

Britain's Socialist Workers Party descends into factional warfare

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Britain's Socialist Workers Party is presently embroiled in a bitter factional conflict. However, its defining feature is the absence of any principled political differences between the SWP leadership and its opponents.

Over the past period, the SWP has, on the basis of appeals to moral outrage, lined up behind pro-imperialist movements in Libya and now Syria, paving the way for military intervention in the first instance and a bloody civil war in the second.

In Egypt, it has entered into counter-revolutionary alliances with various representatives of the Egyptian bourgeoisie, first the Muslim Brotherhood and now the liberal and Nasserite parties.

At home, it has lauded various trade union bureaucrats even as they betrayed one struggle after another, while urging an alliance with Labour Party councillors in the fight against cuts, preparing once again to call for the election of a Labour government.

On these issues, there is full agreement between the party leadership and its critics.

The dispute has focused almost exclusively upon allegations of rape made against a leading member of the party and the mishandling of the charges by the SWP's Disputes Committee. The opposition is led by what are unashamedly referred to as the party's "celebrity members", such as Richard Seymour, who runs the blog *Lenin's Tomb*, and fantasy writer China Miéville. It draws support from academia and the Socialist Workers Party Students Societies. Their views are posted widely and internal documents routinely leaked to hostile publications.

The opposition denounces the supposed misogyny of the SWP and charges the leadership with underestimating the struggle against "patriarchy." This is combined with accusations that the party's bureaucratic structures and a rigid internal discipline, which includes a ban on factions, are a barrier to work with "non-hierarchical" semi-anarchist Occupy-type movements and, more important still, efforts to replicate Greece's SYRIZA (Coalition of The Radical Left) as a new electoral vehicle in Britain for the opposition's own social aspirations.

Attempts by the SWP leadership to pose as an orthodox opposition to such positions are a transparent fraud. The elements involved in the anti-leadership faction and their politics have been incubated by the SWP. They draw on positions advocated for years by the party.

The most striking confirmation of this fact is the way opposition supporters repeatedly cite as their inspiration the SWP's disgraceful backing for the extradition of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange to Sweden on the basis of trumped-up accusations of rape, and the SWP's denunciations of MP George Galloway as a "rape denier" for his statement that Assange had not, in fact, raped anyone.

According to one Viv S, it was precisely because of the Assange

case that "we felt we had to come forward". Journalist Tom Walker wrote in a resignation letter, "The SWP itself called for Julian Assange to face rape charges in Sweden, in a *Socialist Worker* article I am proud to have written. I do not see why what is good enough for Assange is not good enough for the party's leaders."

The complaint levelled against the SWP is that its own adaptation to feminism and other forms of identity politics is stuck in the 1970s mould and has not kept pace with the contemporary evolution of such politics. One member complains that "it wasn't until 2007 that the T was added to LGBT on party documents", while another says that, having "recently started a degree," she found that eight years of party membership had left her unaware of "a whole new world of intersectionality, gender politics, and critical studies", and left her trapped in "a classical Marxist tradition" and unable to make sense "of new understandings of oppression."

Richard Seymour has repeatedly argued that the SWP's Greek co-thinkers should end their pro-forma criticism of Syriza's reformist and pro-European Union agenda. "The point will be to support the mass movements capable of pressuring a Syriza-led government from the left," he argued last June. "No, they are not a revolutionary formation; no, they won't overthrow capitalism; no, their manifesto is not a communist manifesto. Yet it is just possible that Syriza won't betray workers in the interests of European capital..."

The reply to the opposition by the SWP's leading theoretician, Alex Callinicos, makes the grotesque pretence of defending "revolutionary parties... that draw on the method of organising developed by Lenin and the Bolsheviks."

In reality, there is precious little democracy in the SWP and excessive centralism. Moreover, from the standpoint of essential issues of programme and perspective, the SWP has nothing revolutionary in it. It merely exhibits a readiness to employ left rhetoric to justify increasingly right-wing policies.

From the time it split with the Fourth International in 1951, the SWP's forerunner, the International Socialists (IS), dedicated itself to a sustained attack on Trotskyism. The tendency, then led by Tony Cliff, repudiated any prospect of social revolution in the post-war period. It argued that the emergence of what it called a "state capitalist" system in the Soviet Union was only the most developed expression of a new form of capitalist exploitation on a world scale, which lent capitalism a new lease on life.

This new form of capitalism, the IS claimed, included the post-war welfare reforms and state nationalisations carried out by the 1945 Labour government. The working class was deemed to be reformist in its nature and non-revolutionary—supplanted by petty-bourgeois intellectuals and other bourgeois forces that presided over a "deflected

permanent revolution”, consolidating state capitalist formations in one country after another.

The IS’s declaration that the Soviet Union was equivalent to US imperialism and its insistence that the reformist parties and trade union apparatuses represented the interests of the working class enabled it to secure a niche in a layer of the petty bourgeoisie that relied upon the welfare state and the trade unions for their own privileges. This layer combined radical rhetoric and pressure on the labour bureaucracies to safeguard wages and public-sector jobs and services with unswerving opposition to any attempt to construct a working class party independent of the Labour Party.

The IS decided to adopt what Callinicos terms “a Leninist model of organisation” only in 1968, when revolutionary movements it had spent almost two decades saying would never emerge erupted across Europe and internationally. This pose of orthodoxy was considered vital in combating the danger of workers gravitating to the genuine Trotskyists of the Socialist Labour League. But the essential line of the SWP, as the IS became known in 1977, remained its insistence that the reformist and Stalinist bureaucracies were the natural leaders of a reformist working class.

This was used to argue for various opportunist alliances (described as “United Fronts of a special type”) with trade union functionaries and the like, which Callinicos describes as “a continuous process of dialogue” with the working class. He lists as examples the Stop the War Coalition, in which the SWP aligned itself with the Communist Party of Britain; the Muslim Association of Britain; churches; and even the Liberal Democrats and Unite Against Fascism, which is funded and organised by the Trades Union Congress!

Callinicos’ argument is a poorly disguised defence of the SWP’s substantial apparatus. He defends this apparatus, in part, because many depend on it for their livelihoods, but more important still because it provides a power base from which to negotiate alliances with sections of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy as well as Islamist groups, and to provide foot soldiers for every new political adventure.

Warning that the “stakes in these debates are very high” if party discipline is breached, he cites as an example how the “New anti-capitalist Party (NPA) in France imploded in 2011-12, leading to a very serious breakaway to the Front de Gauche led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon.”

What does this mean? As Callinicos sees it, the SWP, as it advances an explicitly non-revolutionary agenda and jumps in and out of bed with whoever needs a pseudo-left apologia, requires bureaucratic discipline to prevent SWP members from simply joining the various bourgeois tendencies being courted. Hence the danger of a weakening of the bureaucratic party regime.

Callinicos raises one additional concern—that his opponents are making a mistake in underestimating the need to maintain the SWP’s revolutionary pose given the discrediting of the old parties and trade unions. He agrees that “an insurgent working class” is not “at the centre” of contemporary radicalised movements, but argues, “It would be ridiculous to assert that the working class is finished.”

This is an extraordinary thing to have to argue in a supposedly Marxist party. It is animated by an understanding that to openly ditch the SWP’s bogus allusions to revolution, Leninism, Trotskyism, etc., would impede the SWP in carrying out manoeuvres with discredited parties and trade unions vitally in need of the left cover it provides.

The same considerations animate the SWP Central Committee resolution meant to be an answer to the opposition, which affirms “the

right of the Central Committee to impose disciplinary measures,” but has not one word of political criticism. It offers instead a debate on topics such as “The changing nature of the working class” and “The radical left, the united front and the SWP.”

Whatever Callinicos might wish, the SWP’s present crisis reveals that the essential character of the party can no longer be masked behind the type of pseudo-socialist verbiage in which he specialises. The extreme polarisation of society has separated a significant section of the upper-middle class from its former reliance upon the working class and driven it ever more firmly into an alliance with those at the apex of society.

The social layers on which the SWP is based now earn double, treble and more often many multiples the average salary of even a skilled worker. Some have a stock portfolio, an inheritance from their parents and grandparents, private medical insurance and the prospect of a comfortable pension.

They inhabit environs where emphasising sex, sexual preference or colour often provides a means for their own social advancement. In these circles, the working class and working class males, in particular, are routinely disparaged for the “backward”, “racist”, “misogynist” and “homophobic” attitudes that are ascribed to them by their self-appointed and self-righteous critics.

The opposition of these layers to the ruling elite, such as it is, is not based upon socialist principles or animated by the striving for equality. It is the politics of petty envy and sectional interest. They want little more than a bigger slice of the cake for themselves and privileged status for their racial group or those of a similar sexual orientation. For the same reason, they view the struggle of the working class against private ownership of the means of production, on which all such privileges ultimately depend, as a threat.

It is no longer the case that they are merely sceptical of the revolutionary capacities of the working class. The closer the objective situation comes to decisive class struggles, the more openly the petty-bourgeois pseudo-left set themselves consciously against revolution and in defence of the existing order.

The headlong rush by the pseudo-left tendencies to the right creates the conditions under which a great ideological weight can be lifted from the backs of the workers and young people now being driven into struggle against the profit system and its defenders. There is nothing so damaging to socialism as its being associated with the rotten politics of the SWP, the Socialist Party and innumerable similar tendencies.

But their evolution, rooted in a profound social polarisation between the classes, is bringing to a close an historic period in which petty-bourgeois leftism could present itself as a counterfeit of Trotskyism, as represented by the International Committee of the Fourth International. It helps pave the way for the development of a genuinely socialist movement of the working class.



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