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Britain

Respect prepares for new challenges

- News from around the world -

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The Respect National Council on Saturday May 21 was a well-attended and extremely upbeat meeting. The buoyancy of the meeting reflected the huge opportunities which have opened up for Respect following, first, its election results, and its break through into Parliament, and then George Galloway's spectacular Capital Hill intervention.

Galloway's Washington performance had had a worldwide impact. In the days following his intervention supportive emails poured in from all over the world, 1500 from the USA alone. His intervention has swept away, at a stroke, much of the mud which had been thrown at him for a long time (some of which had inevitably stuck) and given him a new credibility which is shared by Respect itself.

It was reported, for example, that when Galloway walked on to the set of the British current affairs TV programme 'Question Time' the previous week he got a standing ovation from the studio audience. This is apparently something which had never happened before.

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

National Secretary and leading SWP member John Rees introduced the discussion on the election by saying that, whilst the election results were extremely good they only represented a bridgehead from which Respect could develop. The problem with bridgeheads is that if you did not advance out of the bridgehead you would get pushed back into the sea.

The British establishment now saw Respect as a threat and they will do everything they can to destroy it. The attacks on George Galloway and the attacks on Respect itself will continue. Respect, therefore, had to go forward and become stronger or it would be pushed back. This, he said, meant building it into a mass-membership campaigning party as an urgent task.

There was clearly agreement on this perspective in the meeting. There was also agreement that Respect had to both consolidate the bases it had won and at the same time expand outwards into new areas. There was not so much agreement, however, on exactly what this meant or how it should be done.

Socialist Resistance supporters John Lister and I, amongst others, argued that turning Respect into a mass membership party (an initial membership of 10,000 plus is what was being projected) had implications for what kind of organisation Respect needs to be and how it needs to organise.

Unless these new members are given a party to which they can relate with functioning and accessible local branches that have a political life and a campaigning profile they will not last very long. There was a stress on having local meetings, but there was also opposition by some to what they called 'Euros' traditional meetings' which seems to be an opposition to meetings of the members to discuss politics in favour of set-piece meetings with outside speakers. What is really needed is a mixture of both.

I argued, as did several others, that Respect needs take advantage of its election results to make a fresh approach to the trade union left - particularly those union leaders who remained awkward and continued to confront the employers.

If Respect lets the current period go past without making new gains in the unions it would be a serious problem. Mass recruitment is important but so is the recruitment of established activists and socialists who remain outside of

Respect.

There was also some discussion on the Greens and the sectarian stance they had taken towards Respect during the election campaign. Although no one expected them to change it was felt that given the showing of Respect in the election it would be worth approaching them again for at least a non-aggression pact in future elections. Maybe political reality or crude self-interest would change their position.

The missing factor in the discussion as John Lister pointed out was the issue of a Respect newspaper or/publication. This had been agreed in principle by the Respect conference last year, but not progressed since for various reasons. How it could be possible, he asked, to have an effective mass-membership party without a party publication? How could it be a campaigning organisation without a publication in which to advance its campaigns?

The lack of a publication has meant that Respect has not even been able to present its election results in an accessible form for members in many parts of the country.

The upshot was that arrangements were made for a sub-committee to meet to discuss the implementation of the conference decision for a paper - which everyone said they were not opposed to in principle. However, there is not so much agreement on what a publication should be.

John is arguing to begin with something on the scale of a regular, monthly or bi-monthly, eight or twelve page tabloid publication, whilst leading members of the SWP appear to be arguing for an occasional four page broad-sheet, or a "magazine": Leading SWPers have questioned whether Respect could sustain a monthly. No doubt the issue will come back to the next National Council.

Another important discussion was on next year's local elections. It is the intention of Respect to stand a substantial number of candidates in targeted constituencies in those elections - particularly where it did well in the general election.

There is the possibility in East London that Respect could win substantial groups of councillors - or even win outright control in Tower Hamlets, although the real possibility of this is hard to assess.

John Rees stressed that this means having councillors who will be prepared to take part in mass campaigning against the government and in the end (as he said in the London Respect rally the previous week) being prepared to go to prison in the course of the struggle. He argued that the preparation for these elections has to begin now if we are to get the kind of results we got in the general election.