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Respect is in crisis. Only four years after its foundation its prime movers, the Socialist Workers Party and George Galloway, are at war. In a recent document, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times”, Galloway has warned that Respect faces the possibility of “oblivion” unless it shakes itself free of SWP control. Stuart King looks at where Respect came from and why it has failed to deliver the “breakthrough” that its leaders promised and is facing a break-up instead

THE LAST ten years provided promising opportunities to develop and strengthen a revolutionary and anti-capitalist movement to the left of Labour. Sadly, little has been achieved. The organised left is probably numerically weaker, and is certainly less well rooted in the working class, than it was a decade ago.

As the twentieth century ended things looked very different. Labour was in power but hundreds of thousands of workers and youth were disillusioned with its neo-liberal programme. Its privatisation policy in health and education, refusal to repeal the anti-union laws, introduction of student loans and fees, attacks on striking fire fighters and other workers, imperialist adventures in former Yugoslavia, Africa, Afghanistan, Iraq: all these led to a growing discontent with New Labour.

Amongst a wide layer of activists Blair was distrusted and even despised. This was a period when the far left should have been able to win large numbers to a revolutionary alternative. Or at the very least it was a period when significant organised breaks from Labour to the left could have been achieved.

In Scotland the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) was formed and challenged Labour with some success. Arthur Scargill created the Socialist Labour Party (SLP), but he quickly drove out the left wing and the SLP became a shrivelled Stalinist sect. After this debacle the Socialist Alliance (SA) was re-vamped and re-launched in the late 1990s.

It gathered together almost the entire far left, including its two biggest components, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the Socialist Party (SP). It drew in hundreds of non-aligned militants, disillusioned Labour Party members and former members of the far left. The SA was able to make a good showing in the first Greater London Assembly (GLA) elections and stood ninety candidates in the 2001 general election. It organised a trade union conference of 1,200 militants to establish a campaign to democratise the political funds of trade unions and change the union constitutions that had ensured a monopoly of union money and affiliation to Labour.

Many of those in the SA saw these interventions as steps

best of times

towards the formation of a new working class party. But its majority, the SWP and the SP, had different ideas. They did not want it to become a party, which would have to decide on a programme: revolution or reform. They saw it as a purely electoral coalition – a means of pooling the left’s resources to challenge Labour at the polls. For the SWP and the SP this meant that the SA was active during elections but put into “cold storage” when elections were not on the agenda.

This was a disastrous mistake. Good election results are rarely the product of three weeks’ door-to-door campaigning. They are a test of how popular a party has become in the whole preceding period. Bourgeois parties build up this popularity by influencing public opinion in the media, via control of councils and so on. Working class organisations have to do it by sinking roots in the class they claim to represent. They have to be at the forefront, as parties, of the struggles of the class. This is impossible if the SWP majority decide, as they did, that the SA has no role to play, for example, in the mass anti-war movement. Come the election who will vote for an organisation that has had an invisible cloak placed over it during the previous years? The SA inevitably withered.

But the electoral solitary confinement that the SWP prison officers imposed on the SA was not the only problem it faced. It was also denied the opportunity – by a self-styled revolutionary organisation – of saying to the workers whose support it sought, that the alternative needed to Labourism was revolutionary communism. The SWP, supported in this instance by the SP, and the International Socialist Group (ISG), argued that it was impossible to win the workers who were breaking from Labour to a revolutionary alternative.

Of course the only legitimate way to have tested this was in practice. Could an election campaign, waged on a revolutionary programme that was articulated in an accessible and effective way, win support. Permanent Revolution supporters (then in Workers Power) argued that it should be tried because there was no divine

rule that said workers needed to be won over by left reformism first and only later taken one by one into a back room and shown the dirty books of revolutionary communism. Like Marx we disdain to conceal our views.

The SWP argued that such concealment was the order of the day. Their excuse was that they wanted to keep genuine reformists within the ranks of the Socialist Alliance and not split it by imposing their own views. The fact that their wretched bureaucratic manoeuvres drove out almost everyone who was not a member of their organisation, including the reformist comrades, rather exposes this pretext for the sham that it always was. After all, revolutionaries were prepared to accept the democratic decisions of SA conferences even when they voted down revolutionary proposals. Reformists within the SA would

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surely have done the same. And if they would not then frankly they are not people with whom we would want to build an organisation in any case.

The real reason for the SWP’s coyness about advancing a revolutionary programme is that they do not believe it can win support from the working class. They have a stage-ist schema that says a mass left reformist movement must be created first, and out of that they can get one-by-one recruitment to revolution in the shape of the SWP. The schema cannot be disrupted. To fit in with this schema they limited the SA programme (People Before Profit)¹ to a series of left reformist demands that studiously avoided the question, reform or revolution. During elections the SWP regularly watered down this platform even further

to a handful of reformist proposals.

People Before Profit was quite left in its socialist policies – thanks to the input of revolutionaries in the SA. But the policy conference that decided upon it was dominated by the SWP and it deliberately fudged the question of reform or revolution. For example, the SWP voted down proposals to call for the capitalist state to be overthrown, for the army and police to be dismantled, smashed, in the course of a revolution, and replaced by workers' militias and organs of workers' self-government – workers' councils.

This idea of building a purely electoral bloc on left reformist politics was a complete departure from revolutionary electoral tactics. The purpose of revolutionaries standing in elections is not to perpetuate the myth that by winning majorities in parliaments or local councils we can implement “a socialist programme”. Unlike reformists we do not believe real power lies within these institutions. If any serious measures were taken in parliament that undermined the capitalist state, the ruling class would use its real bastions of power – the unelected judges, mega-corporations, army and police – to remove the government or parliament itself in extremis.

Elections provide revolutionaries with a good arena of political work inside the class, one in which workers are discussing major political issues – how should the country be governed, what policies should be adopted on the economy, inequality, health, war etc? Elections give us the opportunity to advance communist answers, put forward a different vision of society, not in an abstract way but relating the everyday problems that workers face – poverty, low wages, lack of housing, lousy transport, racism and discrimination – to the fight for socialism.

Electoral activity should be geared to convincing people of your ideas, organising them for action and building the revolutionary organisation and its periphery. If a party does not come out of an election campaign having strengthened its roots and organisation in an area, however many votes it gained, it has failed.

The SWP's approach to the SA (and now to Respect) turned this principle on its head. No revolutionary argu-

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ments were heard in election campaigns, only left reformist ones, the only measure of success was “how many votes were won?” Using these campaigns to build an organisation became virtually impossible. The SA branches that were the staple diet of every SWP member's work during the election were wrapped in cling film and flung to the back of the freezer once the votes had been counted.

Only where the SWP were weak did SA branches build themselves into significant permanent organisations. Abstract left reformism combined with organisational

manipulation was the hallmark of the SWP's period of leadership of the Socialist Alliance. And it led the SA from being a promising opportunity to revitalise the left and build a revolutionary alternative into, to use Galloway's phrase, oblivion.

United fronts of a special type

The SWP theorised this right turn towards espousing left reformism as a stage with the novel idea of the “united front of a special type”. This underpins the SWP's later turn to Respect. SWP leader Alex Callinicos summarised it in an article “Unity in Diversity”², where he argued that “broader” united fronts had emerged with the development of the anti-capitalist movement (ACM) after Seattle in 1999 which had led to a higher level of “political generalisation”. Internationally these united fronts of a special kind could be seen in the World Social Forum/ACM and in ATTAC in France. In Britain they could be found in the Socialist Alliance and Globalise Resistance. These united fronts were politically broader, encompassing more issues and struggles than the narrower, “classical” ones like the Stop the War coalition or Anti Nazi League. Callinicos declared: “Most obviously, the programme of the Socialist Alliance, while it leaves open the decisive strategic question of reform or revolution, is an explicitly socialist one that demands the comprehensive transformation of British society.”

The SA, he argued, responded to the “decay of Labourism by providing an alternative to New Labour especially, though not exclusively, at elections, in England and Wales, and thereby to offer disaffected Labour Party members and supporters a new political home.” And he went on to say: “To adopt an explicitly revolutionary programme, as some groups within the Alliance argue [he couldn't bring himself to name us!], would be to slam the door on Labour Party supporters who have rejected Blairism but who have yet to break with reformism.”

John Rees was to add in a debate with Murray Smith of the SSP, “in its political construction [the SA] is a united front because it brings together former Labour Party members who are not revolutionary socialists and those, like the SWP, who are revolutionaries. Its programme, broad as it is, represents the minimum acceptable to the revolutionaries and the maximum acceptable to the former Labour Party members.”³

So the purpose of what Callinicos called this “hybrid” organisation, not quite a united front not quite a political party, was to corral defecting Labour supporters into an alternative organisation to new Labour. There the SWP, as the “revolutionary organisation”, could win them over by being the best activists and leaders – but not by arguing the need for revolution, which would have only put off these still reformist workers.⁴

It was part of a political schema that the SWP, ISG, SP and SSP all shared, that is workers, even those breaking with reformism, could not be won directly to revolution. They had to pass through a “halfway house”, through a left reformist or centrist phase in their development.

Members of Permanent Revolution, then part of Work-

ers Power, argued in the SA for a different strategy. We were in favour of a new revolutionary party of the working class and were in favour of the SA setting out to build one; not of declaring the few thousand members of the SA a new party but using the organisation to break tens of thousands of disaffected Labour Party members, plus local, regional and national trade unions away from Labour and to the project of forming a new party.

There was no need to hide the need for revolution when the SA stood in elections, nor to push revolutionary politics under the carpet to lure them in. The campaign for a candidate in Greenwich fighting on such an open call for revolution was not in any way harmed. Quite the opposite, new forces were drawn in, new campaigns were launched and real steps towards building a large and vibrant SA in the area were taken. More generally, in the unions workers regularly vote for revolutionaries in trade union elections even if they don't agree with all their politics. But they withhold those votes, quite rightly, if they think the revolutionaries are pretending to be reformists in order to – let's use the right word – con people into voting for them.

In the case of the SA, fighting the election in this way would have been a campaign for a new workers' party, not a finished product. We did not present our policies as a take it or leave it platform. Indeed we encouraged workers' organisations to enter the Alliance and debate out what sort of programme a new party should stand on, how it should organise and fight. We merely refused to hide what we thought the answers to such questions were.

This was the method and tactic the then exiled Russian revolutionary leader Leon Trotsky suggested to his supporters in the USA and which they used after the upsurge of workers' struggles in the 1930s.⁵ Trotsky, however, was clear that there should be no fudging on the need for revolution in the building of a movement, a united front, for such a party. By contrast, in the SA we had so-called revolutionary organisations arguing with the ex-Labour Party members and workers that revolutionary politics was premature, too advanced and only being put forward by ultra-left sectarians. This was a policy guaranteed to deepen the attachment of left reformist workers to their existing ideas, not break them from such ideas.

Launching Respect

By 2003 the SWP had decided to wind up the SA. It had served its purpose. Their members had received a good training in electoral work from it and many of the left reformist allies that it had politically pandered to had been unceremoniously dumped by the SWP the minute they had expressed concern at its bureaucratic practices. And the wheel clamps the SWP fastened on the SA outside of election times had antagonised the independents. They wanted the SA to be more like a party and started campaigning to say so.

Accountability and criticism is not something that the SWP leadership hold in high regard. They operate a decision-making process that is elitist, behind closed doors and undemocratic. They had had their fill of the SA's tradition of robust democratic accountability. Moreover,

despite the left reformism they had imposed on it, the magical electoral breakthrough had not come. It seemed that their schema wasn't working. Or was it that even left reformism was too strong a medicine for the great British voting public?

Furthermore, the growth of the SA had stalled. The SP had left, taking with them their handful of councillors. The SA had only one success in council elections, with the victory of Michael Lavalette in Preston. Despite a successful union political fund conference this did not translate into unions, or even union branches, voting to support the SA. This was in contrast to the SSP where the RMT in

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Scotland had affiliated, resulting in the whole national union being expelled from the Labour Party.

Of course this was largely because of the way the SWP treated the SA as an electoral vehicle. But at the very same time the Stop the War movement was going from strength to strength – reaching its high point in 2003. Two million marched against war in London on 15 February that year and 500,000 protested against the outbreak of war on the Saturday after the invasion on 22 March. In September 100,000 marched and an estimated 500,000 poured onto London's streets after work to protest against George Bush's visit on 20 November. In October George Galloway was expelled from the Labour Party for denouncing the war, calling Bush and Blair "liars and wolves" on an Arab TV station, questioning the war's legality and arguing that troops should therefore not obey illegal orders.

This was a golden opportunity for the SWP. It could launch something bigger and better than the Socialist Alliance. It entered into discussions with Galloway, leading figures in the anti-war movement and Muslim organisations like the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB) to launch a new political party.

At the July 2003 National Council of the Socialist Alliance the SWP presented its proposals on a take it or leave it basis. It had already driven out working class militants like Steve Godward of the FBU, from the SA in Birmingham where it was test-piloting its new style alliance. It was clear the SA was on its way out.

At Marxism that year Lindsey German presented the new initiative, announcing that the aim was to unite the millions who had marched against war in a new political party. It was here, in reply to a criticism by one of our members of the idea that you could unite such forces, including the MAB, in anything resembling a socialist party, that she infamously replied that she was not going to allow gay rights to become a "shibboleth" in the way of such a project.⁶

The new party "Respect: the unity coalition" was

launched in January 2004 at a 1,400 strong "Convention". This was a conference packed with the SWP and Galloway's allies in which opposition amendments to the "founding declaration" aimed at making it in anyway socialist were quickly voted down. Lindsey German for the SWP central Committee made clear from the platform that they "did not want a repeat of the Socialist Alliance programme" and were looking for something "broader, wider, less explicitly socialist".⁷ SWP members illustrated this by opposing attempts to put opposition to all immigration controls in

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the declaration as being "too advanced for the ordinary people we are trying to win."

This indeed was a neat reversal of their position of only three years before when they had denounced the SP for wanting to do the same thing at the SA conference that adopted People Before Profit!

The declaration of 11 points was a socialism-free zone. It contained important campaigning demands like ending the occupation of Iraq, stopping privatisation policies, re-nationalising transport and repealing anti-union laws, but remained vague on any issue that might alienate its new hoped for constituency. The formulation that dealt in passing with lesbian and gay rights was left so vague and underdeveloped that it managed to completely avoid using the words lesbian and gay: "Opposition to all forms of discrimination based on race, gender, ethnicity, religious beliefs (or lack of them), sexual orientation, disabilities, national origin or citizenship." Abortion and a women's right to choose were left out completely.⁸

In place of socialism as a goal, Respect declared: "We want a world in which the democratic demands of the people are carried out: a world based on need not on profit: a world where solidarity rather than self-interest is the spirit of the age." Or as we put it at the time, "a world in which the words socialism, revolution, capitalism, the class struggle and the working class are not mentioned."

It was a programme designed to appeal to a cross-section of groups and classes: workers disillusioned with Labour; Muslims (both workers and small employers) outraged at the attack on Iraq and Afghanistan; the middle classes radicalised by the anti-war movement; even, for George Galloway, disaffected "conservatives and liberals". Respect was to be a populist movement, not a socialist one. It was to be radical but not class-based. And the SWP were at the heart of this non-socialist project. George Galloway sent the convention away to raise a million pounds, "get a million votes" and win seats in the upcoming GLA and Euro-elections. Votes were everything, socialist policies were nothing.

The election campaign in 2004 revealed both how

Respect intended to build itself and the strains within it that would eventually lead to its current crisis.

George Galloway was the leading figure and public face of Respect. His courageous attacks on Blair's government and against the war on Iraq made him a figurehead for Muslims and it was he who drew the support of organisations like the MAB. But the MAB was a small Islamist organisation associated with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and had in the recent past argued for an Islamic state. As an organisation it did not formally support any political party, its leaders "standing down" to run as Respect candidates. But it also supported Ken Livingstone for mayor of London (not Lindsey German) and Greens and Liberals in various parts of the country. In Birmingham, Respect struck an alliance with a Peace and Justice Party, a grouping with local councillors who supported Kashmiri independence. Similar support amongst sections of the Muslim community was being won in East London.

John Rees, National Secretary of Respect, was quite open about the nature of the Respect coalition, declaring: "Respect rests on three foundation stones – the socialists, the left in the unions and Muslims who have been radicalised by the wars in Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq."⁹ It is not clear what Hindu, Sikh and Afro-Caribbean (Christian or otherwise) workers thought of this emphasis in the West Midlands constituency where Rees stood. Clearly they were not considered radical enough to be part of the foundation stones!

In the GLA elections Lindsey German headed up a list of Respect candidates and put out a ten page manifesto which did not mention the word socialism once. It restricted itself to mild left reformist promises – reliable, cheap and safe public transport, more council housing and an end to sell offs, "rethinking crime" by calling for better street lighting, more transport staff at night and more caretakers in council blocks.

But it was Galloway who dominated the headlines and was interviewed regularly in the national press and it was here that the lack of control over "the Respect MP" really mattered. Revolutionary socialists have made it a matter of principle that their elected representatives are controlled by and accountable to the party. Too many times workers' representatives have been elected to parliaments only to betray their parties and working class voters, adapting to the lifestyle, and in the end the politics, of these bourgeois debating clubs.

Yet at Respect's foundation Galloway made it clear he was not going to be controlled by Respect conferences or committees. Not for Galloway the traditional agreement to live on the average worker's wage and donate the rest of the parliamentary salary to the party. He made clear he needed at least £100,000 a year to live on – indeed he earns much more with his journalism and TV appearances. This the SWP readily agreed to, block-voting down an amendment to the Respect constitution on the question. It is a scandalous position when many of Galloway's East End constituents have to exist on wages below the GLA decency threshold of £8.00 an hour, but the SWP went along with it rather than lose their "star" leader. They knew that without Galloway Respect was nothing.

Galloway's one man show approach to Respect was

revealed again right in the middle of the campaign when he gave an interview to the *Independent on Sunday*, where he explained his deeply held religious convictions meant he opposed abortion on principle: "I'm strongly against abortion. I believe life begins at conception and therefore unborn babies have rights. I think abortion is immoral." He added: "I believe in god. I have to believe that the collection of cells has a soul." Galloway knew this interview would win him support amongst his religious allies and sure enough the MAB immediately issued a press release praising Galloway's stand. The SWP's leading Respect figures remained silent on the question – clearly women's rights were another "shibboleth" that were not allowed to get in the way of this coalition.

Galloway's remarks should have come as no surprise to the SWP leadership, he was well known for his anti-abortion stance in Parliament (where he has also opposed embryo research). He is regularly praised on right to life anti-abortion web sites for his voting record in opposing any attempt to loosen the restrictive 1967 Abortion Act and supporting measures aimed at restricting it further. This activity continued even after Respect formally nodded through a policy document that included opposition to further restrictions on abortion, with Galloway putting his name in support of an October 2006 early day motion proposed by Geraldine Smith, Vice Chair of the pro-life all-party group in Parliament.¹⁰

Clearly Galloway decides his own policies on such questions whatever his party says. He is the unaccountable "celebrity leader", a position that led to his notorious appearance on the Big Brother TV programme, a decision again taken without any consultation with Respect or its leadership and that caused the organisation major problems.

Yet through all of this the SWP zipped its lip. Galloway was allowed to be unaccountable, for the sake of votes. Galloway was allowed to dress up as a cat on Big Brother, for the sake of votes. Galloway was allowed to vote against Respect policy on abortion, for the sake of votes. Galloway gets what he wants. And the SWP stay in control of the organisation in return. The problem comes when what Galloway wants is an organisation – effectively a party that is an election machine for him – that will destroy the SWP's control of Respect and create something that will be an obstacle to them because it will be a rival party to them.

This is what is now happening and it is what threatens to tear Respect apart. And despite the occasional electoral success, these problems have been evident in Respect for some time.

Respect's electoral results

Initially Respect did a lot less well than Galloway and the SWP expected – in the June 2004 Euro-elections it got 252,000 votes, averaging 1.75% per constituency (the BNP received over 800,000 votes). In London Respect got just over 87,000 votes – just under 5%. The best spin was put on these results, with talk of an "astonishing breakthrough" for a party in existence for a few months. Indeed the party had made some considerable gains in the per-

centage of votes in the largely Muslim inner city areas of Birmingham, East London and in Preston.

In the May 2005 general election Respect stood in only thirty constituencies, a third of the number the SA had stood in at the previous election. Its one great success was George Galloway ousting Labour MP Oona King in Bethnal Green and Bow. Oona King was an MP of Afro-Caribbean descent, who was Jewish and a staunch supporter of Blair's war against Iraq, representing a constituency that was overwhelmingly Muslim and anti-war. Galloway had picked

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his target seat well. But only in a few other constituencies did Respect gain significant support – Salma Yaqoob in Birmingham with 27.5% of the vote, East Ham 20%, Poplar 17% and West Ham 19% were the few respectable results. This did not stop the SWP bringing out a *Socialist Worker* (SW) special with the modest headline "Birth of a new power", a bit of an exaggeration as Respect had tallied 85,000 votes in total in the general election!

Further gains were registered in local elections the following year. In May 2006 twelve councillors were elected in Tower Hamlets, three in Newham and one, Salma Yaqoob, in Birmingham. This achievement of gaining 18 councillors nationally (including one in Preston) needs to be seen in the context of local elections where the Tories gained over 300 seats from Labour and the fascist BNP more than doubled its number of councillors from 20 to 46. Certainly there was disillusion with Labour but it was not leading in any mass way towards Respect or other left parties.

All these claims of "stunning victories" and "major breakthroughs" (in fact quite minor electoral gains) hid an awkward fact – none of this electoral support was being turned into an active membership base across the country. Between its second and third conferences Respect lost a third of its members and with it much of its ability to campaign as a political organisation. It remained chronically reliant on the footsoldiers of the SWP to dish out its leaflets and knock on doors and not all the SWP membership were that keen. All the SWP's talk about how this was a "new type" of organisation that did not need the traditional membership meetings, that could rely on barbecues and social events, was proving hollow when it came to real political campaigning.

These growing problems were covered over at Respect conferences. The SWP leadership needed to keep up the pretence that its new tactic was successful and going from strength to strength. Galloway knows the media hates a loser. So at the 2006 conference he told the delegates that 10,000 students had joined Respect, only to be corrected next day when it turned out that 2,000 had "signed forms". This did not stop Galloway and Respect putting out a press

release headed “Third annual conference silences doubters”, claiming “a staggering 10,000 students had joined Respect over the last few weeks” (SW that week limited itself to “thousands” of students joining). In fact membership figures dragged out of the leadership revealed that membership had declined from 3,040 in 2005 to 2,160 in 2006.¹¹ This is an organisation that Lindsey German had promised would draw in the hundreds of thousands, if not millions, who had marched against war. Its membership was smaller than the SWP, itself in steep decline.

There comes a point when such a situation can no longer be covered up and the result of the Ealing Southall by-election in July this year brought the matter to a head, sparking Galloway’s document and proposals for change. Respect received 1.6% of the vote, its 588 votes being less than it received in a single ward in the constituency in the 2005 local elections. In contrast the BNP scored nearly 9% of the vote in the simultaneously held Sedgefield by-election. In a Shadwell ward by-election in Tower Hamlets held on the same day Respect held onto its seat in a contest with the former Labour leader of the council, but even this victory was tempered by the fact that Respect was forced into a by-election because one of its councillors had resigned, denouncing the party to anyone who would listen.

This revealed some of the problems even in Respect’s most successful areas. Respect in Tower Hamlets was recruiting local Muslim small businessmen who often stand as councillors to further their interests in the community and have good links to the Mosque elders. They are attracted to Respect because of Galloway, its opposition to the Iraq war and because it stands against attacks on Muslims; they are just as likely in some areas to support Liberal Democrats for similar reasons. But they are also themselves petty exploiters, in Marxist terms small capitalists, who exploit their extended families and other workers as employees. In principle – or at least until the

It has led to unseemly squabbles over winnable council seats, with John Rees being opposed by groups of Muslims as a candidate in East London

present dispute with Galloway – the SWP saw no problem in welcoming such individuals into Respect. After all it is a non-socialist, cross-class coalition in these areas.

But while the SWP have long since ceased being principled socialists they have not stopped being socialists. And the growth of what are effectively communal-based political factions in the ranks of Respect has started to threaten them. They were even obliged to expel a long-standing full time worker in Birmingham when he refused to support an SWP-backed candidate on the grounds that a community-based candidate (and businessman) stood a better chance of winning.

And this has made the coalition very unstable. It has

led to unseemly squabbles over winnable council seats, with John Rees being opposed by local groups as a candidate in East London. Recently in Birmingham five Muslim men were adopted as candidates for Respect in Moseley and Kingsheath. When the SWP put up Helen Salmon as the sixth candidate another Muslim male challenged and defeated her for nomination, with apparently sixty people being enrolled in Respect the week before to ensure his victory. Not for Respect any notions of positive action for women, let alone all-women shortlists!

The SWP and Respect

Despite throwing considerable resources into building this populist organization the SWP has not grown out of it. The annual Marxism event is a measure of the SWP’s size, periphery and influence – it is getting smaller by the year.

The rightward turn is also reflected in the SWP’s attitude to religion and religious groups. The SWP leadership argues that the Muslim community has been the most radicalised by the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine and therefore emphasises the importance of this community in building a radical alternative in Britain. In relation to building an anti-war movement there is an element of truth in this. But in relation to broader political issues, the evidence that Muslims have somehow become a vanguard in society, let alone a vanguard in the working class does not exist.

What the SWP downplay is the Islamist influence in much of this politicisation and radicalisation among young Muslims – the idea that the state and civil society must adapt to, or be dominated by religion.¹² The growth of this religious ideology is related to developments in the Middle East, especially the failure of the secular nationalists movements – PLO/Fatah, Ba’athism, Nasserism – to deliver freedom from imperialist and Zionist oppression and exploitation.

Islamist movements, with reactionary views on women’s rights, education, sexual orientation and working class rights, have gained political influence across the region – the Islamic regime in Iran, Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Taliban, Al Qaida – and have had an impact here. These ideologies, apparently offering a sense of identity and struggle, and in the end “salvation”, have an important influence on a young Muslim population discriminated against in jobs and housing, threatened on the streets and alienated from British capitalism as a result.

Muslims and their organisations joined the mass anti-war protests of 2003 in huge numbers and this was an enormous and positive development. It was a situation where the “classical” united front was absolutely crucial, where it was possible for socialists and revolutionaries to march and protest with groups and organisations that they had little in common with in other areas. Agreement on limited demands – stop the war, withdraw the troops now – could be combined with disagreement and open political criticism on all other issues. But by trying to build Respect, a so-called united front of a “special type”, into an organisation embracing such groups on a broad range of political issues, the SWP found themselves compelled

to adapt to the politics of their would-be partners. Their new allies could not be subjected to criticism for fear of driving them away, and the politics and actions of the SWP had to be changed accordingly.

The SWP's adaptation towards the growing assertion of religious rights against secular society has been breathtaking. It supported the "Incitement to Religious Hatred Act" which was an anti-democratic measure that potentially restricts the right to attack religions and their ideas, effectively extending the blasphemy laws, which previously only applied to Christianity. And it did this in a period where religious fundamentalists had already asserted their "right" to close down plays that offended their religion and were leading attacks on abortion rights.

Instead of campaigning against the existing laws which restrict the right to criticise the Christian religion, the SWP joined those who wanted to extend this "protection". The supposed reasoning behind this Act, the BNP slandering of Muslims and Islam which was inciting racial hatred and attacks on the Asian community, needed to be dealt with, not by further restrictive laws on freedom of speech, but by denying the BNP a platform to spew out its racist filth and driving it off the streets.

The SWP has also played a terrible role in campaigns to defend secular education from the influence of organised religion. It says it opposes religious schools in principle, but in practice it supports the establishment of hundreds of new ones. It does this on the grounds that having large numbers of Church of England and Catholic Schools but few of any other religions is discriminatory. Therefore in every instance where there are proposals for new religious schools, for Muslims, Sikhs, Jews or other religious groups, it supports them and denounces as "racism" or "Islamophobia" any opposition. It even took this fight into the teachers' union the NUT, where its delegates opposed resolutions calling for secular education and an end to religious schools.

Respect says it stands for "fully state run education with all children in the same school where they are free to observe whatever faith, or none, they choose." This remains a hollow declaration when it supports every new initiative for a religious school from a "minority faith", schools which by their nature discriminate against other religions in selection, and impose religion on children through the curriculum and school structures.

The current crisis in Respect

In its "What the SWP stands for" column in *Socialist Worker*, it says that we need "revolution not reform", that the workers need an "entirely different kind of state – a workers' state based on councils of workers' delegates and a workers' militia", that a revolutionary party needs to be organised by proving "in practice to other workers that reformist leaders and reformist ideas are opposed to their own interests." Yet the SWP's actions and policies in Respect and elsewhere do not take us one step nearer to such goals. They take us away from them. It fudges the question of revolution and reform, argues reformist politics to workers in elections and campaigns via Respect,

and is quite willing to ditch its commitment to lesbian and gay rights and a woman's right to choose.

The SWP is not the first party, and will not be the last, to leave its principles in its "Where we stand" column like an old family heirloom – to be looked at and admired but never used. But it is the main party doing this in Britain today and this should cause every one of its thinking members to question the overall political method of its leadership. If your principles are so out of kilter with your

where there are proposals for new religious schools, it supports them and denounces as "racism" or "Islamophobia" any opposition

practice, something has got to be very wrong with your organisation and its political method. The current crisis in Respect poses that as an inescapable question now.

Problems arise when, despite the opportunist adaptations and the throwing overboard of ever more principles, the "get rich quick scheme" fails. And clearly Respect is failing. Galloway would never have risked producing a document like "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times",¹³ with its radical re-organisation proposals to put the SWP in a minority and break its control of the machine, unless he thought the situation was at crisis point.

After pointing out the disappointing results in Ealing Southall, Galloway links this to the declining membership saying: "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." But he does not make the link between this and Respect being an electoral coalition – it has no "media", no paper or magazine to organise its members, few branches organised to carry on day to day political campaigning, a tiny national office and small staff. Indeed in every way the SWP is a stronger organisation precisely because it has all these things.

Instead Galloway focuses on "amateurishness", lack of fundraising, lack of following through decisions. What is significant is the areas of activities he criticises – for example Respect's float at the Gay Pride parade and "high handed instructions" to those in "elected office" to take part. Such events, he thinks, should be covered by lesbian and gay members and youth. He is clearly protective of Respect's elected representatives because he knows full well few of them have much sympathy with lesbian and gay events – Galloway knows "a test of commitment", as he puts it, and doesn't like it.

He also raises the amount of time and financial resources spent on the Fighting Unions conference and campaign, criticising the fact that four months of office time was spent

on it rather than following up on the “breakthroughs at the local elections”. This is a problem for the SWP because they see the left in the unions as one of the “foundation stones” of Respect and here is Galloway basically saying it’s a waste of time.

If anything the Fighting Unions campaign should be criticised for being little more than a series of rallies for left trade union leaders to make radical speeches at. Its conference was a typical SWP-dominated affair with lots of platform speakers and SWP members reporting on their workplace and the great gains of Respect. It had no resolutions from the floor or from union branches, and it invited none. It had no discussion of the problems of the left in the unions and no plans to begin building a fighting rank and file organisation. It is not surprising that most non-SWP militants think that the RMT’s shop stewards’ network, for all its faults, offers a more serious attempt at organising left trade unionists.

But this is not Galloway’s reason for criticising the Fighting Unions initiative. He thinks such work is a distraction from more important activity. At its heart Galloway’s document is a call to make Respect a real “election” party, in the classic reformist sense of being an effective vote-gathering machine for the chosen ones like himself. He wants it to give up on anything that gets in the way of this, like building in the unions or supporting gay pride.

The aim, he says must be “a focus on recruitment, fundraising, establishing the profile of our candidates and unashamedly promoting Respect as the critical force in

the wider reconstitution of the progressive and socialist movement.” To do this he proposes a new “high powered elections committee” of nine (only three or four are to be SWP) and a full time National Organiser to “sit alongside” the National Secretary, John Rees. These proposals are designed to cut down the organisational control wielded by the SWP in Respect.

The SWP always attempts to organisationally dominate and manipulate its “united fronts of a special type”, which is why it regularly falls out with its independent allies and is always in search of new ones to promote. This time it is in confrontation with the leader of Respect and they will either have to submit to the proposals or admit to the SWP members that the last four years’ work has gone down the pan. Their response to Galloway suggests that they are still aiming for a compromise. His demand that John Rees be sacked suggests that he is going for broke. We do not know what the outcome of this unprincipled spat will be.

What is not at issue in this dispute is the reformist and populist politics of Respect – both sides agree that it has to be built as an electoral coalition on the broadest possible basis, including drawing in local businessmen. Respect remains a political organisation that no workers or members of the left should give support to in elections or otherwise. It is high time ordinary members of the SWP called their leaders to account for this dreadful right wing tactic, which offers only a political dead end for the British working class and the SWP itself.

NOTES

1. The original platform People Before Profit can be found at: www.sademocracy.org.uk
2. All quotes from Unity in Diversity, Alex Callinicos, *Socialist Review* 262, April 2002.
3. John Rees, “The broad party, the revolutionary party and the united front”, *International Socialism* 97, winter 2002
4. Despite the reams of paper expended in the debates between the SWP and the SSP leaders on this question, both in Frontline and in *International Socialism*, the only significant difference was that the SWP wanted to keep its separate “revolutionary organisation” in a special united front that was not quite a party, while the ex-Militant, Tommy Sheridan-led ISM was willing to become a tendency in a party organisation. They both agreed these would be organisations that avoided “the decisive strategic question” of reform or revolution. Or as we say in plain English: they were building left reformist not revolutionary organisations.
5. See *Permanent Revolution* No1, (first series), pp 73-79.
6. German’s exact words from the transcript were “Some Muslims are anti-gay and this is perfectly true, but it is not a question we pose to Christians who join the Socialist Alliance, is it? Now I am in favour of defending gay rights, but I am not prepared to have it as a shibboleth.” Actually it was a question we posed directly to all who joined the SA because the programme People Before Profit, unlike Respect’s eleven point declaration, was crystal clear on the defence of gay rights, and members joined on the basis of agreeing with the programme.
7. A report of the first conference can be found at www.permanentrevolution.net/?view=entry&entry=1629
8. The ISG, which plays the role of providing left cover for the Respect leadership, produced a policy pamphlet for Respect sometime in 2006 which contains better positions on abortion and lesbian and

gay rights than the founding declaration. On abortion it still does not call for extending a woman’s right to choose but limits itself to defending the existing restrictive 1967 Act. On lesbians and gays it calls for an end to discrimination and homophobia. This pamphlet “Another World is Possible – policies of Respect, the unity coalition” plays little role in the electoral campaigning of Respect and is not available on their website. Policies on abortion and gay rights can be found relegated to “other policies”.

9. *Where Next for Respect*, Respect pamphlet 2004.

10. The EDM calls on the Government “to set up a joint committee of both Houses to consider the scientific, medical and social changes in relation to abortion that have taken place since 1967, with a view to presenting options for new legislation”. This committee was due to report this session of parliament and was, at the time of the EDM, predicted to set the scene for attempts to tighten still further abortion time limits.

11. See a report of the conference in *Weekly Worker* 645 October 19 2006. The CPGB joined Respect at its inception from the SA and has been beavering away ever since to move it leftwards.

12. Of course this is an idea not limited to Muslims. The past period has seen a growth of political fundamentalism across the spectrum from the religious Christian right and its anti-gay bigotry, in the US and Britain, to Sikh and Hindu extremists. Radical Sikhs have demanded the right to censor plays, and closed one by force in Birmingham because it “offended their religion”. An unholy coalition of “faith groups” is fighting to extend their control over the education system by fighting for ever more religious schools and opposing government attempts to moderate the religious and racial discrimination and segregation that goes along with them.

13. See: www.liammacuaid.wordpress.com