

Third Time as Farce: Respect Heads for Political Oblivion

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FOLLOWING THE degeneration of Arthur Scargill's Socialist Labour Party into a tiny Stalinoid sect, and with the Socialist Alliance having succeeded only in demonstrating its own political irrelevance, we now see yet another attempt to build a left alternative to Labour – Respect, the Unity Coalition, headed by the Socialist Workers Party and former Labour MP George Galloway.

Respect has set itself the aim of attracting the forces that were mobilised around the big demonstrations against the Iraq war last year, in order to mount an electoral challenge to the Labour Party in elections to the European Parliament and the Greater London Authority. Indeed, in a press release in February announcing its failure to agree a joint slate of candidates with the Green Party, Respect proudly declared that the new organisation was “seen as the political wing of the anti-war movement”. The problems with this approach are surely obvious.

The first, of course, is the political irresponsibility of trying to harness the campaign against military intervention in Iraq to an electoral alliance centred on the Socialist Workers Party. Faced with the choice of using their own organisation to build a genuinely broad anti-war movement, or using the anti-war movement to build their own organisation, the SWP leaders have predictably chosen the latter. With the likes of *Observer* journalist Nick Cohen energetically denouncing the Stop the War Coalition as a Trot front, the SWP has helpfully provided such liberal supporters of US imperialism with further ammunition to attack the anti-war movement.

True, the formal position of the Stop the War Coalition is that it is organisationally and politically separate from Respect. But that is a tactical compromise the SWPers in the StWC leadership had to make in order to keep Labour lefts like Jeremy Corbyn and Tony Benn on

board, along with other non-supporters of Respect like CND. In practice, where they have been able to get away with it the SWP and its allies have turned local StWC groups into de facto branches of the Respect Coalition. And the fact that prominent SWP members such as Lindsey German and John Rees are standing as Respect candidates, billing themselves as leaders of the Stop the War Coalition, only serves to underline the public identification of the StWC with the SWP's new electoral initiative.

The electoral policy of StWC, adopted at the instigation of the SWP and its allies, was outlined in a statement issued by its steering committee in February. It was a characteristically dishonest document, which in practice advocated a vote for Respect whilst simultaneously denying that this was what it was doing.

In a nod to Labour Party and CND members in the StWC, the statement begins with the correct argument that opposition to the Iraq war “embraces people from a very wide variety of political organisations and views” and that “the ability to mobilise people across political, religious and other boundaries in support of peace has been one of the foundations of the strength of the anti-war movement”. It offers the assurance that the StWC “has never advocated electoral support for any particular Party or political movement, and does not associate itself with any one candidate or list in elections”.

This is elementary common sense. A moment's consideration would reveal the absurdity of asking people to back candidates on the basis of the stand they took on the Iraq war. By that criterion, faced with a choice between a Conservative who opposed the war (such as Kenneth Clark) and a Labour candidate who supported it, the StWC would be committed to argue in favour of a vote for the Tory, thus alienating the overwhelming majority

of Labour supporters. Given the above quotations, therefore, you might assume that the StWC would avoid making any recommendation on who to vote for in elections.

Not so. The statement continues: “Nevertheless, the Coalition recognises the strong and growing desire to hold the Blair government to account at the ballot box for its war policy, particularly in the elections taking place on June 10 this year. We believe that voters should take this opportunity to vote for peace by supporting any candidates or parties that opposed the war in Iraq, are urging an end to the Anglo-American occupation of Iraq, and are against British support for George Bush’s programme of endless war, providing only that such candidates or parties share the Coalition’s founding values of support for civil liberties and opposition to racism.”

Who exactly are these “candidates and parties” who support such a programme? Well, of course, there are many Labour candidates who would sign up to it, plus most Greens and the odd Lib Dem. Even though the policy of advocating a vote for particular candidates is clearly wrong, for the reasons the StWC outlined earlier in the steering committee’s statement, this would at least imply some sort of tactical approach, whereby the StWC would back those anti-war candidates, of whatever party, who stood the best chance of defeating pro-war candidates.

But such is the depth of Respect’s sectarianism that its leaders cannot even bring themselves to apply that tactic. Their line is that they alone represent genuine opposition to the war, and that they should therefore be the exclusive beneficiaries of an anti-war vote. As Respect chair Nick Wrack wrote in a letter to the *Guardian*: “Respect is the only party which unequivocally calls for immediate withdrawal from Iraq. We believe only the Iraqi people have the right to determine their future. The convenor of the Stop the War Coalition, Lindsey German, is Respect candidate for London mayor. Anti-war MP George Galloway heads our list for the European elections in London. Leading anti-war campaigners are heading our lists in the other constituencies.” So the practical conclusion drawn from the StWC electoral policy by Respect is to stand candidates almost everywhere, irrespective of the position other candidates took on the invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Quite aside from all this, there is the question of whether the anti-war movement can indeed be successfully harnessed to Respect’s electoral intervention in the way the SWP leadership

imagines. Like most of the far left, the SWP holds a permanently exaggerated view of the level of political consciousness among the general population. In their own minds, the SWP leaders face a situation in which people who opposed the Iraq war are crying out for a left-wing alternative to the Labour Party. Yet, in reality, far from uniting a majority of people around a leftist agenda, the anti-war protests brought together people who had little in common politically other than their rejection of war on Iraq.

In fact, they weren’t even united in their attitude to the war. Among those who took to the streets in the huge demonstration of 15 February 2003, there were undoubtedly many who shared the Liberal Democrats’ view that they were not against the war in principle but only because it was being waged without the support of the United Nations. As you would expect, given the softness of prevailing anti-war sentiment, once the invasion began the level of opposition declined sharply. Since then public opinion has been fairly evenly divided over the war, with narrow majorities for or against, depending on how the situation is going in occupied Iraq.

There is, in short, only a very limited section of the population who share Respect’s hard anti-war position, and even fewer who will respond positively to an invitation to support a left electoral alliance dominated by the SWP.

Respect’s leaders have made much of the experience of the Spanish elections where, according to the SWP’s analysis, the Partido Popular was swept from office because of public opposition to the Aznar government’s role in the Iraq war. The Respect Coalition, it is argued, can expect to attract a similar protest vote against the Blair government in Britain.

The truth is that, despite popular hostility to the Iraq war being much greater in Spain than it has been in this country, the PP looked likely to win a small majority in the elections until it outraged a large section of the Spanish people by lying to them about the Madrid bombing. If there is a lesson to be drawn from Spain, it is the opposite of that drawn by the SWP – namely that just because a government involves itself in an unpopular military adventure it doesn’t necessarily follow that the governing party will be heavily punished by voters in a subsequent election.

In any case, in Spain there was a mass-based electoral alternative to the PP in the shape of the PSOE, a long-established and far from left-wing social democratic party. The idea that the Respect Coalition, an organisation hitherto unknown to voters and dominated by the extreme left, will

benefit from anti-government sentiment in Britain in the way that the PSOE did in Spain is just laughable.

Like the SLP and the Socialist Alliance before it, the Respect Coalition ignores the essentially monolithic character of the British labour movement, where the trade unions in their large majority still remain affiliated to the Labour Party. The experience of history is that you can't win any significant popular support by launching a new political party, denouncing the treachery of the Labour leadership and appealing to voters to rally to your cause. In order to mount a meaningful electoral challenge to Labour from the left, there has to have been a previous struggle within the Labour Party itself, resulting in undemocratic stitch-ups, expulsions and splits. On that basis, prominent figures who have been victimised by the party apparatus can sometimes stand independently and win popular backing. This is the explanation for successful electoral interventions by Tommy Sheridan and Dennis Canavan in Scotland, John Marek in Wales and four years ago by Ken Livingstone in London.

Hardly any of Respect's candidates are in this position, with the partial exception of George Galloway. Of course, Galloway's fight to retain his Labour Party membership was always something of a rignarole. As he has recently made clear, he was from the start intent on leaving Labour over the Iraq war in order to form a new political organisation to stand against the party, but felt that it would be electorally more advantageous to provoke the Labour leadership into expelling him. In an interview with the *Observer*, he revealed that his allies with whom he has now launched Respect "advised me to force the party to go through the long drama of expulsion on the basis that the monstrosity of the proceedings would work in our favour". No doubt TGWU general secretary Tony Woodley and former Labour leader Michael Foot, who submitted statements in support of Galloway to his disciplinary hearing, having accepted his assurance that he was fighting to remain within the party, will be pleased to know that they were being used as pawns in a cynical manoeuvre to boost the electoral prospects of the Respect Coalition.

All the same, his expulsion might have earned Galloway a substantial sympathy vote if he had stood in his home base of Glasgow (though the fact that Galloway didn't resign his parliamentary seat and seek re-election suggests that even there his support is more limited than he makes out). It is far less likely to win him similar support in London, where he tops the

Respect list for elections to the European Parliament. It is easy to understand why Galloway, with his taste for flash suits and expensive cigars, would like to get his pudgy little hands on the inflated salary and generous expense account of a Euro MP. But in order for him to do so, Respect would need to win around 8% of the vote. Even allowing for the prospect that he may achieve some success in his efforts to win support among the Muslim communities, that seems an almost impossible task.

Galloway's leading role in Respect is in any case something of a mixed blessing for his allies. He established a high profile as a result of his opposition to the Iraq war, but other aspects of his politics will perhaps play less well with the electorate. After all, this is the man who in the past enjoyed close relations with leaders of the bloody Ba'athist dictatorship in Iraq. And in a recent interview with the *Independent on Sunday*, Galloway volunteered the information that "I'm not as left wing as you think. I'm strongly against abortion. I believe life begins at conception.... I think abortion is immoral". Asked whether he did at least hold a pro-choice position, he retorted: "Who is choosing for the child?" Presumably Galloway would prefer to see a return to the situation pre-1967 when women were regularly butchered by back street abortionists.

The convolutions of the SWP on this issue are a wonder to behold. They are of course perfectly well aware that it is down to the conscience of the individual whether they are for or against abortion, but it is a question of political principle that socialists (or even supporters of basic democratic rights, for that matter) defend a woman's right to decide whether or not to terminate her pregnancy. But in order to maintain their bloc with Galloway, the SWP and its allies have adopted the new line that being pro-choice or anti-choice is itself an issue of individual conscience. We can only suppose that, if a private member's bill seeking to restrict entitlement to abortion came before parliament and Galloway supported it, the Respect leadership would defend his right to do so!

Conscious of the limited name-recognition that Respect enjoys among the general electorate, the leadership has decided that the alliance will appear on the ballot papers as "Respect: The Unity Coalition (George Galloway)". For some, this may only reinforce the view of Respect as a marriage of convenience between the SWP and George Galloway's ego. But just think, we'll have the chance to vote for a party named after a man who opposes a woman's right to choose, spent his Christmas holidays with Tariq Aziz and told Saddam Hussein: "Sir, I salute your courage,

your strength, your indefatigability.” I’ll bet voters can’t wait for the polling stations to open on 10 June so they can avail themselves of this opportunity.

The profoundly sectarian basis of Respect’s politics (of which the adaptation to Galloway is the opportunist reverse side) can be seen in its decision to stand in elections to the Greater London Authority. Here the challenge facing the labour movement is to ensure not only that Ken Livingstone gets a second term as mayor but also that a large enough Labour group is elected to the London Assembly to back his programme. The latter will be no easy task, given the slump in party membership, the demoralisation of activists and the disillusionment of Labour supporters. There is a real danger that Labour voters will stay at home in protest against Blair, or that the Liberal Democrats, dishonestly positioning themselves as a progressive alternative to New Labour, will manage to break away a chunk of Labour’s traditional support. Either would reduce the number of successful Labour candidates, leaving Livingstone facing a politically hostile Assembly.

In these circumstances, the SWP’s appeal to voters to “punish Blair” by refusing to vote Labour is the height of political stupidity. *Socialist Worker* has claimed that under proportional representation “a vote against New Labour and for Respect cannot help the Tories, Liberals or anyone else get in”. At best this can be put down to ignorance. While Respect is highly unlikely to poll the 5% necessary to get one of its candidates elected to the London Assembly on the top-up list, by diverting even a small proportion of the vote from Labour it could very well boost the representation of the Tories and Lib Dems on the Assembly. In addition, through its vitriolic attacks on Labour, which fail to distinguish between the party and the government or between candidates who are Blairite clones and those who are critics of New Labour, Respect will contribute towards disorienting Labour supporters and playing into the hands of the Tories and Lib Dems.

Respect has even decided to stand Lindsey German of the SWP against Livingstone for mayor. So we will witness the bizarre sight of a Respect candidate standing on an anti-war platform ... against a Labour candidate who was a leading opponent of the Iraq war. Admittedly, Respect has a formal position of calling for a second preference for Livingstone. There is no indication, though, that this demonstrates any serious tactical orientation towards the Labour Party. It probably has more to do with the fact that the SWP wants to avoid disrupting relations with Livingstone in building the European Social

Forum and Unite Against Fascism, in both of which he has played an important role.

This slight dilution of Respect’s sectarian line towards the Labour Party, on the Livingstone issue at least, evidently aroused some opposition among the SWP’s membership and periphery – understandably, as it clearly contradicts the “Labour is no different from the Tories” line that informs Respect’s general propaganda. One *Socialist Worker* reader wrote in to express her surprise that the paper was “urging readers to vote Ken Livingstone as their second preference for London mayor. You suggest this is partly to stop ‘a Tory or Liberal sneaking in’. But Livingstone is a member of the Labour Party and will support other Labour Party candidates. Their views are essentially the same as the Tories and Liberals”. Under such pressure from the ranks, and also from the likes of Galloway, who reportedly wasn’t too happy with the decision to endorse Livingstone, the Respect leadership will probably maintain the formal position of a second preference for Ken while rather playing it down in public.

Certainly, on the ground, the attitude of Respect supporters is in my experience extremely hostile to Livingstone. At a recent Iraq demonstration outside Downing Street I heard an SWP member denouncing him bitterly for having returned to the Labour Party. Ken was just “holding up Tony Blair’s trousers”, the comrade declared angrily, apparently oblivious to the fact that Livingstone had been accepted back into the Labour Party on his own terms and without making any compromise on his politics, which by any standards was a triumphant vindication of his decision to defy Blair four years ago. As Graham Bash recently observed in his *Weekly Worker* column, we are used to the far left claiming defeats as victories, but it is a new phenomenon to find them portraying a victory as a defeat.

Another bizarre decision by Respect is to contest the Assembly seat in Barnet & Camden, where the Labour candidate, Lucy Anderson, enjoys the backing of the Rail Maritime & Transport union, having signed up to the RMT’s four-point programme, which includes support for the abolition of the anti-union laws, re-nationalisation of the rail network, opposition to the semi-privatisation of the London Underground and support for seafarers’ jobs. She was selected by Labour Party members on the basis of a statement that included a denunciation of “the illegal and shameful war on Iraq”. Two years ago, she was part of a delegation from Lawyers for Palestinian Human Rights which visited the occupied territories and issued a report condemning abuses by the Sharon government.

The seat is, moreover, highly marginal and the Labour candidate was defeated by a mere 551 votes in the 2000 elections. The present Tory Assembly member, Brian Coleman, is a right-wing bigot who regularly launches tirades against asylum seekers, overseas students, Irish travellers, cyclists and supporters of traffic calming measures – in fact anyone who isn't a white English roadhog like himself. Needless to say, he wasn't exactly noted for his opposition to the Iraq war. Yet local Respect supporters justify their decision to stand against Anderson on the familiar grounds that there is no longer any political difference between the Labour and Tory parties.

When Livingstone wrote an article for the local paper, the *Camden New Journal*, urging support for Anderson and emphasising that she was the only candidate who could defeat Coleman, the response of local Respect supporters was to bombard the paper with indignant letters urging readers not to vote Labour. It is the sort of ultra-left lunacy that the German Communist Party descended into in the early 1930s, splitting the German labour movement and allowing the Nazis to gain power.

At the Friends Meeting House rally in London last October that launched the Respect Coalition, John Rees stated: "We are not turning our back on Labour supporters. There are millions of them, and we understand that the only sustainable left in this country can be built by winning those millions who have not yet been won." But it is difficult to see quite how Respect will succeed in gaining a hearing among Labour supporters by waging a divisive electoral campaign in a London Assembly seat which they cannot possibly win and where the result of their intervention could be to hand victory to the Tories.

Even the *Weekly Worker*, not a publication usually associated with softness towards Labour, has pointed to the irrationality of the SWP's position. At the February meeting of the Socialist Alliance executive, when the wisdom of standing against an RMT-backed Labour candidate was questioned, Anderson was dismissed as just "a Blairite" by the SWP's Rob Hoveman. "A funny sort of Blairite that openly supports the RMT's minimum platform", the *Weekly Worker* reporter observed. "Attempts to build a working class alternative will be doomed if we are unable to relate tactically to the Labour Party."

Why is it that the SWP's leaders, for all their formal adherence to Leninism, reject an elementary Leninist united front tactic towards Labour? Well, partly it is that Respect has been told that it needs to stand in all the London Assembly seats to qualify for an election broadcast. But the more fundamental explanation, I would suggest, is that the SWP leadership lacks the ability to make a sober assessment of reality and instead takes refuge in a land of political fantasy where millions of people are ready to break with Labour and back a new political alliance they have never heard of. According to this reasoning, all that is necessary is for Respect to loudly proclaim its political principles, and the masses will follow. The result is that the SWP and its friends in Respect have launched themselves on an ultra-left binge which, as already noted, bears a striking resemblance to Third Period Stalinism.

The likely outcome of the June elections, therefore, is that the Respect Coalition will suffer political disaster and, consequently, will follow the SLP and the Socialist Alliance into oblivion. It will be a case of history occurring, as it were, three times: the first time as farce, the second time as farce, and then as farce once again. ■

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