

Beyond fake 'unity': thinking outside the box of a polarised Respect

by John Lister and Alan Thornett
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As events in Respect have spiralled downwards into crisis, various calls for unity have been raised which have a certain superficial attraction. Wouldn't it be better if the two sides of the National Council (basically the SWP and fellow travellers on one side, and everyone else, including recent expellees from the SWP, on the other) could just sort out their differences and work together?

But the idea has had less credibility by the hour: the actions of the SWP and its immediate supporters (in response to a crisis entirely of their own making) have been so damaging, so cynical and so reckless that it is now impossible to find a core of members of the National Council who would be willing to trust them to honour any agreement that might be proposed.

We already have the experience to show that these fears are well founded. This is not the first time around for a unity drive: after the acrimony of the September 22nd NC in which 13 out of 14 SWP speakers had personally attacked George Galloway, seemingly determined to force him out of Respect, before moving on to pass, in his absence some of the key proposals from his August letter to the National Council, peace appeared to break out. The September 29 National Council carried a succession of unanimous votes for unity. The NC:

voted unanimously - on a motion proposed by an SWP member - to press George Galloway to reconsider his resignation as parliamentary candidate and to come back into a leading role in Respect

voted unanimously for a formula which would allow the appointment of a national organiser to work alongside John Rees

voted unanimously to endorse a resolution to conference originally written by Alan Thornett and John Lister, but moved at the meeting by Alan Thornett jointly with John Rees. This included a number of proposals which for three years had been points of contention, including agreement in principle to launch a newspaper.

There was also an apparent consensus of the vast majority of delegates in proposing that Nick Wrack, then still in the SWP, should be nominated to the national organiser post.

It's worth recalling these slightly surreal discussions and decisions from September 29th,

because since then every one of the unanimous decisions has been opposed and obstructed by the SWP leadership and its coterie who voted for them at the time.

The frenzied, back-biting attacks on George Galloway have continued and intensified in closed SWP meetings and in more public arenas. This same process of polarisation has alienated more prominent members of the SWP.

Nick Wrack has been hauled before an SWP Star Chamber, instructed to decline nomination for the job as national organiser of Respect (for which he was the only candidate), and expelled when he refused. Rob Hoveman and Kevin Ovenden, long-standing and experienced SWP members working in George Galloway's office, were hauled before a similar SWP committee and instructed to resign their jobs or be expelled: they too have now been expelled from the party. Leading trade union militant Jerry Hicks did not wait to be expelled: he drafted a devastating critique of his party's leadership and resigned from the SWP.

The masquerade of unity was also promptly undermined by polarised meetings in Tower Hamlets, and more recently in other towns and cities, in which the SWP has battled to secure the lion's share of delegate positions for the conference, and hyped up the rhetorical attacks on Galloway, Salma Yaqoob and those who have supported them.

The conflict has not been accidental but deliberate: every clash, and every angry, frustrated statement or expletive that has been provoked, has then in turn been exploited to build up the fiction of a "left-right" clash in Respect, a "witch-hunt" against the SWP - in which all of the various currents and individuals which have criticised the way Respect has been run, and identified with the points made by George Galloway and Salma Yaqoob, have been branded as the "right" wing.

A "petition" against the non-existent witch-hunt has been whipped up as a test of loyalty to hundreds of SWP members up and down the country, many of whom have as a result signed as "Respect supporter", indicating that they are not even members of the organisation.

At the top of the list are the names of four Tower Hamlets councillors, two of them SWP members and two very close to the SWP, who have subsequently held a press conference to publicise their resignation of the Respect whip and the establishment of a new party grouping in Tower Hamlets - Respect (Independent) which may run candidates against Respect. The press conference was arranged by a full time worker in the Respect Office (an SWP member clearly working under the direction of Central Committee member John Rees), with the £300+ venue billed to Respect, and attended by Respect National Secretary John Rees,

who has yet to voice any criticism of this very public and very damaging split in the organisation, which has given huge ammunition to New Labour and relegated Respect from its position as the main opposition party in Tower Hamlets.

The SWP leadership has resorted to ridiculous manoeuvres in their efforts to manipulate an artificial majority behind their position at the Respect conference, scheduled for November 17: large numbers of phantom members have been claimed for "Student Respect", an organisation wholly owned and controlled by the SWP, allowing the SWP to send along one delegate for every ten claimed members, and potentially outvote genuine delegates from real branches. When challenged to produce evidence that these students were genuine members, the SWP leadership has responded by claiming this is another part of the "witch hunt" and an attempt to exclude students.

Increasingly acrimonious Respect meetings in different cities are seeing battles over delegations to conference, in several instances leading to more SWP members resigning in disgust at their party's sectarian antics, as well as angry walk-outs by non-SWP members.

Looking over the period since Galloway penned his critical letter at the back end of August, it is impossible to avoid concluding that the SWP leadership's tactics have been an absolute and unmitigated disaster not only for Respect, which can never be restored, but also for the SWP itself.

From the prestige and credibility it gained by acting as the principal organised political current in the most successful political regroupment to the left of Labour since World War 2, the SWP leadership has now cemented itself into the position of a rigidly centralist and dogmatically sectarian current that would rather smash three years' work and destroy hard-won political alliances than tolerate any genuine pluralism or political development in Respect.

All of the worst fears and reservations so widely held on the left about the SWP and its methods have been confirmed: the Party's line has been so appalling that its every tactic appears designed to demoralise its best members, alienate non-SWP members and further isolate the party within Respect.

Even their very worst enemies could not have hatched up a scheme half as destructive as the one the SWP Central Committee has imposed upon itself. It must be the first time such a large-scale left current effectively launched a witch-hunt on itself, driving towards a split which - if they were to go to a stitched-up Respect conference and win the vote - would be a Pyrrhic victory, leaving only a downsized SWP and a wafer thin layer of hangers-on in Respect.

Such a formation would never attract any broader forces - many of whom will instinctively recoil from the SWP for years to come as the reality becomes more widely known.

The SWP leadership have also broken from most of the well-known figures who could draw a crowd for Respect - notably Galloway and Salma Yaqoob, but also Victoria Brittain and Ken Loach.

In other words the SWP leaderships tactics have driven off virtually all of the independent forces that made Respect a genuinely broad-based coalition. After three years of work they now stand to walk away from the project weaker and more discredited than they were before it launched: their track record is one of politically hobbling Respect, under-selling it and failing to tap its potential in a period uniquely favourable to building a left alternative. And having failed to build it to its potential, rather than face up to any of the errors that have been made, or correct them, they have embarked on a suicidal policy of polarising Respect for and against the SWP.

However, for those of us who have not stopped looking to build a broad left-wing party, the fact that the SWP leadership appears to have pressed the self-destruct button opens up a far from a satisfying situation. They are threatening to destroy something far more than the SWP itself.

The problem is that if the SWP leadership stick to their guns, reject the proposals that we have made for postponement, and insist on convening the conference on November 17 there is no viable basis for non-SWP members to participate in it. There could only be a negative outcome.

We already know that there is no way we would be allowed to win any votes, and that the process of checking credentials of delegations from Tower Hamlets, Student Respect and other areas would be a nightmare, with a real possibility of anger and frustration on both sides exploding into threats and even violence.

But we also know that even if by some fluke we DID win a vote on a contested issue, there is no chance of the policy being implemented as long as the SWP leadership calls the shots.

Worse, we know from grim episodes in the history of the sectarian left, and from the way the SWP has now drummed up signatures for its current "petition" that it is possible for highly centralised groups such as the SWP to march in squads of delegates who know what they are going to vote for before they get there, who will be oblivious to the damage that they and their antics do to the organisation.

We also know the impact a polarised, packed conference like this would have on independent

forces and those with no experience of the far left: they would be profoundly shocked, alienated and demoralised: the result would be that many valuable people would be lost to the project and quite possibly lost to the left for years to come.

So we have a real problem: do we march whoever we can gather into a stitched-up conference to be abused and reviled and voted down by SWPers accusing us of witch-hunting them - and decide only afterwards how to regroup and rebuild?

Do we participate in a conference that not only cannot solve the problems, but which could make them many times worse and also parade them on the national stage in front of the press and mass media, to the delight of the real right wing and witch hunters?

Or do we decide that that is a not a useful expenditure of energy and that the time has come to build something new and inclusive which can address the problem of working class representation for which Respect was originally launched to address?

Of course it would be a setback to accept that Respect as we have known it, with all the effort involved in getting it off the ground had been destroyed by the SWP leadership. But the fact is the political conditions which created it are as relevant now as they were then, even more so. And it is already clear that there are people all round the country who are ready to join or rejoin a more inclusive organisation.

With the emergence of Brown the situation is far worse in the LP than it was when Respect was founded. The possibility of reclaiming Labour for the left is dead in the water. The defeat of the John McDonnell campaign saw the Labour left at its lowest ebb for 60 years. There has to be a recomposition of the left which goes far beyond what Respect has been able to do.

We need a new organisation as soon as possible which will start to address these issues and create the condition to unite with those from the Labour left, the trade union left and the activists of ecological and climate change campaigns which can present a political alternative to the betrayals of new Labour.