

Respect splits: Socialist Workers Party in crisis

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On the other side is the SWP, the biggest socialist group in Britain, which provides most foot soldiers for Respect and controls its national office. The SWP is promoting an open letter to 'Save Respect?', signed by around 900 people. It rejects Galloway's allegations and claim that socialists are being subjected to a witch-hunt in Respect. It accuses Galloway himself of organising a split, especially by calling a rival conference rather than recognising the official one (at which the SWP expects to have a majority).

Aligned with the SWP is a small number of independent activists, including councillor Oliur Rahman in Tower Hamlets. With Galloway is a large part of the non-SWP membership and leaders, including Linda Smith of the Fire Brigades Union, Muslim activists Salma Yaqoob and Yvonne Ridley, Stalinist journalist Victoria Brittain, and left wing filmmaker Ken Loach.

What has become (accurately) known as the 'Businessmen's Faction' in East London, comprising local Muslim petit-bourgeois loyal to Tower Hamlets councillor Abjol Miah, is also firmly behind Galloway and, unsurprisingly given their class nature, vehemently anti-SWP. Two leading members of the Fourth International in Britain, Alan Thornett and John Lister, are also backing Galloway against the SWP.

New to the Galloway camp is a gaggle of renegades from the SWP, whose clarity of class thinking had been eroded by years of unprincipled collusion with reformist allies in Respect - something the SWP had been encouraging up to a matter of weeks ago. These people include Nick Wrack, brother of FBU leader Matt Wrack. Galloway proposed him for a powerful new role in Respect as a manoeuvre against the SWP. Despite a party instruction not to do so, Wrack accepted and crossed over, being quite justifiably expelled by the SWP in the process.

In the short term the Galloway wing will be significantly weakened on the ground, and will be ever more dependent on the 'community leaders', whose wheeler-dealing characterises its vote-gathering activity in local elections. But maybe Galloway will start to attract backing from broader sections of the Labour left and left wing union leaders like Bob Crow and Matt Wrack, whose unions are now outside the Labour Party, but who were repelled by the SWP's heavy influence.

The SWP itself is in real trouble. Coming under attack from the right can make a left wing group stronger, providing a clear platform to explain your politics and criticise your opponents. But for the SWP there is a terrible problem. They put themselves in this position; only yesterday they argued passionately against the very arguments they use today; they are hoist with their own petard.

In 2003, the SWP argued that Respect's predecessor - the Socialist Alliance, of which Workers Power was a part - should be transformed into something less socialist. It dropped the Alliance's programme in favour of a handful of populist policies, and reduced the goal of socialism to nothing more than a word in the Respect acronym.

Above all, the SWP angrily denied that by striking agreements with middle class Muslim community leaders they were constructing an unprincipled cross-class bloc. They accused their critics - including Workers Power - of being opposed to organising Muslims. But they ignored and misrepresented our real argument: that organising Muslim workers and youth for socialism means fighting the influence of the middle class leaders.

Now suddenly the SWP has recognised the problem. Its leaders are denouncing middle class businessmen, community leaders, and careerists, who join Respect from Labour and the Liberal Democrats. Is this because the SWP leaders, like John Rees and Lindsey German, suddenly decided to subject Respect to a basic class analysis? Sadly not.

The SWP was forced to face reality by the actions of their opponents. First it faced, in Birmingham and East London, opposition to the selection of SWP members as council candidates from organised blocs of Muslim members. Then Galloway launched his attack.

Thornett, Nick Wrack and other unprincipled socialists may loudly protest at the SWP's 'over-reaction', but it is absolutely clear that Galloway's letter was an assault on the SWP and a defence of some of the worst aspects of Respect's class collaboration. Galloway's letter singles out two Respect initiatives that the SWP promoted for special criticism. One was Respect's float on the lesbian and gay Pride march this year (not something designed to accommodate conservative Muslim forces!) This was a principled, if belated step on the part of the SWP.

Another target for Galloway's criticism was Respect initiating the Organising for Fighting Unions conference, a significant event attended by hundreds of union representatives. Galloway regarded this as a distraction: union business is for the union leaders; Respect's job as a political party is to get votes. A clearer expression of the electoralist, i.e. the completely bourgeois view of politics, one could not hope for.

The SWP is of course not blameless. As anyone who has worked in any of its campaigns will know, it behaves in a bureaucratic manner, exercising organisational control from behind the scenes. Doubtless this will have alienated potential allies and exhausted the patience of some of its own members.

Rees replied to Galloway's open letter in two forms - one internal (it was promptly leaked to the internet), and one public. The internal response sought to prepare SWP members for the unexpected: suddenly, they were amazed to hear, there was a right wing in Respect, one they would have to defeat this at the conference in November. As a result, large numbers of previously unseen SWP members turned up at Respect meetings (not that the business wing is averse to sudden packing of meetings, of course!) The SWP commanded greater numbers than Galloway and the councillors could muster. It became clear that the SWP would win the conference.

Galloway, Linda Smith and their wretched attorney Thornett (whose group has gone over to Galloway in the most supine manner - the latest in a long history of accommodation on the part of the Fourth International) declared that the SWP would pack the conference, and are holding their own conference on the same day - in effect a split.

In his last polemic against the SWP leadership before his justified expulsion, Nick Wrack argued:

'Respect is not a classical united front. Nor is it helpful to describe it as a united front of a special kind... Respect is a broad political organisation that contests elections. It puts forward a comprehensive political programme. It is not a union of forces for a temporary fight on a single or several limited demands but a permanent formation around a wide-ranging political manifesto... To the wider world and to most people

who join it, it is a party.?

Now this is partly true, though Wrack draws entirely the wrong conclusion from it. Respect is most certainly not an example of the classical united front, which, as advocated by VI Lenin and Leon Trotsky, involved revolutionaries criticising their allies' policies, not adapting to them. But is it impossible for the united front tactic to take the form of a party, as Wrack suggests? It is not impossible.

Lenin and Trotsky saw the need for communists in a range of circumstances to build new parties of the working class, drawing in reformist and syndicalist forces. The point however, was to struggle within such parties against it adopting reformist policies or programme.

But it is this that Wrack leaves out. Because Respect is a party, he believes it is not a united front and therefore... he believes it must have a programme that all the participating components can agree to. This means the policy of the party is agreed by the lowest common denominator, resulting in a reformist programme and thus: a reformist party. The idea of building a new party and openly fighting within it for revolutionary policies is completely missing.

It will be difficult for the SWP to resist this haemorrhage to the right. It has had to expel former loyalists Rob Hoveman and Kevin Ovenden for applying the policy that Rees and German devised. Well known activists like Jerry Hicks and like Gary MacFarlane have also resigned, going over to the Menshevik 'broad party' model of organising. More will follow.

At the same time there is a large rump of members who never liked Respect. These people, it has to be said, never fought Rees and German. They are unlikely to provide much of a base for an angular 180-degree turn towards activist 'building the SWP on the streets, on the estates, in the workplaces'.

The SWP is therefore today in its worst crisis since its foundation in 1977. It will have to adjust to being a smaller, weaker group. If it tries to provide itself with some political coherence by lurching leftwards, it will find its own words being quoted back to it. The fact that it will be denouncing the consequences of its own opportunism will undermine its case and the patience of anyone listening.

The answer is not to move to the right, nor to swing towards sectarianism. It is to reject the opportunist concept of the 'united front of the special type', in which revolutionaries are supposedly required to suspend criticism of their allies. It is to reject the cross-class basis on which Respect was built. But it should avoid the equal and opposite error of sectarianism, in which all the party can say to the class is: 'Here is the party - it is us. Join us.'

A left faction is needed in the SWP to make a serious re-assessment, to embrace the real revolutionary use of the united front tactic; and to apply it today in the fight for a new mass workers' party and a revolutionary programme.

The SWP-led Respect majority on the national committee says it wants to launch a paper, pay more attention to the working class and pursue its discussions with the RMT transport union, the Communist Party of Britain (Morning Star) and Bob Wareing, the deselected Labour MP, who aims to stand against the new Labour.

But the CPB hates the SWP like sin, and Galloway has been writing in the Morning Star a lot lately. And the RMT has vehemently denied the SWP wing of Respect's claim that its London Region is backing Lindsey German for London Mayor.

Clearly John McDonnell's failed campaign for the Labour leadership and Brown's anti-democratic rule

change at Labour Party conference have convinced the CPB and a small number of Labour lefts that a new party could - or some sort of left reformist political unity project - could get off the ground, and they are lining up a new reformist leadership to run it.

In this context, revolutionaries need to avoid both opportunism and sectarianism. Revolutionaries need to call on all the working class forces opposed to the war and government attacks at home to call an open conference and commence a democratic debate on the political programme that could form the basis for a new party.

This would replace bureaucratic manoeuvres and opportunist stitch-ups a democratic debate. It would replace the Labour left's strategy of taking over Labour and Respect's strategy of cross-class alliances with a policy of working class political independence.

Only by proposing unity in a party while fighting openly for a revolutionary programme, can we thwart both the attempts of the reformists to cohere a new bureaucratic leadership in waiting, and the centrist policy of opportunists, like Rees, German and Thornett, to replace open political struggle with manoeuvring into positions of organisational strength whilst accepting the reformists' proposals on all programmatic points.

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