

Crisis in the British SWP

Monday 21 January 2013, by [SEYMOUR Richard](#) (Date first published: 11 January 2013).

Laurie Penny writes an article about the crisis in the SWP [1], following up on Tom Walker's very finely written resignation statement [2]. It quotes my long-time friend and comrade China Mieville making some, to my mind, extremely well put observations about the catastrophic nature of this crisis and the roots of it in the party's deformed democratic structures and lack of accountability. It is an excellent piece. And it stands in stark contrast to the shameful whitewash in this week's Socialist Worker, and ironically does more service to the party.

So, let us recapitulate. A serious allegation is referred to the Disputes Committee of the Socialist Workers Party, my party, to investigate. The Disputes Committee is composed largely of individuals who know the accused. The Disputes Committee asks the person making the allegations a series of completely inappropriate questions that, had they been asked of someone making such allegations in a police station, we would rightly denounce them as sexist. Another comrade makes a related allegation against the same accused, and submits a statement. The committee subjects this comrade to similar treatment. The committee reaches a verdict of 'not proven'. The conference of the party is then lied to about the nature of the allegations. The Central Committee and the Disputes Committee collude in a cover-up. They *suppress* it. This is already a *disgrace*.

But word does get around. People begin to hear what has happened, and are outraged. They begin to hear of senior party members spreading the most disgusting rumours about the two women involved. Many members, especially young members, begin to kick off about it. It becomes clear that this will be an issue in the party conference of 2013. So, there is a preemptive strike against four members for participating in a Facebook thread discussing the case, which is alleged - on the basis of selective excerpts - to be evidence of 'secret factionalising', which is prohibited. The expulsion is enacted immediately, with no due process, no disciplinary hearing. The four comrades are expelled by email. This is totally at odds with the party's usual procedures. It is a clear bureaucratic manoeuvre to stymie the upsurge. But it produces a revolt. A group of comrades form a faction to contest the expulsions, campaign for the rejection of the Dispute Committee's report on the allegations, and challenge the party's democracy deficit. (Naturally I join this faction.)

We organise. But the members who raise this issue, many of them students, are yelled at in meetings, denounced for 'creeping feminism', or for carrying the germ of autonomism into the party. Old polemics against 'feminism' from the 1980s, always somewhat dogmatic, are dusted off and used as a stick to beat dissenters with. People who try to raise the issue at district aggregates are shouted down. Wised up hacks turn up at meetings, with their best 'what, us?' innocent expression, claiming to be shocked and horrified at the lack of trust in the party, and astonished that some people use terms like 'hacks'. They express befuddlement about why the faction even exists. They accuse dissenters of being 'inward-looking'. Nonetheless, the faction grows quickly. Soon, there are two factions, both opposing the expulsions and criticising the findings of the Disputes Committee. They have different emphases and different tactics, but similar objectives. They go to conference, expecting to be in a minority - after all, most comrades still haven't got the slightest clue what is happening, or have only heard the rumours and lies. In the history of party conferences, dissenting motions generally haven't fared well. But we find, suddenly, that there is a groundswell. The more members hear, the more they're throwing up. And we get to conference, and our delegates face down the most appallingly bureaucratic arguments. And we are surprised, and disappointed. The

party ratifies the expulsions by two thirds to one third. The party ratifies the Dispute Committee findings by a slender margin. But the reality is that despite formal wins for the leadership, this amounts to a serious crisis for them.

How do they respond? A sane response would be to say, 'much of the party is still not convinced, we need to debate this further and work out a solution'. At the very least. 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. CC members tell full-time party employees that the accused was 'exonerated' by conference (no such thing), insist that conference voted for an 'interventionist' party, rather than a 'federalist' party, and begin a purge. Report backs from conference either don't discuss the Disputes Committee session in any detail or discuss it in an arrogant, dismissive manner. A CC member gives a report back that instructs members, "if you can't argue the line, you should consider your position in the party" - as if the party was the possession of the bureaucracy. They tell members to get on with focusing on 'the real world'. In the real world, this is a scandal. And we, those who fought on this, told them it would be. We warned them that it would not just be a few sectarian blogs attacking us. We warned them that after we had rightly criticised George Galloway over his absurd remarks about rape, and after a year of stories about sexual abuse, and after more than a year of feminist revival, this was a suicidal posture, not just a disgusting, sickening one. They continued, obviously, convinced that this was the correct, hard-headed Bolshevik position. Now members are caught between the choice of having to expend energy on a fight to save the party and its traditions, or burying their heads in the sand, or swallowing the Kool Aid and joining the headbangers.

There isn't enough bile to conjure up the shame and disgrace of all of this, nor the palpable physical revulsion, nor the visceral contempt building, nor the sense of betrayal and rage, nor the literal physical and emotional shattering of people exposed to the growing madness day in and day out.

This is the thing that all party members need to understand. Even on cynical grounds, the Central Committee has no strategy for how to deal with this. A scandal has been concealed, lied about, then dumped on the members in the most arrogant and stupid manner possible. The leadership is expecting you to cope with this. This isn't the first time that such unaccountable practices have left you in the lurch. You will recall your pleasure on waking up to find out that Respect was collapsing and that it was over fights that had been going on for ages which no one informed you about. But this is much worse. They expect you to go to your activist circles, your union, your workplaces, and argue something that is indefensible. Not only this, but in acting in this way, they have - for their own bureaucratic reasons - broken with a crucial component of the politics of the International Socialist tradition that undergirds the SWP. The future of the party is at stake, and they are on the wrong side of that fight. You, as members, have to fight for your political existence. Don't simply drift away, don't simply bury your face in your palms, and don't simply cling to the delusional belief that the argument was settled at conference. You must fight now.

One last thing. There is an article in *The Independent* about this case. It uses the phrase "socialist sharia court". It is miles away, in tone and spirit, from Laurie Penny's piece. I would urge people to think carefully about who wants to use the sort of language deployed in the *Independent* article. I think the answer is, "racists". I would also point out that, as far as I know, the *Independent* did not speak to any party members. My advice is to disregard that piece.

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P.S.

* JANUARY 11, 2013: <http://www.leninology.com/2013/01/crisis-in-swp.html>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.newstatesman.com/laurie-penny/2013/01/what-does-swps-way-dealing-sex-assault-allegations-tell-us-about-left>

[2] <http://www.cpgb.org.uk/home/weekly-worker/944/swp-why-i-am-resigning>