Respect’s crisis is opportunity for new workers party

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In early September Respect MP George Galloway circulated a letter to the Respect National Council entitled ‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times’. The letter appears to point to a possible early disintegration of the ‘Unity Coalition’. Galloway makes a series of bitter complaints about how Respect is run, ranging from complaints over office procedures to accusations of ineptitude in election work and a general lack of accountability and democracy. He ends by warning that Respect may be facing oblivion. Although he does not mention by name the organisation he holds responsible for all this, it is quite obviously the Socialist Workers Party.

Respect was formed in January 2004 following Galloway’s expulsion from the Labour Party for his steadfast opposition to the imperialist Iraq war. A year later in May 2005 George Galloway was elected as MP for Bethnal Green and Bow. The SWP was always keen to identify the Respect brand with Galloway’s flamboyant personality. Respect received boosts from high profile media events, such as Galloway’s brilliant showing before a US Senate committee. Following his election he spoke at huge rallies across the country. At universities such as Leeds and Manchester nearly a thousand people crammed into packed lecture halls to hear him speak. This was the golden age of Respect.

In the special issue of Socialist Worker that followed Galloway’s election various Respect supporters, from SWP members to the Muslim activist Salma Yaqoob, talked of their ‘hopes for this new party’. In a thinly disguised attack on critics of the project, such as Workers Power, Lindsey German said: ‘to the complaints that people don’t like some aspect of the coalition, we should reply that coalition politics are precisely about agreeing on certain issues around which we can unite.’ Indeed, Respect was held up as legitimising the SWP’s policy of forming ‘united fronts of a special type’ with other forces to the right of them and always tailing the politics of their allies, whilst keeping the organisation of these campaigns under strict control of the SWP.

Crisis postponed?
The background to the crisis is the failure of Respect to take continued headway in terms of membership growth or further electoral success. Overall membership figures have dwindled from 3,040 in 2005 to 2,160 in 2006.

The immediate crisis was sparked by two London election results: in Southall and Shadwell, both with large Asian communities. Respect bombed in Southall in July, receiving only 588 votes, or 1.61 per cent. In Shadwell the following month, Respect defended a council seat successfully, but saw its lead cut from over 400 to just 97. In both, Labour enjoyed a ‘Brown bounce’, i.e. a revival due to Tony Blair’s departure. The question for Respect strategists, given the likelihood of an early election in autumn 2007 or the following spring, was could the coalition make further breakthroughs, or would it suffer serious reverses?
Galloway’s complaints about the internal regime of Respect attack the SWP’s well known bureaucratic method of running its campaigns. It has prompted a sharp response from the SWP, led by John Rees, Respect’s National Secretary, who is explicitly criticised in Galloway’s letter. The SWP leadership called an all London members’ meeting on a Friday evening to discuss the crisis, to which 200 members turned out. At it Rees denounced Galloway as going over to communalism and described the struggle in Respect as between the left (i.e. the SWP) and the right (Galloway, and some of the muslim businessmen).

The accusation of communalism is gross hypocrisy coming from John Rees. He is the architect of the Respect project, built around winning the support of influential Muslim leaders, who could deliver the votes of their communities. This involved major political concessions from the outset - downplaying gay and lesbian rights, supporting the reactionary religious hatred bill, which placed restrictions on the freedom to criticise religion, even supporting the extension of religious schools.

The background to the crisis in Respect are the growing tensions between the SWP and the certain muslim communities that acted as an electoral base for the Alliance.

Salma Yaqoob, a leading figure in the Muslim Association of Britain and Respect councillor, indicates in her contribution, Challenges for Respect, that tensions with the SWP stretch back to 2005, claiming that, since a tactical disagreement with John Rees, she has had barely two phone calls from him. However, the reasons for this crisis run much deeper than a falling out between friends. This is shown very clearly from the fight over the selection of Respect candidates in Birmingham.

SWP member and national student and antiwar activist, Helen Salmon, lost out in the vote to a Muslim candidate after sixty people joined the coalition in Birmingham in two days - prompting extremely rare criticism of Respect in Socialist Worker. This manipulation of the democratic process by influential community leaders is an inevitable consequence of the basis on which Respect was formed. Such leaders in the Muslim community have not earned their status due to fights in the class struggle, but because of their social position: as businessman, religious leaders or coming from a well-connected family. As Workers Power said from the outset when we refused to join the Respect coalition, the idea of welding such people into an alliance with the left and trade unionists, held together by George Galloway’s celebrity status, was an unprincipled act of political adventurism and sure to end in disaster.

The showdown came on 22 September when Respect’s National Council gathered for a packed and stormy meeting. Galloway demanded to know whether the SWP had circulated a truth-kit about him to its members, which John Rees had to admit. At one point the MP stormed out of the meeting. He returned however to negotiate a peace treaty, which took up some of his proposals. The Respect NC is to reconvene on 29 September and the coalition’s conference is due on 17-18 November. However, the common desire to keep Respect together at least until the general election and London mayoral and council polls next May seems to have cooled tempers. Nevertheless further election failures or clashes over candidacies could easily blow the truce apart.

Workers’ party or popular front

The working class has now experienced two terms of a Labour government, with more privatisations than the Tories, significant growth of social inequality and, above all, the imperialist wars for oil and geo-political dominance. Half of Labour’s 1997 membership has deserted the party; two of the more militant unions, the Fire Brigades Union and the Rail Maritime and Transport union (RMT), are now outside its ranks; millions more are discontented. With this background there has been (and remains) a tremendous opportunity to build a new working class party.
This requires, however, a clear class starting point. A party fights for political power, and all programmes in class societies necessarily express class interests. It is measured against this historic task, to break the vanguard of the working class away from Labourism and reformism, that Respect can be seen for what it is - an obstacle. Respect is a populist project, radical, antiwar, with commitments to oppose attacks on social gains and democratic rights but no clear answer as to what system is at the root of these attacks nor what measures are needed to overthrow the system. Respect’s programme from the outset made major concessions to middle class Muslim community leaders. Lindsey German, a leader of the SWP, summed up its position at the founding conference of Respect, when she said it was looking to build something less explicitly socialist? than the Socialist Alliance. It is absurd for a self-identified Marxist to come out with such a statement. As we said in 2005: ?If socialism is to mean anything, it must be the objective interests of the working class. To say that a programme was too socialist is merely to say that it fought too consistently in the interests of the working class.?5

The SWP did not fight for Respect to be established on clear working class socialist principles. The response of Lindsey German was that those who ?wanted to go to the factory gate to look for the working class were living in the past.? They should go down to the mosques because ?that is where the working class is today?. Of course, at the mosques there are indeed some of the most exploited workers in Britain, ones that suffer racist oppression on top of this. However, it is the very nature of religious communities that they are cross-class and their leaders are self-selecting on the basis of their success in business or their position at the mosque.

It is entirely legitimate to unite with such forces in action around demands that are in the immediate interests of the working class, such as opposition to war. Such an alliance - as the SWP repeatedly tell us - made the great antiwar protests on 15 February 2003 possible. However, this unity is necessarily short lived, as the middle class, because of their more affluent position, are reluctant to take the direct action necessary to stop the war, and will oppose the movement organising such action. This is analogous with the role played by trade union and reformist forces in any united front as they, too, are fearful of the destabilising effects of militant action. In the united front, revolutionaries must fight for an independent working class policy and continue to criticise reformist, pacifist or liberal leaders. The SWP has however developed what it calls a ?special type? of united front where it suppresses all criticism of its allies and argued not for what is necessary but what is acceptable to these allies.

But the root of the SWP’s error is that it confused a party, which is an organisation which struggles for political power with a united front which unites politically disparate forces for one or a few immediate objectives. The trouble is that the SWP thought that an ?united front? or alliance was good enough to enter the electoral battlefield. After all since ?socialism can’t come through parliament? socialism was not really the issue when standing for parliament. The main thing was to win some seats. Galloway, a lifelong reformist and parliamentary cretin sees a party as simply there to get him, and others like him, into parliament.

In Respect, the SWP and Galloway made the canny calculation that in certain areas of London, Birmingham and a handful of northern cities, it was possible because of the high concentration of muslim voters, to win several seats, if Respect presented itself as ?the party for Muslims?. The price they paid was reducing socialism to a letter in the acronym, RESPECT, not even mentioning the word in its local election material. It meant dropping issues like the right to abortion, gay rights, and secular schools in order to pander to the reactionary social views of the leaders of the muslim community. For Galloway this was no sacrifice because he shares most of these reactionary social views, and regularly parades his own Catholic beliefs. For the SWP, it was a much more dangerous game. Again it was Lindsey German who gave the most crass expression of this method. She argued at Marxism 2003 that they should not ?make a
shibboleth? of gay and lesbian rights, if it hampered their ability to form the new political alliance.

Class or Community?
In its sally into the Muslim communities the SWP did not even try to attract and organise the antiwar working class and youth distinctly from the leadership of the mosques. To orientate to them solely on the basis of their religion, and not because of their class was an opportunist adventure: one which hit the jackpot in the short run but in the end was doomed to failure. It should become a text book illustration. Grabbing at short term and narrowly defined success (wining seats) it ignored totally the political basis on which they would be won and what the successful candidates were likely to do once elected.

In the event the SWP could not even persuade the community leaders to give it a place on their electoral lists. The latter clearly thought ?the party of muslims? should have muslim candidates, if they were providing most of the voters. Now the SWP has started to accuse these leaders of being ?communalists? and businessmen.

John Rees thus belatedly acknowledges the problems of the cross-class nature of his whole political project. In a letter written two weeks after Galloway?s attack he admits: ?We believe that the constant adaptation to what are referred to as ?community leaders? in Tower Hamlets is lowering the level of politics and making us vulnerable to the attacks and pressures brought on us by new Labour. It is alienating us not only from the white working class but also from the more radical sections of the Bengali community, both secular and Muslim, who feel that Respect is becoming the party of a narrow and conservative trend in the area.?

Better late than never. However some people warned from the beginning that this was a rotten block that would fall apart at the first serious test. Back in 2003, in the dying days of the Socialist Alliance, when John Rees and the SWP first cam up with the idea that led to Respect Workers Power argued for an outright rejection of ?any idea of an electoral bloc with non-working class forces or communities defined on a religious, ethnic or cross-class basis.? We argued that there should be ?no question of ... entering into any form of political bloc with religious institutions or their representatives for the purposes of contesting elections. This would necessarily compromise both working class independence and the socialist character of the platform and mean suppressing key elements of our immediate demands (e.g. secular education, separation of church and state and women?s gay and lesbian rights.)? If Rees is now denouncing Galloway as a communalist, this is simply a pragmatic tit-for-tat response to Galloway?s attacks on the SWP.

Faced with the prospect of the collapse of their political adventure, the SWP leaders are retailing Galloway?s more crass reactionary statements and silly episodes like his appearance on reality TV show, Big Brother, and his failure to hold himself accountable to the Respect leading bodies. In fact it was the SWP that boosted the tasteless cult of George?s personality. They answered any critics with the disloyal suggestion that they were Islamophobes or aiding the press witch-hunt against Galloway.

Indeed John Rees himself wanted the same freedom from democratic control as Galloway. When the mildest attempt was made at Respect?s 2005 conference to make him report regularly to the membership, John Rees commented ?if you want a national secretary sitting behind a desk answering emails, then get another one?.

In fact, it was Rees and the SWP which elevated Galloway to the position of a populist ?bonaparte?, unanswerable to the annual conferences or national council of Respect. He alone was able to reconcile and arbitrate between the two major forces in Respect: the ?red? SWP with its activists, journalists and the socially conservative muslim community leaders with their voters. This tradition of the great leader is
natural to populism, but dragged into the workers movement by Stalinism. Marx. Lenin. Trotsky denounced all cults of leaders. The task of revolutionaries is to expunge it and replace it with workers democracy: regular election, instant recall, no privileges, full accountability.

But the chickens have finally come home to roost. Whatever truce can be patched up, between the SWP and Galloway, Respect?s days are numbered. and when the collapse comes it will leave the SWP?s entire political project in ruins.

**What kind of party?**

An article printed in Workers Power in April 2005 asked the following: ?Has populism worked? No. But by trying to make it work the SWP has actively, though not necessarily permanently, blocked many from taking steps towards building a working class socialist alternative - a new workers? party. ?8 The collapse of Respect would not be a tragedy. It need not even be a setback, providing both SWP members and Muslim working class militants and youth, shed their illusions in populism as an electoral short cut to the House of Commons or the council chamber and turn to class politics, on the streets and in the workplace.

The objective conditions for breaking tens of thousands of worker militants and youth including from amongst the racially oppressed, away from Labour are not only still present, they are actually getting better. Gordon Brown?s ?bounce? is due to little more than popular relief at getting rid of Blair. He has brought the former chair of the Confederation of British Industry, Digby Jones, into his government and set out to cut the real wages of public sector workers.

His reform of Labour?s conference will further reduce it to a focus group marginalising still more what little influence union leaders retain. A briefing paper by ?a leading official? in Unite/T&G says: ?The proposals represent an attempt to destroy the Labour Party as a democratic political organisation based on the labour movement. The working class would be to all intents and purposes disenfranchised. We would back to the situation we faced when the party was first founded.?9 Brown?s contempt for the union leaders is such that he continues to humiliate them even when Labour is in enormous debt - a colossal £27 million. Meanwhile the unions continue to pour around £11 million every year in to a party that kicks their members in the teeth.

John McDonnell, champion of the withered Labour Left, ran a campaign that proved the most miserable failure in the Party?s history. More and more figures in the unions and on the left say openly that Labour cannot be reclaimed from within. In many speeches McDonnell has come close to acknowledging this, pleading that the left MPs are still useful to the extra-parliamentary social movements and the unions fighting a Labour government. As supporters of such campaigns we naturally agree that they should expect support from the left MPs the unions pay for.. But what McDonnell ignores is that these campaigns, and the trade unions, are held back, because they do not have a party to lead and coordinate their efforts. In addition they waste their money on hundreds of MPs who actively support a government which is intent on fighting them and who are supporting imperialist wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But there are signs of movement. Bob Crow has recently circulated RMT branches canvassing their support for a project for the union to stand anti-neoliberal candidates in the next election. The Communication Workers Union saw substantial conference minorities wanting a break - long before its present industrial dispute against the Labour-backed Royal Mail bosses.

Even in the old warhorse of Stalinism, the Morning Star, unofficial newspaper of the Communist Party of Britain (CPB) - for years wedded to the Labour Party - realises the game is up. In a significant recent policy article, Rob Griffiths, the CPB?s general secretary, concludes: ?The final crisis approaches for the whole trade union movement and the non-sectarian left. Are we to have a mass party of labour in Britain? If the
Labour movement cannot or will not reclaim the Labour Party from the privatisers, the warmongers and the Thatcher fans, it will have to re-establish one. Does our movement have the leadership and vision to fulfill such a historic responsibility??10

The International Dimension
Nor is the situation in Britain an isolated case. The attacks on the working class are part of a global offensive related to the recent period of world history that has come to be known as globalisation. It has created a general crisis in Social Democratic, Labour and Communist parties who have traditionally based themselves on the working class. In government, either alone or in coalition, they have simply continued, the neoliberal attacks of the right wing parties. This has led to splits from them and unifications, such as Die Linke in Germany and the calls for new workers party, recently initiated by the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (LCR) in France.

In the context calls for new workers parties are a spreading international phenomenon. Of course there are real differences as to what people mean by this call. Everything depends on what sort of party is meant. In Britain the CPB, the SWP at the time of the Socialist Alliance, the Socialist Party and other far left groups, all insist that the new party must be founded on a left-reformist programme with a orientation to elections as its fundamental activity. For those amongst them who still call themselves revolutionaries it is always ?too soon? to put forward a revolutionary programme for the new party. It will, they say, repel reformist workers. But when will the time come to argue for the revolutionary programme? At some unspecified time in the future when the ?workers are ready?. Of course, in truth, the time never comes as the ?revolutionaries? continually endorse the reformist programme of the left MPs and trade union bureaucrats to maintain an alliance with them.

In Germany this method has led the SWP?s sister organisation Linksruck to liquidate itself into Die Linke, a new left party based upon the old East German Stalinist party, PDS, and a split, led by Oscar Lafontaine from the governing social democracy, SPD. In Die Linke Linksruck have totally capitulated to its right wing leadership, attacked left critics and been rewarded with positions on its ruling national executive and lucrative jobs as advisors to its parliamentarians. Meanwhile, when in regional government coalitions with the SPD, in Berlin and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern the new party has carried out social cuts and other attacks on the working class. Yet Die Linke was formed following a series of important working class struggles against the ruling social democracy. However it never gave leadership to these struggles. It hoped instead to simply benefit at elections from disillusionment with the SPD. As a result it has not become a mass membership party but is based mainly on the ageing membership of the PDS.

Another example of this are the actions of an apparently much more left-wing workers party, the Italian Rifondazione Comunista (Communist Refoundation). Rifondazione broke from the old Italian Communist Party when it turned to the right in the early nineties. Its charismatic leader Fausto Bertinotti, once a militant trade union leader, talked very left. Rifondazione played a significant role in the huge workers ad social movements during the resistance to Silvio Berlusconi (2001 to 2006). The party was in the forefront of the vast antiwar mobilisations. Yet in 2006 they entered a coalition government with Romano Prodi, former head of the EU Commission and one of the central drafters of the Lisbon Agenda, the neoliberal plan to slash social services and promote privatisation across the continent. In his cabinet Rifondazione ministers have supported Prodi?s continued stationing of Italian troops in Afghanistan.

What all these examples show is that the parties with a reformist political programme when they get into government in a period in which the bourgeoisie wage an unremitting offensive against the working class simply carry on with the attacks the bourgeoisie require. Of course any government within the straightjacket of the bourgeoisie state, its army, police, judiciary and state bureaucracy, will rule for the
bourgeoisie. In a boom period like the one after the Second World War this could go alongside enacting significant social reforms. Today when the capitalists mean ?reforms? they are demanding the destruction of these gains, in this situation the reformists dare not carry out the most petty real reforms. This means that for ?revolutionaries? to consciously and deliberately advocate a reform programme for a workers party is an even bigger betrayal than before. This makes the struggle for a revolutionary programme for a new workers party all the more critical.

Does this mean that revolutionaries present their programme as an ultimatum to workers and youth who have not yet broken with reformist ideas, who are confused about what the connection should be between elections and the struggle in the workplace and the streets, about what role members of parliament or trade union leaders should have in a working class party? Not at all. Revolutionaries should enthusiastically participate alongside such workers in the struggle to build their party, in every efforts to make it a party of active class struggle. They should at the same time patiently explain that such a party must become an anticapitalist and a revolutionary party and that this must be boldly expressed in its programme.

**What Now?**

In Britain the CPB leadership narrowly voted against joining Respect in 2004, but now is proposing its Left Wing Programme as the basis for regroupment of the Labour lefts and those to the left of Labour11. The decision by the RMT to stand electoral candidates, indicates the growing possibilities of a campaign to break the unions from Labour and to lay the foundations of a new working class party. In short, the prospects for a new working class party have not diminished because the ?big three? union leaders? man has succeeded Blair. On the contrary, the inevitable disillusion with Brown will bring the project closer to fruition. Initiatives like the National Shop Stewards Network and Organising For Fighting Unions as well as the Campaign for a New Workers Party, could take the lead and convene a common conference to discuss the issue and local conferences in every town and city. The fightback by public sector workers against the pay freeze gives an excellent opportunity to agitate for a new party amongst workers in struggle. In the fight for a new party we need to make clear the failures of all varieties of reformist politics, including the left. We need to criticise all halfway house ideas on offer from far left groups like the SWP and the Socialist Party. We need to fight for a revolutionary programme if we are to win in the struggles ahead.

**ENDNOTES**

1 Lindsey German, et al, ?Our hopes for this new party?, supplement to Socialist Worker, June 2005
2 For example see John Rees, ?The broad party, the revolutionary party and the united front?, International Socialist Review 97, Winter 2002, and Alex Callinicos, ?Unity in diversity?, Socialist Review, April 2002
4 Andy North, ?Debate at selection meeting for Birmingham Respect candidate?, Socialist Worker, 3 February 2007
6 RESPECT stands for Respect, Equality, Socialism, Peace, Environment, Community, Trade unionism.
7 Jeremy Dewar, ?For a new mass working class party?, Workers Power, no. 302, January-February 2006
8 ?No respect for principles?, Workers Power, No. 295, April 2005
9 Robert Griffiths, ?The final crisis is near?, The Morning Star, 10 September 2007
10 ibid