

*The following document was written by Nick Wrack. It was written as a contribution to the SWP's Pre-conference Internal Bulletin, and co-authored with another comrade in the SWP. Nick Wrack was expelled from the SWP. He is a former national Chairperson of Respect.*

## OUT TOWARDS THE OPEN SEA by Nick Wrack - September 2007

The decision to turn the Party outwards towards working with other radical left forces in society, implemented through the various forms of United Front work over the past few years, was correct. Such a turn inevitably brings with it new problems as the party collectively and comrades individually are forced to confront new situations and to consider different ways of working.

Respect is the most significant and the most important arena for this turn in our work. It arises out of our correct assessment that there is a significant space to the left of Labour which can be filled by a radical working-class force in which revolutionaries can work with others to build a serious electoral alternative to New Labour. Whatever may be said about the strength and length of the Brown bounce, it cannot fundamentally alter this assessment.

Unfortunately, the theoretical arguments that we have put forward to explain our work in Respect have not been fully worked through and consequently not all of the necessary conclusions about what Respect is and how we should relate to it have been properly drawn. This is partly because we have not systematically and regularly discussed these issues as a party. As a result of this absence of dialogue we fail to draw all the correct strategic and tactical conclusions about our work within Respect.

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.

Respect is a broad political organisation that contests elections. It puts forward a comprehensive political programme. It is not a union of forces for a temporary fight on a single or several limited demands but a permanent formation around a wide-ranging political manifesto. Whether it is described as a party or a coalition is immaterial. It stands in elections. It has a manifesto. It has branches. It has an MP and councillors. To the wider world and to most people who join it, it is a party. Those who join it see it as their party. They want to build it, make it more successful.

To achieve this means patient, persistent and consistent work at a local level to create, maintain and develop active Respect branches. Without branches that relate to the local working class communities successful election campaigns are almost impossible. This means that we have to put into practice our claim that 'Respect is not just an electoral organisation'. Because unless we act to build Respect on a regular basis across the country rooted in every locality we will never be able to have successful election campaigns. This is the lesson of Southall. There is a grave danger that we will suffer in the GLA elections in May 2008 as a consequence of our failure to implement this approach.

### Overarching strategic objective

The reason for our failure to approach Respect in this way is primarily that we do not see Respect as the overarching strategic objective for the party in this period. Firstly, we treat it as a united front that can be turned on for elections and then forgotten about for the rest of the time. Secondly, although we carry out many united front operations we do not link them all back to Respect. We should constantly be trying to see how we can relate our work in DCH, STWC, UAF and our various industrial interventions to the question of building and recruiting to Respect. There is insufficient strategic thinking about how the work can dovetail towards building Respect. This reinforces the weakness of Respect at local and national level. Respect is seen as just another area of united front work, on a par with the others. It is not. It has to be much more than that. It has to be the most important area of work into which all other areas of work are brought together.

This does not at all mean liquidating the party. On the contrary, it means that the party will carry out work in a broader political milieu comprising trade unionists, anti-war activists, environmentalists, radicals from Muslim communities, etc. Our political ideas will find fertile ground here. Our task then is to explain patiently the ideas of revolutionary socialism whilst building Respect as an active, campaigning organisation with real purchase in the local and national working class.

When we sell the paper or intervene at work, we do so openly as members of the party. But often we do not also identify as being members of Respect. And when we do Respect work it is often not clearly understood how this contributes to the building of the party. Many comrades do not see Respect work as being an opportunity to raise our wider politics but as an electoralist, reformist operation; foot-soldiers for others. It is not surprising that many comrades have rebelled against Respect work as they see it as a watering down of their revolutionary activity. We need much more discussion about how we intervene in Respect as revolutionaries without creating unnecessary divisions with others involved.

This also raises questions about how we relate to others in Respect from different traditions and backgrounds. We should be immensely proud of the work we have carried out within Muslim communities. No other political force has been capable of this. We have correctly argued against those who have criticised us for it. We must not succumb to those criticisms now. Our approach within Respect should be informed by the need to broaden the forces involved. Every new member or group that gets involved should be welcomed and encouraged.

New forces will bring with them their own ideas, habits and methods of work. Inevitably this will mean that discussions and disagreements will arise. Sometimes these disagreements may be sharp, but we should not make them so unnecessarily. Nor should we shy away from raising problems and involving all parts of Respect in a discussion to resolve them. So, for example, if there are issues about sexism or homophobia then they should be tackled at the time, not left for months and then raised as a way to beat those who disagree with us. Any formation that manages to involve people from beyond the (very small) traditional left will inevitably have to confront these problems. Our motto should be "to explain patiently". That can only help to raise the understanding of all.

Unfortunately, in the recent crisis, charges of sexism and homophobia have been raised in such a way as to brand a whole community or a section of it, rather than as the backwardness of this or that individual. Even worse has been the charge that we are faced with "communalism". This is an inflammatory charge designed to polarise the debate and can do nothing to resolve disagreements about candidate selection. Anyone who took the time to discuss with the subjects of the accusations would very quickly have to conclude that the term is not appropriate.

It is inevitable, given the electoral successes of Respect, that we will attract people with opportunist inclinations. This is not so shocking. We just need to deal with it. With all things we need most of all a sense of proportion and a sense of perspective. With the launching of Respect we took to the open sea. We need to hold our nerve and carry on, not retreat to the calm of the shore at the first sight of inclement weather. We also need a deft hand at the tiller.

The response from the CC to George Galloway's letter, however, has shown anything but a sense of proportion or a sense of perspective. If we accept that Respect is critically important and needs to continue then that has to inform our response to any difficulty or conflict within Respect. Our approach, as the dominant organised force, has to be such that temperatures are reduced not raised. This is sometimes difficult but necessary.

Firstly, there has been a completely exaggerated description of problems in Tower Hamlets and Birmingham. Secondly, there has been a disproportionate response to these problems and to George Galloway's document. Instead of engaging with the points that Galloway raised the CC responded by taking the party to a war footing, stating that Galloway had declared war on the SWP, that this was a battle of left against right, of the socialists against communalism and so on. This was to blow the criticisms raised by Galloway so much out of proportion as to engulf the whole of Respect in a crisis that could have been avoided. Lots of comrades involved in small weak Respect branches who look around the country at the absence of Respect branches elsewhere will relate to much of what Galloway said. We should have engaged with his letter, disagreeing where necessary. But to present it as an attack on the work with trade unions and gay rights was a serious disservice to the party.

There are real problems at the heart of Respect. Personal and political relations have broken down between the leadership of the party and other prominent members, Salma Yaqoob and George Galloway. We need to rectify this. We cannot take the view that it does not matter if Galloway walks away or if Salma goes. They are both vital assets for Respect. They reach an audience and have a constituency way beyond what we could reach on our own. The great strength of Respect is that it draws together people from different traditions.

Further, 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. We must ensure that the structures and methods adopted are always rigorously scrutinised to see if they create an impediment to others getting involved.

Where do we go from here? There are massive opportunities to build a left alternative to New Labour. Respect is only one stage in the process. It may be that Respect grows and attracts new forces. It may be that Respect takes its forces into some new formation involving left trade unionists and others. The actual line of development cannot be predicted in advance. We need to be attuned and sensitive to opportunities as they emerge. We must be quick and adept in responding. We must also initiate approaches to others.

In all this our approach should be: "firm in principle, flexible in tactics". In that way we will build the left without compromising our revolutionary integrity.