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After the split in Respect

Revolutionary organisation and its relationship to building a broad left party

- Debate - Building new parties of the left -

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When revolutionary Marxists engage in complex processes such as building broad left parties, with all the political pressures that entails, it is essential to reaffirm our long-term strategic objective of building a revolutionary party and its meaning for our practice today.

Introductory Note: This text is reworks a document written at the beginning of November 2007 for a discussion in the International Socialist Group (ISG). It is not a perspectives document or a text that addresses the immediate political issues that confront revolutionaries inside Respect Renewal or in the climate change movements. It is a discussion document that tries to step back a little from immediate tasks and initiate a discussion on the political nature of revolutionary forms of organisation that are necessary in the present political juncture. This is necessary because we are in an important new situation. The context of this discussion is the split in Respect and the foundation of Respect Renewal, and the possibility of revolutionary regroupment, all at a time of immanent recession indicted by the credit crisis, huge energy price increases, and the first signs of a new round of austerity.

This text argues that when revolutionary Marxists engage in complex processes such as building broad left parties, with all the political pressures that entails, it is essential to reaffirm our long-term strategic objective of building a revolutionary party and its meaning for our practice today. In the present context of Respect Renewal, it is argued that we will need higher levels of collective discussion, organisation and action. These issues are given heightened importance when we will be confronted with an opportunity of revolutionary regroupment - what kind of new organisation do we want to build?

Revolutionaries Marxists have always been prepared to change their forms of organisation to suit the circumstances, while maintaining their central underlying principles. The discussion on revolutionary organisation initiated by Lenin at the beginning of the 20th century was based on his theoretical analysis of how revolutionary class-consciousness is developed within the workers' movement -which does not occur spontaneously. Based on this analysis he developed his theory of the party, which has come to be known as democratic centralism. Lenin summed up the central principles of this form of organisation in 1906 as, 'freedom of discussion, unity of action'. (See Report on the Unity Congress of the RSDLP.) In addition, revolutionary Marxists have also understood that the basis of such a party/organisation, the unity of its membership, is an active agreement with its revolutionary programme. These two principles of Lenin's theory distinguish it from loose social democratic and libertarian/anarchist forms of organisation.

It has been argued that because the term 'democratic centralism' has become associated in the eyes of some people with Stalinism or other types of bureaucratic and highly centralist types of organisation, for example the British SWP, we should use another term, such as, 'revolutionary democracy'. I tend to think this is an unnecessary concession to reformists and libertarians and could lead to confusion in our discussions. We have always defended the genuine tradition of Bolshevism against Stalinism and other caricatures. Trotsky in his struggle to build the Fourth International did not see it necessary to abandon the terminology, on the contrary, he presents a rather hard version, for example, in his important text 'Stalinism and Bolshevism'. However, the discussion should not be about terminology, as long as it is clear that we are talking about the same thing.

After the Split

The split in Respect is of course a setback on several levels and puts the left once again in a bad light in front of the class. However, the success of the Respect Renewal conference opens up new possibilities to broaden the basis of Respect, if we can seize the moment. It opens an opportunity for a unity of left forces into a broader socialist and class struggle organisation to the left of New Labour, which could act as an alternative leadership and pole of attraction for those working class militants and campaigners - all those who oppose imperialist wars, global warming and the effects of neo-liberal capitalism.

However, those organised forces that are available today in Britain are mostly left reformists. Indeed some of the new militant vanguard forces are not even explicitly socialist. Consequently any new genuinely broad left party will, in all likelihood, be of a left reformist, loosely class-struggle character. The degree to which it moves further left, will depend partly on developments in the class struggle, and partly on the ability of the organised revolutionaries inside to push it to the left. At the Renewal Conference in November, George Galloway made a high-note speech most of which we agreed with, but where he also forcefully repeated, as he has on other occasions, that he is 'not a Marxist, Trotskyist, Communist, or Castroite . . . but old left labour'. He is not alone in these views in Respect and certainly not if it succeeds in uniting with broad left forces, which it must do if it is to be successful. In addition his 'two camp theory' of world politics, what we have called 'campism', often leads him to politically supporting any movement or individual, here or internationally, who opposes the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan. This would inform his political support for London Mayor Ken Livingstone, irrespective of his other right wing policies. This may open up divisions inside Respect even in the short term.

Also, in today's conditions, Respect Renewal (RR) will inevitably leave open the big questions, 'what road to socialism?' or what kind of strategy and programme will be required for a socialist transformation of society. This is because if RR is to become a genuinely broad pluralist party, it can only be based on a limited action programme. This reinforces the view that the revolutionary current needs to remain highly organised.

A Broad Party Today

Despite the limits imposed on us, an urgent task for Respect Renewal is to vigorously seek unity with others on the left, such as the Communist Party of Britain (CPB), the leadership of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) and other unions who have disaffiliated from the New Labour, green and socialist environmentalists, and even if possible, Labour left forces linked to McDonnell, *et al.* Today the latter have no possibility of influencing New Labour. If, as the recent Labour Representation Committee (LRC) Conference suggests, they think that by appearing more open towards social movements and struggles outside of New Labour they can rebuild the left inside New Labour, in the context of a right wing Brown government, they are deluding themselves. Since 1997 over 200,000 members have left the Labour Party and millions of voters have been lost. Nonetheless, the road of unity with these forces will be difficult, but necessary if Respect Renewal is to survive and grow in the medium term. However, it is important to remember that if we are successful, the revolutionaries, certainly in this political period, will be a minority in a left reformist, militant working class party. While we leave open the degree to which such a party can evolve to the left, we must be at all times aware of the historic lessons in relation to such parties.

Any serious unity of the broad left will oblige the existing leadership of Respect, particularly its left wing, to relinquish some political ground as well as leadership positions. We should be clear that it is not possible for a new 'broad pluralist party' to be led by revolutionaries at this time (except opportunistically and/or bureaucratically like the SWP tried to do). Therefore it is essential that revolutionaries must not only remain an organised minority within a broad pluralist party - and hopefully continue as an influential component of the leadership - but must improve their level of organisation. In addition, a process of revolutionary regroupment with those breaking from the SWP will be important for strengthening the Marxist nucleus.

We should fight for this new broad party to be a class struggle party and endorse what Trotsky called an 'action programme', a limited programme, but one which goes beyond mere reforms and parliamentary struggles. In other words we will fight for it to include some key and conjuncturally relevant transitional demands. However, we do not need to impose on this discussion our own historical terminology. Nonetheless, a precise terminology in our own discussions is important if we are to avoid vagueness and slippage. Many past discussions, for example, debates over the changing character of the PT in Brazil, and what we should have done about it, or the debate with the American SWP on the validity of the theory of 'Permanent Revolution', all involved some arguments over the meaning and a wilful misuse of words.

In the present context we should not, nor have we, been fighting for Respect to adopt a revolutionary programme or revolutionary forms of organisation. (See addendum at end of this text for the kind of political priorities we should be promoting today.)

The Political Basis of Unity

Respect Renewal should go on a unity offensive within the left, explaining why it is necessary and what we understand by the term unity. We should argue that the time is now ripe for the various currents on the left to propose what their individual terms for unity are.

I am sure we agree that our bottom line on abortion, is a 'woman's right to choose', but this is not supported by our only MP, nor by some other forces in Respect. On this and other aspects of sexual and gender politics, we may find as many allies presently outside Respect Renewal, in the labour movement, with whom we are discussing, as inside. This is because the issue of abortion rights has mostly been won inside the labour movement, and among many sections of society, but not necessarily all, particularly among some minority ethnic/religious groups. This issue is potentially explosive. There are international examples of this problem. In PSOL in Brazil, our one time leading comrade Heloisa Helena has publicly supported right to life demonstrations, causing considerable division on the left, which will be a problem for us across the continent. Respect has adopted a policy of a woman's right to choose by default - SR/ISG fought for it three conferences ago. Our resolution was opposed by the platform and defeated, however the SWP leadership felt obliged, out of embarrassment, to slip it into one of their resolutions - apparently it had been left off by 'mistake'. Clearly, we would not expect GG, an avowed Roman Catholic, to argue for a women's right to choose but, but if he is confronted with this issue, say on 'Question Time', he could put his own position as a Roman Catholic as long as he said that his party Respect, supports a women's right to choose. Nor can he support (vote for) anti-abortion bills in parliament.

Accountability of our representatives will be essential in a new party like Respect. We must insist that the democracy of a broad pluralistic party must include full electoral accountability of its leaders and representatives, free and open discussion, the right of tendencies to organise, including the right of political organisations like the ISG and Socialist Resistance (SR) to exist, produce their own publication and if necessary caucus, but with some acceptable restraints and norms of loyalty to the new party. All of this will be crucial for its healthy growth and development as a real pole of attraction. A broad pluralist party will probably take a form akin to the operative norms of the Second International - loosely social democratic (obviously not democratic centralist). The difference between a broad left pluralist party and a revolutionary Marxist organisation is the political basis of their unity. The former contains many strategies and programmes (pluralism), but is united on a limited anti-capitalist programme, while the revolutionaries may contain many important differences over tactics (with the democratic right of tendency), but they are united behind a revolutionary Marxist programme.

Some historical and international lessons

There is not the space here to discuss in detail, but there are many other experiences internationally, both positive and negative that we can draw on, although none is the same as the process here in Britain, nor does any one of them involve the same kind of forces. This is why it is wrong for the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) to draw schematic negative conclusions that the period of building broad parties may be over, based on the many difficulties and splits that have occurred internationally. Such instability is inevitable. We should look at Rifondazione in Italy and the subsequent correct split from it by Sinistra Critica (Critical Left) over Italian participation in the war in Afghanistan; the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) after the split; the emergence of Die Linke, the left party in Germany; the Left Bloc in Portugal and other new left formations, all in their different ways both negatively and positively reinforce the need for a disciplined revolutionary organisation. For example, our section in Italy remained organized and was able to play a crucial role in the extended political crisis of Rifondazione. While in Scotland it was wrong in principle for Scottish Militant Labour, the Marxist nucleus, to propose dissolution into the SSP (although this may not have avoided the split), which was an embryonic broad left/anti-capitalist party not a revolutionary party. We should also learn the lessons from the crisis of our Brazilian section, its gradual regionalization and decay inside the Workers' party (PT), its co-option into the local state in some regions with well paid jobs, and presently its continued participation in a neo-liberal bourgeois government. The minority who split from Socialist Democracy's (DS) disastrous capitulation to bourgeois politics and patronage, now work inside a heterogeneous far left co-ordination, the Party of Socialist and Liberty (PSOL), appears not yet fully organized, nor are they yet the official section.

These and other historical examples show the need for a clear political and organizational demarcation between the revolutionaries and the reformist/centrist majority, and the need to build the revolutionary nucleus in all situations. We must reaffirm our rejection of the thesis put forward by some on the left that today we are in the stage of building broad class struggle parties, while the building of a revolutionary organization/parties can be put on hold, or even be put off until tomorrow.

The difficulties and limitations we face in constructing RR flow directly out of the weak nature of the British left, the levels of class consciousness and struggle that exist today and, with some ups and some downs in the class struggle, for the foreseeable future (the scale of any fight back against the new austerity cannot be predicted). The Brazilian PT in its first decade or so was considerably to the left of anything that can be built today in Britain. However, by the mid 1990s it had become clear that most of its leadership had shifted to the right and Lula, for example, had personally made disastrous guarantees (to US Democrats) that Brazil under a PT government would honour the national debt. Two of the last political fights that animated Ernest Mandel on the international executive committee (IEC) of the Fourth International (FI) which I attended, was to re-emphasise the continued importance of nuclear disarmament, and the need for the Brazilian Section to start organising and preparing now (1995-6) for a break with the Lula leadership of the PT - particularly if the PT came to power. They did not do so.

In general it will be a matter of assessment and tactical judgement how far the revolutionaries can push for the adoption of more advanced demands within a broad party. However, in reality the inevitable future struggles within such a party will be determined by political events and the response of the new party to them, which will act as the catalyst for future re-alignments within, or outside the new party. Our view of such a party is that it is a necessary stage in the longer-term process of recomposition within the workers' movement and our fight to construct a revolutionary party.

Revolutionary organisation

For the above reasons it is essential that the revolutionaries consolidate their forces based on a revolutionary programme and democratic centralism (revolutionary democracy, if you prefer) as traditionally understood in our

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movement, by which I mean the best of the tradition represented by the United Secretariat of the Fourth International. Our understanding of the democratic right to organize as a tendency or faction, while maintaining unity in action, is radically different to the super centralized practice of the SWP. This super-centralism not only makes it very difficult to organize real political debate, especially outside of a pre-conference discussion period, but leads the party into a wrong, sectarian relationship to the class. It also leads to rapid splits when political differences force their way into the open. Lenin's theory of the party, to which we subscribe, has nothing to do with Stalinist methods, nor the travesty practiced by super centralised sects, of the British SWP variety. Rather it originated as a critique of the loose norms of membership and opportunist practices, along with a growing bureaucratic leadership of the Russian social-democratic and labour party (RSDLP) of which the Bolsheviks were a part, methods which came to dominate the formally Marxist Second International as a whole.

Lenin's theory of organisation was both a response to the degeneration of the RSDLP and to his theory of class-consciousness, which rejected the idea of a spontaneous development of a revolutionary consciousness. For him the revolutionary party was an essential catalyst for the development of revolutionary consciousness among the masses. Both Lenin and later Trotsky therefore argued that the revolutionary party/organisation had to be a cadre organisation of Marxists, not a politically loose, undisciplined assemblage, but one based on a clear revolutionary programme and unity in action. However, the precise organisational norms could differ according to objective circumstances. Under conditions of a relatively stable bourgeois democracy the democratic centralism we practice is obviously more open, transparent and less centralised than during intense class struggles or under a dictatorship. For example today, as with the French Revolutionary Communist League (LCR), we should have no problem in making public internal differences and debates in our press, as long as our members pursue the line that has been democratically decided. We would not expect comrades with minority positions to lead or prominently argue the case of the majority with which they disagreed. But without common action based on a democratic decision -making there is no democracy of any kind.

Therefore when revolutionary forms of organisation come under attack as they are today, provoked by the practices of the SWP, we must be prepared to confidently defend ourselves. We should make no concessions to those on the left who now wish to tar all revolutionaries, all 'Euro-Leninists', including ourselves, with the sectarian methods of the SWP, an organisation which does not practice democratic centralism, misunderstands the relationship between leadership, party and class (and the development of class consciousness), and fails to understand the method of the united front. Our understanding of the method of the united front informs our non-sectarian approach that has stood the test inside Respect. Here we have combined political intransigence with flexible and democratic practices.

The political line of divide we wish to draw in the class today is not between revolutionaries and reformists, but between those who wish to fight New Labour's capitalist policies and the new austerity, and those who don't. The New Zealand co-thinkers of the SWP wrote a good text criticising the SWP's sectarianism on this question.

To sum up, it is essential to strengthen the revolutionary nucleus in the coming period. Alongside initiatives to build a broad party, the revolutionaries must urgently build their own forces, not only through individual recruitment and consolidating links with the ecosocialist wing of the mass movement, but especially through regroupment of revolutionaries, which is now a possibility, although not a foregone conclusion. We should make no concessions on programme or forms of revolutionary organisation as we understand it, but there will be many other political and practical issues for negotiation in a regroupment process. The development of an anti-capitalist perspective for Respect will also be an essential part of any regroupment process. The bad experience of bureaucratic super centralism will probably make the ex-SWP comrades cautious in the short term, although most will still consider themselves revolutionary Marxists. Also, the prospect of 'Euro-starting again' will be especially daunting for them. However, we can overcome these and other doubts through continuing joint work alongside political discussion. Success will partly depend on whether they can organise themselves as a current and they are a growing in number as scattered individuals: it will take time. Initially, their main focus and ours will be on salvaging and building Respect Renewal. But we must argue that in order to successfully resist the inevitable pressures from the right on all

revolutionaries in a successful broad party, we must prepare for future battles with rightward moving tendencies. All history shows us that this is likely to occur: this means revolutionaries must remain well organised.

Redrafted, 12.1.2008

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The Political Basis of a left 'Euro-Unity Party' - A draft action programme presented for discussion.

At the November conference it was proposed that Respect Renewal re-discuss its programme at the founding conference in the spring of 2008. It needs updating especially to re-emphasise ecosocialism.

This programme should be part of any discussion with other forces that Respect Renewal hopes to unite with. We should initiate a debate explaining why left unity is necessary, what we understand by the term and the political basis for it. We should be pro-active in arguing publicly that Gordon Brown's refusal to break in any way from New Labour's capitalist policies shows that the time is now ripe for the various currents on the left who want to fight neo-liberalism, war and environmental catastrophe, to form a new left party.

Components of an action programme today

Respect Renewal is a campaigning, eco-socialist organisation and supports an electoral strategy that will provide us with a necessary platform for our ideas. This will allow our elected representatives to publicly campaign for, and where possible implement, aspects of our programme. Our electoral purpose is therefore not to use our elected representatives to administer the capitalist system either nationally or locally.

Against War and Imperialism:

For the complete and immediate withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan

No to war on Iran

Against all imperialist interventions, or to NATO encirclement of Russia and China

End all threats to Cuba and Venezuela

No to the arms trade

No to nuclear weapons, No to Trident - for British unilateral nuclear disarmament

Support for the campaigns against US interceptor missile bases in Britain and Europe.

Environment and global warming:

Campaign for a realistic target, based on the latest science, for unilateral carbon reduction in Britain of 90% by 2030

For radical new international treaties for global carbon reduction

For equitable, non-market solutions and against a strategy such as the Stern Report that is determined by profitability, or those which make the workers pay

All reduction to be implemented without carbon trading or strategies of green taxation

Campaign for a massive shift from carbon fuels to sustainable energy production, a shift to non-carbon ambient energy - solar, wind and water electric power generation.

For the immediate re-nationalisation of the energy industry, including the national grid

No to nuclear energy

For car-free inner cities and an expansion of cheap or free public transport. We encourage the transfer to sustainable modes of transport and adequate rural bus services. For an integrated transport system under public ownership

For the expansion of the rail and coach networks

No to privatisation of the underground - bring all public transport back into public ownership

Freeze all airport expansion including the fourth runway at Heathrow

Equitable restriction/rationing of international air flights

For the abolition of all internal flights

For public funding and re-establishing direct-works departments in local government as part of a massive subsidised campaign of insulating the old housing stock

For a programme of sustainable and affordable social housing - all new houses to be carbon neutral

For the protection of biodiversity, green and open space, and the countryside against rampant development

Reduction of the working week and redeployment of workers as environmentally destructive industries are closed down

For working class and socialist solution to the eco-crisis

Defend Social services and Welfare rights

For an end to all privatisation in the public sector. No to a privatised East London line

No to creeping privatisation or the market inside the NHS

For a massive public investment in the NHS and education

No to school academies

Tax the super-rich and big business to increase funding for public services

For the nationalisation of the utilities

For a return to a publicly funded student grant scheme

No attacks on pension funds and for a living state pension with no means testing

For Social and democratic rights

For a decent minimum wage of at least Â£8 an hour

For trade union freedom - repeal anti-union laws

Defence of civil liberties: no deportations, no to ID cards, rights for asylum seekers

Against racism, Islamophobia, sexism, homophobia and all forms of discrimination.

For mass action against manifestations of racism and fascism

For equal rights for women and the oppressed

For a woman's right to choose whether, when and how to have children.

For a system of proportional representation in all elections and against any prohibitive thresholds to disqualify small parties from standing