

Great Britain: Apology not accepted

Tuesday 28 May 2024, by comrades-speak-up@proton.me (Date first published: 21 May 2024).

I found out that the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) had apologised to me for mishandling my sexual harassment case, not from the SWP, but from a friend who forwarded their public statement the day after it was released.

There is an insulting lack of sincerity in an apology that is made very publicly without making any attempt to contact either of the women, or indeed any of the people, involved who are owed an apology.

But it also suggests that no real lessons have been learned. For one, they have no idea about the mental state of those involved or what the impact might be of having this publicly rear its head again without warning. Ten years later they're still failing to support the women involved.

The main issue for me though is that the SWP's handling of the situation was about much more than the composition and processes of the disputes committee. Although, this was in itself terrible. Amongst many failures in the process, I was asked if it was fair to say that "I liked to have a drink" by the first panel. And in a complete failure of fair procedures, Martin Smith was given full access to all of my testimony in advance of the hearings, while I wasn't allowed to see any of his.

But the leadership of the SWP weren't just bystanders to procedural mishap, they were actively involved in trying to stop the case from being heard, and they fought for two whole years to defend the outcome of the committee. In the process, they not only sanctioned but in some cases actively cultivated a culture of bullying and intimidation.

These people remain on the Central Committee today.

Weyman Bennett privately and publicly told people that I was a police spy. Throughout this period, comparisons were made to Martin Smith being like IWW member Joe Hill, who was framed and hung for a murder he didn't commit. This was echoed by members around the country. This narrative of the powerful political man being attacked to weaken his political power, is an all too familiar paradigm in cases where women accuse men of rape and sexual harassment. At no point did the leadership condemn this narrative or take any action against members when this behaviour was reported.

Instead, shortly after raising complaints about this happening, the partner of the national secretary stood up in a meeting of general members, pointed at me and shouted that the bullying was nonsense and I just kept trying to add in more complaints. Following this meeting, another leading member came inches from my face shouting 'am I bullying you now, am I'.

Despite reporting all this and more, at no point did the Central Committee intervene. I was told that they were powerless to do anything and I would have to take each individual complaint to the disputes committee.

Another sleight of hand by the Central Committee was to conflate the cases of rape and harassment with debates about democracy and political organisation. Alex Callinicos played a key role in this – it was argued that people were straying towards identity politics and autonomist models of democratic organisation. That a new liberal politics of women’s liberation was part of this, and it was strongly implied that there was an overreaction to the behaviour of Martin Smith shaped by this non-revolutionary political culture.

This also moved the terrain of the debate. According to this narrative, I and others weren’t really trying to get justice for rape and sexual harassment, we had a different agenda and couldn’t be trusted. This whole period showed that there did need to be a reckoning over the democratic culture in the SWP, but there was a distinction between this and the allegations. Conflating them was a cynical attempt by the Central Committee to rally the faithful: this isn’t about rape, it’s really an attempt to undermine our entire political tradition, join us to defend it.

I want to say more. So much happened in this period of time that should have no place in our revolutionary tradition. Others will have their own individual stories to tell too.

So why have they apologised now? One can speculate about the motivation. Presumably the SWP remain dogged by the scandal and are struggling to attract and keep new members in the organisation. More likely this is a calculated apology aimed at rehabilitating them, than a sincere reflection on their systematic mishandling of rape and sexual harassment cases.

Have the SWP learned any lessons? It appears not.

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