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# Workers' Liberty

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*RMT opens up debate on working-class representation*

## Organise the rank-and-file!

The broadside condemnation of Blair's New Labour government by the RMT railworkers' union conference this week (29 June – 4 July) is a welcome jolt to the labour movement.

So is the probable decision, soon, by the RMT's Scottish region to affiliate to the Scottish Socialist Party.

But where we go from here depends on what rank-and-file activists and socialists, in the RMT and other unions, make of it.

RMT activists have been jolted free from their previous automatic, laid-down-by-rule tie to backing New Labour in elections. They should now take an active, not a passive, role in formulating the choices and alternatives.

That can best be done by RMT branches everywhere initiating local labour representation conferences. Other union branches – even those of unions not affiliated to Labour, e.g. the PCS, now boosted by a new left-wing leadership can join them in this. In Oxford, the Trades Council has already agreed to call a labour representation conference. Elsewhere too, the Trades Council may be a good vehicle. Or the drive for a labour representation conference can be coupled with a drive to revive the Trades Council where it has petered out.

In Scotland, too, the RMT can help stir up the whole labour movement by calling a broad labour representation conference.

Those labour-representation conferences will need to discuss the basic policies needed by the working class.

Using those policies as a yardstick, committees set up from them may choose to back local Labour parliamentary and council candidates loyal to the labour movement.

They may choose to mobilise union delegates to “deselect” Blairite Labour

MPs and councillors and replace them with socialists.

Or, concluding that “deselection” is not a viable option in the near future, they may decide to back independent working-class socialist candidates, or to propose their own labour-representation candidates.

If they are not yet strong enough for any of these options, they may just organise hustings and circulate questionnaires in which all the candidates claiming to be “Labour” or “working-class” have to respond to what this collective of local trade unionists considers to be the key questions.

At one level or another, local trade unionists can be brought together to address the question of a workers' voice in politics in a collective, organised way.

Sadly, we cannot rely on the RMT leadership to push things that way. Three problems at the conference pointed to the need for independent rank-and-file initiative.

\* In a generally left-wing conference, a crucial left-wing motion was defeated thanks to RMT general secretary Bob Crow speaking against it.

A motion from the union's Bakerloo London Underground branch (initiated by Workers' Liberty) called for the union to remove full-time official Mick Cash from his position as RMT representative on the Labour Party National Executive Committee, and replace him with someone who will stand by RMT policy.

In the Labour NEC meeting in the run-up to the war, Cash backed the pro-government motion against an anti-war one from Mark Seddon. In the one held during the war, Cash said he would find a debate on the war “embarrassing” and suggested that the meeting move on to the next business (which it did).

RMT policy was firmly against the war. Yet Crow defended Cash. Anti-Blairism should begin at home – but it clearly doesn't yet at RMT HQ.

\* The conference voted for “closer links” not only with the Scottish Socialist Party, but also with middle-class parties like the Welsh nationalists and the Greens.

\* While the conference voted to write Labour Party affiliation into the RMT rule book – previously, it was only policy – Bob Crow made it pretty clear that he was actually trying to provoke disaffiliation. He pushed through a decision to reduce the union's nominal affiliated numbers to a token 5,000 (out of 60,000 members, almost all of whom pay the political levy).

This manipulative approach, doing one thing under cover of proclaiming the opposite, is no way to rekindle positive working-class political activity. If the Labour Party tries to disaffiliate the RMT, then the RMT and other unions should fight against it. On the worst outcome, the RMT conference decisions could lead to the union's role in politics becoming no more than that of a sideline funding agency, with Bob Crow and the union exec sitting in HQ dispensing largesse to a motley selection of left-talking politicians from all quarters.

The whole thing would become a miniature, telescoped re-run of New Zealand. There, many unions disaffiliated from the Labour Party in the 1980s when it pursued extreme market-economics politics in government, and a large left-wing breakaway “New Labour Party” (different sort of “new!”) was formed.

But then that left-Labour Party purged its pricklier left-wing members and groups. It mutated into a vague non-socialist “Alliance”, and working-class voters drifted back to a slightly revamped Labour Party.

The big picture is that we need to aim for a <i>workers' government</i>. Nothing less will be a real alternative to Blairism. Jospin in France and Schröder in Germany, both in coalition with the Greens, represent only slight variants on Blair's course.

To fight for a workers' government – and to gain concessions now – the working class needs its own political party.

We need to mobilise the unions within the Labour structures towards a break with Blairism – fighting the beast at close quarters, face to face – and at the same time organise the most committed activists to establish a clear,

vocal socialist presence on the political scene.

Sadly, the SWP has been working towards the opposite combination – dissolving the fight for independent working-class political representation into “popular fronts”, while evading the face-to-face fight against Blairism.

During the Iraq war, the Communication Workers' Union (CWU) executive nearly passed a motion of no confidence in Tony Blair as Labour leader. Who saved Blair's bacon? The SWP. They withdrew the anti-war motion to which the no-confidence vote was attached as an amendment. Why? In order, so they said, to “preserve the united front” with

CWU leader Billy Hayes. Hayes talks left but was frantic to avoid a sharp clash with Blair.

And in the RMT leading SWPers have backed the call for “closer links” with middle-class parties like Plaid Cymru and the Greens. There again, the motive seems to be the “preserve the united front” with the top union leadership.

Better left-wing union leaders than right-wingers. Better some movement from the union leaders than none. But socialists cannot rely on, or wait for, leaders like Hayes and Crow – or Woodley, or Rix, or anyone.

Organise the rank-and-file!

## Crisis in the Socialist Alliance

On Tuesday 1 July, the SWP organised a coup in Birmingham Socialist Alliance.

Mobilising dozens of people who have never before been involved in the Socialist Alliance – and very likely won't be again – they voted out all the officers of the Birmingham SA and replaced them by SWPers and their allies.

The main target was Steve Godward, victimised FBU activist, vice-chair of the Socialist Alliance nationally until recently ousted by the SWP for having “minority views”, and incumbent chair of Birmingham SA.

Steve has been critical of the new “popular front” turn by the SA. But other officers who support the new turn but might be expected to demand accountability and insist on debate and discussion – such as Stuart Richardson, a well-known supporter of the *Resistance* newspaper – were swept out too.

Socialist Alliance “independents” all across the country have been angered by the coup, and many, regrettably, are quitting the SA or cutting back their commitment.

Why is the SA being *narrowed down* in this way when the new turn adopted at the 10 May conference is supposed to be about building something *broader*, wider more inclusive?

The Birmingham coup is in tune with the national executive elections at the 10 May conference, where the SWP voted through a slate with an effective numerical majority of itself and its close allies.

In fact, the “broadening” and the “narrowing” are two sides of the same political coin.

The new turn means the SA becoming part of a broader coalition. With whom? That is not clear to anyone, probably not even the SWP leadership, but the possibilities are clear.

\* The Greens and Plaid Cymru (as in the RMT).

\* The hierarchy of the Muslim community and the mosques (as in the projected “Peace and Justice” coalition in Birmingham), and the Muslim Association of Britain (British offshoot of the Muslim brotherhood, the Arab world's largest Islamic fundamentalist organisation). Alliance with these conservative or reactionary forces is quite different from allying with left-wing Muslim workers and youth.

\* George Galloway MP. Galloway opposed the Iraq war. So did many other non-socialists – and Galloway is not a socialist. On his own account – in reply to the Daily Telegraph's charges against him – he has been a close friend of the mass-murderer Saddam Hussein's deputy Tariq Aziz, and has funded his political operations with cash from the Saudi and Emirates governments.

How can a political platform be worked out for a coalition of such forces? Not by debate on a socialist, working-class basis – but only by negotiating and horse-trading. Once the negotiations are finished, a Socialist Alliance likely to ask awkward questions can only be an embarrassment to the SWP.

So, in order to build a “broader” popular-front coalition, it is entirely logical that the SWP seeks to narrow down the Alliance.

Already, some in the Socialist Alliance have started to organise against this turn, and to continue the purposes the SA was founded to accomplish. A meeting on 25 May made the first steps towards founding a “Network for Working-Class Representation/Independent Socialist Alliance”, and sketched out a draft platform as a basis for discussion and debate.

Check it out: [www.independentsocialistalliance.net](http://www.independentsocialistalliance.net)