

Respect splits: The view from France

Wednesday 9 January 2008, by [DUVAL François](#) (Date first published: 3 January 2008).

The split in Respect represents a setback for the construction of a radical left alternative.

The present article reviews the discussion which is unfolding in Britain. It will be followed, next week [in *Rouge*], by contributions from two protagonists in the debate, Alan Thornett (ISG) and Chris Bambery (SWP).

The creation of Respect, in the heat of the antiwar movement of 2003, constituted a promising stage in the regroupment of the radical left and construction of an alternative to New Labour. This coalition gathered together militants from trade unions and campaigns, militants of the Labour left revolted by the neo-liberalism of Tony Blair, opponents to the war in Iraq, Muslims, and revolutionary militants of various currents among which, inter alia, were the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) - principal organization of the British far left - and our comrades of the International Socialist Group (ISG, British section of the Fourth International) . In spite of a particularly unjust electoral system (first past the post with only one round), Respect succeeded in getting an MP elected: George Galloway - former MP, excluded from the Labour Party for his opposition to the war, with sometimes controversial positions - as well as several dozen councillors.

Paradoxically, these successes have just led to a split. The political basis of the debate - which became vicious - was constituted by the divergent answers given to questions about the function and the nature of Respect. For the SWP, Respect was to remain primarily an electoral coalition - "*a united front of a special type*" - and not to seek to replace the existing political parties. This conception obviously made it possible to prevent all "encroachment" on its own interventions in all kinds of struggle. Conversely, the other components of Respect and many militants not in organised currents wished to go further, not to limit the intervention of Respect to election campaigns but, on the contrary, to act more and more as Respect in all mobilizations. And, consequently, to build Respect as an independent political force, pluralist and equipped with democratic structures at the base.

After having 'protected' George Galloway for a long time against (well-founded) criticisms which were expressed in the ranks of Respect, the leadership of the SWP recently denounced with virulence his "*uncontrollable*" character, as well as the "*communist*" and electoralist drift which, according to them, was becoming apparent in certain local branches of Respect.

George Galloway, for his part, took up again on his own account a series of proposals on functioning made previously by our comrades of the ISG. Finally, the split materialized, on 17 November, with the holding of two concurrent conferences. One was primarily animated by the SWP and some allies. The other, grouping together the great majority of the other components, decided on the launching of a new movement, Respect Renewal.

P.S.

* Originally published in French in *Rouge*, January 3, 2008. Published in English in *International*

Viewpoint Online magazine : IV n° 396 - January 2008. Translation by Andrew and Rob for Mac Uaid.

* François Duval is a leading member of the LCR (French section of the Fourth International).