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Membership crisis ignored at Respect conference

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The Respect conference, held on October 15, brought out both the strengths and the weaknesses of the current stage of development of Respect with some force. Unfortunately there were few decisions taken which will tackle the problems that emerged.

The strength of Respect was that it came out of a genuine mass movement - the anti-war movement. It sought to bring together the best and most radicalised segments of that movement. This included the left, the socialists, radicalising young people, and Muslim anti-war activists who rightly felt that they were being demonised and vilified by the establishment. The catalyst was George Galloway's expulsion from the Labour Party over the war. [<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/respect23.jpg>]

In the three short years since then the need for a broad pluralist left alternative to new Labour has become ever more urgent. The space to the left of Labour has widened, the crisis of working class representation has become more acute, and any change within the Labour Party more remote.

Nor is this about to change. The commitment of new Labour to the Bush agenda and the neo-liberal offensive is relentless. Blair will push it to the limit while he remains in office and Brown will continue it when he takes over. Respect has represented the best opportunity yet, in England, to address this situation.

A left alternative like Respect must be a class struggle party based in the campaigns and in the unions. But it cannot be built without electoral success. It cannot tackle the crisis of working class leadership if it does not challenge in the electoral field and if it does not make some breakthroughs in that field. That is what built the SSP in Scotland, the Left Block in Portugal and the Red Green Alliance in Denmark into serious organisations. Fortunately Respect has notched up substantial achievements at the ballot box. The breakthrough into Westminster was an historic achievement (given the first-past-the-post) system and the 16 local government seats won last May were a confirmation that Respect had gained a resonance in a number of deprived working class inner-city migrant communities that no other left party had achieved for over half a century

These achievements were reflected in the conference by the impressive contingent of radical young Muslims from East London and by the role of the new councillors in the proceedings. No wonder the conference took a strong line against the current wave of Islamophobia.

These gains, however, were in sharp contrast to the development of Respect itself, which had declined over the past year both numerically (from just over 3,000 member to just over 2,000 over that period) and - since the loss of membership seems to be heaviest amongst independents - in its plurality.

This is a serious problem. By the time it had existed for six months Respect had reached a membership figure of 5,000 and a target was set of 10,000. Since then the membership has declined, particularly over the past year.

Of course membership figures are not the only criteria by which to judge the development of an organisation like Respect - votes and mobilisations are other obvious examples. But they are pretty important, and if an organisation cannot win new members in the wake of electoral success when is it likely to do so? The weakness of the Respect office is a factor in this, but in the end the growth or decline of an organisation like Respect is a political issue.

Yet far from using the conference to discuss this sharp contradiction - between electoral success and membership decline - and work out how to tackle it, a carefully worded formula was found which gave the impression that the

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membership had gone up. The conference was in denial.

George Galloway in his opening speech claimed that everything was going great and that Respect had just recruited 10,000 students! Respect was he said "the fastest growing party in Britain". John Rees insisted that Respect was "bigger this year than last year".

It was smoke and mirrors. But there is a logic to it. If there is no problem no solution is needed and things can go on as before.

The Respect Party Platform (RPP), which Socialist Resistance supports, sought to draw attention of the conference to the decline in membership and discuss what was behind it.

We argued that the loose coalition model for Respect, so strongly defended by the SWP and George Galloway was at the root of the problem and that Respect needed to be organised properly as a party if it was to be successful.

Loose coalitions are normally temporary arrangements. Why would people join such a coalition, what would it offer them in terms of their political activity?

George Galloway's disastrous appearance on Celebrity Big Brother no doubt lost Respect a lot of members but it was not the root cause of the problem.

Democracy is crucial in regenerating Respect, since there is a big section of the left, particularly in the unions, which should be in Respect but will not join because they do not see a democratic space inside in which they could function.

Some think that it is too dominated by the SWP or that George Galloway is unaccountable or both. To bring them into membership Respect has to be seen to be democratic at every level of its functioning.

The conference did adopt a new accountability clause for elected representatives but only time will tell if George Galloway will function in the framework of it.

The Respect trade union conference is a very good initiative to strengthen the links between Respect and the trade union left - but unless those who are impressed by the debates it has also feel that there is a space for them inside Respect then they will not join.

In the same vein the conference was right to support the John McDonnell campaign as a way of standing four-square with the Labour left in their fight against the Brownites. But unless conditions are right inside Respect it will not result in an influx of new members from the Labour left.

Strong local branches are crucial to the development of Respect. The election strategy adopted - of selecting a small number of electoral targets and putting big resources into them - is effective in beating the first-past-the-post system, but it leaves a lot of branches, where there are no campaigns, out in the cold, under resourced, and out of touch with the organisation as a whole.

The RPP supported various resolutions that sought to strengthen and build Respect. We supported the call for the launching of a Respect newspaper which would provide a national profile to Respect, give extra resource the

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branches, help with recruitment, and get the message across more effectively.

We supported the 20-member resolution calling for the establishment of a delegate based National Council. This would help to reconnect the branches to the leading bodies by involving them more directly in the decision-making processes. It would also reconnect the leading bodies to the work of the branches.

The same resolution also proposed the introduction of an STV system of voting for elections at conference. This would get rid of the slate system - long been perceived as an unchallengeable bulldozer - and make Respect look more attractive and democratic to those considering joining.

These proposals did not pretend to resolve all the problems of Respect but they would have been a step in the right direction. The SWP were strongly against these resolutions and they were both lost. The proposal for a newspaper got about a third of the conference, the proposal for a delegate based National Council a lot less. Voting these resolutions down, however, simply leaves the problems of Respect unresolved. It leaves a situation where there is a question mark over Respect's longer-term future as a pluralist party.

The conference saw a number of very good debates on issue ranging from the trade unions, students and education, the public sector, the NHS and the environment. But how Respect is perceived by the bulk of the left outside is a serious problem. It would be a disaster for the left and the workers movement if Respect fails, since there is no other broad organisation of the left registering on the radar screen in England.

The fragments of the Socialist Alliance - the Socialist Alliance and the Democratic Socialist Alliance are going nowhere. The Socialist Party's Campaign for a New Workers Party is simply a propaganda campaign by the Socialist Party and proposes an even looser and more federal structure for a future party than the SWP model for Respect. The initiative from the RMT organised conference to launch a shop stewards network has its strengths in trade union terms but it avoids the burning issue of working class political representation.

The fight therefore has to continue to win Respect away from its current course of development and to develop towards being a pluralist party with a transparent and democratic structure along the lines of the SSP in Scotland and similar parties in other parts of Europe. This is not easy, since the SWP is entrenched in the way it sees Respect, but it has to be done if Respect is to face up to the challenge facing it.