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Britain

Open letter from Socialist Worker New Zealand

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[IMG/jpg/respect.jpg]

Your comrades in the International Socialist Tendency in Socialist Worker - New Zealand, have watched what appears to be the unfolding disengagement of the Socialist Workers Party (Britain) from RESPECT - the Unity Coalition with gradually mounting concern, anxiety and frustration.

Dear comrades,

SW-NZ's perspective since 2002 has been that building new broad forces to the left of the social liberal (formerly social democratic) parties is an essential step towards the rebirth of a serious anti-capitalist worker's movement. The work carried out by the SWP and its allies to build a broad coalition of the left which could compete with Blairite/Brownite New Labour on equal terms has been an inspiration to us, and, we believe, to all serious socialists throughout the world.

In the last two months, to our distress, all the good work that has been carried out in England and Wales seems on the verge of going down the tubes. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the specific organizational proposals put to the Respect National Council by George Galloway MP in August, an outright civil war has broken out between the SWP leadership and other forces in Respect. This, as far as we can see, could - and should - have been avoided.

It seems to us that your party's leadership has decided to draw "battle lines" between itself and the rest of Respect - a stance, we believe, guaranteed to destroy the trust and working relationships on which any broad political coalition stands. Of particular concern to us is the expulsion of three respected cadre from the SWP - Kevin Ovenden, Rob Hoveman and Nick Wrack - for refusing to cut working relationships with those seen as being opposed to the SWP. To draw hard lines against other forces within a united front (even of a "special type") and to expel members who refuse to accept those hard lines is behaviour you would usually see from a sectarian organization, not a party of serious socialists looking to build a new left alternative. It is perhaps in this context that Galloway's reported comments about "Leninists" should be understood, rather than as an attempt to exclude revolutionary politics from Respect.

What distresses us particularly is that the above mentioned comrades were expelled after submitting what seem to us to be thoughtful and critical contributions to your pre-conference Internal Bulletin. If these three comrades are not being victimized for raising a political alternative to the line of the Central Committee, it certainly gives the appearance of such victimization - or even, to use a word which has become common currency recently, witch-hunting.

The opening contribution of the SWP CC to the Internal Bulletin makes a couple of points which seem to us to be particularly problematic in this context. Firstly, the CC state that:

"The critics of the SWP's position have organised themselves under the slogan "firm in principles, flexible in tactics". But separating principles and tactics in this way is completely un-Marxist. Tactics derive from principles. Indeed the only way that principles can become effective is if they are embodied in day-to-day tactics."

It seems to us an uncontroversial statement that tactics must be based on much more than principles - a lesson which Lenin himself explained clearly in his famous "Left-Wing" Communism. Revolutionary tactics must be based on the objective realities of the time - the level of class consciousness, the balance of forces in society at any given

moment, the resources and cadre available to a revolutionary organization. To derive tactics from principles is not the method of scientific socialism, but of a dogmatic or even sectarian approach, that the party is "schoolteacher to the class".

As we see it, the disaster overtaking Respect has been exacerbated by the SWP deriving tactics from principles. The principle is that "the revolutionary party" embodies the correct programme, that it must work as a disciplined unit to win its position, and that there is nothing to learn from reformist or other forces. This feeds into a tactical approach that any threat to the organizational leadership of "the revolutionary party" must be fought using all means at the party's disposal, and those forces who oppose the strategy of the party must be eliminated if they do not accept defeat.

According to the information we have, your party chose not to debate Galloway's proposals openly within Respect first, and tease out the politics behind them. Rather, the SWP leadership first moved to neutralize internal dissent, before coming out fighting in Respect with accusations of "witch-hunting". Instead of leading with the political arguments and winning leadership among the broad left forces in Respect, your leadership seems to have mobilized the party for a civil war waged primarily by organizational or administrative means. Inherent in this drive to defeat Galloway and his allies appears a "for us or against us" approach which seems to leave no room for any possible reconciliation - in effect, ensuring the death of Respect in its current form as a coalition of the broad left and a nascent transitional formation of working-class politics.

An attempt by the SWP to establish dominance by sheer force of numbers at the upcoming Respect conference would, it seems to us, result in a Pyrrhic victory at best. Such a course of action, even if successful, would simply drive out those forces who are opposed to your party's current line and leadership, and reconstitute Respect as a front for SWP electoral activities. We can not see this as encouraging class consciousness or political consciousness, among the SWP, Respect or broader left forces. On the contrary, it seems almost designed to harden the boundaries of organizational loyalty and the divisions between "the revolutionary party" and other forces - almost the definition of sectarianism. Again, if these stories are true, then Galloway's comments about "Russian dolls" would seem to us - as revolutionary Leninists ourselves - to be fair comment.

Another quotation from your Central Committee's IB contribution which struck us runs as follows:

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Of all the claims made against the SWP's position the argument that Respect must be our "over-arching strategic priority" must be the most ill considered. Firstly, it ignores the fact that the building of a revolutionary party is the over-arching priority for any revolutionary Marxist. All other strategic decisions are subordinate to this goal."

Six years ago, the American International Socialist Organisation was criticized by the SWP (Britain) for a sectarian refusal to engage with the anti-capitalist movement. Alex Callinicos' own article on the split with the ISO-US includes the following statement:

"In an extraordinary speech at the ISO's convention in December 2000, the group's National Organizer, Sharon Smith, attacked the idea that the ISO could, by systematically focusing on this minority, "leapfrog" over the rest of the left, and insisted that methods of party-building forged in the downturn were necessary irrespective of the changing objective conditions. "Branches are now and will always be the measure of the size of the organization," she said."

The ISO-US was criticized for failing to see to that the gains from a revolutionary organization engaging properly in a broad movement, for both the organization and the class struggle, could not be simply quantified by how many members the organization gained. A sect with many members is of far less consequence in the class struggle than a smaller group of revolutionaries playing an organic leadership role in promoting political consciousness among the working classes and oppressed layers. We feel that the SWP may repeat the ISO-US's mistakes - with the much

greater consequences, this time, of the wreck of the biggest advance for the British left-of-Labour since the Second World War - if it lets Respect, as "only or primarily an electoral project" crumble at this point.

In contrast, Socialist Worker - New Zealand sees Respect - and other "broad left" formations, such as Die Linke in Germany, the Left Bloc in Portugal, the PSUV in Venezuela and RAM in New Zealand - as transitional formations, in the sense that Trotsky would have understood. In programme and organization, they must "meet the class half-way" - to provide a dialectical unity between revolutionary principle and reformist mass consciousness. If they have an electoral orientation, we must face the fact that this cannot be avoided at this historical point. Lenin said in "Left-Wing" Communism that parliamentary politics are not yet obsolete as far as the mass of the class are concerned - this is not less true in 2007 than it was in 1921. The question is not whether Respect should go in a "socialist" or "electoralist" direction, but in how Respect's electoral programme and strategy can embody a set of transitional demands which intersect with the existing electoralist consciousness of the working class.

The personality of George Galloway MP and the links with Muslim communities in London and Birmingham, seen in this light, are surely assets to be worked with, not embarrassments to be minimized. When Galloway came to New Zealand in July to support our campaign against Islamophobia, he electrified audiences with frankly some of the best political oratory that we have ever heard. No-one is claiming that he is a saint, or that he has not made some questionable political choices, but we refuse to believe that somehow over the space of a few months he has become a "communist, electoralist" devil.

The latest news that comes to us is that John Rees, a SWP CC member and the National Secretary of Respect, has publicly supported the four Respect councilors in Tower Hamlets who have resigned the Respect whip. If this is true, then the "civil war" in Respect has escalated to the point where the two factions are virtually functioning as separate parties - a "de facto" split much more harmful in practice than a clean divorce. This course of action is not only causing a serious haemorrhaging of cadre, but destroying the credibility which your party has built up as the most consistent and hard-working advocate of a new broad left in England and Wales. If the SWP appears to be attempting to permanently factionalise Respect, then it will be no wonder that other forces are trying to exclude them - not because of a "witch-hunt against socialists" (are you seriously claiming that Alan Thornett and Jerry Hicks are witch-hunting socialists?) but for reasons of simple self-preservation.

Socialist Worker - New Zealand comrades see this course of action from our IST comrades in the SWP as potentially suicidal. We see uncomfortable parallels with the self-destruction of the Alliance in New Zealand in 2001-2, where one faction deliberately escalated an inner-party conflict to the point where a peaceable resolution became impossible. Both sides of that struggle were permanently crippled in the aftermath. If you comrades are serious about trying to salvage the potential of Respect, I would urge your party to adopt the following measures:

Â. Lower the temperature of the internal struggle in Respect, by agreeing to a postponement of the Respect conference until at least after the SWP conference in January;

Â. recommit to building Respect as an active, campaigning organization in the unions and the movements, rather than a formation solely concerned with fighting elections, and to combining the SWP's work as an independent revolutionary organization with this goal;

Â. put up proposals for more comprehensive institutions of democratic debate and political education within Respect;

Â. retreat from the current course of factionalist brinkmanship in the current debate, and take whatever steps are necessary to repair the working relationship between yourselves and other leaders and tendencies within Respect; and

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Â· retract the expulsions of Kevin Ovenden, Nick Wrack and Rob Hoveman, at least pending debate at your party conference.

If, on the other hand, Respect is finished as a united political force, it would surely be better for the two sides in this debate to approach the question of "divorce" amicably and calmly, rather than forcing the issue to a final conflict in the next few weeks and destroying the trust between the SWP and other forces on the left for perhaps a long time.

I would also encourage your party to, as a matter of urgency, write a report for the information of your fellow members of the International Socialist Tendency, giving your analysis of the crisis within Respect and your long-term strategy for building a broad-left political alternative in Britain.

In solidarity,

Daphne Lawless

Editor, UNITY magazine

Socialist Worker - New Zealand