Cynicism and the SWP

Bob Pitt

THAT THE 15 February demonstration against war on Iraq was a spectacular success goes without saying. Estimates varied from one million marchers to double that number, but with a protest that size exact figures are an impossibility. It was certainly the largest demonstration ever seen in Britain. All of which came as a welcome surprise, given that the main force within the Stop the War Coalition, the body responsible for organising the event, is the Socialist Workers Party.

The sole concern of SWP, as with all far left sects, is to increase its own size and influence, and to hell with the interests of the wider movement. Faced with the alternative of winning a campaign but without any significant recruitment to the SWP, or losing the campaign and gaining new members, the SWP would opt for the latter every time.

Yet these sectarians set about organising the 15 February demonstration with an almost faultless sense of tactics. The rally in Hyde Park did not, as you might have anticipated, feature a bunch of Trots wearing different hats – Lindsey German, in her capacity as convenor of the Stop the War Coalition, was the only SWP member on the platform – and the range of speakers was genuinely broad. Jessie Jackson, Mo Mowlam, Ken Livingstone, various trade union general secretaries, Ms Dynamite – even Lib Dem leader Charles Kennedy was persuaded to join in. Peace activists who were planning a sit-down protest in Piccadilly Circus at the end of the march were refused an advert on the Coalition website, on the eminently sensible grounds that this would put off potential marchers who were unconvinced of the merits of direct action. Everything, in short, was done to make the appeal of the demonstration as wide as possible.

On the face of it, all this seemed to directly contravene a basic principle of revolutionary politics, which I like to call Bob's Law. A variant of Sod's Law, this states: What the far left can get wrong, the far left will get wrong. However, it should be borne in mind that these are only laws of tendency. A piece of buttered bread, when dropped, will occasionally land with the buttered side up; once in a while the far left does get something right. But in the end the general tendency inevitably asserts itself.

And so it proved with the SWP. The following week's *Socialist Worker* saw a predictable return to the familiar ground of ultra-left sectarianism. The editorial called on trade union leaders to "encourage and organise militant action" against the war, which would "go beyond the limits imposed by the anti-union laws". The prospect of trade union members responding to war with political strikes, at least in any significant numbers, is of course negligible. And if such action were to receive official support, the unions concerned would stand to have their funds sequestrated. Not a terribly bright idea, I would say.

The front page of the paper carried the slogan "Drive Blair Out!" Personally, I think calls for the Labour leader's resignation are politically premature. However, if Blair is to be "driven out", it is difficult to see how that can be done without a campaign inside the Labour Party.

But *Socialist Worker* did not call on the trade unions to use their weight within the party to take up a struggle against Blair and his war policy. On the contrary, it proposed that they should break from Labour: "The trade union leaders should cut off all funds to the Labour Party, and withdraw all resources for the forthcoming elections."

There was no suggestion that the hundreds of thousands of ordinary people who protested on 15 February should put pressure on Labour MPs in order to encourage a rebellion against Blair within the Parliamentary Labour Party. On the contrary, an article by Kevin Ovenden specifically opposed this course of action, arguing that "parliamentary procedures will not stop this war.... Every radical change in Britain ... has come through extra-parliamentary action or the impending threat of it". According to Ovenden's reasoning, a revolt in the PLP would be irrelevant, but Blair can be removed by students occupying their colleges and sit-down protestors blocking traffic in city centres.

As Stop the War convenor Lindsey German told the 15 February rally: "In London we're going to occupy the whole Whitehall area of government, so they won't be able to get their ministry cars through." Of course, the peace movement has a long tradition of such forms of direct action, but these are conducted in a self-disciplined manner, with police aggression being met by non-violent resistance. However, if the SWP tries to block the streets of central London by mobilising people who have no background in the peace movement, and who in some cases will be involved with the various anarchist groups that participated in the J18 and May Day riots, this is recipe for violent confrontations with the police and the consequent discrediting of the anti-war movement among the general public.

Trying to be charitable, you might explain the contrast between the serious way in which the SWP organised for 15 February, and the way it took leave of its senses immediately afterwards, on the basis that its leaders had simply become disoriented by their own success. But there is more to it than that. The SWP clearly knows how to build a broad and effective campaign, but in order to raise its profile as "the revolutionary party" and facilitate recruitment to its own ranks it abandons those methods in favour of an ultra-leftist approach that undermines the anti-war movement. It is an exercise in political cynicism. ■