

The following article by Mark Steel was written for the SWP's Pre-conference Internal Bulletin (IB). It has now appeared on the Urban 75 site, so I reproduce it here. I would not have published it without Mark's permission before it had entered the public domain.

[Editorial note – the Urban 75 article had an extra final line that did not appear in the version published in the SWP's IB. I publish here without that extra line]

<http://www.socialistunity.com/?p=1051>

MARK STEEL **on the condition of the** **Socialist Workers Party**

In the spring of 2006 I did a tour of theatres in Britain, performing my show on the French Revolution, in over forty towns, to a total of around twelve thousand people. (I wouldn't suggest for a moment that any member should be obliged to watch it, but it's probably fair to say the audience it attracts includes the type of person who may be interested in something we have to say). So before the tour began I spoke at length to members of the Central Committee, on four separate occasions, about how the SWP could benefit from this, and they decided there should be Respect stalls at each venue. I arranged that for each venue there would be as many free tickets as needed, made available for Respect supporters, so that it could be used as a social event, as well as a means for publicising Respect with leaflets or anything else the

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<http://hurryupharry.bloghouse.net/>
posted on by Studies in Anti-Capitalism, 16/11/07, at
www.studiesinanti-capitalism.net

branches liked. At not one venue did a single person turn up to do this.

In fact the only places where there was any Socialist Worker presence at all was Leicester (4 comrades), Windsor (one on her own) and a contingent of about twenty from Portsmouth, who sold Socialist Worker and distributed leaflets.

This isn't an artistic luvvie strop about people not coming to my thought-provoking hilarious show, nor is it a complaint about lazy comrades failing to take up an opportunity. It's simply an indication of how far the party has shrunk. These examples aren't one-off failures of planning, they're typical and not exceptions. There may be areas that have resisted the trend, but the overall decline is inescapable.

But the most disturbing side to the SWP's decline has been the refusal to acknowledge this trend is taking place at all. For some time we were told there were ten thousand members, although this was a patently absurd figure. This number seems to have been revised downwards, which leaves two possibilities, either that the original figure was wrong or we've suddenly lost thousands of members, either one of which should merit a thorough discussion. But far from having one, anyone who has raised the issue has been derided.

(My personal low point in trying to address this problem came after a weekend in which I did two nights in Central London, where again no Socialist Worker stall or paper sellers were present despite 600 people attending each night. So I

asked a Central committee member how he squared this with his claim we were rapidly growing. And he replied "It just goes to show there's so much going on these days we can't cover everything.")

But there is now a large contingent, of people who were inspired for many years by their membership of the SWP, and who still act as socialists with courage and imagination, who have not become tired or cynical, but have dropped out of the party either formally or in all but name. Unless we radically address the decline we've fallen into, and transform the culture that has up until now resisted such a process, the SWP will become a group that few people with the sense of drive, imagination and purpose essential to change the world will be attracted to in the long term.