

Respect-Unity coalition in Britain: a marriage of Labourism and Islamism

Part one

Chris Marsden, Julie Hyland
18 April 2005

This is the first of a two-part series.

The Respect-Unity coalition is the organisation fielding the largest number of candidates in the May 5 general election purportedly offering a socialist alternative to the Labour Party. Respect particularly stresses its opposition to the invasion and occupation of Iraq. However, its election campaign demonstrates the political opportunism that characterises the group.

As the general election was about to be called, Respect issued “An Invitation to Labour Party Members and Supporters.” This document is an effort to convince Labour supporters that they can register a protest vote for Respect, to demonstrate opposition to Prime Minister Tony Blair, and still remain loyal to the party.

By placating the conscience of troubled Labourites, Respect aims to form a working alliance with ostensibly left-leaning Labour MPs and trade union bureaucrats, in the hope of reinvigorating the Labour Party and rebuilding support for it within the working class. Far from being a genuine alternative to Labour, Respect is little more than a temporary home for time-served Labour Party functionaries who have formed a political bloc with Islamic fundamentalists. It is a vehicle through which its leading tendency, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), can build relations with the labour bureaucracy.

Respect was formed in the immediate aftermath of the Iraq war. Its name is an acronym for Respect, Equality, Socialism, Peace, Environment, Community and Trade Unionism. It is headed by the former Labour member of Parliament (MP) George Galloway, and is largely the inspiration of the SWP. Respect proclaimed itself to be the political vehicle through which the mass antiwar sentiment that brought nearly two million people onto the streets of London in February 2003 could find expression.

In truth, it was founded on the basis of an explicit rejection of any possibility of constructing a socialist party based on the working class. During the antiwar protests, Respect’s founders, operating within the Stop the War Coalition, insisted that nothing should be said or done to offend the handful of antiwar Labour MPs, the Liberal Democrats and other establishment figures. Success, for the SWP, depended upon making an appeal to all classes and not raising any demands that might alienate potential support. This line served to prevent the antiwar protests from developing into a more general political rebellion against the Labour Party, which had dragged Britain into the illegal war against Iraq, and its allies in the trade union bureaucracy.

Similar political considerations have shaped the character and programme of Respect. While Respect advocates a few minimal social reforms, it regards anything more as impermissible, because it might

alienate others wishing to oppose war and rectify the “democratic deficit” created by the Labour government.

In deciding to found Respect and accept former Labour MP George Galloway as its figurehead, the SWP has opted to create an explicitly non-socialist political vehicle, continuing the party’s historic orientation to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy.

Galloway was forced out of the Labour Party after decades of membership because of his vocal opposition to the Iraq war. But he remains irreconcilably hostile to Marxism and has a long record of politically opportunist relations with various Arab bourgeois regimes and individuals. He hopes to use Respect to continue his parliamentary career.

The SWP combines toadying to Galloway and disaffected Labour Party and trade union functionaries with an adaptation to what it habitually refers to as the “Muslim community.” Its other partner in Respect is the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB).

Originating in an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, this bourgeois formation advocates a fundamentalist variety of Islam and enjoys minimal support in Britain. But, by using the contacts and political credentials of its alliance with the MAB, the SWP hopes to win the backing of various Imams and so-called “community leaders” and secure a significant vote amongst Britain’s Muslims. In certain inner-city constituencies, it hopes this will be enough to win seats from Labour as a result of hostility to Blair’s war-mongering—particularly under conditions where such a vote will carry greater weight as a result of the expected low voter turnout.

In opposition to the SWP’s opportunist adaptation to communal politics, the *World Socialist Web Site* insisted, “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 [an SWP leader John] 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." (See: Britain: The Respect-Unity coalition and the politics of opportunism)

This analysis of Respect has been amply borne out by its campaign for the May 2005 general election, and by its invitation to Labour members and supporters, in particular.

There can be few occasions where an appeal for support for a new party has been framed to reassure potential voters that this will not damage what is meant to be that party's main political opponent. Respect's "invitation" consists largely of a loyalty pledge to the ever-dwindling left wing of the Labour Party.

It begins by trumpeting Respect's own pro-Labour political credentials: "Many of us in Respect have, like you, always voted Labour in previous general elections. Indeed, many of us come from Labour families who have voted Labour for as long as there has been a Labour Party. Some of us have held office in the Labour Party or been Labour candidates."

After arguing that Labour is no longer the "natural home" of working people and calling for a vote for Respect, the invitation explains: "Many Labour supporters will feel that backing a party like Respect will break the unity of the labour movement."

To such concerns, Respect replies that it has no intention of standing against left Labour MPs, and will work loyally with them "in the wider trade union and anti-war movement." The end result of supporting Respect, it concludes, will be to "make it easier for the left inside the Labour Party." It continues: "At the moment Blair just takes the support of the left for granted, just as he takes working class votes for granted." In the event of a significant vote for Respect, "The whole political spectrum will be forced to move to the left."

To make absolutely clear, Galloway himself has recently and unashamedly described his party as the "ghost of Labour past—we are what Labour supporters want it to be."

Respect's attempts to boost the credentials of the Labour left fly in the face of political reality. To date, Respect has not clearly defined precisely whom it views as an "antiwar" or left Labour Party candidate. However, this topic does preoccupy a large number of nominally socialist or left-leaning groups and individuals, including some who support Respect and who are also calling for an "antiwar vote."

Of these, most are forced to acknowledge that of the 140 Labour MPs who originally voted against the Iraq war, only some 34 could be broadly defined as still maintaining an antiwar stance, combined with some criticisms of Labour's social and economic policies.

The SWP has great difficulty in openly explaining the basis of the work of its front group, because there are so many issues that must be avoided so as not to antagonise either Galloway or its allies in the Muslim Association of Britain. Therefore, perhaps the clearest attempts to justify the championing of the Labour left are made by the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), a small group that operates on the fringes of the Respect coalition. According to the CPGB, the Labour left constitutes a growing force that can still claim the allegiance of the broad mass of working people, and is the basis for politically rehabilitating the entire Labour Party.

In its April 9 publication, *Weekly Worker*, the CPGB boldly asserts, "It is clear that Labour remains a bourgeois workers' party—justifications for the notion that it is now bourgeois pure and simple are without exception politically misconceived. Yes, the bourgeois pole within that odd political amalgam is now more dominant than at any time in the organisation's history. Yet it is also

obvious that—bolstered by the social weight and political authority of the anti-war movement behind it—we are seeing the working class pole reasserting itself to a certain extent in this general election in the shape of the LATW [Labour Against the War] and openly anti-war Labour candidates.

"It is the duty of serious working class politicians (given current balances of class forces in the movement and our own weaknesses) to support and strengthen this pole...."

The characterisation of Labour as a "bourgeois workers' party" derives from the analysis made by Marxists in the period immediately following the formation of the Labour Party in 1900. Labour's connection with the trade unions then provided the basis for defining it as a workers' party, given the unions' own mass base in the working class. But the party, formed largely at the instigation of the trade union bureaucracy, had a bourgeois reformist programme. The task of socialists was to break the working class from illusions in Labourism, and not to encourage the erroneous misconception that the Labour Party could be transformed into a genuinely socialist party.

Today, the strivings of working people to defend their interests against big business are met by more or less open hostility from both Labour and the trade unions, which have abandoned even the semblance of reformist policies. They impose the dictates of the corporations, rather than making any effort to ameliorate the impact of capitalist exploitation on the working class.

This has resulted in the widespread turn away from these organisations by millions of workers. Hence the necessity for groups such as the SWP and individuals such as Galloway to operate outside Labour's ranks, but only in order to direct workers back into the arms of the bureaucracy, in the guise of its left representatives.

In this regard, it should be noted that the efforts of Labour Against the War, hailed by the *Weekly Worker* as expressing a resurgence of the left, are focused on saving the seats of just 31 Labour MPs who voted against the Iraq war by appealing to activists to campaign for them.

To be continued



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact