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Britain

How the SWP's bureaucratic factionalism is wrecking Respect

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No one who supports left unity could be anything other than deeply disheartened by the turn of events inside Respect, which has created a crisis that threatens the future of the organisation. The current crisis is unnecessary and the product of the political line and methods of organisation of the Socialist Workers Party.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/respect23-2.jpg>]

Happier days - Respect founding conference

The real meaning of the crisis, its roots and underlying dynamics are however being obscured by the SWP's propaganda offensive, an attempt to whip its own members into line and throw up a smokescreen to fool the left in Britain and internationally. How so?

The crisis was started by a letter from Respect MP George Galloway to members of the National Council on August 23, a time it should be remembered that a general election seemed a short-term possibility. In his letter Galloway drew attention to organisational weaknesses of Respect, the decline of its membership and political life in general, but also to the (not unrelated) lack of accountability of the National Officers, including the Respect national Secretary John Rees. These criticisms reflected those that had been made for several years by supporters of Socialist Resistance. Galloway also made a series of proposals for breathing life back into Respect's campaigning, including an election campaign committee and a National Organiser.

A sensible response by the SWP leadership to these proposals would have been to say "OK, we don't agree with everything you say, but maybe we took our eye off the ball and need to get things going again. Let's discuss this, let's reach a compromise". This was obviously the intelligent way to deal with the crisis and one that could have led to a positive outcome. But it would have meant the SWP sharing some of the decision-making power it wields within the organisation.

Instead the SWP went into battle mode and declared war on Galloway and those who agreed with him. In order to justify this the SWP has thrown up an extraordinary smokescreen to obscure the real nature of the dispute. This reads as follows: George Galloway and those who support him are witch-hunting the left and SWP in particular. This witch-hunt is being led in the name of "communalist" politics (read "Islamism"). The democracy of Respect is being undermined by National Council members who are critical of the SWP. To defend democracy and the left means to support the SWP's position.

The SWP leadership has adopted a classic strategy of unprincipled faction fighters: *change the subject*. In fact the story they tell - of the mother of all conspiracies, an attack on socialism and the left - is highly implausible to anyone who knows the basic facts. Why should just about everyone of the National Council who is not an SWP member or close sympathiser - including some of their own (now expelled) members in addition to well known socialists like Alan Thornett, Ken Loach, Linda Smith, Victoria Brittain and John Lister - suddenly launch an unprincipled attack on socialism and the left in the name of Islamist "communalism"? The story may play well at internal SWP meetings, but it is a fantasy. The Rees-German-Callinicos leadership have evidently decided that those who control the terms of the debate, win it. Hence the Big Lie.

Real roots of the crisis

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As is normal in these situations there is an accumulation of fractious meetings, especially leading up to the Respect conference and the election of delegates, each of which gives rise to organisational charge and counter-charge. But the roots of the crisis do not lie in what happened at this or that meeting. They lie in the whole approach that the SWP have had to Respect.

While Socialist Resistance and other put forward the objective of building a broad left party, the SWP rejected this in the name of building a "united front of a special kind". In effect this would be an electoral front, a political bloc to the left of Labour to be deployed mainly during elections. It would go alongside a series of other "united fronts" the SWP wanted to build.

Socialist Resistance pointed out two things: first, an organisation mainly deployed at election time would suffer major disadvantages as against parties and party-type formations that had a permanent existence. Political bases in localities are mainly built through long-term campaigning work, which can then be exploited to create an electoral presence.

But this was anathema to the SWP, because the SWP wanted to have simultaneously the existence of Respect and for the SWP to continue most of its campaigning and propaganda in the name of the SWP itself. The SWP, as easily the largest force in Respect, was able to enforce this orientation. But it meant that Respect was robbed of long-term campaigning work and its own propaganda instruments. For example, the SWP bitterly resisted the proposal that Respect should have its own newspaper - because it would get in the way of selling Socialist Worker. De facto the SWP wanted Socialist Worker to be the paper of Respect.

The "united front of a special kind" was not a united front at all, but a political bloc with a comprehensive programme for British society. The SWP's way of organising it however deprived it of any real internal life of its own and any campaigning dynamic outside elections. Thus it was very difficult to raise the profile of Respect in the national political arena in any systematic way. And it is extremely difficult to keep non-SWP members in this kind of formation, in which they can only - occasionally - give out leaflets and act as meeting fodder.

This was a disaster. As the three major parties cleave more and more together in a neoliberal consensus (a project now near completion in the Liberal Democrats), the political space obviously exists to form a party or party-type formation to the left of Labour. It is not at all obvious that there is less space for this in Britain than in other European countries, where relatively successful broad left formations have existed.

The name or the exact form doesn't matter - you don't have to call it a party. But it has to act like one. This cannot be a revolutionary party, for which at the moment a broad political base does not exist, but revolutionaries can play a central role within it. Such a formation does however have to have a systematic anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist campaigning stance on all the key questions of the day. Because of the central role of electoral politics in advanced capitalist countries, the left appearing there is vitally important, although made much more difficult in Britain by the undemocratic "first past the post" electoral system, which marginalises the extremes.

In the light of the way that the SWP chose to run Respect it was inevitable that it would see a decline of its membership and a drift away of independents. Any progressive dynamic for Respect was asphyxiated by the dead hand of the SWP and the strict *a priori* limits they put on its development. It was thus always highly likely that this would lead to a sharp political discussion about the way ahead; this could have been highly productive and strengthened Respect's role and unity. But the SWP interpreted it as a challenge to their authority and control. In effect they said to the others in Respect - you can have respect on our terms, otherwise forget it.

SWP's role on the left

It's a basic law of politics that influence and opinion count for nothing if they not organised, given coherent expression and deployed effectively in society. In Britain there is massive opposition to the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, to privatisation, to the growing gap between rich and poor, to the assault on public services, to the massive enrichment of the City, asset strippers and supermarket capitalists - to neoliberalism as a whole. But this is crying out for political expression at a national level. The fiasco of the failed attempt by the Labour left to get a candidate nominated by MPs in the Labour leadership (non)-contest, illustrates the blocking of any road to the left inside the Labour Party.

Unfortunately the consensus of the three main parties is today more effectively challenged from the right, by the UK Independence party and the fascist BNP; and it was only ever given very partial expression from the left by Respect. Regrettably a more effective attempt to organise left wing opinion, the Scottish Socialist Party, has for the moment been shipwrecked by the Sheridan crisis - in which, it must be added, the SWP played a terrible role.

Respect is the third major attempt to build a united left formation in the last 15 years - preceded by the Socialist Labour Party (SLP) launched by Arthur Scargill in 1994 and the Socialist Alliance refounded at the beginning of this decade. The SLP foundered on Scargill's insistence on his own bureaucratic control and the Socialist Alliance's potential was far from maximised: indeed the SWP's decision to sideline the SA during the height of the anti-war movement effectively sealed its fate.

If Respect now crashes this will have extremely negative effects. It will create deep scepticism about the possibility of greater left unity and the potential for a broad left party. It will set back and complicate the whole process of politically and organisationally refounding the British left. Although the SWP leadership clearly don't see this, it will have major negative consequences for the SWP itself and confirm the suspicions of all those who see the SWP as a deeply sectarian and factional formation.

It will confirm those suspicions because they are, sadly, correct. The SWP has shown itself in successive experiences - the Socialist Alliance, the SSP and Respect - to be incapable of fruitful long-term co-operation with other socialists in building a national political alternative. The leopard hasn't changed its spots.