

Great Britain: The SWP splits Respect

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Respect as we have known it for the last four years as an alliance principally between the SWP and George Galloway is over. Following the decision of the SWP central committee last Wednesday that the Respect conference will go ahead as planned and unchanged in other words on a completely undemocratic basis twenty one members of the none-SWP part of the National Council have issued a call for an alternative conference that on the theme of renew Respect. Work is going ahead to build it on the broadest basis possible.

It is a remarkable situation. The SWP leadership have managed to alienate themselves virtually all of the active none-SWP members of the national among them are: Linda Smith National Chair, Salma Yaqoob National Vice-Chair, Victoria Brittain writer and playwright, George Galloway the Respect MP, Jerry Hicks leading industrial militant and member of the SWP at the start of this, Ken Loach, Abjol Miah the leader of Respect on Tower Hamlets Council, Yvonne Ridley journalist, and Nick Wrack - the first national chair of Respect and a member of the SWP when this debate started.

No other organisation or nationally known individual have remained with the SWP side in this.

Faced with a Respect conference on November 17th and 18 which is organised on a totally undemocratic and which will have a built in SWP majority after a campaign by the SWP for delegates 12 members of the National Council have called an alternative conference on November 17th on the theme of Renew Respect. Initial speakers include George Galloway MP, Linda Smith National chair of Respect, Salma Yaqoob, national vice chair and Ken Loach, National Council member. It will start the process of rebuilding Respect on a difference and more inclusive basis.

The start of the crisis was the SWP's disastrous reaction to a letter from George Galloway to the national council at the end of August. This raised some home truths about the development of Respect, which some of us had been raising for a long time, and made some modest proposals towards greater plurality. The letter was supportable but did not go far enough. The issue behind it was whether the SWP would relax the tight control which they exerted on Respect and accept some diversity particularly at the level of the leadership bodies and the national office.

The letter could have opened up an over-due and fruitful discussion about the development of Respect as a more inclusive organisation with a greater national presence. If the SWP had been prepared to discuss the issues politically, make some compromises even symbolic compromises to show that they were prepared to take other people's views into account and that

Respect was not a wholly-owned subsidiary of the SWP there could have been a positive outcome.

Instead they went in totally the opposite direction - confirming that they had no intention of relaxing control. They took the letter as a frontal attack on the SWP, with all that implies, and launched a nation-wide tour of SWP districts vilifying George Galloway and scandalously calling him and Salma Yaqoob (amongst many other things) communalists and characterising the letter as a part of a right wing attack on the left in Respect.

And the George Galloway they were vilifying was the same George Galloway that the SWP had repeatedly shielded from criticism from ourselves and others ever since Respect was founded. They now denounced him for unaccountability yet at the time of the Big Brother debacle they fought might and main inside Respect to avoid a word of criticism of his unilateral decision to go on the programme being expressed by Respect.

At the Respect National Council meeting on September 22 the dispute focussed on the proposal in the letter for a new post of national organiser alongside the national secretary. SWP delegates, reflecting their paranoid internal discussions about George Galloway, came close to driving out of Respect under conditions which would have collapsed Respect in front of an expected general election.

The meeting ran out of time and adjourned until September 29, where agreement was eventually reached that the post would be of equal status with the National Secretary. There was also a consensus that Nick Wrack a former national chair of Respect and an SWP member take up the post on a temporary basis, if possible. When this was activated Nick Wrack was instructed by the SWP Central Committee to withdraw his name from the frame.. When he refused he was expelled from the SWP. At the same time two workers in George Galloway's office who were members of the SWP were instructed by the SWP Central Committee to resign their jobs. When they refused they were also expelled from the SWP.

On Monday October 15 a Respect Executive Committee meeting with an SWP majority voted against Nick taking up the National Organiser's post and set aside the decisions of the NC on the matter. Behind the national organiser issue was the wider issue of whether Respect was to develop as a pluralist organisation in which no single component part dominates or controls or one controlled at every level by the SWP.

The following night there was a meeting of the Conference Arrangements Committee (CAC), at which Linda Smith, the national chair of Respect, raised the issue of the constitutionality of the CAC itself (which has never been endorsed by the NC). She also asked for the membership and financial records of the student members. She was unable to get such records or resolve the problem of the CAC itself.

By now the SWP were presenting the battle inside Respect as a battle of right against left with themselves being the defenders of the socialist camp inside Respect. This was the same SWP who have always fought to lower

the socialist profile of Respect. Publication after publication came out in the name of Respect with the SWP in control without a mention of socialism from cover to cover.

I was one of the first, when the SWP joined the Socialist Alliance in 2000, to say that the turn they had made towards working with others on the left, after many years of isolationism, was an important step forward for the whole of the left. Now after 4 years of the Socialist Alliance and three and a half years of Respect this turn outwards has effectively come to an end. It is impossible to see that the SWP with its current leadership and method of operation playing a positive role in the construction of a broad pluralist party in the foreseeable future.

In fact even as this battle for Respect has continued the SWP leadership have been theorising their exit from this strategy. The first bulletin for the SWP conference (in January) has last minute CC text (written in the middle of this debate) which argues that the period of the upsurge of struggle in the mid 1990s and through Seattle and into the first years of this century which created most of the left parties is starting to wither. Right-wings currents are developing inside these parties - including the current opposition inside Respect. It is a short step from this to concluding that the era of such parties is over and that it is time to build the party¹. It is hard to see how the SWP can have its heart in anything it salvages from the mayhem they have created.

Other CC documents in the bulletin reinforce and entrench the sterile model they SWP have defended for building Respect. For the first time it is openly argued that Respect is an electoral (united) front for the SWP and that it is perfectly acceptable to deprioritise it between election and reprioritise it when an election comes along.

This precisely the model the SWP insisted on imposing on Respect and the model on which it foundered. What this got completely wrong was the relationship between the SWP and Respect itself. This was with the SWP as the dominant organisation with the highest possible public profile and its own press and priorities with Respect as an electoral wing.

More precisely it foundered on the way it conducted democratic centralism inside the SWP and the way this shaped the way they functioned in the broad organisation. This was that the SWP membership would be regimented inside Respect meetings and conferences in a way which alienated everyone else. They would be told what to do and how to vote in advance of meetings and conferences at caucuses prior to the event. In most cases they were told what to do and how to vote not having been involved in a process of discussion inside Respect itself.

Inside broad left formations there has to be a real, autonomous political life in which people who are not members of an organised current can have confidence that decisions are not being made behind their backs in a disciplined caucus that will impose its views they have to be confident that their political contribution can affect political debates.

This means that no revolutionary current can have the 'disciplined phalanx'¹ concept of operation. Except in the case of the degeneration of a broad left current (as in Brazil) we are not doing entry work or fighting a bureaucratic leadership. This means in most debates, most of the time, members of political currents should have the right to express their own viewpoint irrespective of the majority view in their own current. If this doesn't happen the real balance of opinion is obscured and democracy negated. Evidently this shouldn't be the case on decisive questions of the interest of the working class and oppressed like sending troops to Afghanistan. But if there are differences on issues like that, then membership of a revolutionary current is put in question.

Revolutionary tendencies should avoid like the plague attempts to use their organisational weight to impose decisions against everyone else. That's a disastrous mode of operation in which democracy is a fake. If a revolutionary tendency can't win its opinions in open and democratic debate, unless it involves fundamental questions of the interest of the working class and oppressed, compromises and concessions have to be made. Democracy is a fake if a revolutionary current says 'debate is OK, and we'll pack meetings to ensure we win it.

This method is the polar opposite of the way the SWP has worked in Respect. It is also the polar opposite of the way things must work in a recast and reshaped Respect which emerges out of this crisis. In Socialist Resistance we have long advocated such a method. We supported the way Scottish Militant Labour worked inside the SSP keeping their own organisation but never intervening in an organisational way inside the SSP. For example never, under normal circumstances, causing a meeting in order to ensure that they were a part of the process of discussion and not imposing an external discussion. Maybe they did not keep themselves organised enough at some stages but the general approach they pioneered is one we should continue to aspire to.