

Britain's Respect-Unity coalition split: The collapse of an opportunist bloc

By Socialist Equality Party (Britain)
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Political lessons must be drawn from the collapse of the Respect-Unity coalition. The split is between the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and a disparate group headed by the coalition's only Member of Parliament, George Galloway, in which Muslim politicians predominate. Two rival conferences under the titles Respect and Respect Renewal are now to be held on November 17.

While both sides seek to blame the other for the break-up, the split is the shipwreck of a shared political project that was based on the most pragmatic and opportunist considerations.

Respect was only held together for the past months in an effort to ensure that it could continue to stand candidates. Galloway first made public his disagreements with the SWP in September, demanding a shift of control of the party's national body from the SWP to himself. But things were patched up in the expectation that Prime Minister Gordon Brown would call a snap general election. When this did not happen, on October 26, four members of the Respect group on east London's Tower Hamlets council—the party's main power base outside of Galloway's neighbouring Bethnal Green and Bow constituency—broke away. Declaring themselves Respect (Independent), the four—two of whom are SWP members—were publicly backed by the SWP.

The SWP now writes at length complaining of Galloway's opportunist politics. The MP's supporters are accused of supposedly “dropping the original conception of Respect as a wider working class organisation” in favour of “promising favours to people who posed as the ‘community leaders’ of particular ethnic or religious groupings if they would use their influence to deliver votes.”

A Central Committee (CC) statement alleges, “There were cases where a lot of people joined Respect just before a selection meeting, turned up to vote a certain way—and were never seen again when their nominee failed to get a candidacy. In Tower Hamlets members were signed up in large numbers by a few individuals.”

It concludes, “Clearly some Respect activists had fallen into the trap of believing it could advance by doing what our opponents had always accused us falsely of doing—acting as a cross class party whose horizons were limited to representing just one ‘community.’”

The statement goes on to attack Galloway for leaving “much of his constituency work in Tower Hamlets to those whose salaries he paid out of his MP's allowances,” of having “the dubious record of being the fifth highest earning MP,” on £300,000 a year, absenting himself from politics for weeks to “appear in the despicable ‘reality TV’ show *Celebrity Big Brother*” and now signing people up to “help him kill the dragon of Trotskyism.”

The problem with such expressions of outrage is that Galloway is a known quantity politically. And everything he and his supporters are now denounced for doing was, until a few weeks ago, accepted and defended by the SWP. At one point, the CC statement notes that it had defended Galloway after his politically damaging appearance on *Celebrity Big Brother*, with its annual conference agreeing “on a general reaction, which

every one of our members tried to argue in their workplaces, colleges and schools.” It made no criticism of Galloway even when he declared his opposition to abortion as “immoral” in the *Independent on Sunday* due to his belief in God.

The SWP now complains that Galloway wants a party only as a vehicle for a few celebrity names. But all of those now supporting Galloway—Salma Yaqoob, journalists Yvonne Ridley and Victoria Brittain, and director Ken Loach—were in the past held up by the SWP as proof that Respect had succeeded in breaking out of the narrow confines of the “sectarian left.” As for the claim that an unprincipled orientation to Muslims is Galloway's invention, the statement admits that the SWP made sure that Respect candidates were chosen on the basis of their being Muslim.

The experience of the Tower Hamlets group also discredits the SWP's assertion that the four rebels represent a working class and socialist vision in opposition to the Galloway faction. The local *East London Advertiser* revealed the four had almost immediately met with the Liberal Democrats' leader on the council, Stephanie Eaton, to discuss working together. The split follows numerous other defections—to both Labour and the Liberal Democrats—that prompted the SWP's John Rees to complain that the coalition was being alienated “not only from the white working class but also from the more radical sections of the Bengali community, both secular and Muslim, who feel that Respect is becoming the party of a narrow and conservative trend in the area.”

This raises the question as to why the SWP found itself in the same organisation as Galloway and chose him as its leader. After all, the same statement boasts of how it was instrumental in waging the necessary “political fight” to form Respect and arguing “with people on the socialist left who objected to working with George Galloway, claiming his past record ruled this out.”

In reality, the conception of Respect Galloway now champions is entirely in line with the organisation's founding ethos. Respect emerged out of the Stop the War Coalition (STWC), which was led by the SWP and the Muslim Association of Britain—an Islamist group.

The mass movement against the Iraq war provoked widespread sentiment amongst working people for a political alternative to Labour. The SWP responded by working to prevent any possibility of this developing in a socialist direction. At a time when millions were seeking a way to oppose the Blair government, the STWC insisted that no political issues could be raised that would supposedly alienate the broad political and social layers opposed to the war. What this meant was that there could be no call for a political struggle against the Labour government—thereby calling the bluff of the handful of Labour MPs and trade union bureaucrats who had made a show of opposing the war—and that nothing must be done to create difficulties for the coalition's newfound allies in the MAB, the Greens, Stalinists and others.

The immediate impulse for Respect's formation was Galloway's expulsion from the Labour Party in October 2003 over the Iraq war. The

only prominent Labourite to find himself outside of the party, Galloway was receptive to the invitation extended by the SWP to head its project. This certainly played a part in determining the character of Respect, but only within the framework of a shared orientation between himself and the SWP.

The SWP insisted that Respect should be a movement in which socialists—i.e., themselves—could work with non-socialists without unnecessary ideological baggage. Thus it habitually referred to the “Muslim community” as an undifferentiated mass, ignoring the class differences. This ensured that nothing would cut across Galloway’s own longstanding relations with Muslim businessmen and various reactionary regimes in the Middle East. Instead, the SWP sought to tap into these sources of finance and support. To this end, its leading personnel declared the defence of abortion rights and opposition to anti-gay discrimination as “shibboleths,” glorified the wearing of the hijab and touted the party around mosques and Asian businesses up and down the country.

The type of relations the SWP had with Galloway could only have been established by an organisation that had already undergone a profound opportunist degeneration over decades.

By the time Respect was founded, the SWP, despite its occasional rhetoric, had nothing in common with either Marxism in general or the political legacy of Leon Trotsky in particular. It originated as one of a number of tendencies that broke from the Fourth International on the basis of an impressionistic response to the apparent stabilisation of capitalism following World War Two.

This stabilisation occurred only thanks to the betrayal of revolutionary movements in Europe and internationally by the Stalinist bureaucracy. American imperialism was then able to utilise its vast economic resources to rescue its rivals in Europe and Japan and stabilise global capital. This was the era of the “Cold War,” with the extension of Stalinist control of the so-called buffer states in Eastern Europe followed by the revolution in China under Mao on one side and the acceptance by the imperialist powers of US hegemony on the other.

For the SWP’s founders, this was proof of the failure of Trotsky’s revolutionary perspective. The Fourth International had underestimated the strength of the Stalinist bureaucracy and the continuing vitality of capitalism and overestimated the revolutionary capacities of the working class. This prompted a wholesale rejection of the strategic orientation of the Marxist movement—the building of an international revolutionary socialist party of the proletariat.

The SWP’s leader, Tony Cliff, responded to the formation of Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe by declaring them to be a form of state capitalism and extending the same designation to the Soviet Union itself.

The Trotskyist movement regarded the Soviet Union as a degenerated workers’ state, in which the gains of the October revolution—socialised property—must be defended against imperialism by the working class overthrowing—by means of a *political* rather than a *social* revolution—the bureaucratic caste that had usurped power under Stalin. The overthrow of Stalinism in Eastern Europe was also the task of the working class and necessitated resolute opposition to any attempt by the imperialists to overthrow these regimes by force.

The SWP’s assessment of the bureaucracy as a new class conferred on Stalinism a historical legitimacy as the representative of a new economic order rather than a parasitic excrescence that must be removed if the new order was to survive.

This prostration before the supposed power and permanence of Stalinist rule was bound up with an adaptation to imperialism itself. It rapidly became clear that more than a struggle over a definition was involved when Cliff’s supporters were expelled from the British section of the Fourth International for refusing to defend North Korea during the war waged by the United States, based on their conception that this was a conflict between two major capitalist powers, Washington and Moscow.

This political adaptation to the anti-communism so strenuously propagated by the bourgeoisie and its media facilitated the SWP’s building relations with sections of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy in Britain as well as various student protest movements. But the party was equally prepared to adapt itself to Stalinist-led movements and regimes, such as Vietnam. Indeed, the SWP was to enjoy a long relationship with the Stalinist Communist Party in Britain and hails its record of building up a layer of shop stewards in the trade unions as a model.

The SWP was not alone in accepting the domination of the workers’ movement by the mass Stalinist, social democratic and bourgeois nationalist parties as a permanent state of affairs that rendered impossible any struggle for the political independence of the working class. It is revealing to compare its history and political trajectory with that of the Militant Group, now known as the Socialist Party. The Militant did not share the SWP’s definition of the Stalinist bureaucracy, but instead emphasised that it had been forced to carry out extensive nationalisations in response to the challenge from imperialism and the pressure of the masses. From this it concluded that not only the Stalinists, but also the reformist and nationalist parties and regimes could be forced to implement socialism through a combination of militant struggle by workers and its own role as an internal pressure group.

The one political variant that was absolutely excluded by all the radical tendencies, whether or not they professed sympathy for Trotskyism, was that the working class could be won to the leadership of the Fourth International.

Definite social interests were represented by groups such as the SWP. The party drew its cadre primarily from a petty bourgeois layer that benefited from the social concessions won by the working class and embodied in the welfare state, many of whom occupied positions within academia, local government and the lower ranks of the trade union apparatuses.

The SWP viewed the social and political struggles of the working class through the narrow prism of what was necessary to defend these gains. Having rejected any possibility of revolution, it functioned as the left flank of the labour and trade union bureaucracy—championing its own brand of left reformism and rank-and-file trade union militancy. It was hostile to any struggle to break the working class from social democracy, viewing all such efforts as sectarianism that threatened the unity of the workers’ movement. Without such a unity, it argued, all that would result was the victory of fascist reaction. The SWP’s CC statement on the split in Respect makes this clear, arguing that in the fight against “exploitation, war and racism...the possibility of fighting back against particular attacks and horrors depends on the widest possible unity. The minority who are revolutionaries cannot by their own efforts build a big enough movement ourselves.”

The statement goes on to boast that “throughout its history the Socialist Workers Party and its predecessor, the International Socialists, have worked alongside other organisations and individuals—from the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign in the late 1960s, through the Anti Nazi League in the late 1970s and again in the mid 1990s, the Miners Support Committees in 1984-5, to the Stop the War Coalition and Unite Against Fascism today.”

The basis for such unity efforts has always been a rejection of any attempt to differentiate between revolutionary socialist politics and reformism. Hence, the statement’s boast of the “capacity of the SWP as an organisation to act to draw together constructive forces round minimal demands we all agreed with.”

The past two decades have witnessed world historic events that have completely refuted the political perspective advanced by all of the radical groups. The bureaucracies that they proclaimed as the natural guardians of workers’ interests have instead restored capitalist property relations in the Soviet Union and, in the West, have been the primary instrument for the

dismantling of the welfare state and the destruction of civil liberties.

The SWP was supremely indifferent to the juridical liquidation of the USSR in 1991. It described the event that has had a devastating impact on the lives of hundreds of millions of workers in an April 24 obituary of Boris Yeltsin as merely “the replacement of one form of capitalism—state capitalism—with another, market capitalism,” and by one SWP theoretician as “neither a step forward nor a step backwards, but a step sideways.”

The party’s response to the birth of New Labour was a similar shift to the right. At a time when vast layers in the working class were abandoning Labour, the SWP seized on what it saw as an opening for it to make new alliances with “big names” among the Labour and trade union lefts and in this way integrate itself into the structures of official politics.

Leading SWP theoretician Alex Callinicos admits that “what has been happening in Respect is very far from being unique. Right across Europe the radical left is in crisis.” He includes in his list of affected organisations the collapse of the Scottish Socialist Party and Rifondazione Comunista in Italy, which is “participating in a centre left government that is trying to implement neoliberal policies.” But even when dealing with this clear political betrayal, he meekly complains of “a tendency on the part of what has crystallised as the right wing of the new parties to *lapse into old reformist habits*” [emphasis added] and insists that further opportunist amalgams must be attempted.

Various radical groupings are now busy lining up behind one or another faction in the Respect split, hoping to either pick up one or two supporters or position themselves as political partners of whatever formations now emerge. They normally argue that the SWP went too far in adapting itself to Islamism and to Galloway, but only because this hampered a broader regroupment project.

The Socialist Party has complained that Respect had “not developed into a force even equivalent to other formations such as the WASG [Electoral Alternative—now part of the Left Party] in Germany, the Left Bloc in Portugal and the Brazilian P-SOL [Socialist and Freedom Party, which was expelled from the Workers Party]”. It criticises the SWP for not welcoming the Rail, Maritime and Transport union’s “discussion on putting up a trade union-based, anti-cuts, anti-privatisation slate” in the forthcoming London mayoral elections and failing to propose a joint slate.

The International Socialist Group was affiliated to Respect and has allied itself with Galloway, but has exactly the same orientation as the Socialist Party. Its leader Alan Thornett, who broke from Trotskyism in 1973, argues that Respect without the SWP can attract a broader coalition of forces. He cites the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain as well as the RMT as “potential allies,” adding that “if Respect is to seriously build itself, it has to convince those coming from the Labour and trade union left that there is a democratic space within Respect in which they can function.”

Nothing progressive, let alone left-wing, can come out of any new such formations. The net result of every one of the recent regroupment projects has been a disaster, in which the likes of Galloway have been given a platform to discredit socialism.

The Socialist Equality Party is the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International. It alone takes up a fight for the political independence of the working class. The collapse of Respect proves once again that the working class cannot rely on any representative of the labour bureaucracies or their apologists to provide an alternative leadership. There is no substitute for the building of a new and genuinely socialist party through an irreconcilable struggle against these forces, whose essential role is to prevent working people from making the necessary political break with reformism.





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