

Counterfire Statement on the Crisis in the SWP

The events surrounding the SWP conference in recent weeks have created a storm of debate around the left. This debate will not go away. It goes to the very heart of how left organisations should conduct themselves and what standards of behaviour should be acceptable from socialists, especially those in the leadership of such organisations.

Counterfire was established three years ago by a small group of former SWP members, some of whom were members of its leadership. We broke with the SWP majority over a range of issues, most importantly the leadership's withdrawal from serious work with others in united fronts, and its downgrading of anti-war and anti-imperialist activity. We wished to maintain the best elements of the IS tradition: the centrality of the working class to a radical, emancipatory project, alongside a willingness to think seriously about how the class and society have changed. We have, since that time, quite deliberately avoided commenting on the SWP's internal issues. We believe that the constant, divisive, and often nit-picking debate for which the left is notorious is a real barrier to its growth. A new left will only be built through working collectively even where political differences otherwise exist.

However, the crisis in the SWP has now made comment unavoidable. The SWP remains the largest organisation of the far left in the UK, and its ongoing malaise impacts on all of us. What happened at and around the SWP's conference this year demonstrated that the party offers no viable future for socialists. This is a large claim and not an easy one to make: Counterfire stands in the same political tradition as the SWP, and the SWP still contains many hundreds of decent and principled activists who cannot and should not be written off or dismissed. Their organisation, however, is in the process of destroying itself. We want to contribute to an understanding of why, and suggest a way forward.

We start by examining the events that have precipitated the crisis, and the degeneration they reveal in the leadership of the organization. But this degeneration, which we warned about some years ago, is linked to the progressive withdrawal of the SWP from systematic engagement with the wider movements, and the leadership's consequent failure to relate to the changing world as it actually is. We go on to outline the nature of the arguments that led eventually to our break with the SWP in 2010. We end by arguing that revolutionary socialist organization that is open, creative and fully involved with the movement is more crucial than ever.

Conference and the disputes committee

The immediate cause of the crisis is the case involving a leading member of the SWP accused of rape by a young woman comrade. This case surfaced first two years ago as a complaint of harassment, and was supposedly dealt with by informal investigations involving other members of the leadership. It was discussed at the 2011 conference where the accused defended himself, was exonerated, and remained on the SWP's leading body, the central committee, receiving a standing ovation from conference. Clearly the complainant was not satisfied and eventually asked for a formal hearing of the disputes committee.

This committee is elected annually at the conference to deal with disputes between comrades, both personal and political. Its members are usually experienced and well respected comrades and are not full time employees of the party. They are usually joined by one or two central committee members. Most years it has few cases to deal with, and even less controversy. It is very far from being a "sharia court" – an anti-Muslim comparison that should never have been brought into this debate.

This year was very different. The debate was not on the facts of the case, which were barred from discussion, but on the process used. The transcript of the debate makes unpleasant and uncomfortable reading, where even the person introducing the case agrees that they all knew "Comrade Delta", against whom the accusations were made, while they did not know the woman. Their final decision was that the rape case had been "not proven". The only dissenter was the long-term chair of the committee, who felt that while rape had not taken place, some sort of sexual harassment had, and the behaviour of "Comrade Delta" fell far short of that expected from a central committee member.

The debate caused an uproar that has only grown since the end of the conference. The vote at the conference itself was evenly divided, and the row has split the SWP down the middle, not least on generational grounds.

The leadership's response has been to attempt to draw a line, discipline those who do not agree with the decision, and carry on as though nothing has happened. This is not tenable, both within the organisation and without, where the discussions have now become a matter of public record. When they appear in the Daily Mail, we know that the enemies of the left are taking advantage of the left's mistakes.

The case is one of the most serious that can be brought. There has never been such a charge against a leading member of the SWP in the 40 years of its existence. Any leadership seriously wanting to deal with it should have immediately realised the gravity of the accusation and, at

the very least, suspended the accused from party membership. It has to be said that the current leadership failed completely. This was not a straightforward disputes committee case and should not have been approached as such.

Some say it should have been handed over to the police. While it is every woman's right to decide how to deal with rape, many women find this extremely problematic for reasons that will very largely have nothing to do with politics. As survey figures published earlier this year confirmed, under-reporting of rape is enormous. If a woman genuinely does not wish to report the accusation to the police, that wish should be respected. Either way, the woman should have been provided with all the support she needed.

There were other immediate options to take. The disputes committee, recognising a glaring conflict of interest, could have stood down in favour of party members who were not personal friends of the accused. External advice from lawyers sympathetic to the labour movement, and from experienced rape counsellors, could have been sought. Comrades from other organisations could have been approached to assist. Serious, potentially criminal cases arising in the movement in the past have been put in front of labour movement enquiries where a body enjoying the confidence of both sides could conduct a competent investigation.

Democracy and the movement

A clear generational divide has opened up inside the SWP, with younger and newer members making their opposition most vocal. Much of the discussion has centred on issues of internal democracy. The behaviour of the leadership in attempting to pre-empt a dispute at conference by expelling four former party workers – meanwhile leaving “Comrade Delta”, post-conference, “as a member in good standing” – created the biggest factional dispute inside the party since the late 1970s. The pretext for expulsion was a private discussion on Facebook, leaked to the central committee, in which some members discussed forming a faction inside the party in compliance with the party's rules. Quite understandably, a generation of activists now well-used to treating the internet as simply a normal part of their lives have been most incensed by this. There is little reason to treat private internet discussions as different to a private conversation held anywhere else.

Both the reason given for the expulsions, and the circumstances in which they occurred, have led to sharp questions about the SWP's democratic procedures and culture.

But “democracy” cannot exist in the abstract. As the failure of the 2009 Democracy Commission demonstrates, fine words alone cannot deliver

it. Democracy is a real, living question for socialists and has been since the first workers' movement, the Chartists, inscribed it on their banners. Democracy, as Chartist leader Joseph Rayner Stephens put it, is "a knife and fork question": not an abstract ideal but an immediate necessity to be fought for.

That applies both to society as a whole, and to our own organisations and movements. Where the movement has reached its peaks, it has been at its most democratic: the Paris Commune, and the brief flowering of the workers' councils in Europe. A mass movement creates the necessity of organisation. Effective organisation creates, in turn, the need for leadership – not for leaders as such, but for an ability to make and then implement decisions. For that leadership to be effective within the movement, it must be democratic, or it will lack legitimacy. We cannot rely, as the state and the ruling class can rely, on coercion, and nor should we. Questions of democracy are always also questions of political direction and organisation.

What applies to the whole movement applies also to that section of the movement claiming to be the clearest-sighted about its future direction. Democracy inside a revolutionary organisation is – or should be – the necessary link between that organisation and the wider class. Ideally, debate and discussion allow for the sharing of ideas and experience, sharpening the organisation's intervention. Intervention, in turn, and taking part in real struggles then inform further discussion. Revolutionary organisation does not exist in a vacuum, but in an exploitative and oppressive society. One of the jobs of the leadership and all the members is to conduct a constant battle against all forms of discrimination and backward ideas based on politics and theory. Factionalism devalues theory because loyalty to the group becomes more important than genuine theoretical training.

But the more an organisation of socialists retreats from intervention and active engagement, the more its internal democracy will come under strain. It will no longer be subjected to the discipline of engagement in the movement.

Mass movements and the new working class

We are some distance from the earlier peaks of the workers' movement. But Britain has seen successive mass movements over the last decade, most spectacularly over the question of the British state's support for imperialist wars. The SWP played a critical role in organising, alongside many others, those movements. Those movements did not arrive as perhaps some of us expected. Many of us thought that what we called the "downturn" – the period of decline and retreat for the workers' movement from the end of the 1970s – would end with a return to the industrial militancy of the past. We believed, with the election of New

Labour in 1997, that we would enter a period of “reformism without reforms”, in which the high expectations of Labour would be disappointed, weakening its historic support.

That did not happen. In its contradictory way, and subject to many confusions, New Labour did introduce some reforms: the Education Maintenance Allowance; Sure Start centres; tax credits; the minimum wage. It increased spending on the NHS and education – while fostering creeping privatisation. It was feeble relative to what was necessary, and easily possible. Disenchantment with official politics continued to spread, as falling election turnouts show. But this did not produce an upturn in working class militancy, and a political break with Labour came from a wholly different location.

Instead, something unusual took place. The forms of working class organisation and resistance that shaped our own history have not been the most powerful forms of resistance in Britain in the recent past. Strike days stuck at their record lows. Yet mass movements appeared with the growth of the anti-capitalist movement, and then – more spectacularly – with the anti-war upsurge from late 2001. New layers of activists, mostly young, largely themselves part of the new working class, often in precarious employment, came forward. They helped shape and lead the anti-war movement, driving some of the biggest demonstrations in British history – alongside, it should be remembered, walkouts from schools, limited workplace action, occupations of colleges, blockades of roads and other forms of direct action.

The retreat from the movement

The Iraq War was not stopped, although as is now clear from accounts by former Labour ministers and other insiders, we were within striking distance of halting Britain’s engagement. Blair was under immense political pressure following the February 15 demonstration and almost buckled. We did, however, help create a solid anti-imperialist block in British society – perhaps for the first time – and wider public opinion has remained immovably opposed to military intervention. Hundreds of thousands have marched against Israel’s attacks on Gaza.

Respect was launched on the back of profound disenchantment amongst Labour’s supporters at Blair’s support for Bush’s wars. This disenchantment was deepest amongst working-class Muslims but was spread far more widely, creating a minority prepared to look elsewhere for political organisation and representation. Respect, for the first time in 50 years, won Parliamentary representation for left of Labour and produced spectacular results elsewhere. But as the anti-war tide receded, and with the suddenly plausible threat of a Conservative government understandably frightening many into supporting Labour, it fell into serious divisions and splits from late 2007.

The SWP, which had played so important a role in establishing first the Stop the War Coalition and then Respect, retreated in turn. A majority were won to the belief that nothing had been gained from the anti-war movement or Respect, and that a turn to “party-building” was now necessary. This meant, in practice, a turn away from engagement with the movements. Significant political divisions appeared between a minority who had attempted to build the movements and now saw the possibilities inherent in a wider political radicalisation, and a majority who believed that a “turn to industry” and a concentration on the clear routines of branch meetings and paper sales were necessary.

United front as tactic or strategy

These divisions appeared on the Central Committee. They were not well theorised at the time, but debate roughly fell into that between the “united front as tactic” and the “united front as strategy” in the run up to conference in early 2009. At the heart of this debate was a question of how the SWP and its members should engage with those not in the party. All agreed that, one way or another, building organisations with others over shared political concerns was necessary. This implied working with those we would not want to label as revolutionaries. This is the essence of the united front.

The key difference was in approach. A belief in the united front as a *tactic* would mean that any campaign and organisation the SWP engaged with would be strictly temporary in nature. Engagement would be set by the immediate and pressing needs of the moment – responding, for instance, to an upsurge in Nazi activity or the imminent threat of war. As the immediate need shifted, so would the Party’s engagement. The *strategic* focus for the Party would remain on the necessity to build the SWP itself. Party-building, and therefore rapid recruitment from joint work, was essential. The underlying premise was that a return to industrial struggle, in familiar fashion, would reduce the need for engagement outside of trade union work. The working class was a “sleeping giant”, in a well-used phrase, which would arise at some point from its slumbers.

A belief in united front as *strategy* implied something quite different. Work in other organisations, alongside non-SWP members, would be determined by broader strategic concerns. For the UK, that meant anti-imperialism from the early 2000s; and then joined, as economic crisis spread, by anti-austerity work. It implied continuous, long-term work with others to the right of the SWP (indeed perhaps even somewhat hostile to it) without an immediate prospect of their recruitment. Building the Party, still necessary, would happen as a result of building effective working relationships and winning an argument about broad strategy for the movement.

Underlying this conception, although not adequately formulated in Party debates at the end of the last decade, was a recognition that both the British working class had changed, and that our own forms of organisation needed to adapt with and to it. Trade unions were essential as the bedrock working class institution, but could not be the only game in town for socialists. Their recent strength has been in their contribution to movements of political protest, which include one day strikes, rather than in prolonged industrial action. None of this implies for an instant a retreat from the principle that the working class is the key agent of change in capitalist society. But as Engels noted the workers struggle exists in three registers: ideological, political and economic. In some periods the main form of struggle may be political and ideological rather than purely economic. To judge the state of the struggle simply by the level of strike action is to ignore the level of generalised, politicised anger and opposition that suffuses society today.

Deepening malaise

It should be clear that these two approaches differ sharply. They would be hard but not impossible to contain in a small organisation. Those differences were, however, exacerbated by the approach of the CC majority, which launched a series of highly personalised attacks on leading members of the minority. As the minority warned Alex Callinicos and Martin Smith in December 2007, an attack of this kind would, first, irreconcilably split the leadership; second, it would split the party; and, third, it would “unleash a factionalism into the bloodstream of the party that would prove impossible to remove”. That prediction proved depressingly prescient. Suspensions and expulsions preceded conference in January 2010, again with private online discussions used as a pretext. For the first time the CC used secret caucuses of its own supporters against the minority. This was the first time too someone was instructed to stop running a website. Email accounts were hacked to gain ‘evidence’ for expulsions. Students who disagreed were invited to leave the party before they were expelled.

The majority line has now demonstrably failed. In successive years, the industrial upturn was claimed to be just around the corner, with successive trade unions alleged to hold the key to the upturn, culminating in the pensions’ struggle of 2011. A peculiar naivete was fostered about the willingness (or even ability) of various senior trade union leaders to deliver those strikes. This went hand in hand with a severe overestimation of the willingness of ordinary trade union members, in weakened organisations and confronting rising unemployment, to take industrial action, matched to a verbal ultra-leftism. The incessant calls for a “general strike” – without the slightest hint as to how such a thing might, or could, be organised – summarised these twin failings: abstract, “radical” slogans offered in the place of real organisation or capacity to deliver. The collapse of the pensions

campaign – largely at the hands of Unison general secretary Dave Prentis – has subsequently led to pronounced demoralisation amongst SWP members. Demoralisation, in turn, has provoked demands for greater internal democracy.

Of course all leaderships make mistakes, but the problem here is one of overall method. By turning away from engagement with the movement, in the absence of a real upturn in industrial struggle, the SWP leadership has fostered sectarianism. “Building the party” is now the alpha and omega of the SWP leadership’s strategy, with little to offer beyond that. The leadership’s perspective has failed. Its party-building drive is, as a result, producing quite the opposite result – as membership figures for this year attest, however many may be signed up in a year, more are being lost. Newer members do not stay. Older members quietly drop out.

As the leadership’s objective failures mount, its subjective errors worsen. As its real political influence diminishes, bureaucratic self-interest comes to dominate. It is very hard to escape the conclusion that the gross mishandling of the rape accusation arose from a desire to defend the party machine above any other consideration, with grotesque results.

The IS tradition

The SWP has never recovered from the crisis of 2007. Far from it: the organisation has been locked, as predicted, in a permanent factional paroxysm. There are no real prospects of its recovery. This decline is a minor tragedy on three levels: first, because it traps committed and sincere SWP members in a degenerating organisation; second, because the prospects of rebuilding the left in Britain are diminished while one of its larger sections devours itself; and third, because the gains of the tradition in which the SWP should stand are traduced and diminished.

Ian Birchall’s excellent recent biography of Tony Cliff made clear what those gains are. Cliff and the International Socialist tradition were never an orthodoxy. Quite the opposite: they stood opposed to others claiming an allegiance to Leon Trotsky, in which the writings of a select canon of masters were treated as if Holy Scripture. The IS was heterodox, seeking to use the best elements of the Marxist tradition to analyse changed circumstances – the better to change them. The analysis of state capitalism in Russia was one part of that; deflected permanent revolution another; the permanent arms economy a third. More importantly for today, efforts were made in the 1960s and 1970s to understand how changes in working class forms or organisation, particularly around the development of the shop stewards’ movement, could provide the class basis for a revolutionary socialist organisation.

Understanding properly that fundamental relationship between organisation and the wider class was central to Cliff and the IS' approach, alongside the wider theoretical work.

That tradition of independent thinking has now fossilised into an orthodoxy of theory and organisational practice. The working class in Britain today is hugely different from that of 1972: in service industry, often lacking job security, largely not in unions; more female and less white. As in the past, a changed working class is finding new ways to organise, just as the rise of newer industries in the 1930s established patterns of organisation that lasted for the next 40 years. There should be no reason to expect otherwise: the ENV shop stewards' committee will not rise out of their graves and come marching down Holloway Road. A changed class, pushed into a position of weakness in the workplace, is more politically radical than that of the past: more inclined to protest and demonstrate, its younger members more inclined to locate themselves on the left of the spectrum, as **Adrian Cousins' recent article on the British working class** documented. Changes in the class should provoke changes in our own organisations and our relationship to that class.

The way forward

This failure to respond to new circumstances is not confined to the SWP. There is a wider problem on the radical left in Britain, in which old organisations have not been able to respond to a new radicalism. Evidence of growing polarisation and radicalism is clear across Europe. But the organised left, with rare exceptions, is not growing, as **Chris Bambery has argued**. Some of this contradiction has taken a generational form: for the SWP, the generation of activists that came through the experience of the anti-capitalist and anti-war movements, find their experiences belittled on the promise of an upsurge in "proper" class struggle that never quite seems to materialise. Yet the SWP's biggest successes over the last decade, with no exceptions, have all been when it has applied the method of the united front and worked effectively and meaningfully with others from different political traditions. Engaging critically with a range of radical ideas is important too at a time when various left wing intellectuals have a worldwide following. There was a glimpse of the potential of this at Marxism this year: a successful event, reflecting the radicalisation that is taking place, but which the SWP leadership and at least some of the membership were clearly unhappy about, deliberately talking down the reported attendance.

The road ahead is clear. First, in conditions of Britain today, work in united fronts is of the primary strategic importance. Openness, internal democracy, a willingness to act constructively as a minority in bigger organisations, and an ability to maintain long-term relationships with

others not sharing our politics are critical. Second, understanding the transformations that neoliberalism has wrought on the British working class means understanding how political radicalisation can coexist with a still quiescent industrial struggle, and responding to it. It means understanding how changes in the workplace, and the role of the internet, have changed how it is possible for us to organise. Third, it means a reassertion of the central importance of strategy within the movement: that the key tasks for socialists in Britain today, a declining imperial power, are in opposing the British state's drive to war and in building an effective anti-austerity movement – joined, in Scotland, by the fight for a radical independence. Campaign-hopping cannot substitute for serious work in the movements.

To have an effective strategy for revolution means having also an effective organisation. The need for that organisation is as strong as it ever was. Austerity and the crisis will grind on for the immediately foreseeable future. Labour, the historic party of the British working class, accepts the need for austerity. New organisations of the radical left, akin to Syriza, can be built in these circumstances and in those likely to prevail after the next general election, and within which revolutionaries can play a decisive role. But for them to be effective, they themselves must also be organised.

Discussions on building a new left will continue. The precise organisational forms it will take have not been settled, and nor is there an obvious blueprint. We can take and learn from the best of the past, adapting and learning from the movement and the class. The radicalization of the last decade actually present the left with enormous opportunities. The discredited practices of those who cannot meet these new challenges should not prevent the whole left from moving forward.