

AFTER WEMBLEY: TURN TO THE UNIONS

RACHEL LEVER, a member of the Executive Committee of the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy, outlines the tasks facing Labour's Left after Wembley.

FOR FLEET Street, Labour's Wembley conference all had to be fitted in to the 'greedy unions' or 'union barons' mythology.

Yet the victory for a real change in the method of electing the Party Leader (as against the GMWU's sabotage proposal) actually reflected the enormous pressure of rank and file trade unionists, who increasingly support the democratisation of the Labour Party. If it had been left to the whims of general secretaries, the principle would never have been carried in Blackpool, or a wrecking proposal would have gone through at Wembley. All the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy's 'tactical brilliance' would have been to no avail without the support of hundreds of trade union delegates.

The Press wanted to give the credit for the Wembley result to Clive Jenkins. But in fact the casting of the ASTMS vote was decided by the *delegation*, and *against* Jenkins' plea. At Blackpool, he had swung the delegation against a 'vote for both' position which would have settled the issue there and then at 50% trade unions, 25% CLPS, and 25% shared between the PLP and prospective parliamentary candidates. So much for the idea that Jenkins was the chief architect of the 'union majority' position.

Even now, unless the rank and file steps up its fight, there is a serious danger of the Wembley result being reversed by a counter-attack from the Parliamentarians and sections of the trade union top brass. Yet there is also every reason to hope that the Wembley result will help to stoke up an important fight to democratise not only the block vote, but many other union procedures and structures as well.

For one thing, the Wembley formula provides for all votes to be recorded and published. If it's to be done for electing the party leader, why not for all conference votes. Trade unionists are bound to be asking this question, and others.

Immediately the spotlight is on the Leader election, and how the rank and file is going to have democratic control in that process.

Normally, if the block vote is functioning halfway democratically, it is cast according to union policy as agreed at conferences or nationally elected committees, and if there is no previous policy it is up to the delegation to decide.

But the leadership election will require other arrangements. Nominations will not be known in time for union conferences to decide and mandate their delegates. So if it is not to be decided by Executives, there will have to be some recall or special delegate meeting in September to mandate the delegation. This raises

the possibility of other matters that have come up since the union conference being discussed and decided at such a meeting, which would have by then the published agenda for the whole Labour Party conference.

Mostly what's wrong with the block vote is that the union delegations are often dominated by non-elected officials, or leaders who might once have been elected but are now in position for life and therefore less accountable than the Labour Leader they are electing. To remedy this, all delegates should be lay members of the union, elected either at annual conference, or in branch or workplace ballots, or at special mandating conferences. And attention will have to be paid to those sections of unions at present wholly or virtually disenfranchised: women, who can be a majority in a union and absent from the delegation; and black people, who are rarely seen in the trade union seats at Labour conferences. Special measures will have to be taken to include them in delegations.

If these measures are taken under pressure of the Wembley decision, they will have profound repercussions. Quite a number of unions have now cast their votes for measures in the Labour Party which they would do well to emulate themselves. How many trade union general secretaries and presidents submit themselves to annual election, as a Labour Leader must now do?

Although in the short term anti-union feeling has found an echo among constituency party members, the increasing pressure from rank and file trade unionists in favour of both trade union and Labour Party democracy could undo this damage in the longer term. Specific measures to give the constituencies a heavier vote at Annual Conference might also help — such as shifting some of the union vote into the constituencies accord-

ing to their affiliated trade union membership, and into workplace party branches.

The next immediate battle, however, is to make the Wembley vote stick. This means getting union conferences that had no chance to adopt a position between Blackpool and Wembley to support the decision arrived at on January 24th, and explaining to any doubters that a reversal would not bring a slight adjustment in favour of an essentially similar option such as the three-thirds formula, but would sweep away major features such as annual election and the recorded vote and give the PLP a decisive say.

The sooner the new system is put into practice, the better. It should mean an electoral college at the Brighton conference in October. But we cannot put it past the waverers on the NEC, under the tutelage of the Conference Arrangements Committee, to plead that it's all too sudden and can't be done for another year. Letters and resolutions to the NEC supporting an electoral college this year are essential.

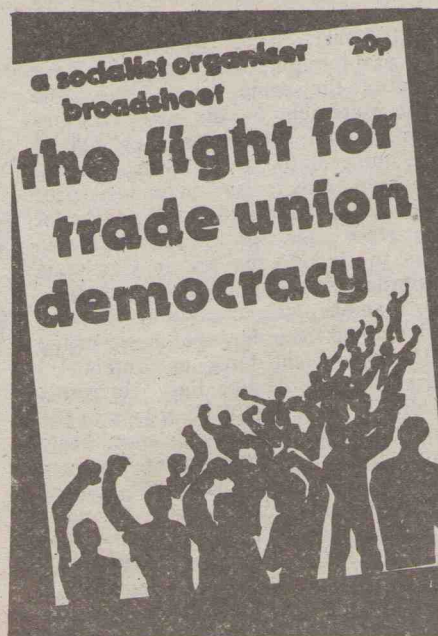
This is also the year in which MPs will for the first time face the reselection process. And there are many democratic changes still to be won: control of the Manifesto, the functioning of the PLP, local government.

To extend the gains the rank and file have won, to make them work, and to fend off a counter-attack (which will also focus on weakening the left on the NEC), we must step up the left unity that has been forged in the past year. And we must extend support for the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy through affiliation of both Labour Party and trade union bodies.

The Rank and File Mobilising Committee has been a significant force in the past year in turning back the right's machinations. Formed in June 1980 on the initiative of the SCLV (Socialist Organiser), it brought together up to ten organisations and supplemented the unremitting detailed work of the CLPD with meetings, broadsheets, rallies, and press publicity. While not the ruthless phalanx the right wing fear it to be, it has enabled some of its component organisations to get together at local level; provided a regular framework for central cooperation instead of the previous episodic, ad hoc or non-existent contacts; and helped to focus attention on the priorities and play down or remove inessential barriers to victory.

The tremendous authority it had on the left, gained from the appeal of unity, may well have been a decisive factor at Wembley, persuading delegations to back the only formula which would win against the right even though it was not their preference.

In the coming months, maintaining that unity, and extending the scope of united activity into the trade unions, can be decisive again — in consolidating the democratic reforms and making them work.



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