

The unions, Labour, and socialist politics

Since its election victory on 7 June, New Labour has declared plans to chop up public services further and parcel them out to profiteers. This new slap in the face for the unions has provoked a flux and ferment in union politics such as has not been seen for 100 years.

The unions need to engage with politics. And what has passed for the unions' engagement in politics is now under a searchlight beam which shows it up to be largely a sham.

There are three possible ways out.

The unions could get together to reassert themselves and restore "the political labour movement" as a reality.

The unions could abandon politics. They could become pure "business unions", each union concerned only with its dues income and the wages-and-conditions deals it can negotiate with the bosses in its sector.

Or the unions could turn to narrow-minded, pragmatic, lobby-group politics, trying to trade political support and funds for favours with a variety of MPs, Lib-Dem, New Labour, or even Tory.

All three possibilities are in play. The outcome depends in large measure on what union activists and socialists do now.

Fire Brigades Union

On 23 May the Fire Brigades Union conference, against the wishes of the union leadership, resolved to open the possibility of union money being used to back election candidates against New Labour if they are more in line with union policy. The FBU did not, as some have suggested, "break the link with New Labour", or withhold money from the Labour Party; but it did send ripples across

the union movement.

On 21 June UNISON conference voted for a review of the union's political funds. That vote, like the FBU one, was carried against the conference platform. The conference also voted, with the union leaders' support, for "strikes when deemed necessary, a national day of action and a national demonstration against privatisation, with a lobby of parliament".

Last weekend, Bill Morris of the TGWU publicly speculated about his union organising joint campaigns over public services with the Liberal Democrats. The TGWU logo might appear on Lib-Dem posters.

Trade union candidates?

The GMB coyly failed to deny press reports that it might help field "pro-public services" trade-union (or union-backed) candidates in next May's local authority elections.

On 4 July the GMB announced it would send postcards to Labour MPs with a picture of Dr Richard Taylor, who won a seat in the general election as a "Health Concern" independent. GMB general secretary John Edmonds said that with the postcards the union "is just asking a simple question, 'Will you stand up for public services in the same way Dr Taylor did'. If the answer to that question is, 'no', then obviously it will be very hard for our members to support MPs who are prepared to see our public services effectively privatised out of existence".

Ambiguity, evasiveness, grandstanding — the union leaders' stance has much of all those. The recent upheavals may lead to nothing very decisive for a while yet. Or complexities and untidiness may emerge

without fundamental change.

The balance of evidence, though, is that the current ferment in Britain runs much deeper. New Labour has developed a political machine which has no use for the unions — except as cash-cows which make no demands, for so long as they are willing to play that role. The Blair faction has progressively shut down the Labour Party's democratic channels. The working class has been largely disenfranchised. We have been deprived of even that measure of independent working-class political representation which the old, federal, union-dominated, and relatively democratic Labour Party used to provide.

All these are not just last week's headline news. They are solid trends of several years' evolution. The recent union conference votes and the mass working-class abstention on 7 June

Can the unions rebuild working-class politics?

- Disaffiliation?
 - "Shopping round"?
 - Workers' representation
- Discussion on how to go forward from the votes in FBU and UNISON, with activists from different unions

5.30pm, Sunday 8 July

Friends' International House, Byng Place, next to ULU.

- Meeting organised by Action for Solidarity. Room booked for "Welfare State Network".

Workers' Liberty

Bulletin for the discussion at "Marxism 2001", no.2.

are two indications that increasing numbers of working-class people see these trends and, in different ways, seek responses.

Use Labour conference

Standing pat, repeating traditional Labour formulas, and relying on business-as-usual, is not an option. Sooner or later, one way or another, union politics will change. If socialists fail to fight for it to move forwards, then we will, by default, contribute to it moving backwards.

The best possibilities are those built on the recent talk of challenging the Blair faction at Labour conference and, as necessary, through independent trade-union and socialist candidates in elections. Such moves would point to a fight to reclaim the Labour Party from the Blair faction and — since the Blair faction would split rather than face a serious union challenge — to the creation of a new mass workers' party based on the trade unions.

Some people in the Socialist Alliance say that this perspective is futile nostalgia. For example, an article by Mike Marqusee in the latest *International Socialism* journal gives a good and clear account of the recent transformations in the Labour Party. It explains why "engaging in the party's internal debate" was vital. But that was the past. Now that "the

admixture has qualitatively changed" in the Labour Party (as Marqusee accurately describes it), he seems to drop the whole idea of trying to rally the unions for independent working-class politics.

"We don't want to reinvent the Labour Party. Even if we wanted to we couldn't — history has moved on".

But why should the strategic priority of fighting to reorient the mass labour movement fall just because the tactical choice for socialists of being active in the Constituency Labour Parties and renouncing independent electoral action has become barren?

No-one can bring back "the Labour Party" just as it was in 1900, nor should socialists particularly want to. But we can, should, and do want to "reinvent" a new "Labour", or mass working-class, party. If it is to be really a mass working class party, it should be based on, or linked to, the existing mass united organisations of the working class — the trade unions. Authentic socialism can advance only through independent working-class politics, not through any substitutes or bypasses.

For mass independent working-class politics to leap up from the grave into which the Blair faction is currently lowering it is, however, not the only possibility in the present situation. Complete withdrawal of the unions from politics is unlikely. However,

"shopping around" with the Lib-Dems, Plaid Cymru and Scottish National Party is very possible.

"Shopping around"

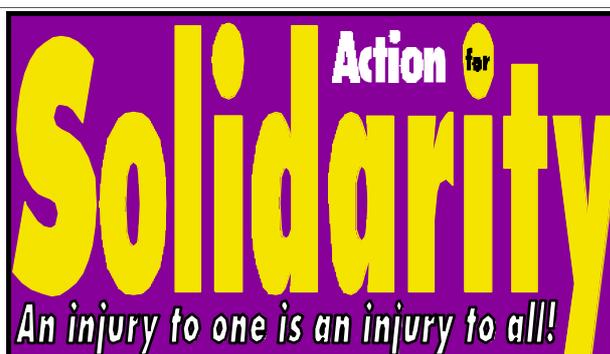
This "shopping around" would be a great step backwards. It would reduce the labour movement to a lobby group, doing deals with big-business parties to see who will throw the best sops. In fact it might fragment the labour movement into a variety of lobby groups, each backing particular parties or MPs more

responsive to its sectional concerns. It would destroy the idea of working-class solidarity and common purpose in politics.

If the left in the unions confines itself to the sort of agitation favoured by *Socialist Worker* — "Make the break with New Labour!" — then, by default, we will be throwing what weight we have towards that alternative of "shopping around". It is the alternative that "goes with the grain" of the established political balance of forces. Scatter iron filings, and they move towards the strongest magnetic pole. So long as unions judge "pragmatically" and "realistically" — and they will, unless socialists can win the arguments to make them do otherwise — we in the Socialist Alliance, with our 1.62% of the vote in less than one-fifth of the parliamentary constituencies, are a much weaker magnetic pole than the Lib-Dems or nationalists.

Negative agitation against New Labour is not enough. Our positive answer, and the measuring-rod by which we condemn New Labour, must be independent working-class politics. Engels explained: "The working class has interests of its own, political as well as social... The working men find it necessary to organise themselves as an independent Party... The organised Trades would do well to consider... that the time is rapidly approaching when the working class of this country will claim, with a voice not to be mistaken, its full share of representation in Parliament... For [that] organisations will become necessary, not of separate Trades, but of the working class as a body".

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The future of the Socialist Alliance

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5.30pm, Wednesday 11 July

"The Plough", Museum Street (a short walk down Gower Street).

● Meeting organised by Workers' Liberty