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Respect in crisis

What lessons for socialists?

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Heading rapidly towards a split between the two main forces who founded it in 2004.

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The transformation of Labour into a thoroughgoing party of big-business has left the working class effectively disenfranchised. The Socialist Party has been calling for the trade unions to stop funding Labour and for the creation of a new mass party of the working class for over a decade.

Unfortunately, in that time there have been a number of false starts on the road to a new party. These include the Socialist Labour Party, the Socialist Alliance and, more recently, the Scottish Socialist Party. The latest formation to hit severe problems is Respect; which is currently heading rapidly towards a split between the two main forces who founded it in 2004 – George Galloway MP, on the one side, and the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) on the other. Inevitably, particularly given Galloway's election as an MP for Respect in 2005, the crisis will lead to disappointment amongst those layers who welcomed Galloway's election, and will be used by New Labour supporters, and those who believe Labour can be reclaimed, to argue that it is impossible to build a new formation to the left of New Labour.

Potential for a new mass workers' party

The Socialist Party entirely refutes this. Since 1997 New Labour has lost more than half its membership and over four million, predominantly working-class, voters. They have stopped voting for New Labour, and in most cases stopped voting at all, because they rightly see all three main parties as virtually identical; offering up an unrelenting diet of cuts and privatisation. Never before in history has there been such a vast gulf between the mainstream political parties and the mass of the population – the overwhelming majority of whom stand far to the left of the mainstream parties.

At the same time, workers who enter struggle are increasingly demanding that their union disaffiliate from New Labour. It is not a coincidence that it is unions who have been involved in important strikes, the fire-fighters union, the FBU, and the railway workers union, the RMT, that have been the first to stop funding New Labour. And, after New Labour's brutal treatment of the postal workers there is now the possibility that rank-and-file postal workers will follow the FBU in campaigning for the breaking of the Labour link, pushing the pro-Labour leaders of the union aside. If a new broad workers' party already existed it could quickly win the active support of these layers of workers. In the absence of

such a party the process will be more complicated. Nonetheless, it shows the objective need and the potential for such a party.

The situation today has many similarities to the circumstances that led to the foundation of the Labour Party over one hundred years ago. Unwilling to any longer accept the capitalist Liberal party, trade unionists and socialists fought for their own independent working class voice. However, the process which led to the foundation of the Labour Party, in which Marxists played an important role, was not quick, simple or straightforward. It took place over twenty years and included, just as today, many false starts.

Socialist Party discussed with Respect

The Socialist Party discussed with the leaders of Respect at the time of its foundation in 2004 and again in 2006. However, we concluded that we could not join Respect because we felt that the mistaken political approach and methods of its leadership would mean, unless there was a change of direction, that Respect would not be a step on the road to a new mass workers' party, but rather would complicate the process towards the development of such a party. In the current faction fight within Respect both sides can make "correct" criticisms of the other, unfortunately, this does not necessarily mean that they have actually learnt the lessons of the Respect experience.

There are a number of prerequisites for a new party, or pre-party formation, to be a positive step towards a mass political

force representing the working class. Firstly, it must be able to actively involve significant sections of workers and young people entering struggle. If, as we argued for at the time, George Galloway had launched the call for a new party from the platform of the massive, two million strong, anti-war demonstration on 15 February 2003, it could have been an important step towards such a party. Unfortunately, Respect was launched after the peak of the anti-war movement and was seen by its leadership primarily as an electoral vehicle rather than a genuine attempt to build a new broad, class-struggle based party. It has attempted to take short-cuts to win electoral support and is now suffering the consequences.

Respect not filled vacuum

Respect has never claimed more than 4,000 members and has clearly not come close to filling the huge vacuum to the left of Labour. However, this has not stopped it taking an extremely arrogant approach towards groups of workers moving towards independent political representation. Respect, for example, has recently demanded that the RMT do not contest the London Assembly Elections because Respect is standing. The starting point for socialists should be to welcome the RMT's discussion on putting up a trade union-based, anti-cuts, anti-privatisation slate in the elections. The Respect leadership's approach, by contrast, could slow down or prevent potentially important steps towards a new workers' party.

The leadership of Respect has taken a similarly high-handed approach within its

own ranks. As the failure of Arthur Scargill's Socialist Labour Party (SLP) in the mid 1990s demonstrated, a bureaucratic top-down approach repels the new generation of activists who, given their experience of the establishment parties, have an understandable suspicion of parties. For any new broad formation to be successful it is crucial it has an open, welcoming and federal approach. Federalism was adopted by the early Labour Party enabling it to bring together many different organisations and trends, preserving the rights of all to organise and argue for their particular points of view. Unfortunately, Respect, despite calling itself a coalition, has a centralised structure which bears no resemblance to a coalition or federation.

Until recently the SWP and George Galloway formed a bloc within Respect, with the SWP using their weight of numbers to force through whatever policy they thought fit. This meant, for example, that the entire membership of the national council and the overwhelming majority of decisions on election campaigns and candidates were effectively decided by the SWP.

On specific issues, for example the call for Respect MPs to take a workers' wage, the SWP have used their numbers to try to prevent criticism of Galloway, who argues that MPs should be paid twice as much as their existing salaries of £47,000 per year, plus expenses. Socialist Party public representatives have always taken a workers' wage, and we would argue for a new party to adopt this policy. This does not mean that it is necessarily wrong to work together with individuals, like George Galloway, who do not support this demand, but

it was a major error for the SWP to try to prevent a discussion on this and other issues.

Socialist banner lowered

The leadership of the SWP are now arguing that they are being pushed out of Respect because they are socialists. Galloway is adding to the impression that the SWP are 'too left wing' by attacking them as 'Leninists'. In reality the undemocratic methods of the SWP bear no resemblance to genuine Leninism. And, unfortunately, it is the SWP that led the way in arguing that Respect should lower its socialist banner. At the founding convention of Respect, Lindsey German of the SWP argued that the Socialist Alliance had failed because it was too explicitly socialist and that Respect would succeed by being 'broader' (i.e. less explicitly socialist). This argument was mistaken, as the Socialist Party has been able to show repeatedly. For example, in the 2004 euro-election in Ireland Joe Higgins received 5.5% of the first preference votes across the whole of Dublin on a clear socialist programme. This is broadly comparable to the vote Lindsey German received in the 2004 London Mayoral Elections, of just under 5%.

Nonetheless the Socialist Party would welcome a new mass workers' party, or significant step towards one, even if its membership didn't initially adopt a fully-rounded out socialist programme. Provided a new mass party was rooted in struggle, had a democratic and federal approach, and stood clearly against cuts and privatisation and war, it would repre-

sent a step forward. However, as socialists we would argue within such a party for it to stand for socialism, as the only means to permanently and completely end cuts, privatisation and war. The vast majority of Respect's members, however, are longstanding socialists, who argued for Respect not to be 'too socialist' because they hoped to 'broaden' Respect's electoral appeal.

In fact, far from broadening Respect's appeal, its leadership's approach has narrowed it. A new mass left formation cannot be built on one issue, or by appealing to just one section of the working class. Respect has concentrated in the main on one section of society, the Muslim community, which it is important to win, but has largely failed to reach out to other sections of the working class. Today the SWP are criticising Galloway on this issue, even suggesting he has a 'communalist' approach, but they have supported Respect's strategy up until now.

For socialists the programme we put forward should always be aimed at raising the confidence and combativity of the working class. This means doing everything possible to encourage the unity of the working class. For example, that is why our sister organisation in Northern Ireland has always fought for unity of the Catholic and Protestant working class.

In Britain today, the reactionary policies of New Labour are fostering division. This makes it all the more important that socialists attempt to overcome these divisions rather than exacerbate them.

Where now?

Most non-SWP activists within Respect appear to be opposing the SWP in the current split. The National Council of Respect has put a motion to Respect's conference in opposition to the SWP. It states that they "welcome the discussion" on standing in the London Assembly elections inside the RMT and will "offer the best possible conditions to the RMT for a joint slate". It would be welcomed if at least part of Respect retreated from its previous, sectarian position on this issue, however, not if this is part of a general move to the right. In addition, if they are serious about reaching out to the RMT, in the current situation, and given the importance of a national trade union beginning to take steps towards independent workers' representation Respect should be prepared to go further and support the RMT if they do decide to initiate a trade union led, anti-cuts, anti-privatisation slate.

The resolution goes on to say that they will try:

"To discuss with the RMT, the Labour left, the CPB and others the possibility of a jointly organised conference to extend the discussion on a solution to the crisis of Labour representation."

Potentially, such a conference might be useful, but only if organised on an open and democratic basis and if there are forces within it clearly arguing the case for breaking the trade union link with Labour and founding a new mass workers' party. Neither wing of Respect has up until now supported breaking the Labour link but the

argument for doing so is growing with every passing day. Galloway has even previously suggested that Respect's role might be to force New Labour to the left. Today, even key figures on the Labour left, such as John McDonnell MP, are concluding that "the old strategy" of reclaiming Labour, is now "largely over". However, McDonnell does not as yet have a worked out alternative beyond supporting single issue campaigns.

To be productive a conference must not just be a Respect rally but a genuine discussion on the way forward involving all serious forces. Given the Socialist Party's longstanding campaign on this issue, and our significant base in the trade unions (we currently have 22 elected members of trade union NECs) it is not a good sign that neither we nor the Campaign for a New Workers' Party, which we initiated and now has over 3,000 supporters, are mentioned as organisations to be approached.

The need to link the anti-war, anti-privatisation and other campaigns together with trade unionists to build a new mass workers' party is clearer than ever. If you agree join with us in supporting the Campaign for a New Workers' Party
www.cnwp.org.uk