

Britain

Respect conference: a setback and an opportunity

Saturday 3 December 2005, by [Socialist Resistance \(Britain\)](#) (Date first published: December 2005).

The second annual conference of Respect took place on the weekend of the 19 and 20 of November in London. There were 350 delegates (based on 1-10) and 50-100 visitors and observers. Socialist Resistance (SR) had 12 delegates from local Respect branches and intervened into the conference around the issues of civil liberties, the defence of the Health Service and education, LGBT rights and the building of Respect - key debate at the conference. SR held a very successful fringe meeting on the Saturday evening to discuss the debates at the conference.

Socialist Resistance remains fully committed to building Respect, since it is the best thing to happen on the left in England for a long time. The conference, however, was a deeply worrying event. It unfortunately put a question mark over Respect's long-term development as a broad based alternative to new Labour and its neo-liberal agenda. It questioned Respect's ability to develop as a genuinely pluralist organisation capable of embracing the bulk of the left in this country. It was a sharp reminder that Respect only has a future as an open pluralist organisation, in which the bulk of the left can feel comfortable and play a role.

This was a serious problem. It should have been a conference which summed up the undoubted successes of the past year and mapped the way forward. How to recruit new members and integrate them for the long term. How to develop Respect - as John Rees, Respect's National Secretary and leading member of the SWP, had argued - as a "mass membership party". How to consolidate the strong areas and build the weaker ones. How to bring other sections of the left into Respect. How to develop effective local branches in as many places as possible. How to develop Respect as an organisation which can function with elected representatives both in Parliament and in local government. How to be seen as the anti-war party, but not only as an anti-war party. The conference needed to discuss how to locate Respect firmly in the emerging campaigns against the new neo-liberal offensive of the Blair government. How to confront the assault on civil liberties which is taking place. Indeed the conference adopted excellent resolutions on these issues - on the NHS, education, and pensions. It had an important debate on climate change. It adopted a strong statement on the war in Iraq and supported the upcoming peace conference.

It adopted a series of excellent resolutions on the war (introduced by writer Haifa Zangana), the defence of civil liberties (introduced by Paddy Hill one of the six people wrongly jailed for 16 years after the Birmingham pub bombings in 1974), and opposition to the anti-terror legislation currently going through Parliament - though this was marred by the failure of the conference to oppose the Incitement to Racial and Religious Hatred Bill. This Bill is currently going through Parliament and would extend Respects currently existing blasphemy laws. The SWP has supported this law and argued for it inside Respect.

It was also regrettable that the resolution, supported by several Respect branches, which called for Respect's existing policy in support for LGBT rights to be included in future election manifestos (it was controversially not included in the manifesto for the general election), was caricatured in the debate as islamophobic when neither the mover nor the resolution mentioned Islam. The resolution was adopted but it is hard to see why it is such a sensitive subject. LGBT rights are mainstream issues across the spectrum of progressive opinion and Respect must reflect this.

It was in the session on building Respect, however, which was opened by Colin Fox of the SSP - the key session of the conference as far as Respect's future development is concerned - where the main problems arose. Faced by a clutch of resolutions aimed at developing Respect as an organisation - resolutions calling for better administration, better democratic functioning, better contact with members and branches, more collective policy discussions and Respect's own publication - John Rees and George Galloway (Respect's MP) responded negatively with demagogic speeches and crude appeals to loyalty. Some resolutions were opposed, others were not, but the tone of the debate was that they were either unnecessary or placing unreasonable demands on Respect's resources.

This created a contradictory situation. The conference passed a number of important resolutions on building Respect but the rhetoric from leading members was to the effect that these would be a low priority.

In his introduction to this session John Rees berated the conference saying that it was not a matter of minutes and reports it was a matter of political leadership - and he and others were giving it. With George Galloway he had given it in the anti-war movement and they and others were giving it in Respect. He gave a list of examples of political leadership he and others had initiated since the formation of the anti-war movement. He said that if Respect wanted him to sit in the office behind a computer it would have to find another national secretary.

Of course we all want Respect to have an effective, proactive and campaigning leadership. We all want a leadership that responds to political developments as they take place. But it has to be a leadership based on the collective development of policy by Respect's membership and elected committees as a whole, not one based on individual leadership initiatives with the rest expected to follow without question.

Behind all this of course is the debate as to whether Respect should develop as a party or a loose coalition - and the more structures it has the more it takes on the character of a party. But there is no avoiding this if Respect is to develop as an effective and democratic organisation. If it is going to challenge for political power at national and local level taking on all other political parties and dealing with all the problems that will arise in the course of this, it has to be able to effectively organise its work and develop its line. It has to ensure that its membership feel included. It has to have its own political life separate from its participating organisations. It doesn't matter what it is called but it cannot avoid taking on the character of a political party.

Other left parties from across Europe were invited and spoke at the conference - the RC from Italy, the Left Block from Portugal, the Left Party from Germany and the SSP from Scotland. They are not all called parties but they all organise themselves as it they are.

Unfortunately a decision appears to have been taken by George Galloway and the SWP to defend the loose coalition model and ensure that development of party structures go thus far and no further. This imposes a narrow organisational framework that is not a viable model for an organisation which challenges for political power on the full spectrum of political issues. Nor is it working: despite the important successes Respect has had Respect remains organisationally weak with a great diversity between its branches as far as their numerical strength and political viability is concerned. Yet there was no assessment of this from the leading figures, the conference was urged to look only at the achievements and not at the problems.

Alan Thornett, a members of the Respect National Council and a leading members of Socialist Resistance (moving the Southwark resolution) argued that whilst the gains Respect had made in the general election were extremely important we had to take a much more sober view of the development of Respect since then. This had been a period of great opportunity yet the membership has remained the same and no new section of the left has joined. Some Respect branches are strong, others weak and struggling. Unless we recognised this and got to grips with it Respect would run into serious problems.

The discussion from the floor on building Respect was dominated by supporters of John Rees's position. Speaker after speaker demanded that Respect have an internal regime that, frankly, would not be tolerated in any union. No need to waste time on minutes, communicating with branches and poring over policy. All we need is to intervene spontaneously into and build the latest campaign and bring the Respect message.

George Galloway's close-of-conference speech continued on this theme - despite the fact that the debate had been closed and the votes taken. He said that what John Rees had said had been "brilliant". There was simply not the money, or staff in the Respect office, to implement the proposals being made. He said he had always been against Respect having a newspaper and he was even more against it now. Respect was not a party, he said, but a coalition and that is the way it should stay. If Respect had a newspaper people would fall out over Cuba or what the Soviet Union had been. No one had remotely suggested anything like this as content for a paper.

George Galloway referred directly to a point raised in Socialist Resistance broadsheet, that Respect has not increased its membership of 4,000 since the general election, nor brought in any new sections of the existing left. In this he even managed to argue that the size of Respect's membership does not matter. It is votes which count he said: "it is better to have 4,000 members and 250,000 votes than 10,000 members and 100,000 votes". "We are doing well," he told the conference "enjoy". All this was a dangerous cover up of the inability of Respect to recruit or broaden itself out to wider sections of the anti-war movement and the left. The idea that a small, narrowly based party can command big votes on a long-term basis is completely false

Galloway argued that the old language of the left needs to be discarded. Indeed it should. And the first thing we should junk is browbeating speeches about how the leaders are doing a good job and the job of everyone else is to get behind them.

SWP members applauded all this to the rafters. Even worse it has since emerged that some SWP members who had voted for various resolutions in their local Respect branches switched votes and opposed them in the conference without any discussion with their delegation. It is impossible to build a local branch on that basis.

In responding to these developments we need to re-affirm the importance of the Respect project and continue the fight to build it. It is the only show in town. If the Respect project foundered it would be a major loss to the left from which it would take a long time to recover. We urge anyone proposing to leave Respect to stay in it and help build it on the basis of the decisions of the conference and to fight to change it where necessary.

Despite some important resolutions on building Respect being voted down and the inference in George Galloway's closing speech that those adopted would be given a low priority a number of important resolutions were adopted which if properly implemented could take Respect forward and build on its achievements.

The Southwark resolution argues that Respect has to be built as a mass membership organisation in which all members feel they have a role to play in developing the life of the organisation. This means building a much stronger national profile for Respect at both the political and organisational level.

A series of practical measures were adopted which are listed below. * The implementation of these resolutions would go a long way to improving the administration and collective development of Respect and improve its chances of bringing in other sections of the left and the trade union movement. As the Camden and Barnet resolution said: "It is vital for our development into a mass party that we are recognised as the most democratic, transparent and pluralist organisation within the wider labour movement".

Practical measures adopted by conference for building Respect.

- Urging local branches develop strong and regular campaigning activities.
- Making Respect as open and inclusive as possible in order to encourage recruitment and keep and consolidate the new members.
- Making a fresh approach to those sections of the left, including the trade union left, which are not currently in Respect.
- Strengthen our political profile at national level by producing further editions of the successful Respect tabloid paper.
- Seeking to strengthen the national office and press and publicity profile between elections.
- Building strong local branches which develop their own political life and culture through regular discussion and debate.
- The National Council should convene consultative groups on specific areas of policy, such as housing, health, transport, drugs, civil liberties etc. drawing on the expertise and specialist knowledge of interested members and supporters of Respect in order to develop policy papers for discussion by the National Council and the party at large and to produce fact sheets and campaign materials for use by party members.
- The National Council should establish (or encourage the establishment of) special interest groups for members involved in specific areas of work, such as a Respect teachers' group, a Respect health workers' group and so on.
- That the National Secretary should circulate reports on the business conducted at meetings of the National Council; as soon as is practically possible after those meetings.
- The National Council meetings should be open to branch observers.
- Mechanisms should be developed to encourage and facilitate the flow of information both between branches and between individual members with common areas of interest. For example.
- The Respect website should, as part of a wider upgrade, include a bulletin section accessible only to members - a feature widely used by other membership organisations.
- The publication of a general Respect manifesto which can be available for sale and on the website.

P.S.

* Published by International Viewpoint Online magazine, IV n° 373 - December 2005.

* Socialist Resistance is a socialist newspaper produced by British supporters of the Fourth International in conjunction with other marxists.