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Britain

Respect Renewal is underway

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[Respect, the anti-capitalist left party in England and Wales, has split. Last weekend its two factions held separate conferences. Liam Mac Uaid, editor of Socialist Resistance, explains the roots of the division and the road forward outlined by the Respect Renewal conference.]

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/RespectRenewalPlatform2q.jpg>]

L to R: George Galloway MP, Kevin Ovenden, Linda Smith, Ken Loach, Salma Yaqoob

Origins of the crisis

In August this year Respect's member of parliament (MP) [George Galloway](#) wrote a document to the organisation's National Council (NC). At the time it was generally believed that [Gordon Brown](#) would announce an early general election and Galloway was clearly alarmed by Respect's utter lack of preparation. Among his key points were

* Despite being a rather well known political brand our membership has not grown. And in some areas it has gone into a steep decline.

* We have stumbled from one financial crisis to another.

* With the prospect of an early general election we are simply unable to challenge the major parties in our key constituencies.

* There is a custom of anathematisation in the organisation which is deeply unhealthy

* There is a marked tendency for decisions made at the national council or avenues signposted for exploration to be left to wither on the vine if they are not deemed to meet priorities.

Respect's National Secretary [John Rees](#) is a leading figure in the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). Rees judged the document to be an attack on the SWP. Over the following weeks the SWP claimed that they were being attacked on account of their socialist politics and that a "witch hunt" was being organised against them.

Two camps rapidly formed on the NC. One comprised the SWP members and some allies and the other consisted of Galloway and nineteen non-SWP NC members including [International Socialist Group](#) (ISG) members [Alan Thornett](#) and John Lister.

The two day annual conference was scheduled for the weekend of 17th and 18 November. It quickly became a major source of contention. The SWP argued that it was the legitimate decision making body and would go ahead as planned. The other camp argued that there was strong evidence from all over the country that SWP branches were being instructed to get as many of their members elected as delegates as they could. In some confirmed cases SWP full timers tried to argue that delegations be comprised entirely of SWP members. Equally controversial was the selection of large numbers of student delegates, many of whom were not paid up Respect members. Another disputed issue was the election of delegates from [Tower Hamlets](#), the borough which contains Galloway's constituency. Two rival delegations each declared the other one illegitimate.

300 attend Renewal launch

The outcome was that on Saturday 17th November both sides of the dispute held separate conferences thus making the split *de facto*. Each conference attracted about 300 people. Supporters of [Socialist Resistance](#), the paper which the ISG helps produce, attended the Respect Renewal conference. This was the conference which began to organise the majority of non SWP Respect supporters.

The *The Morning Star* newspaper, which reflects the views of the [Communist Party of Britain](#), said of the audience “The hall was packed out with a genuinely diverse crowd - young and old, men and women, black and white, Asian, Muslim, Christian and those of no faith, plus trade unionists and socialists from different traditions.”

Linda Smith, Respect Renewal’s chair and an official in the [Fire Brigades Union](#), opened the conference by declaring that it is the real Respect and that the other conference had no legitimacy.

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

George Galloway in his opening remarks observed that four years after its founding Respect has lost half of its membership and now has only 2500 paid up members. He argued that the SWP’s leadership didn’t want Respect to grow too large because they feared they would lose control of a large organisation. Summing up his politics he said “We set out to create a mass, broad party for working people. That party needs pluralism and democracy.”

[Salma Yaqoob](#) spoke twice. After Galloway she is Respect’s best known public figure. She directly referred to the Venezuelan revolution as an example of how some societies are rejecting the neo-liberal model and explained how Respect in Birmingham is trying to build itself as the anti-communist organisation.

Among the guests addressing the event was Penny Duggan of the [Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire](#). She reported on the strikes in France and told the audience of the LCR’s commitment to building a broad party that will incarnate the resistance to capitalism in France.

Summing up the discussion Nick Wrack remarked on the participants’ “feeling of liberation”. Even though the organisation had been split down the middle the people in the hall, who formed the core of independent activists and contained significant numbers of Bangladeshi members from Tower Hamlets were determined to carry on building a party. He added that members need to see Respect Renewal as a part of a process towards building a broader party that will include people from the Communist left, the Labour Party and environmentalists. This process will start with a series of meetings and discussions across England and Wales in the coming months with organisations and individuals. George Galloway added that members will be invited to submit documents outlining their ideas on Respect’s development and that the acting leadership would be doing the same. There will be a conference after the May elections to develop a programme.

Speaking on behalf of Socialist Resistance John Lister said that the organisation was willing to cease production of its monthly paper and hand over its financial resources as well as its production facilities to allow Respect Renewal to begin producing a monthly paper. This decision was welcomed and agreed by the conference. Socialist Resistance will shortly be discussing how to maintain its own public profile in the light of this step.

Hitting the ground running

The first issue of Respect Renewal’s paper will be ready for the [Campaign against Climate Change](#) demonstration in

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December. The new publication will be different from the well designed but uninspiring, apolitical tabloids that Respect has traditionally produced. It will have analysis, discussion and give branches something to organise around.

The split in Respect is a temporary setback in the construction of a class struggle mass party in Britain. However the choice was either a separation or a continuing slow decline. The Respect Renewal conference demonstrated that there are several hundred people who have tried working in Respect for three or four years and have concluded that its old way of working was stopping it from growing. In most parts of the country branches met infrequently or only to elect conference delegates. Many members felt, rightly or wrongly, that the SWP treated it as their own property and felt that the pain and disruption of a split was a necessary price to pay to allow the organisation to develop.

[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/respectrenewalconference_audience.jpg]

The omens are promising for the relaunched organisation's future. Birmingham, Bristol, Manchester and parts of London sent along enough people to quickly establish viable, dynamic branches. A leadership and infrastructure are emerging quickly. This includes Salma Yacoob, Alan Thornett, Nick Wrack, Rob Hoveman and Kevin Ovenden. These last three were also recently expelled from the SWP.

The conference was a big success. Salma Yaqoob said that she had arrived with a heavy heart but was leaving with a light heart. She had reason to. We were present at the significant next step in the creation of Britain's class struggle, anti-imperialist working class party.