

Strathclyde Telegraph defends inflammatory attack on SEP as “fair comment”

Steve James
6 January 2009

The following letter was sent to Martin Cairns, editor of the *Strathclyde Telegraph*, student newspaper of Strathclyde University in Glasgow, Scotland. The *Telegraph* published a scurrilous attack on the Socialist Equality Party and Jerome White, its presidential candidate, in its November edition, indicating that threats of violence were a correct and amusing response to "Trots." Steven Johnstone of the International Students for Socialist Equality responded to the article ("Reply to an anti-Trotskyist rant over SEP candidate's appearance in Scotland").

He demanded an official retraction from editor Martin Cairns, repudiating the views expressed in the sketch by news editor Ralph Kirkwood. The *Telegraph* printed Johnstone's letter in its December edition, but has refused to distance itself from Kirkwood's attack.

Below we publish a further reply by Johnstone to an unpublished e-mail from Cairns outlining the *Telegraph's* position.

Dear Mr. Cairns,

The *Strathclyde Telegraph* published my letter of December 3 protesting your news editor Ralph Kirkwood's "Will the real Jerry White please stand up?" But in an unpublished reply, you refuse to distance yourselves from his inflammatory remarks regarding the Socialist Equality Party and its candidate in the US presidential election, Jerry White.

You state that "we have a policy of publishing all letters by Strathclyde students and/or which relate to university, *Telegraph* or student issues, hence your letter was published. However, we do not disavow or distance ourselves from Mr. Kirkwood's article, as under the principle of fair comment, he has every right to express his opinions, just as you do. While I agree that Ms. Taylor's article was a model of objective

reporting, Mr. Kirkwood's article was clearly labelled as a 'sketch,' not a news article."

You present your stance as impartial, when it is clearly not the case. You were obliged to publish our letter according to your own policy and normal journalistic standards. But you maintain that this is somehow equivalent to publishing under a banner headline a scurrilous piece by Mr. Kirkwood, who you assert can say whatever he wishes because it is in the form of a "sketch." You assert further that his right to express his opinion is governed solely by the "principle of fair comment."

No, Mr. Cairns, it is not. Statements calling on students to taunt Socialist Equality Party members about ice picks and boasts that "I could take Mr. White and his colleague by myself" are both inflammatory and threatening and not "fair comment" at all.

I must point out that you are far less sanguine when it comes to any abuse or threatening language directed against members of the fascist British National Party. The December edition of the *Strathclyde Telegraph* contains your article, "A question of democracy," about the leaking of the BNP's membership list.

You oppose a number of threatening phone calls and an isolated case of arson on a car near to an ex-BNP member's house in the strongest possible terms, warning of an escalation from threatening language to "muggings" and declaring that "a comparison with Zimbabwe is not far off the mark."

"Like them or loathe them," you insist, "the BNP are a legitimate political party in our country, and consequently it, and its members do not deserve this sort of abuse."

Finally you declare, "I make this argument because our society is supposed to be based on a culture of

tolerance, and such a principle must apply universally or it is worthless."

A spirited defence of the BNP's democratic rights indeed! Why then do you believe that the SEP is not entitled to the same "culture of tolerance" that you extend on principle to the various racists, xenophobes, homophobes, thugs, closet Nazis and the merely politically disoriented that have gravitated around the BNP?

I leave it to your readers to formulate their own opinions as to what determines your own political sensibilities. But in your official capacity as editor, I insist once again that the *Strathclyde Telegraph* repudiate Mr. Kirkwood's statements and apologise for publishing them.

Yours sincerely,

Steve Johnstone

For the International Students for Social Equality



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact