

# SWP (Britain): Crisis, Democracy & Renewal

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There is a crisis engulfing the British Socialist Workers Party – the leading affiliate of a group of socialist organizations of which I’m a part. Normally I don’t write about other socialist groups and generally think that too many leftists (including myself) spend an inordinate amount of time obsessing about the heresies, disputes and crises of others on the left. But because the SWP is the largest revolutionary socialist party in the English-speaking world (more of a comment on the weakness of the revolutionary left than anything else) and because I have been asked about the crisis by people outside of my own organization, the International Socialists, not to mention the seriousness of the issue, I feel a response is needed.

The first thing that I want to say is that the SWP has been a source of inspiration for me over the last 22 years that I have been a socialist and member of the International Socialists. Their mobilizations against imperialism, racism, war, austerity, fascism and sexism (to name a few) have had an important impact upon tens of thousands, occasionally millions. In February 2003 there were something like 2 million people demonstrating against the looming war in Iraq on the streets of London. It’s not clear that a mobilization of this size would have occurred without the involvement of the SWP.

But nobody and no organization is above criticism when they go wrong. It’s only on that foundation of comradely criticism that any correction is possible. Not so much from me – I’m nobody. But from large numbers of sympathetic people.

## The background: From Toronto to Delhi

First I want to start with some of the external context. The last two years have seen an explosion of mobilizations around a number of issues, from Cairo to Wall Street, not least around sexual violence against women. The Slut Walks, which began in Toronto, challenged the idea that women who dressed “like sluts” were responsible for their own rape. Women and their supporters were rightfully outraged, not only in Toronto but around the world. Tens of thousands marched and raised the issue to importance, leading to sustained campaigning and a revival of feminism. This was followed by the horrific gang rape and murder of a woman in Delhi, India (of course, the lawyer for the defendants in that case also blamed the woman and her boyfriend for her rape, claiming he never heard of a “respectable woman” being raped). That spawned massive and militant demonstrations against the outrageous levels of sexual harassment and rape in India.

The backdrop internationally is the outrageously low conviction rate of accused rapists compared to other crimes. There is no possible other conclusion than that rape isn’t taken seriously by the authorities – globally. This level of outrage and radicalization as a result of a grave injustice is to be

welcomed and encouraged. But surely none of us who have been on the left for a long time thought that a new radicalization would take place that wouldn't also challenge our own practices? All of us are creatures of habit and context. We get used to certain norms of behavior that are problematic when viewed from a distance, even if we ourselves don't always see it. It was inevitable that the left itself would be subject to scrutiny and criticism as women, young and old, were radicalized around these issues for the first time. And if the left hopes to grow and remain relevant, it has to learn from the movement. It doesn't mean it's easy – nobody likes to feel like they're wrong or deserving of criticism – but it is necessary, if uncomfortable.

## **The SWP**

I'm not going to dwell on the specificities of the case itself. There's enough lurid details on the internet. And, more importantly, most of these are of the character of he said/she said (or she said/she said, etc). Nobody is in the position to judge on this basis. Rumour is the end of real political debate in my opinion.

The bare bones are as follows: a woman in the SWP accused a member of the leading body (the central committee or CC) of rape. She declined to go to the police but wanted the party's Disputes Committee to hear her case and rule on it, knowing that the only possible "punishment" that the DC could mete out would be expelling this member from the party or, at the very least from the Central Committee.

I want to say that it's not an organization's responsibility or right to force a member to go to the police and, frankly, the police/judiciary hardly have a good record of dealing with rape cases. Terrible, in fact. And I do strongly believe that any socialist organization – or any organization, union, etc for that matter – needs to have an accountable and transparent process for deciding on members' behavior and the adherence to core principles of the organization. And, of course, every company or organization does have this. It's just that most of them aren't elected and not accountable to the people whom they investigate. Should the party have said that they wouldn't consider discipline against the accused unless the accuser went to the police? Should they have waited until a verdict by the judicial system? Should they have just expelled the member without a hearing? What kind of precedent does this set for other cases of conflict or accusations within an organization? And people who say "you aren't qualified to deal with serious cases only the police are" are being disingenuous indeed – as any poor person or black person or indigenous person, etc. etc. could tell you.

But this case was dealt with terribly. Abominably. Amateurishly. We don't have to be in Britain or know the accused or accuser or the details of the case to say this. Why? Because the process was an utterly avoidable disaster. While 5 of the 7 members on the Disputes Committee were women, they were all long-standing friends, colleagues and co-workers of the accused. An eighth member who was in the same branch as the accuser stepped down from hearing the case. Why does it make sense for someone who knew the accuser to step down because of bias but not those who knew the accused? It's irrelevant if they were studiously objective, principled, etc. This is so obviously absurd and a terrible way to handle this that it's hard to see why the SWP CC and DC thought this wouldn't be controversial. Just from an optics point of view: justice must not only be done it must be seen to be done. Especially when the mass movement is demanding justice for rape victims.

This committee was discredited before it had even heard evidence. It should have recused itself and found another mechanism to deal with the case. I won't prescribe what that other mechanism ought to have been (I honestly am not sure), whether it meant bringing in outside mediators from the

labour or women's movement with experience in rape cases or sourcing experienced and unbiased people from within the party. When they failed to do this it was inevitable that a significant number of party members wouldn't take it seriously – not to mention opening the party up to charges from the rest of the left (and from the most reactionary sections of the mainstream media) to charges of hypocrisy on women's rights and worse. That this didn't occur to the party leadership means that they didn't take this issue of rape seriously. The irony is that not only has justice not been served for the accuser, it hasn't been served for the accused. His exoneration isn't taken seriously by a large number of party members.

Alas, the disaster that was the handling of the case is only the beginning of this sad tale.

Having made a major misjudgment in its handling of the formal complaint, the CC then demonstrated that it would brook no criticism of the process and its results. After "discovering" a Facebook discussion in the three-month lead-up to conference – when the SWP constitution permits the formation of factions to press particular questions or policy changes – the CC expelled 4 members for secret factionalizing. It was "secret" because they had not yet decided whether to form a faction. Now, this begs the question of how one forms a faction if you can't have a discussion with other members prior to announcing the formation of a faction. Secret factions are certainly wrong because they are dishonest, unaccountable and tend to form into cliques, which are unhealthy in any organization. But even if these four members were trying to organize a secret faction and therefore formally outside of the constitution, how could you not see that it would be a stupid and unnecessary escalation to expel them? The CC managed to surrender the high road with all the skill of a tempestuous teenager. When you kick a hornet's nest because of a bumble, do you back off or do you kick the nest again for good measure?

The CC answer has been, at every step of the process, to kick the hornet's nest. At the annual conference of the SWP they refused to allow the accuser, known as "W", to give a dissenting view of their investigation process. Now, I can't speak to accusations against the Disputes Committee that they asked inappropriate questions (about lifestyle choices, sexual history, etc). Again, this is hearsay, which is asserted by supporters of the accuser but denied by the DC. But refusing "W" the right to make those accusations herself, on top of being discredited by their very composition, gave the accusations power – and deepened the perception of a cover-up. Is it any wonder that delegates barely voted to accept the Disputes Committee report (in fact a majority either voted against the report, officially abstained or didn't vote)? Not only that; two people were removed from the Central Committee who disagreed with this whole embarrassing process, deepening the sense of a cover-up and of intolerance for even tactical differences (again, regardless of the specifics of the cause).

Following this further fiasco, the CC has behaved as though they won a 90% vote of confidence, insisting that it was time to move on and shut up even as several of the largest daily newspapers in the UK were breaking the story. As the fall-out has spread both inside and outside the party; as SWP student groups and numerous branches have passed resolutions criticizing the leadership, including calling for a recall conference, the response has been no better. Internal publications, known as Party Notes, have hinted at "dealing with" "slurs" and "unfounded accusations" – rather than acknowledging that the biggest rebellion against the leadership in a generation is a sign that concerns must be engaged. It goes on and on.

All this demonstrates a number of things about the SWP leadership. The first, of course, is a shocking level of tactical incompetence. But that itself speaks to a level of entitlement and insulation from the membership and from reality that is troubling. These are not stupid people, some of them have written books and articles that are dear to my heart for their clarity and intelligence. It can only be habits of bureaucratism that lead to this; an expectation that whatever is said will be accepted or imposed without challenge. It is a habit rooted in using administrative measures to

resolve political disputes. And it shouldn't need to be said that such measures are inimical to a revolutionary party that seeks to provide leadership within the working class, to fight to win working class people to the idea that they can overthrow capitalism and create a better world. I don't believe in "pre-figurative politics", that a socialist party ought to look like a socialist society. The party is a weapon to aid working people in the struggle against capitalism. But it can only be a useful weapon if it teaches workers – and its own members – to constantly assess and question themselves and each other in the course of implementing tactics. To subordinate that questioning to a formal democracy – you already voted, now shut up – even in the face of real experience, is to blunt the weapon and hollow out the very form of party democracy.

Some people have argued for specific measures – the right of factions and tendencies to exist all year round, full-year publishing of an internal bulletin, the end of the slate system to elect leading bodies, like the CC and DC, etc. To be honest this is to put the cart before the horse. The New Anti-Capitalist Party in France is federal and has the right of tendencies to exist – and they are, frankly, shit on racism against Muslims in France and sectarian towards others on the left like the Front de Gauche. Organizational form is no guarantee of good politics or true democracy.

But there must be a rethinking of an attitude to decision making in which the elected leadership – and the full-time apparatus – act like generals directing an army of soldiers. The right to dissent on this or that strategy or tactic in a union or movement must exist and must be encouraged. That doesn't mean you have to have factions 12 months of the year. People who say "well, the Bolsheviks had permanent factions" in the lead up to the 1917 revolution are missing the point. This isn't Russia and this isn't 1917. I'm open to an argument for permanent factions but I'm afraid that references to history as some kind of template are less than convincing.

I think part of the problem has been an attempt to dress up our structures as the best structures for democratic decision-making (and, of course, emerging from the great battles of revolutionary history). In truth, all structures are a historically (and politically) determined balance between democracy, effectiveness and stability. Take the slate system. What the slate system within a small organization provides is a great degree of stability. Replacing an entire leading body is made more difficult and even challenging the proposed slate of the CC is difficult. This isn't always such a bad thing. I'm not saying anything radical when I say that small left groups are notorious for splits and infighting. It's a feature of being isolated and unable to really implement one's policies because of a lack of influence. It leads to a tendency towards fighting over the smallest things because the stakes are small and abstract.

The SWP – and their sister organizations – developed a model designed to counter that instability and tendency to splitting repeatedly (with mixed success). Slate elections (along with not orienting on other small left groups who love to engage in debate over minutiae) were part of that method. Sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't. It's still hard to build a group from scratch that aspires to lead mass struggles. But there is a danger that we turn a necessity or a tactic into a virtue. So, the slate system becomes the only system. A ban on factions outside of pre-conference period becomes the best way to organize (to be honest, I think it's a good idea in small organizations and a bad idea in mass parties but where one becomes the other is a matter of debate). I hope that the opposition inside the SWP doesn't simply flip over the coin and think that this is the answer.

Some critical thinking is necessary and, I believe, the deeper issue is one of a different attitude towards democracy – rather than particular prescriptions or structures. Debate in a period of movements with new ideas and new challenges isn't sterile scholasticism and nitpicking, it's healthy and to be invited as a means to renew the party. Personally, it seems to me that an end to the slate system in the SWP might be a good thing because it would make the members of the CC feel democratic pressures more directly and personally. It would bring some productive "instability" into

the leadership and – along with a revitalized democratic culture - make it easier for new blood to enter the top leadership of the party. But that is a decision that the SWP membership will have to make and it will have little to do with some commentator from across the ocean.

Finally, this present crisis is distressing and potentially quite dangerous to the continued strength and unity of the SWP. But it is also a sign of hope. Old practices and assumptions never, ever end smoothly. All transformations require a struggle. Habits are hard to break, in part, because habits are hard to form – they were fought for in the past and the new ideas are themselves fighting to become habit. Hopefully this is the beginning of a rebirth. Key to this will be the strength and confidence of movements outside of the SWP and the left more broadly.

### **Shawn Whitney**

\*\* I actually wrote this a couple of weeks ago but held off posting it because the convention of the International Socialists in Canada was coming up and I didn't want to pre-empt the discussion within our organization. I was unable to make it to convention – I have a newborn and a four-year old and work as a freelancer – so I can't comment on the discussion that took place there. I had to admit that I was disappointed that no public statement was made on the crisis. Being neutral or silent on something that could affect our work and credibility here seems to me a mistake and a sign of our own tendency to conservatism. For the moment I'll say no more.

A couple of links to more articles if you're that way inclined:

Lenin's Tomb: <http://www.leninology.com>

International Socialism blog (set up by some SWP members who are in opposition to the central committee and campaigning for a recall conference): <http://internationalsocialismuk.blogspot.co.uk>

Article by Alex Callinicos in *Socialist Review*, magazine of the SWP:

<http://www.socialistreview.org.uk/article.php?articlenumber=12210> (I have to say that this deals badly with the argument inside the party. His argument, for instance: "First, decisions must be debated fully, but once they have been taken, by majority vote, they are binding on all members. This is necessary if we are to test our ideas in action." This neglects to mention that the CC won only a majority of votes cast but a minority of delegates on the key question of the report of the Disputes Committee at conference. It's also stale and formalistic - the world moves quicker than every 12 months and if something agreed is wrong the next day, that is when it should be "re-opened", not a year later. Jeez, does it really need to be said?

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### **P.S.**

\* <http://redioactive.blogspot.ca/>

\* The author is a member of the International Socialists in Canada, which, like the SWP, is part of the International Socialism Tendency.