

Campaign Briefing

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The unions and our party: a progressive link

By Len McCluskey, Unite Assistant General Secretary

It's a commonplace that few, if any, of our sister parties in the Socialist International have the remarkable and enduring federal structure that our Labour Party has constructed and defended for the best part of a hundred years.

Membership of political parties is both historically and currently low as a proportion of the population but membership of trade unions, while under the cosh from the anti-union laws and an unfavourable economy, still takes in one third of the working population. The relationship with the unions gives Labour an organic link with working people virtually unique among SI parties.

From time to time that link comes under sustained attack from our ideological enemies.

For New Labour the unions were and are a drag anchor on the lurch to the right. No surprise that Oona King's mayoral bid team felt it OK to criticise the unions and little wonder that Blair set his face against repealing the anti-union laws brought in by Thatcher.

The link is now under attack from the Con-Dem coalition which has picked up on proposals made by Sir Hayden Philips under the last government, allegedly to clean up party funding.

The unions' link with Labour is much more than a financial transaction although our organic links are underpinned by affiliations. Union branches affiliate to local CLPs, our regions affiliate to the Party regionally and of course the national unions affiliate to the Party nationally, at all levels arguing the case for working people from within the Party.

Having got their feet under the table of government for the first time in 80 years, the Cleggites are seeking to break the link, using party funding as their stalking horse, to make sure that there's no effective opposition and they don't have to again wait 80 years for their next taste of power.

Labour renewal starts here. And the Left needs to back it.

Ed Miliband's speech made a real break with New Labour. It signals a return to the core values of social democracy, a renewed commitment to liberty, to solidarity and above all to equality. Whilst celebrating the successes of the first years of Labour in power, he drew a line under the disastrous Iraq war, and made a commitment to foreign policy "based on our values not just our alliances". He stressed the need to

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First Past the Post – Not AV

By Kelvin Hopkins MP

A referendum on AV has been promised by both major parties as a sop to the LibDems to get them on board for possible coalitions. The LibDems are now in bed with the Tories and likely to be savaged by the electorate at the next election for their treachery. So why dangle a completely unnecessary bribe to them now?

AV is seen to be the thin end of a proportional representation wedge and should be rejected as such. PR would lead inevitably to a proliferation of political parties with perpetual coalitions and no chance of a majority Labour government. These coalitions would result in post-election deals by opportunist party leaders – just like Clegg.

Even AV would mean Labour candidates sucking up to minor parties for second and third preferences to secure victory.

First Past the Post means that voters choose between parties for their governments, most crucially majority Labour governments, and we must keep FPTP for the future if we want democratic socialist advance.

"It was a remarkable speech ... and it will have an appeal well beyond the Labour party.... His words on optimism were also important because the media concentrate on spreading pessimism about everything, claiming that new ideas won't work – so, instead of working to improve their lives, people can be dissuaded from making the effort. ... I supported him for leader and he's justified every hope I had."

Tony Benn

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Labour renewal (continued)

blame ourselves not the electorate for our defeat and recognise the reasons for our rejection and the public's mistrust of politicians and politics. It will uplift the party, but the enthusiasm was not shared by everyone in the hall. The über-Blairites will fight back, and the Left must not stand aside. The speech reflected his campaign, stressing his values and the need for change. He described his values as rooted in his personal and family history, in his parents escape from the Holocaust and their immigration to Britain, but also in the collective experience of Labour with a reference to 1945 when Labour also needed to reduce a deficit – one much larger than today's as he pointed out – which it did whilst delivering on Labour's values.

There were gestures to the right too: what he said on the deficit was intended to re-commit the party to fiscal responsibility, and he warned unions to remember the effects of their actions in opposing the cuts – to counter-balance his robust defence of trade unionism and trade union rights.

The reality is that Ed Miliband is not on the Left of the party – he is squarely in the mainstream centre – but he is a Leader the Left can and should support whilst also pressing for inclusiveness and democratic reform in the party. In return for that support, the Left needs space to argue its case in a fair and open debate—something that New Labour always denied.

“For those who doubt that Ed Miliband represents a significant shift beyond New Labour politics, today's speech was their answer.
...
These are the earliest days and as he said: "you won't always like what I have to say". The speech was all values and mood music, and the devil will be in the policy detail. But that he represents a real change is not in question.”
Seamus Milne, The Guardian

CLPs short changed

The way that yesterday morning's debate on rule change proposals was conducted was very unfair and very undemocratic. It underlined the way that CLP delegates are treated as second class citizens at their own conference.

In response to Lancaster and Fleetwood CLP the platform argued that rule changes are so important that they need thorough discussion.

East Lothian then moved an important rule change on the selection process for MPs. They were restricted to only 3 minutes, denied a seconder and soon told “wind up please”.

Later the Lancaster & Fleetwood delegate, on a point of order, asked that their rule change be remitted or withdrawn rather than being put to the vote. This was brushed aside with the comment that this was not possible.

This was utter nonsense. According to Citrine, once a motion is moved it is the property of Conference and it can agree withdrawal. Also, at almost every Conference rule changes have been remitted.

For example, in 2009 separate rule changes were moved and then remitted from the following CLPs Caerphilly (on NEC membership); Hyndburn (on membership procedures); Beverley & Holderness (on NEC structure); Labour Party Disabled Members Group (on NPF representation).

In fact we understand that the actual decision of the NEC was to ask the CLPs to remit their rule changes and only if they refused would the NEC ask for the proposal to be voted down.

Michael Meacher reviews Kellner

The best that can be said about the latest pamphlet from Peter Kellner entitled ‘The Crisis of Social Democracy’ is that it exposes the shallowness of Labour Right thinking which is now pretty much indistinguishable from that of the Tories.

Kellner thinks spending cuts rather than tax increases are now permanently the order of the day. Just wait for austerity to bite good and hard after 20 October. Kellner wishes away inequality, the fault-line of capitalism, as mere lack of opportunity. Just try living (as 2-3 million still have to) on £5.93 an hour.

Not a word is said about the abuses of unrestrained markets, deregulation of finance, hire-and-fire labour exchanges, and inequality more extreme than any other country in the Western world bar the US.

We should thank Peter Kellner for exposing so clearly why the Labour Party must now embark on a course of fundamental change if it is to flourish.

Don't miss the high point of the week:
Conference assessment and the next steps for Labour
6pm tonight – Bar 38, Peter Street
(almost next door to Conference)
Diane Abbott MP - Mohamed Azam - Ann Black
Billy Hayes - Kelvin Hopkins MP - Mark Seddon
Christine Shawcroft - Sam Tarry - Peter Willsman
Entry: £1 (Concessions 50p)

Venezuela—democracy and social progress
12:30 today
Harty/Barbirolli Room, Radisson Hotel
*Film showing of *South of the border*
*Panel including the Venezuelan Ambassador
Hot buffet, wine & refreshments