

Friday, 12 February 2010

Lindsey German: Why I resigned from the SWP

I have been asked by many people why I decided to resign from the SWP after a lifetime of commitment to it. I would like to explain the immediate reasons and then to give some background to my decisions and my increasing disenchantment with the direction in which the leadership is taking the party. I hope I can do so in as non confrontational a manner as possible. My resignation marks a turning point in my life and _ whatever the agreement or disagreement with my political positions _ it should be time to move on.

I resigned on Wednesday on my way to a Stop the War public meeting in Newcastle which I had been asked not to attend by the Central Committee. I was first phoned about this two days before by a CC member who told me this wasn't a proper STW meeting, that it was organised by ex members hostile to the party, and that most STW members in Newcastle knew nothing about it. This turned out not to be true, as two sets of minutes of meetings (in the public domain) make clear. Indeed, at the second meeting, it is clear that the only objections to it came from SWP members, one of whom appeared to object to me speaking at it.

A later conversation with the CC member made clear to me that the general feeling of CC members was that I should be asked not to attend the meeting. I found this unacceptable. For the convenor of Stop the War to be stopped from speaking at a STW meeting by the party leadership would not be understood or agreed in the wider movement and I thought it would damage the SWP in the movement locally and nationally. I therefore asked if I would be subject to discipline if I went and if I was being instructed not to go. Although no firm answer was given, it was clear from correspondence with the National Secretary that the CC 'reserved the right' to take action against me. I have always been clear that if political differences between myself and the leadership brought about a conflict like this, I would resign rather than being expelled from an organisation which I have helped to build for more than 37 years, for most of which time I was part of the leadership. That is what I did, with great regret.

I believe the CC was wrong in the particulars of this case, but that this reflected a more general political error. The meeting itself was a success, with 35 people including a number of Muslims attending. There were unfortunately no SWP members (two paper sellers didn't come into the meeting) and only a handful of ex members. Most people represented the breadth of STW and saw themselves, rightly, as at a STW meeting, not some factional gathering.

The leadership's error was compounded by its reply to my resignation, when it glossed over these issues to assert that I resigned because I disagreed with the leadership and because of my membership of the Left Platform. That is simply untrue, and there is no logic in their statement that my resignation invalidated what I said at conference. I resigned because of their actions which I believe did a disservice to the movement. The assertion that there was no question of discipline is not true: the correspondence speaks

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for itself, as does the National Secretary's reply to my resignation letter.

The wider issues

There are, of course, major political differences, as evidenced in the debate before and during conference, where my position was clearly in a minority. But denigration of the Left Platform doesn't mean those issues and political debates go away, because they stem from real questions in the movement. I believe the party leadership has systematically moved away from the perspective applied in the past decade, which has been so successful in building the anti capitalist and anti war movements. I also believe that much of what we did with Respect was right and that to try to build a left electoral alternative involving working class people, including Muslims, was a courageous thing to do. Its failure meant that honest accounting on this question was impossible, drowned in a frenzy of personal abuse against John Rees for decisions which had been taken collectively.

Instead, the party has moved to a more inward looking and sectarian approach, expressed in the repeated views that 'we got nothing out of' the united fronts and that the party must come first. Branch meetings and sales are prioritised above all else, and there is a growing tendency to rely on internal meetings rather than to confidently engage with the wider left. Most branch meetings remain small, however, and the majority of members passive.

My perspective has been characterised as nostalgic and my motivation as personal bitterness. Neither is true. Of course the situation with the movements has changed over the past decade. I have always argued that we should build a united front around the recession, which was rejected then adopted in part through the Right to Work conference (although this was effectively a 'united front from below', something we have always criticised in our tradition, and consequently was majority SWP).

This is not the time or place to rehearse these arguments at length. Some people have said to me that such political differences should not need to result in resignation. However there are two other issues here. One is the abandonment of the methods of building pioneered by Tony Cliff, following Lenin and expressed most clearly in his 'Lenin: building the party'. Talk of bending the stick, seizing the key link in the chain or indeed polemical debate is frowned on in the present climate, and is definitely not practiced by the leadership. That it strikes me is a serious retreat from how we have built for all my political lifetime.

The second issue is the internal regime, which has deteriorated. There have been more expulsions and 'offers you can't refuse' in the past year than at any time since the 1970s. Any national meeting now seems to be open season for personal attacks on Left Platform members. The disputes committee session at conference was effectively an attack on me by leading members, even though I had been accused of no offence. The only LP member on the disputes committee was not allowed to attend the session, despite the fact that she had written a minority report.

A leadership often not confident of its political arguments has resorted to gossip, innuendo and moralism. One of the claims about me was that I was 'standing by my man' because I agreed with John Rees politically. I wouldn't insult even a bourgeois politician with that. Again, my record should speak for itself. However, I have felt politically curtailed in recent months: all LP members who submitted journal articles had them rejected; none of us are ever commissioned to write reviews or articles in publications; I was not asked to speak at the women's school, despite having written and spoken more on theoretical questions on women than anyone else in the party. STW was not asked to speak at the RTW conference, despite backing it. Now the leadership attempting to curtail my STW work is a demand too far.

The future

Those are my reasons for resignation. What next? I intend to remain politically active in the movement and as a socialist. It is a critical time for the left, which in my view (and in the view of many other people across the left spectrum) has failed to rise to the challenges posed by the worst economic crisis since the 1930s. The left enters this election weak and divided. The lengthy downturn in class struggle and 13 years of new Labour has taken its toll. The danger for the left is that it becomes a reenactment society. Too much time is spent in nostalgia for the 70s rather than relating to the working class as it actually is, and the concerns that people have.

There are real questions about why the left has been unable to relate to mass movements like the anti war movement without it causing a crisis. There are also questions why at the first setback it retreats to a comfort zone which often cuts it off from the wider movement.

I am very proud of what socialists have achieved in the movements, and especially in STW which is still centrally important politically. I am also proud to be a socialist and have always thought that socialists have to organise and be part of a wider movement. How we do that in the 21st century is an urgent question for us all, if we are not to face the threat of barbarism.

I hope to be part of contributing to some answers on that question. I am sorry that this will no longer be done as part of the SWP. I am still committed to the ideas that I learnt from so many comrades, especially Tony Cliff with whom I worked closely for many years. I hope that I will continue to work with SWP comrades in the wider movements and that many of our differences will be resolved in practice. I hope too that we can work together in a comradely way in order to achieve the goals that we all share.

Lindsey German