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Great Britain: The SWP apology for rape cover-up 11 years ago is too little, too late

Wednesday 22 May 2024, by [rs21](#) (Date first published: 21 May 2024).

In May 2023 the British SWP's Central Committee issued an inadequate and unconvincing "press release" appologising for their management of a 2013 crisis, when the SWP defended a Central Committee member accused of rape and drove out of their organisation those who supported the women complaining about his behaviour.

We republish the response by the group rs21, which was launched by many of those who decided the SWP had so betrayed socialist politics that it was necessary to start again.

***Content warning sexual violence, harassment, SWP**

The SWP's Central Committee recently issued a statement and apology for their party's 2013 crisis, when the SWP defended a Central Committee member accused of rape and drove out of their organisation those who supported the women complaining about his behaviour. rs21 was launched by many of those who decided the SWP had so betrayed socialist politics that it was necessary to start again. The apology sounds positive, but the rs21 Steering Group argues that it is inadequate.

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The SWP Central Committee statement can be consulted [here](#).

The crisis in 2013 seriously harmed the women who complained about the behaviour of Martin Smith, also known as 'Comrade Delta', who was a Central Committee member at the time. It harmed all those who upheld socialist and feminist principles. It ruined lives, destroyed trust and friendships, and people are still living with trauma now. It also harmed the SWP and the whole left. So it might seem that the [statement](#) from the SWP Central Committee could mark the beginning of a process of addressing the issues, but there are good reasons to think otherwise.

If you are unfamiliar with the crisis, [one of the many summaries is here](#). There are masses of [documents here](#) and public articles from the time in the [rs21 archive](#).

We have to ask why this statement has come now, 11 years after the crisis. Right up until this statement came out, SWP activists were still claiming that the crisis was history, they had changed their procedures long ago, and that it was an issue only raised now by their political opponents for point scoring. The statement isn't the result of internal debate or a political reckoning inside the SWP - many members had no idea it was coming. The statement presents itself as an apology to the two women who brought complaints, and to the wider movement, including former members of the SWP who supported the women. Yet the statement is well hidden on the Socialist Worker website, the SWP has not shared the statement on its social media and we haven't seen a single SWP member share it publicly. Rather than a genuine shift in the politics of the SWP, this looks more like a document that members can share with those who raise the issues in the hope that the organisation

can rehabilitate itself and recruit and retain young people without genuinely changing.

We don't know about debates inside the SWP Central Committee, which are secret even from their own members. What we do know is that the majority of the SWP's Central Committee is still made up of those who were heavily involved in defending the rapist. It still includes the person who argued that raising the issues just gives ammunition to the right-wing press. It still includes the person who refused one of the women who complained permission to attend the conference session where her 'case' was discussed. None of these individuals have shared the statement on their Facebook accounts.

The statement does acknowledge that the SWP's response to the cases in 2013 was wrong, and apologises. It also recognises some of what they did wrong:

- Having a panel containing (an understatement) people who had worked closely with Smith.
- Trying to pass judgement on matters of fact about which it could not meaningfully establish the truth.
- Being insufficiently mindful of or sensitive to the challenges women face when they bring forward serious accusations of sexual misconduct.
- Not doing enough to acknowledge potential imbalances of power due to gender, seniority in an organisation and age differences.

This is the SWP's first public acknowledgement that there were *political* problems with how they responded to the complaints, rather than merely *procedural* ones. But the statement only scratches the surface.

The main [article](#) on the subject published in the International Socialism Journal (ISJ), the SWP's theoretical journal, was by Charlie Kimber and Alex Callinicos, who remain on the Central Committee. This argued that the opposition wasn't really a challenge to their mis-handling of a rape allegation so much as 'giving up on the organised working class' and 'movementism'. The SWP has produced no new analysis of what happened since.

We think the SWP still has a lot of learning to do. The statement still plays down what happened in 2013. It asserts that the SWP was opposed to rape apologism in 2013, not acknowledging that the majority of SWP members went along with rape apologist arguments. It treats the crisis of 2013 as if it was an isolated incident, when we have since seen other allegations against SWP members and complaints from a young trans activist just last year that the organisation was 'institutionally abusive, exploitative, and transphobic'.

rs21 has had quite a journey from being [founded](#) by people who left the SWP over the crisis. This isn't just about the fact that most of our current members (and of our Steering Group) were never in the SWP. It has been a political journey too. We had to answer the question of why the bulk of SWP members could be so wrong, not just the leadership or the disputes committee. This led us to examine both gender politics and questions of organisation.

On gender politics, the SWP has always been avowedly anti-feminist, seeing feminism as a rival to Marxism. It was common in the SWP in 2013 to hear that 'class unites; oppression divides'. rs21 rejects this approach. Class and oppression are tightly bound together. In some battles class unity helps undermine oppression. Sometimes we struggle to win a majority of working-class people to opposing oppression. As Lenin put it in 1920, 'Workers and oppressed peoples of all countries, unite!' We see ourselves as both Marxist and feminist. There are of course many feminisms - some of which are politically rotten (just as many socialisms are!). It is not enough for socialists to be for women's liberation. We have battles to fight here and now, before we win liberation. Sexism

pervades society and, despite our best efforts, permeates the left. We have to consciously fight to make our organising and our spaces welcoming, relevant and empowering for women and non-binary comrades. We aren't always as successful as we would like, but this struggle is what it means for us to be a feminist organisation.

Our feminism has practical consequences. Just look at the difference between the SWP's current [Terms of Reference and Procedures for the SWP Disputes Committee](#) and rs21's [Guidelines on sexual violence and domestic abuse](#). We recognise that the pervasive nature of sexism and the obstacles women face when challenging sexual violence mean that it is not appropriate to use the same guidelines to deal with sexual violence as for someone stealing money from a local branch. The SWP are still following an essentially 'investigatory' and pseudo-judicial approach. rs21 seeks to prioritise the safety and empowerment of the survivor, of other members and of those we work with in the movement. We reject the idea that these should be subordinated or counterposed to the interests of a political group.

There is no indication what lessons, if any, the SWP has yet learned from the crisis in relation to questions of organisation.

We believe that, as well as sexist politics, part of the reason that the majority of SWP members closed ranks around a rapist arises from the way they organise. SWP members refer to their organisation as 'the' party. None of our organisations can claim to be 'the' party. We think much more work needs to be done to develop revolutionary ideas, build mass movements and revolutionary currents within them before a party can be established in Britain. We are an organisation contributing to that work. The SWP's delusions of grandeur have consequences. If you believe your organisation is the magic ingredient necessary to save the world from climate catastrophe and imperialist war, then defending the SWP becomes a duty above all others – even at the expense of your principles.

In the SWP, which has a huge paid apparatus for an organisation of its size, there is an overreliance on paid officials and a leadership that has been broadly unchanged for years. It means that defending the party easily becomes defending key leaders of the party, who are seen as indispensable. It also meant the leadership could deploy the paid apparatus, lies and smears to crush opposition.

The power of the apparatus is central to the lack of meaningful democracy in the SWP. In practice, the Central Committee is self-selecting, with just three (unsuccessful) challenges in half a century. The fact that the Central Committee still has ten members who were there in 2013 shows the SWP's failure to encourage members to lead. The discouragement of dissent also contributed to the defence of the leaders in 2013 and there is no evidence this has changed. Ironically, the very issuing of this statement without internal political debate illustrates the top-down nature of the SWP and gives no confidence that members have really changed their views. Democracy isn't a luxury for the left, it is the best way to take decisions about what an organisation does in the movement and how we correct mistakes.

Despite all the SWP's problems, it has members who contribute to many struggles and who are on the right side of many arguments. We wish those in the SWP who are still trying to fix it the best of luck. However, there is no evidence that the SWP has done the kind of work that would be needed to understand the political mistakes that were made, hold those responsible accountable, and make the necessary changes to the organisation. We continue to believe that the SWP is a dead end for those wanting to build a revolutionary left in Britain.

rs21 steering group

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P.S.

RS21

<https://www.rs21.org.uk/2024/05/21/the-swp-apology-is-too-little-too-late/>