Britain: Islamic fundamentalist group threatens candidates and voters

By Socialist Equality Party (Britain)
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A series of threats and provocations by a group of Islamic fundamentalists against Respect candidate George Galloway and other political figures, combined with efforts to intimidate Muslim voters, represents a serious attack on democratic rights that must be opposed by all working people.

On Tuesday, April 19, Galloway was addressing a tenants' meeting on the Osier council estate, in the Bethnal Green and Bow constituency, London, where the expelled Labour MP is standing in the May 5 parliamentary election against the pro-war Labour incumbent Oona King. Part way through the meeting, a group of some 30 Islamic militants entered the room and began threatening Galloway.

The Respect leader was forced to hide in his car after the men denounced him as a false prophet and threatened him with "the gallows." The youths shouted at Galloway: "We are going to follow you," and "We know where you live."

The group also warned Muslims that they faced a "death sentence" if they voted in the elections. A reporting team was filming the event, and a video can be viewed on the BBC news website.

It was also reported that a fight occurred before the group came into the meeting, after which three men were arrested.

Earlier that day, 20 Muslim youths stormed the launch of a campaign by the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) urging people to vote. The MCB is an umbrella organisation of some 400 different Muslim groups that has been courted by the Blair government.

The protesters, who claimed it is un-Islamic to vote, pushed past a security guard to disrupt the event at the Regent's Park mosque in central London, and denounced the council as a "mouthpiece" for Prime Minister Tony Blair. The council's secretary general, Iqbal Sacranie, was jostled as the youths shouted abuse at him. At one stage, someone threw a punch and clipped his spectacles.

The provocation and threats made against Galloway were initially attributed in an article in the *London Evening Standard* to the organisation Hizb-ut-Tahrir. But blame for both attacks has now been directed toward a group called al-Ghuraaba, also known as the Saviours Sect. The *Guardian* reported, "The gang of youths who stormed two election meetings this week are members of al-Ghuraaba, an offshoot of the now disbanded radical organisation al-Muhajiroun."

The group's web site features an animated graphic displaying the words, "Vote Today—Hellfire Tomorrow," and a picture of Galloway being held by two police officers, below which is printed, "The Respect Party is a Kaafir [non-Muslim organisation] which, like every other political party, believes that sovereignty belongs to man and not Allah."

There are press reports that members of the group have been intimidating constituents in the Bethnal Green and Bow constituency, where an estimated 50 percent of voters are Muslims. Respect's press officer told the *World Socialist Web Site* that shopkeepers who had put up its election posters in their windows were being threatened.

The Socialist Equality Party is unconditionally opposed to the attempt by the Islamic fundamentalists to subvert the election and prevent Muslims from exercising their democratic rights. However, while defending all candidates and parties against the actions of groups such as al-Ghuraaba, it is necessary to issue a political warning.

The Islamic fundamentalists have no mass base of support in Britain. But they have been emboldened to act due to the opportunist adaptation many of the parties have been making to Islamic groups—in large part because Muslim voters are able to determine the result in key inner-city constituencies. No organisation is more guilty of such political opportunism than Respect.

In the past, some 70 percent of Muslims could be relied upon to vote Labour. But massive hostility to the Blair government's participation in the Iraq war, combined with the impact of its pro-business policies, means Labour can no longer take these votes for granted.

Muslims constitute some of the most oppressed sections of the working class in Britain, who face some of the worst social problems compounded by prejudice and discrimination. To defend their social interests and democratic rights, including the right to freedom of worship, is a fundamental task of socialists. This is made all the more important by the introduction of anti-terror legislation that has been used to make sweeping arrests of Muslims, most of whom have been released without charge, and a campaign by the government and the media to whip up fear and racism.

But rather than make a political appeal to Muslim workers as part of a fight to mobilise all working people against Labour based on their common class interests, Respect has adapted to religious sentiment by pitching an appeal to a socially undifferentiated "Muslim community."

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Respect is itself a coalition between the Socialist Workers Party and the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB), an Islamist group that emerged from the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The SWP has insisted that it cannot advance policies that will alienate those who are not socialist, particularly, it seems, those who practice Islam. To this end, Respect limits itself to a programme of social reforms that do not fundamentally challenge the profit system. It has downplayed its commitment to secularism and other issues of principle, while allowing both Galloway and MAB members running as Respect candidates to make statements opposing abortion without challenge.

In its campaigning, Respect has concentrated on making appeals to local Imams and self-styled "community leaders"—and in Galloway's case, Asian business organisations—to urge voters under their influence to vote for Respect. Events have proven that this only plays into the hands of the Islamic fundamentalists, whose own propaganda insists on the primacy of the Islamic faith, and who reject any assertion that the working class has interests opposed to those of the bourgeoisie.

Respect's turning a blind eye to class differences plays directly into the hands of the major parties, which have long sought to confine Muslim workers to pro-capitalist politics by similarly courting the support of the Imams and Muslim organisations such as the Muslim Council of Britain.

Only the wholesale adaptation to the influence of Islam can account for the extraordinary failure of Respect to make any attempt to defend itself and its supporters from the attack by al-Ghuraaba.

For several days, neither Respect nor the Socialist Workers Party posted a word about the attacks on their candidate and supporters on their web sites. When asked about this by the Socialist Equality Party, Respect's press officer, Ron McKay, said that though this may seem "strange," they were trying to "play it down."

He justified this by stating that al-Ghuraaba was a "tiny and unrepresentative sect."

Respect has still made no appeal for anyone to condemn the attack by al-Ghuraaba. It was forced to break its silence only on April 22, after threats of legal action by Hizb-ut-Tahrir. The group was reported in the April 23 *Daily Mail* to have "instructed libel solicitors to take action against George Galloway, who had initially—and it would seem mistakenly—blamed the attack on them."

Galloway had been quoted by the *London Evening Standard* as attributing the attack to the organisation.

To prevent a possible libel action, Respect posted a brief statement explaining that the *Standard* had wrongly named "Hizb-ut-Tahrir as the organisation responsible for the attack on George Galloway." Respect had been contacted by "Jalal and Qusim from Hizb-ut-Tahrir, who assured us it was not HT who were responsible," and Respect had passed these assurances on to the *Standard*.

Only at the very end of its five-paragraph-long statement does Respect note that the attack was, in fact, carried out by al-Ghuraaba, before mentioning without comment that the same group had "subsequently invaded another of our meetings in Luton."

As far as Respect is concerned, to mount a campaign against the attack by al-Ghuraaba would risk alienating the Islamist groups that it is seeking to cultivate and cut across its appeal for support based on religion.

Galloway was, in fact, due to appear on a platform alongside Jalaluddin Patel, the leader of Hizb-ut-Tahrir in Britain, Iqbal Sacranie, the secretary of the Muslim Council of Britain, and Dr. Azam Tamimi of the Muslim Association of Britain, as well as Oona King and the Conservative Party candidate. The event, due to take place on Saturday April 23, was cancelled without notice. In its place, the promotion firm IQra media offered a discount-priced viewing of a Respect video. Organisers told the Socialist Equality Party that the debate was cancelled due to "the presence of certain individuals on the platform."

Oona King had withdrawn from the debate earlier due to Hizb-ut-Tahrir's presence. She has utilised Respect's opportunist attempts at vote-getting among Muslims to make the pretence of taking the moral high ground. She told the *London Evening Standard*, "When politicians seek to stir things up by drawing on resentment, racial and religious, they risk opening Pandora's Box—and then it spirals out of their control."

No one should have anything but contempt for this transparent attempt to capitalise on the opportunism of Galloway and Respect. What King fails to mention is that the biggest cause of "racial and religious" resentment is Labour's participation in the imperialist bombardment of Iraq, to which she lent her full support.

The fact that opposition to these attacks has been expressed in a predominantly religious form is the product of the degeneration of the party that she represents and its transformation into an open proponent of the interests of big business. This has left workers with no political vehicle through which they can even partially articulate their interests. Moreover, it must be said that Respect can teach Labour nothing when it comes to seeking to exploit connections with religious leaders to turn out the vote. It has been doing the same thing for years.

King's real complaint against Respect is that it is exploiting antiwar sentiment amongst Muslims to win support away from Labour. In contrast, the Socialist Equality Party's principled political opposition to Respect centres on its refusal to oppose Labour on the basis of a working class and socialist programme, while struggling against the political and ideological influence of Islam and religion in general.

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