

Britain: The Respect-Unity coalition and the politics of opportunism

Part One

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On June 10, a new electoral coalition, Respect, will be fielding candidates in the European Elections.

The name is an acronym for Respect, Equality, Socialism, Peace, Environment, Community and Trade Unionism. Headed by former Labour MP George Galloway, its leading personnel are largely drawn from the Socialist Workers Party (SWP).

Respect advances itself as a democratic alternative to Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labour government and as a political vehicle through which the mass antiwar sentiment that brought nearly two million people onto the streets of London on February 15 last year can find expression.

However, an appraisal of its origins and programme shows that Respect has been established in order to prevent a genuine political break with Labourism. It is based on the explicit rejection of any possibility of constructing a socialist party based on the working class. Its founders argue that any attempt to do so would be the height of sectarianism and that what is required is a party that appeals to all classes, which is supposed to rectify a democratic deficit in British politics.

The only pretence of socialism constituting a component of its programme is Respect's call for a handful of social reforms to be enacted—ones it judges that will appeal to the working class without alienating other elements within its desired constituency, including disillusioned Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and Muslim clerics.

Those who now make up the leadership of Respect were principal actors in the Stop the War Coalition (STWC)—the Socialist Workers Party and the Muslim Association of Britain, who were then aligned with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Around this axis gravitated a host of other left groupings and Stalinists.

The antiwar movement was a defining moment in political life in Britain. Internationally antiwar sentiment had assumed unprecedented proportions and 11 million had been involved in the February 15 and 16 international days of action.

The biggest demonstrations in Europe took place in those countries that were most closely aligned with the Bush administration in the United States, both on the issue of war and its right wing economic and social nostrums.

No government was more notorious in this regard than that led by Tony Blair.

Blair's government still carried the designation Labour, but this no longer fooled anyone. The prime minister was bracketed alongside Margaret Thatcher and other ideologues of the right, and his government was far more overtly pro-big business and hostile to social reforms than many Conservatives and Christian Democrats in continental Europe.

As a result the protests against the war in Britain assumed an implicitly political character. Opposition to the government's attacks on living standards and democratic rights coalesced around outrage at an

unprovoked war of aggression being waged against an oppressed people.

Never before had popular sentiment been so divorced from the political establishment. Indeed Blair had publicly insisted that government could not be answerable to the electorate. The Conservatives were fully behind the war and only the Liberal Democrats were joined by a dwindling number of Labourites in the no-war camp.

As events unfolded the gulf between the political elite and the masses widened. Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy spoke at the first antiwar demonstration, but thereafter refused to take part and ended up supporting "our boys" once war was declared. More importantly the Trades Union Congress, after initially declaring its opposition to war, issued a public statement that it would no longer support a movement critical of Blair.

The antiwar movement, therefore, was heterogeneous in its social composition and political inchoate, but it was overwhelmingly working class, predominantly young and objectively in conflict with the existing order.

With Labour the target of the protesters' anger and the TUC refusing to associate themselves with the demonstrations, the STWC found itself at the head of a mass movement by default. Instead of providing a leadership to those seeking a way of preventing war, those involved worked to politically neuter the mass movement. The STWC insisted that nothing must be allowed to alienate the handful of antiwar Labour MPs, the Liberal Democrats and other establishment figures. This was complimented by efforts to foster illusions in the ability of the United Nations and the European powers such as France and Germany to act as a check on US militarism.

Due to the absence of any significant opposition within the Labour Party to the war, George Galloway, a man with a record of opportunist relations with a number of Arab bourgeois regimes, including that of Saddam Hussein, was promoted by the STWC as representing the voice of dissent from within the government's ranks.

Within the STWC the SWP was continuing its role as a loyal defender of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy.

The SWP does not articulate the interests of the working class, but of a significant layer of the middle class that benefited from the old welfare state provisions and occupied positions within academia, local government, the civil service and the trade unions.

Their efforts to advance and protect their social position historically coincided with a defence of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy as the political expression of the policy of class compromise embodied in the welfare state. Any mobilisation of the working class was aimed solely at pressurising the bureaucracy in order to stiffen its resolve against attacks by big business on these social gains.

The SWP rejected electoral challenges to Labour on the grounds that

this was a diversion from a struggle to foster a leftward movement within the party by encouraging militancy within the trade unions on which it was based.

This perspective is no longer viable. Labour's transformation into an avowedly pro-business party expresses the collapse of the entire post-war economic and political arrangements based on the nationally regulated economy and with it the perspective of social reformism.

For some time the SWP sought to avoid the implications of Labour's abandonment of its old programme. And it still does not accept that such a fundamental transformation has taken place within the trade unions. But given the widespread hostility towards New Labour, in 2000 the SWP decided to join with a number of other left groupings in the Socialist Alliance and to stand candidates against Labour for the first time. Its essential political orientation, however, remained the same. The Socialist Alliance was advanced as a home for dissenting elements from within the Labour Party and for any trade union bureaucrats wishing to remain true to Labour's old reformist policies.

Every time a leading Labourite found himself outside of the party's ranks, the SWP offered itself as an ally in building a new reformist party. However, its advances were repeatedly scorned—most notably by National Union of Mineworkers President Arthur Scargill and London Mayor Ken Livingstone—and the mass defection from Labour's ranks anticipated by the SWP never materialised. Instead Scargill founded a Stalinist party that has since all but disappeared, while Livingstone has been welcomed back into the Labour Party in a deal brokered by Blair.

The SWP's promotion of such political bankrupts has only deepened its alienation from working people. The organisation discovered to its cost that its efforts to provide a platform for those like Kennedy and others during the antiwar protests had done it no favours. Just months afterwards it candidates, running under the Socialist Alliance banner, failed to win any significant support in the May 2003 local elections. Instead, the biggest swing from Labour went to the Liberal Democrats, particularly in areas with a large Muslim population, while most people abstained.

The response of the SWP has been a sharp lurch to the right. It has concluded that the reason for its lack of success is its association with socialism and the working class and has abandoned the Socialist Alliance project orientation in favour of the construction of Respect.

This is not merely a continuation of its old orientation under a new name. It evidences the incorporation of the SWP and a number of smaller groupings into the framework of bourgeois politics.

The SWP has decided that the antiwar movement's ability to galvanise broader social layers must provide the template for creating its own explicitly non-socialist political vehicle. Though its orientation to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy remains as a constant, it is to be complimented by an appeal to all antiwar forces and to Muslims in particular.

In August 2003, the SWP's John Rees wrote: "The task for the anti-war left is now to create from among the forces opposed to the war the largest possible alternative to New Labour. The Socialist Alliance represented the largest possible grouping of the left in the period before the war. But the war has greatly increased the potential reach of such a project."

Just what this meant was made clear by individuals within the STWC who make no pretence of being revolutionary socialists and were the first to publicly propose the creation of an all-class antiwar party. Foremost amongst these was George Monbiot, a *Guardian* journalist and environmentalist, and Salma Yaqoob, an Islamist who had previously supported the Green Party.

Their proposal was for an alliance of "socialist parties, anti-globalisation campaigners, peace activists and faith groups, including Muslims." Yaqoob told the *Guardian*, "The strength of the anti-war march was the diversity of the protesters—people came from different backgrounds, different faiths and different political affiliations... Together we probably

make up the majority."

On January 23, she told the *Guardian* that the Respect-Unity coalition had "a dialogue going with the Greens. Negotiations are still ongoing—it should be a joint or open slate. What I would say is there isn't much difference in policy".

She said of the SWP, "They've played an important role. They've proved they're willing to work with others, even if it meant convincing their own members."

Respect's founding declaration reiterates these claims that a movement's viability depends on its ability to make the broadest appeal on the least controversial basis. Consequently its "declaration for a left electoral challenge to New Labour" on which it is to contest the European elections is less than 700 words in length.

The new coalition is directed to any one "deeply disappointed by the authoritarian social policies and profit-centred, neo-liberal economic strategy of the government", its states.

By referring only to neo-liberal policies, Respect firstly hopes to appeal to a wide range of political groupings associated with the alternative globalisation movement, with whom the SWP are already aligned around the World and European Social Forums.

Groups such as Attac and various other "non-governmental organisations" meet in conferences that are in fact heavily funded by several imperialist governments to endlessly discuss strategies that are supposed to curb the worst excesses of the major corporations by limited regulation of the market. In reality, the conferences themselves and the strategies they advance are a means of controlling social discontent that politically compliments the very neo-liberal strategies being implemented by the World Economic Forum and other such institutions that they claim to oppose.

Secondly, Respect's denunciation of neo-liberalism is its way of confining the working class to a perspective of neo-Keynesian social reformism as opposed to an explicitly anti-capitalist and socialist perspective. This is emphasised by its claim only to oppose a government policy rather than opposition to the Labour Party itself.

This is not mere semantics. In a recent interview given to a supportive group, Galloway made clear that Respect's aim is to win support from sections of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. A success for Respect in the European elections could enable pressure to be brought to bear in the Labour Party to depose Blair as leader and tack left, he said. If this was successful, Respect "probably won't go on to become a party". Only if it were not successful in provoking "a coup inside the Labour Party and a fundamental change of direction away from Blairism" would the coalition continue—with the eventual objective of founding "a party of the 1918 Labour party constitution".

That, however, was a task for the future. Until then even reformist socialism should be spoken of only behind closed doors. "We want to rally people who are progressive, but perhaps might not define themselves as socialists yet... it is important that we don't define ourselves in such a way that we rule out winning people that we can win".

There you have it. Whereas in the past the argument against revolution was that workers had to pass through a reformist stage, now the population in general must pass through a "progressive" stage before even reformist socialism can be raised as a possibility.

To be continued



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