

AWL conference 2003.

Working-class representation and trade union political funds.

Resolution from outgoing National Committee.

1. Our basic principle is that the unions should pursue collective working-class interests, including in politics, and deploy their funds accordingly.

2. We are for the deployment of political funds, as all other union matters, being decided democratically.

3. Specifically now, however: (a) There is a renewal in the unions on the level of reasserting basic trade unionism as against the New Labour/partnership line, which opens the possibility of some serious moves of union selfassertion within the New Labour structures. Such moves do not undo Blair's bourgeois transformation of Labour into "New Labour", but it would be foolish to advocate that more militant unions hive off by disaffiliating. We are against disaffiliation, and for a concerted stand by the unions for trade-union policies.

(b) The phrase, "democratise the political funds" was initially used to express the correct broad idea of the FBU May 2001 decision — that the union, nationally and regionally, should critically examine election candidates seeking its support, and consider backing independent working-class candidates against New Labour. It has come to be reinterpreted as fragmenting the political funds, having money allotted branch-by-branch or in proportion to different parties' support in the membership. We are against fragmenting the funds in such a manner, which will end up with a political "pick-and-mix" approach.

Our approach is: (i) For a national union policy based on advancing politically its policies and principles and the interests of the working class in general. What this means now is spelled out in section 3(a) and 4.

(ii) In pursuit of this national approach, we argue against automatic support for New Labour and its candidates, and for the possibility of supporting independent working-class candidates. We argue for decisions about such alternatives to be taken, where appropriate, at regional and local level in the unions, subject to the fullest democratic control (e.g. workplace and membership ballots).

4. We emphasise that the need for the unions to consider backing candidates against Labour is a temporary expedient which is a consequence of Blair's New Labour project, which has been a defeat for the workers' movement. Further, we explain that allocating funds to a variety of groups or candidatures is not a principle of democracy or pluralism. Rather, it is temporarily necessary because, whilst Labour is no longer an adequate vehicle for working-class representation, no viable replacement workers' party has been created. It would be preferable if there were one workers' party through which the unions could assert themselves politically by standing and/or supporting candidates. We fight for such a party, and when it is in existence, the union's political funds should be allocated only to that party.

5. We are also for: a) Reducing union contributions to the Labour Party to the flat affiliation fee, ending extra donations, as the CWU has done. (We are not for reducing the level of affiliation). b) Making union representatives in New Labour structures fight for union policy. c) Withdrawing union sponsorship to MPs who flout or oppose union policies (as the RMT has done).

d) Using union funds for independent working-class political campaigning — e.g. for referenda on privatisation, for a European workers' charter rather than supporting bourgeois yes or no campaigns on the euro.

6. Another problem with the phrase "democratise the political funds" is that it does not well cover the issues mentioned in point 4, which are to do with the substance of how the funds are used as well as the procedures by which their use is decided. We conclude, therefore, that the phrase "democratise the political funds" is not a good or clear summary of what we advocate.

Suggested reformulations.

Proposed by MT. Both carried.

Reformulation 1.

In 3(b), replace: "We are against fragmenting the funds in such a manner, which will end up with a political "pick-and-mix" approach" by "We are against fragmenting the funds in such a manner, which will end up (i) providing a safety-valve for the bureaucrats, freeing them to back Blair with the bulk of the political funds as long as they allow a few branches to give money; elsewhere; (ii) drifting towards business-unionism, i.e. giving money to whatever mainstream party candidate seems friendliest or most susceptible to lobbying".

In 3(b)(i), replace: "(i) For a national union policy based on advancing politically its policies and principles and the interests of the working class in general. What this means now is spelled out in section 3(a) and 4" by: "For a national union policy which would establish a framework for the union's political activities and use of its political fund set by union policies and the principle of independent working-class representation in politics".

Make unions assert themselves. Amendments from ME.

a) Carried. Add at end of current 1 "Our central task is to make the trade unions assert themselves politically against the Blair government and our strategy on the current use of trade union political funds is for that aim."

b) Defeated. Delete current 3b(ii) and replace with new 3b(ii) "In pursuit of this approach we call for all Labour candidates seeking trade union support to be vetted in accordance with the unions policy and trade union principles, whether at local, regional and national level. We are against unconditional support for the Labour Party and its candidates. We also argue for the possibility of supporting independent working class candidates subject to the fullest democratic consultation eg workplace or membership ballots."

c) Defeated. Delete current 4 and replace with new 4 "We recognise no electorally viable Party exists in Britain today that is an adequate vehicle for working class representation. We recognise the Blair take over of the Labour Party has been a set back for working class representation in the current Party system.

We emphasise the need for the unions to consider backing candidates against Labour is a temporary expedient which is a consequence of Blairs New Labour Project, which has been a defeat for the workers movement.

We recognise the existing link between trade unions and the Labour Party, but do not see the continuation of the link in its present form as inevitable. We will work in affiliated unions to demand they use the existing Labour Party Trade Union link to assert themselves politically."

No confidence in Blair Addition from Tom Rigby (carried)

We should campaign in the Labour-affiliated unions for them to adopt resolutions of no confidence in Tony Blair as leader of the Labour Party.