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The UK general election and the growth of class antagonisms

By Chris Marsden

7 May 2015

Twelve days before this Thursday's general election, the *Sunday Times* annual Rich List revealed that Britain now has more billionaires per head of population than any other country.

One thousand people have a combined wealth of \$856 billion (US dollars). Just the 117 richest people have a wealth of \$503 billion. They own more than the bottom 40 percent of the entire UK population.

In just one year, their wealth increased by \$43 billion. Now think about this. It would take more than 2 million workers earning the minimum wage a full year just to fund this increase. It would take 23 million to give the favoured 100+ all they presently own.

The super-rich have doubled their wealth since the great crash of 2008-2009. They have done this by returning to rampant speculation—using money handed over by governments or gouged from working people through wage cuts, speed-ups and gutting services.

Here, in the second richest economy in Europe, this has left the poorest 20 percent 57 percent worse off than in 2009. Incomes are falling, with the poorest 10 percent earning just £160 a week. More than 13 million people live in poverty, including almost a third of children.

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens speaks of the years leading up to the French revolution as “the season of Light...the season of Darkness.” Light for the ruling elite, who were rolling “with exceeding smoothness downhill, making paper money and spending it.” Dark for the exploited masses, who were about to rise up against the *Ancien Régime*.

The magnificent chronicler of the social ills of his age would recognise much in contemporary Britain echoing his portrayal of pre-revolutionary France. A vast and growing social gulf is the defining feature of life in the UK. It is this that accounts for the deep sense of crisis hanging over these elections.

No party is anywhere near able to form a majority government. The Tories and Labour are reviled because both are committed to austerity. Millions are looking for an alternative—hoping that the Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru or the Greens will offer some respite from endless social pain.

They won't. Instead they want to prop up Labour so it can take over if the Tories fail to stitch up a coalition with the Liberal Democrats and others.

A government drawn from any combination of these parties, led by either Labour or the Conservatives, will be highly unstable. It will be rent by deep fault lines—over whether or not to remain in the European Union or even whether to maintain the UK as a unitary state.

Most importantly, it will have no legitimacy in the eyes of working people. You cannot secure a democratic mandate for an endless assault on the vast majority to further enrich a fabulously wealthy and parasitic minority.

The Socialist Equality Party insists in our manifesto: “[N]one of the great problems facing working people can be resolved without ending the dictatorship of the financial oligarchy. It is a cancer on society that must be excised.”

Let me cite just one example proving this: the housing crisis. The super-rich are busy speculating on property and raking in billions. As a result, the average price of a home in the UK has reached \$419,000—over 10 times the average annual wage. In London, the figure is \$806,000, rising by more than the average wage every single year.

Rents are so high that among those living in subsidised public housing, half still struggle to pay their bills, with more than a third skipping meals to make ends meet.

This week *The Independent* revealed that more than 50,000 families have been shipped out of London boroughs in the past three years in a naked campaign of social cleansing. Soaring rents and welfare cuts mean poor people are forced to move out of homes they can no longer afford at a rate of 500 families a week. Among the top ten guilty councils, seven are run by Labour.

British capitalism faces a fundamental crisis of rule that must bring explosive class confrontations.

This is made more certain because the next government must deepen its military provocations against Russia and China, as well as in the Middle East, to re-secure its position as America's chief partner in crime.

Mass anti-war sentiment presently finds no political expression because the parties of austerity are also the parties of militarism and war. This must change. The Socialist Equality Party alone represents a genuine political opposition to the existing social and political order.

We have fought to make workers and young people aware of what is happening in Britain and internationally and, above all, to cut through the conspiracy of silence on the growing danger of war in Ukraine, Iraq and Syria. We have advanced a socialist and internationalist programme as the basis for the working class to assert its own interests and to put an end to capitalism.

The central issue we have stressed is the need to build the International Committee of the Fourth International as the new revolutionary leadership of the working class.

Holborn and St. Pancras, where we have stood David O'Sullivan, is where Karl Marx wrote *Das Kapital* and where, in 1864, the First International was founded. It was where Vladimir Lenin met Leon Trotsky for the first time in 1902.

In Glasgow Central, where we have stood Katie Rhodes, John Maclean led a heroic movement against the horrors of World War I. In 1918, he was tried and found guilty of sedition. He delivered a speech from the dock turning the tables on his persecutors, declaring:

“I am not here, then, as the accused; I am here as the accuser of capitalism dripping with blood from head to foot.

“No matter what your accusations against me may be,” he added, “my appeal is to the working class.”

“I appeal exclusively to them because they and they only can bring about the time when the whole world will be in one brotherhood, on a sound economic foundation. That, and that alone, can be the means of bringing about a re-organisation of society. That can only be obtained when the people of the world get the world, and retain the world.”

These are fine words, speaking to profound convictions once widely held in the working class.

In the period ahead, workers in Britain will find in the SEP and the ICFI the road back to these—their genuine socialist traditions—buried for decades under the leaden weight of Labourism, trade unionism and Stalinism. They will be able to finally put an end to the twin evils of class exploitation and military conflict.