

## **Taking Stock: Respect, SWP and Islamist politics in Tower Hamlets.**

**By Jamil Iqbal and Richard Phillips**

A major new research project investigating anti-war movements in the UK, led by Richard Phillips of Liverpool University and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), throws new light on a political crisis that emerged in recent months, with particular significance for Tower Hamlets.

Recent media reports suggest that Respect, the recent success story of socialist politics, is in crisis. According to the *East London Advertiser*, Respect councillors in Tower Hamlets may split into two groups, one led by Abjol Miah, an ally of George Galloway **and an Islamist belonging to the Islamic Forum Europe**, the other by Oliur Rahman, who is said to be a Socialist Workers Party (SWP) loyalist. The argument between Galloway and the SWP revolves around different visions of the new left: whether or not its members should leave their identities at the door, or whether the movement should be seen as a coalition of permanently different groups. There have already been casualties of this dispute: the SWP expelled three members for dissenting from its criticisms of Respect, and negative publicity about the party threatens its ability to function in elected chambers and to fight forthcoming local and general elections.

To understand Respect's problem, it helps to look back over the past months and years, during which time the party emerged out of the anti-war movements and deeper relationships between the old – some would say 'white' – left and others, including the SWP on the one hand and Islamist groups on the other. The ESRC-funded study of anti-war movements in the UK has shown how the SWP, through its dominant position in the leadership of Stop the War Coalition, allied itself with Muslim-identified activists and groups including Islamists. Now the SWP wants to distance itself from this, and accuses George Galloway of the 'communalism' it recently practiced itself.

In practice, it is impossible to disentangle the SWP, Respect and Stop the War. As one of the Councillors of Respect Party in Tower Hamlets, Lutfa Begum, has put it 'those people in Stop the War they're all Respect members'. This means that the argument about communalism really an internal crisis rather than an argument between discrete parties. Each of these overlapping groups were responsible for forging relationships with Muslim-identified groups, rather than the secularists their predecessors on the left might have sought out. Galloway, for instance, appealed to the religious sentiments of the Bengali Muslim community in the East End of London for his campaign for election in 2005, against the Blair-loyalist Oona King who stood for Labour. Leading figures in the SWP had been advocating the alliance with religious groups for some time. In the 1994 pamphlet, *Prophet and the Proletariat*, Chris Harman – then as now one of the SWP's chief ideologists – argued that the party should make common cause on the issue of "anti-imperialism" with Islamists, in part as a way of recruiting their members. David Garbin, a researcher at Surrey University argues that, 'It is for such reasons of political calculation that the leadership of the anti-war movement in Tower Hamlets has refrained from a

public and critical discussion of Islamism, except at the most superficial level. That silence has contributed to the general failure to appreciate the nature of Islamist politics’.

This alliance was productive. Stop the War worked with Islamist groups through the East London Mosque, Islamic Forum Europe (IFE) and Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) to promote anti-war demonstrations. Stop the War entered into a formal partnership with the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB), which formed a mainstay of its anti-war campaign between 2002 (when the partnership was formed) and the end of 2005 (when it was dissolved). MAB’s more extravagant and lazier critics (not least the liberal journalist Nick Cohen) judge it by association with the Muslim Brotherhood. The two organisations do have some common ancestry and links, but the British counterpart is neither radical nor violent as its transnational counterpart allegedly is. One thing the two do have in common, however, is their religious rather than secular approach to identity and politics.

But by concentrating on an alliance with religious rather than secular groups, Stop the War – with its longstanding SWP and future Respect members and activists – effectively marginalised secularists, including Muslims and others. These included Bangladeshis, for instance, but who did not feel able to accept invitations from Stop the War and MAB. As Ansar Ahmed Ullah, member of Nirmul Committee puts it, ‘When we realised that they [Stop the War] also wanted the local Islamists to speak at the rally, we said that’s fine but we do not wish to share the same platform with Islamists’.

The old left’s attempt to attract new supporters and build bridges had backfired, dividing Bangladeshis rather than drawing them together as a class. Now, as this division and its longer term implications for Respect are exposed, the SWP and Respect are taking positions and fighting it out. The SWP, though complicit in the alliance with Islamists, is accusing Galloway and Salma Yaqoob of communalism, while (according to the Socialist Unity website) Galloway wants to oust SWP Central Committee member, John Rees, as National Secretary of Respect.

The looming division of Respect is depressing for those who believed and perhaps still believe that the party can forge a new left. This could be a productive crisis, forcing the new left to decide whether we want a politics in which people must leave their identities at the door, or one in which bridges are built within a more genuinely pluralistic movement. But the danger of the battle within Respect may be the possible separation between socialism and pluralism, the two forces that have made the movement so appealing.