

Class Collaboration – at the Ballot Box and on the Streets

Respect and the Stop the War Coalition

Launched with fanfare and great expectations, Respect was supposed to be the future of the left. Yet by November 2007 it was split in two, holding two conferences at two venues on the same day, both laying claim to the original politics of Respect.

The simmering war between George Galloway and the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) came out into the open in August last year when Galloway produced a document entitled 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times', addressing Respect's failure to grow, and placing most of the blame on the SWP. Acrimony grew, and the effective end of the project was the result. In February, adding insult to injury, Respect councillor and nominal SWP member Ahmed Hussain broke ranks and joined the Tories.

As the conflict developed, the SWP declared that around Galloway there had evolved a 'coalition of interests more resembling a popular front' including those 'far from the roots of class politics', while Galloway looked for 'shortcuts' to electoral success such as his appearance on *Big Brother* (*Socialist Review*, December 2007).

Naturally they claimed they had opposed it all along, but a retrospective on Respect by leading SWP theoretician Chris Harman shows that their perspectives were essentially the same from the beginning:

'The left focus would not be a revolutionary one, but would attempt to draw in the diverse forces of the anti-war movement... It was a project that only made sense if we could involve large numbers of people who did not agree with us on the question of revolution'

(International Socialism, December 2007).

They went on to claim that Galloway somehow misinterpreted this intention as he promoted individuals and forces very distant from the left, including Muslim elders and millionaires.

Harman proudly claims: 'Socialists did their best to deal with these unhealthy developments. They struggled against the non-left interlopers...' In fact, close observers saw no sign of the SWP struggling against these developments. On the contrary, they helped to bring them about – in the vain hope that George Galloway would be an attractive figure head, Muslim businessmen would be willing financial donors for the electoral campaigns and SWP members would be naïve enough to be used as foot soldiers in the big game of 'real politics'.

Even after all this, they had no desire to break with Galloway and his electoral appeal: 'The split in Respect was not something of the SWP's choosing, and certainly not something we wanted to see' (*Socialist Review*, December 2007). After all, it was not a question of intrinsically rotten politics, only a matter of not enough democracy:

'The conclusion of our discussions was that it was necessary to try to continue to build Respect according to the original conception as a left focus reflecting the diversity of the forces involved in the anti-war movement. This could only be done by opposing the attempts by Galloway and his allies to stifle accountability of elected representatives, to prevent Respect members from challenging moves towards opportunism and to drive the biggest group of organised socialists from positions of influence in Respect.'

(International Socialism, December 2007)

The truth is of course that Respect was a popular frontist project from the very start and the SWP leadership knew exactly what they were involved in. Respect's Founding Declaration (co-written by the SWP) made this abundantly clear:

'But the yearning for a political alternative is even wider than the anti-war movement. Pensioners, students, trade unionists, Muslims and other faith groups, socialists, ethnic minorities and many others have been deeply disappointed by the authoritarian social policies and profit-centred, neo-liberal economic strategy of the government.

'There is a crisis of representation, a democratic deficit, at the heart of politics in Britain. We aim to offer a solution to this crisis.'

As we wrote at the height of Respect's popularity:

'Respect is quite explicitly a cross-class alliance of all those who want to redress the "democratic deficit" in the bourgeois parliamentary system.'

(1917, No. 28, December 2005)

The politics of Respect have nothing in common with genuine Marxism, but they do represent a significant trend in the British workers' movement and a particular form of misleadership that needs to be politically marginalised if the revolutionary project is to be successful. It is important to examine what was wrong with Respect and what lessons can be drawn for revolutionaries.

'The main question of proletarian class strategy'

Respect failed because it specifically sought to keep working-class discontent and class struggle within the boundaries of parliamentary politics. While its leadership bent over backwards to include as many social layers as possible to address the 'democratic deficit' in Britain, no significant section of the bourgeoisie was interested in building the project and it proved impossible for Respect to make any major electoral breakthroughs. While the SWP leadership's conflict with Galloway exacerbated the failure, it was not in itself the cause.

In times of heightened social struggle, the capitalists are more inclined to ally with reformist misleaders in what are known as popular fronts – cross-class alliances between working-class and non-working-class organisations. Well-known examples include the popular fronts in France and Spain in the 1930s, Allende's Unidad Popular in Chile in the early 1970s, the Lib-Lab coalition in Britain in the late 1970s and the Olive Tree government in 1990s Italy. The end result is to contain social struggle, as the reformist leaders tell the workers not to be too militant or they will offend 'our' bourgeois allies, break up the coalition and let the right wing into power. In fact a working class which is politically and militarily dependent on 'progressive' elements of the bourgeoisie is easy prey for the right, as dramatically demonstrated in Chile by Pinochet's bloodbath against the workers whom Allende had refused to arm.

While the low level of class struggle today means that the danger of a bloodbath is clearly not imminent, it is still vital to recognise, and unequivocally oppose, class collaborationism whenever it is posed as a way forward for the workers' movement. It is only

through such political training that we will avoid future setbacks and be able to stand resolutely against the suicidal politics of the popular front when it is 'popular' and draws the masses behind it. Even on a smaller scale, class collaboration leads working class discontent away from fighting for our immediate interests as a class.

Trotsky's analysis from the 1930s remains as relevant today as then:

'The question of questions at present is the Popular Front. The left centrists seek to present this question as a tactical or even as a technical maneuver, so as to be able to peddle their wares in the shadow of the Popular Front. In reality, the Popular Front is the *main question of proletarian class strategy* for this epoch. It also offers the best criterion for the difference between Bolshevism and Menshevism.'

(*'The POUM and the Popular Front'*, 1936)

The SWP's 'revolutionary' critics

In the inevitable dissection of the debacle in the left press, most groups pay lip service to the class collaboration at the heart of Respect, but focus their attention on the SWP leadership's bureaucratic 'control freakery'.

The Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) criticise the SWP from within Respect:

'[The SWP's] strategy of riding on the backs of "community activists" in places like the East End and Birmingham in order to win recruits and gain a foothold in the council chambers has rebounded ... it never had a hope of using the network of businessmen for its own ends. Now that network has been wielded as a weapon *against* the SWP, ensuring that none of its comrades will retain their council seats in the Tower Hamlet's "breach head"...

'Those responsible for Respect's left populism, its ditching of working class principle and its rightist electoralism are not George Galloway and Salma Yaqoob. Those responsible are John Rees, Alex Callinicos, Chris Bambery and Lindsey German. They are not fit to be leaders of a revolutionary socialist organisation.'

(*Weekly Worker*, 8 November 2007)

While the CPGB scapegoats the SWP, they conveniently forget that at the last general election they claimed that those leaders now responsible for 'ditching of working class principle' were 'working class politicians' worthy of political support! Like the SWP, the CPGB is not opposed in principle to popular frontism. Again, the problem is simply a lack of 'democracy':

'If a principled left is going to emerge in the SWP it needs the space to fully think things through. It needs open, democratic debate.'

(*Weekly Worker*, 24 January 2008)

If the CPGB were 'to fully think things through' themselves perhaps they could explain why their organisation endorsed and thus took responsibility for the Respect project in the first place.

The SWP's main competitor on the British left is the Socialist Party, flagship of the Committee for a Workers International (CWI), who were a little less enthusiastic about the rise of Respect.

'While Respect could have had potential if launched on a correct basis, it was unfortunately seen by its leadership from the beginning primarily as a vehicle for getting anti-war votes rather than as a means to encourage workers and the new generation drawn into activity by the war to find their own independent political voice.... The concern regarding Respect has been that, in order to win Muslim votes, it has made unprincipled concessions which would make it much more difficult to

reach out to the wider working class.'

(*Socialism Today*, Dec-Jan 2007-08)

Like the CPGB, the Socialist Party's 'concern regarding Respect' was not enough to stop them from giving it electoral support. Of course, the CWI are no strangers to politically supporting alien class forces, as we outline in our pamphlet 'Marxism vs. "Militant" Reformism'.

The two halves of the split in the League for the Fifth International, Permanent Revolution (PR) and Workers Power (WP), did not join Respect or give it critical support in elections. PR explains:

'Permanent Revolution has always argued that Respect was founded on a deeply opportunist basis. The SWP thought that arguing for socialism and revolution would put people off, so Respect was not to be an explicitly socialist organisation. They thought they could unite the extremely broad coalition that opposed the war – liberals, Islamists, clergyman, small business people and the far left – into an electoral party. It was a populist project built on sand.

'Worse – to gather this coalition together they had to dump a series of principled political positions – positions like defending gay and lesbian rights, fighting for abortion rights, opposing all immigration controls, insisting their MP earned the average worker's wage – not the £100,000 minimum that George Galloway insisted on.'

(www.permanentrevolution.net, 28 October 2007)

However, PR's conclusion is remarkably similar to that of the CPGB, calling for rank and file rebellion in the SWP:

'For anything really positive to come out of this debacle the SWP need a fundamental reassessment of their entire method, from the point at which they abandoned the Comintern's understanding of the united front to found Respect. The rank and file members of the SWP, must fight to hold their leadership to account.'

(www.permanentrevolution.net, 12 November 2007)

PR's former comrades in Workers Power make almost identical criticisms and propose a similar solution of 'serious re-assessment':

'... [T]he SWP angrily denied that by striking agreements with middle class Muslim community leaders they were constructing an unprincipled cross-class bloc. They accused their critics – including Workers Power – of being opposed to organising Muslims. But they ignored and misrepresented our real argument: that organising Muslim workers and youth for socialism means fighting the influence of the middle class leaders.

'... A left faction is needed in the SWP to make a serious re-assessment, to embrace the real revolutionary use of the united front tactic; and to apply it today in the fight for a new mass workers' party and a revolutionary programme.'

(*Workers Power*, November 2007)

Some believe that the collapse of Respect is a setback for the workers' movement in Britain, but the working class has lost nothing of value. In fact, this could be a positive development if it helps a layer of working class militants reject class collaborationist politics, in all its variants, and understand the importance of the political independence of the working class. It is not enough to merely talk about building a 'left' faction in the SWP that is for 'open and democratic debate'. Such a development must be linked to a root and branch reassessment not just of the SWP's pop-frontist method, but of its entire political programme.

Why do these ostensibly 'revolutionary' organisations fail to concentrate on, and generalise from, the class collaborationism at the heart of Respect? Because to do so would only expose their own ongoing support to the SWP's more popular example of class

collaboration, the Stop the War Coalition (StWC), the forerunner of Respect.

StWC's Fairweather Friends

The SWP were quite clear that Respect was intended to be a replication on the electoral field of the 'broadness' of the StWC – that is, its lowest-common-denominator politics and class collaboration – but these features were ignored by the so-called 'revolutionary' left in their enthusiasm at the large number of people mobilised in the massive anti-war demonstrations of 15 February 2003. Workers Power were particularly excited:

'The huge marches on 15 February were a turning point in history. Never before have 30 million marched on the same day in 600 cities against imperialism and war.

'The day proved two things. First, all over the world a majority oppose Bush and Blair's war. Second, we have the numbers and the power to really stop the war – as long as we press on to mass action.

'... We live in extraordinary times. Let's take advantage of them. The imperialists are divided, unpopular and losing the support of the people. The whole world burns with hatred for Bush. Let's do all we can to turn the global war crisis into a global revolution against the warmongers. Take up the call: Global General Strike, Blockade the Streets, Hold People's Assemblies. That way we can not only stop the war – we can open a global challenge to the system that causes war.'

(Workers Power, March 2003)

While these demonstrations were certainly significant in terms of size, they could only have become part of a 'global challenge to the system that causes war' to the extent that an anti-imperialist movement was built in direct opposition to the class collaborationist politics of the SWP and their allies. WP (whose comrades were at the time members of the StWC leadership committee) refused to do so, along with all other left groups. Instead they thought it wise to encourage illusions, particularly their own, that 'a global revolution' was within reach.

With large numbers mobilised on the streets it was much harder for these fairweather revolutionaries to criticise the very same class collaboration at the heart of the StWC that they now take the SWP to task for over Respect – avoiding 'isolation' being more important than having consistent principled politics. They ignore the pacifist politics and overtures to bourgeois forces and instead see only the SWP's bureaucratic control when analysing the failure of the StWC to maintain, let alone build on, these mass demonstrations.

Revolutionaries start with a sober assessment of the objective situation and advocate an open political struggle against class collaboration, and its proponents in the workers' movement, no matter how popular it may appear at any particular conjuncture. In Britain today this means intransigent opposition to the popular-frontist nature of the StWC.

The 'united front of a special type'

The SWP have attempted to justify their Stop the War Coalition and Respect projects by inventing the category of the 'united front of a special type'. The idea arose in the wake of the anti-globalisation demonstrations around the world:

'... although the StWC has a narrow focus, its mobilisations have brought into activity large numbers of people who are generalising far beyond the war in Afghanistan. They link up Bush's war drive to the gross injustices being committed against the Palestinian people... It has been the anti-war movement that has brought the people inspired by Seattle and Genoa onto the streets of Britain.

'This development is a consequence of the process of political radicalisation that has been under way internationally since the Seattle protests of November 1999. One facet of this process has been the emergence of new kinds of united front. In Britain the most important examples are the Socialist Alliance and Globalise Resistance. While these coalitions bring together revolutionaries and reformists, their political platform is much broader than some relatively narrowly defined campaigning issue.'

(Socialist Review, April 2002)

Labelling the explicitly cross-class Respect, the left-reformist electoral bloc of the Socialist Alliance and SWP front groups such as Globalise Resistance as 'united fronts' is novel indeed. This innovation has rightly been attacked by their leftist critics as incompatible with the genuine communist understanding of the united front – at least when writing about Respect. Workers Power explain why they didn't join:

'... The political spectrum of the 'united front of a special type' was limited to what was acceptable to the celebrities. There was no question either of the SWP leaders themselves exceeding these limits, let alone making any criticism of their partners, whatever they said or did or failed to do.

'... This is in glaring contrast with the revolutionary communist tactic of the united front, which is based on unity in action (strikes, mass demonstrations, etc.) with reformist-led mass trade unions and parties. But there must be complete freedom of criticism, otherwise the revolutionary strategy and, indeed, the revolutionary organisation will be hidden from view, and workers will be unable to see an alternative leadership when the reformists betray.'

(Workers Power, Winter 2007–08)

It seems to escape the attention of WP that exactly the same could be said of the StWC, whose leadership also focused on getting celebrities onto their platforms, and critical voices off.

At a formal level WP do recognise the popular frontism of the StWC:

'In Stop the War it was something nearly identical to the Popular Front of Stalinism, with the Liberals leadership and so-called progressive Tories (Michael Ancrum) invited along to demonstrations and Peoples Assemblies.'

(Workers Power, Winter 2007–08)

Despite their own experience of the SWP and their allies limiting the activities of the anti-war movement to what is acceptable to bourgeois rule, WP persist in supporting the StWC. If their actions were in any way consistent with their formal political line they would surely reject continued participation in 'something nearly identical to the Popular Front of Stalinism'. They are only consistent in their willingness to tailor their politics in accordance with pursuit of short-term gain.

Permanent Revolution do make some attempt to explain the contradiction of supporting the StWC but not Respect:

'Unlike the Stop the War movement, Respect was not founded to struggle for a specific goal by the mass of the working class, rather it was a propaganda bloc designed to win votes at elections.'

(www.permanentrevolution.net, 12 November 2007)

The distinction between single issue campaigns and propaganda blocs is a very real one, but not every single issue campaign is a united front or worthy of support by communists. In this case, it is simply not true to assert that the StWC was based on the mass of the working class. In assessing whether any particular campaign should be supported, Marxists use similar criteria as when determining

whether to give critical support in parliamentary elections. Does the working class have an independent voice in the campaign? Is the campaign focused on the interests of the working class? Or does it limit and betray those interests in favour of courting bourgeois allies?

Our publication 'Building the Revolutionary Party and United Front Tactics' explains the dangers of broad, ongoing, class collaborationist alliances (i.e., popular fronts) and how revolutionaries should intervene in them:

'A popular front does not necessarily have to be for governmental purposes. There are many movements for broad programmes of social liberation which, if they are to be completed and successful, will require a struggle which goes beyond the bourgeois order.

'To confine within the bounds of capitalism a campaign struggling against some fundamental aspect of that system – imperialist war, or racial or sexual oppression, for example – is to defuse that struggle. Giving political representatives of the bourgeoisie a veto power over the programmatic development of such a movement obviously precludes developments which go beyond the confines of the capitalist order.

'Popular-frontist leftists seeking the broadest possible coalitions try to attract liberal-bourgeois types, and thus limit the demands of their movement to that end. So we get minipopular-fronts – or at least popular fronts in intent – for peace, gay rights or women's liberation. We must stand thoroughly opposed to such movements.

'But very often the character of small front-type formations is for a time unclear, or even indeterminate. We must oppose their tendency towards popular frontism, and support their tendency towards a proletarian or united-front character. Precisely for the reason that they are unclear, they may be valuable arenas in which Bolshevik intervention can teach some revolutionary lessons.

'In any case revolutionaries certainly don't turn down opportunities to go to popular-front meetings and demonstrations to expose the dangers they are leading the working class towards. But we would never take responsibility for such a formation, sponsor it, call on anyone to support it, or stand for a position in its leadership.'

For an anti-imperialist anti-war movement!

The problem for those groups who supported and built the StWC is that they are unable to explain how an openly cross-class and pacifist anti-war coalition that excludes militant anti-imperialism from its platforms in favour of bourgeois politicians and liberal celebrities has anything in common with the communist understanding of the united front and the nature of imperialist war.

Lenin explained the purpose of a genuine united front:

'From all this follows the necessity, the absolute necessity, for the Communist Party, the vanguard of the proletariat, its class-conscious section, to resort to changes of tack, to conciliation and compromises with the various groups of proletarians, with the various parties of the workers and small masters. It is entirely a matter of *knowing how* to apply these tactics in order to *raise* – not lower – the *general* level of proletarian class-

consciousness, revolutionary spirit, and ability to fight and win.'

(Left Wing Communism)

To raise class-consciousness, to fight and to win, what is needed is an explicitly anti-imperialist united front, which would openly call for the defeat of British imperialism and intervene inside the wider anti-war movement as a distinct and alternative pole of attraction to the dead-end politics of the StWC. With British and American troops still stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan and ongoing threats against Iran, this is now more necessary than ever.

The idea of an anti-imperialist anti-war united front has been previously rejected by the ostensibly revolutionary left. Now the Respect project lies in ruins and the StWC is a pale shadow of its 2003 high-point, perhaps they will be able to grasp the importance of it – but only if they can see the common thread of popular frontism that stands at the core of both the StWC and Respect.

We call on all working-class militants to reject cross-class projects like Respect and the Stop the War Coalition. As we argued in our June 2004 leaflet 'For an openly anti-imperialist anti-war movement!':

'It is time to draw the lessons of the failure of the 'broad church' approach either to stop the war or to engender a widespread anti-imperialist consciousness among the masses mobilised in the anti-war demonstrations. The task of revolutionaries in opposing a criminal imperialist assault on a neo-colony is to seek to shift the political axis of "anti-war" sentiment amongst working people and youth by convincing them of the need to side with the victims of their own ruling class. This requires a sharp political struggle against the rotten class-collaborationist politics represented by the StWC. Revolutionaries should intervene in events called by the bourgeois pacifist StWC, engaging the masses mobilised by these misleaders with an alternative anti-imperialist message and aiming to build an explicitly anti-imperialist bloc within the wider anti-war movement.

'There are those who will continue to complain that such a bloc will "exclude" people in advance. The only people this will exclude are the bourgeois pacifists and pro-UN apologists who dominate StWC platforms. Attempting to reduce the political influence of these misleaders would be a good thing not a bad thing.

'The only slogans and ideas that have any substantially progressive content are revolutionary socialist ones, as Lenin pointed out in condemning social-pacifism during World War One:

"A propaganda of peace at the present time, if not accompanied by a call to revolutionary mass actions, is only capable of spreading illusions, of demoralising the proletariat by imbuing it with confidence in the humanitarianism of the bourgeoisie, and of making it a plaything in the hands of the secret diplomacy of the belligerent countries. In particular, the idea of the possibility of a so-called democratic peace without a series of revolutions is deeply erroneous."

'("Conference of the Foreign Sections of the RSDLP",
Social-Democrat, No. 40, 29 March 1915)'

International Bolshevik Tendency

www.bolshevik.org

BCM Box 4771, London WC1N 3XX, 07951 313 236, britain@bolshevik.org

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