

## Broad Parties and Narrow Visions: the SWP and Respect

by Murray Smith

The crisis which has led to a split in Respect is an important development, affecting as it does the principal force of the radical left in England. The future will tell us whether the current crisis represents just another failure, another dead-end, another missed opportunity for the English left, or whether, as seems increasingly possible, it offers Respect itself the chance for a renewal and is perhaps a step on the road towards a broader formation.

Whichever way you look at it, the Socialist Workers' Party is at the centre of the crisis. It is or was the central component of Respect, as it had been of the Socialist Alliance which preceded it, and it has been one of the main protagonists in the conflict that has engulfed Respect. So I want to look at what has happened from the point of view of the relationship between the SWP, a traditional far left organization, and the broader left formation that Respect is. I think there are some lessons to be learned which go beyond Britain.

There is no need to go over again here the analysis which has been made many times before concerning the possibilities of building new parties of the radical left and the tasks of revolutionary Marxists in rebuilding the workers' movement and new workers' parties on the basis of refusal of neo-liberalism, and of fighting for consistently anti-capitalist politics in that framework (1). But this analysis obviously underpins our analysis of the crisis of Respect

The forces that will rebuild the workers' movement and build new parties will to a very large extent come from the new generations. But this will not happen spontaneously. A look at the experiences of new parties in different countries shows that the first steps along the road to new parties are taken by existing forces that refuse the neo-liberal consensus. The measure of their success can be judged by their ability to draw in new forces, which in the best of cases quickly outnumber the founding components. But to begin the process of building new parties, we start with the raw material we inherit - from traditional socialist and communist parties, trade unionists, ecologists and forces from various new movements, etc. - and from the traditional revolutionary groups.

### The revolutionary left and its limits

In the context of the crisis of Respect, it is the last of these that concerns us. In Western Europe the revolutionary groups represent organized forces which originated in opposition to Social Democracy and Stalinism. Maoist organizations arose in the 1960s and were influential in many countries of Europe, though marginal in Britain. Those which survived generally did so by taking considerable

distance from their origins. This is much less the case with Trotskyist organisations, which on the contrary attach great importance to the historical continuity of their struggle, and remain attached to their political heritage, though they often interpret it in radically different ways. The far left in Britain has always been predominantly Trotskyist.

Three significant organisations eventually developed from the wreckage of the post-war British section of the Fourth International - the WRP, which imploded in the 1980s, and the currents which are today represented by the Socialist Workers' Party and the Socialist Party (formerly Militant). The section of the Fourth International reconstituted in the 1960s (represented today by the ISG) came largely from outside that tradition.

These organisations represent organized forces which in spite of many weaknesses often carry on some of the best traditions of the workers' movement. They also, because of their activist character, can usually have an influence out of proportion to their numbers. They can play a role, positively or negatively, in the recomposition of the workers' movement and the building of new parties. Positive examples of this are the key role of SML in Scotland in establishing the SSP, and that of the (ex-Maoist) UDP and PSR (Fourth International) in setting up the Left Bloc in Portugal.

In spite of their tradition of political resistance to Stalinism, many Trotskyist groups developed internal regimes based on what can only be called bureaucratic centralism. There are particular reasons in the history of British Marxism for the sectarian and bureaucratic character of many Trotskyist groups. It is not a question of putting the three organisations cited above in the same basket, neither Cliff nor Grant deserves to be compared to Healy. But they share one thing in common, the inability to accept democratic debate, the confrontation between different platforms, for any length of time. It is not considered normal. This is not however a purely British phenomenon, it is common to, for example, Lutte Ouvriere and the Lambertist PT in France. The Trotskyist movement as a whole, some of its components more than others, has paid a heavy price for decades of persecution and the pervasive influence of Stalinism, even on those who opposed it. It would be more correct to characterise these organisations and the international regroupments around them as factions rather than the parties they usually consider themselves to be.

The category "revolutionary/far-left organization" has some pertinence. All these groups have or have had things in common - well-defined programmatic and historical references; a high level of activism such as to preclude a mass party except in times of revolution; tendencies towards "vanguardism" - a schematic counterposition between 'vanguard' and 'masses'; the idea that

they actually are a revolutionary party or at least represent the nucleus of one, etc. There is however a difference between some and others. The forces grouped in the Fourth International have abandoned crude vanguardist conceptions and the idea that they are the revolutionary party. And crucially, they have internal regimes that are democratic and pluralist, as members of the SWP's international current, the IST, have been able to experience for themselves in the FI's largest section, the French LCR.

Genuine internal democracy, the right of currents to organise even outside of conference periods and to present different platforms at congresses, proportional representation of minorities on leading bodies, does not of course guarantee that no mistakes will be made nor offer absolute guarantees against splits. It does make errors easier to correct and to conduct sometimes sharp debates while preserving the unity of the organisation. The LCR's pluralism does not make it able to be in and of itself, the new, and necessarily pluralist, broad anti-capitalist party that is necessary, something that a large majority of its members now seem to have understood. It does give it a serious advantage in building a pluralist party. The question that has often been posed, but that the SWP (or for that matter the Socialist Party) has never really answered, remains: if you are incapable of practising pluralism within your own organisations, why should anyone believe that you will be capable of doing so in a broader party?

#### The end of a cycle

The SWP, after a long period of sectarian isolation, made a turn in 1999-2000 towards working with other forces and towards building new political formations. It invested forces in the then moribund Socialist Alliance, which the Socialist Party had failed to do anything with. The first major result was the London election campaign in 2000, followed by participation in the 2001 general election and in local elections. Michael Lavalette was elected councillor in Preston in 2003. In a parallel move, in 2001 the Scottish organization of the SWP joined the SSP, which it had categorically refused to do when the party was formed in 1998 (we will come back to this later). This turn by what was at that point the biggest far left organization in Britain was very welcome, but the sharpness of the turn justified some interrogations. To try and probe, I wrote an article in *Frontline* 8 "Where is the SWP going?" In the same issue Nick McKerrell published "The United Front Today". This turned out to be the beginning of a debate which was fruitful in its content, clarifying for us the SWP's thinking. It was also fraternal and pluralist in its form, in that our contributions, a reply from Rees and my reply were published in *International Socialism*, and also in *Links* (2). There had already been exchanges with Alex Callinicos in the *IST International Bulletin* and there were again in 2004 after the European elections and the creation of *Respect*.

And there were exchanges of correspondence between representatives of the leaderships of the SWP and the LCR, also published in the *IST International Bulletin*.

When I wrote that article in 2002 I did not know the answer to the question posed in the title. Simply, it was clear that the SWP was moving. We knew where it had been, not where it would go. It seemed useful to look at the question. After the exchanges with Rees and Callinicos, in particular the insistence on the concept of the "united front of a special type" and of coalitions as counterposed to parties, I was not entirely reassured. But the test of theory is practice. The SWP was in the SA, it was in the SSP, it was in the European Anti-capitalist Left, there would be time to see how things evolved.

It is now possible to answer with some degree of certainty the question of the orientation of the SWP. We cannot predict exactly where it will go now, but it does seem that the cycle that began in 1999-2000 is over. The question as to whether the SWP is capable of playing, consistently, a positive role in the building of a broad party has been answered, for the moment at least, but quite definitely, in the negative. Not just or primarily in the pages of its documents, though we will quote some of those, but in practice. And not once but three times. First, with the Socialist Alliance. Second, with the SSP. And thirdly, and it would seem decisively, with *Respect*. The SWP leadership chose consciously and deliberately to run the risk of a split rather than let *Respect* escape from the straitjacket of the "united front of a special type". Neither the ham-fisted way they have gone about it, nor their widely rejected organizational practices, should hide what is essential. The reason for their line of conduct was a fundamental political incapacity or refusal to evolve in the necessary way, which would have involved the SWP itself changing radically.

Because, as we have often explained, revolutionary groups which want to play a constructive role in building new parties have to change. They have to break with certain aspects of their past. They don't have to change their fundamental ideas, in the sense of programme. They do have to abandon the idea that they are the revolutionary party or its nucleus and that the "over-arching priority" (to quote a recent SWP document) is to build their own organization. They do have to abandon the fetish of organisational independence. They have to work constructively as a current within the new party. I wrote five years ago; "The role of revolutionary Marxists today is to build broad socialist parties while defending their own Marxist positions within them, with the aim, not of building a revolutionary faction with an 'entryist' perspective, but of taking forward the whole party and solving together with the whole party the problems that arise, as they arise." (3). On the basis of subsequent experience, there seems nothing to add or take away.

This is what the SWP has consistently refused to do. The theoretical justification for this has been the concept of the "united front of a special type", which has become, without any difference of meaning that I can see, in Chris Harman's latest offering (4), the "political united front". There is no need to go over here the criticism of this concept. That was done five years ago. And Andy Newman has done so more recently (5). And from a point of view quite different from his or mine, so has the Australian group Socialist Alternative, which comes from a split in the IST's Australian affiliate (6). Respect is a formation which has policies, more or less clearly developed like those of any party, on a whole range of issues, which campaigns on them and stands in elections. Such a formation is what we call a party, people vote for it as such, people join it as such. If it is made to fit into the straitjacket of being a "united front", albeit of a "special type", or a coalition, its development will be stunted, it will fail to develop or do so in a deformed way. Which is just what happened to Respect.

There is of course nothing much in a name. Looking at the new formations in Europe, they can be called a bloc (Portugal), alliance (Denmark) party (Scotland, Netherlands) or a generic term like Respect or Die Linke. They are nevertheless parties, and define themselves as such. In his article "Regroupment and the Socialist Left Today" (7), Alex Callinicos made a thoroughly artificial distinction between on the one hand the SSP as a party and the Portuguese Left Bloc and Danish Red Green Alliance which were in fact parties, and so described themselves, in other countries, but which he defined as coalitions. It was at odds with the reality then, it looks even more so now, and the SWP appears to have dropped that one. Of course, all parties that represent real forces are also in some ways coalitions of tendencies, currents, interest groups. But organisations that, over and above these differences, are membership-based and organised around a programme are parties. At the last congress of the Left Bloc in June 2007, both delegates and the new leadership were elected proportionally to support given to each of four platforms. And the 4,000 plus members of the Red-Green Alliance vote directly to choose their slate of candidates for Parliament. Coalitions don't work that way.

This poses a problem for the SWP leadership. The function of the concept of the "united front of a special type" was clear. To justify the fact that the SWP was building Respect, which was in reality clearly a party in the making, while continuing to build the SWP, which they considered to be a party, and indeed the revolutionary party, by refusing to define Respect as a party. Furthermore, there was what has been called the theory of concentric circles, with the SWP at the core, Respect as the second circle, the other united fronts as the outer circle. This in itself was not necessarily a problem. The fact of having a

defective theory does not always prevent people doing the right thing. For example the concept of concentric circles does not actually prevent you from prioritising the building of Respect in practice. And in a general sense, when the theory came into conflict with reality, it could have been the theory that was changed. Unfortunately it wasn't.

The SWP's approach had very concrete consequences, in terms of the building or not of Respect and the relationship between Respect and the SWP. These problems were at the heart of the crisis. It would be an over-simplification to say that Respect was simply seen, always and everywhere, as a united front to be trotted out at election times and put on the back burner in between times. In some areas that was not the case, and those were areas where Respect got councillors elected or had a good chance of doing so. But it was the case in most places. Overall the SWP's approach stunted the growth of Respect - locally, with sporadic functioning of branches, no recruitment drives, nationally with no culture of internal democracy, no paper.

In fact the SWP behaved in the same way in Respect as it had in the Socialist Alliance. It frequently talks about the 'limits' of the Socialist Alliance, as in the Chris Harman article already quoted. But to a considerable extent, though not entirely, those limits were self-inflicted. It is true that the base of the SA was narrower than that of Respect. It is also true that not everything that could have been done to expand that base was done, far from it. The definitive example is the quite conscious choice that the SWP made to sideline the SA and intervene in the anti-war movement directly as the SWP. It is true that Respect had more potential, coming as it did from the massive 2003 antiwar movement and involving broader forces. But it met the same problem. One might say that the potential productive forces of Respect, its potential to grow, came into conflict with the constraints of its structures and functioning. That is what produced the crisis that began on August 23 with George Galloway's letter. It is now of course clear to everyone that tensions already existed before Galloway's letter, between the SWP and the predominantly Muslim branches of Respect in Tower Hamlets and South Birmingham, and Salma Yaqoob in particular. It is also the case that some people in Respect - Socialist Resistance, later the Respect Party Platform - had argued for years that Respect had to evolve away from its hybrid half-party, half-coalition state towards being a broad pluralist party, with a newspaper, recruitment drive, properly functioning branches a leadership that was accountable to the membership, etc. But so long as Galloway and the SWP saw more or less eye to eye on how Respect should function, the status quo remained.

Galloway lights the fuse - unwittingly?

When George Galloway wrote his letter "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" (8) on August 23, a snap autumn election was a real possibility, and Galloway's initiative was undoubtedly prompted by the clear state of unpreparedness of Respect. Galloway recognised the successes and potential of Respect, making a special point of signalling three areas outside London where Respect was progressing, all of them branches dominated by the SWP. He then went on to detail the problems and weaknesses. His letter was fairly restrained in form but quite uncompromising in content.

"Despite being a rather well known political brand our membership has not grown. And in some areas it has gone into a steep decline. Whole areas of the country are effectively moribund as far as Respect activity is concerned. In some weeks there is not a single Respect activity anywhere in the country advertised in our media. No systematic effort has been able to be mounted - in fact, a major effort had to be launched to get back to the levels of membership we had, despite electoral successes, widespread publicity and the continuing absence of any serious rival on the left. This has left a small core of activists to shoulder burden after burden without much in the way of support from the centre, leading to exhaustion and enervation".

"We have stumbled from one financial crisis to another. And with the prospect of an early general election we are simply unable to challenge the major parties in our key constituencies. None of the Respect staff appears to have been tasked with either membership or fundraising responsibilities. Or if they have it isn't working. There is a deep-seated culture of amateurism and irresponsibility on the question of money. Activities are not properly budgeted and even where budgets are set they are not adhered to".

He then went on to confront the way in which the SWP ran Respect. Under the heading "staffing", he wrote:

"This is a mystery to me and others. People pop up as staff members in jobs which have not been advertised, for which there have been no interviews and whose job descriptions are unclear and certainly unpublished. One staff member was appointed at a meeting at which that same staff member was present, making it obviously embarrassing for anyone to query whether they were the right person for the job, whether they could be afforded or why the job should go to them rather than someone else. This unnecessarily poor management leads to tensions, even animosity and the suspicion that staff are recruited for their political opinions on internal matters rather than on a proper basis".

Under "internal relations":

"There is a custom of anathematisation in the organisation which is deeply unhealthy and has been the ruin of many a left-wing group before us.

This began with Salma Yaqoob, once one of our star turns, promoted on virtually every platform, and who is responsible for some of the greatest election victories (and near misses) during our era. "Now she has been airbrushed from our history at just the time when she is becoming a regular feature on the national media and her impact on the politics of Britain's second city [Birmingham] has never been higher.

"There appears to be no plan to rescue her from this perdition, indeed every sign that her internal exile is a fixture. This is intolerable and must end now. Whatever personal differences may exist between leading members the rest of us cannot allow Respect to be hobbled in this way. We are not over-endowed with national figures". Under "decision-making and implementation":

"There is a marked tendency for decisions made at the national council or avenues signposted for exploration to be left to wither on the vine if they are not deemed to meet priorities (which themselves are not agreed)".

The criticism of the way Respect was functioning, the "whole areas of the country(...) effectively moribund as far as Respect is concerned" was implicitly a criticism of the SWP, which failed to build Respect in many areas where it had branches. The rest was even more direct. Finances were run by the SWP-dominated national office. And it was not necessary to be Sherlock Holmes to know that the staff members who "popped up" were SWP members, the decisions left to wither on the vine were those that did not correspond to the SWP's priorities, and that it was the SWP and in particular John Rees who had "airbrushed" Salma Yaqoob.

The charges were sufficiently clear for everyone to know that it was the SWP that was being targeted and sufficiently diplomatically formulated for the SWP to take the message on board and open discussions. No one has ever demonstrated that at this point Galloway wanted a rupture with the SWP. But he did want some changes and proposed a new elections committee dominated by non-SWP members and a new post of National Organiser with equal status to the National Secretary. What was proposed was not the exclusion of the SWP but the creation of a counterweight to their influence, one with enough authority to reassure the non-SWP components and help pull Respect out of the doldrums.

#### The SWP's reaction

The reaction of the SWP was violent. They "went nuclear", to use the term that has been attributed to their National Secretary, Martin Smith. Local aggregates and national delegate meetings of its members were held, where Galloway and Yaqoob were designated as "communalists", the problem in Respect was defined as a left-right split, as electoralism versus campaigning politics, there was supposedly a "witch-hunt" against the SWP. A National Council meeting of Respect on September

22 saw 13 out of 14 SWP members present launch violent personal attacks on Galloway, who stormed out of the meeting. When he was persuaded to return, the NC began to adopt unanimously some of his proposals, a process that was completed at the next NC meeting on September 29. Basically, all of Galloway's proposals were adopted. John Rees remained as National Secretary, but after much resistance the SWP backed down and accepted that the National Organiser should have equal status with the National Secretary.

This public outbreak of sweetness and light, quite at variance with what the SWP leadership was telling its own members, actually had nothing to do with a real desire to reach a compromise in the broader interests of Respect. It seems likely to have been motivated by the fact that the possibility of a snap election was still looming and hostilities might have to be suspended for the duration. At an SWP National Council meeting the following day (September 30) the tone was quite different, the Central Committee sought to put the organisation on a war footing. And omitted to inform its members that at the Respect National Council that day before it had given way on just about everything, including on the post of National Organiser. It would have been embarrassing to admit, and anyway the retreat was only tactical. Just look at the calendar of events.

Brown ruled out an autumn election on October 6. On October 8, Nick Wrack, an SWP member critical of the SWP Central Committee's approach to Respect, proposed by Galloway as National Organiser (he was the only candidate) was instructed by the CC to withdraw his name. On October 12, SWP members Kevin Ovenden and Rob Hoveman were ordered to resign from their posts in Galloway's office. On October 14, Wrack, Hoveman and Ovenden were expelled from the SWP for refusing to comply. On October 15, the SWP-dominated officers meeting refused to apply the decision of the September 29 NC and appoint a National Organiser. On October 16, Respect national chair Linda Smith argued at a meeting of the Conference Arrangements Committee (the national conference was due to be held on November 17) that the CAC was unconstitutional as it had not been approved by the NC, and proposed additions to the committee to make it less weighted in favour of the SWP, which was refused. The same evening the Tower Hamlets Respect meeting broke up in disarray, whereby the SWP branch secretary reconvened the meeting with essentially SWP members and supporters and approved a list of delegates with a majority of SWP members on it, though the SWP are quite a small if active minority in the branch.

I think that at that point it was all over bar the shouting (of which there was of course rather a lot). On October 23, Socialist Worker published an editorial attacking Galloway and his supporters. On October 24 Linda Smith sent out a document "Respect at the Crossroads" signed by herself and

26 others, including Galloway, Salma Yaqoob, Ken Loach, Alan Thornett, Nick Wrack and the majority of Respect's local councillors. From then on they began organising first of all as "Respect at the Crossroads", then as "Respect Renewal". There were some negotiations with the SWP aimed at concluding an amicable divorce, but they came to nothing. It is not clear if the SWP really meant them to.

By its reaction to Galloway's letter the SWP had managed to create a situation, or at the very least accelerate the process, whereby all of those forces in Respect which disagreed with its approach to building Respect and/or its methods, had come together in a crystallised united opposition. And not simply on an anti-SWP line, but on a series of proposals that went in the direction of Respect beginning to function more like a party.

In a recent article that we will come back to (9) Salma Yaqoob explains how she now sees things: "The coalition model that Respect was founded upon had its merits. In the future, however, I am convinced that we need to organise much more along traditional party political lines. We need to be clear that we are building a political party, and not making some form of temporary agreement between rival interests for electoral purposes".

This led to the situation of two conferences on November 17 in two places in London, with about the same number of participants, around 350 plus at each. The one organised by the SWP in Westminster claimed to be the 4th national conference of Respect, with delegates elected from the branches it controlled. The other, at Bishopsgate, was not a delegate meeting but included just about every prominent Respect member who was not in the SWP. Since November 17, SWP members have been claiming that Galloway and his supporters "split from Respect" and refused to attend the "national conference", organising a "rally" on the same day. This is silly. Respect Renewal has not split from Respect, there has been a split in Respect, there are two Respects. Respect Renewal supporters say they did not attend the SWP-run conference (which logically elected a "National Council" with over 60 per cent SWP members) because they argued that it had been organised unconstitutionally and did not recognize it. Since November 17, local branches have been choosing which of the two conferences they recognize. We will come back later to the prospects for the two wings of Respect.

#### The SWP's explanation

Let us now look at the SWP's explanation for the split. A left-right division? Nobody much outside the SWP takes this seriously. In Respect Renewal there are socialists like Alan Thornett, John Lister, Ken Loach, who have been arguing from the start not only that Respect should function as a party, but that it should have more clearly affirmed

socialist policies, which the SWP systematically opposed. They have now been joined by those who have been expelled from the SWP. Electoralism versus campaigning politics? But wasn't it the SWP that wanted in most places to keep Respect moribund and only bring it out at election times? And wasn't it many of those now in Respect Renewal who argued for Respect to be a campaigning organisation, because that was the role of a party aiming to represent working people, and also the best way to build an electoral base? In the SWP CC statement "Respect, the United Front and the Revolutionary Party" published in Pre Conference Bulletin 1 (10) we can read "We have often said that Respect should exist between elections". However we also read that Respect is clearly defined as "primarily an electoral party" and "this year-round presence is directed to reaping support in elections". You can't get much more electoralist than that. Maybe some people in Respect Renewal also see things that way - but many of them certainly don't. In any case, what is happening is certainly not a left (SWP)-right (Respect Renewal) split.

As for the witch-hunt. One of Britain's best left trade union leaders, Mark Serwotka, accepted the SWP's line on that and spoke at their conference accordingly. That was a real windfall, most people outside the SWP (and some in it) don't believe a word of it. If ever there was a case of the leadership of an organisation pressing the button of party loyalty this is it. The SWP has invented the do-it-yourself witch-hunt. But...one might say, hasn't Galloway been going on about fighting Trotskyism and Leninism? Yes, he has. What Galloway actually thinks about Lenin and Trotsky, I have no idea. But he is far from the only person who is repulsed by the image that quite a few British Trotskyist groups give of Leninism and Trotskyism, usually experienced via their organisational practices. From what can be seen from the outside neither the internal regime nor the modus operandi of the SWP has much to do with Leninism. Of course a group like the SWP is difficult to compare with the Bolshevik Party. But a group of comparable size, the French LCR, has an internal regime much closer to the real Bolshevik tradition. We will come back to that.

On the question of witch hunts, there are a couple of leading members of Respect, Alan Thornett and Jerry Hicks, who know a thing or two about witch hunts and victimisation, having been victims of them. In the 1980s supporters of Militant and other socialists knew what it was to be witch-hunted by the Labour Party machine and the media. But that was in the real world.

What about communalism? This is certainly the most outrageous and potentially damaging of the accusations brought by the SWP leadership. It means appealing to electors not on the basis of politics, programme, or class but on the basis of being part of the same community - in this case, Bengali in Tower Hamlets, Pakistani or Kashmiri in

Birmingham. Those accused being the majority of Respect councillors in Tower Hamlets and Salma Yaqoob and her supporters in Birmingham. This is dangerous, slippery ground. An organisation like the SWP which has resolutely combated Islamophobia, should know that accusing leaders of Respect of communalism risks pandering to it. Salma Yaqoob has in the article quoted above, provided a devastating reply to the SWP's accusations and exposed the threadbare nature of them. Respect's other Birmingham councillor, Mohammad Ishtiaq "explained [at the Respect Renewal conference] that he had been put under pressure not to stand against the Lib Dem candidate on the grounds he was from the same biraderi [extended clan], and by standing he would split the biraderi vote. Ishtiaq resisted those pressures out of a conviction that this kind of politics had to be broken" (11).

In PCB 2 Paul Holborrow and Jan Nielsen ask "How have we managed to split Respect in Tower Hamlets into our section and the rest (overwhelmingly Bengali). This development is particularly disturbing given our recent reputation (of which we should be justifiably proud) as defenders of Muslims against the tide of Islamophobia. This has been a brilliant example to the whole of the European and British Left". The SWP should indeed be proud of its reputation in this field, and it has been a not always very well followed example. So what has happened?

The answer to their question seems to lie in the SWP's unwillingness to accept the candidates chosen in Birmingham and Tower Hamlets, and the fact that those that they supported were either not chosen or not elected. There is a substantive issue here. When you choose candidates, you should choose candidates who are electable, who are rooted in their communities. In the areas we are talking about they will tend to be Bengali or Pakistani or Kashmiri, that does not automatically mean that they will appeal to the electorate on communalist grounds. And non-Muslim Respect candidates have also won support among Muslims, notably Michael Lavalette. There is a related accusation of potential candidates signing up members to help them be selected. In her article Salma Yaqoob recognises that the phenomenon of "pocket members' bought and paid for by individuals with the sole intention of influencing selections meetings" exists and adds that "these undemocratic practices can be dealt with". But she does more than that. She explains the reality of family and clan loyalties in South Asian communities with their positive and negative aspects and how the negative aspects can be combated. There is, by the way, quite a history of undemocratic practices in the labour movement, they are in no way particularly characteristic of Muslims or Asians. Nor is the fact of group loyalties (Catholic, Protestant, certain unions) being used to further this or that political career. Finally, as Salma Yaqoob points out, the SWP's accusations would carry more weight if in the first place, they

had been made before, and if in the second place the SWP's own practices were above suspicion, which appears to be the case neither in Tower Hamlets nor in Student Respect.

Accusations - very vaguely formulated - of sexist behaviour have also been launched against Muslim men in Tower Hamlets. In the article previously mentioned, Chris Harman recognises that this is not a particular characteristic of Muslim men, it also happens in the labour movement, citing the example of miners. He adds, "The point, however, is that the left have always sought to resist such behaviour". Well, yes...But if Harman is trying to argue that sexist attitudes occur among backward Muslims and miners, but not in "the left" (including the SWP), perhaps he should get out more. Anyone who knows the left, and even the far left knows that sexist attitudes and behaviour are far from having been vanquished in its ranks. In a recent post (12), the talented blogger Splintered Sunrise makes a number of allusive but pretty well targeted remarks concerning the SWP, which are perhaps clearer to those who know the party from the inside than they are to me. However he makes one clear reference that does correspond with first-hand reports I had of the run-up to the split in the SSP, where SWP members and other supporters of Sheridan behaved in an outrageously sexist fashion. This was perhaps the translation into practice of fighting against "the dominance of feminist ideas amongst a section of the party" which two leading SWP members criticised in a 2006 document (13). In a recent post (14), Andy Newman gives details of a case in Bristol SWP last year.

Anyway putting all that together, we get a situation where the (mainly white) SWP is accusing the leading figures in the (largely Asian) Respect branches in East London and Birmingham of communalism, vote-fixing and sexist behaviour. No problem? Does no one in the SWP feel uneasy about that?

What the split is really about is what kind of party Respect should be. In any normal living party you can and will have disagreements over the relative importance of elections and extra-parliamentary campaigns, community-based and industrial work, new movements and traditional trade union work. Those questions can be sources of tension, conflict, choices that have to be made. They do not necessarily need to lead to splits, though that can happen. But you have to have a large measure of agreement on what kind of party you are building, or indeed whether it is a party or something else that you are building. Behind all the external discourse about left-right splits and witch-hunts, that is what it is about. And in the SWP's internal debate, that is the question they actually address.

#### The SWP's methods, democratic centralism?

The fundamental problem is the relationship that

the SWP sees between its own organization and Respect. That is the root of the problem. But the way in which the SWP operates compounds the problem. And since this is what most people encounter they sometimes take it for the fundamental problem. The SWP practices what it calls "democratic centralism". The concept has been so discredited by the misuse of it by Stalinist, and unfortunately also Trotskyist organisations, that the use of the term is of debatable value today.

Democratic centralism was defined by Lenin as complete freedom of discussion, complete unity in action. As such it is a very commendable objective for a political party. But it is an objective. Tony Cliff is reported to have said that democratic centralism was "5 per cent discipline and 95 per cent discussion and conviction". Whether Cliff always lived up to this in practice is secondary. Whether he did or not, he was right. And that is how the Bolshevik Party and Lenin conceived of it. And they also discussed issues out openly; I dealt with this in an article some time ago (15).

At the time I wrote it I was unaware of the following very clear explanation by Tony Cliff: "The party has to be subordinated to the whole. And so the internal regime in the revolutionary party must be subordinated to the relation between the party and the class. The managers of factories can discuss their business in secret and then put before the workers a fait accompli. The revolutionary party that seeks to overthrow capitalism cannot accept the notion of a discussion on policies inside the party without the participation of the mass of the workers - policies which are then brought "unanimously" ready-made to the class. Since the revolutionary party cannot have interests apart from the class, all the party's issues of policy are those of the class, and they should therefore be thrashed out in the open, in its presence. The freedom of discussion which exists in the factory meeting, which aims at unity of action after decisions are taken, should apply to the revolutionary party. This means that all discussions on basic issues of policy should be discussed in the light of day: in the open press. Let the mass of the workers take part in the discussion, put pressure on the party, its apparatus and leadership" (16).

This is not, unfortunately, how the SWP operates. But it was how the Bolshevik Party operated, particularly in the decisive year 1917. And how could it have been otherwise? How can you lead one of the greatest revolutions in history without having an open dialogue with the working class, without all the fundamental choices being debated out openly? How can you do that with this constricted idea of the vanguard which decides in secret and then goes out in serried ranks to apply the decision?

In the first place, it seems very questionable to what degree there is real freedom of discussion in

the SWP. According to the SWP constitution, factions are permitted in pre-congress periods only. In practice that seems rare, although it is the case that critical contributions are published in pre-conference bulletins. As I said above the culture is not one that encourages the expression of differences. The only major factional struggle in the SWP (IS at the time) in the mid-1970s led to the expulsion or resignation of hundreds of members. The Central Committee is elected on a blocked list ("slate") proposed by the outgoing CC. The only way to overturn that is to propose an alternative list that would get the support of more than 50 per cent of delegates. At the 2006 conference long-standing member John Molyneux was refused election to the CC despite having significant support among delegates - his list got 57 votes as against 208 for the slate proposed by the CC.

Here is the description Molyneux - who in the current debate supports the line of the SWP leadership - gave of the way the SWP operates: "...the nature of the problem can most clearly be seen if we look at the outcome of all these meetings, councils, conferences, elections, etc. The fact is that in the last 15 years (perhaps longer) there has not been a single substantial issue on which the CC has been defeated at a conference or party council or NC. Indeed I don't think that in this period there has ever been even a serious challenge or a close vote. On the contrary, the overwhelming majority of conference or council sessions have ended with the virtually unanimous endorsement of whatever is proposed by the leadership. Similarly, in this period there has never been a contested election for the CC: i.e., not one comrade has ever been proposed or proposed themselves for the CC other than those nominated by the CC themselves. It is worth emphasising that such a state of affairs is a long way from the norm in the history of the socialist movement. It was not the norm in the Bolshevik Party or the Communist International before its Stalinisation. It was not the norm at any point in the Trotskyist tradition under Trotsky."

In a recently published article (17), Phil Hearse quotes this passage (from an SWP Pre-Conference Bulletin) with the comment: "John Molyneux put all this down to the nature of the period and the low level of the class struggle in the 1980s and 1990s. It is far from obvious that this is true. Its root cause is the conception of 'democratic' centralism that the SWP have". Of course. According to Rob Hoveman and Kevin Ovenden, who both joined the SWP in 1984, there were no expulsions for political differences from the mid-1970s until now. I cannot verify the accuracy of that. But as they say, their own case and that of Nick Wrack certainly represent cases of expulsion for political differences. Just look at it. All three of them were and are active in Respect, they all had political differences with the CC over Respect, they all wrote contributions to that effect in PCB 1, they were all expelled for "breaches of discipline". How convenient. In some organisations

the leadership wouldn't get away with such blatantly bureaucratic methods of dealing with political differences. But the SWP has no monopoly of them. In 1998 the CWI expelled its entire Pakistani section on trumped-up charges of financial misconduct.

Chris Harman paints a rather idyllic picture of the democratic functioning of the SWP. He writes of local meetings with alternate interventions from supporters and critics of the CC's position "and then a national delegate meeting. Again, those who disagreed with the leadership's position were able to speak without hindrance—including three non-delegates who were invited as the only observers so they could make their points. At the end of the meeting a vote was taken in support of the leadership's reply to Galloway's arguments and it was carried overwhelmingly in a room containing more than 200 people; there were only two "noes" and four abstentions. Arguments on both sides in the debate within the party were then printed in an internal bulletin; all the arguments within Respect were circulated to party members; further local aggregate meetings took place and then another national meeting, attended by about 250 people, which voted with two against and a handful of abstentions to endorse a central committee document" (18). Well that sounds all very democratic. And the bit about alternate interventions is true. But there are other versions of what happened; According to Hoveman and Ovenden, in their final mail to the National Secretary before being expelled: "The CC are also utterly deluded if they believe that there has been a "ringing endorsement" (Martin Smith's words) of their approach in the aggregates and the party council held in the past few weeks. These meetings, many of which involved a very small percentage of the membership, demonstrated a high level of confusion, disparate views and at no point endorsed the expulsions from the party the CC seems to be developing a taste for" (19). And Nick Bird, who subsequently resigned after 17 years' membership of the SWP, wrote an account of the September 30th Party Council. He began by confirming the contrast between the SWP leadership's attitude at the Respect national Council and what it was saying internally. "Some reports of the Respect national council meeting on September 29 suggest that an amicable compromise was agreed and that all is well. That was not the impression given at the SWP's party council meeting held the following day". Bird then describes the way the meeting functioned:

"Pat Stack announced from the chair that after the debate the meeting would vote on the CC and Rees/Graham Leigh documents. No amendments would be accepted. (And clearly no alternative documents could be heard, since no agenda had been issued and no call for such alternatives had been made.) As usual, the CC speaker who introduced the debate (Rees) had 25 minutes to elaborate the CC's position, while everyone else

had four, making it difficult to present a coherent case”.

“However, there certainly was a debate. It lasted over three hours and a number of longstanding members opposed the CC position in forceful terms” (20).

#### The view from outside

That is apparently the SWP’s idea of a democratic debate: one document, no amendments, no alternative document, take it or leave it. As Bird puts it: “It was a case of: which side are you on? (I believe Chris Harman put it in those exact terms)”. However it is the external expression of the SWP’s version of democratic centralism that poses the most problems. Having caucused beforehand in their own meetings SWP members are then expected to go into other meetings – campaigns, united fronts, trade unions...Respect – and vote as a bloc.

In a post on the Socialist Unity blog, Andy Newman explained how it works: “Even without an absolute majority, the SWP were able to exercise control of the NC until recently. Another former ally who the SWP fell out with, Mike Marqusee, has described how this works: ‘Many will have had the experience of attending a meeting ostensibly to discuss or organise an initiative or campaign only to find themselves faced with a block of SWP members who have arrived with a pre-determined line and set of priorities. The non-SWPers present may hold a variety of views or doubts, but these end up rotating around the axis established by the SWP. It’s a lop-sided and ineffectual discussion because a key participant – the SWP – is playing by a different set of rules, and not engaging openly and fully with the debate as others see it’ Formations for the Next Left, By Mike Marqusee, 10th July 2003.

“This certainly was the experience of the Respect Officers’ Group, where the SWP majority was so absolute, that Socialist Resistance supporters John Lister and Alan Thornett declined nomination to it at the 2006 conference, as they felt their presence gave the Officers group a false appearance of plurality and democratic legitimacy” (21). That is in fact the “soft version” of SWP-style democratic centralism. In situations of conflict it can be more brutal, as when the SWP marched 35 members into the first meeting of Bristol Respect after November 17.

Here is something I wrote in 1999:

“Should our current apply democratic centralism, that is should it have internal discipline within the SSP? On major issues we should seek to speak with one voice, but that should come from political conviction after a full debate rather than the imposition of a formal discipline. But we should not have the same attitude on tactical and organisational questions. To intervene systematically after having pre-agreed a CWI position on all questions would reduce the role of

the structures of the SSP to one of rubber-stamping our decisions. It would quickly squeeze the life out of the party” (22).

Fortunately Respect did not let the life be squeezed out of it, a lot of people fought back. But the logic of the SWP’s conception of democratic centralism was certainly to reduce the role of the structures of Respect to rubber-stamping decisions. In case of failure they just ignored the decisions they didn’t like.

Of course, it is impossible to forbid people who have a similar position on a given question from discussing together before a meeting as to how best to argue their case –whether they come from the same current or not. As Harman points out, Galloway and his supporters certainly met together to discuss the way forward. Only bureaucratic repression can stop such caucusing and it is not even always effective. But that does not mean that those involved in such a discussion are then bound by some kind of discipline in the broader meeting, cannot listen to other arguments, or decide that at this stage of the discussion there is no point in forcing a vote, making compromises, etc. Nor, crucially, does it mean that those who do not agree with the majority opinion in the caucus meeting cannot express their own opinion in the party.

The problem arises when there is a group of people who consistently caucus together and then all vote the same way. Such people have to be told in no uncertain terms that that is unacceptable behaviour, that it distorts the democracy of the party, precisely because, as Mike Marqusee put it, they are playing by a different set of rules. If the people in question represent a small minority the problem may be negligible and they can be ignored. If they represent a big bloc or even a majority, like the SWP in Respect, the problem is on an altogether different scale and has to be dealt with if the party is to develop a healthy, democratic culture where opinions are listened to and everyone feels part of the decision-making process – especially if they are not part of any platform or current, which is the case of the majority of members of the new parties of the radical left in Europe.

#### The broad party and the “united front of a special type” – the SWP and the SSP

A key element in the opening out of the SWP at the beginning of this decade was its entry into the Scottish Socialist Party in 2001. The SWP had been invited to take part in the formation of the SSP in 1998 and had categorically refused. Shortly afterwards, in a debate with Alan Mc Combes, Chris Bambery effectively explained why”: The fudge in the SSP is not over the national question but between reform and revolution” and “the attempt of the Scottish Socialist Party to bridge that divide, to have people from the social democratic tradition, the reformist tradition and the revolutionary tradition in the same party, and

to say we can conduct this argument over a period of time is fundamentally wrong" (23). So on that basis the SWP did not come into the SSP. But two years later they did come in, because that corresponded to the new orientation in England, because nothing succeeds like success and because the SSP had in a short time left the SWP little room to grow in Scotland. But the SWP always had a problem with the SSP. On a practical level there was a permanent tension with the SW platform in the SSP, which repeatedly took its campaigning priorities from London, priorities which often clashed with the decisions of the SSP. And the way that it operated as a closed faction with its own discipline alienated many SSP members, though individual SWP members earned respect for their activity. But on a more fundamental level the SWP had a political problem. The SSP was not a revolutionary party as the SWP conceived it, nor was it possible to portray it as a coalition, something which Alex Callinicos had to recognise. Its very existence was an affront to the SWP, and it was right on their doorstep, and it was successful.

It would of course be wrong to say that the SWP was responsible for the crisis that engulfed the SSP in 2006. They are not responsible for the initial decision by Tommy Sheridan to start a libel case. But the way they behaved from at least the National Council meeting in May 2006 up to the split certainly made the situation worse. Even having, to widespread surprise, won his case, Sheridan was incapable of winning a majority in the SSP, not even with the support of the SWP and the CWI. But without the backing of these two factions he would not have been able to split the socialist movement in Scotland by launching Solidarity. It is difficult to see the way the SWP swung behind him as anything but an operation for short-term factional gain, a not very successful one as it turned out. There is a remarkable document in PCB 3 by the Scottish Steering Committee of the SWP. It appears that Sheridan and the CWI are trying to turn Solidarity into "an organisation built on the same political foundations as the SSP that we had just recently left", rather than "a united front organisation", "a coalition or united front of forces building on the resistance to new Labour". This is seen as the reason why its recent National Conference had "only 110 attendees compared to 350 in June". We learn all this, by the way, under a sub-heading "The demise of the SSP"...The SSP is of course faring rather better than Solidarity, to say the least, because it is built on much more solid political ground. The Steering Committee make all sorts of criticisms of the SSP, most of them not new - the party seems to have done practically nothing right in the five years the SWP spent in it. These criticisms can be better answered in detail by comrades directly involved in the SSP. But the overall characterisation, of the SSP as sectarian compared to the SWP, is quite breathtaking. Does anyone outside the SWP who knows the two organisations actually believe this? As for the

decline and coming demise of Solidarity (its only councillor, in Glasgow, has defected to the Labour Party), it has nothing to do with it refusing to be transformed into an SWP united front. It is the logical result of the cynical and unprincipled politics that presided over Solidarity's creation. It is clear in any case that the SWP is preparing to leave the sinking ship, though it will be difficult for it to do so while Sheridan is facing prosecution.

### The future for Respect

What are the prospects for the two wings of Respect? It is too early to tell with absolute certainty, but a reasoned view would be as follows. The aim of Respect was, and in principle this still applies to both wings of it, to build a broad coalition/alliance/party to the left of New Labour. Axiomatically, this involves different forces and individuals working together. Now, the SWP has just demonstrated its inability to conduct a reasoned political debate with Galloway, most of the Muslims, Socialist Resistance and the independents. Already there were people who had collaborated with the SWP in the Socialist Alliance (John Nicholson, Liz Davies, Mike Marqusee...) and who chose not to continue the experience.

There were people who dropped out of Respect because of the SWP. This may come as a surprise to some SWP members, but a lot of people really don't like the way the SWP operates in Respect - and that is when it is at least formally committed to working with broader forces. Hypothesis: one of the reasons that many trade unionists and Labour people did not join Respect was because of the SWP. Not the only reason, but one. Prognosis: Respect Renewal may have problems building and broadening, but there is no absolute barrier to it doing so. The SWP is infinitely less likely to. With a few local exceptions (for example Valerie Wise and others in Preston) the SWP-dominated Respect seems to have few if any independent figures of any stature.

Look at the follow-up to the two conferences. In South Birmingham the SWP found itself isolated, in quite a small minority, and was gently but firmly excluded from leading positions. In Bristol the SWP was in a big majority and was ready to vote down and out Jerry Hicks and his supporters, who left beforehand. They have since formed a Respect Renewal branch. In North Manchester it was the SWP who left the meeting after losing a motion to recognise the authority of the Westminster conference. What is striking is that over and above the relationship of forces, which of course varies from area to area, as Respect members take sides the SWP is in most cases left with...the SWP and not much else. The SWP can clearly maintain its Respect as long as it wants to, via its own network. It appears to be multiplying Respect public meetings. Its biggest strong point is that it is a national organisation, so in the short to medium term its Respect can have a broader geographical spread. And it does have some

branches which have real roots – Preston, Sheffield, Bolsover in particular.

The strong points of Respect renewal are its well-known figures like Galloway, Yaqoob, Loach, its newspaper, its solid bases in Tower Hamlets, Birmingham South, Newham with a presence in some other areas of London, North Manchester, Bristol, Cambridge... It also has some political cadres who have experience in building national organisations, a number of them recent or less recent SWP members. The real question is: with a will to build and putting resources into it, and developing a pluralist political culture, can Respect Renewal win back former members and gain new ones? There is no reason at all to answer that question in the negative.

There will of course be political debates and differences within Respect Renewal. Two are predictable. First, the question of the London mayoral election. Respect Renewal does not seem at present to have the resources to present a candidate, if it so wished. SWP-Respect may decide to continue to present leading SWP member and leader of the anti-war movement Lindsey German. In that case there would probably be those, Socialist Resistance for example, who would be for supporting her candidacy, while others would be in favour of a vote for Ken Livingstone, the Labour incumbent, which appears to be George Galloway's position. There is also the question of a proposed modification of the abortion laws in a more restrictive sense, where Galloway, who is a practising Catholic, is likely to take a position that will be contested by other members of Respect.

#### Was the split really necessary?

Many people regret the split, many consider there was no political justification for it. Certainly it is regrettable. Certainly there were no differences of political programme that could not have been dealt with in the same organisation, notwithstanding the SWP's discourse about a left/right division. But the clash with the SWP was an accident waiting to happen. It is not possible to build a broad party while continuing to operate as a classical far-left group, with your newspaper, public activities, industrial intervention, etc., and where members' time and money go in priority to the group. You cannot have your cake and eat it. You cannot have your broad party and still build your own group as before. And you cannot get round the problem by baptising what is clearly a party-in-formation a united front of a special type or a political united front. That way you just fall between two stools, which is what the SWP seems to have done. If you want to build a broad party you have to: a) have the political clarity to see that that means that your own organisation will have to change radically in the way it operates, and conduct public activities and campaigns as the party; and b) have the political courage to commit material resources to the party. When the SSP was launched, SML put the vast bulk of its human and

material resources – offices, computers, its newspaper, full-timers – at the disposal of the party. On a more modest scale, but following the same approach, Socialist Resistance stopped publication of its own paper and put its human and material resources at the disposal of Respect, which made it possible to produce a Respect newspaper three weeks after the Bishopsgate conference. At present, the LCR is engaged in an attempt to launch a broad anti-capitalist party. It has said quite explicitly that if the project succeeds, the LCR in its present form will cease to exist.

If the SWP had been able to change, no split would have been necessary. Since it not only did not but dug its heels in when challenged, a split became probable and at a certain point inevitable.

#### Where now for the SWP?

In PCB 2 there is a remarkable, and in many ways astonishing contribution from comedian and longtime (29 years) SWP member Mark Steel. He paints a bleak picture of an aging, shrinking organisation, which is missing out on many opportunities. In PCB 3 several contributions take issue with Steel's contribution, notably one from Alex Callinicos. They challenge some aspects of what Steel says, without disproving his overall picture.

Now, Steel is clearly quite disillusioned with the SWP, and it also seems that he has not been very active in it recently, so he may be missing out on some positive developments. But he also has an advantage over most SWP members. He moves around the country a lot, which means that he can get an overview, albeit rough, of the state of the party, something that only the leadership normally gets. Furthermore, the picture he paints bears some relation to the observable level of SWP presence and activity on the ground, participation at Marxism, etc. I do not know how many members the SWP has, but the figure of 8,000 that Callinicos cites seems totally unbelievable, it does not correspond to what outsiders see and hear of the party. According to figures given in PCB 1, Socialist Worker sells 8,700 copies a week. The last two "Marxism" events have attracted about 4,000 participants. And take the much-mocked petition launched by the SWP against the "witch-hunt", which obtained somewhat over 1,000 signatures. Isn't that strange? One would have thought that faced with a witch-hunt against the party, not only all its members but many sympathisers would have rallied round. Let's suppose that some people didn't sign because they didn't want to be identified as SWP members because of their jobs, and we know others didn't sign because they didn't agree with it. That still leaves several thousand on the missing list. The point of this is not to gloat over the SWP's decline. It is to take note of the fact that we are not dealing with a party that is growing and expanding its influence. We are looking at a fairly stagnant organisation.

The figure of 1500-2000 members does not seem too wide of the mark.

The SWP now finds itself with a supposed coalition in which there is no other organised political force and few individuals of any influence. It is probably the case that the repeated assertions that the SWP remains committed to the perspective of building a broad political coalition are sincere. The leading group probably thinks that corresponds to the situation and is the best way to build the SWP. The problem is that it requires partners who are no longer there. Having lost them, the SWP has little chance of attracting any others. It will therefore tend to fall back willy-nilly on the old 'build the party' line, well summed up in the concluding part of the Scottish Steering Committee document. Whether this occurs using Respect as a front (assuming they are able to keep using the name) for a time is a secondary question. Giving up any serious attempt to build a broader force and retreating to the old party-building by ones and twos is the slow road to nowhere, a process which could be accelerated by internal divisions.

Of course the SWP leadership will not openly adopt such a position, just as their Scottish comrades were obliged to make a hasty and unconvincing denial that they were planning to leave Solidarity. But that is the logic of their situation. However having held the organisation on an open line for seven or eight years, care has to be taken in making a new turn. Of course, it seems clear that a certain number, probably not negligible, of SWP members has always resisted involvement in the SA, SSP and Respect, and is consequently relieved to get back to normal. In a note to the Salma Yaqoob article already quoted, Rob Hoveman gives the remarkable information that at the time the crisis erupted, 60 per cent of SWP members is Tower Hamlets were not members of Respect. And that was in Respect's biggest branch, with real local roots. There is another, much smaller number which is openly opposed to the sectarian turn. In between there are probably a lot of members who are following the leadership out of party loyalty or habit, who may be more or less clearly asking themselves questions about where the party is going.

It is therefore necessary to provide an explanation for what has happened, one that avoids dealing with either the ingrained sectarianism of the SWP or the way the CC has handled the crisis. This comes in the form of the appreciation contained in the CC document (24) of the tendencies at work in the radical left in Europe. A section of this document is entitled "Respect and the crisis of the radical left in Europe". Whether there is what can be called a crisis is debatable. Certainly there are problems, but no one should have imagined there wouldn't be. But according to the CC the decline of the global justice ("anti-capitalist" in their terminology, which was always an over-optimistic definition) and anti-war movements which favoured the rise of new formations has led to

rightist tendencies are developing in the various parties and to a left/right polarisation. We are it seems no longer in the "heady days" of 2001-2003. In passing, let us note that we see recurring the importance that the SWP leadership attaches to contingent factors (the global justice movement, the anti-war movement) as against the fundamental factor, which they also recognise, the space opened up by the neo-liberal path of social democracy and the demise of Stalinism. But more fundamentally, any idea that we have simply gone back would have to be balanced by the fact that since those heady days we have seen the emergence of a new party, Die Linke, in a key country, Germany. And in another key country, France, it now appears much more likely than it has up to now that one way or another we will see the emergence of a new, broad formation of the radical left.

In the CC's analysis, Galloway and Respect Renewal can be situated in the framework of a "polarisation left and right in the movements resisting neo-liberalism and war". The first problem with this, of course, is that they have not demonstrated their assertion that Galloway and Respect Renewal are in fact moving to the right. Secondly, on a European level, the assertion is much too sweeping. To back up their argument, they cite the PRC's participation in the Prodi government, "tensions" over a much more minor affair in Portugal, the confused but far from despairing situation of the radical left in France and the undoubted existence of a significant wing of Die Linke that is ready to go into coalition with the SPD. And of course, they never miss an occasion to prematurely bury the SSP. I await their demonstration that the undoubtedly severe setbacks for the SSP and the socialist movement in Scotland have anything to do with a left/right polarisation.

In fact the explanation for the various problems affecting the radical left in Europe is more complex. Experience is showing that there is no easy, conflict-free road to building a consistently anti-capitalist party. When you leave the margins of politics and begin to be present in national parliaments and local councils, you encounter problems that you did not have before - votes, alliances, the question of participation in government or local government. Some of these pressures come from the way the institutions seek to domesticate and integrate anti-system parties. And some of them come from your own supporters, who want the party to 'make a difference', to get its hands on the levers of power, as they see it. The only way forward is to deal with these problems through democratic debate and sometimes confrontation. The stronger the revolutionary Marxist, class-struggle forces in these parties, the more likely it will be that they avoid the trap of, to take the worst-case scenario, participation in neo-liberal governments.

In the short term, the SWP's appreciation of the situation of the radical left in Europe provides an explanation for their characterisation of Respect

Renewal as rightward-moving. In the medium term, it may make it possible to say, "well, we tried to build a radical left coalition, but we failed through no fault of our own, we just have to build the SWP".

The future for the SWP looks rather bleak. The leadership should not have major problems at its annual conference this weekend. A split of any numerical importance seems unlikely. The danger lies elsewhere, in drift and haemorrhage. Some of course will leave just because they are tired or demoralised. However, the experience of the SA, SSP and Respect has left its mark on the SWP. A certain number of comrades, including some very experienced ones, have drawn some conclusions and become convinced of the need to build Respect as a real party, a broad party as against a coalition or front. One of the clearest expressions of this is the document "Out Towards the Open Sea", by Nick Wrack and Paul Holborrow, in PCB 1. This document argues: "Respect is not a classical united front. Nor is it helpful to describe it as a united front of a special kind, unless the "special kind" is more clearly explained. Without further explanation or clarification it can lead to errors in our work, particularly the periodic switching on and off of Respect work, which undermine the possibilities for developing Respect". They go on to argue that whatever Respect is called, party or coalition, it is in fact a party and has to be built as such, and not just at election times." They continue by arguing that "we [the SWP] do not see Respect as the over-arching strategic objective for the party in this period(...) It has to be the most important area of work into which all other areas of work are brought together". They also challenge the way in which the SWP operates in Respect: "we must not give the impression that we always want to be in control. The left and other new forces who we want to involve in Respect or whatever develops out of it will not get involved if they see the organisation dominated by the SWP". They conclude their document by saying: "In all this our approach should be; 'firm in principle, flexible in tactics'".

Several other contributions in the pre-conference bulletins are critical of the CC in relation to Respect, criticising all or part of the CC's orientation and its application. But the Wrack-Holborrow document really outlines an alternative orientation. And the CC replies to it in the same PCB. In response to "firm in principle, flexible in tactics" they argue: "But separating principles and tactics in this way is completely un-Marxist. Tactics derive from principles". In a very interesting and pretty comprehensive critique of the SWP leadership, the New Zealand affiliate of the IST replies to this quite effectively: "It seems to us an uncontroversial statement that tactics must be based on much more than principles - a lesson which Lenin himself explained clearly in his famous "Left-Wing" Communism". Revolutionary tactics must be based on the objective realities of the time - the level of class consciousness, the

balance of forces in society at any given moment, the resources and cadre available to a revolutionary organization. To derive tactics from principles is not the method of scientific socialism, but of a dogmatic or even sectarian approach, that the party is 'schoolteacher to the class'" (25).

The CC also replies, and here I think we get to the heart of the matter: "Of all the claims made against the SWP's position [in the internal bulletin the CC's position is always described by itself as "the SWP's position" - a small but revealing detail] the argument that Respect must be our over-arching strategic priority" must be the most ill-considered. Firstly, it ignores the fact that the building of the revolutionary party is the over-arching priority for any revolutionary Marxist. All other strategic decisions are subordinate to this goal". An interesting critical contribution in PCB 2 addresses the question of the concentric circles, and asks: "Does one circle expand in relation to the others? Does Respect grow into a mass party and we sink our roots into it or does the SWP build itself and Respect fall away like scaffolding? It isn't clear". Actually, I think it is. The "over-arching priority" is to build the revolutionary party (= the SWP) and all the rest is scaffolding. The idea that the new parties that are coming into existence might in the course of time, through many debates and struggles, become revolutionary parties, i.e. parties capable of leading the socialist transformation of society, is obviously not within their terms of reference. But, as I put it in the debate with John Rees five years ago: "Building a broad socialist party today may in fact be the best way to advance to a mass revolutionary party tomorrow". The SWP still doesn't agree with that, it still counterposes broad parties to revolutionary parties. The problem is, what other perspective does it have? Building the SWP by ones and twos?

A certain number of SWP members have now been expelled or have left. Trying to calculate whether they are 70 or 100, or more, or less, holds little interest. Some of them are apparently organising themselves into a group into which they can welcome new arrivals from the SWP. That in itself is not a problem for the SWP leadership. The problem for the SWP leadership is not that for those who leave there is a group to join - there was that in the 1970s. The problem is that this group has, along with others, a credible political perspective in the form of Respect Renewal. Those who leave will not just go into a small group, but into a small group that is helping to build a big party. That is a real threat for the SWP.

#### Is the SWP indispensable?

In 2004, Respect could not have been launched without the SWP. In that particular conjuncture, there was no way round the SWP. The other main far-left organisation, the Socialist Party, chose not to participate. That did not stop Respect taking off. The question now is - can Respect develop without the SWP? We have already said that far-

left groups of a certain size can make a positive or negative contribution to building new parties.

What happens when they choose not to play a positive role? Well, they could end up like Lutte Ouvriere, a still substantial organisation that is simply off the board when it comes to the recomposition of the workers' movement. Looking at the debates on the French left and the perspective of a new party, what the LCR, the Communist Party, the Socialist left and various other forces do can make a difference one way or the other. If LO suddenly decided that it was in favour of a broad anti-capitalist party and began to relate to other forces, that would be positive, though fairly astounding. If it does not, that will not stop the process. The fact is that what revolutionary groups of a certain size do or do not do can accelerate or slow the process of forming new parties. But they cannot block the process for ever. They can be by-passed.

Fundamentally, the form of the traditional far-left, revolutionary group has probably passed its sell-by date. Phil Hearse explains in the document previously quoted:

"The forms of the emergence of mass anti-capitalism and rejection of Stalinism and social democracy has thrown up a cacophony of social movements and social justice organisations, as well as a huge array of militant left political forces internationally. This poses new and complex tasks of organising and cohering the anti-capitalist left. And this cannot be done by building a small international current that regards itself as the unique depository of Marxist truth and regards itself as capable of giving the correct answer on every question, in every part of the planet".

That is on the political level. On an organizational level there is little chance that young people will accept the old type of 'revolutionary' organization. This is not because they are backward. It is obvious that that it is more difficult to talk about socialism today, or indeed revolution, though current developments in Latin America are making it easier. Although the kind of young people Mark Steel talks about who campaign around a multitude of issues and go to social forums may not be susceptible to ringing appeals to socialist revolution, they are certainly capable of joined-up thinking, of seeing that questions of global warming, war, neo-liberal economics and their consequences, are all linked to and flow from the same system, and that we need a global alternative to it. We are operating, as Phil Hearse puts it, in a situation "where the working class itself has been transformed in terms of its cultural level, geographical distribution and political and trade union organisation; and where the experience of mass social movements and the balance sheet of Stalinism (and social democracy) has radically reaffirmed the centrality of self-organisation and democracy at the heart of the revolutionary project".

In that situation the type of parties that young (and not so young people) will join will not be like the traditional left groups. Of course, some will. Some do join the SP, the Socialist Party, Lutte Ouvriere. And a recent sociological study shows that the new recruits to the LCR are having an effect that is both rejuvenating and proletarianising. But they are also demonstrating the limits of the ability of the type of organization the LCR is, even though it is incomparably more democratic than the organizations we have just mentioned, to welcome these new members. Which is why how to build a broad anti-capitalist party qualitatively different from the traditional left groups is at the centre of the LCR's preoccupations.

There is no certainty that any of the present formations of the radical left will evolve into revolutionary parties. Some might, some certainly won't, there will be all sorts of regroupments and recompositions along the way, there will be conflicts and there will be failures and setbacks. But intervening in these processes, building these parties and conducting debates with them is the way forward. And it is certain that the end result, if we can use such a term, will be quite different from the present left groups or the idea some of them have of a future mass party. Parties that will be able to build from the new generations will not just be vertical structures, even ones where the leadership will be under the control of the members and not vice versa. They will involve horizontal networks of sectors and interest groups, and forms of communication and diffusion of information that owe more to the new movements than to the old parties.

#### **Revolutionary Marxist organisation in broad parties**

In broad parties that involve many different currents and individuals, and many people who are new to politics, what should be the role of revolutionary Marxists? How should they organise? And indeed, should they organise? Let us put one aspect out of the way before attempting to answer that. Any Marxist group, or indeed any non-Marxist group, that comes into a broad party, should have the right to organise as a current, platform or whatever. Whether what they have to say helps to take the party forward or is seen as mistaken or irrelevant, is of course another question. But they should have the right to try and convince the party.

When the SSP was founded there were several platforms. The biggest was the International Socialist Movement (ISM). Later the CWI loyalists broke off and formed their own platform. There was the Republican Communist Network and the Scottish Socialist Republican Movement. Later the SWP joined. All these platforms had something in common. They were all imports, previously independent groups transformed into internal platforms. That was perfectly natural, but it always seemed to me that it was not set in stone and that over time new regroupments would arise

based on new questions and not old loyalties. That process was underway when the crisis of the party erupted in 2006. Many people outside Scotland think that the dissolution of the ISM at the beginning of 2006 was a mistake. Some think that its absence exacerbated the crisis of summer 2006. I think that there is no way that the ISM, as it was, could have continued, given the conflicts within it and the role some of its members played in subsequent events. Maybe it could have been maintained in some form. But what happened next was instructive. Faced with crisis that erupted in May 2006, the United Left was formed. It involved the bulk of the cadres of the ISM and some who had never been in the ISM, and it played a key role - not alone, with others, but a key role nevertheless - in stopping Sheridan and his supporters from taking over or destroying the SSP. And when the battle was over, they dissolved. And I think that was right.

We will come back to the ISM, but let's first look at what the role of Marxism and Marxists should be within broad parties. On one, fundamental level, the role that Marx and Engels defined for Communists back in 1848, to "have no interests separate from those of the proletariat as a whole", but while fighting for the attainment of immediate aims, to never lose sight of the final goal, the overthrow of capitalism, and the international nature of the struggle. But that means, not abstract propaganda for the socialist future and internationalism, but being able to propose, at each stage of the struggle, a line of march, strategy, tactics, that take us closer to that goal, not further away and not down any side alleys. On another level, there is a role of diffusing and popularising the Marxist method of analysis, simply because Marxism, creatively applied, remains the best tool for understanding history, the economy, society.

As for forms of organisation, they depend on the concrete situation. Let us take three examples. To go back to the SSP, I am not convinced that today the party is so heterogeneous that there is a need for an organised Marxist intervention via a platform. From afar, that does not seem to be a crying necessity. There are other ways of developing the influence of Marxism, via the ordinary structures of the party, in educational activities and by publications such as Frontline. On the other hand Die Linke in Germany and Respect are extremely heterogeneous and likely to become more so, so organised Marxist platforms seem to be on the order of the day. The way in which these platforms should be organised depends on the situation, but too tightly organised ones can have the effect of putting off many party members. It appears that in Die Linke, much of the left prefers to organise in a looser, more 'network' fashion. As for Respect, it seems important that the revolutionary Marxist forces - Socialist Resistance, ex-SWP, independents - find a way to organize and intervene that is both effective and provides an example that is radically different from the manipulative practices of the SWP.

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#### Notes

- (1) See my recent article, "The Radical Left in Western Europe" originally written for the German-language Inprekorr and available on the Socialist Unity site, <http://socialistunity.com/> 20 April 2007.
- (2) The whole debate was published in Links 23. <http://www.dsp.org.au/links>
- (3) "The broad Party, the revolutionary party and the united front", Links 23, January-April 2003.
- (4) "The Crisis in Respect", an article just published in International Socialism 117, but which was widely circulated internationally in draft form (by the SWP), with the obvious intention of giving their version of events. The quotes in this article are from the draft.
- (5) "A reply to 'The record: SWP and Respect'", Socialist Unity, 12 November 2007
- (6) "The Respect Fiasco in Britain", <http://www.sa.org.au/>
- (7) IST Discussion Bulletin 2, January 2003, Links 23.
- (8) Socialist Unity, 31 August 2007
- (9) "The SWP takes a step backwards", Socialist Unity, 3 January, 2008
- (10) Some people disapprove of quoting from 'internal' pre-conference bulletins. As a general rule, I'm in favour of open, public debate, and in this specific case the SWP debate concerns the whole left. I have only taken care only to quote the CC or well-known members, and not anyone who might not want their employer to know they are in the SWP.
- (11) Report by Ger Francis on South Birmingham Respect meeting, Socialist Unity, 1 December 2007
- (12) "I am not a number!", Splintered Sunrise blog, 17 December 2007. This the first time I have referred to an article by an anonymous blogger whose real identity I do not know. Not without some misgivings. But one has to move with the times, and blogs have played a key role in this debate. Without them much information necessary to have an overall vision of the situation would have been unavailable, certainly not in real time. I would cite in particular Socialist Unity and liammacuaid, (the identity of whose authors I do as it happens know). The posts on these blogs have sometimes led via the "comments" button to some rather surreal exchanges. But their role has been overwhelmingly positive. One of the key weapons of bureaucratic leaderships, big and small, has always been control of information, retained and then distilled at a time and in a way that suited the leadership. The Internet, web sites, blogs have changed all that. There is no way to put the genie back in the bottle. And a very good thing too.
- (13) "The crisis in the Scottish Socialist Party", Iain Ferguson and Mike Gonzalez, IST Discussion Bulletin 8, July 2006
- (14) "Sexism in the SWP and Respect", Socialist Unity, 14 December 2007
- (15) "Some remarks on democracy and debate in the Bolshevik Party", Links, 26, July-December 2004.
- (16) "Trotsky on Substitutionism" International Socialism first series, 2, 1960.
- (17) Phil Hearse, "Broad left parties and democratic centralism", [www.marxsite.com](http://www.marxsite.com) # January 2008.
- (18) Harman, 'The Crisis in Respect'.
- (19) E-mail dated 14/10/07. published by Socialist Unity 11 December 2007.
- (20) Nick Bird, "I've had enough", Weekly Worker 691, 8 October 2007'.
- (21) "SWP-Respect - Few Allies", 26 November 2007.
- (22) "Contribution to the debate for the Scottish congress [of the CWI], 21 September 1999.
- (23) "Scotland's Road to Revolution", Socialist Review

226, January 1999]]

(24) CC document, "Respect, the United Front and the Revolutionary Party".

(25) "A letter to all members of the SWP" (Britain) from Socialist Worker-New Zealand, Socialist Unity, 31 October 2007.