

Britain: SWP/RESPECT ‘lefts’ oppose union disaffiliation from Labour Party

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Certain key events have the effect of stripping away false pretences and revealing things as they truly are. The February 7 decision by the Labour Party national executive to expel the Rail Maritime Transport Workers Union (RMT) for allowing its Scottish branches to affiliate to the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) has certainly done so. It has exposed the claim by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and its newly established electoral coalition RESPECT to offer a genuine political alternative to the right-wing policies of the government of Prime Minister Tony Blair.

The decision of some RMT branches to affiliate to the SSP is a partial indication of the growing hostility felt by many workers within the trade unions to Labour’s pro-business agenda. The SSP benefited from this because it advances itself as a traditional reformist alternative to the Labour Party, dressed up with occasional references to revolution and a strong dose of populist Scottish nationalism. The SWP is one of the affiliate groupings within the SSP, which is dominated by a split-off from the old Militant tendency led by Tommy Sheridan.

On the surface of things, one might expect that the SWP would therefore hail the RMT’s decision as a victory for and concentrate on making an appeal for trade union branches in England to declare their support for RESPECT. (The SSP and RESPECT have an agreement to accept their respective territories on either side of the border.) But instead of encouraging disaffiliation as an expression of the weakening of Labour’s grip over the working class, the SWP has done everything it can to turn disaffected workers back towards Labour.

This has taken the form of a campaign supporting what they describe as a democratisation of the trade union political levy—monies paid from trade union members to the Labour Party—while urging the unions to retain their national link with Labour.

Essentially the SWP and its allies are asking the trade union bureaucracy to support the right of individual union branches to either affiliate or fund RESPECT and the SSP, while promising them that in turn they will not seek to challenge Labour’s overall political domination. This provides a vital service to the union bureaucracy, which faces growing hostility from the rank

and file over their continued support for a government whose central aim is to attack the gains made by the working class. The unions will be able to direct workers towards the SSP and RESPECT, knowing that these groups will only protest against Labour’s worst excesses while calling for the party’s “reform” in alliance with a handful of equally servile “left-wing” MPs and union leaders.

The SWP’s agenda is determined entirely by the strategic political needs of the trade union bureaucracy. Indeed it is no exaggeration to assert that its programme could not have been better formulated if it had been written by the bureaucracy.

Not a single left trade union leader has threatened to end its political relations and funding of Blair’s government, including the RMT. The decision of certain RMT branches to disaffiliate from the Labour Party was taken despite the continued loyalty of the RMT leadership. But under conditions where there were mass political protests against Prime Minister Tony Blair over the Iraq war and deep hostility to the government’s support for the privatisation of the rail network, RMT leader Bob Crow and his executive did not feel they could oppose affiliation to other tendencies at branch level. But they did so only in an attempt to preserve the union bureaucracy’s strategic alliance with its counterparts in the Labour Party. Crow made this very clear in his February 12 response to the union’s expulsion.

Crow first explained, “The Party’s actions also grossly underestimated the mood in the union. It’s not as if the relationship with the party had become strained overnight. The 2001 RMT Annual General Meeting passed a motion that stated unless new Labour changed direction the union could no longer support them financially or politically.

“Since that time it has been increasing difficult to justify the huge sums the RMT was giving to a party whose government was attacking and privatising all sections of our membership.... Against that depressing background it was extremely difficult for the RMT’s 2003 Annual General Meeting to agree to enshrine affiliation in the rule book.” AGM also demanded that at the local level “they should have the right to have other forms of representation.”

He then adds, “It is difficult to overstate the extent and breadth of the alienation to the Labour government in the union’s membership. It is not the case of there being an

organised left. The alienation came from across the spectrum. People who were once loyalists had simply had enough. Those who believe that this is some organised takeover are badly mistaken.”

Things could not be clearer. For three years the RMT has been opposing growing demands for disaffiliation from Labour, right up until they were forced to offer a compromise of allowing branches to support other tendencies as well.

And even after expulsion, Crow took the opportunity to profess his union’s loyalty to Labour. He declared, “Affiliation to the Labour Party is still enshrined in our rule book and will continue to be our policy. The RMT is still embedded in the fabric of the party. One hundred years of history are not changed by one letter from Old Queen Street. We will send the affiliation cheques. If Labour doesn’t cash it, then, that is up to them.

“Let me make it absolutely clear that the union still wants the party to be reclaimed and return to its traditional roots.”

It is only on this basis that the RMT will be prepared to work with the SSP and RESPECT. Crow explains, “The RMT will continue to work for a progressive agenda in the wider trade union and labour movement. We will work constructively with activists, Labour MPs and trade unions within the party.

“We will also work with all progressive organisations that can advance our agenda—we are not interested in tokenism or the politics of the fringe—our members are demanding proper representation. If the progressive agenda is to gain ground we do not have the luxury to be tribal in our approach. Change will be through waves of pressure from within and outside the Labour Party.”

Crow’s comments are precisely mirrored by the SWP and company. The SWP has described the expulsion of the RMT as “a historic step this week towards building a mass left wing challenge to New Labour.”

On the same day as the RMT’s expulsion the SWP-dominated Socialist Alliance (which it has now wound up in favour of RESPECT) held a conference of the trade union left. It was presented as the resurgence of the trade unions and a counterattack against Blair’s threats to those unions reducing their political levy. Instead it turned into a rout.

Crow spoke at the conference and refused to call on other unions to break with Labour. He said the RMT did not jump, but were pushed.

The SWP supported Crow, arguing, “The RMT’s position means it can continue to back a small group of left Labour MP’s, chaired by John McDonnell, but it will also back other socialists.”

At the February 7 conference expelled Labour MP George Galloway, who now heads RESPECT, declared, “Respect is not calling on unions to disaffiliate,” adding only that the unions must not be “wholly owned subsidiaries of Labour.” He urged the audience of trade union officials not to walk away from the Labour Party.

Significantly the two other main union speakers from what the SWP hails as the “awkward squad” didn’t turn up—Billy Hayes of the Communication Workers Union and Mark Serwotka of the civil service union, PCS .

Billy Hayes replacement Peter Firmin, of the Socialist Alliance group, opened the conference by declaring that despite the expulsion of the RMT and the failure of the “democratise the political fund” campaign to have any impact, “you should not set up a party outside of Labour.” The stand-in for the absent Serwotka, SWP member Yunus Bakhsh, argued for a continuation of the campaign to democratise the political levy. Neil Williams of the Fire Brigades Union said “we don’t want to cut ourselves off” from Labour and argued for a campaign to reaffiliate the RMT with Labour in order to “control the bureaucrats.”

The SWP and other such groups act as a conscious opposition to the political development of the working class and last line of defence for the labour and trade union bureaucracy. When they founded the Socialist Alliance in 1998 they attacked any attempt to portray the necessity of a complete break with Labour as “sectarianism,” declaring that despite enormous disillusionment with Blair it remained the mass party of the working class. They issued a statement June 29, 2002, explaining their campaign to democratise the political levy: “This is not a campaign to disaffiliate the unions from Labour but to ensure that elementary democratic control over the political fund and of our representatives within the Labour Party by rank-and-file union members.”

What their reaction to the RMT’s expulsion proves once more is that the SWP and its political formations such as RESPECT have nothing to do with a principled struggle for socialist ideas in the working class. They are not an alternative to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy, but an essential political adjunct of the bureaucracy that has been fully integrated into its lower and middle ranks.



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