

Crisis in the British SWP: On the situation in the SWP - No Marxism without feminism

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The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) has been the largest organisation on the far left in Britain for more than two decades. It has achieved this by a single minded focus on the recruitment of individual members with whom it comes into contact in street activity; organisations it dominates such as Unite the Resistance and Unite against Fascism; work on campuses; sharp and short lived turns to local campaigns and systematic trade union work. It has been a major dynamic force in some of the largest radical movements of the last thirty years, including the Anti Nazi League and the Stop the War Coalition. It is also the dominant group in the International Socialist Tendency and its sister organisations tend to defer to its strategic and theoretical judgements.

The SWP is now going through arguably the most turbulent period in its history. This will have an impact on the entire radical left in Britain and will also affect left currents internationally. If the SWP disintegrates this will be a profoundly negative outcome, as it will mean the demoralisation and fragmentation of thousands of activists who relate to the party, and a weakening of the class struggle left in unions and campaigns. It will also shape the views of tens of thousands of activists whose understanding of revolutionary Marxism is strongly influenced by their contacts with the SWP. In particular, the radical left is looking to see how the party deals with issues of internal democracy, women's rights and its understanding of feminism. The right wing in the union movement is also following it closely and we can expect that they will use it in dishonest polemics against the entire left.

Outsiders are relying on leaks for their information on the cause of the turmoil and the party leadership's response. This most significant document is the transcript of the report of the party's Disputes Committee to its conference, on an allegation of rape against a member it identifies as Delta. After admitting that all the committee's members had known and worked with the alleged perpetrator for a number of years, they concluded that the woman wasn't raped by Delta and that allegations of sexual harassment were not proven. The active involvement of two members of the Central Committee in the enquiry adds to the impression that it was weighted against the woman, as they would have been very influential in its decision making. The subsequent decision to exclude from the Central Committee two members who had supported the woman making the allegations, gives a strong signal that her case was completely without merit and that she and her supporters will be marginalised inside the organisation.

The word feminist was used as a term of abuse within the discussion, strongly implying that it is impossible to be a feminist and a revolutionary socialist at the same time. The term "creeping feminism" was used, for example, as if the real danger was that that organisation was in danger of becoming 'infected' by alien ideas from the women's liberation movement, rather than the actual issue; how it could support a comrade alleging sexual violence.

The SWP has had a position for many years that it does not describe itself as feminist, preferring to call itself a supporter of women's liberation. For Socialist Resistance the badge of feminism is one we are proud to wear. We think the fight for women's liberation is an indispensable part of the struggle for socialism, and can only be strengthened by a stronger voice for socialist feminists within

this.

There are legitimate debates about how left activists describe their politics in relation to mass movements for liberation, and about how we work in those movements and around the demands they raise. But to use the term 'feminist' as a derogatory characterization, especially in such a situation, is not acceptable.

Whilst no organisation could guarantee getting everything right with such a difficult issue, unless there is a culture in the organisation built around feminist principles at every level, including in the way it deals with disputes, there is little chance of success.

A radical movement must have no interests separate from those of the oppressed

Members of revolutionary organisations are not immune from the prejudices of the societies in which they live. The fight against sexist behaviour, including sexist violence and other forms of discrimination, is an ongoing one which also involves recognising that these problems are very likely to occur within our own ranks.

The comrades of the Mexican section of the Fourth International put it like this in a document agreed at their Congress in 1989:

"A party like ours, whose revolutionary principles include a feminist perspective, finds itself up against challenges and contradictions when trying to set norms and rules about internal functioning. When we join a revolutionary party we usually assume a certain world view, implicit in our principles, and that becomes an accepted common identity, establishing therefore in practice a social form of control between the members of the revolutionary party. This social control is found in our party norms and bylaws, and is enforced fundamentally by the control commission, and by all other party bodies. This is where sanctions come in to the picture. And this is why they are accepted by the militants as a necessity.

"There are certain values that have historically been accepted by Marxists regarding a revolutionary activist's behaviour. Nevertheless, when confronted with feminist questioning, we have fewer common values...

"The changes in behaviour and in values that feminism proposes are not accepted by society as a whole, nor by all revolutionaries, because they are part of what has historically been considered as private. For that reason, creating norms for party life using feminist criteria is no easy task. We know that it is not a matter of giving recipes or models for life. The search for new men and women is just that: a search. We know that the total liberation of both men and women is not possible in the capitalist system, but precisely that is one of the contributions of our internationalist current, to recognize the necessity of struggling for change, starting today. We do not assume the cynical attitude that says "we can't change this today; it will change under socialism."

"In our new revolutionary Marxist current, we have a conception of feminism as a movement that seeks profound change, the subversion of the established order ...Our feminist struggle is not simply for formal equality, but to revolutionize gender relations, as a whole, between men and women. It is for this reason that our feminist conception includes also the private sphere. Our purpose is to feminize both the public and the "private." [\[1\]](#)

This is one of the reasons why Socialist Resistance has provision within its constitution for women members to meet together at all levels of the organisation at any time – in what we call women's caucuses – so that those most affected by these issues have the possibility to come together and propose collective solutions, which should then be implemented by the organisation as a whole.

Some commentators have used this issue to attack everything the SWP has ever done – sometimes when they themselves have no tradition of supporting those fighting sexual violence. This is clearly not our position.

We also disagree with the conclusion that many seem to be drawing; that organisations on the left should not themselves seek to take any action over questions of sexual violence.

Rather, we believe that any organisation committed to revolutionary social transformation has to, as part of that process, commit itself to taking such action so that women in their organisations can exist and act in confidence.

Process

The SWP is just about large enough to enable members who chose to live in a relatively closed political and social world. This is combined with the fact that many of its members, consciously or unconsciously, see themselves at the only revolutionary organisation of real significance. Overlaid with this is a Marxist understanding of the class, race and gender bias of the state's system of justice. Despite the difficulties which can arise in cases of rape and sexual harassment, a political organisation has a responsibility to defend its members against such crimes and to establish a political culture, a code of conduct and internal procedures which can best achieve this aim. In fact, if an organisation is to regard itself as feminist, it must be in a position to defend its members against rape or sexual harassment.

This is not to argue that these issues, when they do arise, are easy to deal with – or that we are trying to suggest that we have all the answers – with the Delta case we do not know any of the substance of the allegations. It does mean that we think there are a number of principles that should guide any discussion about how to proceed.

If a complaint about sexual violence, harassment or rape is raised, the comrade concerned should be supported to contact a rape crisis centre or other appropriate resource if s/he has not already done so. The complainant should also be supported if she/he decides to go to the police and should certainly not be persuaded or pressurised not to do so.

It is therefore necessary for the organisation itself to deal with the issue whether or not the courts are involved and, if they are, in parallel with it. It would be unacceptable, for example, that a victim of abuse would be required to coexist in an organisation with the perpetrator – who in the case of a credible complaint – would have to be expelled or at least suspended whilst this procedure was going on.

Procedures should be put in place to support those bringing such issues up e.g. a female majority on the investigating body, the right of the complainant to have a supporter with them, the right of both parties to call as many witnesses as they want. Those procedures should be reviewed in deciding how to proceed with a particular case, to see if there are any additional measures that ought to be put in place.

Power relations

Any organisation with a morally authoritative core group, which collaborates closely with new members, has to be aware of an imbalance of power relationships. This is particularly the case when older men and younger people are working together. There is scope for coercion, undue influence, subtle intimidation and inducement by favours.

It is hard to see how any woman joining the SWP could now have confidence that if she were raped

or harassed by a senior man in the party, her case would be handled in a way that does not exonerate the perpetrator and stigmatise the victim. That is the implication of the “not proven” ruling.

Democracy

At the time of writing, the SWP has made only one public response. In an extraordinary statement in *Party Notes*, which is also publicly available on their website [2], they dodge most of the salient points being raised by their own members, as well as by the left more generally. They conclude: “As far we are concerned, this case is closed. This is not a ‘cover up’. It is a determination to reflect the decision of our conference. We believe that both parties to the case should have their right to confidentiality and their right as members in good standing respected.”

To the outside world, but in particular feminists, trade union militants and socialist activists, this attitude is complacent to the point of offensiveness. It is not even an attitude which commands general support inside the SWP, as many members who have to engage in real mass organisations understand very clearly how the handling of the rape allegations will be perceived. Their reservations were already apparent even at conference, when 18 delegates abstained from voting: the 231 votes in favour and 209 against hardly constitute a clear expression of confidence in the process.

Further, it seems evident that given the narrowness of their support at conference, an unprecedented situation, that such a plea to treat the matter as closed was not going to be met with unquestioning obedience. This was never going to happen, with or without the leak to Socialist Unity.

The level of outrage evident in the transcript of the Dispute Committee’s report, and the visceral anger of many party members at the manifestly unjust handling of the allegations, meant that the instruction not to discuss the matter again would be breached immediately. A scandal on this scale was not going to disappear because a leadership and its paid employees insisted on it. It should be difficult for a Marxist to agree to this sort of omertà.

The ground for this absurd request had been prepared by the pre-conference expulsion of some comrades who had been discussing on Facebook how they would approach the conference. Given that in 2013 most people with computers are using social media sites to talk to friends, this is essentially the same as expelling them for talking about their own party conference. This is punishing people for thought crimes and has nothing in common with revolutionary socialist democracy but, while it was widely considered shocking, it was not judged surprising. Rightly or wrongly, the SWP is perceived by many activists to have a very low threshold for dissent and we have seen in recent years how every conference is accompanied by expulsions shortly before, or after, for differences that should be easily containable inside the same organisations.

Further, the basis on which the outgoing Central Committee proposed not to re-elect two of its former members, Ray Morall and Hannah Dee to the new leadership following conference, was deeply disturbing. Charlie Kimber and Alex Callincos put it thus:

“The comrades not only attacked the statement’s endorsement of the Disputes Committee but also criticised the detailed defence of democratic centralism it offered (though they accepted the section on the expulsion of four comrades for organising a secret faction). It was the vehemence of their opposition to the statement that decided the majority of the CC that it would be dishonest to recommend to conference the existing slate as a Central Committee that could work together.

"We only propose that conference should remove Hannah and Ray because the minority four are very far from being a coherent political grouping. They are united negatively, as much as anything else as a mutual self-defence pact.

"The CC majority believe Hannah and Ray have in different ways destroyed the basis of trust essential for a leadership to work as a coherent body. ..." [3]

SR does not follow the SWPs practice in having the outgoing Central Committee proposing its replacement. We think there are deep problems with that approach. But we think there are also huge problems in arguing that comrades cannot be part of a leadership because they have political differences – effectively arguing that leadership bodies need to be homogenous. In our tradition, on the contrary, minorities have the right to representation – and to decide who those representatives should be.

In the document *The Dictatorship of the proletariat and socialist democracy* [4] the position of Socialist Resistance and the Fourth International is set out:

"In order to prevent any abuse of power by a vanguard party leading the working class under the dictatorship of the proletariat, the following principles are adhered to by the Fourth International:

"a) Fullest internal democracy of the party itself, with full rights for organising tendencies and a refusal to ban factions and possibilities of public debates between them before party congresses."

The functioning of the socialist organisation has, to the best of its ability and the limitations of historical circumstances, to contain within it the seed of the socialist society. As Jane Kelly and Dave Packer wrote about a previous SWP conference:

"Democracy is not 'icing on the cake', but essential for the successful building of revolutionary or anti-capitalist parties. [5]" It is heartening to see that many comrades in the SWP are now coming to a similar conclusion. Richard Seymour wrote on his influential site Lenin's Tomb:

" More generally, a sane leadership might think about opening up year round communications so that party members can communicate with one another outside of conference season. They might think about creating more pluralistic party structures, ending the ban on factions outside of conference season and rethinking the way elections take place. Instead, they tell everyone in Party Notes that there will be no further discussion of the matter. [6]

The future

The SWP has attracted some of the best socialist activists. It has introduced many thousands of people to the ideas of revolutionary Marxism during years of defeat and retreat. It is influential in many unions and campaigns. These are major gains for the British working class movement. But there is another side to this. Many of these militants have been trained to accept a level of submission to their leadership that they would consider unacceptable in any other area of their lives. They have often allowed themselves to be active participants in manifestly anti-democratic practices in the class struggle. Now they are being asked to move on from the most serious crisis in their party's history, because they should trust the leadership and its handling of a rape charge. Comrades inside the party need to start drawing up a balance sheet of how they arrived at this situation – and the issue of democracy is fundamental to doing that.

The entire radical left now has to reassess its understanding of feminism. The split in the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) has similar roots. It was about a majority of the SSP's leadership unwillingness to lie to cover the then convenor Tommy Sheridan's misogynist behaviour, both inside and outside

the party. The SWP, a platform in the SSP at the time, backed Sheridan for tactical reasons. It now appears there may have been some solidarity from sections of the SWP leadership. Sheridan's misogyny was well known by some of the SSP's inner circle, who thought they could control it. It shows the fallacy of building a party on anything other than democracy and feminist principles. The Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) was destroyed because its unaccountable leader was allowed to sexually assault its members. George Galloway's Respect is now reduced to a personality cult, due in no small measure to his failure to understand rape. The experiences of parties which collapse in this way is seldom positive. Most of the WRP's cadre quickly drifted away from Marxism. We don't yet know if the SWP will collapse or slowly lose members, alienated by its bureaucratic practices and disgusted by its handling of the rape allegations. We appeal to those who continue to identify with feminism and revolutionary Marxism to discuss among themselves and with those of us outside the party how, out of this awful situation, we can re-shape the left in Britain.

Socialist Resistance National Committee, January 19th 2013.

P.S.

* <http://socialistresistance.org/4556/on-the-situation-in-the-swp-no-marxism-without-feminism>

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF (article 27631), [Women and Party: Sanctions policy in a feminist party](#).

[2] <http://www.swp.org.uk/14/01/2013/response-attacks-swp>. Document available on ESSF (article 27611), [Crisis in the British SWP: Statement by SWP Central Committee](#).

[3] <http://www.cpgb.org.uk/home/weekly-worker/online-only/swp-crisis-central-committee-splits?>

[4] See on ESSF (article 22694), [The Dictatorship of the proletariat and socialist democracy](#).

[5] See on ESSF (article 27617), [Great Britain and beyond: Some Lessons of the Crisis in the SWP](#).

[6] <http://www.leninology.com/2013/01/crisis-in-swp.htm>. Available on ESSF (article 27618), [Crisis in the British SWP](#).