

The crisis in the SWP-Britain

Published in *Socialist Worker* (USA) January 30, 2013

Since its national conference in January, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in Britain, the country's largest revolutionary organization, has been shaken by the most severe crisis in its history, stemming from the failure of its leadership to properly respond to rape and sexual harassment allegations made against a leading member, and, in turn, from attempts to stifle discussion of this failure and its consequences.

The crisis has had reverberations beyond the SWP and beyond Britain in an increasingly public debate. The latest example: On January 28, an international group of left-wing writers and activists who have worked closely with the SWP issued an open letter declaring that they would no longer "participate in SWP publications and platforms until the party recognizes and seriously addresses the legitimate criticisms of its handling of this case and the ensuing crisis."

Tragically, the SWP leadership has so far summarily dismissed all such protests, including many from the party's own members, declaring that the decisions reached at the national conference are final and not to be disputed in any way. Also this week, the SWP's *Socialist Review* published an article by party leader Alex Callinicos titled "Is Leninism Finished?" which presents a highly distorted history in an attempt to paint the SWP leadership as defending "Leninism," while deriding members with perfectly reasonable concerns and criticisms as a "small minority" that is "scandalously" spreading "salacious gossip." This attempt to justify a badly mishandled internal dispute by claiming the mantle of the entire revolutionary Marxist tradition is a caricature of Leninism. Callinicos' article was published ahead of an SWP National Committee meeting on February 3 where the leadership appears to be preparing to take action against those who have criticized it.

While we are reluctant to comment on the internal affairs of other socialist organizations, the public nature of the controversy--and actions by the SWP leadership that have only exacerbated the crisis--compel us to address the issue. Below is a statement of the Steering Committee of the International Socialist Organization (ISO)--the publisher of this website--circulated two weeks ago, on

Statement issued on January 15, 2013

Published, January 30, 2013 <http://socialistworker.org/2013/01/30/the-crisis-in-the-swp>

January 15, to ISO members explaining its understanding of the SWP's crisis. We did not publicize this statement in order to respect the internal procedures of the SWP. But we now believe that the SWP leadership intends to disregard the traditions of socialist democracy and continue down a ruinous path.

We stand by the members of the SWP who have raised very grave doubts, which we share, about the leadership's attitude and behavior in the face of this crisis. We support these members' calls for the SWP to convene an emergency national conference to air the disagreements and come to a genuinely democratic decision about what must be done to rescue the party from this crisis. We oppose in the strongest possible terms the threat of expulsions and other disciplinary actions. Such measures would not only inflict grave and irreparable harm on the SWP, but damage the revolutionary left internationally at a time when economic, social and ecological crises underscore the need to project a socialist alternative. Further, we reaffirm our belief, as stated below, that the way forward for the SWP and for the left depends on an active commitment to democracy, free and open debate, women's liberation and socialism from below.

The Statement: Steering Committee of the International Socialist Organization

WE DO not normally comment on the internal affairs of other organizations on the revolutionary left. However, the current crisis in the British Socialist Workers Party (SWP) is being widely discussed on the Internet, and many comrades will already know about it. For this reason, we feel it is appropriate for us to address the important issues raised by the crisis with the ISO membership.

The crisis in the SWP grew out of a sharp debate over allegations of sexual harassment and rape against a leading member of the party. At issue are not only the allegations themselves--which should be taken with the utmost seriousness--but also the process by which the charges were heard and the measures taken against those who questioned the process and the outcome, even before the SWP national conference held in early January. The details have been

leaked and commented upon widely on the Internet. Regardless of the truth or otherwise of these allegations, these give cause for concern.

The situation is deeply disappointing and disheartening. The largest revolutionary socialist organization in Britain has become the subject of ridicule and worse, and the crisis in that organization will have repercussions for the revolutionary left internationally. In the SWP, dedicated comrades are questioning whether they should remain in the party out of revulsion at what they believe to be a serious injustice within an organization that is dedicated to fighting injustice. Many others, including prominent members, are directly challenging the leadership's decisions and agitating for a more open and democratic party.

ISO comrades are rightly concerned with this turn of events. A commitment to women's liberation is a fundamental principle of the revolutionary socialist tradition and is central to the politics of our tradition. It is not enough to simply articulate our support of these politics in words. We must demonstrate this commitment in how we organize alongside others in social movements--and within our organizations. Likewise, we reaffirm our commitment to open, clear and comradely discussion, as well as democracy and accountability.

ISO MEMBERS approach this discussion with complete seriousness. Regardless of our differences with the SWP leadership in recent years, we take no joy in the crisis facing the SWP. The outcome will shape the future of the left, not only in Britain, but also around the world. For over 60 years, the SWP has been a leading force in the international workers' movement for its principled and militant defense of workers' democracy, socialism from below, self-emancipation, internationalist opposition to all imperialism, and defense of all the oppressed against racism, sexism, and homophobia. For many, its disastrous handling of this situation is calling into question its commitment to this emancipatory project.

As a result of the public nature of its crisis, the Socialist Workers Party has been laid open to attack by forces that would like to humiliate and weaken the revolutionary left. Articles in the mainstream press have caricatured the SWP as having set up a "sharia court" to resolve the allegations--a racist slur. On blogs and Facebook, radicals hostile to socialism have used the occasion to claim that all socialist

organizations are dominated by sexism. These are slanders.

At the same time, we do not accept the sectarianism and bashing of feminism that this debate has occasioned among some comrades inside the SWP. The central tenets of feminism are women's liberation and opposition to sexism. For this reason, feminism has been under sustained ideological attack for more than four decades by right-wing forces who wish to erase all the gains made by the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Now is the time for the revolutionary left to defend feminism, not to attack it. In this context, attacks on feminism by SWPers, aside from being sectarian, raise the suspicion that the party doesn't take accusations of sexual abuse seriously when they are raised about their own leadership.

We also recognize that there are serious internal problems in the SWP. There appears to be an attempt by the SWP Central Committee to silence party members' grave concerns about how these serious charges were handled. In the run-up to the SWP conference, for example, four members were expelled on the charge of secret factionalism, adding to the view that there was some kind of cover up, and reinforcing the right-wing caricature of socialist organizations as top-down hierarchies that tolerate no deviation from their "line." Leading SWP members have described these and other actions by the Central Committee as a breach of democracy.

If the allegations that have been made--both formally at the party's national conference and through Internet discussions--are true, then the SWP leadership is directly responsible for the dire crisis the party faces today. It seems clear to us that the Central Committee handled this entire situation irresponsibly, producing widespread outrage inside the SWP. The SWP's leadership is attempting to close all further discussion on the subject after winning a vote at the SWP conference by a very narrow margin. This is not in keeping with the practices of democratic centralism, but an example of profoundly poor judgment on the part of the leadership. And it is not only the SWP that will pay the price. The charges made against the SWP will definitely be made against all socialists who seek to build their organizations, including the ISO.

The bourgeois press and sectarians with an ax to grind are interested only in seeing the SWP weakened by this crisis. That fact, however, should not impede SWP comrades and revolutionary socialists from taking up the critical issues raised

by this crisis and engaging in a necessary debate.

Nevertheless, some people who are engaged in legitimate debate about the SWP and its actions--that is, party members and others on the left--have unfortunately made concessions on principles that the revolutionary left shouldn't make.

For example, the SWP journalist Tom Walker, who resigned from the party, was one among a number of left-wing writers who argued that the party's internal structures don't have the capacity to judge cases of rape. While Walker makes many important and valid points, he concludes that the allegations should have been turned over to the police and the courts. We don't believe this to be the case. We know that women who go to the justice system with complaints about sexual assault are very often disbelieved and humiliated by police and prosecutors. That is why only a minority of such incidents is ever formally reported. Moreover, the police investigating such allegations within a revolutionary organization would care not a bit about justice for the woman making the charges. Instead, they would seize the opportunity to harass and persecute the left. In fact, we understand that the female SWP comrade who made the complaint about the incident in question herself chose not to go to the police.

Of course, it is the choice of the woman who wishes to report rape or sexual assault to go to the police or not. Yet a revolutionary socialist organization should have the capacity--and indeed the responsibility--to establish the means to handle such allegations in a way that is impartial and respects the rights of any person raising such charges. We believe that a socialist organization built around principles of democracy must be capable of this, both to preserve the rights of every member and to uphold the principles of revolutionary socialism.

Any such charges involving sexual assault must be investigated fully and through a process that is unimpeachable. The proceedings must not have the slightest trace of the prejudices and humiliations capitalist society subjects women to when they make such a charge. The accused must have the right to respond, without a presumption of guilt. And a revolutionary socialist organization must be capable of taking any internal disciplinary action necessary to maintain its principles.

THE SWP leadership has failed to address these serious

charges in a way that gives the whole membership confidence that they have been properly investigated and resolved. As a result, the SWP leadership has undermined its own moral and political authority. Some of the statements made about how the SWP Central Committee handled the initial complaints--and how the Disputes Committee heard this case--are shocking and disturbing. Richard Seymour, an SWP comrade we know and respect, has written on his blog that if some of the questions directed at the women bringing the complaints had "been asked of someone making such allegations in a police station, we would rightly denounce them as sexist."

Likewise, there have been many descriptions of how the SWP leadership reportedly tried to silence dissent and squelch the concerns of members. These actions, if they are true, are a breach of democracy in a revolutionary organization. At the very least, it should be obvious from the extremely close vote at the national conference on the Disputes Committee's report, and the very public debate since, that the party remains deeply divided. The question is not settled, as the SWP Central Committee insists. Further discussion and action is necessary to allow the party to move forward in a spirit of unity and trust and to properly handle the charges brought to the CC and the Disputes Committee. It is incumbent on the SWP leadership to convince its membership of its case. A razor thin vote cannot be taken as a vote of confidence or a mandate.

Any bureaucratic measures to ban discussion of the biggest crisis the SWP has ever faced, including wholesale expulsions, will not end the crisis. The outside world will only be more firmly convinced that this is a cover-up in an undemocratic and sexist organization. For years to come, the party will have to face the hostile questioning of movement activists and will be unable to play the role it should in building among the new radicalization spurred by the current economic crisis.

Members of the SWP are discussing the future of the party and deciding on what course they should take. We have, as we said before, a very real concern about the outcome of the party's crisis, and ISO members will no doubt follow the discussion. We strongly urge comrades to treat this situation with the seriousness it deserves. Please contact the ISO national office if your branch has any further concerns.

In the meantime, we urge ISO members to think carefully

and to be responsible in their commentary about this question in public forums, such as the many long Facebook threads that have developed. We understand that comrades have opinions and convictions, but we remind people that comments made online "live forever." We don't want to become, even unintentionally, purveyors of misinformation or arguments that can be turned against the left. SWP members must resolve this crisis inside their organization--which is why we hope that no disciplinary actions are taken against those comrades who are critical of the leadership.

Our most immediate concern is for this dispute to be resolved in a way that addresses the real concerns that have been raised by the SWP membership, and in a manner that clearly demonstrates the party's commitment to democracy, women's liberation, and the struggle for workers' power.

ISO Steering Committee
January 15, 2013