

What we think : Respect

RESPECT AT THE CROSSROADS

Linda Smith, National Chair, Respect and 26 NC members and councillors

The following document has been sent today (24 October) by National Chair of Respect, Linda Smith, to the Respect office in order for it to be circulated to all Respect National Council members. It has been widely circulated on left blogs and in the light of the editorial printed in Socialist Worker attacking George Galloway and others this week we believe that it is important that all Respect members understand what is at currently at stake for the future of Respect.

A very serious situation has developed inside Respect, in particular over the past two months. It comes at a time when the need for a broad pluralist organisation of the left has never been greater. The political conditions facing Respect today are even more favourable than when we launched the Coalition in January 2004. Millions remain opposed to the war and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. Brown has tried to present a different face from Blair, but his support for Bush remains.

Trade union members in key unions like the CWU postal workers union are disgusted with the government. Union members are openly campaigning for the political fund no longer to go to the Labour Party. Where the RMT and the FBU led, other unions will inevitably follow. The RMT are discussing forming their own party and standing their own candidates in the GLA elections next May.

Across the country young people attend political events on issues such as the war, climate change, the arms trade and racism in their thousands. Muslim communities continue to face the lash of popular prejudice. All of these people need a political party, to

Statement by 26 members of Respect National Council
<http://www.isg-fi.org.uk/spip.php?article618>
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draw together the growing discontent with the political establishment and especially with New Labour.

Unfortunately, the good work undertaken and achieved by Respect over the last three and a half years is now in danger of being completely undermined by the behaviour of the leadership of the SWP.

On the ground many SWP members have worked alongside other members of Respect to great effect.

However, it has become clear over the last two months, and the last two weeks in particular, that the actions of the SWP leadership imperil the very existence of Respect as a broad, pluralistic and democratic left alternative to New Labour. Since the letter from George Galloway, which echoed some of the criticisms others had been making earlier, was sent to the members of the National Council on August 23, the SWP leadership have demonstrated that they are incapable of engaging in open and frank discussion with those who have disagreements with them.

The chain of events in this crisis is contrary to the ethos which Respect has been seeking to develop and which is reflected in its constitution: "Respect is a broad, open and inclusive organisation... It is politically pluralistic and will encourage all its members to participate in its campaigns and activities".

George Galloway's letter criticised aspects of the way Respect has been run, and proposed some changes, in particular the appointment of a new post of national organiser to work alongside John Rees, the National Secretary. Behind the national organiser proposal was an attempt to bring more diversity to Respect and to start to restore confidence in the way the national office functioned. This proposal - and indeed the letter itself - was responded to with great hostility by John Rees and the leadership of the SWP, who characterised this as a part of a right wing attack on the left in Respect. Salma Yaqoob's document "Challenges for Respect" refuted this and the outrageous allegations of communalism, which the SWP leadership had raised.

In fact, the real issue is whether Respect develops as a pluralist organisation in which no single component part dominates or controls.

The National Council on September 22 unanimously reaffirmed the principle of accountability throughout the organisation, including the elected leadership and elected representatives. The National Organiser issue was debated for several hours by the NC on September 22, adjourned to September 29, where agreement was eventually reached that the post would be of equal status and there was consensus that Nick Wrack take up the post on a temporary basis, if he could.

Following the circulation of an email by John Rees calling for suggestions about the National Organiser's position Alan Thornett added his support to the proposals from Victoria Brittain and George Galloway that Nick take up the post until conference. Nick was instructed by the SWP Central Committee to withdraw his name. When he refused he was expelled from the SWP. At the same time Kevin Ovenden and Rob Hoveman were instructed by the SWP Central Committee to resign their full-time employment with George Galloway's office. Had they resigned it would have seriously disrupted the work of our only MP's office. When they refused they were also expelled from the SWP.

On Monday October 15 a national officers meeting with a built-in SWP majority voted against Nick taking up the National Organiser's post and set aside the issue until conference. The same meeting voted against appointing Ian Donovan and Ghada Razuki to the Conference Arrangements Committee (CAC). The following night Tuesday October 16 there was a meeting of the (CAC), at which Linda Smith, the national chair of Respect, raised the issue of the constitutionality of the CAC itself (which has never been endorsed by the NC).

She also asked for the membership and financial records of the student members. She was unable to get such records or resolve the problem of the CAC itself. The same night, October 16, there was a major dispute in Tower Hamlets Respect branch at which the business of the meeting could not be concluded. Most of the 110 members present on the night left the meeting believing that

the issues were to be resolved at a committee meeting to be held two days later. SWP members and a few others stayed behind and purported to vote through a completely unrepresentative list of delegates to the national conference.

At the committee meeting two days later the committee voted to reconvene the all members meeting to settle the delegate question. The SWP's 10 committee members opposed this and when defeated walked out. Astonishingly, a letter was sent out from the Respect national office at 1.35am that night containing a "transcript" of the committee meeting with a subject line containing obscenities.

On Friday October 19 attempts were made by the SWP to block the election of delegates in Birmingham. Meanwhile the SWP has sent out a circular instructing its members to get delegated to conference.

The passwords to the membership database and office email have been changed and the National Chair has not been given access to them.

All these actions have struck a huge blow at the unity of Respect and put a legitimate conference in jeopardy.

We are appealing to members of Respect to support us in defending the coalition's plurality. We can no longer allow Respect to be jeopardised by one section.

SIGNATORIES

Linda Smith, National Chair
Cllr Salma Yaqoob, National Vice-Chair
Ken Loach, National Council
Victoria Brittain, National Council
Yvonne Ridley, National Council
Abdurahman Jafar - Muslim Council of Britain
Abdul Khaliq Mian - National Council Member Newham
Clive Searle - National Council Member Manchester
Mobeen Azhar - National Council Member Manchester

Berny Parkes – National Council Member Dorset
John Lister - National Council Member
Nick Wrack, National Council Memberr
Cllr Abjol Miah, National Council and leader Respect group
Tower Hamlets council
Alan Thornett, National Council London
Rita Carter, National Council London
Dr Mohammed Naseem, National Council Member Birmigham
Ger Francis, National Council Member Birmingham
Ayesha Bajwa, National Council Tower Hamlets
George Galloway MP, National Council
Abdul Karim Sheik - Leader of Respect Group of
Councillors Newham
Hanif - Newham Councillor
Mamun Rashid - Tower Hamlets Councillor
Abdul Munim – Tower Hamlets Councillor
Dulal Miah - Tower Hamlets Councillor
Haroun Miah - Tower Hamlets Councillor
Fuzol Miah - Tower Hamlets Councillor
Mohammed Ishtiaq - Birmingham Councillor