

# The Complete Guide to the Student Left

or "how not to become completely jaded and sack it all in"

So it's Freshers' week. Everything is new. You're entering a new, vibrant community. You might have been "into" politics before you came to Uni. You might be still just trying to figure out what you think about the world. Well what better place to find out than at University? At your freshers' fair you may be greeted by a whole host of left-wing and radical organisations which will (if you come from a conservative shit-hole like I did) seem exciting, new and worlds away from what's going on back home. What better way to start figuring out the world than joining one of these socialist groups? What better way to challenge injustice and inequality than standing by like-minded individuals? Well, think again.

Now I know what you're probably thinking at this point. The reputation of the Left precedes it I'm sure. What I am not going to argue here, as many other of the socialist groups you will encounter will do, is the superiority of the People's Front of Judea to the Judean's People Front. The Left is horribly sectarian, filled with bitter little grouplets who despise each other. If that's the kinda thing you're looking for I'm sure your latest issue of Weekly/Socialist/Communist Worker will provide, I'm not interested in that bollox.

There are many reasons why you may want to get involved in socialist politics - you may feel disillusioned, angry (and rightly so!) - but the best reason to stay involved is to be able to challenge and re-

think your preconceptions of how society should and can be organised. This implies a process of education, REAL education that is. You see, for all the pretence that Universities have about being spaces for free thought, the fact is that radical ideas are under-funded, badly taught (usually by highly unsympathetic lecturers) and generally marginalised. Unfortunately, the only real opportunity you have to really explore radical ideas is either through independent study (something that is very difficult to sustain) or through discussions and practical action with like-minded people. Accordingly involvement with the Socialist Party/Socialist Workers Party/Communist Party of Britain/Communist Party of Great Britain/Alliance for Workers Liberty/International Bolshevik

Will you join the party?



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Tendency/International Committee of the Fourth International/Student Broad Left (No, I'm not bullshitting you, there are literally this many groups) may appear to be an appealing option.

What these groups traditionally won't tell you, however, is that they are not just "socialist" groups but identify with a very specific tradition of socialism – Leninism. Leninism is the interpretation of Marxist theory forwarded by Lenin, leader of the Russian Communist party, in the years leading up to and after the Russian revolution. Now you can argue until the cows come home the ins-and-outs, triumphs and failures of the Russian revolution, in fact I'm sure these people will indulge you if you were to ask. Whatever conclusions you may draw, the fact is that Leninism, as embodied by the practice of many contemporary socialist groups, has changed very little since 1917. It is still based on Lenin's original vision of an authoritarian, highly disciplined organisation of "professional revolutionaries" who need to "win" leadership over the working class. How does this translate into everyday practice? Well typically the people who will be manning the stalls and megaphones during your first weeks of university won't be students; they'll be paid recruiters working for the party. The leadership of these organisations are well aware that many students are interested in left-wing ideas and will typically exploit these first few weeks to swell their organisations membership. The party requires a passive and obedient rank-and-file to unquestioningly carry through the "strategic vision" of the leadership. The very reason that so many different lefty sects exist is a culture in which it is preferable to simply expel dissidents from the party than allow for open and honest debate - debate that may bring the "wisdom" of this leadership into question. The result: hundreds of little Lenins in hundreds of different groups all proclaiming their one and "correct" revolutionary strategy.

Leninism is also a highly manipulative practice. Organisations will often set up "front groups" like Unite Against Fascism or Another Education is Possible which are seemingly admirable attempts to unite activists around a common cause, but in

reality are firmly in the control of paid organisers and provide a steady recruitment stream for the party. These are not spaces for debate, discussion and common action but are cynically exploited for party building. For example, if you have at any point put your details down for a petition "against the BNP" or for "free education" on a freshers' fair stall you can guarantee that those details will go no further than the organisers list of "sympathetic contacts" (recruiters will often be quite candid about this if you ask them). The "what is socialism?" or "socialism 101" meetings that these groups will host in the first few weeks will always be filled with party members (to give the impression of inflated interest in their group) who will ask sympathetic questions from the floor - "where do I sign up?", "your group sounds great, where can I find out more?". The talk itself is likely to be nothing more than the party-line handed down from the leadership and discussion tightly controlled by the chair (so as to save the embarrassment of a few awkward questions).

All in all, it's anti-democratic, it's manipulative and it's total bullshit.

Students who do end up getting involved with these groups will typically follow two paths; either they will eventually join the party, maybe even become a paid organiser or they will get bored of the lack of control, the sectarianism and the pointless activity (endless newspaper sales and badgering from regional organisers to fulfil your monthly quotas) and sack off all lefty politics convinced that this is all it has to offer. I think this is a real shame.

Now, I know what you are thinking: "he's just going to say, 'join the anarchists instead, they're awesome!'". Well you know what? I'm not going to do that. Radical politics is about challenging the world we live in and that should include those who identify as "the left". It should be about empowering people to have the confidence to take action, not indoctrinating them with party positions or wasting their time in petty squabbles. My advice therefore: question, discuss and debate. There are plenty of open websites and discussion boards, like Revleft and

Libcom, that can be used to debate and discuss ideas and are independent of any organisation or political group. Indymedia is a good resource for discovering what activism and events are going on in your local area; you can see which groups are active and if it takes your fancy maybe go along to a meeting and check it out. Many cities have radical, social centres that act as a hub for political activism. There has also been a recent resurgence in class struggle forums or communist discussion groups which provide an excellent opportunity to explore and discuss ideas without the pressure of recruitment always hanging over your head. Get out there and get involved - just don't be duped into thinking that the boring, dead-end and authoritarian politics offered by the socialist left has anything to do with the kind of fair and free society we hope one day to create.

### You have been warned...

libcom.org presents the top five best Trotskyist pick-up lines to use on the cute Marxist-Leninist at your local paper-sale.

**5** "Hey sweet thang, wanna dictate my proletariat?"

**4** "My revolutionary Party has a huge, militant membership - wanna lesson in Entryism?"

**3** "Is your father a commissar of production and distribution? Because he surely expropriated some bourgeois diamonds for your eyes"

**2** "Do you believe in love at first sight? Or do you need to be broken of your false consciousness by the vanguard since without us you're only capable of trade union consciousness?"

**1** "Is that a deflected permanent revolution in your pocket or are you just pleased to see me?"