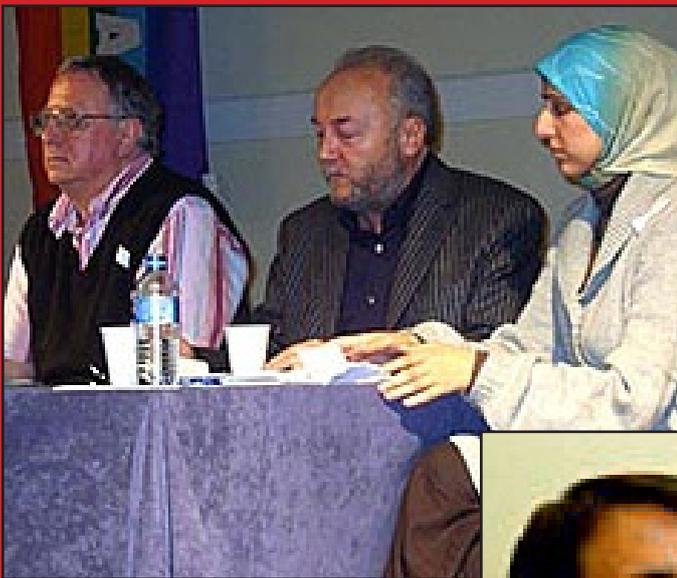




# INTERNATIONAL VIEWPOINT

News and analysis from the Fourth International

IV396 - January 2008



## Britain

Debate on Respect

## Italy

Sinistra Critica



## Pakistan

PPP - feudal traditions

## IV396 - January 2008

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## US/World Economy

**Devastating Crisis Unfolds**

Robert Brenner

THE CURRENT CRISIS could well turn out to be the most devastating since the Great Depression. It manifests profound, unresolved problems in the real economy that have been — literally — papered over by debt for decades, as well as a shorter term financial crunch of a depth unseen since World War II. The combination of the weakness of underlying capital accumulation and the meltdown of the banking system is what's made the downward slide so intractable for policymakers and its potential for disaster so serious. The plague of foreclosures and abandoned homes — often broken into and stripped clean of everything, including copper wiring — stalks Detroit in particular, and other Midwest cities.

The human disaster this represents for hundreds of thousands of families and their communities may be only the first signal of what such a capitalist crisis means. Historic bull runs of the financial markets in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s — with their epoch-making transfer of income and wealth to the richest one per cent of the population — have distracted attention from the actual longterm weakening of the advanced capitalist economies. Economic performance in the United States, western Europe and Japan, by virtually every standard indicator — the growth of output, investment, employment and wages — has deteriorated, decade by decade, business cycle by business cycle, since 1973.

The years since the start of the current cycle, which originated in early 2001, have been worst of all. GDP (Gross Domestic Product) growth in the United States has been the slowest for any comparable interval since the end of the 1940s, while the increase of new plant and equipment and the creation of jobs have been one third and two thirds, respectively, below postwar averages. Real hourly wages for production and non supervisory workers, about 80% of the labor force, have stayed roughly flat, languishing at about their level of 1979.

Nor has the economic expansion been significantly stronger in either western Europe or Japan. The declining economic dynamism of the advanced capitalist world is rooted in a major drop in profitability, caused primarily by a chronic tendency to overcapacity in the world manufacturing sector, going back to the late 1960s and early 1970s. By 2000, in the United States, Japan and Germany, the rate of profit in the private economy had yet to make a comeback, rising no higher in the 1990s cycle than in that of the 1970s.

With reduced profitability, firms had smaller profits to add to their plant and equipment, as well as smaller incentives to expand. The perpetuation of reduced profitability since the 1970s led to a steady falloff in investment, as a proportion of GDP, across the advanced capitalist economies, as well as step-by-step reductions in the growth of output, means of production, and employment.

The long slowdown in capital accumulation, as well as corporations' repression of wages to restore their rates of return, along with governments' cuts in social spending to buttress capitalist profits, have resulted in a slowdown in the growth of investment, consumer and government demand, and thus in the growth of demand

as a whole. The weakness in aggregate demand, ultimately the consequence of the reduction in profitability, has long constituted the main barrier to growth in advanced capitalist economies.

To counter the persistent weakness of aggregate demand, governments, led by the United States, have seen little choice but to underwrite ever greater volumes of debt, through ever more varied and baroque channels, to keep the economy turning over. Initially, during the 1970s and 1980s, states were obliged to incur ever larger public deficits to sustain growth. But while keeping the economy relatively stable, these deficits also rendered it increasingly stagnant: In the parlance of that era, governments were getting progressively less bang for their buck, less growth of GDP for any given increase in borrowing.

#### From Budget-Cutting to Bubblicomics

In the early 1990s, therefore, in both the United States and Europe, led by Bill Clinton, Robert Rubin and Alan Greenspan, governments moving to the right and guided by neoliberal thinking (privatization and slashing of social programs) sought to overcome stagnation by attempting to move to balanced budgets. But although this fact does not loom large in most

accounts of the period, this dramatic shift radically backfired.

Because profitability had still failed to recover, the deficit reductions brought about by budget balancing resulted in a huge hit to aggregate demand, with the result that during the first half of the 1990s, both Europe and Japan experienced devastating recessions, the worst of the postwar period, and the U.S. economy experienced the so-called jobless recovery. Since the middle 1990s, the United States has consequently been obliged to resort to more powerful and risky forms of stimulus to counter the tendency to stagnation. In particular, it replaced the public deficits of traditional Keynesianism with the private deficits and asset inflation of what might be called asset price Keynesianism, or simply Bubblicomics.

In the great stock market runup of the 1990s, corporations and wealthy households saw their wealth on paper massively expand. They were therefore enabled to embark upon a record-breaking increase in borrowing and, on this basis, to sustain a powerful expansion of investment and consumption. The so-called New Economy boom was the direct expression of the historic equity price bubble of the years 1995-2000. But since





In some parts of Detroit it's cheaper to buy a house than a car

equity prices rose in defiance of falling profit rates and since new investment exacerbated industrial overcapacity, there quickly ensued the stock market crash and recession of 2000-2001, depressing profitability in the non-financial sector to its lowest level since 1980.

Undeterred, Greenspan and the Federal Reserve, aided by the other major Central Banks, countered the new cyclical downturn with another round in the inflation of asset prices, and this has essentially brought us to where we are today. By reducing real short-term interest rates to zero for three years, they facilitated an historically unprecedented explosion of household borrowing, which contributed to and fed on rocketing house prices and household wealth.

According to *The Economist*, the world housing bubble between 2000 and 2005 was the biggest of all time, outrunning even that of 1929. It made possible a steady rise in consumer spending and residential investment, which together drove the expansion. Personal consumption plus housing construction accounted for 90-100% of the growth of U.S. GDP in the first five years of the current business cycle. During the same interval, the housing sector alone, according to Moody's Economy.com, was responsible for raising the growth of GDP by almost 50% above what it would otherwise been — 2.3% rather than 1.6%.

Thus, along with G. W. Bush's Reaganesque budget deficits, record household deficits succeeded in obscuring just how weak the underlying economic recovery actually was. The rise in debt-supported consumer demand, as well as super-cheap credit more generally, not only revived the American economy but, especially by driving a new surge in imports and the increase

## World Economy

of the current account (balance of payments and trade) deficit to record levels, powered what has appeared to be an impressive global economic expansion.

### Brutal Corporate Offensive

But if consumers did their part, the same cannot be said for private business, despite the record economic stimulus. Greenspan and the Fed had blown up the housing bubble to give the corporations time to work off their excess capital and resume investing. But instead, focusing on restoring their profit rates, corporations unleashed a brutal offensive against workers. They raised productivity growth, not so much by increasing investment in advanced plant and equipment as by radically cutting back on jobs and compelling the employees who remained to take up the slack. Holding down wages as they squeezed more output per person, they appropriated to themselves in the form of profits an historically unprecedented share of the increase that took place in non-financial GDP.

Non-financial corporations, during this expansion, have raised their profit rates significantly, but still not back to the already reduced levels of the 1990s. Moreover, in view of the degree to which the ascent of the profit rate was achieved simply by way of raising the rate of exploitation — making workers work more and paying them less per hour — there has been reason to doubt how long it could continue. But above all, in improving profitability by holding down job creation, investment and wages, U.S. businesses have held down the growth of aggregate demand and thereby undermined their own incentive to expand.

Simultaneously, instead of increasing investment, productiveness and employment to increase profits, firms have sought to exploit the hyper-low cost of borrowing to improve their own and their shareholders' position by way of financial manipulation — paying off their debts, paying out dividends, and buying their own stocks to drive up their value, particularly in the form of an enormous wave of mergers and acquisitions. In the United States, over the last four

or five years, both dividends and stock repurchases as a share of retained earnings have exploded to their highest levels of the postwar epoch. The same sorts of things have been happening throughout the world economy — in Europe, Japan and Korea.

### Bursting Bubbles

The bottom line is that, in the United States and across the advanced capitalist world since 2000, we have witnessed the slowest growth in the real economy since World War II and the greatest expansion of the financial or paper economy in U.S. history. You don't need a Marxist to tell you that this can't go on.

Of course, just as the stock market bubble of the 1990s eventually burst, the housing bubble eventually crashed. As a consequence, the film of housing-driven expansion that we viewed during the cyclical upturn is now running in reverse. Today, house prices have already fallen by 5% from their 2005 peak, but this has only just begun. It is estimated by Moody's that by the time the housing bubble has fully deflated in early 2009, house prices will have fallen by 20% in nominal terms — even more in real terms — by far the greatest decline in postwar U.S. history.

Just as the positive wealth effect of the housing bubble drove the economy forward, the negative effect of the housing crash is driving it backward. With the value of their residences declining, households can no longer treat their houses like ATM machines, and household borrowing is collapsing, and thus households are having to consume less.

The underlying danger is that, no longer able to putatively "save" through their rising housing values, U.S. households will suddenly begin to actually save, driving up the rate of personal savings, now at the lowest level in history, and pulling down consumption. Understanding how the end of the housing bubble would affect consumers' purchasing power, firms cut back on their hiring, with the result that employment growth fell significantly from early in 2007.

Thanks to the mounting housing crisis and the deceleration of employment, already in the second quarter of 2007, real total cash flowing into households, which had increased at an annual rate of about 4.4% in 2005 and 2006, had fallen near zero. In other words, if you add up households' real disposable income, plus their home equity withdrawals, plus their consumer credit borrowing, plus their capital gains realization, you find that the money that households actually had to spend had stopped growing. Well before the financial crisis hit last summer, the expansion was on its last legs.

Vastly complicating the downturn and making it so very dangerous is, of course, the sub-prime debacle which arose as direct extension of the housing bubble. The mechanisms linking unscrupulous mortgage lending on a titanic scale, mass housing foreclosures, the collapse of the market in securities backed up by sub-prime mortgages, and the crisis of the great banks who directly held such huge quantities of these securities, require a separate discussion.

One can simply say by way of conclusion, because banks' losses are so real, already enormous, and likely to grow much greater as the downturn gets worse, that the economy faces the prospect, unprecedented in the postwar period, of a freezing up of credit at the very moment of sliding into recession — and that governments face a problem of unparalleled difficulty in preventing this outcome.

[This statement was written by Robert Brenner, a member of the ATC editorial board and author of *The Economics of Global Turbulence*. References for all data cited here can be found in this book, especially in the Afterword.]

From *ATC 132* (January/February 2008)

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Robert Brenner is an editor of *Against the Current*.

## Debate on Britain's militant left

# The Crisis in Respect

## The viewpoint of the Socialist Workers' Party

Chris Harman



Chris Harman

Two meetings took place in London on 17 November 2007. One was the 360-strong annual conference of Respect, which was attended by 270 delegates from 49 local branches and 17 student groups.

The other, held in opposition to the conference and under the title "Respect Renewal", was a rally of 210 people called by MP George Galloway and some members of Respect's outgoing National Council. This article attempts to locate the politics behind the division and draw out some lessons.

## The eruption of the crisis

Respect's only MP, George Galloway, precipitated the crisis through a series of attacks on the biggest socialist group within the organisation, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). The first attack in August 2007 was purportedly about organisational disagreements with Respect's national secretary, John Rees, who is a leading member of the SWP. But behind them lay a political agenda of shifting Respect to the right. This was shown by criticism of Respect's sponsorship of a 1,000-strong Defend Fighting Unions conference and of its participation in the Pride London (a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender rights march).

By mid-October 2007 Galloway was denouncing the SWP as "Leninists", who were trying to control Respect "by Russian doll methods". Paul McGarr and Aysha Ali, two east London activists, were "Russian dolls", "members of a group that meets in secret, deciding on a democratic centralist line". Galloway's supporters unilaterally declared that John Rees was no longer national secretary of Respect and that Lindsey German, convenor of the Stop the War Coalition, was no longer Respect's candidate for mayor of London—despite the fact that a 300-strong members' meeting had selected her. They went on to announce they would not recognise Respect's annual conference.

They threw all sorts of groundless allegations against the SWP: it was trying to fix the outcome of the Respect conference; it was "blocking delegates" in Birmingham; it was voting for delegates "at completely unrepresentative meetings" in Tower Hamlets; it was dragging out meetings in the hope that others would leave; it was urging its members to stand for election as delegates in local branches; it had made four Tower Hamlets councillors "turn their backs on Respect".

The allegations were all false, and remarkably similar in tone to those used by the media

during the Cold War in the 1950s, and by the right in the Labour Party against supposed "Trotskyist infiltrators" in the 1960s and 1980s. The aim was to destroy opposition to a particular direction in which Galloway wanted to pull Respect—one markedly to the right of that of Respect when it was launched four years ago. Galloway told one activist from a Communist Party background that his was a "fight against Trotskyism". No doubt he did not say this when recruiting some other people to his side, like Ken Loach and Alan Thornett.

Serious activists know that our members do not behave at all as he purports. The SWP has a long record of joint activity with people and organisations with different views to our own. Even Peter Hain, now a senior government minister, recalled in a radio programme in October 2007 being able to work with us inside the Anti Nazi League in the late 1970s. He described our party as the dynamic driving force, but said we were able to work with people who were committed to the Labour Party. Today members of the SWP central committee play a leading role in the Stop the War Coalition alongside Labour Party members such as Tony Benn and Jeremy Corbyn, as well as Andrew Murray, a member of the Communist Party of Britain

## Unity and honest argument

We have a good reputation with the rest of the left because we follow the method of the united front as developed by Lenin and Leon Trotsky in the early 1920s. This method stands in direct opposition to manipulating votes or rigging meetings. It starts with the understanding that exploitation, war and racism hurt working people, whether they believe in the efficacy of reform to change the system or believe, like us, in revolution. This has two important consequences:

(1) Fighting back against particular attacks and horrors depends on the widest possible unity. The revolutionary minority cannot by its own efforts build a big enough movement. Revolutionaries must reach out to political forces that agree with them on particular immediate issues, even if they disagree over the long term solution.

(2) By struggling over these issues alongside people who believe in reform, the revolutionary

minority can show in practice that its approach is correct, and so win people to its ideas.

Those who have worked in united fronts alongside us know we have always been open about our politics, while simultaneously building unity with those who do not agree with us. Anyone with a particular political approach, whether reformist, revolutionary or even anarchist, organises in practice to put across their point of view, even if they sometimes try to deny doing so. And that means getting supporters together, whether formally or informally. Galloway's supporters in Respect could not have organised against us if they had not acted as "a group that meets in secret".

It has always been necessary for us to organise to argue for policies that make united fronts effective. This was true when we took the initiative in launching the Anti Nazi League 30 years ago. If the SWP had not argued with other activists across Britain, the Anti Nazi League would never have been able to inflict a devastating defeat on the far-right National Front.

Much the same applied 23 years later when the Stop the War Coalition was formed in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. There had been a highly successful central London rally, initiated by the SWP and involving well known figures. But the first organising meeting nearly descended into disastrous sectarian squabbling as various small groups tried to impose their own particular demands. It was the capacity of the SWP to draw constructive forces together around minimal demands that enabled the coalition to go forward. Far from SWP members behaving like "Russian dolls", our capacity to debate what needed to be done within our organisation and then to win others to it was a precondition for creating one of the most effective campaigns in British history.

## The politics of building Respect

The united front method also underlay our approach to Respect. Back in 2003 up to two million people had demonstrated against the war. Many activists concluded that a political expression for the movement was required. We shared this general feeling. Our duty was to try to create a credible electoral focus to

## Respect Debate

the left of Labour—and this could not be done without involving much wider forces than the SWP, given the electoral system in England.

The left focus would not be a revolutionary one, but would attempt to draw in the diverse forces of the anti-war movement—revolutionaries, of course, but also disillusioned supporters of the Labour left, trade unionists, radical Muslim activists and people from the peace movement. The expulsion of George Galloway from the Labour Party precipitated the launch of the project. We worked with a range of other people to agree on a minimal set of points. These were fully compatible with our long term goals, while also acceptable to our allies. The initials of Respect summed up the nature of the project—Respect, Equality, Socialism, Peace, Environment, Community and Trade unions.

There had to be political arguments to get Respect off the ground, and the SWP was essential to this. There were some on the left who objected to working with Muslims. We had to argue against them, pointing out that Islam, like other religions such as Christianity, has been subject to multiple interpretations—and that the claim that it was innately reactionary was part of the racist ideology being used to justify imperialist wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Only the course of the struggle would show whether particular individuals' horizons had been widened enough for them to be drawn to the left. There were also arguments with people who objected to working with Galloway, claiming his past record ruled this out. He had, for instance, never been a member of the Campaign Group of MPs; he refused to accept that Respect MPs should have a salary no greater than the average wage; he had blamed the violence of the great poll tax protest of 1990 not on the police but on "lunatics, anarchists and other extremists principally from the Socialist Workers Party". But for us, in the summer of 2003, what mattered was that Galloway had been expelled from New Labour for campaigning against the war. As such he was a symbol of opposition for very large numbers of people who had previously looked to Labour.

Precisely because the SWP was a coherent national organisation it was able to carry these arguments in a way in which no one else was. Galloway at that time recognised that a "Leninist" organisation could fight to build unity among people with an array of different political perspectives in a way that a loose group of individuals could not. We showed our commitment to this over a four-year period. So we always strove to ensure that the Respect electoral lists were much broader than the SWP, even in areas where the SWP members were a large proportion of Respect activists.

It was SWP members, working in this way, who produced the first electoral breakthroughs for Respect in Tower Hamlets in East London when local trade unionist Oliur Rahman became a councillor with 31 percent of the vote and

SWP member Paul McGarr came second, ahead of Labour, with 27 percent in a mainly white ward. No one mentioned "Russian dolls" back then.

We fought for lists of candidates that reflected the diversity of the struggle against New Labour from the left. That argued that they should be mixed in terms of ethnicity, gender and religious origins. So in the local elections in Birmingham in 2006, Respect stood five candidates—two Muslim women, a Muslim man, a black woman and a female member of the SWP. In the working class immigrant areas of Tower Hamlets and Newham in east London SWP members argued for a mixture of Muslim and non-Muslim candidates. Respect won 26 percent of the vote and three council seats in Newham, 23 percent of the vote and 12 seats in Tower Hamlets and one seat, for well-known Muslim anti-war activist Salma Yaqoob, in Birmingham

### Defending Respect as a project for the left

But the very success of Respect led to political arguments—and SWP members had to try to find ways of dealing with them. The biggest was that opportunist electoral politics began to intrude into Respect in the areas where it was the most successful electorally.

At the time of the 2005 general election Galloway began promoting within his own campaign in Tower Hamlets individuals and forces very distant from the left, including a millionaire restaurant owner and a millionaire property developer. The SWP and others on the left struggled against such non-left interlopers, and by and large defeated them. Two years later, our willingness to struggle in this way was used by Galloway to denounce the SWP.

There is a model of politics increasingly used by the Labour Party in ethnically and religiously mixed inner-city areas—promising favours to people who pose as "community leaders" of particular ethnic or religious groupings if they agree to use their influence to deliver votes.

This is what is known in US cities as Tammany Hall politics, or "vote bloc" or "communal" politics in the Indian subcontinent. It is something the left has always tried to resist. But it was this that began to appear in Respect in Tower Hamlets. So, before the 2006 council elections, two of Galloway's present allies, Azmal Hussain and Abjol Miah argued strongly that all the candidates in some wards should be male and Bengali. Two of the Respect councillors selected under this pressure soon broke with Respect, one joining the Labour Party, because they felt their personal ambitions were not being satisfied.

Similar arguments also took place in Birmingham in the run-up to the 2007 council elections. A candidate supported by Salma Yaqoob had only just left the Conservative

Party until just three months before and had been planning to stand against Respect as an independent. When an SWP activist objected to promoting him, Salma Yaqoob said the activist "had a problem with Asian candidates". In another case, about 50 people suddenly joined Respect to vote for Asian Muslim consultant as candidate. The overall outcome was a complete change in the character of Respect's list of candidates in 2007 in Birmingham compared to the year before. It was now made up entirely of men from Pakistani backgrounds instead of an ethnic mix containing a majority of women.

Principled socialists had no choice but to argue against such developments. Otherwise people would believe the Labour Party lie that Respect was a communalist party.

Developments in Tower Hamlets also forced principled socialists to take a stand. Arguments broke out within the newly elected Respect group on the council. Four councillors, including the only two women councillors, objected to what they saw as right wing positions taken by the majority of the group. None of the objectors were at that point in the SWP, although two soon joined. The issues became sharper with a council by-election in the summer. A Respect selection meeting got heated when a young woman activist, Sultana Begum, dared to stand against Galloway's preferred candidate Harun Miah. The SWP members and the left wing councillors argued that Sultana Begum had the fighting spirit best suited to represent Respect. Backing her was one of the alleged "crimes" of the SWP, according to Galloway, even though SWP members, after losing the vote at the selection meeting, worked very hard to win the seat for Respect. Our real "crime" was that we argued out politics openly and vigorously, and refused to be dragooned into being "Russian dolls" for George Galloway's friends.

### The mystery of Galloway's turn

Why did Galloway turn so suddenly against the SWP? It was part of a more general shift in his political activity. He had behaved marvellously in the summer of 2005, going to the US Senate and denouncing the war in front of the world's television cameras. But he soon showed a different face. At the beginning of 2006 he dealt a blow to everyone who was preparing to campaign for Respect in the local elections: he absented himself from politics for weeks to appear in the despicable "reality TV" show *Celebrity Big Brother*. Every active supporter of Respect was faced at work with taunts from the right and with people on the left saying they would never vote for Respect again. The SWP had to decide how to react to this. The pressure was particularly acute during these weeks because leading Respect members such as Ken Loach and Salma Yaqoob were keen to denounce Galloway. Fortunately, as a "Leninist" organisation of "Russian dolls" we had our annual conference just as *Celebrity*

## Respect Debate

Big Brother started and were able to agree on a general reaction, which our members then tried to argue. We pointed out that appearing on the TV programme was stupid and an insult to those who had worked to get him elected, but that it was not in the same league as dropping bombs to kill thousands of people in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Had SWP had not defended Galloway during the Big Brother affair, Respect would probably have disintegrated then. Nevertheless, the Big Brother farce damaged Respect. Galloway never once acknowledged the damage he did. On the contrary, in the months after the fiasco he began to use his "celebrity" to build a career as a radio talk-show host, interspersed with television appearances and, again insulting to Respect activists, appearing as guest presenter on the Big Brother's Big Mouth in June 2007. Yet he had the gall just two months later to complain that the SWP was "undermining" Respect. Meanwhile he had achieved the dubious record of being the fifth highest earning MP. Some tribune of the people!

### The eye of the storm

Galloway's attack on the SWP in mid-August came after New Labour unexpectedly indicated there might be a general election within four or five weeks. Galloway had long before said he would not stand for re-election, but now wanted to stand in the other Tower Hamlets constituency. He clearly felt there was no future in appealing to workers on the basis of class arguments (hence his attack on the Organising Fighting Unions initiative) and instead there had to be a shift towards courting conservative "community leaders" (hence his attack on intervening in Pride). The SWP was resisting such a turn, and so it had to be attacked.

To understand how the final split occurred it is necessary to describe the events that followed in Tower Hamlets in some detail.

There was an explosive meeting in mid-October to elect delegates to the annual conference. The question of "pocket members" raised its head again. Scores of people attended who activists had never seen before. Respect's rules stipulated that nominations for delegates had to be received in advance of the meeting. In all, 46 nominations had been received and there were a number of vacant places. But just before the vote was about to be taken a paid parliamentary assistant to Galloway brought in a second handwritten list. This list contained names of people who were not fully paid up members of Respect, people who had not been asked if they wished to stand, people identified by only one name and one member of different Respect branch (Newham). The meeting became chaotic as the Galloway supporter in the chair tried to insist this was the only list put to the vote, and then left the meeting. The branch secretary took over in the chair with the agreement of the meeting and the original nominations were ratified, leaving

room for spare places to be filled through discussion with proposers of the second list.

George Galloway, who was not at the meeting, put his name to a denunciatory email claiming the SWP had "systematically undermined" the meeting, ignoring democratic procedures so as to take control of the conference delegation. When the SWP and the left councillors defended themselves, he accused us of aggression. Two days later he told some of our members (including his 2005 election agent) to "fuck off" and some of his supporters made it clear they wanted to drive the SWP out of Respect. They attempted to do so at another Tower Hamlets meeting the following week, but seeing that they did not have clear majority the chair ended the meeting without taking any vote.

One very disturbing feature of this meeting was the attitude of Galloway's supporters towards women members of Respect. Rania Khan, at 25 the youngest councillor, recalls "We had about 50 women that night and they had valid membership cards but they were not allowed to take part. Someone who was close to the council group leader said to one of the women queuing up outside, 'My wife doesn't come, why are you here?' "

The left councillors were so angry by this time that no one could dissuade them from breaking with the rest of the Respect group on Tower Hamlets council—although not from Respect as such. As Lufta Begum says, "John Rees said to us, don't. But we could not endure it any more".

Up to this point the SWP had done its utmost to reach a compromise that would prevent the split in Respect coming out into the open. Our only precondition was that principled socialists had to have the right to argue within Respect's democratic structures against opportunism and Tammany Hall communalism. But the behaviour of Galloway and his supporters in Tower Hamlets showed that compromise would not work. There was only one possible way of keeping Respect alive in its original form—for the SWP and others on the left to fight flat out.

### The internal discussion in the SWP

Galloway and his supporters have portrayed the SWP as a closed "Leninist" group in which a small number of people at the centre dictate to the members. The picture does not correspond to the way the SWP really works. This was shown by the way we reacted to the attacks on us from late August onwards.

We circulated Galloway's first document and our reply to our members, and called a meeting for all London members. There was open debate, with alternate speeches from those who supported and those who opposed the central committee's interpretation of events. A series of members' meetings in each locality followed and then two 250-strong

national delegate meetings, where those who disagreed with the leadership's position were able to speak without hindrance. Votes were taken, with around 250 for the leadership on each occasion, two against and four or five abstentions.

Three SWP members, two of whom were employed by Galloway, had put their arguments in the London members meeting, in the party's internal bulletin and at the first national delegate meeting. But they then chose to ignore the vote and went on to help orchestrate the attacks on the SWP and the left councillors in Tower Hamlets. We had no choice but to terminate their membership of the SWP. The vote at the second SWP national meeting endorsed this decision.

Thousands of people with a record of activity in the working class, anti-war and anti-racist movements had had access to all the different arguments and followed them attentively. They decided overwhelmingly that they would not be "Russian dolls" for Galloway as he tried to turn Respect into a vehicle for furthering the political careers of people who shared few of its original values. They would instead continue to build Respect according to the original conception. To this end, every effort had to be made to ensure that the Respect annual conference took place with delegates elected on a democratic basis. It was while we were deciding on this approach that news came through that Galloway's supporters were trying to sabotage the conference by calling their own rally on the same day. Galloway's rally consisted to a very large extent of speeches denouncing the SWP.

### Politics and unity

Respect has not been the only attempt to build a left alternative to a right moving social democratic party. We have seen similar attempts with the Scottish Socialist Party, P-Sol in Brazil, the Red-Green Alliance in Denmark, the formation of Rifondazione Comunista in Italy, the Left Bloc in Portugal, Die Linke in Germany, and the efforts to find a single anti-neoliberal candidate for the 2007 presidential elections in France. Respect has not been the only case in which the project has suddenly been endangered by the behaviour of leading figures.

The Rifondazione leadership in Italy joined a centre-left government implementing the policies it once opposed. The majority of the leadership of the Scottish Socialist Party gave evidence in a libel trial against the party's best-known figure, Tommy Sheridan. José Sá Fernandes, a left wing independent activist elected to Lisbon council with the Left Bloc's support made a deal with the Socialist Party. Some of Die Linke's leading East German members participate in local government coalitions that implement cuts. First Marie-George Buffet and then José Bové tried to impose themselves undemocratically as the "unity candidates" of the anti-neoliberal left in

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France—with Bové then agreeing after the first round to be adviser on “food sovereignty” to Ségolène Royal.

The meagreness of the reforms offered by Labour and other social democratic parties has created a huge political vacuum to their left, which the forces of the revolutionary left are usually too weak to fill more than partially by themselves. It is this which creates the need for a gathering of left forces wider than the revolutionary left organised through a united front. But the very thing that makes such political united fronts potentially able to attract wide support—the involvement of well known non-revolutionary political or trade union figures—necessarily means they are unlikely to last indefinitely without intense arguments breaking out over their direction.

Galloway, for instance, has been open about his commitment to the path of reform. He has said that the Labour government would have been very different “if John Smith were still alive”. On television and radio programmes he has often demonstrated a strange faith in the capacity of the police to deal with crime, and has declared his commitment to the unity of British state, which he sees New Labour as undermining.

Such views meant that at some point he was likely to be attracted to opportunistic methods that revolutionary socialists would have to resist. The same was true of Bové in France, Sá Fernandes in Portugal and Fausto Bertinotti in Italy. The LCR in France has a different attitude to the role of working class in the struggle to change society to that of Bové or Buffet. George Galloway and the “community leaders” in Tower Hamlets or Birmingham have a quite different attitude to those of us who are consistent revolutionaries. Unity to fight mainstream parties is one thing. An agreed programme on how to change society is another.

These lessons are going to continue to be important. The few dozen revolutionaries who have joined the Respect Renewal breakaway will learn this lesson the hard way. They will face a choice between having to avoid speaking on a whole range of issues or saying things that upset one or other of its component parts. We can only hope that at some stage principle wins in the battle with opportunism.

Meanwhile, the main body of Respect faces the continued challenge of trying to build a consistent left focus. That will be harder after the breakaway. But wider political developments are likely to offer new opportunities in the medium term.

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Of all the words written about the split in Respect, the least important are those dealing with who did what at some meeting or other. Of much more interest are those articles attempting to provide some political explanation of these events.

Two recent articles from Martin Smith and Chris Harman[1] attempt to provide this political explanation. What I propose to do here is to address three aspects of this debate. Firstly, the SWP's echoing of attacks once the preserve of those more known for pandering to Islamophobia than challenging it. Secondly, the SWP's crass understanding of the dynamic of race and class inside the Muslim community, and the conclusions they draw from it. And thirdly, how best to protect the political integrity of the newly emerging Respect as an entity rooted in opposition to war, neo-liberalism and racism.

### A spectre is haunting Respect?

Leading members of the SWP are conjuring up the spectre of reactionary religious forces on the march inside Respect.

In his article in the December 2007 issue of Socialist Review, SWP National Secretary Martin Smith quotes, with apparent approval, an opponent of Respect as saying: ‘The split will strengthen the weight of the Islamists in Respect Renewal, some of whom have links to Jamaat-e-Islami [Pakistan's largest religious party]. I don't think that's going to make the party very hospitable to socialists.’[2]

Chris Harman echoes the theme, but goes for a double whammy, invoking two apparently sinister organized forces at work inside Respect: ‘...some of Galloway's allies in the Islamic Forum of Europe have connections with the Bangladeshi group Jamaat-i-Islami...It was involved in the military suppression of the Bengali liberation movement in 1969, before developing separate Pakistani and Bangladeshi wings, both of which still use force to drive the left from university campuses’[3]

This argument could not be clearer: conservative Islamic organisations are organizing inside Respect against socialists. It is an argument that we have heard time and time again from those who most viciously opposed Respect from the start, as part of their pro-war agenda. That the SWP now echo these arguments is astonishing.

To ascertain whether there are conservative Islamic religious forces exercising their weight



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inside Respect, it is first helpful to evaluate whether they are emerging in broader British society. Writing about this nearly two years ago my estimation about Muslim radicalism, - those engaging in political activism from a self consciously religious perspective - was as follows:

‘...the dominant character of Muslim radicalisation in Britain today points not towards terrorism or religious extremism, but in the opposite direction: towards political engagement in new, radical and progressive coalitions that seek to unite Muslim with non-Muslim in parliamentary and extra-parliamentary strategies to effect change... the existence of this new and progressive radicalism is a sharp break from those who would lead British Islam into confrontation with all levels of British society.’[4]

As evidence I pointed to increasing Muslim participation in an array of campaigns and initiatives, from the anti-war movement to the European Social Forum, from political alliances with the Mayor of London's office to the emergence of Respect.

Two years later that process has deepened. The decision of the MCB to end their boycott of Holocaust Memorial Day[5], the comments from its chair Mohammed Bari that discrimination on the basis of sexual preference was ‘obnoxious’,[6] and the growing relationship between the MCB and the Trades Union Congress represents important progress. Reactionary and conservative religious radicals certainly exist, and their influence has to be continually countered. But the general political trajectory of Muslim radicalism is still towards progressive politics.

That general trend is much more dramatically pronounced inside Respect, which has gathered together a significant grouping of Muslims who combine their Islamic faith with a commitment to the struggle for social justice.

One indication of which way the wind is blowing has been the complete absence of any serious dissent inside Respect over the kind of secular/religious fault lines that run through wider society. This includes issues

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such as abortion law, homosexuality, gender equality or faith-based schools.

For many people these are matters of personal morality and religious belief. For that reason we would be wise to deal with them with some sensitivity[7]. But these issues, of course, have a wider political and social significance that we cannot ignore. In this context, an argument about the importance of the right to self-determination, freedom and equality is very powerful. I have argued on many occasions that if Muslims demand respect for their beliefs and lifestyle, then the same tolerance and respect for the rights and choices of others is obligatory.

What we have achieved is the creation of an alliance which emphasizes universal themes of justice and equality. Within this there will be all sorts of ideological (and theological) views. But they are united by the defence of the rights and freedoms of all. It is an alliance that has advanced support for progressive social causes.

There is no evidence of any Muslim bloc inside Respect seeking to give our political agenda some Sharia flavour. There is no evidence that members of Jamaat-i-Islami or any other Islamic organization are on some 'entryist' mission inside Respect.

There is no evidence of the SWP raising concerns about undue religious influence in all the time I have been Vice Chair. And there is no evidence that such forces are about to emerge in the absence of the SWP. Quite the opposite, in fact. When we were organizing the Respect Renewal conference the Islamic figure our Bengali councillors in Tower Hamlets wanted to speak was Tariq Ramadan, the most progressive exponent of a modern European Islam.

The SWP allegations are groundless. They are driven more by the dynamic of a faction fight in which they are grasping around for ideological cover to mask what is in reality sectarian manoeuvres to entrench their control. The danger for the SWP, in repeating arguments which first emanated from the so-called pro-war 'left', is that in so doing they allow the waters of Islamophobia to lap at their feet.

### Are Muslims in retreat from the struggle against war and racism?

The SWP have suggested that there is a retreat from engagement in radical politics by Muslims, and that George Galloway was adapting to this reversion to conservative community politics. They locate this retreat in the impact of the 7/7 bombings. This claim is wrong.

There is no evidence that Muslims, radicalised by the impact of war and Islamophobia, are falling in behind Home Office attempts to incorporate establishment figures on the basis of softening opposition to British foreign policy or to their campaigns of demonisation against Muslims. The handful of Muslim figures who have taken such a view patently do not

have the support of the wider community. Any political benefits the Labour party have gained from the 'Brown Bounce' have very much disappeared. While there is fear and concern over new government threats to our civil liberties, there is simply no evidence that the Government's agenda is substantially weakening the anti-imperialist or anti-racist consciousness among any significant layer of Muslims in Britain today.

The SWP attempts to justify this argument with reference to a decline in the numbers of Muslims attending anti-war marches. This is far too simplistic. The inability of the anti-war movement to prevent the invasion of Iraq inevitably had a certain demoralizing effect, across all communities, undermining a belief in the power of social movements to make a difference. It was not just Muslim participation on anti-war protests that subsequently declined.

But the anger over the war on terror has not gone away. It re-emerged over the Israeli attack on Lebanon, and would undoubtedly emerge again in the advent of any new escalation like an attack on Iran. Furthermore, events organised by coalitions of Islamic institutions such as the Global Peace and Unity conference and Islam Expo have continued to grow after 7/7 and have continued to develop a critical, radical edge. These attract tens of thousands of participants.

It is a mistake therefore to conflate a dip in Muslim involvement in a single set form of activity – a Stop the War demonstration – with a major political regression to community politics.

### Does Respect pander to community leaders?

Does Respect pander to 'community leaders i.e. small businessmen'[8]?

Related to this mistaken analysis, is a crude understanding of the appeal of Respect inside the Muslim community. The SWP states: 'This logic of electoralism has led Galloway and his supporters to be drawn into making alliances across the whole Muslim community', wherein, George Galloway, myself and others will become increasingly dependant upon 'community leaders' i.e. small businessmen'. [8]

It is true that Respect does have an appeal across the whole Muslim community. There are two possible explanations for this. One, traditionally favoured by the ultra-left and now by the SWP, is that Respect has consciously courted the support of community leaders/small businessmen, at the price of politically compromising ourselves. Again, no actual evidence is produced to substantiate this, nor is there any explanation as to why sections of the Muslim business community would think their class interests are best served by hitching their wagon to a fringe political party.

Another explanation lies in an understanding of how racism impacts on all Muslims. This

racism affects all Muslims, although of course it is mitigated by class background.

Firstly, though, one must be clear about the nature of Muslim communities in Britain today. Muslim communities are dominated by disadvantage and poverty[9].

- Around 69% of Muslims live in poverty.
- 35% of Muslim households have no adult in employment – double the national average.
- Overall, they are 3 times more likely to be unemployed than the population as a whole.
- 73% of Pakistani and Bangladeshi children live in households below the poverty line – compared to 31% for all households
- 32% of Muslim households were overcrowded, and generally Muslims have poorer housing conditions, and are more reliant on social housing
- 28% of young Muslims are unemployed
- 20% of Muslims are self-employed – frequently in marginal and insecure occupations

These are the communities where we have won our strongest support – in some of the poorest wards in the country. Our support does not come primarily from the small, or not so small businessmen, seeking to advance their interests. It comes overwhelmingly from those who experience poverty and disadvantage.

But, in tandem with this poverty and disadvantage, is racism. Irrespective of their class background, Muslims are constantly aware of the discrimination and prejudice they face. It is no less real for the self-employed taxi driver, or the owner of a small grocers shop. There is anger throughout the community at this racism, compounded by anger at the blatant double standards of Western foreign policy.

A consequence of this system of disadvantage and exclusion is the pitifully poor political representation imposed on these communities. For many years this has been dominated by the Labour Party, happy to rely on the large votes from Muslims, but desperate to retain control over them.

So when politicians come along who articulate the feelings of the community, they will get respect, whether they are Muslim or non-Muslim. One of the biggest reasons why Muslims say they support me is that I make them feel proud of who they are, even to the extent of thinking I am a role model for their children.

This sense of pride and community loyalty applies to Muslims who are unemployed, it applies to Muslims who run corner shops, and it applies to our handful of more wealthy backers.

There are Muslim businesspeople who live in million pound mansions in leafy suburbs, while operating businesses in our communities paying low wages and delivering poor conditions for their workers. But I have not yet found these people to be natural supporters of a fringe left-wing party. There are other businesspeople who both live and work in our communities, and who retain a close

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connection with the community they come from, and who have the same interest as their brothers and sisters in confronting racism, opposing war, and seeing good representation for the disadvantaged areas they live in.

Respect's base is among the poorest sections of our communities. And the experience of anti-Muslim racism, and disgust at imperialist war, motivates some small business people in those communities to join us. The roots of our cross community support do not lie in right-wing, anti-working class politics. They can be found in a commitment to oppose racism and war, and the significance of a political party being seen to speak out in defence of that community's interest.

Running through the SWP's analysis is a crude reductionist attempt to read off all political actions from some supposed economic interest. If this is too simplistic in trying to explain Respect's support from some people who own small businesses, it is even more so in relation to people seen as community leaders. The single biggest reason such individuals acquire weight and influence is not wealth, it is reputation.

South Asian communities are built on the basis on migration. New immigrants settle where they have already family or personal links. As a result, most of Birmingham and Tower Hamlets Muslim communities live in areas with others of a similar background. That background invariably lies in common village roots in Pakistan, Kashmir and Bangladesh, with ties reinforced through marriage. These strong community ties bring real benefits. They have provided an indispensable leg-up to newly arrived immigrants from rural areas as they navigate their way around their new country.

The value of such support is incalculable, and is not readily forgotten. And on the basis of their records in doing such work, certain individuals can acquire prestige and influence. It is insulting to our voters and supporters to reduce the prestige which certain individuals in the community have, to some form of patronage or favour they dispense.

Of course this influence can be, and often is, abused. Family and clan loyalties have allowed influential figures in the community to claim control over blocks of votes that can run into the hundreds. This system can stifle genuine political debate, and at its worst can lead to corruption of the electoral process.

But the existence of such loyalties is a reality that cannot be wished away. Family or clan loyalties are not an invention of 'community leaders'. They originate in the social structures of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, and persist because of the experience of migration and the importance of mutual support and interdependence in the daily lives of South Asian communities in Britain today.

This social reality can be both a strength and a weakness. And it leads to real pressures which

we have to resist by asserting the primacy of principled politics.

Our campaigns to end the postal vote have to be seen in this context. It is for the reasons that biraderi (extended clan) networks can exert undue influence that we have been campaigning vigorously in Birmingham against postal votes. Women in particular have been disenfranchised. Postal votes are filled out in the "privacy" of one's own home. But it is not private when family members, candidates or supporters, can influence - subtly or otherwise - the way you complete your vote. Community leaders may claim to be able to yield significant voter blocs, but no one can interfere with the secrecy of the polling station. A secret ballot means that loyalties to family and friends can be maintained in public, but political arguments can still win out in the real privacy of the voting booth.

Ultimately, however, we have to stick to principles and lead by example. Last year in Birmingham Sparkbrook we came under considerable pressure when we selected a candidate whose family were originally from the same village in Pakistan as the sitting Lib Dem councillor. It was alleged we were splitting the biraderi vote. And that we could not win by so doing. We resisted those pressures, just as we resisted pressures when the same people said we could never win by standing a women candidate. And we were proved right on both occasions.

The SWP's allegations that we are in thrall to 'community leaders i.e. small businessmen' are as ignorant of the communities they profess to be knowledgeable about as they are misleading about the actual activities of their critics.

### Respect: the politics of 'Tammany Hall' and 'pocket members'?

The SWP claim that following the outcome of selection meetings in Birmingham and Tower Hamlets the character of Respect changed, and there was a move 'away from the minimal agreed principles...towards putting electability above every other principle'.<sup>[10]</sup> They also claim that 'Tammany Hall' politics i.e. the buying of ethnic voter blocs in return for political favours, have now corrupted Respect.

These are about as serious a set of allegations as can be made.<sup>[11]</sup> You would expect therefore that the SWP to produce evidence to substantiate them. You would expect them to be able to point to how the political programme of Respect has been subsequently watered down; or to cite examples of our elected councillors pandering to a pro-war, neo-liberal agenda; or to give a single instance where our councillors have abused their elected positions or brought Respect into disrepute. Yet no evidence is forthcoming.

The SWP's attempt to evoke an analogy between Respect and the practices of the Democratic Party machine - known as Tammany Hall - is particularly ludicrous. For

decades, Tammany Hall politics played a major part in controlling politics and carving out ethnic voter bases in cities like New York City and Chicago through patronage, bribery, kickbacks. It was first and foremost based on the use and abuse of power - a real power which, by any definition, is lacking among Muslim communities in Britain.

There is no parallel between the Tammany Hall system and the attempts by disadvantaged and excluded minority communities in Britain to organize themselves to exert influence over the political system. The former is a colonial-type operation to keep politics in the hands of big business. The latter is a struggle for justice and equality by those kept out of the corridors of power. One would have thought the SWP could tell the difference between the two.

All sorts of groupings organise to maximize their influence in society. I see no reason - other than ignorance and prejudice - why the organization of minority communities should be singled out for particular hostility, particularly when representatives of those communities do not wield significant political power in our society.

Of course, pressures exist and have to be countered. We have seen allegations, over many years, of 'pocket members' bought and paid for by individuals with the sole intention of influencing selection meetings.

These undemocratic practices can be dealt with. Membership rules can be tightened, or in extreme cases a national party can intervene if a local organization is bringing it into disrepute. Prior to the split I am not aware of the SWP either proposing new measures to tighten membership requirements or raising at a national level their concerns about selection processes inside Respect.<sup>[12]</sup>

Instead they overplay the outcome of a few selection meetings where their preferred candidates did not get selected. There is more than a touch of double standards here. The SWP complain about candidates encouraging their supporters to 'pack' a meeting.<sup>[13]</sup> Yet the SWP goes through the same process every time it approaches a contentious meeting or conference. It will have its full-timers ensuring that the membership details of its supporters are up to date - no doubt in some cases using SWP district bank accounts to speed the process. And when their side wins, they congratulate themselves on a 'good mobilisation'. When the other side wins, they cry foul about meetings being 'packed'!

The SWP, with a half a century of political existence behind them, came into Respect as a well-organised party, with an apparatus staffed by fulltimers and an extremely top down and centralised decision making culture. With a familiarity of operating in committees and party political structures that the vast majority of Respect's new supporters and members did not have, the potential for an organised political grouping having an influence wholly disproportionate to its social base among Respect voters, was very real.

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As it became clear that Respect's strongest voter base and elected representatives came from within sections of the Muslim community, where the SWP had virtually no influence, so they increasingly resorted to bureaucratic manoeuvrings and control to exercise influence. By packing a committee with their members, by acting in committee meetings to a prepared plan and in a disciplined manner, they could lockdown the decision making structures in their favour. New Respect activists learnt the only way to challenge this was to outplay the SWP at their own game, and 'pack' meetings better than they could, which they duly did.

Whichever side 'wins' in these sort of contests, it has to be admitted that the process brings with it an unhealthy dynamic into our internal life. The coalition model that Respect was founded upon had its merits. In the future, however, I am convinced that we need to organise much more along traditional party political lines. We need to be clear that we are building a political party, and not making some form of temporary agreement between rival interests for electoral purposes.

### Conclusion

I see nothing that has happened in the last year or so that fundamentally challenges my view that the political foundation upon which Respect rests; opposition to imperialism, neo-liberalism or racism, is anything other than solid.

Those in the leadership of the Renewal wing of Respect are implacable on all these three fundamental issues. Likewise, the bulk of our members and supporters have essentially old Labour values, given backbone with anger at war and racism. Our members feel pride when they hear Respect leaders like George Galloway articulate their concerns with his trademark eloquence and uncompromising anti-imperialism and anti-racism.

Many come from backgrounds in the South Asian sub-continent where they are all too familiar with the reality of political corruption, and certainly in inner city Birmingham, they will have seen similar practices replicate themselves in the behaviour of the Labour party. By contrast they see us as embodying political principle. This is what our reputation rests on. But we can't take it for granted. We have to work hard to protect it.

We must create a more rounded and extensive political culture so that our members absorb through a variety of means our fundamental principles, and where new leaders and candidates are moulded out of our traditions. That is a process. It will require determination and consistency on our part. To that end the production of a Respect newspaper is one important step in the right direction. More steps will follow. However I am confident of the political direction we are travelling. I am also confident that Respect is emerging reborn and renewed from its recent difficulties.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 Martin Smith, 'Where next for Respect?' Socialist Review December 2007 Chris Harman, 'The Crisis in Respect', document sent to IST members, December 2007.

2 Smith opt cit.

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4 A point George Galloway repeated in his letter to the SWP concerning their attempt to brow beat Muslim councillors into participating on a Gay Pride float.

5 Salma Yaqoob, 'British Islamic Radicalism' in Islamic Political Radicalism: A European Perspective, editors Raymond Tallis &, Tahir Abbas, Edinburgh University Press, 2006

6 [www.muslimnews.co.uk/paper/index.php?article=3299](http://www.muslimnews.co.uk/paper/index.php?article=3299)

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8 John Molyneux, 'On Respect: a reply to some points', SWP pre conference discussion bulletin 3, 2007.

9 [www.nya.org.uk/Templates/internal.asp?NodelD=92837](http://www.nya.org.uk/Templates/internal.asp?NodelD=92837)

10 Harman opt cit.

11 For somebody who allegedly prides himself as a practitioner of a scientific Marxist method, the paucity, anecdotal and one-sided nature of Chris Harman's evidence is striking. The fact that in order to substantiate his claims about Birmingham Respect he is reduced to reproducing a comment from a friend's sister, who apparently happens to live in Birmingham, and who allegedly thinks Birmingham Respect is 'communalist', has more than a touch of desperation about it. Nobody that I know has ever heard of the source he quotes, for all I know she might not even be a Respect member. And if she is, she is certainly not an active one. It is revealing he can't find any members from his own organization active in Birmingham Respect to publicly reiterate and substantiate the 'communalist' charge. They certainly have never made any such charge at any Respect meeting that I have attended.

The only other piece of evidence Harman produces in relation to Birmingham is a disputed selection meeting held last year. He cites the fact we selected seven Asian male as evidence of succumbing to conservative patriarchal pressures from inside the Muslim community. He conveniently ignores the fact that the most high profile Respect figure in the city is a Muslim woman. He also ignores any reference to my request to the SWP that they come forward with female candidates for the outstanding 33 uncontested wards:

The bigger question SWP members should be asking themselves about the Kings Heath selection meeting is why, in a catchment area that included Birmingham University and a 6,000 plus student population, the SWP could not recruit even half a dozen of so students to support their candidate, Helen Salmon.

12 The SWP proposed changes to membership only after they had elected to go 'nuclear' over George Galloway's letter and Respect was in the process of dividing into two.

Their proposal was that members should be restricted as to how many members any individual member could recruit in any one month, that the National Office should be able to ask prospective members for proof of their right to the concessionary rate and that new members had to attend a minimum number of meetings prior to voting for candidates etc.

The first of these proposals was clearly unenforceable but also bizarre in its demand that members should limit their recruitment aspirations. Respect's problem has not been too many members but too few. The second proposal promised a potentially racially inflammatory test of the veracity of members. Bangladeshi members in Tower Hamlets have already had plenty of experience of condescending white members demanding ID from them as though they were having to pass an immigration entry test. The third and most significant restriction however was clearly an opportunist device to keep control over selection of candidates and election of officers in the hands of those for whom attendance at political meetings was a way of life, this likely to be, of course, mostly SWP members. So much then for trying to create a new kind of organisation which would help to enfranchise those who had for so long been disenfranchised. Most extraordinary of all, these proposals also promised restrictions which are not to be found in either the Labour Party or the trade union movement.

The SWP proposals threatened to entrench the tendencies marked in many areas of making Respect an extension of the local SWP branch's campaigning activity rather than giving it a life of its own.

13 Rob Hoveman adds the following background information in relation to Tower Hamlets: 'In four years in Tower Hamlets, in the area where we have the biggest

support for Respect electorally and where we have had an MP for almost three years, an examination of the membership of Respect in the borough revealed that the SWP had recruited virtually no-one white to Respect outside the SWP itself. This represents an abysmal failure. Moreover, according to their local organizer, a Tower Hamlets SWP branch meeting was told that 60% of the SWP members in the borough had not joined Respect and that they would, in the face of the "witch-hunt" the party was facing, now be trying to get them to join!

Much has been made about the process of candidate selection in Tower Hamlets for the council elections in 2006. What was most apparent in the run-up to the local elections, however, was, on the one hand, the lack of white candidates to put up for election and, on the other, the fact that the SWP candidates, most of whom were white, had had no real prior connection with or involvement in the Bangladeshi community which was inevitably going to be the major source of votes in the election.

Few, if any, of the SWP candidates in Tower Hamlets had serious roots in the wards in which they stood. Of no-one was this more true than John Rees. Although he had worked in the area for many years, as this was the site of the SWP national office until the last couple of years, he had not been involved in local campaigns and in fact lived in Hackney.

He wanted to stand in Whitechapel because this is where he thought he was most likely to get elected. A number of Bangladeshi activists thought this unlikely as no-one in the Bangladeshi community in Whitechapel had any prior knowledge of him. This was the one source of acute division at the candidate selection meeting in the Kingsley Hall, where the room divided almost but not exclusively on racial lines over his standing in Whitechapel. Although his candidacy was confirmed at that meeting by majority vote, he subsequently concluded that he could not win there and switched to Bethnal Green South as a more promising prospect. Even so he did not really start his local campaign until four weeks before the election and concentrated heavily on getting SWP members in to canvas by knocking on doors.

I was in favour of John Rees standing in the election but the tactics deployed to try to get him elected seem to me to have been fatally flawed. Throwing in wave after wave of canvassers in the last few weeks, when most psephologists will tell you most votes have already been decided, shows an incredible lack of understanding about how confidence, and therefore votes, are won amongst sections of the community. And hoping to ride the coat-tails of Bangladeshi candidates who do have roots and the connections betrays an electoral opportunism (unsuccessful in this as in other cases) entirely counter to the long-standing SWP position that SWP members need to build real roots in the community.

Finally, in relation to SWP claims about there being something underhand about new members being recruited before the candidate selection for Bethnal Green and Bow in November 2007, what they did not point out was that many of the new members who were being registered were being registered by SWP councillor Lutfa Begum in order to vote for her daughter Rania Khan to be the candidate. Rania Khan incidentally was the SWP's own preferred candidate for the nomination. There may well be nothing improper in Lutfa Begum encouraging new members to join in the run-up to a selection. But what is improper is the SWP's double standards when it comes to such actions.'

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Debate on Britain's militant left

## The SWP's ever-increasing welter of allegations and distortions

A Reply to Chris Harman on Respect

Alan Thornett

Chris Harman claims that his article *The Crisis in Respect* is an attempt to locate the politics behind crisis in Respect. It is nothing of the sort. It is a continuation of the method the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) has employed in the debate around the issue from the outset, which has been to bury the politics behind an ever-increasing welter of allegations and distortions mostly, but not only, about George Galloway and Salma Yaqoob.

To the extent that he does deal with the politics it is an attempt to defend the indefensible i.e. the 'loose coalition' model of organisation which the SWP insisted on for Respect and the way the SWP leadership reacted to George Galloway's letter at the end of last August.

Harman claims that the crisis was precipitated by a series of attacks on the SWP. It was not. It was precipitated by the astonishing over-reaction of the SWP leadership to George Galloway's letter, which called for some rather modest changes in the way Respect was organised and run. The letter did not imply a crisis or a split in Respect. It did, it is true, add up to a critique of the SWP and the way it ran Respect. But it was impossible to criticise any aspect of Respect without this being the case, since the SWP were running it from top to bottom. Respect was, in effect, by then, a wholly-owned subsidiary of the SWP. That was in fact the nub of the problem the letter was trying to address.

Harman also claims that the letter was designed to shift Respect to the right. It was not. There was absolutely nothing in the letter to suggest such a shift. The issues Harman singles out in an attempt to establish this are the questioning (in the context of financial administration) of the decision to spend £2,000 on the hiring of an expensive float for the 2007 Gay Pride at a time when Respect had no money, and the resources put into the Organising Fighting Unions conference (OFU) and the subsequent £5,000 loss. There can be different views on these issues but they were both legitimate questions to raise and neither of them held any water at all as examples of a move to the right.

In fact Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) rights are an unfortunate subject for Harman to pick to attack the letter, given the SWP's dubious record on the subject inside Respect. There have indeed been clashes with George Galloway over this issue in Respect. Whilst Galloway supports LGBT rights, and has a record of doing so, he has controversially argued on several occasions for the issue to be given a lower profile in Respect material. The problem for Harman, however, is that the SWP have, on each occasion, supported

Galloway over such proposals against Socialist Resistance (SR) supporters, and others, who have argued for a higher profile.

This was the case at the first two conferences of Respect, where SR supporters were denounced by SWP leaders for raising resolutions highlighting LGBT rights. It was also the case with the first draft of the Respect manifesto, which I wrote, where George Galloway was also supported by SWP leaders when he argued for reducing the profile of this issue. Whether it was right or wrong to suddenly spend a lot of money on an intervention into the 2007 Gay Pride parade, when previously SR supporters had to campaign to get a leaflet produced for Pride, can be discussed. But it was not a shift to the right. It was what it was: the questioning of particular expenditure at a time when Respect had no money for an election campaign or anything else.

There was always a legitimate question to be asked about the way the OFU conference was built and resourced through the Respect office and full-time staff. I was opposed to the way it was built from the start, and declined to be a part of the organising committee as a result. I had argued for a conference organised jointly with sections of the trade union left, and if possible with the Communist Party of Britain (CPB), with the aim of strengthening the links between Respect and the trade union left and other partners in the project. This approach was rejected on the Respect officers' committee in favour of a conference called and organised by Respect itself - with the main aim of getting the maximum attendance. In the event, the conference, although quite big, did nothing whatsoever to strengthen the relationship between Respect and the trade union left. It was perfectly legitimate for George Galloway to criticise the resources put in by the Respect office, and the £5,000 loss incurred.

Gay Pride and OFU, however, were side issues in the Galloway letter. In any case, Harman himself argues elsewhere in his article that the shift to the right is an intention behind the letter, rather than in the text of the letter itself. What Harman fails to take up is the central issue of the Galloway letter: the state that Respect was in. The stark reality was that



Alan Thornett, left, with George Galloway and Salma Yaqoob

the membership of Respect had declined from 5,500 two years earlier, to 2,200 by August 2007: something which would normally be seen as a crisis. Not only were many of Respect's branches moribund or inactive, but Respect was politically narrower, since the bulk of those who had left had been independent activists. It had financial problems and it was in no position to face a general election. There were problems with its decision making process, the functioning of its elected committees, and the undemocratic top-down control exercised by the SWP. These were the real issues which provoked the letter.

None of these were new problems. Some of us had been raising them for several years. The Respect Party Platform (RPP) - had tried to raise them at the Respect conference in October 2006 and had been roundly slapped down by John Rees (Respect National Secretary and a leading SWP member), with the support at that time of George Galloway. The declining membership was blatantly covered up. In fact, falsified membership figures were presented to the conference by John Rees. These were designed to give the impression that Respect had grown when it had declined. All protests about this manipulation were ignored.

The conference was told that, in any case, membership figures were not the best way to measure the strength of Respect: that there were a lot of Respect supporters who were not prepared to join, but could be called upon in important campaigns like elections. This was an oblique - but revealing - reference to SWP members and the way the SWP saw Respect. This was that it did not need to be a real organisation, with real members, because there were plenty of SWP members who could be drafted in as foot-soldiers as necessary. It meant that Respect was not a real organisation at all but a front for the SWP! It did not have any internal political life of its own because it did not need an internal life. It was an extension of the SWP: a device to be used at election time. SWP member after SWP member went to the rostrum to denounce us and to claim that their Respect branch was vibrant and expanding, that there was no crisis and that it was malicious to suggest otherwise. The following is an extract from the

## Respect Debate

RPP assessment of the conference, published soon after:

"The real situation inside Respect was the elephant in the room which must not be mentioned. How, following major electoral gains winning a seat in Westminster and then 16 councillors in the local elections was Respect smaller and politically narrower at the time of the conference than at any time since it was founded despite the gains in East London.

"According to the annual report, as discussed at the National Council prior to the conference, Respect had lost a third of its members over the past year, down from just over three thousand to just over two thousand, and many of its branches are in bad shape. Yet far from using the conference to discuss this problem and how to tackle it, the whole thing was covered up. The version of the annual report given to the delegates had even been altered, and all the membership figures removed. A carefully worded formula was inserted in place of the figures which gave the impression that the membership had gone up. It was smoke and mirrors. A declining Respect becomes an expanding one. George Galloway in his opening speech not only claimed that everything in the garden was absolutely rosy but that Respect had just recruited 10,000 students! Respect was, said Galloway "the fastest growing party in Britain". John Rees insisted that Respect was "bigger this year than last year"."

All proposals we put forward at the conference to address this disastrous situation were also slapped down by an SWP majority. The implication was that since there was no crisis - other than in the heads of a disgruntled minority - there was no need for any solutions either. We were successfully isolated and defeated.

This was the real background to George Galloway's letter. What was new was that they had now been reflected in a poor result in the Southall Parliamentary by-election, there was a general election in the offing, and George Galloway had now raised them. The letter was an attempt to tackle this situation. It made proposals for a much-needed membership and fund drive and a modest reorganisation of the leadership structures of Respect, to bring a bit of plurality in at the top. If the SWP had been prepared to discuss the issues politically and make some compromises, to show that they were prepared to take other people's views into account, there could have been a positive outcome. John Lister (the other SR member on the Respect NC) and I issued a statement welcoming George Galloway's letter as far as it went, but calling on him to go further, particularly over the democratisation of Respect internal procedures and structures, and on accountability.

Harman says rather patronisingly that those from the left like me, John Lister (and Ken Loach and others) who supported the letter and eventually supported Respect Renewal

were confused! But there was never any doubt where we would stand on the letter. It was pointing to problems we had been raising and changes we had been proposing for a long time. Nor was there any chance from the outset that we would support the SWP leadership once it was clear that they were opposing the letter in favour of an unacceptable status-quo. If the fiction of a left/right divide was calculated to draw us into the SWP camp, it was never going to work.

This was the reaction of almost all the non-SWP members of the NC. It was a remarkable situation. The SWP leadership managed to alienate themselves, within a few weeks, from virtually all of the active non-SWP members of the NC: people they had been working with for three and a half years. There were 50 members of the NC, of which about 44 were actively involved. At the time of the letter, the SWP had 19 members of the NC. By the time of the split, 19 NC members supported Respect Renewal and 21 supported the SWP, of which 17 were SWP members (several others declined to take sides).

Among those supporting Respect Renewal are Linda Smith (the National Chair of Respect and leading member of the Fire Brigades Union), Salma Yaqoob (National Vice-Chair and elected councillor in Birmingham), Victoria Brittain (a well known writer and playwright), Jerry Hicks (leading industrial militant and member of the SWP at the start of this crisis). There was also film maker Ken Loach, Abjol Miah (the leader of Respect on Tower Hamlets Council), Yvonne Ridley (also a journalist), and Nick Wrack - the first national chair of Respect and a member of the SWP when the crisis broke.

One feature of the SWP Respect after the split is that the ratio of SWP members to independent activists on its National Council elected on October 9th is even greater. SWP members are seventy percent of the incoming NC. It will be difficult to have much of a coalition on that basis.

Harman claims that the SWP did its "utmost" to reach a compromise to prevent a split. It did not. In fact it was the SWP's total refusal to compromise which set a split dynamic in train. Far from making concessions, the SWP went totally in the opposite direction. They took the letter as a frontal attack on the SWP and launched a nation-wide tour of SWP districts vilifying George Galloway and scandalously calling him and Salma Yaqoob (amongst many other things) "communalists", with its divisive connotations for those from the Sub-Continent, of brutal colonial pogroms and imperialist divide and rule. They also characterised his letter as a part of a right wing attack on the left in Respect.

The charge of communalism was particularly outrageous in the case of Salma Yaqoob, who, far from being a communalist, had a high profile and exemplary record in combating it in Birmingham - which she convincingly

outlined in her reply to the SWP Challenges for Respect.

There may well have been examples where Respect focussed too much on building in one single community or worked too much through community networks in a particular area. The SWP are seriously wrong, however, in describing this as communalism and Harman continues with this dangerous line. Of course, the task is to resist relying on such networks and especially where, which is often the case, they are male-dominated. Unlike The Labour Party, however, we need to fight for transparent processes, as has been the case over postal voting. If there have been concessions to these practices, the SWP have to show what they did about it at the time not just claim, without any evidence, that it was all down to George Galloway. Salma Yaqoob covers some of these things a lot more adequately in her excellent reply to Harman - A Spectre is Haunting Respect?

At each of the SWP's internal meetings the attacks on George Galloway became more frenzied. A minority which emerged inside the SWP in opposition to all this, and which argued for the SWP to make compromises before it was too late, was brushed aside and some were later expelled. In hindsight, is it probable that once the SWP leadership had gone down the road of whipping up their members against Galloway in this way, it was already impossible to prevent a split. It was very difficult to pull back from the kind of allegations which were being made and the bitterness engendered. So SWP leaders, finding themselves in a hole, kept digging. In fact, the kind of language used then continues in Harman's letter. In it he not only claims that there was a witch hunt against the SWP, but that it reflected the tone of the Cold War of the 1950s and the purges of Trotskyists in the Labour Party in the 1980s! At another point it compares us with the leadership of Rifondazione joining the Prodi coalition.

It is worth noting that the George Galloway the SWP were now vilifying was the same George Galloway that the SWP had repeatedly shielded from criticism from ourselves and others ever since Respect was founded: not just on the profile of LGBT rights, but other issues as well. They now denounced him for unaccountability, yet at the time of the Celebrity Big Brother debacle they fought might and main to protect him against any degree of accountability at all. They successfully blocked any of criticism of his decision to go on the programme being expressed by Respect. Harman repeats the crassest arguments deployed by the SWP at the time to defend their actions. For example: that George Galloway's appearance on Big Brother was not as bad as invading Iraq as Blair and new Labour had done! So that's alright then! On that criterion he had a completely free hand!

Harman's answer to the charge that the SWP undemocratically dominated Respect -

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something which was so recognisable to non-SWP members - is to claim that it cannot be true because the SWP has a good reputation in campaigns such as the Anti-Nazi League and the Stop the War Coalition! Whether this claim holds water or not his answer reflects the scale of the problem. The SWP has indeed always treated Respect as a single issue campaign and sought to build it as such. This is the infamous united front of a special kind - when it needs to be something much more akin to a political party if it is to succeed. The level of democracy, of involvement of members, and of common political experience and development, is something very different in an organisation (whether you call it a party or not) which fights for political office than in a single issue campaign which is confined to a limited objective. Again this was the nub of the issue.

Harman claims that George Galloway and others have attacked democratic centralism and Leninist organisation. What has been challenged, however, is not democratic centralism as such, but the way the SWP operated democratic centralism inside Respect, and the effect this had on the democracy of the organisation. In other words, the SWP's bureaucratic conception of 'democratic' centralism and the way they applied it to Respect.

The objection was not that the SWP had meetings as the SWP. The objection was the relationship between its decision making processes and those of Respect itself. Many in Respect, who were not in the SWP, were becoming painfully aware as to what this involved. It meant the huge SWP delegations on the leading bodies of Respect acting under democratic centralist discipline as normal practice, with no attempt to limit the impact of this, or allow a genuine process of discussion to take place. This made it a waste of time for others to attend, since all the important decisions were determined in advance. I had declined nomination for the officers group (the executive committee) after the 2006 conference for exactly this reason, because my attendance was pointless. The elected committees were not the real decision-making bodies at all. They were token meetings controlled by the parallel decision-making structures of the SWP. Decisions which were taken were only carried out if they corresponded to the SWP agenda.

It was this dubious mode of operation which required a top-down structure with the 'important leader' at the top running both Respect and the SWP. And it was this which was challenged by George Galloway's proposal to establish a national organiser alongside the national secretary, with equal authority. This also explains why this proposal was resisted so strongly by the SWP. It was seen as a direct challenge to John Rees and his ability to run things this way.

It was this issue rather than events in Tower Hamlets in East London which was the driving

force of the split on the NC. After several hours of debate at two NC meetings - during which SWP delegates came close to driving George Galloway out of Respect - an agreement was reached on the appointment of a national organiser with equal status to John Rees. It was seen as a breakthrough by the non-SWP members of the NC. An officer's meeting then set this decision aside and referred the issue to the Respect conference. That decision took the crisis to a new level. It sent a message loud and clear that the SWP was going to defend their top-down conception to the bitter end, and that it was probably too late to save Respect in its original form. It was also this which brought the crisis in Tower Hamlets to a head and triggered a battle over conference delegates. If everything was going to be decided by a vote-out at conference, delegates became crucial.

There had been wider problems and conflicts in Tower Hamlets Respect, it is true. Many of them reflected genuine problems arising out of Respect's electoral success, however, for which nobody should apologise. Respect made a major breakthrough - unprecedented on the left - into impoverished working class minority communities in East London and Birmingham, amongst people who were outraged by the war. A large number of new members, many of whom had little experience of the labour movement or the traditional left, with different traditions of political organisation, came into Respect. But how those gains could be consolidated and built, and how the problems which would inevitably arise could be tackled (whatever new community was involved) was another matter.

It is true that Respect's appeal as an anti-war party had an impact right across the Muslim communities in a way which would not be the case in a white working class area, for example. There were - and are - restaurant owners who strongly support Respect again in a way that would not be the case in a white working class area. But this is a product of the position such people find themselves as migrants in British society, their political experience back home, and the nature of the so-called war against terror with its demonisation of Muslim people.

It would be a big mistake, however, to conclude that the several restaurant owners who support Respect Renewal determine the class character of that support. They absolutely do not. The bulk of Respect's Muslim supporters are amongst the most impoverished sections of the working class in Britain. It casts shame on the SWP that they are now resorting to arguments which previously came either from the right wing or the ultra left.

The problems arising from all this, of course, were never discussed in Respect at the level of the NC or the even the officers group. Harman makes a series of allegations about Tower Hamlets Respect about non-left interlopers and the like. But why was none of this brought to the elected committees at the time? The fact is

a conscious decision was taken by SWP leaders to keep them internal to Tower Hamlets and the SWP, since the elected bodies were not seen as the real leadership. That was the SWP. Instead of collective discussion, the problems, where they existed, were internalised and compounded. It was a big mistake. It was impossible for the elected leadership to take responsibility for such problems when they were not informed of the existence of them. Instead of discussion and debate around issues as they have arisen, the SWP's answer was lowest-common-denominator politics. It avoided conflict but nothing was resolved.

The political framework behind all this was the 'loose coalition' conception - which the SWP had insisted on imposing on Respect - rather than building it as an all-round political party. With a loose coalition, the priorities were not political development and the establishment of collective political experience. These were seen as the preserve of the SWP itself, which is a logical approach with a united front campaign. For such a campaign or a loose coalition, the priority was to be able to be able to deliver votes when they were needed. How the organisation itself developed was a secondary matter.

There were also implications for internal democracy. A loose coalition does not imply the same level of democracy or accountability as a party. Nor does it imply the detailed rules needed for standing for political office, policy making, membership status, selection procedures and accountability. Harman alleges irregularities in Tower Hamlets, specifically of large numbers of members joining at the unemployed rate - when some of them, he argues, must have been employed. It is hard to know whether there was substance in this allegation or not. But what is clear is that the SWP has an appalling record of overlooking such irregularities when it has suited them. This raises questions as to how such a situation, if it existed, was allowed to develop in the first place. Both the 2006 Respect conference and the SWP-organised 2007 Respect conference featured large numbers of student delegates who had no legitimate status at all. They were 'elected' from the lists of students who simply expressed an interest in Respect at a Freshers' Fair, but never joined, and in most cases were never seen again. It was one of the factors making the conference an undemocratic and unacceptable event which was no longer viable as a united conference. It would have been unlikely ever to get past the item 'endorsement of delegates' then breaking up, which would have done no one any good.

Harman makes no serious attempt to explain the SWP's dramatic switch - as far as George Galloway is concerned - from unquestioned leader to number one enemy of the left. It's true that Galloway is a maverick and is a controversial politician. But he was both of these things the day Respect was formed and he remained so the day it split. At the time Respect was formed, the SWP saw it as

## Debate on Britain's militant left

**The view from France - Respect splits**

## 'Rouge' to republish the discussion

François Duval

important to include someone like Galloway in a project like Respect, if it was to have a broad appeal. And they were right, at least in principle, even if they got it wrong in practice. You can't have a broad party including both revolutionary socialists and left reformists without any left reformists of any weight and influence. And Galloway is still the only left Labour MP to make a break with Labour, having been expelled from Labour over the war – and to have put his weight behind building an alternative. He is the best public speaker on the left, not an unimportant attribute, and was and remains a central leader of the anti-war movement. It is largely from these two factors that he has the biggest electoral base of anyone on the left outside of the Labour Party. He is left Labour in his politics, as he made very clear at the Respect Renewal conference. But it was this which he brought into Respect from the outset - a genuine component of left-Labour politics.

Nor is Harman right to draw a parallel between the Big Brother episode and Galloway's other media appearances - in particular his twice weekly Talk Sport show. This is a left-wing show and is a service to the left. It is used by GG to promote left-wing causes and left-wing ideas in front of an audience of half a million. It is hard to see and objection to that.

The degree of success achieved by Respect Renewal since the split is both an indication that the political conditions for such a party remain as strong as ever. Respect Renewal remains fragile and will only develop successfully to the extent that it is able to turn outwards towards the rest of the left. The strength of Respect Renewal, however - which was never the case with the original Respect under the SWP - is that it is serious about approaching other sections of the left, such as the trade union left and the CPB, about a wider regroupment of forces to tackle the crisis of working class representation. It is serious when it says that it does not see itself as the answer, but only one component of the answer. It means it when it says that if it is possible to move towards a wider regroupment, it would put no organisational preconditions in the way. Its only precondition would be that it would represent a step forwards in building the kind of new party the working class needs in order to respond to the betrayals of social democracy.

All these issues could have been discussed in the framework of the old Respect had the SWP leadership acted differently. Unfortunately, that was not the case. In reality, there was resistance to this kind of approach. The task now, therefore, is to make Respect Renewal the success it has the possibility of being. It has made a very encouraging start; the task now is to build on this initial success.

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The split in Respect represents a setback for the construction of a radical left alternative.

The present article reviews the discussion which is unfolding in Britain. It will be followed, next week, by contributions from two protagonists in the debate, Alan Thornett (ISG) and Chris Bambery (SWP).

The creation of Respect, in the heat of the antiwar movement of 2003, constituted a promising stage in the regroupment of the radical left and construction of an alternative to New Labour. This coalition gathered together militants from trade unions and campaigns, militants of the Labour left revolted by the neo-liberalism of Tony Blair, opponents to the war in Iraq, Muslims, and revolutionary militants of various currents among which, inter alia, were the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) - principal organization of the British far left - and our comrades of the International Socialist Group (ISG, British section of the Fourth International). In spite of a particularly unjust electoral system (first past the post with only one round), Respect succeeded in getting an MP elected: George Galloway - former MP, excluded from the Labour Party for his opposition to the war, with sometimes controversial positions - as well as several dozen councillors.

Paradoxically, these successes have just led to a split. The political basis of the debate - which became vicious - was constituted by the divergent answers given to questions about the function and the nature of Respect. For the SWP, Respect was to remain primarily an electoral coalition - "a united front of a special type" - and not to seek to replace the existing political parties. This conception obviously

made it possible to prevent all "encroachment" on its own interventions in all kinds of struggle. Conversely, the other components of Respect and many militants not in organised currents wished to go further, not to limit the intervention of Respect to election campaigns but, on the contrary, to act more and more as Respect in all mobilizations. And, consequently, to build Respect as an independent political force, pluralist and equipped with democratic structures at the base.

After having 'protected' George Galloway for a long time against (well-founded) criticisms which were expressed in the ranks of Respect, the leadership of the SWP recently denounced with virulence his "uncontrollable" character, as well as the "communist" and electoralist drift which, according to them, was becoming apparent in certain local branches of Respect.

George Galloway, for his part, took up again on his own account a series of proposals on functioning made previously by our comrades of the ISG. Finally, the split materialized, on 17 November, with the holding of two concurrent conferences. One was primarily animated by the SWP and some allies. The other, grouping together the great majority of the other components, decided on the launching of a new movement, Respect Renewal.

Translation by Andrew and Rob for Mac Uaid.

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Italy

# Sinistra Critica says “goodbye” to Communist Refoundation

*Sinistra Critica (Critical Left)*

## Introduction

Sinistra Critica declares that the experience in the Party of Communist Refoundation (PRC) is over, and is beginning the construction of a new political project. SC is changing into a movement and is proposing the initial phase of constructing an anti-capitalist coalition to the left of Arcobaleno (the Rainbow Coalition). It will make the commitment within the movement, from next Saturday at Vicenza, of continuing its work in the Pact against Insecurity, in the feminist movement, the LGBT movement, for the ecological and anti-racist struggles. A recruitment campaign and fund drive will start in January, with the aim of holding our first national mobilisation in the spring.



Salvatore Cannavò made opening report

### Final Resolution of first National Conference

The first national conference of Sinistra Critica approves the introductory speech and in particular:

1) declares that the experience is over, and announces the initiation of a new political project. This is a separation resulting from the observation that two different projects are taking different roads: on the one hand, Rifondazione is in effect ending its own history, hijacking the conference of its own militants, in order to give life to a new political subject, with a new identity, timidly reformist and with a vocation of being in government; on the other, Sinistra Critica proposes to continue building a class left, anti-capitalist, oppositional, centred on the movements and ready to re-appropriate the theoretical and practical space for a modern revolutionary left now made vacant by Rifondazione. A left in opposition to the PD (Democratic Party), and indeed, today, in opposition to the Prodi government.

2) In the next few days the militants and leaders of SC will leave the PRC and its representatives will constitute autonomous groups in the Chamber of Deputies; the group in the Senate has already been formed. This decision will be conveyed to the PRC nationally by way of an open letter, and the same letter will be presented to local organisations; at a provincial level we will organise meetings

in order to explain this decision to the members of the PRC.

3) Sinistra Critica is not a party but a movement, a political subject orientated towards the mass movement. It will form local groups and groups working on particular issues, and provincial co-ordination bodies. From January it will have a membership drive and a fund-drive.

4) As far as the project of constructing a political force adequate for the needs of our time, we are proposing the establishment of an anti-capitalist Constituent Assembly to the left of Arcobaleno, which will bring together the best experiences of Rifondazione and of various sectors of the movement, anti-social-partnership trade unionists, radical feminism, the ecological movement, and above all of the youth. This Constituent Assembly represents a real and promising project, capable of bringing to life in the here and now, even if in exemplary or partial form, a class and anti-capitalist Coalition of the Left, based on at least three reference points:

- a. the link with the social movements and their dynamics and objectives;
- b. providing an alternative to that of the right while maintaining independence from centre-left governments and consequently also opposition to the Democratic Party;
- c. independence in political work from the institutions, not however

excluding the electoral arena and the tools needed there, including the use of the symbols of the hammer and sickle, which has today been abandoned yet again.

5) To have a real life the anti-capitalist Constituent Assembly must be linked to the paths taken by the movement, so in the short-term Sinistra Critica commits itself to:

- a) the widest possible participation in the Vicenza demonstration and to the struggle against the US base but also to the reconstruction of a general movement starting from the Pact signed on 25 November and calling another day of mobilisation on 26 January;
- b) developing and articulating the Pact against Insecurity made after the strike of 9 November which will have to be capable of intervening in such a way as to organise a real existence beyond the level of mere, though necessary, demonstrations;
- c) giving continuity to the renewal of the feminist movement that was expressed last 24 November around the question of the fight against male violence and which will see another national meeting on 12 January;
- d) sustaining and building the movement against the influence of the Vatican and against sexual discrimination and for civil rights and a secular state, based around the LGBT movement and the NoVat day on 9 February;

e) continuing the fight for common goods and defence of the environment, seeking to generalise disputes and proposing wider structures for co-ordinating and maintaining such struggles over time;

f) strengthening the anti-racist struggle and the struggle for the organisation of migrants, starting with the justified opposition to Prodi and Veltroni’s “security package”.

6) Lastly SC decides to give a mandate to the national co-ordination to prepare a national campaign around the centrality of work, social rights and defence of the environment against the logic of profit. In particular the centrality of work is underlined by the murders in Torino, which show how hard the daily battle is of capital against working people. A national campaign, then, which will be a way of building Sinistra Critica, and which will focus on a bid day of mobilisations next spring.

### *Unanimously approved.*

The Sinistra Critica (Critical Left) was set up in January 2007 by the minority of the Party of Communist Refoundation (PRC) which refused the participation of the party in the Prodi government. It includes the comrades of Bandiera Rossa, Italian section of the Fourth International.



## Portugal

## Where is the Left Bloc going?

## Interview

Francisco Louçã

On June 2-3, 2007 the Fifth National Convention of the Left Bloc took place in Lisbon. Since its creation in 1999, this unitary organization of the anti-capitalist Left in Portugal has strongly consolidated itself and has established a presence in the country. Today it has become a significant force, with 4,200 members, an active presence in struggles and social movements, as well as 350 local councillors and 8 members of Parliament. The following interview with Francisco Louçã was conducted on July 7, 2007.

**Q.** *The Left Bloc is a pluralist party of the socialist Left. How does it define itself in relation to the hard core of the socialist programme, in the strong sense of the term, i.e. to the socialization of the large-scale means of production, distribution, credit, etc? How do you tackle the key question of property in your programme? Is it possible to refound an anti-capitalist left without taking a clear position on this question?*

**A.** When the Bloc was formed, eight years ago, we made a political choice which I believe is still valid: to create our party on the basis of the political confrontations which define our activity and not on the basis of a priori ideological cohesion. We thus brought together very different traditions, coming from the Communist Party, Maoist or revolutionary Marxist (Trotskyist) currents, as well as people from independent social movements. The possibility of building this regroupment, in a very defensive situation, implied that we were able to formulate political proposals and to have an impact on society. So started not by discussing a programme of historical reference, but a programme of political intervention. We defined ourselves as socialists shortly after our foundation, in a double sense: initially, by rejecting “real socialism” (Stalinism, the experiences of the USSR, Eastern Europe or China), then by identifying ourselves with the anti-capitalist struggle, against the

social-democratic experience and its current social-liberal version.

In this sense, we defend the idea of collective ownership. But what is really important, in particular for the organizations which followed the path of small minority groups, is to find the means of expressing political ideas which fight to have an influence on the masses. So we translated our socialist ideas into specific proposals, very much linked to the modalities of political life in Portugal.

For example, we recently proposed the socialization of the services of water, energy, etc, and one of our principal campaigns this year centres on the defence, the modernization and the transformation of the national health service. That enables us to concretize our perspective of socialization on the basis of social needs and concrete struggles.

**Q.** *Reading the majority resolution of your June congress, we can see a quite clear difference between the way in which you tackle social questions and environmental questions. On social questions, you put forward defensive demands - refusal of privatizations, defence of a social security system that meets the needs of everyone, etc. -, therefore an anti-liberal programme, compatible with a left Keynesian perspective. On environmental questions, you point out that we cannot answer a problem as serious as climatic disorder without challenging the very logic*



*of capitalism. It seems to me that your approach becomes more radical here, including in the way you choose to formulate things. Is there not here a tension between a minimal social programme, which corresponds to the defence of “possible” objectives – in fact, the term is used on several occasions - and the need to seriously break with capitalism, in particular on ecological questions?*

**A.** On all questions, the only coherent strategy is to break with capitalism. We do not share a left Keynesian perspective, because it is a perspective that is based on the market, a perspective which had a material base in the capitalist systems after the Second World War, but which is no longer possible today. We defend on the contrary the idea that the Left, our Left at least, has fight to develop the consciousness and the capacity for action of people, without limiting itself to making propaganda for socialism. Actually, the idea that the only practical alternative is socialism, which cannot be an immediate objective, leads to a perturbation of the thinking of the Left. In order to fight, you have to demand everything, and yet... everything is not possible. We have to break this crazy mirror!

If the central objective of the European bourgeoisies, at least of the Portuguese bourgeoisie, is to suppress part of the indirect wages of workers and to take for itself revenue from taxation,

from the socialized part of the state, that forces us to defend public services as a democratic gain for which we are collectively responsible, and to win the majority of the population to such an objective.

This battle is not defensive! It is the most offensive battle that you can think of, since by putting forward proposals that are specific, and thus possible, people can see that they are applicable. It is what we do in the fields of health and social security. For example, faced with the biggest initiative of this government with a Socialist majority, that is, the reform of social security, we were the only party to present a concrete alternative in terms of methods of financing, the role of taxation or the way services were divided up between the generations. That gave us a very big impact, because everyone could understand that the only argument of the partisans of a liberalization of social security - that it is the only viable alternative - was erroneous. We have to fight clearly for that ground.

Having said that, our congress developed a basic position on the question of the environment that was more programmatic, centred on climatic disturbances, undoubtedly because it was the first time that we had done it. We had to explain why market solutions -the “Al Gore way” - lead to a dead end from the point of view of the transformation of

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habits of consumption, forms of production, distribution of wealth, North-South relations, etc. That is why we chose a more educational approach.

**Q.** *In the last 20 to 25 years, the cumulative results of neo-liberal policies, the policies of really existing capitalism, have produced a social regression whose effects on class consciousness have been profound. So we can note a general retreat of solidarity to the advantage of "everyone for themselves", which is the expression of the increasing influence of bourgeois ideology... Broad sectors of society are more atomised than ever and are experiencing head-on the material and ideological offensive of capital. This situation favours the multiplication of all sorts of divisions, between those in work and the unemployed, between those who have a permanent job and those in precarious work, between natives of a country and immigrants, old and young, men and women, etc... This general weakening of capacities of resistance marks a qualitative degradation of the relationship of forces. In such a context, to resist durably implies not only organising the social movement around anti-liberal objectives, but also rebuilding it, which supposes the redefinition of a horizon of radical social transformation - what socialism meant for the working-class movement before the Second World War... What do you think about that?*

**A.** It seems to me that the left does not have a very complete answer to this question, because the only possible answer will have to be based on social experience, on the creation of new traditions of struggle. But I believe that there are two elements for a reply. First of all, the capacity for political initiative; secondly, the organization of new social networks, new forms of social intervention. I believe that the key to the strategy of the socialist Left is to take back the initiative and go on the offensive, where it is possible, and to always maintain this orientation. I greatly respect the militants and the tradition of the European radical Left, but I believe that if a party is not able

to establish itself as a reference in national political debates, in particular by its capacity for initiative, it will fail. It is absolutely necessary to build this capacity for political action that becomes a reference.

I can give you two examples in our history. The Bloc was formed in 1999, at a moment when, in spite of the rising tide of liberalism, individualism and the privatization of consciousness, Portugal experienced a rather unique movement of solidarity with the people of Timor, not yet independent and under the military pressure of Indonesia: a nation-wide strike, street demonstrations lasting all day, therefore a mobilization which was not an expression of material interests. How was such a capacity for commitment and initiative possible in an overall defensive climate? The answer is political: certain tensions can make possible important initiatives on concrete themes.

Furthermore, very recently, we won a referendum on abortion with a majority of 60% in favour of one of the most advanced laws in Europe, and that in a very Catholic country, where the weight of the Church on the political world is very strong. That is explained by the capacity for initiative of the supporters of decriminalisation. We were able to divide the centre and the Right, to draw right-wing members of Parliament in behind the movement, and on a key theme: how could we continue to imprison women who have had abortions? That completely changed the terms of reference of the political debate. So it is necessary to be wary of attitudes that are apparently very radical, but which actually lead to a wait-and-see policy, because nothing seems possible. No, many things are possible... on condition that we make choices and create a relationship of forces by taking the initiative where it is possible to take steps forward.

Fundamentally, I believe that you are right. We have to envisage a major reorganization of the social movement in the 21st century. In reality, it will be difficult for the trade unions to organise precarious workers. It is necessary

to create other types of networks and social organizations. We have some experiences in this regard. For example, we organised a march for jobs, one year ago, which crisscrossed the country. There were two to three public meetings every day, with many workers present. Sometimes, the workers of companies that were going bankrupt or threatened with closure contacted us. We took this problem very seriously, because there is more or less 10 per cent unemployment in Portugal. And the workers do not see an alternative, because it is difficult. However, in some cases, we obtained significant gains. Militants of the Left Bloc are in the leadership of the workers' commission of one of the most important factories in the country, Volkswagen, in the south of Lisbon, which employs several thousand workers. There, the workers agreed to give up wage increases so that several hundred precarious workers in the factory could be given permanent contracts. That reinforced confidence in solutions of solidarity, and this in an extremely defensive context.

**Q.** *At the end of the 20th century, the global justice movement represented an element of rupture in the field of ideas. So we saw the appearance of a new form of internationalism. Nevertheless, the difficulty that this movement has had in engaging in large-scale social mobilizations also shows some of its limits. Your congress document highlights two European examples - the mobilizations of youth against the CPE in France and of Greek students against the Bologna reforms - which would not have been conceivable without the precedent of the global justice movement. But such examples remain limited. Without large-scale social mobilizations, don't you see a danger that the global justice movement goes round in circles, and that its demonstrations and forums become rituals, without liberating the capacities of social initiative that are essential to a counter-offensive?*

**A.** This danger exists. But the global justice movement nevertheless had an impressive success by showing itself to

be capable of organizing an international movement against the war on the basis of new forms of organization that were very attractive and very productive. It made possible the expression of a mass movement of millions of people, which was a decisive factor in beginning to confront imperialism and war. Having said that, you are right, it encounters a real difficulty in organizing broad social sectors. In Portugal, the global justice movement has been much more important as a laboratory of ideas than as a movement capable of organization and initiative.

There were two Portuguese Social Forums, but they were of very modest proportions: the first one was certainly a little less so, thanks to the involvement of the trade-union confederation on a unitary line, but the second was limited to a few hundred people, because of the Communist Party's obsessive desire to control the whole process, which dissuaded many social organizations from taking part in it [1]. This narrow-minded attitude has had an effect on the capacity for autonomous intervention of the global justice movement in Portugal. Therefore, the social forums, as organized movements, did not have any influence in Portugal.

**Q.** *Although the international anti-war movement was a spectacular consequence of the global justice movement, it was directed above all against US imperialism and George W. Bush's policy of war without end. Didn't it nourish illusions on the peaceful character of the European imperialisms? Your last congress criticized any support for the intervention of European troops - from Portugal as well as other countries - in Afghanistan. What do you think of the turn of the majority of Rifondazione in Italy in favour of the continuation of the military interventions of NATO member states, provided that they have been approved by the UN, in particular in Afghanistan or, in another context, in Lebanon?*

**A.** It is true that the anti-war movement developed against US and British imperialism. Obviously the positions taken by Chirac and Schröder nourished

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illusions. But I believe that this division of the imperialist front was also the product of the mobilization of public opinion against the war. It is thus also a success to have paralysed the capacity for unification of the various imperialisms around US super-imperialism. That said, there are today obviously important political debates.

In Italy, I believe that Rifondazione is speaking a double language: in the government, it accepts the imperialist intervention in Afghanistan, whereas in the European Left Party, it approves resolutions in favour of the withdrawal of all troops from Afghanistan. And this double language is also found in Italy: you cannot take part in a demonstration against the extension of an American base then, a few days afterwards, vote in favour of the same project. People understand that there is a contradiction and that has created a problem between Rifondazione and the anti-war movement.

And yet, the role of Rifondazione was very important at the head of the anti-war movement, and that was one of its strong points in 2003-2004. There is a deficit here which is leading to a very dangerous situation, because a political party must be very clear about its objectives, in particular on war and peace, which are decisive questions in the life of the people. The best tradition of the socialist movement is clear on this subject, from Jaurès to Rosa Luxemburg. There is no such thing as a left-wing policy which is not clear in its opposition to war, militarism and imperialism.

**Q.** *The Left Bloc is a coming together of the anti-liberal socialist Left, but without the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP). However, at the European level, the Bloc belongs to the European Left Party, which is dominated by forces coming from the communist movement. How do you explain that the PCP has followed a separate path from that of the Bloc, and that your documents make hardly any mention of it?*

The Bloc was built in opposition to liberal policies, therefore in

opposition to the Socialist Party, but also to the PCP. We represent a third force, alternative by its programme and its capacity for initiative. Our strategic goal is to reconstruct the relationship of forces within the Left and in society as a whole. In Portugal, the Communist Party, as in some other countries, represents a form of organization in the Stalinist tradition, in which it is the party that directs the trade unions, in which there are movements to organize women and young people.

That does not make it possible for trade unions to represent workers in a unitary fashion and restricts their capacity to organize precarious workers, as well as other social layers. The social force of the PCP depends primarily on this type of party control of the trade-union movement. So it was necessary for us to break with this conception, which weakens the popular movement. It was to contribute to rebuilding the capacity for initiative of this movement that the Bloc was organized as a political and social force.

So we have relations of confrontation, of debate, but sometimes also of convergence with the Communist Party, even if we defend a clearly alternative vision. The PCP was the party of the Soviet Union throughout its entire history; now, it is the party of the Chinese Communist Party. It is not comparable to the split in the Italian Communist Party which gave rise to Rifondazione Comunista.

As regards the European Left Party, to which we belong, it should be said that the European Communist Parties are divided. The European Left Party has a non-Stalinist conception, a conception of opening out, of being a network, not a Comintern-style conception. The PCP is not part of it. We do not obey the European Left Party.

None of its decisions is binding on us. It is a network of collaboration that depends on the positions of the national parties. The Red-Green Alliance in Denmark and Respect in England are associated with it... The Communist Parties

which form part of it have been transformed, a little bit or a lot, while the PCP is trying to develop a parallel network, with parties of the East, the Chinese, Vietnamese, Cuban Communist Parties, etc...

**Q.** *The Left bloc has obtained a growing number of elected representatives, in the national Parliament as well as in the municipalities. With 350 municipal councillors, it has nearly 10% of its members in elected assemblies. Does this not pose a problem for you, insofar as the weight of these elected representatives can tend to adapt your political priorities and activities to those of these institutions, to the detriment of the priority needs of the social movement. Not to mention the impact that elective mandates can have in terms of material and symbolic privileges, which are of course extremely reduced. How does the Bloc organize itself to build bulwarks against such dangers?*

**A.** As you know it, since you also have elected representatives in Switzerland, if a party stands for election and that results in it winning seats, it must fill them where it obtained those votes. In bourgeois democracy, every mass party will have elected representatives and political polarization can be expressed through electoral gains, even though defeats and retreats are inevitable.

In Portugal, our elected councillors do not receive wages and take part in municipal meetings only once a week in the big cities, and once a month – or even twice a year – in the small towns. They also participate in some commissions. The local councils have very little power: they are forums for political discussion. We also have members elected to municipal executives, which are elected according to proportional representation. They are generally not in the majority, except in a small town of some 30,000 people, close to Lisbon.

It is true that the fact of having these councillors leads to a demand for political answers to local questions. These questions are also important – housing, transport, public services, education, etc. Some of them

are directly related to financial and budgetary policy, but also to the organization of society in the whole of the country, which makes it possible to develop an opposition that is better informed on local conditions.

This obliges us to concentrate a lot of effort and a lot of cadres on municipal matters. Indeed we have to do this work while trying to get out from the four walls of the municipal assemblies in order to explain to the population what is involved in the current confrontations. The PCP on the contrary often allies with the Right in order to obtain posts in the municipal executive, because the Socialist Party and the parties that are in power form a dominant bloc.

This explains why the PCP takes part in municipal governments with the Right and the far Right in several large cities, such as Oporto, Sintra and Coimbra. But what is most important is to maintain a national political profile around central campaigns. For example, over the last year, we have concentrated the bulk of our forces on the march for jobs, directly confronting the employers and the government, as we did in the battle for abortion. The Bloc is widely recognized for that!

**Q.** *The Bloc has made it possible to amalgamate quite different political currents. Not only from new forces and the new generations, but also from older traditions – Marxist-Leninists, Trotskyists, forces coming from minorities in the PCP, etc. Has the progress of the Bloc been made possible by collaboration between these forces?*

**A.** I wouldn't like to generalise. Portuguese conditions are undoubtedly not extendable to other European countries. In France, for example, the LCR is discussing a broad anti-capitalist party. The experience of SolidaritéS in Switzerland is also different. But what is common to many of these experiences and debates on the European Left, is the will to create a political framework that is broader, more offensive, capable of organizing social activists, of representing both a political and social Left.

The path that we have chosen rests basically on the confidence that can be built in the process of constituting a collective leadership on the basis of common political tasks. This confidence has to be tested in the course of our activity, in our successes and our setbacks, going through an apprenticeship of a will to integrate the various trends and to seek consensus and cohesion. If that succeeds, it becomes possible to engage in politics.

There is indeed a great difference between making propaganda, developing ideas, defending a programme, even of a high quality, and being able to transform that into a political weapon by involving broader social sectors in struggle, by mobilizing them. New forces are coming to us because we have convictions, because we make campaigns, because we give examples of battles to be conducted, because we discuss new ways of organizing ourselves on the left. We reach thousands of people by posing centrally the following questions: how can we transform the present relationship of forces? Where should we concentrate our efforts in order to make the enemy retreat?

**Q.** *The post-1968 generation was educated in political organizations that were very homogeneous on the ideological level, where the work of reappropriation of knowledge, theoretical training and development was very important, often to the detriment of the ability to conduct politics within broader frameworks. Having said that, how do you pose the problem of the education of new cadres, who do not develop only through the practice of the movements, but who also acquire tools for analysis and a serious theoretical training?*

**A.** The theoretical debate and the historical knowledge of our generation are an immense asset. Nothing would have been possible without this critical examination of the history of the workers' movement, without this effort to create a living Marxism. I believe that a party of the socialist Left must take up these reflections again and look further into them. We are perhaps fortunate to be continuing this effort within

the framework of a capitalism and a working class which have been transformed, while using Marxism for what it is, that is, as a working tool. Our last congress decided to create a centre of education which addresses itself especially to social activists. Its first courses are starting now and deal with the history of the revolutions of the last century - October, the Spanish Civil War, China, Cuba, Vietnam, May '68, the Portuguese Revolution - in order to think about the strategic questions which they raised. We are also starting to publish a theoretical review.

We are also making an effort to develop new means of communication, since the role played by newspapers, some decades ago, is being supplanted today by interactive means. Thus, our Internet site has developed in a spectacular way, with thousands of visits every day. We publish on it a weekly dossier on political, historical and other questions, which is aimed at a broad audience. We diffuse radio programmes by streaming. Finally, we want to develop audio-visual production - from clips to documentaries - which can be used as a basis for education and discussion, but also in the campaigns of the Bloc. In September, we will hold a study weekend, "Socialism 2007", to discuss strategy and history, trade-union and ecological struggles, but also cultural questions.

*Interview by conducted by Jean Batou of the Swiss organisation SolidaritéS.*

Francisco Louçã is an economist and a Left Bloc member of the Portuguese parliament. He was the candidate of the Left Bloc in the presidential election of January 2005 (where he won 5.3% of the votes).

## NOTES

[1] The Portuguese Communist Party is faced with a new situation, since the Bloc represents on the electoral level a force that is comparable to it and has a growing social base. In response to this situation, the PCP is developing an extremely sectarian attitude: in its newspaper and its meetings, it ceaselessly attacks the Bloc, although we have always made the choice of reacting in a unitary way, without sectarianism, to avoid this type of confrontation.

## Pakistan

# PPP refuses to break with feudal traditions

### Hereditary Bhutto dynasty continues

Farooq Tariq



Bilawal Zardari, with his father Asif Ali Zardari, left, and party president Amin Fahim

Appointment of 19-year-old Bilawal Bhutto Zardari as the new chair of Pakistan Peoples Party is an attempt to keep the feudal traditions of politics in South Asia.

The PPP central executive committee approved the appointment of Bilawal Asif Zardari, unanimously in its meeting on 30th December at Nuedero Sind. He is son of Benazir Bhutto who was assassinated on 27 December, nominated him.

According to the will of Benazir Bhutto read out in the meeting, Asif Zardari, husband of Benazir Bhutto, was to be appointed as chair of PPP in case Benazir Bhutto is not there. However, Asif Zardari then went on to suggest his son Bilawal as new chair.

A student of Oxford University, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari is the eldest and the only son of three children of Benazir Bhutto. Born in Pakistan but never lived here after he went to school.

Asif Zardai will be co-chairperson of PPP. By these developments, PPP has effectively been again in the total control of Bhutto family.

PPP leadership had kept the same feudal traditions during the last 40 years of existence. After Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was hanged on July 4 1979, his wife Begum Nusrat Bhutto took over. When Begum Bhutto wanted her son Murtaza Bhutto to take over PPP in 1996, she was deposed by Benazir Bhutto and became the life long chairperson of PPP. Murtaza Bhutto was killed in a police encounter in September 1996 while Benazir Bhutto was still the prime minister. She lost her power a month later.

The executive committee meeting also decided to take part in the general election of 8 January 2008 and rejected the government version of the assassination. This was despite a massive movement against the military dictatorship of General Musharaf. All over Pakistan, hundreds of thousands have demonstrated against the regime and all the banners and flags of the ruling Muslim League were torn apart. The movement forced the Muslim League supporting General Musharaf to hide everywhere from the public.

A move to boycott the general elections and an announcement to launch a movement to overthrow the military dictatorship by PPP leadership at this moment would have forced the regime to resign. Instead, PPP leadership played on the massive sympathy waves to capitalise through general elections under Musharaf regime. A precious moment of history to get rid of military intervention into politics by a power mass movement has been lost by this decision to participate in the elections.

By appointment of Bilwal Bhutto, PPP has refused to break the feudal traditions of politics in South Asia. It has kept the undemocratic traditions of few families controlling the politics. The heriditic hegemony of politics has been kept and feudalism will be more strengthened by this decision of PPP in general.

Farooq Tariq is the general secretary of Labour Party Pakistan.

Pakistan

## LPP delegation at Naudero & Larkana

Offers condolences after murder of Bhutto

On 2nd January 2008, a delegation of Labour Party Pakistan went to Naudero to condole the death of Benazir Bhutto.

Naudero is home town of Bhutto family and where all the four Bhutto's are buried. Led by Nisar Shah, general secretary LPP, the delegation has met Asif Zardari, co chairperson Pakistan Peoples Party to convey LPP deepest sentiments to Benazir's killings and show our solidarity with the people of Sind. Asif Zardari is husband of Benazir Bhutto and has just come back to Pakistan after the tragic death of Benazir Bhutto from Dubai.

Earlier on the day, the delegation went to graveyards of Bhutto family and put flowers on the grave of Benazir Bhutto, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, Murtaza Bhutto and Shahnawaz Bhutto.

The delegation also went to see Ginwa Bhutto and her son Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto junior at Larkana to convey LPP message of solidarity. Ginwa Bhutto is widow of Murtaza Bhutto and is leading Pakistan Peoples Party Shaheed Bhutto group.

The delegation also included Younas Rahu, general secretary LPP Sind, Nasir Mansoor, member National Executive Committee LPP and Faiz Kireo of LPP Sind committee.

Pakistan

## Labour Party Pakistan leader killed in suicidal attack

Farooq Tariq

Comrade Abdullah Qureshi (72) is no longer with us. A member of North West Frontier Province (NWFP) provincial council of LPP died in a suicidal attack in Swat valley. He was one of the best known senior Left leaders of the valley.

At present, a military operation is going on in the valley against religious fundamentalists and the majority of the valley is under the control of the religious fundamentalists. One of the main reasons given by Musharraf dictatorship for the imposition of emergency on 3 November 2007 was to free the valley from the religious fanatics.

Abdullah Qureshi was the pioneer of Left politics in the Swat valley. Born in 1935, he came from a working class background in the valley. He organized the first organization "Swat Rorwali" (Swat goodwill) in early Fifties. The organization spoke out against the Nawab of Swat and he was arrested several times for organizing the people's resistance against the king. He was deported from the valley in the early Sixties and his nationality was revoked. The Nawab of valley had the ultimate powers in the valley. He settled in Gojaranwala in Punjab. He was a close friend of Ajmal Khatak and Sikander Khan Khalil, the leaders of National Awami Party (NAP), the main Left party in the Sixties.

In 1968, the Swat valley formally joined Pakistan. Comrade Abdullah Qureshi went back to Swat to organize NAP. He was elected as general secretary of the NAP Swat. Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto banned the party in 1974 and Abdullah Qureshi was one of those arrested at the time. He then went on to join Awami National Party (ANP), the new name of the banned party. He was not satisfied with the ideological confusion within

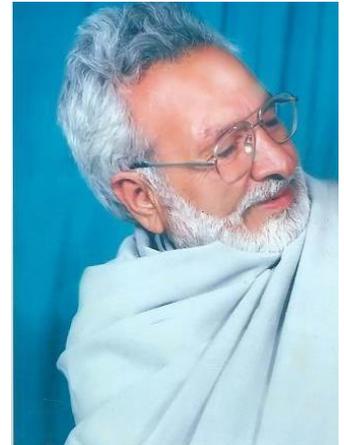
the party and wanted more Socialism as part of the ANP. Later he joined Pakistan National Party of Bazinjo. He left Left politics after the fall of Soviet Union. He was very disappointed by these developments.

He joined the Labour Party Pakistan after it organized the largest May Day rally in 2006. Over 600 had joined the rally and they all came from different small industrial units of the valley. The red flags all over the valley inspired him to take a decision to join the party even at this age.

During the second NWFP provincial conference in June 2007, he was elected as one of the 21 member of NWFP LPP Council. Within the year, he had organized the party in different parts of the valley and LPP became the main party of the Left in the valley. Most of the Left activists joined the party after his decision to join the party.

Hakim Bahudar, Peasant secretary of the LPP and member of LPP national committee was a close friend of Abdullah Qureshi. He tells us more about Abdullah Qureshi "he had been very much inspired by LPP activities for some time. He was a regular reader of the Weekly Mazdoor Jeddohud (workers Struggle). After his decision to join LPP, party became very respected and prestigious in the completely valley. He was the symbol of Left politics in the valley."

Abdullah Qureshi was killed in the suicidal attack near the Nango Lai area check post. He was passing



through the area when the attacker blew himself up resulting in the killing of several other civilians. The incident happened on 9 December 2007. It was the day when the LPP fourth conference was taking place in Lahore. He and other delegates from the valley could not attend because of roadblocks and military operation. Only comrade Hakim Bahadur was able to escape from the valley to attend the conference organized on urgent basis.

The family did not want to disclose the news earlier because of fear of more attacks. They did not want the news to be public. The family fears that it was a targeted attack on him because of his Left ideas. The family is investigating this aspect and has asked the LPP NWFP to help in the matter. Now, with the permission of the family, LPP is announcing his death with great pain.

Although comrade Abdullah Qureshi was only for 16 months in the LPP, but his whole life was devoted to Left ideas. He worked in the most difficult circumstances. He joined LPP while there was an upsurge of religious fundamentalist ideas in the valley. He did not care about his life but more of ideas.

The LPP will hold memorial meetings all over Pakistan for comrade Abdullah Qureshi.

Farooq Tariq is the general secretary of Labour Party Pakistan.

## Pakistan

# LPP - New rules to bring more internal democracy

Labour Party Pakistan fourth conference concluded - Over 450 attended the public seminar by AJT

Farooq Tariq

Nisar Shah elected as new general secretary

More women comrades elected to National Committee

A staggering \$ 9500 pledged by 126 delegates

The two days Labour Party Pakistan conference concluded here last night with a big bang. Despite the imposition of emergency, 126 delegates and 35 observers attended the two days moot at the auditorium of Human Rights Commission of Pakistan in Lahore. The three sessions discussed the international, national and organizational perspectives with dozens of delegates participating in the heated debates.

Delegates from all parts of Pakistan arrived on a short notice of only 8 days. Not all the elected delegates were able to come but all areas were represented in the conference.

The conference started with reading of several solidarity messages received for the occasion. They included messages from Fourth International (France), CPIML (India), Democratic Socialist Perspective DSP (Australia), Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières (ESSF) France, CATDM (Belgium), Revolutionär Sozialistischer Bund (Germany), Labour Militant Voice (USA), Toni Usman (Norway), Afghan Labour Revolutionary Organisation (Afghanistan), Olof Palme International Center (Sweden), Cuban Communist Party (Cuba), Revolutionary Communist League LCR (France), Japan Revolutionary Communist League (JRCL), Freedom Socialist Party (USA), International Socialist Organization (USA), VAK (India), NSSP (Sri Lanka), GFont (Nepal) and several other individual messages.

The international sessions were mainly focused on Venezuela, the war on terror and its effect on Muslim countries, the imperialist globalization offences and fight back and climate change. Comrade Nasir Mansoor introduced the wide ranging discussion.

While several comrades making criticism of some of the constitutional changes in

Venezuela, but stressed the international impact of the revolution and the need to defend it. Comrades of the view that it was heavy dozier in one go and the time was not sufficient to explain the essence of the reforms needed for the Socialist transformation of the society. Comrade hailed Hugo Chavez for standing up to all the challenges and accepting the outcome in democratic manner.

The discussion on national perspectives was mainly focused on the recent movement of advocates, students, social activists and media. It was agreed that Musharraf regime is a weak dictatorship and has not been able to win support among the masses by his so-called growth in the economy.

The emergency was imposed mainly to get rid of independent judiciary before calling the general elections. The delegates unanimously approved the leadership of LPP decision to boycott the fraudulent elections. It vowed to bring the working class in the main of the movement by mobilizing the trade union movement. Comrade Nisar Shah introduced the discussion on Pakistan and stressed the need to do all for an end of the dictatorship. He has recently been released after 18 days in prison.

The organizational session saw a very lively discussion on different tactics of the party building. It was agreed to help form a new student organization. The constitutional amendment to abolish the entire office bearer to a system of secretaries was approved unanimously. From now on, there will be five secretaries including Educational and cultural secretary, Labour secretary, Women secretary, Peasant secretary and youth secretary at national, provincial and district levels. A general secretary will coordinate

the work and spokesperson of LPP at national level will be elected.

The constitutional amendment that no office bearer at national level be elected more than two terms (four years) was narrowly accepted with a margin of 7 votes. After a heated debate, the amendment was put to vote and was accepted.

The LPP new flag was unanimously accepted by the delegates. 12 designs for the new flags were presented to the delegates and a flag with a single white star in a red flag with Labour Party Pakistan written was unanimously accepted by the delegates.

A finance appeal was launched at the conference raising over 500,000 Rupees (US\$ 9500) in pledges. A women comrade who is leading a shanty town struggle for land rights announced Rupees 30,000 (\$500) surprised every one to their pleasure. This raised the moral of the delegates to pledge a record amount. Never ever, such an amount was raised from one single event with only 126 delegates.

The conference elected a 21 National committee in secret ballot. 28 comrades contested. Out of seven contesting women comrades, six were elected. There were only two women comrades in the previous 21 National Committee. Comrade Farooq Tariq topped the list by receiving 98 percent of the votes followed by a women comrade Nazli Javed. The 21 member National committee represents all parts of Pakistan.

In a brief meeting of National Committee, Nisar Shah was elected as new general secretary, Farooq Tariq as national spokesperson, Nazli Javed as women secretary, Nasir Mansoor Labour secretary, Hakim Khan Bahadur as Peasant secretary, Amir Hussani as Education and cultural secretary and Asim Akhud as youth and

student affairs secretary. A seven member's National Executive Committee was also elected by NC. Talat Rubab who was elected to national committee was confirmed as editor of Weekly Mazdoor jeddouhd. It was unanimous decisions to elect representatives for all these different posts.

The public seminar organized by the Awami Jamhoori Tehreek at the same place in the afternoon on 9th December was attended by over 450 with many youth from different organizations. The speakers included the leaders of advocate and student movement. Sarfraz Cheema secretary Lahore High Court Bar Association, Mohammed Shah president Lahore district Bar Association, Nisar Shah advocate, all three spending at least 18 days in jails addressed the jam packed auditorium of HRCP.

Sundes Hurrain of Student Action Committee told the audience that about the arrest of 15 students and advocates defending the home of Lahore High Court Judge who had refused to take oath under new PCO. "We have started a hunger strike camp and will continue till the release of the 15.

Comrade Farooq Tariq stressed the need for a mass movement of advocates, students, trade unions, peasants, women organizations and civil society as whole to build an alternative to the big parties who are taking part in the elections. This election is farce and we must not take part in it and convince masses to boycott the poll.

There was a lot of enthusiasm in the seminar, making it more like a public protest meeting. A lot of slogans were raised against the military dictatorship.

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Farooq Tariq is the general secretary of Labour Party Pakistan.

## Slovenia

## Impressive mobilisation at the edge of capitalist Europe

“European salaries to match European prices”

Chris Den Hond , Lucien Perpette

In November 2007, trade unions in Slovenia organised a major demonstration in their capital city, Ljubljana, to protest the effects of inflation, and to demand cost-of-living adjustments to salaries in this former Yugoslav Republic, which joined the European Union in May 2004.

The 70,000 demonstrators (in a capital city of 280,000, in a country with less than two million inhabitants) demanded “European salaries to match European prices”

Slovenian trade unions have tried hard to develop regional solidarity links, and there were delegations of demonstrators from Croatia, Macedonia, Serbia, and from the Italian port of Trieste, one of the major gateways for Slovenian trade.

Slovenians have paid a heavy price for their country's entry into the European Monetary System. Inflation has increased (from 2.5% in 2005 to 5.8% in 2007). And while political and business leaders are proud that the country adopted the Euro at the start of 2007, Slovenia's average purchasing power is only 79% of the EU average. Two thirds of the population have low incomes, and 12.1% live in poverty, with a monthly income of less than 440 euros. Slovenia's minimum wage is 538.53 euros, but 19,202 workers officially earn less than this, and need a state subsidy to bring their wages up to the minimum.

The population is disappointed and frustrated that EU membership did not bring an increase in living standards. Particularly since a very small, very visible group of new rich have done very well in recent years. According to the national Statistical Office, wages increased 5.2% in the 12 months to June 2007, but profits increased 22%. These profits mostly go to fuel stock market speculation, and a sharp increase in consumption of luxury goods.

Three companies, Mercator, TUS and SPAR control 90% of the retail sector. The Slovenian government does not have the slightest intention to control prices by regulating profits of these monopolies, despite evidence that the three giants collude to keep prices high.



Students at the University of Ljubljana occupy against 'the logic of market economy'

Foreign debt is also increasing steadily. Yugoslavia's growing debt was one of the reasons the Slovenian elite gave for seeking independence – the growing debt of independent Slovenia passes in silence

A range of social movements testified to popular unrest, even before the 17th November demonstration. Customs officers implemented a work-to-rule, and there were work stoppages by drivers at the Veolia bus company and an abrasives company.

The major labour organisation, the Association of Free Trade Unions of Slovenia (ZSSS), succeeded in creating a broad coalition of almost all the country's labour unions, to protest the effects of inflation, and to demand cost-of-living adjustments to salaries, as well as increases that reflect recent increases in labour productivity. According to Dušan Semolič, President of ZSSS, and spokesperson for the united labour front, “it is important is that we inside the European Union are fighting for standards for all the workers. No matter which country we are living in. The European Union has more than 20 million unemployed. The European Union has many faces.”

This wasn't the first major labour demonstration in Slovenia. In 2005 in deep snow, the unions gathered 40,000 people in Ljubljana, to protest against a government proposal that would have increased the Value Added Tax on essentials from 8.5% to 20%, while reducing and simplifying income and profit taxes to a single rate of 20%. The government was forced to abandon these proposals, and the minister responsible was obliged to resign

On the 17th of November 2007, it was not forty but seventy thousand workers who gathered in the capital city. An immense number, in this country of less than 2 million inhabitants, and testifying to popular rejection of neoliberalism and its perverse effects. The speech of Dušan

Semolič was passionate and determined. “If we already have European prices, European management rewards, European profits and a European intensity of work, then we must also receive European wages! It is just not true that there is no money available to increase workers' salaries.” Semolič warned the country's new rich elite. “Gentlemen, alongside your massive incomes, alongside the loans you receive for buying up more companies, and alongside the money the state spends to support you in every imaginable way, there must also be enough money to increase salaries of working people. You are stealing from ordinary working men and women!” He threatened to organize a general strike. “Slovenia's trade unions will rebel, with all the means at our disposal, against any measure that increases poverty. We continue to hope that reason will prevail in the minds of the employers' organisations. If this reason does not come, if there is no progress at the negotiation table, we will be forced to start strikes, a general strike. Let those in power understand that they depend on the labour power of ordinary men and women, and that they have gone too far in exploiting working people! This demonstration is a final warning to the employers!”

A similar tone was adopted by Mateja Kozuh Novak, a retired gynaecologist, and representative of the Association of Retired People (which has 250,000 members). “We are the generation that in the second half of the 20th century created a high standard social state. We can not allow the small minority, who quickly became rich on the backs of all of us, to lower the standards of the social state.

“It's clear that workers have to fight. Our new rich are praising their big profits, but workers can hardly live. I'm very happy that solidarity between generations is present here. I was afraid that in this turbo-capitalism, people would forget that it is essential to work

## Slovenia

together to ensure a decent standard of living for everyone.

“The health system, schools and social care has to remain in the hands of the state.

“Since 1991, instead of improving the public health system, and building effective watchdogs for the health, school and social care systems, successive governments have opened health, school and social care to privatisation, hoping that private ownership would upgrade the system and solve the problems. The result is exactly the opposite.

“It makes me sad, because people in Yugoslavia lived quite well and that’s the reason why it was necessary to destroy Yugoslavia in blood, otherwise it would never have fallen apart. The Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and the other eastern countries fell apart easily, because people lived in bad conditions, but in Yugoslavia we didn’t live badly. For me, the process since 1991 has been pure neo-colonialism. That is clear now.”

The demonstration on Saturday 17 November surpassed all expectations, particularly regarding attendance. The big demonstration in 2005 has assumed mythological proportions in people’s memory – many Slovenians wondered if the trade unions could ever bring so many demonstrators onto the street again. In the end, the November 2007 demonstration was twice as large as the 2005 mobilisation.

Rastko Močnik, a Professor of Sociology at Ljubljana University, sees several reasons why the Slovenian trade unions are so much stronger than elsewhere in the post-Stalinist east of Europe. “The first factor is the rather brutal change in the relations of production here. We were a social state – I mean some sort of socialist system – with relatively solid social standards for the masses and with small social differentials, and we became a peripheral capitalism of the liberal type, by this I mean a brutal form of capitalism. Liberalism destroyed the previously existing workers’ rights, and has brought new types of working relationships - without social security, and characterised by precarious and untraditional legal conditions and of course with intensive exploitation.

“The second reason for the strength of the trade union is that the memory of Yugoslav workers’ self management is still alive. Workers’ self management was far from perfect, and had all kinds of implications, but institutionally it offered working people a

forum where they could express their demands and their expectations. It also made them share responsibility for the decisions adopted by management.

“What shocked most workers, and what has been most negative in this country’s transition to peripheral capitalism is the increase in social injustice and the destruction of the social state.

The socialist system in Yugoslavia grew out of an authentic socialistic revolution, and tried to establish new forms of democracy, particularly direct participative democracy in industry, in factories and in public services. And the abolition of these hard-won achievements has been a shock for the majority of the working population.

“In the labour movement, there is a undeniable contradiction between tactical moves and strategic goals. Tactically, all trade unions represent themselves as partners in social dialogue, with orthodox trade union demands. But strategically, the fulfilment of those demands means changing the form of capitalism which was introduced, and forced upon Slovenia. It is not possible to fulfil trade unions demands in the framework of peripheral liberal capitalism. Labour demands – defence of the social state, education, health and decent retirement for all, implies a change in the capitalist system that has developed in Slovenia these last years.”

The toughness of Slovenia’s labour movement is unusual in Europe today. According to Semolič, “there is much more uncertainty and fear nowadays, and so basic rights are harder to achieve, in health care, education, and for senior citizens. Things have changed a lot. But we are determined to maintain the basis of a social state. The main values which are under pressure are solidarity between generations, solidarity between people, and social responsibility in general. A better life for all, not just for the few who are already living in paradise. These are our goals.

“We are simply convinced that we have more success if we are on the offensive. We don’t only have to play the black figures in chess - sometimes we can make the first move. This has been proven to be the best strategy, and so this is what we do. It means you have to be very strong, and I think that the trade unions in Slovenia are strong enough to go on the offensive if that is required. This rebellious spirit comes from traditions of peasant uprisings, from the resistance movement

during the Second World War and from present times. This is clearly reflected in the trade union movement. To be a rebel, but to a rebel with reason and with a heart.”

For Močnik, the spectacular success of the November 2007 demonstration is also a reward for the high degree of cooperation between the country’s various unions and confederations. “The trade unions managed to establish a united front of demands: the various trade union groupings, which have different dynamics within the trade union movement, and also politically, managed to come together in a united front with a single platform of demands.”

These demands focused on one of the main characteristics of capitalist growth in Europe’s post-Stalinist periphery. Labour productivity is rising, but wages are stagnating. According to Močnik, “productivity in Slovenia is rising because people are working more, because the working day is significantly longer, because people are working for 12 hours a day. In other words, the capitalist class is not developing the technological resources of the society, but only increasing the production of surplus value through the increase of working time, which is a classical type of exploitation from the 19th century.”

Two days after the November demonstration, the Slovenian government sat down to negotiate with the labour unions. Labour representatives rejected the government’s initial offer of a national 1% wage increase as “completely inadequate,” given the high level of popular expectations. However, most independent observers expect that unions in the public sector and elsewhere will, eventually settle for modest increases, and the overall result will be far below what demonstrators expected. If so, Slovenia may see a wave of strikes in early 2008, as more radical labour leaders predicted at the November demonstration.

*Ljubljana, 2 December 2007*

Translated by Adam Novak

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Chris Den Hond is a member of the SAP-LCR, Belgian section of the Fourth International. He is a journalist with the Kurdish satellite television ROJ TV.

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Lucien Perpette is a veteran trade unionist and a long-time militant of the Belgian section of the Fourth International. He is the ‘Inprecor’ correspondent covering the former Yugoslavia.

## Poland - Strike

## Urgent support needed for striking miners

International appeal from 'Budryk' workers

Krzysztof Łabadz



Krzysztof Łabadz

The Strike Committee of KWK 'Budryk', in the name of the striking workforce, turns to all working people with an appeal for help.

A protest has been underway since 13 December 2007 in the Coal Mine 'Budryk'. This protest began with a hunger strike and on 17 December the workforce took the unanimous decision to begin an indefinite strike. The miners from 'Budryk' are demanding equal pay to the level of employees of Jastrzebska Spolka Weglowa (Jastrzebska Coal Company), which their mine is to become a part of. The miners of 'Budryk' only want to be treated equally with other employees! Employees of 'Budryk' have the lowest wages in the whole of the mining industry despite a productivity which is twice as high.

The management board of 'Budryk' have not undertaken negotiations in the framework of collective bargaining and have thereby broken the law, which has escalated the tension among the mine's employees. We are turning to all working people with an appeal for support for our protest. We are asking for financial support for the striking miners, who management are trying to force economically to end the strike. We will not give in, the people who can give in are our families and children, who are

threatened with a lack of financial means to live. If they break us today, then later they can break you.

Let's prove that international workers solidarity is not an empty slogan. Individuals and institutions who are prepared to support financially the families of the striking miners are requested to make payments to the following account:

BIC : POLU PL PR

IBAN : PL 23 8454 1053 2001 0041 5426 0001

with the annotation: 'Support fund for families of striking miners of Budryk'

Name of bank: Orzesko-Knurowski Bank Spoldzielczy oddzial Orontowice

On behalf of the Strike Committee of the Coal Mine 'Budryk'. Orontowice, 29 December 2007

Krzysztof Łabadz, is a leader of the Free Trade Union "Sierpień 80" in the mine "KWK Budryk". His sacking in 2005, when he was Chairperson of the union's Factory Commission, provoked an international outcry.

## Poland - Strike

## Urgent need for solidarity

Jan Malewski

Union solidarity must be built and it is very important for the future of the more class-conscious part of the workers movement in Poland.

In the Polish coal mine "Budryk" an occupation strike started on December 17th. "Budryk" is the most recent coal mine in Poland, starting in 1994, with great productivity (1400 tons/miner/year when the average productivity in Poland is 700 tons/miner/year) and huge profitability (in 2007, during the first nine months, the profit was 45 millions zlotys, i.e. around 12,5 millions euro).

However, salaries in this mine are the lowest in the whole Polish mining industry. Almost all workers are on strike (2430 persons work in this mine) and teams of 300-400 occupied the mine on the two extraction levels: at -700 m and -1050 m. They have elected a strike committee. The strike is supported by Confederation of free trade unions "August 80" ("Sierpień 80") and two local unions, "Kadra" and "United workers of Budryk". The Polish neoliberal government aims to integrate "Budryk" mine, which is public property, into the Coal Company of Jastrzebie (also public for the moment, but with the status of a limited company, and so more easy to privatise).

This is the first step in the privatisation of the whole mining Polish industry, in order to destroy the most important organised section of the Polish workers class. If Capital can defeat the "Budryk" strike, all workers' rights surviving in Poland will be under attack. "Budryk" managers refuse to negotiate. Strikers have not received their wages this month. Managers' hope that the strike

will stop when miners' families do not have bread... And the only Confederation who supports this strike, "August 80", does not have the capacity to guarantee financial resources to strikers.

We received from the strike committee their appeal. It was published on the IV website. It is very important to publicise it, to distribute it in unions and, eventually, to organise material and moral solidarity with Polish miners.

The leader of the "Budryk" strike, Krzysztof Łabadz, is a very well-known working class activist. Two years ago, he was expelled from "Budryk" with eight other unionists, for striking. He has built at this moment a Committee for the support and defence of repressed workers (KPiORP), with other unionists expelled from others factories... This Committee organised demonstrators across the whole of Poland and was able to force managers to reintegrate expelled workers. Not only he and other Budryk unionists was reintegrated, but many others in different regions of Poland.

*If you need more information about this strike and the organisation of solidarity, you can phone me on +33 1 49 28 54 88 or email [inprecor@wanadoo.fr](mailto:inprecor@wanadoo.fr).*

Jan Malewski is the editor of International Viewpoint's French language sister publication, Inprecor, and a member of the Executive Committee of the Fourth International.

## Poland - Strike

## Ken Loach supports Polish miners

Polskie Radio report

British film director Ken Loach has voiced support for the miners at the Budryk colliery in Silesia, who have re-launched their strike action over a pay dispute.

Loach announced he intended to contribute to the union's strike fund. In a letter addressed to the protesting miners at Budryk the internationally acclaimed director has written that the struggle serves the interests of workers worldwide.

Ken Loach is known for his involvement in social problems and political activism. His latest work, *It's a Free World* (2007), portrays the hardship of central and eastern European immigrants in the UK, who arrived there in the wake of Poland's EU entry, working in low paid and unregulated employment.

The state-owned Polish Radio service carried the above report on January 15.

Spanish state

## Espacio Alternativo conference success

The confederal conference of Espacio Alternativo, a revolutionary organisation in which supporters of the Fourth International participate, was held in Barcelona in from 7-9 December. Under the slogan “For a Left of Struggle”, members of Espacio Alternativo discussed for three days around the themes of political and social situation internationally and in the Spanish state, and the aims and tasks of the organisation for the next period.



In a good atmosphere of debate and comradeship the conference discussed political theses, a document on organisation and statutes, as well as documents on various specific areas. The conference reflected the consolidation Espacio Alternativo had achieved in the last three years. Many of the participants were attending a confederal conference for the first time, discussing with some more ‘veteran’ comrades. Also participating in the conference were the invited representatives of political and social organisations in Catalonia and other parts of the Spanish state, Morocco, France, Portugal, Uruguay and Colombia.

To mark the conference a public event was held under the title of “The anti-capitalist left in Europe”. Speakers included Esther Vivas (Revolta Global–Catalonia), Raul Camargo (Espacio Alternativo), Jose Falco (Left Bloc-Portugal), and Francois Sabado on behalf of the LCR in France and the Fourth International. Francois Sabado spoke about the situation in France and resistance to the brutal anti-working class actions of the Sarkozy government, as well as the project of the LCR to bring about the construction of a new broad left party, one that would be anti-capitalist, revolutionary,

environmentalist, feminist and internationalist.

The political theses approved pointed out the necessity of constructing a “left of struggle” that can intervene in contemporary battles, with the aim of giving reality to the possibility of a socialist transformation, in the light of the crisis of civilisation caused by neoliberal globalisation.

The main tasks for Espacio Alternativo in the next periods will be; a) to continue working for the strengthening of social resistance to neoliberalism, by participating in the social movements on the basis of radicalism and unity b) to continue working for a broad anti-capitalist pole of attraction in the Spanish state, that could develop an alternative to the presently hegemonic ‘social-liberal’ left c) strengthen Espacio Alternativo through participation in the struggles, to strengthen its public profile and its political and strategic elaboration.

The conference has set the scene for a qualitative step forward, a new impulse for Espacio Alternativo and its development as a revolutionary, alternative, environmentalist, feminist and internationalist organisation in the Spanish state.



40 years ago this month

## Tet Offensive



NLF guerrilla fighters

The January-February 1968 Tet offensive sealed American defeat in the Vietnam War. Paradoxically the insurgent armies – the Peoples Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and the National Liberation Front (NLF) – achieved few of their main military or political objectives and suffered heavy casualties. But the dramatic scale of the offensive and the images of urban battles seen on TV screens around the world convinced world and American public opinion that the war could not be won by the US. It shattered the bravado and public optimism of the American government and their military commanders in the field. Within five months of the offensive American commander General William C. Westmorland had been sacked, the bombing of North Vietnam had been suspended and US president Lyndon Johnson had announced he would not stand again for a second term of office.

### Build-up to the offensive: 1965-8

The decision that the US would make a stand in Vietnam and not permit a Communist victory was taken not by Johnson, but as early as 1962 by John F Kennedy. Shocked by events like the evolution of the Cuban revolution, the development of leftist nationalism in the Congo and elsewhere and a series of guerrilla struggles in the Portuguese colonies [1], the American political and intelligence elites began to worry that ‘Moscow’, ‘Beijing’ or ‘the Communists’ more generally were evolving a

## - decisive battle of the Vietnam war

Phil Hearse

strategy of armed national liberation struggles in the third world.

The main danger of 'Communist aggression' shifted from an entirely mythical prospect of a Soviet invasion of Western Europe to the very real danger of guerrilla uprisings in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In his inaugural address Kennedy said the US would "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and success of liberty". What this meant, and who exactly would be required to "pay any price" became very clear in Vietnam.

By 1965 there were half a million American soldiers in Vietnam. It was not until US forces had reached this figure that PAVN units were detected in South Vietnam; before that the fighting was done mainly by the part-time guerrillas of the NLF. American strategy revolved around two tactics:

1) An attempt to punish North Vietnamese support for the NLF by destroying the infrastructure of North Vietnam in aerial bombing (Operation 'Rolling Thunder').

2) 'Search and destroy' missions in the Vietnamese countryside, punishing the Vietnamese peasants for their support of the NLF by destroying hundreds of villages, and trying to force the NLF and PAVN into open battle. The key objective was to inflict maximum casualties in a war of attrition.

Rolling Thunder in its three years of permanent bombing achieved its objective of destroying most of North Vietnam's infrastructure. By the time Johnson suspended the bombing of the North, US air planners were having difficulties finding targets still standing to bomb. Paradoxically, Rolling Thunder saw one of the most effective anti-aircraft efforts in history. More than 1200 American planes were shot down, including dozens of giant B52 bombers and hundreds of fighter-bombers. Around one thousand US air crew were killed and hundreds taken prisoner. It seems likely that China supplied some anti-aircraft units in the early phase of the campaign, but the decisive surface-to-air missiles were supplied by the Soviet Union. Some US planes were shot down in dogfights with Vietnamese airforce MiGs, but the accusation that some of these planes were flown by Russian pilots is unproven.



Supplies coming down the Ho Chi Minh trail

Despite the success of the anti-aircraft effort – extraordinary by the standards of the two anti-Iraq wars [2]– the scale of the bombing campaign made it unstoppable. Tens of thousands of North Vietnamese civilians died. Michael Maclear, a Canadian journalist who visited North Vietnam during Rolling Thunder, estimates the number of civilian dead at 180,000 [3]. He says, "The journey showed that five cities had been levelled. These, traveling south, were the cities of Phu Ly, Ninh Binh, Thanh Hoa, Vinh and Ha Tinh, each formerly with populations between 10,000 and 30,000. The North's third largest city, Nam Dinh - population 90,000 - was largely destroyed but at least recognizable. Another 18 destroyed centers were classified as towns" [4]. But it did not prevent or even seriously interrupt the supply of soldiers and materials southwards via the Ho Chi Minh trail through Cambodia.

America's attrition strategy in the South smashed the social structure of the Vietnamese countryside and killed up to a million people in the countryside [5] – most of them civilians. While not crushing the insurgency, the war on the peasantry made it much more difficult. The US outdid the colonial savagery exhibited by the British in Malaya and the French in Algeria in its ruthless and systematic massacre of peasant villagers. Many were herded into 'strategic hamlets' on the Malayan model;



US military police battle to re-take the US embassy.

but after this strategy failed, hundreds of thousands fled the bombing and streamed into the relative safety of the major cities which became bloated with refugees [6].

Between 1965 and 1967 dozens of battles were fought by US soldiers and marines against the NLF and PAVN. Despite escalating claims of military success in the daily 'body count', the US commanders were unable to inflict any crushing defeats on the Vietnamese. In this period the anti-war movement grew worldwide – and decisively in the United States – as news of the savagery of the war filtered through and the toll of US dead grew.

### Response of the Vietnamese Communist leadership

It's now clear that a debate broke out inside the Communist Party (VCP) in 1967 about how to confront this situation of stalemate, where the prodigious use of heavy artillery and aerial bombardment, together with highly mobile helicopter transported troops, was both depopulating the countryside and making insurgent victories difficult.

Some writers have attempted to assign different hard-and-fast positions to particular VCP leaders, claiming that Le Duan led the 'militants' who eventually won a struggle in favour of a general uprising against those who wanted a 'protracted peoples war' (drawn out guerrilla struggle) plus negotiations, or alternatively conventional warfare plus negotiations. Whatever the truth of the precise positions adopted by different VCP leaders, such a debate is entirely normal and indeed closely parallels debates in the Sandinista leadership before 1979 and the FMLN leadership during the Salvadorean insurgency.

By mid-1967 the party leadership had embarked on a line of "General Offensive, General Uprising". This would involve countryside attacks on the US military, but also an invasion of the cities on a perspective of provoking an urban uprising against the Americans and their South Vietnamese Allies. Gabriel Kolko in his book Vietnam - Anatomy of War says that feelers were put out to non-Communist Vietnamese exiles about the possibility of forming a Provisional Government with the NLF in the event that the offensive scored a major success (which presumably would involve the capture of at least one provincial capital).

## Vietnam

Gabriel Kolko argues that the Tet offensive was not launched on the perspective that a general uprising was certain, but only that it was possible. Rather, he argues, the VCP leadership hoped for an uprising but in any event felt the offensive would strike a decisive military blow to the Americans and South Vietnamese army from which they would never fully recover [7].

### There's a Storm Coming

From September 1967 NLF and PAVN commanders began to be briefed on the coming offensive. Articles in the Vietnamese press analysed the state of the war and military perspectives; according to observers these articles, read carefully, revealed the possibility of a general offensive. Vast amounts of matériel began to be moved southward and new PAVN units set off down the Ho Chi Minh trail. American intelligence, including documents captured in battle, revealed that a major offensive was planned, but the US military was confused about the scope and the timing. Nobody believed that the offensive, if there was one, would be on the scale that eventually happened.

PAVN commander Vo Nguyen Giap, the victor of Dien Bien Phu [8], planned a series of attacks in the border areas in October and November 1967 to draw the US and South Vietnamese troops away from the cities. At the same time the US base at Khe Sanh was besieged by the PAVN, and remained invested until April 1968, resulting in hundreds of US dead. American planners wondered whether these battles were the offensive; they weren't, and when the real offensive came it was a complete shock.

The attack unrolled on January 30 as six provincial capitals and many US bases came under attack. This first wave seems to have been an extraordinary mistake because of the use of different calendars by different PAVN and NLF battalions. Next night, 31 January, the real blow was dealt as hundreds of targets were attacked through South Vietnam. NLF fighters attacked key point in Saigon and invaded the US embassy. US military police had to fight a six-hour battle to regain control of the symbol of US power in the country. This caused a news sensation worldwide.

Most of the attacks however were thrown back, sometimes with heavy NLF and PAVN losses. However in the Saigon Chinese suburb



Punishing the peasantry for supporting NLF

Cholon the NLF fighters could not be shifted. This battle was televised and reverberated worldwide. The NLF were driven out only after a massive aerial bombardment which killed hundreds of civilians.

PAVN troops held the northern provincial capital Hue for 26 days, a battle that provoked the spectacularly inept comment by a US commander that "we had to destroy the city to save it". Indeed, with a huge toll in civilian lives. After the city was retaken by US troops, the Americans claimed that mass graves had been found in which the bodies of hundreds of civilians executed by the PAVN were deposited. Subsequent research has shown that after the city was retaken South Vietnamese 'revenge squads' executed anyone suspected of collaborating with the PAVN.

The attacks during Tet had been spectacular, but they had not given rise to a popular uprising. Why not? The civilians who flooded into the cities because of US bombing were in general outside the reach of NLF propaganda and agitation. In any case, it is incredibly hard for an urban population to 'rise up' against a well-armed and brutal enemy if it has no prior form of organisation, has no weapons and no way of physically defending itself, particularly if there is no sign of the insurgents scoring a decisive victory. That it also the lesson the attempted general uprising by the FMLN [9] in El Salvador in 1979; the insurgents lacked the



This picture of the execution of an NLF fighter shocked world opinion

means to defend the civilian population that they were asking to rise up.

More generally the offensive showed the difficulty of defeating huge armies that are very mobile [10] and have superior weaponry in head-on pitched battle. Knocking out the US and South Vietnamese armies was too big a target for a single blow. In any case, the whole history of national liberation guerrilla warfare from Algeria to Mozambique shows the colonial powers were driven out by a long and difficult guerrilla struggle (including a vital urban element in Algeria); they were worn down, demoralised, politically defeated in the long run.

### Political axes of the insurgency

The political objectives of the insurgency were set out clearly in broadcasts by Hanoi Radio, Dai Gai Phong (Liberation Radio) and by numerous proclamations handed out in leaflets to the population. These announced the formation of a National, Democratic and Peace Alliance Front, putting the emphasis on the national and democratic tasks of the revolution. They also announced the formation of numerous united front committees, appealing particularly to professional people, religious groups, young people and others to join the uprising. Particular emphasis was put on calls to rank and file South Vietnam Army troops to desert. Also crucial were the announcement of Uprising Committees, effectively the NLF, to direct the military struggle.

On 31 January Hanoi radio's domestic service quoted the Saigon Uprising Committee thus: "The Uprising Committee calls on all the people and the revolutionary forces in Saigon to resolutely stand up to and constantly attack the enemy and win complete victory. The Uprising Committee calls on the compatriots in the areas still under control of the Thieu-Ky-Loan clique's temporary control to firmly and vigorously oppose terrorism, to help the revolutionary forces track down the dishonest and cruel lackeys, to form patriotic forces and patriotic neutralist forces, and to contribute to liberating our beloved city. The Uprising Committee also calls on the puppet troops of the general reserve forces and ranger and police forces and the armoured and artillery forces not to die uselessly for the country-selling and bloodthirsty Thieu-Ky-Loan clique, to fire on it,

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and to swiftly join the revolutionary ranks in scoring achievements for the fatherland." [11]

In Hue, as in many other places, the National, Democratic and Peace Alliance Front made a specific appeal for the people to rise up: "The National, Democratic and Peace Alliance Front urgently calls on all groups and all forces of patriotic people, youths, women, college students, and high school students in Hue city, to rise up to conduct an armed uprising, to overthrow the traitorous Thieu-Ky clique, to force the Americans to withdraw from the South, to wrest back the administration to the people, and to achieve peace and independence for the country. The fatherland and nation call on all people in Hue city to rise up as one man".

Numerous similar broadcasts and leaflets were monitored by US intelligence. They revealed at least the public objectives of the offensive - to create a broad front of all forces opposed the South Vietnamese regime and hostile to the American occupation, to overthrow the Thieu-Ky South Vietnamese government, to win over substantial sections of South Vietnamese troops, to form popular organisations for every major social sector and to unite these into a provisional government that would negotiate with the NLF about peace and national reunification. The violence of the US response, and its willingness to inflict huge civilian casualties to drive the NLF-PAVN out of towns and cities made these objectives unobtainable.

### To the 'losers' the spoils

Anti-Communist commentators were not slow in proclaiming Tet to be an enormous defeat for the Communists. Walter Schwartz was given two pages in the London Guardian to prove that the military losses incurred by the insurgents were so huge that they had lost the war. But after Tet proclamations by American commanders suffered from what became known at the time as the 'credibility gap'. General Westmorland had regularly briefed the world's press on the major defeats suffered by the NLF and PAVN; such optimistic accounts excluded the possibility of such nationwide attacks. In particular US public opinion was utterly shocked, not only by the scale of the offensive but by the brutal scenes in Saigon shown on their television screens. The eventual

withdrawal of US troops was made certain by this event.

For the Vietnamese Communists the outcome was both much more and much less than they expected. Military it was less successful than expected; one result seems to have been a disproportionate rate of casualties among the units of the NLF who, as the people with local knowledge, were the first to enter the cities. After Tet the NLF was never again so prominent in the fighting, which became increasingly a conventional war in which many North Vietnamese units used heavy artillery and tanks - not the weapons of guerrilla war.

Politically the offensive was successful beyond the wildest dreams of the VCP leadership. Not only was the Washington government confused and humiliated, a big boost was given to anti-war opinion worldwide.

More than that, the Tet offensive outcome was politically appropriated by the Left internationally, and formed an essential part of the backdrop, the political spirit of the times, which suffused the events in other countries later that year. The February 1968 Berlin international Vietnam conference and demonstration was held in the immediate wake of the offensive beneath a banner proclaiming "The duty of the revolutionary is to make the revolution". Politically Tet showed the imperialists were not invincible; moreover those fighting them in Vietnam, unlike Iraq, were politically of the Left. Socialists of many types could sympathise with these fighters, even if they had criticisms of the VCP. Vietnam was also widely seen as a social revolution, not just a national liberation struggle. Tet was a further boost to the Left's interpretation of the world and helped generate an atmosphere favourable to discussion to anti-imperialist and revolutionary socialist themes, especially amongst young people.

Richard Nixon took office in January 1969 and began negotiations in earnest, leading to the withdrawal of most American troops by 1973. From then on it was just a matter of time before the South Vietnamese government collapsed and the country was reunified, finally accomplished in May 1975.

British social commentator Will Hutton [12] claims that the real result of the Vietnam war was that the ability of the Americans to hold

off the VCP until 1975 prevented a swathe of South East Asian states from succumbing to Communism. Like most counterfactual history, there is no way of proving that one way or another. Even if that were true, it was achieved at an enormous price. The United States' ability to intervene elsewhere was stymied for a generation. Military deficit spending caused huge inflation in the world economy and the decline of the dollar, which in turn were major contributors to the 1975-5 world slump. The US was forced into a shockingly brutal imperialist war that transformed the words "US imperialism" from a leftist cliché into a vivid reality for hundreds of thousands. The war brought forth a mass anti-war movement within which the traditions of international solidarity were rebuilt after being largely absent since the Spanish civil war. And by no means least, it put the forces of revolutionary socialism in the imperialist countries to the fore in a mass movement for the first time since the 1930s.

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### NOTES

[1] Especially that led by radical nationalist Amílcar Cabral in the Cape Verde islands

[2] Something like 150 allied planes were shot down by the Iraqis in the 1991 war; in the 2003 war only a handful were downed.

[3] Michael Maclear, Vietnam - the Ten Thousand Day War, Thames Methuen, London 1981

[4] Ibid p.334

[5] See Gabriel Kolko, Vietnam, Anatomy of War, p.200

[6] The urban population grew from 21% in 1960 to 43% by 1972

[7] Kolko's sources for this claim are writings by VCP leaders after the event - which could involve could involved some post hoc rationalisation

[8] The decisive 1954 battle that finally drove the French from Vietnam.

[9] Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front, the Salvadorean revolutionary co-ordination.

[10] Vietnam was the first 'helicopter war'

[11] Viet-Nam documents and research notes, Saigon, March 1968.

[12] In his book "The Writing on the Wall: China and the West in the 21st Century"