

COUNTERFIRE

National Conference 2011

Saturday 17 September - Eve of Conference Rally

The conference weekend started with a rally at ULU which was chaired by Clare Solomon and addressed by Lindsey German, Neil Faulkner, Josh Virasami, Sean Rillo-Raczka and Sanum Ghafoor. The speeches can be watched on-line at Counterfire.org

Sunday 18 September - National Conference

Conference was divided into four sessions:

Session 1 The Left, the Movement and Building Counterfire

Motions passed:

The Constitution (appendix 1)

Website and Print Publications (Appendix 2)

Session 2 The Global Economy and Fighting Austerity

Motion passed:

The Economy, the Movement, and the Left (Appendix 3)

Session 3 Trade Unions and the Changing Working Class

Motion passed:

Revolutionaries, Trade Unions, and the Working Class (Appendix 4)

Session 4 Imperialism and the Arab Revolutions

Motion passed:

Imperialism and War (Appendix 5)

Election of the Steering Committee

According to the constitution National Conference decides the size and method of election of the Steering Committee. A proposal was put, and endorsed, that this year it consist of up to 20 members and that they should be elected on an open ballot paper (i.e. each voter has a choice of all the candidates to vote for or not) and that each elector could use up to 20 votes. The conduct of the election was delegated by the CAC to the Returning Officer who issued and counted all the ballot papers.

In accordance with the constitution voting was by secret ballot. Voting opened at the end of the first session when papers were distributed, and closed at 2pm. They were counted immediately and the newly elected Steering Committee was announced at the end of the final session (Appendix 5)

Observers

National Conference 2011

There were observers at conference from the International Socialist Group (Scotland) and Socialist Resistance (British section of the Fourth International).

The Constitution of Counterfire

1.0 Name, aims and objectives

- 1.1 The name of the organisation shall be “Counterfire”.
- 1.2 Counterfire is a revolutionary socialist organisation dedicated to the overthrow of capitalism by the working class. The political basis of the organisation is set out in the statement “What is Counterfire” (Appendix 1).

2.0 Membership

- 2.1 A member shall accept the aims and objectives of the organisation, make a financial contribution to it and abide by the Constitution.

3.0 Conference

- 3.1 The sovereign body of the organisation is the National Conference.
- 3.2 The National Conference shall be convened annually and happen no less often than every eighteen months.
- 3.3 All members may attend National Conference with speaking and voting rights.
- 3.4 The National Conference shall elect the Steering Committee.
- 3.5 The National Conference may be called by a majority vote of the National Meeting or Steering Committee.
- 3.6 Only the National Conference may alter the Constitution; this must be by a two thirds vote.

4.0 National Meeting

- 4.1 Between meetings of the National Conference the National Meeting shall be the sovereign body of the organisation exercising all powers except to alter the Constitution.
- 4.2 All members may attend the National Meeting with speaking and voting rights.
- 4.3 The National Meeting shall meet no less often than every four months.
- 4.4 The Steering Committee shall take appropriate measures to maximise attendance from all parts of the organisation.
- 4.5 The National Meeting must approve or reject the co-option of members to the Steering Committee.

5.0 Steering Committee

- 5.1 The Steering Committee shall lead the organisation between meetings of the National Conference and National Meeting.
- 5.2 The Steering Committee shall create and oversee bodies as appropriate to the needs of the organisation and may delegate any or all of its powers except those reserved in the Constitution to the Steering Committee alone.
- 5.3 The Steering Committee shall elect National Officers.
- 5.4 The number of members of the Steering Committee elected by the National Conference shall be decided by the National Conference.
- 5.5 Election of the Steering Committee shall be by secret ballot and conducted according to arrangements agreed by National Conference.
- 5.6 Additional members of the Steering Committee may be co-opted by that body. Such co-options must be approved or rejected by the following National Meeting.

6.0 Local groups, Committees and Working Groups

- 6.1 Local area groups shall be formed as appropriate to the needs of the organisation. Newly created groups must be approved by the following National Meeting.
- 6.2 Committees and working groups shall be formed by the Steering Committee as necessary. They may co-opt members. The convener should be a member of the Steering Committee. The name of the convener of each group shall be circulated to the membership.

7.0 Chairs, Conveners and Moderators

- 7.1 Each committee or other body should normally elect its own chair or convener.
- 7.2 Where a body of the organisation has a discussion list it may elect a moderator if necessary.

8.0 National Officers

- 8.1 The Steering Committee shall elect such National Officers as appropriate to the needs of the organisation. Any such appointments must be approved by the following National Meeting.
- 8.2 National Officers shall include a National Treasurer and National Secretary.

9.0 Organisers

- 9.1 The Steering Committee may appoint individuals to oversee and organise specific areas of work. They shall be appointed according to an agreed procedure.
- 9.2 Organisers shall report to the National Secretary.

10.0 Conference Arrangements Committee

- 10.1 Conference Arrangements Committee is responsible for the organisation of National Conference. It shall be elected by the Steering Committee. It must be approved by the National Conference at the start of proceedings.
- 10.2 Conference Arrangements Committee shall recommend to Conference the number of members of the Steering Committee. It shall organise all elections at National Conference.

11.0 Voting and Vacancies

- 11.1 All decisions are made by a majority vote unless otherwise stated.
- 11.2 Any vacancy which may arise on any elected body may be filled by means of an election at the next National Meeting or Conference.

12.0 Complaints and Disputes

- 12.1 Counterfire opposes sexism, racism, Islamophobia, homophobia and other forms of oppressive or discriminatory behaviour and therefore behaviour is not acceptable in the organisation.
- 12.2 Any complaints, breaches of the Constitution, unethical or unacceptable behaviour should be reported to the appropriate national officer as designated by the Steering Committee. A Committee of Enquiry shall then be appointed by the Steering Committee if necessary. Any action, if any, to be taken must be approved by the Steering Committee. Such decisions may be appealed to the following National Meeting.

What is Counterfire?

Counterfire is an organisation of revolutionary socialists. We work in the trade unions, student movement, and protest campaigns to link together different struggles, push them forwards, and build resistance to the system. Counterfire members have played a key role in the Coalition of Resistance, Stop the War, and the student revolt.

A world system in crisis

World capitalism today faces an intractable crisis. The financial crash is tipping Europe into depression and the Third World into starvation. The militarisation of relations between states is a clear and present danger to world peace. Uncontrolled global warming threatens climate catastrophe. These threats to the lives and wellbeing of the great majority of humanity are rooted in a system geared to production for profit and the enrichment of the few. Instead of the chaos, exploitation, and violence of competitive capital accumulation, we need a system based on democracy, equality, planning, and human need.

Change from below

Real change has to be fought for through action from below. We cannot rely on either politicians or bureaucrats to change things for us. We have to build broad, democratic organisations of mass resistance among workers, students, and the poor. We have to use the weapons of class struggle - demonstrations, strikes, occupations, and other direct action - to make real gains. The power of the banks, the corporations, and the state are ranged against us. To make permanent gains and bring about radical social transformation, revolution will be necessary, in which the repressive state, with its police, prisons, and armed forces, is replaced with a new order based on mass democratic assemblies.

United mass resistance

To prevent effective resistance, our rulers and their media attempt to divide us. We must stand together in solidarity. We must reject all forms of prejudice based on race, religion, gender, age, disability, or sexual orientation. We must unite all working people in a single struggle against the rich and powerful. And we must build links between working people here in Britain and those fighting back around the world.

A revolutionary organisation

To do these things effectively, we need an organisation of revolutionary socialist activists committed to building and shaping mass organisations of struggle like the trade unions, the anti-war movement, and the Coalition of Resistance. Counterfire is such an organisation. Our aim is to build local groups rooted in workplaces, colleges, and communities across Britain. The historical stakes have never been higher. We have a world to win. We have a world we must win. Counterfire is at the heart of the resistance. Join us.

ENDS

Appendix 2

Motion: Website and Print Publications

Proposed by: Alex Snowdon

Seconded by: Tony Dowling

Conference notes:

1. The appetite for Counterfire's ideas, analysis and political coverage indicated by impressive levels of traffic to the website.
2. The success of our previous printed publications (pamphlets, short books and broadsheets) in raising Counterfire's profile, connecting with wider layers of people, communicating our political ideas and supporting the political and theoretical development of our members.
3. The close integration of the online and print sides of our publishing, for example by publishing pamphlets comprising website articles, making printed publications available for free on the website, and so on.

Conference believes:

1. The website is Counterfire's political hub, an invaluable resource for members and supporters, and a central means for communicating our ideas.
2. The website, used effectively and creatively, can facilitate the growth of our organisation, for example by publicising our events, enabling membership enquiries, allowing supporters to get in touch with local groups and providing material which can serve as the basis for political meetings.
3. Expanding our range and output of printed literature will help us both reach new audiences and nurture the political development of our membership.
4. The organisation currently benefits from the flexibility and dynamism of publishing literature in response to our needs, rather than being tied to the publishing cycle of a regular publication.

Conference resolves:

1. To actively promote the website, with an expectation that all members will circulate website content to their contacts, e.g. by email, Facebook or Twitter.
2. To continuously make effective use of the website as an aid to organisation and activity, for example by following up new membership enquiries immediately and improving our use of the website to promote events.
3. To launch a major publicity campaign for Counterfire's new book, 'The People Demand: A Short History of the Arab Revolutions', and make selling the book a high priority for the whole organisation.
4. To publish a wide range of further printed literature – pamphlets, books and broadsheets – over the next year.
5. To integrate the online and print sides of our publishing as closely as possible.

ENDS

The economy, the movement, and the left

Counterfire Editorial Board

Conference notes:

1. The traditional centres of capitalism in Europe, North America, and Japan continue to stagnate, as unemployment rises, orders decline and mainstream forecasts for growth revised downwards.
2. Financial markets worldwide are deeply unsettled, registering successive panics over the last quarter. Bank lending and business investment in the core economies of capitalism have not recovered to pre-crash levels, while household spending remains low.
3. The response of governments in capitalism's core economies, after a brief semi-'Keynesian' period in the aftermath of the 2008 crash, has been to revert to austerity measures of greater or lesser severity. This has, in many countries, been supported by an extremely loose monetary policy of exceptionally low interest rates and often 'quantitative easing' – flooding the banking system with newly-printed money.
4. The combination of bailouts for the banks and sharp recession has damaged public finances across the globe. Sovereign debt crises have arisen, most dramatically in Europe.
5. After a sharp recession over 2008-9, newly emerging centres for capital accumulation have recovered and in many cases returned to dramatic rates of growth. This is most dramatic in China, but includes also other economies in East Asia and Latin America.

Conference believes:

1. We are in the early stages of an epochal crisis of capitalism, comparable to the Great Depression of the 1930s. The first phase of this erupted, after its gestation, with the bankruptcy of Lehman Bros in September 2008. The bailouts that followed stabilised the financial system but did not resolve the crisis. They merely transferred a crisis of private finance into a crisis of public debt. This has now opened the second phase of the wider crisis as it has become apparent that rates of accumulation and growth in older capitalist centres will not be sufficient to sustain the debt incurred – most dramatically in Europe. Because the financial system itself holds the public debt, the sovereign debt crisis has fed back into the financial system, provoking fears of a further collapse.
2. The situation has been further worsened by a return to austerity measures. Lacking the political capacity to resolve even the immediate issues of a malignant financial system – whether through defaults on public debt, or serious measures to constrain financial activities, or both – governments have reverted to austerity in an effort to shrink public sector balance sheets. This is impelled on them by the prospect of further crises in an unreformed financial system, and is occurring despite the well-known lessons of the 1930s: that cutting spending during a recession or weak recovery threatens further recession. Countries like Ireland and Greece that have applied austerity most severely are already suffering; the UK is itself now sliding back into recession.
3. Newer centres for capitalism, outside the historic core, have on the whole recovered rapidly. Tighter controls over finance (in the short term) and the absence of prior accumulations of capital threatening profit rates (over the longer term) have enabled a rapid return to growth. However, with domestic markets still relatively small and underdeveloped, stagnation in their major export markets threatens them with recession. There has been evidence of overcapacity and overinvestment for some time, perhaps seen most sharply in dramatic price increases for raw materials (abetted by financial speculation). A slump in export markets would expose this overcapacity, threatening bankruptcies and recession in newer economies.
4. For the UK, austerity is a social and economic disaster – and an integral part of the global crisis. Austerity is being driven by the threat of further banking crises that would require further bailouts, and not merely by Tory/Lib Dem ideology. Breaking austerity therefore requires not merely the immediate task of opposing the cuts, but of raising the need to break finance and fundamentally reshape the economy.
5. The British ruling class is weak. It expects the most dramatic spending cuts for a generation or more to be delivered by a minority Tory government feebly supported by a crumbling Liberal party. However, our own side is weak. Local campaigns, while necessary, are inadequate on their own. Trade unions,

though playing an essential role, are at present not capable of sustaining a mass campaign alone. A national anti-cuts movement must therefore be built, uniting all those prepared to take action against austerity, and this must form part of a broader, international movement.

6. The Coalition of Resistance remains the best vehicle to achieve this inside the UK, uniting anti-cuts campaigns, local groups, trade unions and others. After an exceptional launch conference in November it has implanted itself in many local areas, but this remains too uneven. The CoR-initiated European Conference against Austerity is the opportunity to pull together the different anti-austerity campaigns in the UK and across the continent, uniting them around common objectives.

Conference resolves:

1. To continue to support and build the Coalition of Resistance nationally as a broad, radical united front capable of uniting all those forces opposed to austerity measures. To support the creation of local Coalition of Resistance groups where no effective previous organisation exists, and to push for affiliation to CoR by local anti-cuts groups, unions, and other bodies.
2. To continue to push for a further TUC national demonstration against austerity as a vital part of building a movement.
3. To support and build the European Conference Against Austerity on October 1 as a priority for the movement, here and internationally, and to support initiatives agreed on by the conference where possible.
4. To support and build local anti-cuts protests, including those called by local anti-cuts groups and UK Uncut, as part of creating a national movement.
5. To continue to argue, within the growing, broader anti-cuts movement for an anti-capitalist response to the crisis that includes taxation of the wealthy, placing financial institutions under democratic control, and the creation of secure employment through investment in green infrastructure.

ENDS

Appendix 4

Motion: Revolutionaries, Trade Unions, and the Working Class

Counterfire Editorial Board

Conference notes:

1. That trade unions have been substantially weakened by the defeats of the 1980s and the neoliberal restructuring of capitalism in the 1990s and 2000s.
2. That, compared with their peak in the 1970s, the unions' membership has almost halved to around 6.5 million; while union membership remains around 60% in the public sector, it has fallen to around one in six in the private sector.
3. That the strike rate has been stuck at a century-long low over the past two decades.
4. That rank-and-file organisation is effectively non-existent and many lay officials and stewards operate in a purely routine and bureaucratic way.
5. That the trade union bureaucracy is shackled by the anti-union laws and reduced to calling occasional token strikes.
6. That confidence and combativity of the working class in the workplaces consequently remains very low.

Conference believes:

1. The political upturn of the last decade remains central to the consciousness of workers. Anger about bank bailouts, City bonuses, MPs' expenses, and the Murdoch scandal has fed an existing anti-Establishment mood. Hundreds of thousands of workers have taken part in street protests in recent years. The primacy of politics and the street over the workplace was demonstrated on both the M26 TUC demo and the J30 strike this year.
2. The key to raising the confidence and combativity of workers is infecting the workplaces with the militancy and radicalism of the movements.
3. Trade unions remain central to workers' struggle. M26 and J30 prove this.
4. The form of union and workplace struggle in the near future is, however, likely to be very different from that of 1945-1985. It will not be based on strong sectional strength and rank-and-file organisation. It may have more in common with Chartism or New Unionism, when the experience of united class-wide political campaigns and mass demonstrations infected the workplaces and sparked industrial action.
5. The centre of gravity for the class struggle is likely to remain the street rather than the workplace. This was demonstrated on J30, when picketing was patchy, but many workers attended town-centre rallies.
6. Trade unions are contradictory organisations. They reflect the conflict between capital and labour, and they represent the collective power of workers to resist exploitation in the workplace. On the other hand, as permanent organisations, they generate a bureaucracy of officials whose *raison d'être* is to negotiate the terms of the 'wage contract' with capital; a bureaucracy, that is, whose social role and position mean that it mediates and compromises rather than leads all-out action.
7. This contradiction finds expression in two ways: a conflict between right and left within the which extends from the bureaucracy to the rank and file; and a conflict between the interests of the bureaucracy as a whole (whose primary interest lies in safeguarding the union apparatus on which their livelihoods depend) and the rank and file (whose class interest lies in the revolutionary

overthrow of capital).

8. In certain historical periods, when there is both strong workplace organisation and a high level of struggle, the conflict between bureaucracy and rank and file can take on an organised, semi- permanent form, with networks of workplace-based activists able to lead frequent and some times large-scale unofficial action. This was the case for much of the period 1910-1926 and again during the period centred on 1968-1975. In these circumstances, revolutionaries should be rooted in workplace-based rank and file organisation, not in the union bureaucracy.
9. The present period is not of this kind. The priority for revolutionaries is to build strong united fronts, primarily against the war and the cuts. This means working with the widest possible forces, including left-officials in the unions, in order to a) build the unions, the Coalition of Resistance, and Stop the War, b) strengthen the relationship between the unions and the movements, and c) involve workplace and union activists in general campaigns.
10. We should not seek to build either union 'fractions' or Coalition of Resistance union-based activist groups. It is essential that we cut against syndicalism and sectionalism. An internal union focus will reinforce, not undermine, the lack of confidence and combativity in the workplaces.
11. Our aim must be to unite all section of the working class – organised workers, unorganised workers, those on benefits, students, minorities – in mass campaigns and protests.
12. Our work in individual unions should always be geared to making links with the broader mass movements against war and cuts.

Conference resolves:

1. Counterfire members will, wherever possible, be active trade unionists – recruiting to the unions, arguing for industrial action, encouraging rank-and-file activity, raising political issues in workplaces and union branches, and so on.
2. Where Counterfire members hold positions in the unions, whether elected or appointed, whether voluntary, part-time, or full-time, they will be held accountable within the context of Counterfire's politics.
3. All Counterfire members will seek to relate to, work with, learn from, and influence unionised workers – on picket lines, demonstrations, rallies, and anti-cuts campaigning – with Coalition of Resistance as the primary vehicle for this.
4. Counterfire members will liaise with each other about work inside their own unions – organising CoR fringe meetings, getting branch affiliations to CoR, building up lists of CoR supporters, getting the union involved in local anti-cuts activity, agreeing on motions and issues to push inside the union, and so on.

ENDS

Appendix 5

Motion: Imperialism and War

Counterfire Editorial Board

Conference notes:

1. That the dominant strategy of the imperial powers remains that which began under Bush and Blair and became known as the war on terror: the ongoing occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan and the extension of the Afghan war into Pakistan. This strategy includes continued threats to the security of Iran. It also includes largely unqualified support for the state of Israel.
2. That the Arab revolutions have disrupted the normal operation of imperial power in the Middle East, principally by the removal of the US's second most important ally in the Middle East, the Mubarak regime. Additionally the spread of the Arab revolutions has confronted the US and its allies with severe foreign policy challenges.
3. That the military intervention in Libya and the simultaneous Saudi led crushing of the Bahraini revolution was designed by the Western powers to regain some control over events in the Middle East and to impede the spread of the Arab revolutions.
4. That the economic crisis that began in 2007 has weakened the international standing of the US and strengthened the hand of at least some of its competitors, most obviously China.

Conference believes:

1. That the US and its allies do not have stable, pro-western regime on which it can depend in Iraq.
2. That the NATO operation in Afghanistan is a failure and that the imperial powers are looking for an exit strategy which will mean conceding substantial governmental power to the Taliban.
3. That the defeat of Gaddafi will partially refurbish the ideology of humanitarian intervention although the military operation still does not command domestic support in the US or Britain. It has nevertheless succeeded at the moment in corrupting the Libyan revolution and making it, however reluctantly, a creature of the major powers.
4. That the Arab revolutions have been made more difficult and the Arab dictators in Syria, Yemen and elsewhere more resistant since the Libyan intervention and the failure of the Bahrain revolution. Nevertheless the revolutions continue to fight with tenacity and bravery and the final outcome is not yet decided.
5. The impact of the Arab revolutions on the Palestine issue had been to produce Palestinian unity between Hamas and Fatah. This poses problems for the Israeli state and its backers. But the terms of unity are not necessarily those of a one state solution, the only viable and, to most Palestinians, acceptable solution.
6. That the ongoing economic crisis makes the Western governments even more vulnerable to the anti-war argument than they were before 2007. That the anti-cuts movement is stronger when it makes the anti-war argument one of its central agitational themes.
7. That the economic crisis has worsened the US's competitive position vis-a-vis China. That increasing tension between the major powers is likely to be a feature of the coming period.

Conference resolves:

1. To continue to make sustaining the STWC as a central priority.
2. To continue to make solidarity work with the Arab revolutions a central part of our work.
3. That solidarity with the struggle of the Palestinians will remain a central to our perspectives.
4. To raise within CoR and other campaigns against the recession the view that anti-war arguments are an effective way of strengthening the anti-austerity movement.

ENDS