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Britain

England: a new alternative

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RESPECT - the Unity Coalition, a new pluralist and socialist political coalition in England, was founded in London On Sunday January 25, 2004 at a convention of 1,500 activists. Respect will stand in the elections for the European Parliament and the London Assembly which will take place on June 10.

There was a standing ovation, in the convention, at the moment the political declaration on which Respect will be based was endorsed by an overwhelming majority of those present. The declaration had been amended and added to during a debate in the course of the day.

R.E.S.P.E.C.T. is an acronym. It stands for: Respect, Equality, Socialism, Peace, Environmentalism, Community, and Trade unionism. This summed up very well the main priorities of those present and the aspirations of many people today.

The convention elected an interim (18 person) executive committee which strongly reflects the anti-war movement - from which the initiative for Respect has emerged.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/35717.jpg>]

On the executive are: George Galloway, a Glasgow MP expelled from the Labour Party in October for his opposition to the Iraq war (in particular calling on British troops to disobey orders); the general secretary of the civil service union, Mark Serwotka; film director Ken Loach; two regional representatives of the fire-fighters union; Salma Yaqoob, an outstanding Muslim activist in the Stop the War movement in Birmingham; Dr Siddiqu, leader of the Muslim Parliament in England; and Nick Wrack, chair of the Socialist Alliance. From the far left there are four leading members of the Socialist Workers Party and myself.

The executive will run the election campaign and run Respect until October. There will then be a second conference where the formation of Respect will be completed, with the adoption of a constitution and more permanent structures.

The political need for an organisation like Respect has existed in Britain since the mid 1990s, with the rapid move to the right of New Labour, creating a political space to its left. This space has presented a challenge to the left to break from its isolationism and build something broad and new.

In recent years the Socialist Alliance has addressed this issue in England, and the Scottish Socialist Party addressed it, more successfully, in Scotland. In England the Alliance found it difficult to make a breakthrough, but it was able to do some important groundwork on the creation of a left alternative.

A major new opportunity opened up with the emergence of the mass antiwar movement against the invasion of Iraq. The highly successful Stop the War Coalition (StWC) could not itself become a political organization and stand in elections - that is not its role as a broad united front. The Socialist Alliance, at its conference in May, recognised this and called for the formation of a new political organization out of the radicalization which had taken place around the war. There was, however, no obvious catalyst for such a development and the attempts of the Socialist Alliance failed to bring this into being.

The catalyst came with the expulsion of George Galloway. This dramatically opened up the situation and posed the possibility of a much broader political initiative. Moreover, to his great credit, within days of his expulsion, Galloway made a forthright call for a new political formation to fight in the European and London elections, saying that he was prepared to go on to its list if asked. As an ex-Labour MP, he was in a unique position to call for a new movement. In fact he is the first Labour MP in modern times to make such a break and call for a new party. When Ken Livingstone was expelled he not only rejected such a move but called on others to stay in the LP. In fact George Galloway says he has no intention of applying for readmission to the Labour Party, since this would be a betrayal of the activists of the Stop the War movement.

Respect is potentially the most important development on the English left since the building of broad anti-capitalist parties was put centre-stage, in the mid-1990s, by the rise of Blairism.

The emergence of Respect cannot be understood without an appreciation of the success and vitality of the antiwar movement in England, and the unity it forged between a wide range of political traditions in the process. It did not stop the war, of course, but it was the most important and effective broad campaigning coalition which had been built in England for many years, and it had mass support - it was, and remains, a genuine mass movement.

It was clear from the first big demonstration in September 2002 in London that the anti-war movement was going to be something extraordinary. That demonstration was followed on February 15, 2003 by the biggest political demonstration in British history, with 2 million people on the streets. It was a movement which had a unique potential to reshape and revitalise the left - if the left was prepared to grasp the opportunity.

At the same time people were confronted by New Labour's increasingly reactionary social policy. This was the government that had introduced tuition fees in higher education, was privatizing schools and letting profit dictate what happens in the health service. It was the government that had stoked up racism, and strengthened the far right, by its continuous attacks on immigrants and asylum seekers.

Labour supporters were faced with the fact that today's Labour government is actually worse than its Tory predecessor on many of these issues. It was the potent combination of these factors - the war and Labour's social policy - which prised open still further the gulf between New Labour and its traditional supporters, which has been growing for years.

The task now is to build Respect into a political organization in a short period of time. Today the need is for parties that can reach out to the wider working class by uniting revolutionary socialists with many others who want to fight against the right wing and reactionary policies of New Labour. We need parties that can function effectively at both the electoral and campaigning levels. All the signs are that Respect can become such a party.

Unfortunately the Communist Party of Britain (CPB) has voted at a special conference (held on January 21) not to join Respect at this stage but to continue with its policy of seeking to reclaim the Labour Party for the left. This is regrettable, but it will not stop the momentum behind Respect. In fact the CPB is deeply divided on the issue, with its daily paper, the Morning Star, promoting Respect against the party line. In the days before the Respect convention it carried an article headlined "All aboard the unity express".

The important thing is that Respect does not remain as an election campaign, or a loose electoral alliance, but goes on to develop into a political party which will be there for the long term and which can provide an ongoing alternative to New Labour. There is already a consensus that it will be a democratic and pluralist organization which will allow the far left organizations to affiliate and exist inside it as political platforms.

There is now about a month to construct Respect as an organization and launch its election campaign. The first meeting of the Respect executive, on Saturday January 31st, decided to call for Regional Conventions (on the basis of the European constituencies) to launch Respect at the regional level and elect candidates for the European elections. No one knows, of course, how many votes Respect will attract. But the feeling is that there is at least a possibility, if things go well, of winning a seat in the European Parliament.