

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article1405>



Britain - Debate on militant left

The Crisis in Respect

- IV Online magazine - 2008 - IV396 - January 2008 -

Publication date: Saturday 5 January 2008

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

Two meetings took place in London on 17 November 2007. One was the 360-strong annual conference of Respect, which was attended by 270 delegates from 49 local branches and 17 student groups.

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

Chris Harman: Photo: revistamovimiento.com.br

The other, held in opposition to the conference and under the title "Respect Renewal", was a rally of 210 people called by MP George Galloway and some members of Respect's outgoing National Council. This article attempts to locate the politics behind the division and draw out some lessons.

The eruption of the crisis

Respect's only MP, George Galloway, precipitated the crisis through a series of attacks on the biggest socialist group within the organisation, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). The first attack in August 2007 was purportedly about organisational disagreements with Respect's national secretary, John Rees, who is a leading member of the SWP. But behind them lay a political agenda of shifting Respect to the right. This was shown by criticism of Respect's sponsorship of a 1,000-strong Defend Fighting Unions conference and of its participation in the Pride London (a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender rights march).

By mid-October 2007 Galloway was denouncing the SWP as "Leninists", who were trying to control Respect "by Russian doll methods". Paul McGarr and Aysha Ali, two east London activists, were "Russian dolls", "members of a group that meets in secret, deciding on a democratic centralist line". Galloway's supporters unilaterally declared that John Rees was no longer national secretary of Respect and that Lindsey German, convenor of the Stop the War Coalition, was no longer Respect's candidate for mayor of London "despite the fact that a 300-strong members' meeting had selected her. They went on to announce they would not recognise Respect's annual conference.

They threw all sorts of groundless allegations against the SWP: it was trying to fix the outcome of the Respect conference; it was "blocking delegates" in Birmingham; it was voting for delegates "at completely unrepresentative meetings" in Tower Hamlets; it was dragging out meetings in the hope that others would leave; it was urging its members to stand for election as delegates in local branches; it had made four Tower Hamlets councillors "turn their backs on Respect".

The allegations were all false, and remarkably similar in tone to those used by the media during the Cold War in the 1950s, and by the right in the Labour Party against supposed "Trotskyist infiltrators" in the 1960s and 1980s. The aim was to destroy opposition to a particular direction in which Galloway wanted to pull Respect "one markedly to the right of that of Respect when it was launched four years ago. Galloway told one activist from a Communist Party background that his was a "fight against Trotskyism". No doubt he did not say this when recruiting some other people to his side, like Ken Loach and Alan Thornett.

Serious activists know that our members do not behave at all as he purports. The SWP has a long record of joint activity with people and organisations with different views to our own. Even Peter Hain, now a senior government minister, recalled in a radio programme in October 2007 being able to work with us inside the Anti Nazi League in the late 1970s. He described our party as the dynamic driving force, but said we were able to work with people who were

committed to the Labour Party. Today members of the SWP central committee play a leading role in the Stop the War Coalition alongside Labour Party members such as Tony Benn and Jeremy Corbyn, as well as Andrew Murray, a member of the Communist Party of Britain

Unity and honest argument

We have a good reputation with the rest of the left because we follow the method of the united front as developed by Lenin and Leon Trotsky in the early 1920s. This method stands in direct opposition to manipulating votes or rigging meetings. It starts with the understanding that exploitation, war and racism hurt working people, whether they believe in the efficacy of reform to change the system or believe, like us, in revolution. This has two important consequences:

(1) Fighting back against particular attacks and horrors depends on the widest possible unity. The revolutionary minority cannot by its own efforts build a big enough movement. Revolutionaries must reach out to political forces that agree with them on particular immediate issues, even if they disagree over the long term solution.

(2) By struggling over these issues alongside people who believe in reform, the revolutionary minority can show in practice that its approach is correct, and so win people to its ideas.

Those who have worked in united fronts alongside us know we have always been open about our politics, while simultaneously building unity with those who do not agree with us. Anyone with a particular political approach, whether reformist, revolutionary or even anarchist, organises in practice to put across their point of view, even if they sometimes try to deny doing so. And that means getting supporters together, whether formally or informally. Galloway's supporters in Respect could not have organised against us if they had not acted as "a group that meets in secret".

It has always been necessary for us to organise to argue for policies that make united fronts effective. This was true when we took the initiative in launching the Anti Nazi League 30 years ago. If the SWP had not argued with other activists across Britain, the Anti Nazi League would never have been able to inflict a devastating defeat on the far-right National Front.

Much the same applied 23 years later when the Stop the War Coalition was formed in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. There had been a highly successful central London rally, initiated by the SWP and involving well known figures. But the first organising meeting nearly descended into disastrous sectarian squabbling as various small groups tried to impose their own particular demands. It was the capacity of the SWP to draw constructive forces together around minimal demands that enabled the coalition to go forward. Far from SWP members behaving like "Russian dolls", our capacity to debate what needed to be done within our organisation and then to win others to it was a precondition for creating one of the most effective campaigns in British history.

The politics of building Respect

The united front method also underlay our approach to Respect. Back in 2003 up to two million people had demonstrated against the war. Many activists concluded that a political expression for the movement was required. We shared this general feeling. Our duty was to try to create a credible electoral focus to the left of Labour "and this could not be done without involving much wider forces than the SWP, given the electoral system in England.

The left focus would not be a revolutionary one, but would attempt to draw in the diverse forces of the anti-war movement—revolutionaries, of course, but also disillusioned supporters of the Labour left, trade unionists, radical Muslim activists and people from the peace movement. The expulsion of George Galloway from the Labour Party precipitated the launch of the project. We worked with a range of other people to agree on a minimal set of points. These were fully compatible with our long term goals, while also acceptable to our allies. The initials of Respect summed up the nature of the project—Respect, Equality, Socialism, Peace, Environment, Community and Trade unions.

There had to be political arguments to get Respect off the ground, and the SWP was essential to this. There were some on the left who objected to working with Muslims. We had to argue against them, pointing out that Islam, like other religions such as Christianity, has been subject to multiple interpretations—and that the claim that it was innately reactionary was part of the racist ideology being used to justify imperialist wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Only the course of the struggle would show whether particular individuals' horizons had been widened enough for them to be drawn to the left. There were also arguments with people who objected to working with Galloway, claiming his past record ruled this out. He had, for instance, never been a member of the Campaign Group of MPs; he refused to accept that Respect MPs should have a salary no greater than the average wage; he had blamed the violence of the great poll tax protest of 1990 not on the police but on “lunatics, anarchists and other extremists principally from the Socialist Workers Party”. But for us, in the summer of 2003, what mattered was that Galloway had been expelled from New Labour for campaigning against the war. As such he was a symbol of opposition for very large numbers of people who had previously looked to Labour.

Precisely because the SWP was a coherent national organisation it was able to carry these arguments in a way in which no one else was. Galloway at that time recognised that a “Leninist” organisation could fight to build unity among people with an array of different political perspectives in a way that a loose group of individuals could not. We showed our commitment to this over a four-year period. So we always strove to ensure that the Respect electoral lists were much broader than the SWP, even in areas where the SWP members were a large proportion of Respect activists.

It was SWP members, working in this way, who produced the first electoral breakthroughs for Respect in Tower Hamlets in East London when local trade unionist Oliur Rahman became a councillor with 31 percent of the vote and SWP member Paul McGarr came second, ahead of Labour, with 27 percent in a mainly white ward. No one mentioned “Russian dolls” back then.

We fought for lists of candidates that reflected the diversity of the struggle against New Labour from the left. That argued that they should be mixed in terms of ethnicity, gender and religious origins. So in the local elections in Birmingham in 2006, Respect stood five candidates—two Muslim women, a Muslim man, a black woman and a female member of the SWP. In the working class immigrant areas of Tower Hamlets and Newham in east London SWP members argued for a mixture of Muslim and non-Muslim candidates. Respect won 26 percent of the vote and three council seats in Newham, 23 percent of the vote and 12 seats in Tower Hamlets and one seat, for well-known Muslim anti-war activist Salma Yaqoob, in Birmingham

Defending Respect as a project for the left

But the very success of Respect led to political arguments—and SWP members had to try to find ways of dealing with them. The biggest was that opportunist electoral politics began to intrude into Respect in the areas where it was the most successful electorally.

At the time of the 2005 general election Galloway began promoting within his own campaign in Tower Hamlets individuals and forces very distant from the left, including a millionaire restaurant owner and a millionaire property developer. The SWP and others on the left struggled against such non-left interlopers, and by and large defeated them. Two years later, our willingness to struggle in this way was used by Galloway to denounce the SWP.

There is a model of politics increasingly used by the Labour Party in ethnically and religiously mixed inner-city areas—promising favours to people who pose as “community leaders” of particular ethnic or religious groupings if they agree to use their influence to deliver votes.

This is what is known in US cities as Tammany Hall politics, or “vote bloc” or “communal” politics in the Indian subcontinent. It is something the left has always tried to resist. But it was this that began to appear in Respect in Tower Hamlets. So, before the 2006 council elections, two of Galloway’s present allies, Azmal Hussain and Abjol Miah argued strongly that all the candidates in some wards should be male and Bengali. Two of the Respect councillors selected under this pressure soon broke with Respect, one joining the Labour Party, because they felt their personal ambitions were not being satisfied.

Similar arguments also took place in Birmingham in the run-up to the 2007 council elections. A candidate supported by Salma Yaqoob had only just left the Conservative Party until just three months before and had been planning to stand against Respect as an independent. When an SWP activist objected to promoting him, Salma Yaqoob said the activist “had a problem with Asian candidates”. In another case, about 50 people suddenly joined Respect to vote for Asian Muslim consultant as candidate. The overall outcome was a complete change in the character of Respect’s list of candidates in 2007 in Birmingham compared to the year before. It was now made up entirely of men from Pakistani backgrounds instead of an ethnic mix containing a majority of women.

Principled socialists had no choice but to argue against such developments. Otherwise people would believe the Labour Party lie that Respect was a communalist party.

Developments in Tower Hamlets also forced principled socialists to take a stand. Arguments broke out within the newly elected Respect group on the council. Four councillors, including the only two women councillors, objected to what they saw as right wing positions taken by the majority of the group. None of the objectors were at that point in the SWP, although two soon joined. The issues became sharper with a council by-election in the summer. A Respect selection meeting got heated when a young woman activist, Sultana Begum, dared to stand against Galloway’s preferred candidate Harun Miah. The SWP members and the left wing councillors argued that Sultana Begum had the fighting spirit best suited to represent Respect. Backing her was one of the alleged “crimes” of the SWP, according to Galloway, even though SWP members, after losing the vote at the selection meeting, worked very hard to win the seat for Respect. Our real “crime” was that we argued out politics openly and vigorously, and refused to be dragooned into being “Russian dolls” for George Galloway’s friends.

The mystery of Galloway’s turn

Why did Galloway turn so suddenly against the SWP? It was part of a more general shift in his political activity. He had behaved marvellously in the summer of 2005, going to the US Senate and denouncing the war in front of the world’s television cameras. But he soon showed a different face. At the beginning of 2006 he dealt a blow to everyone who was preparing to campaign for Respect in the local elections: he absented himself from politics for weeks to appear in the despicable “reality TV” show *Celebrity Big Brother*. Every active supporter of Respect was faced at work with taunts from the right and with people on the left saying they would never vote for Respect again. The SWP had to decide how to react to this. The pressure was particularly acute during these weeks because

leading Respect members such as Ken Loach and Salma Yaqoob were keen to denounce Galloway. Fortunately, as a “Leninist” organisation of “Russian dolls” we had our annual conference just as Celebrity Big Brother started and were able to agree on a general reaction, which our members then tried to argue. We pointed out that appearing on the TV programme was stupid and an insult to those who had worked to get him elected, but that it was not in the same league as dropping bombs to kill thousands of people in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Had SWP had not defended Galloway during the Big Brother affair, Respect would probably have disintegrated then. Nevertheless, the Big Brother farce damaged Respect. Galloway never once acknowledged the damage he did. On the contrary, in the months after the fiasco he began to use his “celebrity” to build a career as a radio talk-show host, interspersed with television appearances and, again insulting to Respect activists, appearing as guest presenter on the Big Brother’s Big Mouth in June 2007. Yet he had the gall just two months later to complain that the SWP was “undermining” Respect. Meanwhile he had achieved the dubious record of being the fifth highest earning MP. Some tribune of the people!

The eye of the storm

Galloway’s attack on the SWP in mid-August came after New Labour unexpectedly indicated there might be a general election within four or five weeks. Galloway had long before said he would not stand for re-election, but now wanted to stand in the other Tower Hamlets constituency. He clearly felt there was no future in appealing to workers on the basis of class arguments (hence his attack on the Organising Fighting Unions initiative) and instead there had to be a shift towards courting conservative “community leaders” (hence his attack on intervening in Pride). The SWP was resisting such a turn, and so it had to be attacked.

To understand how the final split occurred it is necessary to describe the events that followed in Tower Hamlets in some detail.

There was an explosive meeting in mid-October to elect delegates to the annual conference. The question of “pocket members” raised its head again. Scores of people attended who activists had never seen before. Respect’s rules stipulated that nominations for delegates had to be received in advance of the meeting. In all, 46 nominations had been received and there were a number of vacant places. But just before the vote was about to be taken a paid parliamentary assistant to Galloway brought in a second handwritten list. This list contained names of people who were not fully paid up members of Respect, people who had not been asked if they wished to stand, people identified by only one name and one member of different Respect branch (Newham). The meeting became chaotic as the Galloway supporter in the chair tried to insist this was the only list put to the vote, and then left the meeting. The branch secretary took over in the chair with the agreement of the meeting and the original nominations were ratified, leaving room for spare places to be filled through discussion with proposers of the second list.

George Galloway, who was not at the meeting, put his name to a denunciatory email claiming the SWP had “systematically undermined” the meeting, ignoring democratic procedures so as to take control of the conference delegation. When the SWP and the left councillors defended themselves, he accused us of aggression. Two days later he told some of our members (including his 2005 election agent) to “fuck off” and some of his supporters made it clear they wanted to drive the SWP out of Respect. They attempted to do so at another Tower Hamlets meeting the following week, but seeing that they did not have clear majority the chair ended the meeting without taking any vote.

One very disturbing feature of this meeting was the attitude of Galloway’s supporters towards women members of Respect. Rania Khan, at 25 the youngest councillor, recalls “We had about 50 women that night and they had valid membership cards but they were not allowed to take part. Someone who was close to the council group leader said

to one of the women queuing up outside, ‘My wife doesn’t come, why are you here?’ ”

The left councillors were so angry by this time that no one could dissuade them from breaking with the rest of the Respect group on Tower Hamlets council – although not from Respect as such. As Lufta Begum says, “John Rees said to us, don’t. But we could not endure it any more”.

Up to this point the SWP had done its utmost to reach a compromise that would prevent the split in Respect coming out into the open. Our only precondition was that principled socialists had to have the right to argue within Respect’s democratic structures against opportunism and Tammany Hall communalism. But the behaviour of Galloway and his supporters in Tower Hamlets showed that compromise would not work. There was only one possible way of keeping Respect alive in its original form – for the SWP and others on the left to fight flat out.

The internal discussion in the SWP

Galloway and his supporters have portrayed the SWP as a closed “Leninist” group in which a small number of people at the centre dictate to the members. The picture does not correspond to the way the SWP really works. This was shown by the way we reacted to the attacks on us from late August onwards.

We circulated Galloway’s first document and our reply to our members, and called a meeting for all London members. There was open debate, with alternate speeches from those who supported and those who opposed the central committee’s interpretation of events. A series of members’ meetings in each locality followed and then two 250-strong national delegate meetings, where those who disagreed with the leadership’s position were able to speak without hindrance. Votes were taken, with around 250 for the leadership on each occasion, two against and four or five abstentions.

Three SWP members, two of whom were employed by Galloway, had put their arguments in the London members meeting, in the party’s internal bulletin and at the first national delegate meeting. But they then chose to ignore the vote and went on to help orchestrate the attacks on the SWP and the left councillors in Tower Hamlets. We had no choice but to terminate their membership of the SWP. The vote at the second SWP national meeting endorsed this decision.

Thousands of people with a record of activity in the working class, anti-war and anti-racist movements had had access to all the different arguments and followed them attentively. They decided overwhelmingly that they would not be “Russian dolls” for Galloway as he tried to turn Respect into a vehicle for furthering the political careers of people who shared few of its original values. They would instead continue to build Respect according to the original conception. To this end, every effort had to be made to ensure that the Respect annual conference took place with delegates elected on a democratic basis. It was while we were deciding on this approach that news came through that Galloway’s supporters were trying to sabotage the conference by calling their own rally on the same day. Galloway’s rally consisted to a very large extent of speeches denouncing the SWP.

Politics and unity

Respect has not been the only attempt to build a left alternative to a right moving social democratic party. We have seen similar attempts with the Scottish Socialist Party, P-Sol in Brazil, the Red-Green Alliance in Denmark, the formation of Rifondazione Comunista in Italy, the Left Bloc in Portugal, Die Linke in Germany, and the efforts to find a

single anti-neoliberal candidate for the 2007 presidential elections in France. Respect has not been the only case in which the project has suddenly been endangered by the behaviour of leading figures.

The Rifondazione leadership in Italy joined a centre-left government implementing the policies it once opposed. The majority of the leadership of the Scottish Socialist Party gave evidence in a libel trial against the party's best-known figure, Tommy Sheridan. José Sá Fernandes, a left wing independent activist elected to Lisbon council with the Left Bloc's support made a deal with the Socialist Party. Some of Die Linke's leading East German members participate in local government coalitions that implement cuts. First Marie-George Buffet and then José Bové tried to impose themselves undemocratically as the "unity candidates" of the anti-neoliberal left in France with Bové then agreeing after the first round to be adviser on "food sovereignty" to Ségolène Royal.

The meagreness of the reforms offered by Labour and other social democratic parties has created a huge political vacuum to their left, which the forces of the revolutionary left are usually too weak to fill more than partially by themselves. It is this which creates the need for a gathering of left forces wider than the revolutionary left organised through a united front. But the very thing that makes such political united fronts potentially able to attract wide support—the involvement of well known non-revolutionary political or trade union figures—necessarily means they are unlikely to last indefinitely without intense arguments breaking out over their direction.

Galloway, for instance, has been open about his commitment to the path of reform. He has said that the Labour government would have been very different "if John Smith were still alive". On television and radio programmes he has often demonstrated a strange faith in the capacity of the police to deal with crime, and has declared his commitment to the unity of British state, which he sees New Labour as undermining.

Such views meant that at some point he was likely to be attracted to opportunistic methods that revolutionary socialists would have to resist. The same was true of Bové in France, Sá Fernandes in Portugal and Fausto Bertinotti in Italy. The LCR in France has a different attitude to the role of working class in the struggle to change society to that of Bové or Buffet. George Galloway and the "community leaders" in Tower Hamlets or Birmingham have a quite different attitude to those of us who are consistent revolutionaries. Unity to fight mainstream parties is one thing. An agreed programme on how to change society is another.

These lessons are going to continue to be important. The few dozen revolutionaries who have joined the Respect Renewal breakaway will learn this lesson the hard way. They will face a choice between having to avoid speaking on a whole range of issues or saying things that upset one or other of its component parts. We can only hope that at some stage principle wins in the battle with opportunism.

Meanwhile, the main body of Respect faces the continued challenge of trying to build a consistent left focus. That will be harder after the breakaway. But wider political developments are likely to offer new opportunities in the medium term.