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Broad Parties

The European Radical Left Tested Electorally

- Debate - Building new parties of the left -

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The electoral experience of the European radical left presents a paradox. The period since 1999 has seen a series of significant social and political movements in Europe—the emergence of the anti-capitalist movement, above all around the Genoa protests of July 2001 and the subsequent development of the European Social Forums, the explosive expansion of a massive movement against the 'war on terrorism', most spectacularly in the gigantic protests on 15 February 2003, at the actual outbreak of war on 20 March 2003, and the demonstrations on its first anniversary, and the mass strikes in France in May-June 2003.

Yet in many countries the radical left did worse in the elections to the European Parliament in June 2004 than it did in 1999. [1]

Most notably, in France the joint slate of Lutte Ouvrière (LO) and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), which won four seats in 1999, lost them all in 2004. The United Left in Spain and Synaspismos in Greece lost seats and saw their share of the vote fall (though that of the Greek Communist Party rose slightly). The most important exception to this pattern was Rifondazione Comunista (PRC) in Italy, whose share of the vote rose from 4.3 percent in 1999 to 6.1 percent in 2004, and which increased its seats in the European Parliament from four to five.

In all probability this result was a reflection of the intensity of the struggle in Italy, which has seen both giant anti-war demonstrations and massive strikes, contrasting with elsewhere in Europe, where the norm was either the anti-war movement (Britain and Spain) or mass strikes (France). At the same time, however, the PRC's achievement is an ambiguous one to the extent that the leadership has performed a series of zig-zags, decisively identifying the party with the movement at the time of Genoa, but more recently moving it rightwards, in Italy towards the social-liberal Olivo coalition and at the EU level towards the less unreconstructed Communist parties with the formation of a European Left Party to contest the Euro-elections.

These elections provide confirmation, if any were needed, that the relationship between social and political struggles and the electoral process is extremely complex, mediated and indirect. Institutional factors played a part. The expansion of the European Union into Central and Eastern Europe meant that the number of European parliamentary seats for existing EU member states was reduced to make room for the accession states. This reduction raised the bar that must be crossed to win seats, working to the disadvantage of the smaller parties and therefore of the radical left.

But the complexities of electoral systems don't explain everything. In the first round of the French presidential elections on 21 April 2002 the candidates of the revolutionary left—principally Arlette Laguiller of LO and Olivier Besancenot—won over 10 percent of the vote, and—in a historic breakthrough—both beat Robert Hue of the Parti Communiste Français (PCF). In the French regional elections of March 2004 the joint lists of LO and the LCR, headed in key regions by Laguiller and Besancenot, ran behind the PCF, winning just under 5 percent of the national vote. Three months later, in the European elections, another LOLCR joint slate obtained only 2.4 percent, less than half the score of 5.2 percent it had obtained in 1999. There seems no alternative to describing this performance as a defeat, as Stathis Kouvelakis argued in the first of the two pieces by him published in this Bulletin.

The picture at the European level is not, however, uniformly negative. Italy aside, Respect, the coalition of the radical left in England and Wales formed in January 2004, was not able, in its first few months of existence, to build up sufficient momentum to win seats in the European Parliament and the London Assembly in the elections of 10 June. But its performance, particularly in the two biggest cities in the United Kingdom, London and Birmingham,

represented a real breakthrough compared to the efforts of the Socialist Alliance in 2000-1 or to earlier initiatives such as those of the Socialist Workers Party and of Socialist Unity in the 1970s. Across Greater London-the biggest conurbation in Western Europe, combining a worldclass financial centre, incredibly culturally diverse and often impoverished inner-city areas, and affluent commuter suburbs- Respect averaged 4.8 percent. In the east London boroughs of Tower Hamlets and Newham, Respect won over 20 percent of the vote. In Birmingham its vote averaged 7 percent, in Leicester over 9 percent. [2]

It is impossible here to offer a detailed analysis of the differing electoral experiences of the radical left right across the EU and it would be silly to try so soon after the Euro-elections. The material published in this Bulletin-three different perspectives on the French elections, an analysis of the political earthquake that swept through the Spanish state after the 11 March bombings, a report on the intriguing cracks opening up in the great monolith of German social democracy-should offer some food for thought. In the rest of this article I focus on some of the broader strategic issues.

Three models

Consider three different political models that have been used by the radical left in elections. Apparently at one extreme is the French model. In a political culture where communism still enjoys a remarkable legitimacy and that is also marked by extremely frequent elections in which the balance tilts back and forth between the bourgeois right and the social-liberal left (the LCR document published later in this Bulletin lists eight national elections between 1995 and 2004!), the revolutionary left have been engaged in electoral campaigns for a very long time-since Alain Krivine of the freshly formed Ligue Communiste (predecessor of the LCR) ran for president in 1969, in the immediate aftermath of the great explosion of May-June 1968. Arlette Laguiller has become a national figure by standing in every presidential election since 1974.

LO and the LCR both contest elections as what they are-openly revolutionary socialist organisations. But this conceals considerable political divergences (though Stathis Kouvelakis argues in his second article that a certain 'anti-political' stance is common to both organisations). LO has perfected a party-building practice of methodically working around selected workplaces, producing (under national direction) weekly workplace bulletins and focusing on socioeconomic agitation and propaganda that repeats certain eternal verities (in particular, the anti working class character of the PCF and the Parti Socialiste, PS).

By comparison, the LCR appears much more mobile, its militants involved in an immense range of political initiatives and movements. The Ligue was, for example, present at the creation of the anticapitalist movement in Europe, which LO shuns as petty bourgeois protectionists and utopians. No wonder that electoral pacts between the two organisations are negotiated with a caution and attention to detail reminiscent of the prenuptials between Hollywood stars-and that, after correspondence in which insults are exchanged with exquisite courtesy, they have sometimes gone their own ways, for example in the municipal elections of 2001 and the presidential and legislative elections of 2002.

Respect offers a model apparently at the other end of the spectrum. First of all, it's a pluralistic coalition rather than a unitary party. Secondly, its programme, adopted at Respect's founding conference in January 2004, is not a full-scale revolutionary socialist programme, but a more limited platform of opposition to war, neo-liberalism, racism, and sexism. [3] Thirdly, Respect embraces a diverse range of political forces whose three main elements are political and trade union activists from a left wing Labour background, the Socialist Workers Party and smaller groups and independent activists from the far left, and progressive Muslim leaders. This apparently disparate grouping reflects a history-a common experience in the anti-war movement. I return to this below.

Apparently in the middle is the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP). Emerging gradually and painfully from the Militant Tendency (now the Socialist Party of England and Wales), the founders of the SSP first crystallised as a distinctive political current through social agitation in parts of Glasgow after the great rebellion against the poll tax at the beginning of the 1990s. Creatively combining community and electoral politics, they seized the opportunity offered by the establishment of a Scottish Parliament elected partly on the basis of proportional representation and by growing working class alienation from New Labour to win one and then six seats in the 1998 and 2003 Holyrood elections respectively. Today the SSP is a highly contradictory phenomenon—a successful parliamentary party with a broad socialist platform that is still tightly controlled by the far left grouping that created it.

Though the leadership of the SSP tends to promote it as a paradigm to be copied elsewhere, there doesn't seem to be much sense in claiming that any of these three models—or indeed any other ones—have a universal validity. Plainly the approach of the LCR and LO represents a very specific set of circumstances: in a country where revolution—from 1789 to 1968—continues to be a reference point, and where even the highly abstract Marxism preached by Laguiller can win massive votes—standing on an explicitly revolutionary socialist basis looks like being the default position.

But circumstances don't determine everything. Indeed the present situation— one of imperialist wars, neo-liberal offensive, decaying social democracy—is one that presents those revolutionaries who are willing to take risks with the opportunity to help remake the left in the 21st century. Given this, it may be useful to explain why the SWP has chosen to pursue the strategy represented by Respect—not, to repeat, because it constitutes a universal model and certainly not because it is above criticism, but because the strategic analysis may have a bearing on other cases.

The conjuncture that produced Respect is essentially the confluence of two phenomena—the crisis of Labourism and the Bush administration's permanent, global war. Obviously these aren't of comparable status—the decline of British social democracy is a long-term process whose roots can be traced back to the 1950s, while the 'war on terrorism' is a much more recent episode, though one that has unfolded against the larger tapestry of the evolution of imperialism. What has fused the two together into a singular phenomenon that currently dominates British politics is, of course, Tony Blair. New Labour promised to rescue British social democracy by repackaging it as social liberalism with the help of the spin-doctor's arts. By the 2001 general election it was clear that this apparent remedy was more kill than cure: Blairism was accelerating the crisis of Labourism by increasing working class alienation and demoralising huge swathes of the party rank and file.

Then the war came. Given that the strategy of the British ruling class since Pearl Harbor has been to preserve a global role by piggy-backing on US imperialism, it is likely that any Labour prime minister would have gone along, more or less, with the Bush administration's warmongering. But the self-righteous fervour with which Blair has embraced the 'war on terrorism' confirmed that, during the Kosovo War of 1999, a rather hollow politician finally discovered in moral imperialism the great cause with which to fill his emptiness. And so Blair hitched the New Labour bandwagon to Bush's imperialist adventure in Iraq, and thereby turned what had been a relatively slow-burning political crisis into an imminent short-term disaster. From the point of view of British politics, the main significance of the elections of 10 June 2004 was the Labour Party's disastrous performance. [\[4\]](#)

The Socialist Alliance and the long decline of Labourism

Given the scale of the anti-war movement in Britain and the leading role played in it by the SWP, this made the question of developing a credible political alternative to New Labour very urgent. Not, of course, that we had ignored it previously. On the contrary: in 2000-1 we played a very active role in trying to develop the Socialist Alliance (SA) into such an alternative (in England and Wales; the SSP had, of course, been pursuing a parallel electoral strategy in Scotland for several years already). In the Greater London elections of May 2000 the London Socialist Alliance won

some promising votes; the SA's performance in the June 2001 election, while not spectacular, represented at least a start.

All the same, the SA failed to realise its full potential. From a strategic point of view, a mass socialist party can only develop in Britain if it succeeds in breaking away substantial sections of Labour's base, which, despite its decay, still reaches deep into working class organisations and communities. The point of the SA was to brigade together the sane elements of the far left into a united front (of a new kind) that could appeal directly to, and win over significant forces from a Labourist background. Hence the SWP resisted attempts to make the SA programme explicitly revolutionary. By leaving open the question of reform and revolution we hoped also to keep the door open to disillusioned Labour Party supporters. [5]

It has to be said that, with some local and individual exceptions, this strategy didn't work. Explaining why it failed raises larger questions. In the revolutionary Marxist tradition the transformation of the German Communist Party (KPD) into a mass party in 1920-1 has played a certain exemplary role. At the Halle Congress of the centrist Independent Socialist Party (USPD) in October 1920 the party split, with a majority voting to affiliate to the Communist International and a right wing minority moving back towards mainstream social democracy. The KPD fused with the majority, forming a party of half a million members. [6] What is of universal relevance in this example is that mass revolutionary parties are likely to develop thanks, among other things, to crises in the reformist parties. But it doesn't follow that these crises need take the form of a sudden catastrophic split such as that underwent by the USPD in 1920-1.

Certainly the decline of Labourism today takes a different form. The Labour Party is like a huge iceberg that is gradually shrinking thanks to global warming. The membership, social roots, and voting base are in pretty continuous decline. Tony Blair won a huge parliamentary majority in the 2001 general election with fewer votes than those with which Neil Kinnock lost the 1992 election. But the iceberg itself, though shrinking, remains pretty cohesive. Labourism hangs together thanks to the enduring strength of the trade unions, which remain the core of its social base, the capacity of the leadership to buy off the activists through a mixture of rhetoric, patronage and very limited social reforms, and the hope against hope of MPs, party activists, and trade union officials that somehow things really will get better. Decline takes place gradually, through a process of attrition, a series of individual decisions through which demoralised activists drop out and disillusioned voters stay at home.

Of course, chaos theory teaches us that a series of gradual alterations such as this may suddenly switch to a catastrophic step-change. One day global warming may cause icebergs to start splitting up, their fragments floating into the open seas and accelerating climate change. It is conceivable that efforts by the Blairite wing of New Labour to accelerate under the banner of a 'radical' third term the dramatic process of privatisation of public services that is already under way might prove too much even for the dominant 'Reclaim Labour' wing of the trade union bureaucracy. The growing popularity of democratising the political fund or even disaffiliation from Labour at union conferences (in 2004 the Rail Maritime and Transport union defied the Labour Party and was expelled and the Fire Brigades Union actually voted to disaffiliate) is an indication that-as John Prescott famously put it-the plates are moving.

But, for the time being, Labour hangs together. Remarkably it preserved its cohesion under the test of the invasion of Iraq. The reason why Tony Blair survived the rebellion of 139 Labour MPs in the House of Commons vote on 18 March 2003-a much bigger rebellion than the one in the famous 'Norway debate' that brought Neville Chamberlain down in May 1940-was that most of the backbenchers who voted against war wanted him to survive. [7] The speed with which, once the shooting started, they rallied round the flag, the desperate gullibility with which the Parliamentary Labour Party have seized on every false dawn in Iraq to argue that we should 'move on' and stop talking about the war, the fact that only George Galloway had the political courage to defy the whip to the point of expulsion-all these are signs of the continuing cohesion of Labourism.

Given that Labour held together, the SA found itself in some internal difficulty. Had substantial ex Labour Party supporters joined, the SA would have had two poles, reformist and revolutionary. No doubt this would have caused tensions, but, if handled properly, it could have encouraged all sorts of political innovation. As it was, there were many fruitful working relationships and real local successes- from Hackney to Preston. But, in the absence of a substantial ex-Labour presence, the SA suffered from a structural imbalance, given that the SWP greatly outweighs the rest of the British far left combined. When, as we usually tried, we applied a self-denying ordinance, we were still, like the elephant in the drawing room, a looming presence. When we asserted ourselves, however democratically, we caused resentment. The Socialist Party and a few well-known 'independents' cited 'SWP dominance' when they walked out of the Alliance. Usually they had their own reasons for leaving, but in truth the SWP did dominate the SA-not by intention, but by default, in the absence of sufficiently strong participation by forces from a reformist background.

The left re-formed

What offered the opportunity to break out of this impasse was the anti-war movement. The war didn't split the Labour Party, but it did, in the shape of the Stop the War Coalition (StWC), produce new ways of organising and acting together. By any objective criterion- given the scale of the national mobilisations, the plethora of local groups, and the StWC's role in mounting the great international protests and in fuelling the crisis of the Blair regime-the StWC was a great success. But it polarised the left. Any great political upheaval resets the political agenda, requiring actors to make choices that reflect, less their past, than the new situation. Such, certainly, was the impact of the war in Iraq on the British left.

There were, to begin with, those who gravitated rightwards. The 'pro-imperialist left', as John Rees calls them, were small in number, but included some wellknown journalists-for example, Nick Cohen and David Aaronovitch-who have devoted much of their output in the past couple of years to attacking the antiwar movement. Secondly, and numerically far the largest group were those who welcomed and enthusiastically participated in the new political alliance brought together by the StWC-an unprecedented united front embracing as it did the traditional peace movement, the remnants of the Labour left and the Communist Party, the main trade unions, substantial sections of what is misleadingly called the Muslim 'community' and of the rest of Britain's vast and diverse racially oppressed population, and the revolutionary left (principally the SWP but also other elements from the SA).

Thirdly, there were various strands of the radical left that, while maintaining a principled anti-war stance, were critical of the StWC. The monthly Red Pepper vacillated between the left wing of the working class movement and the small but noisy autonomist ghetto with their unremitting attacks on 'authoritarian' Leninism and unconvincing efforts at direct action. Various far left sects saw the anti-war movement's very broadness was a priori evidence of opportunism. None of these groups amounted to much, but their voices were sometimes amplified by more influential actors. Cohen, for example, in his polemics in defence of liberal imperialism in Iraq, would draw frequently on material produced by the Zionist sect that calls itself the Alliance for Workers' Liberty.

Despite these flanking attacks from the right and the pseudo 'left', the anti-war movement flourished. But its very success, combined with the revulsion within the labour movement caused by Blair's blood pact with the Washington neocons, made the development of a political alternative to Labourism ever more pressing. Not everyone involved in the StWC would sign up to this project. Leading figures on the Labour left with a long and honourable record of opposing imperialism and its wars-Tony Benn and Jeremy Corbyn, for example-made clear their continuing commitment to the Labour Party. The Communist Party of Britain, a shadow of the old CPGB, nonetheless retains some influence in the unions and the peace movement. Regrettably it decided not to support a new electoral challenge to Labour. Almost all the 'awkward squad' of left trade union leaders continued to pursue the pipedream of a return to 'old Labour' under the leadership of Gordon Brown. The Greens were also hostile, for reasons I

discuss below.

That left four main forces that came together to form Respect. The first was symbolised by a person, George Galloway, representing those longstanding Labour Party members whose disgust with the Blair government was so absolute that they were prepared to break with their old party. The second was constituted by those elements of the far left that were not blinded by sectarianism and therefore recognised the historic opportunity offered by the anti-war movement. Chief among these was the SWP, but it also included other elements of the SA, and individuals like the great film director Ken Loach. The third consisted of a variety of 'ethnic community' activists and intellectuals -most prominently from a Muslim background, but also involving many in Turkish and Kurdish organisations. Finally, there were significant numbers of trade unionists-on the extreme left of the awkward squad, Mark Serwotka of the Public and Commercial Services Union and, much more equivocally, Bob Crow of the RMT, along with many local officials and rank and file activists, particularly in the RMT and the FBU .

An unholy alliance?

This combination of forces represents, as I have already pointed out, a clear divergence from other electoral models used by the far left elsewhere-for example, the open revolutionary campaign pursued by the LCR and LO in France and the broad socialist party that the leaders of the SSP are trying to construct. Indeed, so unusual is Respect that it has been attacked by elements of the far left both in Britain and elsewhere on the grounds of 'opportunism', 'popular frontism', etc. Not for the first time, the main charge of the sectarian left is best stated from the quarters of the proimperialist left, in an Observer editorial that dismissed Respect as 'an unholy alliance of the far left and reactionary Islamic fundamentalists'. [8]

The most important point to be made in response to this kind of criticism is to remind ourselves of Lenin's famous challenge to sectarian Bolsheviks who refused to support the Easter 1916 rising in Dublin on the grounds that it was led by petty bourgeois nationalists:

'To imagine that social revolution is conceivable without revolts by small nations in the colonies and in Europe, without revolutionary outbursts by a section of the petty bourgeoisie with all its prejudices, without a movement of the politically non-conscious proletarian and semi-proletarian masses against oppression by the landowners, the church and the monarchy, against national oppression, etc-to imagine all this is to repudiate social revolution. So one army lines up in one place and says, "We are for socialism," and another, somewhere else and says, "We are for imperialism," and that will be a social revolution!... Whoever expects a "pure" social revolution will never live to see it. Such as person pays lip service to revolution without understanding what revolution is'. [9]

Lenin is pointing here to the fact that mass radicalisation emerges in complex, non-linear ways that reflect both the specific class structure of the society in question and the larger and sometimes catastrophic shifts produced by the contradictory development of global capitalism. What revolutionaries have to do is to respond to the concrete forms of actual movements, not the abstractions they form in their heads. History, the 20th century should have taught us, develops in ambiguous and contradictory ways. Creative political leadership demands that we make choices on the basis of the real alternatives posed by the situation confronting us, however unsuspected the forms these possibilities may take, and not from our personal desires.

More specifically, the idea that Respect is, or aspires to be, a popular front is ridiculous. The Stalinist parties constructed popular fronts that sought to unite workers' parties with the 'progressive' wing of the bourgeoisie and led in practice to the subordination or repression of working class interests. [10] So where are Respect's bourgeois allies? No doubt the odd Asian businessman supports Respect locally, but what has been striking about the coalition

since its inception has been its overwhelmingly labour movement character. Indeed, the fact that the stamp of the socialist and trade union left has been so strong on Respect may be one reason why the anti-capitalist writer George Monbiot, who was involved in the coalition in its early stages, later withdrew.

George Galloway has come under a lot of flak from the sectarian left-partly because of his natty suits, partly because of some of his views on sexual questions. Sure, Galloway has neither the lifestyle nor the worldview of a revolutionary socialist. Why should he? His past is that of a Labour activist and parliamentarian. None of this alters the fact that he has broken with Labour on a principled basis-his consistent opposition to US and British imperialism. When seeking to reconstruct the left, what matters is not people's past or a precise checklist of their current beliefs but the direction in which they are moving

This underlines a larger truth about Respect: the basis on which different forces have come together to form it reflects a common political response to concrete issues that are at the focus of contemporary world politics-above all, imperialist war and the neo-liberal Washington consensus-not a total programme formed through a process of abstract discussion. In many ways Respect had begun to crystallise as a distinct political entity before its actual formation, on the basis of a common approach to key questions that developed in practice among actors from very different backgrounds within the StWC.

The current platform of Respect reflects this process. It is not an explicitly socialist, let alone a revolutionary programme. But it is more than an anti-war manifesto. The issues on which it focuses -war, neo-liberalism, racism, and sexism-represent the same questions highlighted by successive European Social Forums. The broad ideology of Respect is indeed in many ways that of the anti-capitalist movement as it has developed in Europe, particularly since Genoa, embracing a plurality of different currents (reformist, socialist, autonomist, etc), but united nevertheless on a principled basis. No doubt, because the situation is a dynamic one, the programmatic stance of Respect-like that of the larger anti-capitalist movement with which it overlaps-will evolve and become sharper and more concrete in response to specific challenges. But the fact that Respect is a work in progress, both politically and organisationally, is no reason for condemning it out of hand, denouncing it, for example, for failing to proclaim itself a socialist party from the start. [11]

What about that other sectarian bugbear, the 'reactionary Islamic fundamentalists' who have supposedly rallied to Respect? At one level, it is hard to have much patience with the accusation, particularly when it comes, as it has with increasing frequency, from the French far left-that is, from a political milieu where members of LO and the LCR have brought shame on their own organisations, and on the revolutionary Marxist tradition more generally, by siding with the ruling right and the PS to demand the exclusion of Muslim young women wearing headscarves from state schools and thereby no doubt driving many young Muslims into the arms of the so-called 'integrist' (now that's a real popular front).

But the argument is nevertheless worth persisting with. Behind the accusation lies an essentialist, quasi-racist view of people born into the Muslim faith and living in Britain as forming a homogeneous community such that anyone from a Muslim background necessarily articulates the politics of al-Qaida or another radical Islamist current. Such a view bears little relationship with reality. The best perspective within which to understand Muslims in Britain is a historical one that compares them with earlier populations of immigrant origin-the Irish over more than a century and a half, Jews in the early 20th century, predominantly working class and poor, of different religious faith from the 'native' majority, and, for these reasons and because of their experience of racism in Britain (and in the case of the Irish till very recently and of the Muslims today of imperialism in their countries of origin), supplying many activists to the labour and socialist movements.

None of this means that the inevitable destiny of a politically conscious Muslim today is the revolutionary left. Of course not. The experience of poverty, racism, and imperialism and the real though limited avenues of social mobility

offer a series of options to young Muslims including community activism of a relatively conventional kind, incorporation in the Labour machine (which has treated Muslims, as it has other people of immigrant origin, as vote banks), a more personal attempt at social climbing, various forms of self-consciously Islamic organisation (of which the radical sects are merely one variant), involvement in the secular left. The important thing is to understand that these are options-alternatives.

For the radical Islamists, the presence of a large number of Muslims on the great anti-war demonstrations, which have been organised essentially by the secular radical left, was a threat to their influence. While refusing to participate in the anti-war demonstrations, they intervened in some of the earlier protest allies to combat the influence of 'atheist Marxists'. The slogans they used-for example, 'Khalifat not capitalism'-indicated that the fundamentalists saw themselves engaged in an ideological struggle for the hearts and minds of young Muslims, in which they had to show that they, not Marxist organisations like the SWP, were the real anti-capitalists. More recently the radical Islamists have boycotted the antiwar demonstrations and issued leaflets denouncing them in the Muslim areas. From this perspective, the active support many Muslims have given Respect is a real defeat.

How do things look from our standpoint, that of revolutionary socialists in an old imperialist country like Britain? Like socialists elsewhere in the advanced capitalist world, we have to win the support of a working class that, in the inner cities at least, is increasingly diverse in its colours, national origins and religious beliefs. Over the past generation demographic changes, imperialist policies in the Middle East, and domestic racism have all increased the profile within this inner-city working class of people of Muslim origins, who feel themselves (with justification) the targets of the 'war of terrorism'.

Not to have recognised their plight, not to have sought to involve them in a broad anti-war movement led predominantly by the radical secular left, not to have tried to draw their most progressive elements towards a political project that seeks the solution to their ills not in the Islamic umma but in a united struggle against capitalism and imperialism-not to have done all this would have been to abjure our duty as revolutionaries to be, as Lenin argued in *What is to be Done?*, tribunes of the people. Arguably, what has become almost 'the Muslim question' is a litmus test of the capacity of revolutionaries to relate to the working class as it is, as opposed to what it was 30 years ago or in books that we have read. On current evidence, not everyone looks like passing this test.

Strategic orientations

Even when the strategic rationale for Respect has been clarified, many other issues remain on the agenda. I shall mention three here. First, it is important to understand that Respect's successes do not depend exclusively on Muslim support. On the contrary it draws support from other people of immigrant origin but also-very significant-from many white working class people, reflecting the gradual decay of Labourism. Secondly, Respect's successes, while real, were uneven. Side by side with the spectacular results listed at the start of this article, scores in some regions and boroughs represented no real advance on the performance of the Socialist Alliance. Attempts to adduce objective factors to explain these variations are largely unconvincing. The subjective factor-determined, creative, and consistent campaigning that mobilised diverse networks of resistance in some areas, but not in others-seems to have played a critical role in ensuring whether or not the objective opportunities were tapped in particular areas. This lesson will need to be taken on board as Respect's local organisation is strengthened and extended.

Finally, there is the question of the Green Party. Since the late 1980s the British Greens have established a small but real constituency in British politics, partly among those concerned primarily with environmental issues, partly among people of a broadly left wing disposition who could no longer stomach Labour. Well-known activists such as Caroline Lucas, re-elected in June as MEP for the South East, are rightly widely respected, in particular because of their ability to relate environmentalism to the broader anti-capitalist agenda. Unlike their French and German counterparts, the

British Greens have not participated in social-liberal coalitions or supported imperialist wars. They are part of the radical left broadly defined.

But there is a downside. On the key question of the war, the Greens support the United Nations as an alternative to Anglo-American imperialism, and consequently have taken an equivocal attitude towards the occupation of Iraq, calling for a UN takeover rather than immediate withdrawal of 'coalition' troops. Moreover, as anyone who has had practical dealings with the Greens knows, their activist style is sometimes astonishingly sectarian: a comparatively mild example -their speeches at anti-war rallies often are little more than rather blatant appeals for votes. It is a consequence of this political method that the Greens absolutely refused to contemplate any negotiations with Respect over some sort of non-aggression pact or even joint lists in the Euro-elections and expressed ferocious hostility to our entire project. And so, in an electoral contest where the right wing populists of the UK Independence Party made the biggest gains in Britain, the radical left vote was split. This is a problem that both Respect and the Greens must address in the future if they are to be taken seriously by the hundreds of thousands of people who support them.

Beyond these specifically British problems, there are two broader points on which I wish to conclude. The first is that one of the main objective parameters of this analysis is the decay of social democracy-decay, not disappearance. Stathis Kouvelakis in his contributions to this Bulletin refers to what he calls 'the euphoric vision of a self-sufficient "radical left" that prevailed too often in the LCR on the assumption that the Socialist and Communist parties were in radical decline and had, in any case, gone decisively over to the side of the bourgeoisie'. Such an analysis has been articulated in a much more stark and one-sided way by the SSP, which effectively dismisses Labour as just another capitalist party. [\[12\]](#)

But what the recent elections in Spain and France show is, yet again, the capacity of social democratic parties that had discredited themselves through their pursuit of neo-liberal policies in office to rebuild working class support in opposition by exploiting popular discontent with their conservative successors. If Kouvelakis is right, then one reason why the LO-LCR slate achieved such disappointing results in the regional and European elections is that they isolated themselves from the broader mood of opposition to the right that the PS was able to articulate. What makes our task particularly complex is that we have to build an independent radical left while continuing to recognise that reformism, while in decline, continues to perform its contradictory function of both expressing and containing working class resistance to capitalism.

This then connects to a second question. Sometimes a false opposition is presented between the growth and development of the revolutionary left on the one hand, and a broader reorganisation of the radical left on the other. Thus in the debates leading up to the LCR's Congress last October, the majority of the leadership defended the project of a joint slate with LO in the regional and European elections. (The resolution published later on in this Bulletin reflects the views of the majority.) This was strongly opposed by a right wing minority, partly out of intense hostility to LO, partly because of a strategic orientation that focuses on drawing closer to sections of the ex-plural left. The leading figure in this grouping, Christian Picquet, editor of Rouge, argues for a larger shift in which the Ligue merges with a broader radical left that defines itself as defending the French republican tradition, with its democratic and social conquests, against the inroads of (Anglo-Saxon) capitalist globalisation. [\[13\]](#)

Unquestionably, the first position is preferable to the second, and not simply because of the evident drift of Picquet's strategy towards liquidation into some version of the national reformism that is still very strong on the left wing of the French workers' movement. Any outward-looking strategy for remaking the French left has to find ways of drawing in LO, an organisation that, for all its abstract sectarianism, has a real working class implantation and a strong tradition of relatively successful electoral interventions. But ideally an alliance with LO should act as a lever for dividing and disorganising the left of the ex-plural left and drawing some of its fragments along in the wake of the revolutionary left. Sometimes this doesn't seem to figure in the LCR majority's thinking, with the result that the right can end up making formally correct points-for example, that the LCR should have called for a vote for the PS and its allies in the

second round of the regional elections. Under the pact with LO the Ligue was committed to making no call about for whom to vote in the second round. Therefore the campaign launched by the minority after the first round for the LCR to call for a left vote in the second round was a fairly blatant attempt to sabotage the election pact with LO.

For better or worse, we don't face the problem of LO in Britain-of a far left organisation that is both powerful and rigid (the old Militant had some of the same characteristics but a series of increasingly suicidal choices have reduced the SP today to a sectarian rump with a couple of local bases). The structure of Respect has definite advantages from the point of view of pursuing this dual task- making the radical left an increasingly powerful pole of attraction in British politics and building a stronger revolutionary left within it. Respect is a coalition-a federal organisation that individuals can join and to which organisations can affiliate while preserving their autonomy. The programme, while principled, is relatively minimal, meaning that Respect is a pluralistic organisation in which diverse viewpoints coexist.

This structure is critical if the existing forces within Respect are to have the breathing space they need to work together, but even more so if others- particularly wider sections of the trade union movement-are to be drawn in. But, at the same time, within this pluralistic coalition are organised revolutionary socialists, and more specifically the SWP. This is one reason why all the talk about 'popular frontism' and 'liquidationism' is so silly. Our aim is not to dominate Respect, but to build a mass working class Respect, in which of necessity our influence would be diluted, but at the same time we will try to ensure that a strong revolutionary Marxist voice is heard amid the chorus that is and must continue to be Respect. And that means building Respect, but also building the SWP-as part of Respect and as a means of making it more effective.

To repeat yet again, none of this constitutes a model. We are all prisoners of our particular histories: Kouvelakis suggests that what he calls the 'anti-politics' of the contemporary French far left falls into much longer-term patterns. We have to make the best of the opportunities these histories offer. But it is striking how much revolutionaries-not just in Europe but across the world (for example, in Brazil)- face common problems. For example: How to regroup the left around an alternative to social liberalism? How to make revolutionary socialist organisation the motor of this broader process? There may therefore be something of value of our experience in Britain, for all its particularities, in addressing these questions.

Taken from the [International Socialist Tendency website](#)

[1] For the purposes of this article, and indeed many of those that follow, the 'radical left' refers to those forces that actively identify with resistance to neo-liberalism and imperialist war and that seek to develop an alternative to 'social liberalism'- the Third Way approach in which social democracy embraces neo-liberalism that is best exemplified by Tony Blair. The 'revolutionary left' refers to those organisations and currents-in Europe today almost exclusively Trotskyist-that are committed to socialist revolution. So the revolutionary left-organisations such as the SWP and the LCR-is a component of the broader radical left.

[2] A detailed analysis of Respect's performance in the June elections appears in Socialist Review, July 2004.

[3] Respect's programme can be found at www.respectcoalition.org.

[4] See J Kampfner, Blair's Wars, updated edn (London, 2004).

[5] See J Rees, 'Anti-Capitalism, Reformism and Socialism', International Socialism 90 (Spring 2001)

[6] P Broué, Révolution en Allemagne 1917-1923 (Paris, 1971), ch 21, and C Harman, The Lost Revolution (London, 1982), pp194-198.

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[7] On 8 May 1940, 41 National Government MPs voted with the Labour opposition and against Chamberlain and over 40 abstained; the rebels amounted to more than a fifth of all government backbenchers: G Stewart, *Burying Caesar* (London, 2000), p414. By comparison, in March 2003 â€”[t]he 139 Labour rebels represented more than half the 264 “non-payroll” vote-those MPs who were not in government service. But in one of the most skilful sleights of hand by Alastair Campbell this trumpeted to the media as representing a victory for the prime minister.’ Kampfner, *Blair’s Wars*, p309. The reason why this sleight of hand worked was because Labour ministers and backbenchers wanted it to work.

[8] *The Observer*, 6 June 2004.

[9] V I Lenin, â€”The Discussion on Self- Determination Summed Up’, in *Collected Works*, XXII (Moscow, 1965).

[10] See F Claudin, *From Comintern to Cominform* (Harmondsworth, 1975).

[11] For further discussion of the question of the programme in the context of the contemporary anti-capitalist movement, see A Callinicos, *An Anti-Capitalist Manifesto* (Cambridge, 2003), ch 3.

[12] The LCR’s official position is considerably more nuanced than the SSP’s: see D BensaÃ”d et al, â€”A Letter from LCR Comrades’, *IST Discussion Bulletin*, no 3, January 2003. For a critical discussion of the SSP approach, see J Rees, â€”The Broad Party, the Revolutionary Party and the United Front’, *International Socialism* 97 (Winter 2002).

[13] C Picquet, *La RÃ©publique en tourmente* (Paris, 2003).