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Great Britain: The SWP leadership has turned the party into a sinking ship

Monday 27 May 2024, by [SEYMOUR Richard](#) (Date first published: 22 March 2013).

The party's leadership has only itself to blame for the mass exodus of members caused by its cover-up of a rape complaint

Julie Sherry's [article for the Guardian](#) represents the first sustained attempt by the SWP leadership to publicly account for the party's crisis. It was scarcely worth the wait.

The SWP, Sherry admits, handled a complaint of rape against a leading member. But this is only a fraction of the story. The first complaint against this leading member was made to the party in 2010. It was handled informally by the central committee. Members would have been told nothing were it not for a leak, which forced the leadership to address the issue at the 2011 party conference.

At conference, they were given a euphemistic summary of the case by Alex Callinicos that did not mention the nature of the allegations (in a Kafkaesque twist, he would later assert that this was because "there were no allegations" at this point.) The accused and some of his supporters rallied members, by implying that he had been the subject of a witch hunt. Some people are still ashamed that they joined in the foot-stamping ovation that resulted.

The complainant eventually made a formal complaint of rape to the disputes committee in September 2012. The leadership appointed two individuals to sit on the committee, both known loyalists of the accused. Most committee members knew the accused well over many years as friends, colleagues or direct political subordinates.

The accused was allowed access to the complainant's evidence weeks in advance; the complainant has still not seen the accused's evidence. Another woman, a party worker, testified that she had experienced sexual harassment from the accused. The committee knew how to deal with that: "Is it fair to say you like a drink?" they queried. She was effectively sacked for making this complaint.

The hostile and frankly sexist questioning directed at the women during the investigation left the complainant feeling that "they think I'm a slut who asked for it". The "verdict" reached by this body was that the rape complaint was "not proven", with no explanation given as to the reasoning. Central committee members subsequently claimed that it meant the accused had been "exonerated", and thus could return to his role in the party.

Sherry protests that the conference votes prove how openly the complaint was handled. In fact, in the run-up to conference, members were prevented from discussing the case at party meetings. Four members who discussed their concerns about the case in a private Facebook exchange were expelled after the thread was leaked to the party leadership.

Before conference, the leadership dropped two people from the central committee slate who were known to oppose the handling of the case. One of their replacements was Julie Sherry, whose father

had sat on the disputes committee that investigated the rape complaint.

The complainant herself was cynically prohibited from attending the session dealing with the disputes committee's findings. Members were invited to approve the findings on the compelling grounds that the committee's members asserted that they had done a very good job indeed.

The result was an unprecedentedly divided conference. The leadership, which usually gets its way with conference votes, barely scraped by with a narrow win. Sensing a narrow escape, the leadership attempted to shut down dissent. The central committee falsely claimed that conference had voted never to discuss the case again, and toured local meetings telling members to defend the line or get out.

Even after the scandal leaked, and was [plastered all over the newspapers](#), the line did not alter. When an opposition faction with over 500 members was formed, the leadership responded with wild smears. Compelled to call a special conference to deal with the crisis, the leadership rigged debates and gerrymandered votes. This is the process that Sherry lauds.

Readers of Sherry's piece who are not in the SWP may not understand what it is for. It is part of a factional battle being waged by the leadership against hundreds of members who still oppose what they have done. Every self-deceiving line is intended to comfort the dwindling core of loyalists.

We oppose sexism, says Sherry. Too true. Socialist Worker regularly carries articles on protests against sexism, struggles for abortion rights, and the latest disgusting rape scandals. All the more bizarre, then, that they thought members would cheerfully defend the indefensible.

We are not collapsing, Sherry avers. Maginot Marxism. The resignations that began last week, with over 100 of us leaving to form the [International Socialist Network](#), continue every day. Four of the party's student groups have broken away. Further resignations are afoot. The party's annual Marxism festival is looking to be a bleak, isolated affair. Backing for its anti-cuts Unite the Resistance campaign is, as one resigning member put it, "evaporating". The party increasingly resembles a Titanic without the orchestra.

We will take no lessons from the Daily Mail, Sherry says. How right she is. With a record like this, who needs lessons from the Daily Mail?

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The Guardian

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