

# Labour at the crossroads



"Genuine democracy has to be collective"  
Jeremy Corbyn MP

**T**HERE has been a concerted campaign to distance the Labour Party leadership from the trade unions. They have got it into their heads that public sector strikes are unpopular, though from my experience as a London MP I would say that people understand why the postal workers, rail workers and tube drivers were on strike, and a clear majority supported them.

The Labour leadership recognise that, come the election of a Labour government, there are going to be enormous demands on them. They don't want to see a Labour conference, where half the votes are controlled by trade unions, making decisions critical of that government. They will have an immense battle on their hands to force through the public spending cuts demanded by the Maastricht convergence criteria. Although they got through this week by stage-managing conference, they won't have the same kind of control over events once they are in office.

I don't, however, think that the leadership *have* to break the union link completely. There are a number of possibilities. In Tony Blair's speech he made it clear that a Labour government would

review the question of political party funding. This could mean democratic controls over company donations, which would be welcome, but it's more likely to mean state funding for political parties. The idea is obviously to reduce the reliance on the trade unions.

I don't think that we will see an exact replay of the MacDonald experience, but there are similarities. For instance, the Maastricht criteria are the equivalent of the Gold Standard in 1931. But it could be that the opposition across Europe to more welfare cuts is so great that the governments will have to back off. Things depend on what people do to fight back now.

There are enormous tensions in the labour movement between the leadership's idea, which is essentially an expanding free-market economy which *might* then throw a few crumbs to the workers, and the idea that many ordinary party members and trade unionists have, of a welfare society geared to improving people's living standards and services.

Now we are in a situation similar to that before 1918, but in reverse. We are in a transitional stage, moving away from working-class political representation. Blair sees the unions in the same way as the leaders of the US Democrats do. He wants a situation where there are no formal ties with the unions — just the unions giving the party some financial backing, and the party giving trade union leaders the chance to meet with important politicians.

I think what many in the leadership

see as their goal is a sort of combination of the European Social Democrats and the US Democrats — state funding, and a free-market party in which the unions are just a lobby and big business provides much of the funds.

Of course, state funding is profoundly anti-democratic. The public will say: "Why should I pay taxes to maintain a political party that I don't support enough to give money to?" It is part of the bureaucratisation of politics, in which a self-perpetuating oligarchy of the parliamentary caucus receive all the funds, and thus get more and more control. A state-funded parliamentary caucus does not need an active party based on collective decision-making, so they will try to get rid of it.

The twin to the attack on the unions is the de-collectivisation of the Labour Party. Wasn't it Thatcher who developed the idea that there is no such thing as society? What we are seeing now is an attempt to individualise or atomise the Labour Party. Genuine democracy has to be collective.

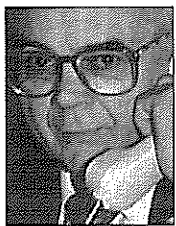


"The plan to kill the Labour Party"  
Ken Livingstone MP

**I**T'S not my job to send people away with a warm glow about what is possible and what can be achieved. My job is to send people away with a cold chill in their hearts about the dangers we face in the next twelve months.

I believe that we're about to see a campaign to permanently neuter the labour movement in Britain. No-one can underestimate the scale of the forces being mobilised to completely and utterly transform the labour movement so that it can never again be a platform for ordinary people to combine together to transform the society in which they live.

Proposals have been published very recently in the Labour Coordinating Committee's document, "New Labour: A Stakeholders' Party," and you know with that title you're not going to enjoy it. They say that the principle of One Member One Vote by postal ballot should be extended to elections of Constituency Labour Party officers, delegates to confer-



"A leadership challenge is inevitable"  
Ken Coates MEP

**A**SSUMING purely rational responses from those whose dreams of a better society, whose commitments and interests, are threatened by New Labour, a leadership election is inevitable not too long after the General Election is out of the way...

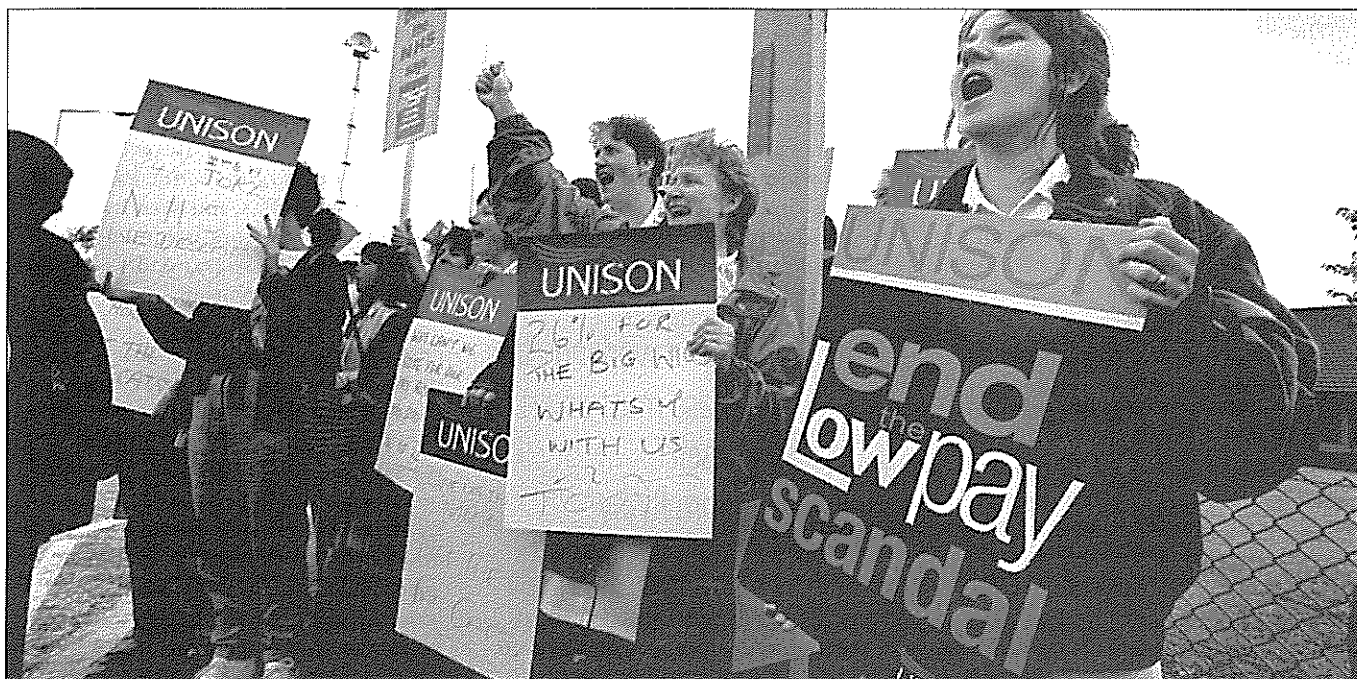
It is only necessary to look back a couple of years to recall that, under John Smith's leadership, Labour was strongly committed to the priority of full employment, to modestly redistributive taxation, and to limited but significant

improvement in labour law and workpeople's rights...

There are people right up to the top level of the Party who lived with the Smith prescription...

A leadership challenge, once the election is out of the way, is the most rational method within a democratic framework to resolve the question of whether the Labour Party should be transformed into an alternative capitalist party... If a challenge were made, it would almost certainly succeed...

But, of course, it is just possible that such a bid may not succeed. If not, a new Party or new Association of Socialist Groups or a new Labour Representation Committee might come to be feasible. New agencies will be formed by people coming together on big issues and working out for themselves how to create a better society... *The Blair Revolution, Deliverance for Whom?* by Michael Barratt Brown & Ken Coates MEP, Spokesman Books



Blair-Labour intends to keep the pay freeze on health and other public service workers. Photo: Paul Herrmann

ence, and local government candidates. The traditional structure, in which ward branches elect delegates to run the constituency party by a monthly meeting should be abandoned. A small steering group of five or six, elected by OMOV, would coordinate the running of the CLP, with local ward branches, task forces and informal networks.

Only individual membership would confer voting rights. If this is agreed at next October's conference, no trade union member would ever again have a vote in the Labour Party at any level in the selection of candidates or in determining policy to hold MPs to account.

It is the biggest threat to the trade union movement which we have seen in our lifetime. In one sense it is more damaging than Thatcher's anti-union laws. We always knew we would mobilise our own class to defeat those laws. These proposals seek to prevent the trade union movement having a political wing in which it can organise and mobilise to defeat those anti-union laws.

What it means is a party in which a leadership, with state funding of political parties and a media centre at Millbank, communicates directly with a disembodied party structure in a series of referenda, with every vote turned into a loyalty test.

The proposals say that the Labour conference should be a mixture of plenary sessions and seminar briefs. The plenary sessions will allow the front bench, "to present their policy themes and so shape the news events of the day." Over 150 years of trade union and Labour struggle to create an instrument for social

change should not be turned into a platform for media exercises! It will be a major defeat for democracy in Britain.

They say that Labour should operate a list system for prospective Parliamentary candidates so that all potential candidates have to be interviewed and approved by the NEC before they can be selected by a CLP. This panel of approved candidates should receive "thorough training and extensive briefing on Party policy and management."

Further: "The NEC should not be a policy-making body. Policy should be the preserve of individual members and Labour's parliamentary committee". That's the Shadow Cabinet, or in government the Cabinet. Not even the 350 MPs will have a say in policy. The Cabinet lays down all policy and has it endorsed by mass ballots of members who can't go to a meeting to discuss it.

We are going to spend the next eight months fighting to get a Labour government. While we're out there knocking on doors, these creatures are planning the neutering of the party and its transformation into something that makes David Owen's SDP look like a Marxist front organisation. At least he had a conference, a debate, and local people selecting their candidates.

I reckon that within four weeks of the general election, these will emerge as the constitutional proposals for change. They will be tabled without prior warning. They'll be turned into a loyalty test, and the leadership will squeeze and crunch individual trade union representatives on the NEC to vote for them. Then we'll have about three months to organ-

ise and mobilise to defeat them.

If they go through, the Labour Party is dead. It isn't just a shift in the balance of power, it's the elimination of the Labour Party as a political force of any consequence.

They also intend to come up with state funding of political parties in those first few months of a Labour government. The party that is saying now that we can't make a commitment to the pensioners, or give any commitment to spending on the Health Service, will say that £20 million should be paid to the leadership of the Labour Party, and £20 million to the Tories, and then they can dispense with us totally.

*Ken Livingstone MP was speaking at the Campaign Group fringe meeting.*



"CLPs and unions must make a stand"  
Vladimir Derer

Nothing that has happened at conference so far has been wholly unexpected. It is disappointing that the trade unions, who are normally very keen on rules, allowed the leadership to get away with an unconstitutional manoeuvre to prevent conference from voting on the question of conference sovereignty and the trade union link. The unions supported the leadership and did not back the reference back from Bolsover CLP which would have allowed a debate to take place.

The other important development was the defeat of the motion on returning the utilities to public ownership. The unions voted with us on this, and so the vote shows that we lost in the CLPs. We have to win back the CLPs.

The key to this — apart from defending the Labour/union link — is to push the issue of democratic rights for the CLPs.

In the past the CLPs tended to support the unions against the leadership, but now the CLPs are being used as a counter against the unions. We need to change this.

"Keep the Party Labour" is a campaign to re-establish unity between the unions and the CLPs. This is the main task today.

One should not exaggerate. The party has not actually changed that much. The influx of members who are supposed to be changing the party are mainly people who are in no sense active. I'm not sure they even vote in the postal ballots. What is more worrying is that many people are discontinuing their membership.

Whether or not Blair has to break the link depends on how the unions react. It depends on how far the unions are prepared to go with him. What we can say is that the attempt, originally pushed by John Edmonds, to create a third category of members, levy-paying trade unionists, was a complete failure.

It is not possible to say how quickly things will move. It is said every year that next year's conference will be the most important in the party's history. It is not a necessary watershed. It could be. But we are in the business of organising, not prophesying. It all depends on the effort the left can muster.

The key task for the left is to win both the CLPs and the unions to make a stand. That has to go through the trade union conferences. If policies are adopted at the trade union conferences, general

secretaries cannot change them.

This stand should include defending the 50/50 split in the vote at party conference and the range of policies — minimum wage, union rights, full employment — which the trade unions seem to have given up.

*Vladimir Derer is the honorary secretary of the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy*



"The working-class base must assert itself"  
Tom Rigby

**T**HIS YEAR'S LABOUR Party conference was the most stage-managed yet. The leadership got their way on everything. But there is dissent just below the surface.

The first indication was the extremely wide support for Keep the Link's petition on Party-union links. GMB general sSecretary John Edmonds joined with Party chair Diana Jeuda of USDAW, Roger Lyons of MSE, Alan Johnson and Tony Young of the CWU, Jimmy Knapp from RMT, Lew Adams of ASLEF, Tribune editor Mark Seddon and the FBU's Ken Cameron in signing a statement which read:

"The Labour Party was set up as a collective voice for organised labour in parliament. Since that purpose is now under threat we give notice of our intention to defend it. To break the organisational links between the Party and the affiliated trade unions would destroy any prospect of the Party acting as a force to realise the labour movement's values of equality and solidarity. It would dash the hopes of all those who look to a Labour Government to change society in the interests of the great

majority and to act against poverty, insecurity and injustice. We will oppose any moves to drive the trade unions out of the Party they created."

The general secretaries were joined by hundreds of rank and file Party members, MPs and PPCs, and even by Tony Booth from the actors' union Equity, revealing that the splits on this issue go into the Blair family itself.

It would be wrong to be complacent. The unions will fight Blair. Whether they do so soon enough and hard enough depends on what we do.

That Labour's New Right kept off the issue of the link at the Labour Party conference does not mean that they have backed down. They had no need to court trouble prematurely, especially when the trade union leaders were ignoring their own union policies and voting for the leadership on virtually everything.

And, besides the link, Labour's New Right has targeted the remaining collective democracy in the CLPs and the potential countervailing power of the NEC under a Labour government. Their "project" is the abolition of the Party as a labour movement-based party in any sense, not just the mechanisms of the union link. The Labour Co-ordinating Committee, who played the role of Blair's praetorian guard in the Clause Four battle, have already declared their programme for exterminating the Labour Party, and are boasting that the attack will come in the first weeks of the new government. Deputy leader John Prescott has been only too keen to say that the trade unions' role is "not set in concrete," and that the party will continue to evolve through the process of OMOV ballots.

Labour's New Right have made their intentions plain. It is up to the working-class base of the Party to organise itself into a force to defeat Blair's programme and reassert the need for working class political representation.

One unified campaign is required. Keep the Link, which organised the resistance to John Smith's attack on trade union involvement in parliamentary selections, has already succeeded in mobilising forces well beyond the traditional left. It should be able to work together with the Keep the Party Labour Campaign, which is at present confined to the hard left. Our object should be to create an open mobilising committee on the model of the campaign for democratic changes in the early 1980s.

*Tom Rigby is the Trade Union Officer of the Network of Socialist Campaign Groups*

## Magnet strikers sacked

**350 WORKERS** from Magnet Kitchens are running a 24 hour picket of their factory in Darlington, County Durham, after being sacked for continuing an official strike.

The workers, members of TGWU, GMB, AEEU and UCATT, struck for a pay rise and improved conditions after a three year pay freeze. In early September the company issued a "return to work or be sacked" ultimatum, and when the 350 refused to return,

attempted to recruit scabs to replace the workforce. So far, very few scabs have been recruited. The strikers are targeting Magnet showrooms as well as holding regular mass pickets and a 1,500 strong demonstration in Darlington on 21 September. The employers are refusing to negotiate or recognise the unions. Contact the picket line on 0402-072676.

**Nick Brereton**