

Next NC: 27/03/04

RESPECT

Sean: SWP have set up "Respect" with less support than they hoped. It's SWP plus Galloway and a couple of groupuscules. It's not a popular front. It is of the same genre as the SCLV in 1978-9. But all the socialist politics are dumped, tailoring the platform to Galloway. It's deeply unprincipled. "Worker's wage" isn't an absolute principle, but it is unprincipled to drop it for Galloway. It shows the SWP completely disoriented. Rooted in their "negativism" - they know what they're against but not what they stand for positively. We're isolated on the left. Given the circumstances, that's honourable. We may come out of it quite well in the medium term as people get disillusioned. The current SWP line on Iraq etc. is in line with the old "soft Pabloite" line on Stalinism, which IS in its better days would have denounced. We should seek out and talk to SWPers.

Jim: TU Convention had 700 people, which was less than expected, though not a complete flop. SWP wasn't very bullish there. In the unions they are arguing for each individual branch to support whatever party it wants. Their orientation is not to the working class but to Guardian readers.

Paul: "Respect" convention was managed very ham-handedly. We need to seek out the sort of people who just turned up to see what was going on; also SAers we have worked with; also Weekly Worker.

Kate: SWP mobilised more for "Respect" than for the TU Convention. But there weren't a lot of non-SWPers at the TU Convention. The SWP don't see have pulled in a lot of people around "Respect".

Bruce: SWP can't be very pleased, and maybe they're hedging their bets. At the Manchester "Unite Against Fascism" rally the line was vote for anyone but the BNP in June. The SWP has different politics when they're wearing different hats...

Matt: It's the same argument with the SWP about working-class representation. They don't understand what it means. Politically they operate as carrion-eaters. "Respect" will not be the success they expect.

Clive: OK, the SWP orients to Guardian-readers, but the audience, the people who read Michael Moore, John Pilger, Noam Chomsky, etc., is large. We have to get in there and criticise, develop a body of literature. In my experience, anti-war activists aren't very interested in "Respect".

Martin: We should not just "surf" on the sentiment of trade-unionists who are indifferent to "Respect". We haven't done too well with our statement, either. We need to rally people positively round our ideas, not just congratulate ourselves on people being equally sceptical of the SWP's ideas and to ours. Talk to SWPers, because the SWPer who is working hard for "Respect" because they want to do something in politics is in one way closer to us politically than the trade unionist who is indifferent.

Maria: The SWP have pushed the "individual branch choice" version of democratising the funds in CWU. We should push better versions of democracy.

John: The SWP struck me as having a lack of ambition and a lack of confidence. Maybe they are deliberately talking down their members' expectations. In the trade unions the SWP are a lightweight equivalent to the old CP. We have to try to stop RMT branches affiliating to "Respect".

Mark S: In Amicus, only card-carrying LP members have a say on the political fund. We need to develop better ideas about democratising the fund. George Monbiot is backing off from "Respect" because of Galloway. "Respect" is going to have a lot of trouble competing with the Greens for its target audience.

Duncan: "Respect" convention had a lot of "dead" SWPers dragged along for the day. Our stand has had an effect in the SWP - we are the clear opposition. Chase the SWPers.

Sean: SWP play on people feeling that they must find some alternative to Blair, no matter what. The SWP does reprise the CP, but on a much less solid way. They don't have the USSR as permanent prop. They survive only because of the general lack of political culture. However, they are now in blatant contradiction to what was good in the "IS tradition". We should raise this. Also, reach out to Muslims. Weekly Worker? They're being completely unprincipled. We should chase them. However careful we are, there is a risk of us being sued for libel. We will have to stand and fight. Serwotka? It's bad that we don't have more influence on him. We have to emphasise building for our own politics; there's no ancillary framework to use as intermediary like the Labour left used to provide.

CURRENT SITUATION

Pete: The Hutton Report was technically and legally a victory for Blair, but maybe not a political victory at all. Likewise the war in Iraq was a military victory, but not the political victory Bush and Blair hoped for. The workers' walkout at the BBC was significant despite the weaknesses, support for Dyke, etc. I doubt there will be a real clampdown by Blair on the BBC's independence. A problem with lack of visible left opposition to Blair: Galloway has been able to appear in the media as the foremost "left" critic of Blair.

Duncan: Apparently the BBC workers' protest was much more about the independence of the BBC, given pro-Dyke spin by the media. Don't dismiss it out of hand.

Clive: Hutton Report was artificially restricted in its remit. The new inquiry likewise. The central issue is that of democratic accountability. BBC is very heavily bureaucratic; there's an issue of democratic accountability of the BBC too. BBC journalism is not great, but if you're going to inquire into poor journalistic standards, start at the Daily Mail.

Patrick: BBC walkouts were important.

John: RMT? The problem is not that their policy was wrong, but that they have not campaigned for it. Does this mean that any union supporting non-Labour candidates will be disaffiliated? No. The RMT has pursued its policy very weakly, and Crow made the revealing comment that he "felt like the Birmingham Six" when the LP expelled the RMT.

Jim: The conference yesterday was rejoicing about the RMT's expulsion while formally complaining against it. Meanwhile the RMT has reduced its nominal affiliation way below its actual levy-paying membership. The RMT has broken no actual rule of the Labour Party. We should campaign in the unions for the RMT's readmission.

PERSPECTIVES

Martin moved the "Independent Workers' Focus" document.

John: Point 3(c) should be fixed up on the magazine.

Matt: We live in politically poisoned terrain. But part of the tone of what Martin says is putting it down to personal failings. 2003

conference decision did not include practicalities. We need more political campaigning in trade unions.

Kate: We need more assessment about publications, separately. "Bad 1980s" reference is incomprehensible. Point 7 needs addition on education being vital for us.

Pete: We can get a lot of contacts through the internet. We should be more vigorous about that.

Maria: UCRATUL is missing.

Patrick: I strongly disagree with Matt. At the 2002 and 2003 conferences we made practical decisions, and it's a fact that we carried them out partially, but not adequately. We should not tone that down.

Cathy: I agree. We could do a lot more on Iraq solidarity with some more people willing to volunteer. The NC has to up its own tempo.

Jill: The "bad 1980s" reference made sense to me. Pete is right about the Internet. But we can't recede into "organising by email".

Bruce: I don't quite agree with this idea about a "bad 1980s". We have to think about how we project ourselves to newer, younger people.

Martin: summed up.

Document noted and forwarded for circulation with small amendment and possible larger amendment at next NC.

Brief items on EC minutes; money and paper subs drive.

IRAQ

Clive: A lot of the anti-war argument is rubbish, and we need care in tracing a Third Camp stance. So the motion tries to do that. The US/UK occupation is bogged down. They are allying with anti-democratic forces in Iraq in their efforts to construct a friendly regime.

Paul: What about the Egypt 1882 analogy? What about links with the IFTU?

Jim: Solidarity with the Iraqi working class is the way, and maybe a way to link up with the better people in the anti-anti-war left. We should work with the IFTU.

Gerry: Argument about "Troops Out"? True, it doesn't answer the situation facing the Iraqi working class. But if we don't raise that slogan, we seem to legitimise the occupation?

Pete: What are the Sistani forces? Dissident forces within the Iraqi CP?

Cathy: Kurds have rejected Baghdad ruling for Sharia law.

Bruce: Broad passive support for the resistance even if its active forces are reactionary? Question of elections?

Sean: The politics focused on "troops out now" are a continuation by other means of the war policy of the pro-Saddam forces. We are for self-determination, therefore against the occupation, but we do not focus on "troops out now".

Clive: The IFTU seems to be run by the Iraqi CP. I have contact with an activist in Basra - lots of interesting information. The occupying troops are a bulwark against civil war, in fact. The point

of revolutionary politics is not to deny such facts but to work for developing something better, for working-class independence, etc.

Agreed: noted to remit for wider circulation.

THE VEIL AND THE BAN

Martin introduced one motion.

1. We are for separation of church and state, and for universal secular education.
2. That means that schools and their teaching should be secular, not that religiously-minded students should not be accommodated. On the contrary, they should be integrated.
3. We oppose religion, but support freedom of religion. We understand that, as Marx wrote: "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people."
"The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo."
"Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers on the chain not in order that man shall continue to bear that chain without fantasy or consolation, but so that he shall throw off the chain and pluck the living flower". Thus we do not attempt to force people, by administrative pressure, to abandon religious "fantasy and consolation", but rather to change the "heartless world".
4. The Islamic veil raises different issues from the Jewish skullcap, the Sikh turban, the Hindu tilaka, the Christian cross, etc., because it is a social mechanism of women's subordination, as well as an individual religious sign. Thus there is a history of secularising Muslim countries such as Ataturk's Turkey banning the veil, which has no parallel in the cases of other religious signs.
5. The proposed law to ban the veil in France cannot however be equated with Ataturk's ban. We should oppose this law while favouring a vigorous political campaign against the veil.
6. It is impossible to disentangle the proposed law from:
 - a) repression by a racist, chauvinist, and insensitive state against a disadvantaged minority. (Prime minister Raffarin, in parliament on 3 February, argued for the law as enforcing "the acceptance of a certain way of seeing the world, unique to France").
 - b) counterproductive attempts to "liberate" teenagers of Muslim background by means of ultimatums and instructions from older representatives of the dominant culture and state authorities.
 - c) enabling the Islamists to appropriate the banner of civil liberty and individual freedom, rally young people around it, and, probably, increase the popularity of the veil. (Only some hundreds of girls wear the veil in school. Many tens of thousands joined the Islamist demonstrations on 17 January).
 - d) increased numbers of young Muslims being ghettoised in religious schools rather than integrated into state schools.The blatant hypocrisy whereby the veil is banned in the name of secularism while the French government continues to subsidise Catholic schools can only worsen these problems. Any assistance the proposed law gives to girls of Muslim background who want to combat family or peer pressure to make them veil themselves will be inextricably compromised, tainted, and counteracted by the many cases where the law means rebellious teenagers being punished for a free choice of their own which does not directly harm others, whether that choice be taken out of religious conviction or pure spirit of defiance. Assistance can better be given by sensitive persuasion and political campaigning, aiming to mobilise and encourage that big majority of Muslim girls in France who do not wear the veil.
7. We argue for countering the rise of Islamism in heavily-Muslim working-class suburbs in French cities by efforts to root socialist politics in those suburbs and mobilise social struggles against the "heartless world" of those suburbs.

8. Islamist demonstrations against the proposed law are reactionary even if they are formally right in their opposition to the law. We support and work with counter-demonstrations organised by secularists, socialists and democrats of Muslim background (in France, groups such as Ni putes ni soumises, various Berber organisations, etc.), even if those counter-demonstrators support the proposed law and we have to explain we disagree with them on that while supporting their political struggle against the veil, against Islamism, and for women' s rights.

Mark S introduced another.

1. The hijab, veil and burkha are public expressions of the ownership of women by men, fathers, husbands, brothers, laid down in muslim teaching, socialists should oppose it. We do not support state bans on adults but to confuse that with the case of schools is wrong.
2. While socialists are highly critical of capitalist education and it' s institutions we support compulsory education for children, within that we fight for the best education, the best syllabus and the best facilities. Support for compulsory education has to include methods of enforcement, preventing children from doing full time work or just not turning up to school. We support using the law to enforce compulsory education, surely this is the biggest ' oppression' of children' s rights, and we would not accept this form of compulsion for adults.
3. Given this approach to compulsory education it is right that we argue against religious and private schools on the basis of equality, and decent education for all. We argue too about what is to be taught in schools. It' s not just being at school that matters, but what children learn, including things parents don' t want them to be taught like sex education, questioning the society they live in and science rather than medieval rubbish like religion. We demand secular education, parents have plenty of time to teach their children rubbish, we oppose the ' parents right' to restrict their children' s education at school. The hijab, veil or burka are religious symbols of women' s oppression, girls should be given space to learn they do not need to wear them, that they can take part in sports like swimming. If these girls ' choose' to robe up out of school or after they leave then so be it.
4. The issue of the veil has been hiped up by Islamic reactionaries, and most of the left and their cultural relativist alies have jumped on the bandwagon. In fact a far more important issue is the fact that reactionary parents, can ' withdraw' ' their' children from sex education and that the education system is capitulating on many issues like sport and even science to parents' ' cultral or religious objections' , also Balir is supporting yet more religious schools. This is the real issue, a victory on the veil in school is one more step in the wrong direction, but all the left can go on about is the veil. We must cut sharply against this stupidity.
5. In France both LCR and LO teachers have been right to fight to impose a ban in schools using the old law supporting secular education.
6. Socialist should not oppose a law on religion in schools but demand that it includes an end to religious schools.
7. The French right are using the issue but so to are the Islamists, a victory for them against the law would be a victory for the enemies of the left. We cannot support the French governments use of the issue to ' unite republican France' , we should expose their racism and nationalism, but neither should we give an inch to those opposing the law.
8. No to all religious education. No to the veil or burkha in schools; for a full education for all children.

Debate: Bruce, Jill, Gerry, Clive, Kate, Sean, Daniella, plus summaries.

Procedural motion not to vote: lost, 2 for (Sean, Maria).

Martin accepted Bruce' s amendment

Voting on broad lines (not details) of the motions.

Martin' s motion: 15 for, 3 against (Sean, Mark S, Duncan), 1 abst (Sacha).

Mark S' s motion fell.

Brief reports on summer school, on No Sweat week of action, and on Haitian trade unionist' s visit

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Present: Sean, Clive, Kate, Jean, Mark S, John, Matt, Paul, Bruce, Maria, Jim, Duncan, Gerry, Patrick, Mark O, Cathy, Mick, Martin; plus Daniella.

Apols: Alison (work).

AWOL: Chris