

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

Part Two

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Respect has been founded on a perspective that is a step backwards even when compared to the founding of the Labour Party. And despite its pretensions to being a “broad church”, Respect is entirely the product of behind-the-scenes discussions between the Socialist Workers Party and a handful of individuals.

Less than three months separated the proposal to launch Respect as a “grand coalition of dissent” at a London meeting on October 29, and the national convention in January. In the interim period rallies to promote the initiative invariably featured the same core speakers, Lindsey German and John Rees from the SWP, George Galloway MP and film director Ken Loach, with no contributions from the floor. The proposed founding declaration was issued on December 7, with instructions that it would not be open to changes until the convention and no group could move more than one amendment.

Such obscene haste was driven to no small degree by Galloway’s expulsion from the Labour Party in October 2003. Despite refusing to resign his seat in Glasgow Kelvin, upcoming elections and boundary changes meant that his parliamentary career could only be guaranteed until 2005.

The SWP’s uncritical embrace of Galloway speaks volumes. A Labour Party member for 35 years and an MP, he is a life long admirer of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the former Soviet Union and a consummate political operator and self-publicist. He is avowedly hostile to Marxist socialism, which the SWP purports to represent. During the first public meeting launching the “coalition of dissent”, Galloway denounced revolutionary socialism as a foreign import and counterpoised his belief in a party uniting everyone including Tories who believed in democracy.

“My socialism is not that of ‘bloody revolutionists’ or foreign ideological importations. It is rooted in this land,” he proclaimed.

Galloway has spent months trying to convince the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain to join Respect and not allow their hatred of “Trotskyists” to prevent them boarding the train to electoral success, but to no avail. In the course of making this appeal, he issued his own pathetic mea culpa for his political apologies for Stalinism, explaining, “I persuaded myself that ... many of the abuses of democracy could be excused, if not justified.”

Galloway has no power base, nor significant political support. In the SWP he has been given a ready made electoral machine, one that he can rely on to offer a left veneer to a programme that is explicitly bourgeois and anti-socialist. Moreover, he is free to pursue his political project together with the SWP while maintaining his already existing relations with the Arab bourgeoisie and continuing his efforts

to cultivate others such as the Muslim Association of Britain.

The SWP’s hope is that Galloway’s backing will be seen amongst other representatives of the trade union and labour bureaucracy as proof that the new coalition can provide them with a safe haven. And it is prepared to go to shameless lengths and to junk what it now refers to as “shibboleths” or “old baggage” to reinforce the message.

It is virtually impossible to read any political comment by the SWP on the new coalition that does not make a ritual denunciation of sectarianism. But this is solely to provide a justification for its jettisoning of fundamental socialist and democratic principles.

At the convention on January 25, the total time allotted for contributions from the floor was less than two hours. Any one challenging aspects of the declaration was booed and hissed by the audience of mainly SWP members and voted down. An amendment proposing that the R in Respect should stand for Republicanism was rejected by the SWP on the grounds that one shouldn’t make a “big deal” about the monarchy; the issue is basically “immaterial” as France and the US are republics and who would think they are any the more democratic than Britain?

A motion proposing that the declaration specifies its support for open borders—an end to immigration controls—was also defeated.

An amendment proposing that Respect should commit itself to its elected representatives accepting only the wage of a skilled worker—“a workers representative on a workers wage”—was also overwhelmingly defeated. The SWP opposer argued that whilst “no one in this hall would not subscribe to this aspiration ... Respect is not a particular socialist organisation.”

He continued that there is “a danger that we would be exclusive if we carried this. What are we going to say to people like George Galloway? Are we going to make it a condition that they have to accept a workers’ wage? It would be to misconstrue what Respect is about.”

It most certainly would. Galloway has stated openly that he “has no time for the idea of workers’ representatives on a worker’s wage,” that he “could not live on three workers wages,” and that £150,000 a year is what he “needs to function properly as a leading figure in a party of the British political system.”

The SWP’s claim that Respect will have a broader appeal than the Socialist Alliance is essentially based on its identification of the growing anti-imperialist sentiment within the Muslim population. Indeed it is difficult to find any other argument advanced by the SWP for why it is deemed necessary to abandon its previous advocacy of old-style Labour policies other than its desire not to alienate Muslims.

Rees's "The left after the war" article goes so far as to identify all criticism of their latest turn with objections "to working with the Muslim community," while Lindsey German told those who accused the party of downplaying its commitment to the democratic rights of women and gays that she was "in favour of defending gay rights. But I am not prepared to have it as a shibboleth...."

Rees spends much of his outline of what he boasts is a postwar strategy for the left eulogising the political potential for winning support from what he refers to as the "Muslim community". Here there is a "palpable desire ... to find a viable alternative to New Labour. This community is, in its majority, working class. It is, in its majority, a community which has been the bedrock of Labour support in many inner cities.

"This is why talk of 'cross-class alliances' or 'popular frontism' by a minority within the Socialist Alliance is so wrong."

He concludes, "Only a tiny minority of Muslims in Britain are followers of 'Islamic fundamentalism' or so called 'political Islam'.

"Those on the left who talk as if all the Muslims were fundamentalists are simply engaging in an unacceptable form of prejudice."

The SWP is engaging in political sleight of hand. Socialists have a responsibility to reach out to Muslim workers and youth, who have been radicalised by the imperialist aggression against Afghanistan and Iraq and who face a concerted campaign by the government and the media to whip up prejudice against them.

But this is not what the SWP is about. It is seeking an alliance with the leaderships of organisations such as the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB) and the backing of Islamic clerics at the expense of the independent class interests of Muslim workers.

The MAB is a bourgeois formation that advocates a fundamentalist variety of Islam. Founded as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, it has a narrow base of support amongst young Muslims of usually Arab descent. Its anti-imperialism is a variety of that practised by numerous more or less radical bourgeois and petty bourgeois formations in the Middle East, Pakistan and elsewhere throughout the world. These social layers are opposed to a socialist perspective for the liberation of humanity, seeking only a more equitable relationship with the imperialist bourgeoisie that allows them a share of valuable natural resources and in the exploitation of the working class and peasantry.

On British soil this translates itself to a perspective of winning certain concessions from the government by making a show of opposition. To do this the MAB has entered into various alliances with any one prepared to support what it deems to be the "interests of Muslims". The MAB has only said that it will back Respect in the European elections, but will support Labour's Ken Livingstone in the simultaneous mayoral election. This is clearly interpreted by the SWP as a warning that it must toe the line. In the cause of electoral success, the SWP, Galloway and company are more than ready to jettison anything that would trouble the MAB.

No group can be held up as representative of the Muslim "community" because no such community exists. Muslims, like practitioners of any religion, are divided into classes. To elevate religious identity over class interests is divisive in every respect. Firstly it legitimises clerical prejudices amongst Muslim workers and youth, most of whom, as Rees admits, are far from sharing the fundamentalist outlook of the MAB. Secondly, such an embrace of Islamism will naturally alienate Hindus, Sikhs, Jews and other minority religions as well as sowing divisions within the working

class as a whole.

When it comes to the vital democratic task of upholding freedom of worship, a rigorous secular approach must be taken that insists that no religion is given prominence over another. Instead whilst proclaiming its new democratic turn, the SWP has gone to extraordinary lengths to concoct a political apologia for Islamism because it calculates that the MAB and local Imams will be able to deliver Britain's one and a half million Muslims as a block vote for Respect.

Contrary to Respect's assertions, the antiwar movement is not a positive blueprint for the formation of a new party. Despite the global outpouring of opposition to US and British imperialism, it failed to prevent war against Iraq precisely because those in its leadership worked to subordinate the movement to pacifist appeals to supposedly progressive sections of the bourgeoisie.

It is not enough to profess opposition to war. The democratic deficit identified by the Respect coalition is very real, but at its base it is rooted in an unprecedented social polarisation. The social interests of the ruling elite can no longer be reconciled with those of the broad mass of the population. It is not possible to win a popular mandate for policies aimed at gutting vital social services, slashing wages and shifting the burden of taxation on to the backs of working people. Today the old parties, and Labour in particular, speak only for a financial oligarchy and stand in open opposition to the mass of the people.

A new party must, therefore, present a solution to all the social and democratic problems confronting the working class—from militarism and war to economic insecurity, the lack of housing, health care and education, and the assault on democratic rights. It must stand on fundamental principles that constitute the basis for a genuinely democratic and socialist programme:

* For the international unity of the working class.

Imperialist war is rooted in the capitalist profit system and the division of the world into antagonistic nation states, which at times of crisis sets into motion a violent struggle of each against all. The struggle against war must be based on the struggle to unify the working class of all nations, races and religions against the common enemy—the capitalist profit system.

* For social equality.

The same corporate interests that dictate the policy of imperialist conquest abroad also determine the attacks on workers' living standards. This can be combated only by building a political movement aimed at abolishing private ownership of the means of production and production for profit and ending the monopolisation of society's wealth by an elite through establishing the democratic control of economic life.

* For the political independence of the working class.

The collapse of social reformism can only be answered by advancing a genuine socialist perspective that seeks to mobilise the working class as an independent force fighting to take political power and establish a workers' government.



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