

On the crisis of the SWP (Britain): We Must Embrace Women's Gains on Responding to Sexual Assault

On My Resignation from the International Socialists of Canada

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The crisis in the British Socialist Workers Party raises an important issue of principle for socialists throughout the world. A serious accusation of rape was made by a teenage member of the SWP against a Central Committee leading member of the party in his 40s. How socialists respond to allegations of rape is not a tactical question nor is it the internal affair of a single organization. Internal organizational practices are reflections of principles. Although internal organizational mechanisms may vary, when mechanisms to address violations of principle fail, credibility and capacity to participate in movements against oppression are damaged.

As a nurse working in the emergency department, I regularly have patients who are victims of violence. Furthermore, I have loved ones who were the victims of sexual assault and abuse. I cannot reconcile my fervent wish to build a party for socialism with being associated to a political tendency that has as its most dominant constituent a party that has grossly violated its opposition to the oppression of women. As of March 19, 2013 I have resigned from the Canadian International Socialists for its continued association with the SWP through the International Socialist Tendency.

Rape is a crime that is equivalent to or worse than violent assault. It is a crime that not only has the potential to cause life threatening physical illness; it leaves many emotionally and psychologically damaged. With 90% of rapes unreported in the UK, any allegation should be investigated as a serious crime. Furthermore, according to one SWP member [\[1\]](#), at the 2011 SWP national convention, after the accused spoke to the meeting, "There had been an attempt by his allies to rally supporters, resulting in some comrades giving him a standing, foot-stamping ovation." This reaction to accusations of sexual abuse, regardless of guilt, represents gross misogyny and creates a threatening oppressive atmosphere.

The capitalist courts have failed many people. Sexism and racism in our society is systematic and police often brutalize the oppressed. In Vancouver, where I live, the police failed over sixty women murdered or missing since the 1980's. Many of these women were the victims of racism, sexism and other prejudices that grip our society. I have heard personal testimony of police arresting a young woman who had called 911 accusing her father of beating her.

Historically raped women were often forced into marriage. For hundreds of years it was believed that a pregnant woman could not have been raped because pregnancy required consent. In 1841 the Canadian civil code put the onus on the woman to prove she actively resisted rape. For most of history suspicion was put on the woman and investigation was done into her moral worth and credibility. In Canada, it wasn't until 1983 that spousal immunity to accusations of rape was eliminated. In 1984 a Judge of the Provincial Court of Manitoba said. "Unless you have no worldly experience at all, you'll agree that women occasionally resist at first but later give in to either

persuasion or their own instincts”

In North American history, false rape accusations were a major tool of social control used against blacks and other oppressed minorities. “The accusations against persons lynched, according to the Tuskegee Institute records for the years 1882 to 1951, were: 19.2 per cent for rape, 6.1 per cent for attempted rape”. Men using rape as a tool of racist oppression stripped the legitimate right of women for justice against rape by creating a culture of terror. The civil rights movement mobilized millions in the fight against racism. Alex Callinicos raising the specter of “lynch mobs” of angry members if the debate continued after the special convention of the SWP is a violently sexist statement [2].

Injustices happen to this day, however through the struggle of the feminist movements of the sixties and seventies to those of today some of the grossest injustice has been defeated. the police and courts in many instances protect the vulnerable and bring justice to victims of crime. Bourgeois democracy is a system of contradictions. While recognizing the role of police and courts in enforcing hegemony of the ruling class, it also must be recognized that the mechanisms of society, often fought hard for by activists, can protect individuals against acts of violence and crime.

The reality is, for all the flaws of British law, in 60% of rape cases that go to court the defendant is convicted. This proportion is higher than for some other violent crimes. In many places women have fought hard to change sexist and racist laws and won. Evidence that consent is absent is no longer defined simply by a statement of “no.” Self-induced intoxication is no longer regarded as consent. In 1991 legislation was passed in Canada in which “complainant’s sexual history is rarely relevant to the issues properly to be determined. The focus should be on the event which is the subject matter of the charge.”

Of course there are real limitations to the court system in contemporary society. That is why it is so important that in many cities feminists have fought for and created rape crisis centers. These centers can advocate for women and help mitigate the negative effects of individual police prejudice and reduce difficulties and feelings of isolation when approaching the legal system. Were I work in an emergency department there are specially trained nurses to deal with sexual assault. These nurses are some of the most caring human beings I have met.

The mentality fostered by revolutionary groups of extreme hostility to the police and courts, often resulting from historic police harassment of socialist organizations, creates conditions where victims of abuse by party members are alienated from mechanisms society has created, under intense pressure from the women’s movement, to bring a measure of justice. As socialists we must fight to make the mechanisms of society better, not substitute our organizations for society.

The utopian concept of building organizations that attempt to substitute for society inevitably leads to the formation of cults. I saw this as a member of the Vancouver socialist cult Fire This Time. When those with authority in an organization are only accountable to that organization for criminal behavior, rampant abuse can occur. After a politically motivated assault by one member on another, I witnessed what results when a criminal matter is dealt with as an “internal” issue. At first denial. Next “this is an internal issue” and a refusal to discuss. Then bullying and marginalization of those opposed within the organization. Those outside the organization who expressed criticism of the assault were labeled as slanderers and enemies. Finally an inward turn occurred in which the “line” was parroted so many times it became gospel and critical thought was crushed. The parallels between my brief experience in a cult and the behavior of the SWP leadership are striking.

The only appropriate response of any organization to an accusation of rape is to fully support the woman in accessing services and professional counsel. Furthermore the SWP should have offered

full financial and moral support should the woman take the case to court. It should have been made clear, without a shade of gray, that by going to court for such a serious accusation she was honoring the struggle of justice for women and that it would be in the best interests of the SWP.

The fact that friends of the accused were allowed to sit on the dispute committee that held the investigation is completely unacceptable. Moralizing about revolutionary credentials is a sad failure on the part of the SWP to recognize biases. Being a revolutionary does not obviate the responsibility to respect impartiality. Furthermore, the Central Committee of the SWP stated that a trade union would deal with rape accusations in a similar manner. This is false. No trade union would conduct a rape trial.

In recognizing the right for party members to form factions, it is implicit that conversations must be permitted between individuals of similar mind. The SWP central committee's decision to expel four members of the SWP for Facebook conversations is an absurd affront to democracy. Furthermore, the woman making the accusation was refused the right to speak at the 2013 SWP conference.

It would be hard to imagine the SWP having an internal investigation had one member stabbed another. This fact alone shows the organization's misogyny.

The SWP's decision to handle the rape accusation through an internal investigation has proven disastrous. Not only has the party trial failed the woman making the accusation; it has led to a split in the organization. There have been mass resignations from the SWP over the handling of rape allegations, in one letter alone over seventy people resigned. Many student sections of the SWP have left the organization. Mainstream media is able to discredit socialism in public opinion because of the act of a small number of socialists. Had the case gone to court, a scandal might have brewed in the tabloids, but the party would have remained defensible.

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P.S.

* From International Socialism (uk):

<http://internationalsocialismuk.blogspot.ca/2013/03/we-must-embrace-womens-gains-on.html>

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Footnotes

[1] <http://internationalsocialismuk.blogspot.ca/2013/01/reflections-on-2011-swp-conference-by.html>

[2] <http://internationalsocialismuk.blogspot.ca/2013/02/stop-bullying.html>