to political formations whose relationship to the state would tend to pull them to the right.

This point is of the first importance. Though examples of left parties moving to the right after winning elected office in a bourgeois parliament are legion, there are no examples of the opposite where a left government has acted as a stepping stone towards the socialist reconstruction of society.[21](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge141_21) So, while Ed’s alternative of joining the government sounds reasonable, historical experience suggests that to do so would have devastating consequences for the left. Moreover, it is not only the case that the elected deputies of left governments tend to be pulled to the right; the same is true of the base of such parties. Indeed, it is at those moments of crisis when it is of the utmost necessity for the base of left reformist parties to break with their parliamentary leaders that the left tends to come under intense pressure not to do this for fear of creating an electoral opportunity the right could exploit. This is one reason why it makes sense to create an alternative pole of attraction earlier rather than later. And if we are wrong and Ed’s more optimistic scenario for a left government pans out, an independent socialist party could easily play the role of what Lenin called a “loyal opposition” to such a government.[22](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge141_22) Indeed, because the focus of a revolutionary party will be on building roots within the working class it will be better able to deliver meaningful solidarity than will a primarily electoral organisation.

If it is a great strength of Harman and Potter’s article that it orients socialists to the agency capable of withstanding attacks from capital, it also points to a possible solution to the question of how to relate to radical electoral coalitions prior to the formation of such governments. In both instances the most important question to answer is: Does participation foster or retard the movement from below? It is because the experience of (left) reformist parties and governments is one of eventual betrayal of the movements from which they arose that we insist on maintaining our independence from them, even if we might give support over particular issues.

The problem with the kind of centrism characteristic of Ed’s essay is that it effectively deploys Marxist terminology to justify a variant rerun of the social contract. Whichever theorist is employed in this way, the use of Marxian rhetoric to cover what is in essence a reformist practice has in the past tended to drag the socialist left into the mire alongside more explicitly reformist currents. Regrettably, this approach is characteristic not merely of Ed’s argument; it also applies to the perspectives of those associated with a number of recent splits from the SWP including Counterfire, the International Socialist Group and the International Socialist Network. In each case, revolutionary rhetoric sits alongside an increasingly rightist political perspective. For instance the People’s Assembly, launched by comrades around Counterfire, has effectively tried to tie the anti-austerity movement to the left bureaucracy of the trade union movement generally and to McCluskey more specifically in a way that has left them ill-positioned to stand against McCluskey when he acts as a barrier to action.[23](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge141_23) This general approach has recently been defended by Unite’s chief of staff Andrew Murray in an article published in the *Socialist Register*.[24](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge141_24) And though Murray provides a powerful critique of Left Unity, the fundamental weakness of his alternative—People’s Assembly plus reclaim Labour—has been cruelly highlighted by the Unite leadership’s capitulation at Grangemouth.

Conversely, the International Socialist Group has effectively liquidated itself into the Radical Independence Campaign in Scotland while the decision by the International Socialist Network to join Left Unity has been justified, at least by the most right wing elements in this new formation, through a tacit break with revolutionary politics. Thus Richard Seymour has taken the argument first presented on these pages that “in practice, we are all pursuing ‘left reformist’ agendas” to the absurd conclusion that “we are all reformists”. Moreover, he has done so by reference to one of Alasdair MacIntyre’s reasons for saying goodbye to the working class.[25](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge141_25) In a critical review of Paul Foot’s study of Harold Wilson’s politics, MacIntyre claimed that there existed what he called a “law of diminishing socialist returns” according to which “everyone’s actions tend to be to the right of their principles” such that revolutionaries are limited to promoting “genuine left wing reforms”.[26](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge141_26)

Now, to the extent that revolutionaries operate within united fronts there is an element of truth to this claim. However, Seymour’s approach is innocent of any sense either of how social movements are terrains of struggle in which competing political tendencies (revolutionary and reformist) operate for influence or of how social movements on a large enough scale can open up horizons far beyond the nominal reformism of their original mobilising demands. This is why it is important to remember, as I stressed in my original essay, that the struggle for reforms is very different from either left or right wing reformism. It is not simply that reforms are best won through revolutionary means while reformists tend to undermine these struggles by limiting them to change within the system; it is much more important that the experience of collective struggles for reforms creates a space within which participants can begin to recognise their own power to fight for more radical, indeed revolutionary, change.

It is because all varieties of reformism eventually come to act as a block to this process that revolutionaries must maintain political independence from left as well as right wing reformist tendencies. The differences between Left Unity and the People’s Assembly and the more mainstream attempt to “reclaim Labour” are thus of secondary importance when compared to the more fundamental problems associated with not merely fostering illusions in reformism but in tying the workers’ movement to one or other type of reformist politics. In each case, these formations essentially risk sacrificing the long-term viability of the anti-austerity movement to structurally conservative forms of politics. This is not to say that left parties cannot win elections and form governments—clearly the example of Syriza shows that this is a far from unrealistic possibility. Rather, as I showed in my survey of the historical experience of similar leftist governments and movements, in the long run they have had devastating consequences for the workers’ movement. It is not that they have never introduced significant reforms; it is rather that they sooner or later turn from policing the labour movement to attacking it in the name of “realistic” politics. In this context an independent socialist left is essential both because it is more able to exert pressure on left governments from below and because it is better placed to fight against them if and when they turn to the right.

While this is a Leninist argument, it is nonetheless silly for Ed to claim that we assume “Leninism comprises a series of complete and final truths”.[27](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge141_27) Indeed the issue of left government highlights the fact that we are critical of many of the arguments developed within the international socialist movement in Lenin’s time. As I see it, Ed has picked up on one of the weakest aspects of socialist politics from this period while we have broken with it on the basis of Lenin’s more lasting insights. For whatever criticisms we may have of Lenin, it would be disastrous for us to forget his key contributions to Marxism. These include the revival of Marx’s critique of the capitalist state, the argument that socialist politics must be oriented to workers’ power organised through workers’ councils or soviets, and the realisation that this goal could not be won through parties which, despite a raft of radical rhetoric, oriented to winning parliamentary elections. Lenin broke with social democracy in 1914 because the latter had become a bulwark of imperialism. He similarly insisted on a break with centrism because, in practice, centrists reproduced the flaws of social democracy. For her part Rosa Luxemburg pointed to the material roots of this conservatism in the role of the labour and trade union bureaucracy within social democracy.

Clearly an approach which builds upon Lenin’s and Luxemburg’s insights runs the risk of retreating into sectarianism, and there is no doubt that there are a myriad of “Leninist” sects out there touting their “programme”. Nevertheless, the tendency towards sectarianism can be overcome through an approach that stresses the flipside of Lenin and Trotsky’s model of an independent workers’ party: the united front tactic. On this issue, because the context in which socialists operate constantly changes, our concrete application of the united front tactic must similarly change. Apart from anything else this means that we take from Lenin and Trotsky not detailed lessons extracted from their context but rather their generally unsectarian and open methodology. At its core this approach starts from the insight that revolutionary socialists need to build parties that are independent of reformism, but also that for these parties to be anything more than sects they must win their relevance to the movement through engagement in real progressive struggles alongside other forces to their right.

To work with people to our right is an elementary and fundamental aspect of revolutionary politics because, as I argued in my original article, reformism of one form or another is the initial common sense starting point of most social movements; it is the flipside to the more normal forms of apathy that characterise the standpoint of the individual within civil society. But because movements move and because they can involve large collectives of people they potentially create a space within which revolutionary politics can become a real force within society. In this situation it is important also to recognise the limitations of the united front tactic. The united front is in essence a defensive tactic through which broad numbers of people are brought together through a limited demand. The Stop the War slogan, for instance, could pull together much wider layers of activists than an approach which detailed the imperialist nature of the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq. However, though an essential mobilising tool, there is an ever present pressure on revolutionaries working within united fronts to accommodate to the dominant reformism of the broader movement. And because agreement must be reached on a wider range of issues this danger is multiplied within “political united fronts”—those coalitions in which revolutionaries might join with forces to their right to help build left electoral alternatives to social democracy. The danger of accommodation to reformism becomes most apparent at moments when shifts in the class struggle require sharp political turns among socialists. Because the united front approach is essentially a defensive tactic, a shift onto a more offensive footing often demands a sharp break with ways of operating that were essential during the preceding united front work.[28](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge141_28)

This need to move from defensive to offensive tactics means there are potentially catastrophic long-term consequences if revolutionary socialists succumb to the short-term desire to paper over political differences in the name of unity with groups to their right. This is why revolutionaries should enter such coalitions on the understanding that in all probability they will sooner or later have to break with their reformist partners. In this context, perhaps the greatest danger in a political united front is that revolutionaries will be drawn towards the illusion that they can use the state to begin a process of socialist reconstruction. This is the direction that Ed would take us in, and I think the evidence I marshalled in my previous essay alongside Harman and Potter’s analysis of the workers’ government slogan points to the simple fact that to do this would be a disaster for the left. The reason we as revolutionaries have joined electoral coalitions to the left of social democracy is not that we believe that by winning office we might begin the revolutionary reconstruction of society. It is rather that we aim to upset the typical electoral consequence of social democrats attacking their own base—swings to the right and/or to apathy. Our aim has been to give an alternative left voice to the sense of mass disillusionment with social democracy.[29](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge141_29)

One has only to imagine the positive impact on the political discourse about immigration in Britain today if Respect had gained the kind of foothold on the left that UKIP has on the right to recognise why joining Respect was generally the right approach for the SWP to take. However, had Respect flourished rather than ending in fiasco this would have generated problems of its own. Such a situation would undoubtedly have served to embolden both reformists and revolutionaries within the coalition. On the one hand, this would have probably helped foster a greater confidence to challenge the government’s austerity programme. But, on the other hand, it would also embolden reformist elements within Respect to try to ensure, as seems to have happened in Syriza, that such militancy is curbed as part of a focus on the parliamentary game. Unfortunately, Ed’s argument tends in this direction. And in so doing it illuminates a real danger associated with any strategy that reifies the united front tactic: beneath his revolutionary rhetoric there lies a relatively tame reformist practice.

Our approach, by contrast, is founded on the belief that there are limits to the applicability of the united front tactic, and the concept of a left or workers’ government is well beyond those limits. If a workers’ government seems a long way off in contemporary Britain, the emergence of Left Unity following on the heels of the debacle over Respect alongside more promising developments elsewhere in Europe nonetheless demands that we develop a clear analysis of these left reformist formations. Unfortunately, I believe that if we followed Ed’s advice we would risk liquidating the revolutionary left into a left reformist formation whose project is essentially utopian. The alternative is not to dismiss these formations; it is rather to accept that if we join one it must be as a politically independent group within a coalition. At the moment Left Unity does not allow this, and that is a fundamental weakness. Meanwhile we need to tread a path between sectarianism and accommodating to reformism. This is difficult, but it is essential if we are serious about fighting for the socialist reconstruction of society.

**Notes**

[1:](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge1411) Rooksby, 2013b; see also Blackledge, 2013a; Thomas, 2013; Molyneux, 2013; Callinicos, 2012, and Callinicos, 1999, and Harman, 2004, for earlier formulations.

[2:](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge1412) Formby, 2011.

[3:](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge1413) Loach, Hudson and Achcar, 2013.

[4:](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge1414) See, for instance, Miliband, 1972; Coates, 1975; Cliff and Gluckstein, 1996.

[5:](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge1415) Snowden, 2013.

[6:](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge1416) Hudson, 2012; see my review of this book-Blackledge, 2013b.

[7:](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge1417) Kampagiannis, 2013.

[8:](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge1418) Rooksby, 2013a.

[9:](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge1419) Gorz, 1975.

[10:](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge14110) The social contract was one of a number of deals between capital and labour as mediated through the trade unions on the one side and social democratic and Communist parties on the other-Blackledge, 2013a, p47.

[11:](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge14111) Blackledge, 2013a. I heard the sad news of Nelson Mandela’s death when I was completing this article. Despite his personal heroism, the awful truth is that since it came to power in 1994 the ANC’s social contract like policies have acted exactly as I suggest above-helping make South Africa one of the most unequal nations on Earth (Ashman and others, 2011, p177).

[12:](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge14112) The term transitional demand was used by Trotsky to describe the kind of concrete demand that, while rooted in the immediate needs of ordinary people struggling within capitalism, opened a space to push beyond these limits to a more general struggle against capitalism (Hallas 1979, p104).

[13:](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge14113) Rooksby, 2013b, p99.

[14:](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge14114) Riddell, 2011, p1159.

[15:](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge14115) Riddell, 2011, p1159.

[16:](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge14116) Harman and Potter, 2010, p94.

[17:](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge14117) Harman, 1982, pp254-260; 273-291; Broué, 2005, pp791-816; Hallas, 1985, pp73-74.

[18:](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge14118) Cliff, 1987, p386.

[19:](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge14119) Callinicos, 2003, p140, see also Callinicos, 2010.

[20:](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge14120) Rooksby, 2013b, p93.

[21:](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge14121) There are, however, numerous examples of governments instituting reforms that lead in a more statist direction that have been supported by many on the left in the mistaken conflation of socialism with state capitalism. This is why the theory of state capitalism retains its importance to this day (see Harman, 2009).

[22:](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge14122) Riddell, 2011, p458.

[23:](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge14123) See, for instance, Richard Allday’s apologetic account of the Grangemouth debacle- Allday, 2013.

[24:](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge14124) Murray, 2013.

[25:](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge14125) Seymour, 2012; 2013.

[26:](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge14126) MacIntyre, 2008, p371.

[27:](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge14127) Rooksby, 2013b, p89.

[28:](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge14128) Hallas, 1976.

[29:](http://isj.org.uk/once-more-on-left-reformism-a-reply-to-ed-rooksby/%22%20%5Cl%20%22blackledge14129) Harman, 2008, p30.

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