

On the crisis of the SWP (Britain): Why I am resigning

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Tom Walker, (now former) Socialist Worker journalist, argues that the time has come to leave the SWP.

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The Socialist Workers Party is in deep crisis - as it has been for several months now. The reason is simple: an allegation of rape against Martin Smith, the then central committee member now referred to on some parts of the internet as comrade Delta, and the way it was handled by the party.

This case, as several speakers at conference noted, was in reality the sole reason for the four expulsions in the run-up to conference, the sole reason for the formation of two factions, and the sole reason for the split in the CC which resulted in an alternative slate being put to the conference, removing two CC members who had attempted to challenge the way the case was handled.

After much reflection, I have decided the immediate aftermath also means that I have no option other than to resign not just from the paper, but from the party, and encourage others to do likewise.

Before I go any further, I want to say that I will not be discussing any details of the case itself whatsoever, either here or privately. Indeed, I do not know them. I know little more than what was reported to SWP conference, which later unfortunately appeared on the internet. I will not be quoting from that document.

However, I believe that what I know is more than enough to come to some unavoidable conclusions, and the fact that the transcript has been so widely circulated - to the point where every member is facing friends outside the party, in their workplaces and campaigns, asking them about it - makes it impossible to remain silent any longer about what those are.

I will, as the conference session did, refer to some of the awful processes used to hear the case, but - and this is absolutely vital - only the processes. The CC will likely issue a response saying that this violates confidentiality and is a disgrace, but surely the real problem is that the case ever happened in the first place and that it has been allowed by the leadership to develop into a crisis in this way. I believe that what delegates on all sides said within the conference was scrupulous about respecting the confidentiality of the case itself and not for a moment prying into the details of the woman's testimony, otherwise I would never write something like this.

I will argue four main things:

- The disputes committee should never have been allowed to investigate and rule on a rape accusation, under any circumstances, period. The case should have been investigated by authorities competent to do so. The disputes committee's extra-legal nature means its finding that this comrade is innocent is meaningless. One person, even on this committee stacked in his favour, believes sexual harassment at least is likely.
- Leftwing parties are institutions that exist within our current society, and they need to put an analysis of gender and power relations at the absolute heart of their structures to avoid replicating that society's problems. Moreover, a lack of democracy inside left organisations is not just a big political issue, but plays a role in enabling abusive behaviour. Having a good record and theory on women's liberation turns out to be little defence against this.
- The CC's determination to 'draw a line' under the discussion, to the extent of banning all further mention of it on pain of expulsion, I believe makes it nigh-on impossible to 'stay and fight' within the organisation for any sensible interpretation of these events or concrete reforms to the structures to make sure it does not happen again. To stay in the party now means to keep your head down and try to live with yourself.
- For this reason, and because of the incredibly damaging publicity around the case, the party has become no longer fit for its stated purpose. It will surely be unable to attract or hold new recruits. I do not believe anyone sensible will ever join it again. We must think again about our methods of organisation on the left. I propose a few outlines of my thinking, but I am very open to others' views.

I will now explore these points in more detail.

Kangaroo court

The disputes committee hearing - and by extension the entire mess that followed - should simply never have happened. To be honest, it is nothing short of incredible that it was allowed to go ahead. What right does the party have to organise its very own 'kangaroo court' investigation and judgment over such serious allegations against a leading member? None whatsoever.

Of course, I am dead set against the capitalist police and courts, and the way they treat people. That doesn't mean we can go off and set up our own. The SWP itself called for Julian Assange to face rape charges in Sweden, in a *Socialist Worker* article I am proud to have written. [\[1\]](#)

I do not see why what is good enough for Assange is not good enough for the party's leaders.

It is stated that the accuser did not want to go to the police, as is her absolute right if that was truly her decision. However, knowing the culture of the SWP, I doubt that was a decision she made entirely free from pressure.

Do not underestimate the pressure the SWP can bring to bear on members by telling them to do or not do things for the ultimate cause of the socialist society the party's members are all fighting for. Against the prospect of the liberation of the whole of humanity, they will attempt to make even the most serious issue seem less important than the party's survival. I do not think the CC are cynical cultists, by the way - I think they believe this themselves.

Either way, respecting that wish not to involve the police does not excuse what the party did next.

The disputes committee's project of amateur justice was doomed from the start, with the questions asked unintentionally reflecting the worst practices of the police and courts. The people involved have spoken about the immense distress and traumatising caused.

I would add that I worry about conference delegates as well after that session. As more than one comrade said, they had never seen so many people in tears as there were in that room.

For many it will have come as a real bolt from the blue. Despite working at the party centre myself, I was under the impression that, yes, we were in for a challenge to the disputes committee, but that we were facing a row primarily about expulsions and democracy. Though some other party workers were getting involved in a faction, I felt it best to maintain a sort of journalistic distance.

In the session itself, my reaction was one of simple, visceral disgust. I was shaking. I still am. I did not know what to do. I walked out of the building in a daze. It is over the last few days of reflecting, and seeing the strong responses to the case from people inside and outside the organisation, that I have come to my conclusions.

Meaningless verdict

From the fact that the disputes committee is not a court flows the fact that, while it found the comrade not guilty of rape and that sexual harassment was "not proven", those verdicts are utterly meaningless. Sitting in the hall, that was too easy to forget.

The disputes committee says we have not heard the evidence or details. That is true, and nor should we. Yet they admit that the only evidence they themselves heard was two straightforwardly conflicting accounts of what happened - one from the accuser and one from the accused. We do not know why they believed the accused.

As those who raised criticisms pointed out, the disputes committee included five current or former CC members, and all have known comrade Smith for many years. Though I believe they took the case deeply seriously, this was not a jury of his peers, but a jury of his mates. If we were talking about any other organisation we would all consider it obvious that allowing it to investigate itself is unlikely to produce damning conclusions. It seems unlikely that a Wikileaks disputes committee, if it existed, would find Assange guilty.

We should also remember that even this committee had a minority of one, who has faced some very real abuse for his position that it is likely there was sexual harassment. It is not my place to argue one way or the other about either allegation, but one thing that cannot be argued with is that both allegations have not yet been investigated by anyone competent to do so.

I also wonder what on earth the disputes committee thought it was going to do if it found comrade Smith guilty. Expel him and send him on his way?

As others have noted, this DIY investigation will have corrupted the evidence, as well as traumatised the accuser too far for her to want to pursue the case by other means. I am absolutely convinced this traumatising is very real, as I cannot believe that the issue would have played out the way it has otherwise. The internet may have read the transcript of what the woman comrade's friends and allies said, but only those who were in the room will have heard the sheer anger with which the words were spoken. If we believe that she was traumatised, then logic dictates that it is very unlikely that the allegations are of no substance.

I really hope both the accusers are not further affected by my writing this, which is fundamentally about attempting to draw lessons from the disastrous process they were subjected to, to make sure it never happens again. From the moment this case became the subject of a faction fight and the leadership refused to row back, I believe the CC must shoulder the responsibility for a series of disastrous decisions that spawned all that has followed and will follow.

Power, sexism and the left

I want to move away for a moment from the process of this case and talk about some of the wider issues it raises. The allegations inside the SWP fit a bigger pattern which should lead us to question the left's long-term theory and practice in this area.

We might consider a spectrum of misogynist behaviour by leaders of leftwing organisations, with George Galloway's comments about rape at one end and the horrors of Gerry Healy at the other. You can argue about who else should be included on it - unfortunately it isn't too hard to think of candidates.

Of course, as nothing is proven either way, we do not know if or where comrade Smith fits on that spectrum. Nevertheless, there is clearly a question mark over the sexual politics of many men in powerful positions on the left. I believe the root of this is that, whether through reputation, lack of internal democracy or both, these are often positions that are effectively unchallengeable. Not for nothing have recent sex abuse allegations in the wider world focused on the idea of a 'culture of impunity'.

Socialist Worker has pointed to the way that institutions close up to protect powerful people within them. What is not acknowledged is that the SWP is itself an institution in this sense, with its instinct for self-protection to survive. As previously mentioned, its belief in its own world-historic importance gives a motive for an attempted cover-up, making abusers feel protected. Also, leaders are put into positions of power within an organisation with open recruitment but quite a closed culture, and this has a dramatic effect on any relationships that take place. Older male party leader with younger female party member is a triply unequal power relationship, and should be considered so.

That still does not account for how on earth an organisation that has such a good analysis of the way the police and courts effectively put the woman on trial in rape cases managed to replicate the state's reactionary lines of questioning. How did it fail so badly to put its own politics into practice?

It may shed some light to learn that 'feminism' is used effectively as a swear word by the leadership's supporters. This seems to be a legacy of a sharp political argument conducted decades ago against radical feminism and its separatist methods of organisation, but unfortunately it is being used today against young, militant anti-sexists coming into the party. In fact it is deployed against anyone who seems 'too concerned' about issues of gender. A group of women comrades who raised questions over whether the SWP has a sexism problem last year were quietly condemned by the leadership as "feminists", and the CC has devoted much energy since to fighting this perceived scourge.

Marxist and feminist theory would surely agree, however, that in a sexist society, sexism is a constant danger in any organisation, no matter what its politics. The only way to deal with this is to not only fight hard against sexism at all times, but to accept that if any woman or group of women are not happy with their treatment, then the organisation has a problem, needs to look hard at it (and that is not "navel-gazing") and needs to change, not claim that the issue does not exist or that the complainants are motivated by political differences.

This leads to an additional issue, which is that the issues of democracy and sexism are not separate, but inextricably linked - the lack of the first creates space for the second to grow, and makes it all the more difficult to root it out when it does. That is surely why people like Paris Thompson, a campaigner for more democracy in the SWP who had just published his own critique in the internal bulletin, were at the forefront of the fight against an attempted cover-up of the case.

Delegates to conference were handed a partial transcript of the Facebook conversation used as evidence to expel Paris and the other three comrades. The CC says it shows evidence of cross-branch coordination and is therefore "secret faction" activity. Yet what the document shows is not at all a group organising in pursuit of political differences - Paris explicitly says he is fighting over those separately - but people trying to make sure that the way the rape case was handled would be discussed properly at conference, not swept under the carpet.

From coordinating motions to party aggregates about the case, to making sure they were elected as delegates, what the four did was not in pursuit of their own agenda, but the agenda of ensuring these serious concerns were heard. Their reward for this, barring a Damascene conversion on appeal by that same disputes committee, is that they have been cast out of the SWP for life.

When you can't draw a line

What has happened since the SWP conference at the weekend? Despite everything, the CC position is 'draw a line under it and move on'. The opposition were also told to sign up to this or face expulsion. That applied as of the minute conference ended - and the leadership intends to enforce it.

The CC is shutting down all debate, on the pretext that it is about the rule that factions must dissolve after conference. Party workers are being spoken to individually, and if they refuse to give a guarantee that they will never so much as mention the case again, they are being told they must leave their party jobs. Some have already gone, others may be going as I write.

Meanwhile branches are being told that the criticisms of the disputes committee raised in conference will not be reported to them and cannot be discussed by any member, even in outline. At the behest of the CC, the *Socialist Worker* report of the conference does not even mention the disputes committee session. For one, this means that the reason behind the alternative CC slate is not explained at all.

Meanwhile, comrade Smith turned up in Hackney on the evening of Tuesday January 8, representing the party at a Unite Against Fascism meeting as if nothing had happened. Next week he is off to Athens, again as part of the party's work. He may have been booted off the CC, but he lingers on, rubbing it in our faces. Frankly it is sick.

If the leadership is allowed to get away with this, it means the problem just sits there and festers. It means it could all happen again. It means the party cannot further examine just how this went so utterly wrong, or do anything about it, as the official position is that the vote means none of the criticisms made were accepted. A similar accusation tomorrow would be dealt with in the exact same way.

Ticking time bomb

I believe that not dealing with the issue ultimately makes the party's destruction inevitable. I am not its destroyer - it has already destroyed itself. Maybe it will be days, months or years, but it is now a

permanent time bomb. I cannot imagine how it will hold on to any recruit who knows how to use Google. Sooner or later the whole thing will be used against the party in the unions. In the absence at the very least of the most grovelling public apology and a massive process of internal reform, I am afraid I think the SWP is broken for good.

I know there will be many who will want to stay in the party and keep fighting until the bitter end. If they can do that without simply 'keeping their heads down' then I absolutely respect it. I hope they, and in particular those who were involved in the opposition to the disputes committee vote, will understand why I felt I had to go now and argue that others should do the same.

You might ask what right I have to jump now. You might say that this is not about us; it is about the people affected. All true. But how can we be expected to just turn off our horror at the whole thing? We are not robots. That is why I cannot stay another second.

Another problem with staying is the likelihood that individuals who opposed the CC at conference will be picked off gradually, one by one. That is not only unpleasant and isolating, but risks diverting a large amount of activist energy into an ongoing internal struggle against victimisations. I hope people will get in touch and discuss it when they feel ready to (or when they find themselves expelled). I will also 100% keep the confidence of any current member who contacts me to discuss this.

To those who will say I should have raised these issues openly before resigning, the CC has made it abundantly clear that to do so means instant self-expulsion. It would also be unfair on others at *Socialist Worker* to launch some tirade in an editorial meeting and make them choose between walking or ritually condemning me. I hope that they especially - people who have been my friends and workmates over several years - will look at their consciences and decide their own way forward.

To all comrades, I say: it is a wrench, it really is, but the first step is to admit to yourself that it is time to go. I do not know how it will turn out, but at least that way we have a chance to try to create something better. The alternative - for thousands of committed socialists to sit on their hands and keep quiet, wondering if the person next to them is thinking what they are thinking - is too awful to contemplate.

I strongly believe that if everyone who reads this is able to take courage to follow their heart and their principles, then, instead of members slowly drifting off into the wilderness or being gradually drummed out of the party, the SWP can be left on the shelf of history alongside the Workers Revolutionary Party, and something a thousand times healthier built in its place.

There is hope yet. The CC talks with dread about young and student cadre who are "influenced by the movement" bringing such ideas into the party, but on the evidence of conference the ideas coming in are militant anti-sexism and a desire for democracy. The substantial opposition votes show that many members' politics remain excellent, even while they also frustratingly show that the leadership simply cannot be defeated through the party's democratic structures, even on this most grave of issues. If it could be, despite everything I would have stayed.

For my part, I am certainly not planning some new 'Workers Socialist Party'. [2] Surely we can do better than that? I intend to discuss, think and write further about how we can take a step back from the specifics of the SWP and learn some wider lessons about sexism, democracy and organisation. I believe that for the good of the whole left, and the class struggle whose course we hope to influence, we ought to be able to find a way to create something that can be a hospitable and enduring home for militant workers, radical students and activists.

I want a left where a case like this simply cannot happen, where no-one will ever have to suppress their unease or disgust thinking it is for the greater socialist good, and where no-one will have to resign because whole areas of discussion have been banned. In that future left, I hope, we will be able to organise together again, democratically, as comrades in the struggle against our real enemies.

Tom Walker

P.S.

* Thursday January 10 2013 Weekly Worker 944:

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

Footnotes

[1] www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=29382.

[2] Where we rearrange the name, but keep most other things the same.