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Britain

A reply to Alex Callinicos on Respect

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Alex Callinicos's article in the current edition of the SWP's International Socialism "Where is the Radical Left going?" is significant in terms of the current debate in the SWP as well as the line of argument he defends. It marks the end of the era of John Rees's leadership of the SWP electoral work, and its transition to the new Central Committee majority.

[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/421px-John_Rees_Scotland.jpg]

Former SWP leader John Rees: Callinicos' article marks the end of Rees' "united front" strategy for the SWP.

Photo: JK the Unwise for Wikimedia

It sets out to take a controversial look at the development of radical parties of the left across Europe and beyond over the past eight or nine years but its back drop is the removal of John Rees and the developing debate inside the SWP which has emerged as a result.

The issue of broad parties and the radical left is a very important subject, of course "and Callinicos is right to stress that the objective conditions remain strong for such parties despite the setbacks which have undoubtedly occurred. He argues that: "Any revolutionary worth his or her salt should throw themselves enthusiastically into building these formations". Indeed they should. But this approach is hardly reflected in the current practice of the SWP under the new majority, since the Left List is now firmly on the SWP's back burner if not on its way out.

Callinicos, in dealing with the situation in Britain (a big section of the article deals with the emergence of the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) in France), fully defends the line and actions of the SWP during and after the split in Respect despite the removal of John Rees. The criticisms of John Rees seem to be confined to a few specific mistakes not the overall strategic line he developed. Alex Callinicos even repeats the myth that following the split in Respect both sides in the dispute (Respect and the Left List) "suffered electoral eclipse" in the London Assembly elections in June. Whilst this was clearly true of the Left List a glance at the Respect results show that it held its own very well.

The other myth he repeats is that the split in Respect in November 2007 was a left/right division "with George Galloway and others following the Brazilian PT and the Italian PRC to the right with the SWP defending a left-wing line.

This is no closer to reality. The issue involved was not left wing versus right wing politics but party democracy and the role and functioning of the SWP within the structures of Respect. It was the refusal of the SWP to loosen its grip on those structures and to respond positively to a proposal from George Galloway for more plurality at the top which triggered the crisis. The Galloway proposal, which involved the appointment of someone with equal authority to John Rees, was presented by the leadership of the SWP as a declaration of war on their organisation. Callinicos, himself describes the letter as an "attack on the SWP". It was this which triggered the dispute.

What emerged after the split as Respect Renewal was not a rightist section of the old version of Respect but a section of the old Respect which defended the democracy of the organisation. Within that there was and clearly still are a range of political positions, debates, and approaches to building Respect. In fact some of the debates prevalent in the old Respect continue in the new one.

An important factor underpinning the SWP's approach to all this was its refusal to treat Respect as a political party

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but to insist on seeing it (famously) as a ‘united front of a special kind’. This approach was developed by John Rees and is strongly defended by Alex Callinicos. It placed Respect as just one united front amongst four or five the SWP was involved in – this one being the electoral version. Callinicos attacks electoralism, but the SWP approach has always had electoralism in its DNA, since it only really catered for electoral situations. It meant that Respect could not develop as an all-round political party because it only came into its own when there was an election about. Most other campaigns were conducted by the SWP itself through its own structures and under its own direction.

It is not true, however – as Alex Callinicos alleges – that either myself, or [Socialist Resistance](#), ever advocated that the SWP should dissolve itself into Respect. In fact we have argued the opposite – that it is essential that revolutionary socialists maintain an organised presence in an organisation like Respect. Such parties are by their nature multi-tendency, and this should be transparent and open and a natural part of the political life and development of such a party. Also because revolutionary socialists have a range of political ideas which go beyond those of a broad party and which need to be developed and defended in their own right. This is the situation in most of the broad parties across Europe which have emerged in recent years – in particular the successful ones.

It is true that myself, and others, have advocated the SSP model, and we still do. But we have always advocated this in general principle and not every detail of its functioning – some aspects of which could not be transported to the English situation. The size of the SWP relative to the other forces likely to be in such a party at this stage is completely different in England to Scotland and this has implications for the shape and functioning of a broad party. The issue was not that the SWP functioned as an organisation both inside and outside Respect. It was how it functioned inside and outside Respect, and the relationship between the two.

It is also true that the issue of the size of the SWP in relation to other forces was not an easy issue, but it could have been overcome given the political will on the part of the SWP. It meant that the SWP had to self-limit its numerical weight in the decision-making processes of Respect and allow it room to breathe. It meant allowing SWP members to participate without mandate. It meant the SWP doing most of its agitational work through Respect. It meant prioritising the profile of Respect over that of the SWP at public events. The SWP was not prepared to do any of these things – why would it if Respect was simply a united front and not a political party.

Alex Callinicos argues that the SWP did not want to exercise the overwhelming control that it in fact did have in Respect. This is not true. The SWP, under the leadership of John Rees, presumably with the agreement of the CC, took a conscious decision to do exactly that – a long time ago – in the latter days of the Socialist Alliance in fact. They decided that they were not prepared to participate in such organisations unless they had a degree of control which, in their view, reflected their size and input into the project. It was posed in exactly those terms. It was a conscious choice. As a result if this they increased the size of the SWP delegation on the SA NC from 5 to 15 (if I remember rightly) with a caucus in advance of meetings. In reality it was a negative turning point in the positive move the SWP had made towards building broad parties in 2000 – 2001 period.

This approach was carried into Respect from the outset. Within a couple of years it resulted in a situation where there was little real point in anyone else participating on the elected bodies. You may as well just ask the SWP what they wanted to do and not bother going. It meant that the real decisions were not being made in the leadership bodies of Respect, but in the leadership structures of the SWP and transported into Respect ready made. It was this, or a refusal to cease to operate in this way, and not some fictitious development of a left/right polarisation over the summer of 2007 which resulted in the split in Respect.

With John Rees removed from this area of work the new majority is starting to dismantle some of the achievements of the ‘broad party’ period as they establish the new ‘build the (SWP) party’ line. A good indicator of the extent of this is the attitude Alex Callinicos now displays towards the Muslim component of Respect – something in which John Rees very much took the lead when Muslims were radicalizing against the war, even if he did blow it later on in

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Tower hamlets. It was this which led Respect to make the most important breakthrough into a migrant community ever made by a left wing organisation in Britain. Callinicos in his article now retails the standard jibe typical of many of Respect's left critics that it was not making a genuine development in these communities at all but was simply seeking to "win votes opportunistically through community leaders". The SWP used to rebut these crass jibes when it was leading Respect by pointing out that such an approach would not even work. They often characterizing them as Islamophobic. How things have changed.