

WORKERS'



RMT CONFERENCE

LIBERTY

PO Box 823, London SE15 4NA. June/July 2003

WORKING-CLASS POLITICAL REPRESENTATION: HOW AND WHO?

OUR UNION has given a lead to others by reviewing our support for Labour MPs, and withdrawn backing from many, including deputy Prime Minister John Prescott.

At this conference, we have a proposed rule change from the Executive:

“That this Union shall affiliate to the Labour Party. The Council of Executives may be, from time to time, requested by Branches or Regional Councils to explicitly authorise support for other organisations or campaigns in pursuance of the Union’s policy objectives, subject to not breaching the provision of these rules...”

A motion from Bakerloo branch condemns the RMT rep on Labour Party NEC, Mick Cash, for backing the Government on the Iraq war, and calls for someone who will fight for union policy to replace him on the NEC.

These motions fit well together with what the RMT has done so far, and with what other unions are doing. Use the union’s positions in the Labour Party to exert maximum leverage; work with other unions along those lines to build a movement to renew working-class representation in politics.

We should make it clear to the Labour Party that support for its candidates is not

unconditional. We must reserve the right to back independent working-class candidates — like our own RMT members, John Milligan of the Scottish Socialist Party, or Greg Tucker, who stood for the Socialist Alliance in 2001 against Keith Hill.

If we are to avoid having levy-payers think their money is being thrown around at the behest of small groups of activists, decisions on these things should be subject to the fullest democratic consultation, preferably through membership ballots. But we must not be tied to backing Blairite privatisers.

If New Labour tries to disaffiliate the RMT for backing independent socialists — and will they dare? — then we should fight them on the political issues, and rally other unions to our support.

The motion from Central and North Mersey branch to conference — calling for the union to use its full affiliation to exert leverage in the Labour structures — also fits in with this approach.

OTHER motions, to this conference, however, strike a different note. They want the union to start supporting middle-class parties like the Welsh nationalist Plaid Cymru and the Greens, as well as Scottish Socialist Party candidates.

They would cut down our affiliation to the Labour Party to a token 5000 members. (It is already down to 10,000, though the union claims 60,000 members and the great majority pay the political levy).

This is soft-sell disaffiliation.

For individual trade unions to disaffiliate from the Labour Party sounds radical, but in fact is an acceptance of defeat. So also, in a different way, is the proposal to “diversify” to supporting friendly individual politicians in a range of political parties both within and outside the labour movement.

THE RMT’s forerunner, the ASRS, played a central role in breaking the old Lib-Lab system and establishing the Labour Party.

Socialists in the ASRS argued that the working class needed its own party, rather than just looking for friendly politicians in the middle-class Liberal Party (there were some, of course) and a few places on the Liberal list of candidates.

Liberals and right-wingers in the ASRS argued the contrary. After a long battle the socialists won. They were right. You can see they were right by looking at the USA, the only big capitalist country where the working class never managed to set up its own mass party, and unions instead back friendly-looking politicians from the middle and upper class parties.

The working class needs *its own* political party to win socialism. The working class needs *its own* political party even to win a decent amount of reform within capitalism.

To go for backing Plaid Cymru or the Greens would mean saying that the socialists were wrong, and the Liberals were right!

THE ASRS founded the Labour Party not on its own, but together with other unions and the socialist groups who had campaigned for an independent workers’ party, the Marxist Social Democratic Federation and the softer Independent Labour

WHO WE ARE

THIS bulletin is produced by members of the Alliance for Workers’ Liberty. We fight in the unions, in the Socialist Alliance, in the Labour Party, and in cooperation with the *Solidarity* platform of the Scottish Socialist Party, for a socialist alternative to both capitalism and Stalinism, based on common ownership and democracy. We want one democratic, fighting union for all railworkers. We reject artificial division between workers of different grades. We oppose racism, sexism, homophobia and all prejudice that divides us. Only our bosses benefit from a divided workforce.

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Web: <http://www.workersliberty.org>. For our regular Tubeworker bulletin, by and for London Underground workers, see: <http://www.workersliberty.org/tubeworker>.

For our fortnightly paper, *Solidarity*: <http://www.solidarity-online.org>

Party. Today too, in the battle to refound working-class representation, we need to look at what is happening in other unions.

The new TGWU leader, Tony Woodley, declared on 1 June: "I'll... call a summit of affiliated unions to discuss how to get Labour back representing working-class people..."

Two days later, the ASLEF conference unanimously resolved "to reclaim the Labour Party as a party not only of peace, but also one in which internal democracy and accountability are re-established" and which is based on the "values of socialism".

Union general secretary Mick Rix told delegates: "We must fight from within and take control of the Party".

The same conference also voted not to back the official Labour candidate for Mayor of London, but instead to help finance the campaign of outgoing Mayor Ken Livingstone. Mick Rix said he did not expect this support for an independent candidate to disrupt or prejudice the union's position within the Labour Party.

On 9 June, the conference of the GMB general union voted to review its donations to individual constituency Labour parties and to withdraw cash if an MP does not share the union's "aims, values and priorities".

About 100 MPs supported by the GMB will be invited to interviews. High-profile New Labour figures like Peter Mandelson could lose union financial backing.

The GMB conference also passed an emergency motion calling on Tony Blair to resign if an independent inquiry establishes that he was deliberately lying about "weapons of mass destruction" in Iraq. (And who seriously thinks he wasn't?)

The broadcasting union BECTU, at its conference on 17 May, decided to ballot its members on whether or not to continue its affiliation to the Labour Party.

Unison leader Dave Prentis has called for a review of Labour Party structures to restore

The RMT should oppose Tony Blair's disciplinary moves against George Galloway for his anti-war speeches. But that is a different matter from hailing George Galloway as a great socialist and promising to back him in elections! In reply to the *Daily Telegraph*, Galloway has said things that should damn him for socialists. He has told *The Scotsman* (19 May) that he doesn't hold with workers' MPs on workers' wages: "As I told Tommy Sheridan once, I couldn't live on three workers' wages". He has said that his political activity on Iraq has been financed by the Saudi and Emirates governments and a Ba'thist businessman. He has said that he was on friendly Christmas-dinner-at-home terms with Tariq Aziz, deputy to the fascist mass murderer Saddam Hussein. How would you feel about Galloway if you were an Iraqi trade unionist?

CUBA SI! REPRESSION NO!

We should certainly oppose the US blockade against Cuba. That doesn't mean we have to support the Cuban regime, let alone delude ourselves that it is socialist.

According to a report from Amnesty International, published in June 2003:

"In mid-March 2003... Cuban authorities carried out an unprecedented clampdown on the dissident movement on the island. Over the space of a few days, security forces rounded up over 75 dissidents in targeted sweeps... They were subjected to hasty and unfair trials, and, just weeks after their initial arrest, were given long prison terms of up to 28 years... In early April 2003, the Cuban government ended a three-year de facto moratorium on executions, killing by firing squad three men who had been involved in a hijacking. They had been subjected to a summary trial and appeals process, and were executed less than a week after their trial began..."

In spite of Cuban government claims that those arrested were 'foreign agents' whose activities endangered Cuban independence and security, and having reviewed the legal documents of many of the 75 dissidents sentenced, Amnesty International believes that they are prisoners of conscience.

Giving interviews to US-based media or sending information to organisations like Amnesty International was mentioned in some of the verdicts as arguments for the conviction of the dissidents. Those activities clearly fall within the parameters of the legitimate exercise of freedom of expression and association and should not be punished by imprisonment."

an effective union voice in the party. Trouble is, he said it in order to give himself a "left" profile and help push through a bland report from the review of its political funds which Unison decided on in 2001. In Unison general conference (17-20 June) Prentis got a left-wing "reclaim the Labour Party" motion voted down. But a motion was passed calling Unison to withdraw funding from Labour MPs who back privatisation.

Derek Simpson, leader of Amicus (AEEU-MSF), has allied himself with the "awkward squad", but his merged union's new rulebook will put its political fund in the hands of a tiny minority, the union's delegates to local Constituency Labour Parties — who, on the old AEEU side, are notoriously handpicked rightwingers.

The picture is uneven. But things are stirring in the union/Labour Party link as they have not done for years.

THE changes made in the Labour Party have radically reduced union input.

An army of media people, advisers, and think-tankies, most of them people with no links to the labour movement, sits on top of the party. The unions still have a voice in the National Executive Committee and the Labour Party conference, but both that voice, and the powers of the NEC and conference, are radically diminished.

Perhaps most important, such union say as there is in the Labour Party is far less subject to control by the rank and file.

The moves by Woodley and others to reverse this political disenfranchisement of the working class are very important and very welcome.

Two questions. What lessons do we draw from the dispute over the guards' role? It was not a success. Why? We suggest two reasons. First, delay. The issue was left to drag on until spirit and momentum had gone out of the dispute. Second, no attempt to get ASLEF on board to make the strike solid.

RMT conference back in 1998 unanimously voted for a dual-question ballot of all companies over a 35 hour week and a substantial pay rise for all grades — in other words for a unified struggle across the companies. Where is the ballot? Where is the strategy for unity?

Woodley is right to campaign for the remaining union positions of strength within the structures of New Labour to be used in a way accountable to union members and to working-class interests.

Such an effort could draw together the forces for a new and sharp campaign for working-class political representation, one which could and would go further than nudging Blair a bit on this or that issue, one that would eventually force an open break between, on the one side, the unions and the socialists, refounding labour representation, and, on the other, the Blairite privatisers and warmongers of "New Labour".

Those who want to change the unions' relationship with New Labour are right — but the way to do that is through a positive fight to restore working-class representation in politics, not just negative gestures of protest.

The central question is rank-and-file control, and the building of rank and file trade union groups which combine the fight for labour representation in politics with the fight to democratise the trade unions.

Woodley is right to call for a "summit" of union leaders to organise a fight in the Labour structures. But it should not remain just a matter of "summits".

Build a Labour Representation Committee — not just as a cabal of left-wing trade-union leaders, but as a broad-based rank-and-file movement, with representative conferences! And don't wait for Woodley! Start now, by organising local "labour representation" conferences to debate the issues, review local options, and coordinate activity.