

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

Part two

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This is the conclusion of a two-part series which began Monday April 18.

In adapting to the imams and Islamic groups such as the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB) in order to win support for Respect, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) has made a decisive shift to the right—albeit one that has been prepared by its decades of political service to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy.

Socialists have a political responsibility to defend democratic rights such as freedom of worship, to oppose the whipping up of prejudice against Muslims and the attacks mounted against them in Britain in the name of Prime Minister Tony Blair's "war on terror." But to adapt in any way to the political and social influence of religion is a betrayal of the interests of the working class.

It has long been considered axiomatic by Marxists that the influence of religion on the working class is an expression of ideological backwardness, essentially a manifestation of feelings of powerlessness that are rooted in the social oppression inherent in class society. The Marxist movement has sought to combat religion through the promulgation and support for science and a materialist world outlook, as an essential basis for the struggle to mobilise the working class against the bourgeoisie and the capitalist system.

The importance of such a struggle has been highlighted by the growing influence of not just Islamism, but Christian fundamentalism and other religious-based movements in recent years.

The SWP repeatedly tries to justify its present political trajectory by maintaining that it is only seeking to connect with the antiwar sentiment amongst British Muslims. But it never once attempts to explain why such sentiment took a predominantly religious form, with workers and youth of Asian origin protesting against war as Muslims, rather than as members of political parties or trade unions, as would have largely been the case in the past. Support for Islamic groups, like other manifestations of religious sentiment, is a reactionary product of the decay and degeneration of the old labour movement, and the failure of the secular nationalist parties and regimes in the Middle East, Asia and Africa to safeguard the interests of the millions of workers who once lent them allegiance.

The working class all over the world is facing ever more

draconian attacks on its social conditions and democratic rights, more often than not perpetrated by the very parties and organisations to which they once looked to defend them from such depredations. The war mongering and attacks on civil liberties by the Labour government in Britain is a classic example of this phenomenon. It has been utilised by the Islamic groups to spread their influence by exploiting confused antiwar and anti-imperialist sentiment.

Instead of combating such a negative development, the SWP and its Respect vehicle lend it a pseudo-socialist cover. In doing so, they champion a perspective that represents a betrayal of the democratic interests of Muslim workers, and is bound to alienate and disorient other sections of the working class.

To cite one example, spokespersons for Respect have repeatedly glorified the wearing of the Muslim headscarf, or hijab, and other more concealing clothing for women, as being somehow progressive. It should be recalled that on the occasion of Respect's founding, SWP leader Lindsey German spoke of her pride at addressing an audience where so many young women were wearing the hijab.

A recent *Respect Newsletter* article by Summer Khan claims, "Women are often judged by their looks or bodies. Hijab forces society to judge women for their value as human beings. A woman in a Hijab sends a message: 'Deal with my brain, not my body!'" "He continues, "For British Muslims facing the fear of losing their identity, RESPECT is THE only party."

Khan's argument is a ludicrous defence of the oppression faced by Muslim women. In a more extreme form, it could be advanced by the Taliban to justify the segregation of men and women and the wearing of the Burka. Would not the complete removal of women from the lustful gaze of men be an even better safeguard against sexism?

The political opportunism of Respect is exemplified in the campaign work undertaken by its leader, George Galloway. Muslims make up around 50 percent of the Bethnal Green and Bow constituency, where Galloway is challenging Labour candidate Oona King, who voted for the Iraq war. People of Bangladeshi origin make up 40 percent of voters. Therefore, Galloway chose to begin his campaign by making a visit to Bangladesh at the end of February, where, according to the *Financial Express*, he met with representatives of the ruling

Bangladesh National Party and the opposition Awami League. Both parties have alternated in government over the past decade and have a record of anti-working class, pro-business policies.

Respect cannot be criticised for reaching out to Bangladeshi workers, but to do so on a principled basis would require making strenuous efforts to break them from illusions not only in the Labour Party but in the major parties in Bangladesh—particularly when they seek to cover their capitalist programme with heavy doses of nationalist and populist anti-imperialist rhetoric. Instead, according to a report in the March 11 *Bangladesh Observer*, Galloway told those attending a reception organised by Anti-War Movement Bangladesh at the National Press Club that “he found people and political parties in Bangladesh are against all forms of wars, including in Iraq, Palestine, Afghanistan and Kashmir.” He was quoted as saying, “Bangladesh is a country of peace and communal harmony. There is no existence of fundamentalism and extremism in Bangladesh.”

The Bangladesh National Party is, in fact, presently in a governmental alliance with avowedly fundamentalist Islamic groups. And Islamic groups and government forces are alleged to have been responsible for the vicious persecution of their political opponents and labour activists, including the assassination of one trade union leader while in police custody.

Galloway is well aware of such issues, but they will not be raised by Respect because this would cut across its appeal to a supposedly monolithic, socially and politically undifferentiated Muslim “community.”

Respect’s almost exclusive appeal to Muslims in Britain will constitute a troubling phenomenon for many Hindus, Sikhs, Jews and other minority groups. And, however regrettably, it provides ammunition for the propaganda of overtly right-wing forces seeking to sow divisions between the white working class and immigrants.

The political licence extended to Galloway has already associated Respect with a major attack on democratic rights by the Bush administration and Christian fundamentalists in the United States.

Galloway has made clear on several occasions that as a Catholic, he is “strongly against abortion”—a view that has also endeared him to the Islamic groups and regimes he has courted. The SWP has refused to publicly challenge his views, on the grounds that they are his own personal opinion. This is, in part, to be explained by their unwillingness to conflict with Galloway in any shape or form, but is also bound up with their own adaptation to religious sentiment amongst British Muslims.

When the Republican Congress and President Bush intervened in an attempt to prevent the husband of Terri Schiavo from withdrawing life support to his wife, after she had spent 15 years in a persistent vegetative state, this attack on essential civil liberties was endorsed by Galloway. He appeared on the BBC’s *Question Time* on March 31, just after federal courts had rejected the unconstitutional intervention by Bush and Congress and allowed Schiavo to die. When questioned by the audience on his views, he responded by opposing the legal decision and comparing it to a policy of euthanasia.

This event demonstrates how Respect’s adaptation to Islamism

opens the door to a more general adaptation to the type of backwardness and religious prejudice that has traditionally been the preserve of the right wing.

The leader of Respect goes on national television and takes a stand that is supportive of the Bush administration and echoes the “right to life” propaganda of the Christian right. Yet the SWP once again makes no attempt to contradict Galloway. Indeed, it is highly significant that it has written nothing on the Terri Schiavo affair, an omission that flies in the face of the widespread interest the case aroused in Britain, let alone its intrinsic political importance.

In his analysis of the political significance of the Schiavo affair, David North, the chairman of the *World Socialist Web Site* editorial board, called for a determined struggle against the “persistence of reactionary ideologies,” insisting that “this fight is not limited to practical efforts to organise workers, as important as these are. An essential component of efforts to organise workers politically as a class is the struggle to raise their intellectual and cultural level, to champion the cause of scientific thought against all forms of religious superstition and backwardness—that is, to champion a materialist Marxist understanding of not only the socio-economic relations of society, but also the foundations and structure of human consciousness. As in the past, the socialist movement must recognise the vast scope of its theoretical and pedagogical responsibilities to the working class.” (See “The case of Terri Schiavo and the crisis of politics and culture in the United States,” April 4, 2005.)

Far from combating religious influence in the working class, the SWP is actively promoting it.

Given widespread hostility to Blair in a poor, working class constituency and the particular hostility felt by Muslims on the question of Iraq, it is entirely possible that Galloway will secure a significant vote in Bethnal Green and Bow, and that Respect may do well elsewhere. But this will not advance socialism or the building of a genuine socialist party of the working class. Rather, such a development will take place as the result of a conscious political struggle against all sections of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy, including opportunist scoundrels such as Galloway, and their apologists such as the SWP.



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