

# **For a democratic, fighting union**

## **Stop begging and dare to fight! An open letter to Tony Woodley and Len McCluskey**

**Dear brothers Woodley and McCluskey,**

We are facing a general election which will probably see the election of a Tory government committed to making huge attacks on workers' rights, jobs and benefits.

We are in this position because the leadership of the trade union movement has done nothing to take on the Labour government. Despite claiming to be socialists, you have failed to mount any serious defence of your members. You make legal, bureaucratic appeals to change the anti-trade union laws, but have done nothing to organise workers to ignore or defy them when necessary.

You have allowed New Labour to be a right-wing, boss-serving, neo-Thatcherite government. You continue to give vast amounts of money to support candidates that are against union policy; you voted to end the right of the unions to put motions on the agenda of Labour Party conference; you refused to back John McDonnell for Labour leader. You beg the government to give money to big business to keep it profitable rather than fighting to defend jobs by nationalising industries and producing what's socially necessary. In this economic crisis you beg rather than fight.

The unions need to act. Fight the New Labour leadership politically. Refuse to give any money to candidates who don't back union policy. Organise the industrial action necessary to defend jobs. Pledge union support to any workers facing plant closures. Organise the unemployed.

To do nothing will lead to the working class looking for political answers from the far right.

You need only look back at labour movement history to understand that the inaction of yourselves and your colleagues is a criminal dereliction of your duty as labour movement leaders. Think of 1931.

A right-wing Labour government under Ramsay MacDonald, in the grip of the sort of market economics that Brown and Mandelson are slaves to, proposed to cut the dole for the millions of unemployed. Why? To "balance the books". They like Brown served the rich. The labour movement — led by TGWU General Secretary Ernest Bevin — revolted.

Bevin was no left-winger — just a responsible trade union leader, with a real (limited) loyalty to the working class. The Labour Party split.

Without what Bevin, Lansbury, Attlee, Nye Bevan and the others did, the Labour Party would have been destroyed. There would have been no 1945 Labour victory out of which came the health service and the welfare state.

But, you insist: the most important thing is the defeat of the Tories in the next general election. Is it? Anti-Toryism was used in the labour movement at the beginning of the 20th century as an argument for sticking with the old Liberal Party - against those who organised the Labour Party! "Lesser evilism" is a profoundly conservative, regressive, anti-working-class doctrine.

Great things are possible in Britain if the labour movement fights - as workers at Visteon and Vestas have shown. Brothers, stop begging, dare to fight!

## **Support Rob Williams for General Secretary**

It is good that the United Left has organised hustings (5 September 2009) to decide on an agreed candidate for General Secretary. We know that our main opponents within the union - the Simpson-supporting fake left "Workers United" group - have already decided on their candidate, Les Bayliss. It is essential that the serious, principled left chooses a candidate who can beat Bayliss, who stands for class-struggle politics, rank-and-file democracy, and for an effective, accountable industrial structure within the union.

In our opinion, all three of the prospective candidates are genuine, respect-worthy trade unionists. But Rob Williams, reinstated as convenor at Linamar after a successful campaign against victimisation, has an outstanding track record of struggle, not just at Linamar, but in just about every other recent major dispute, including the Visteon and Vestas occupations. (We say this despite our many disagreements with the approach, including in the unions, of his organisation, the Socialist Party.) He has also been prominently involved in the National Shop Stewards Network. All this, in our opinion, makes Rob the best candidate for the United Left.



## **United Left: rank-and-file movement or bureaucratic job club?**

While it is reasonable for the United Left to ensure that the meeting is not 'packed' and that there is a fair voting system, there is an over emphasis on keeping people out, making sure they sit where they're supposed to and setting the tone for the meeting with initial questioning along the lines of: "Are you, or have you ever been a member of..."

So far it has been agreed to decide everything by consensus or clapometer. If there is a need for a vote then the weighted voting system will apply so as to stop the dominance of the strong regions in the North West and South East. In the union and in the United Left disagreements that exist between the old Amicus left and the T&G Broad Left are taking the form of bureaucratic manoeuvring rather than any attempt to make clear political differences. Sections of the leadership seem more concerned with bureaucratic defence of position than building a fighting and democratic union.

The actual political lines of difference are blurred behind this jostling and the really important issue of how we ensure the united union is democratic, how we make our lay structures more powerful, is lost.

In the United Left we should spell out the differences that exist and debate them openly. This will stop regional war lordism /block voting and will let us identify what we agree on and the action we can take. Political disagreement and debate should be open and encouraged, not treated as treachery. Pretending differences don't exist and refusing to take votes does not build unity, but hinders our ability to

build an effective left rank and file.

We should fight for changes in the union that would be beneficial, like making sure all union officials are elected and accountable, and ensuring that the committees function so that the members don't just go along with the decisions of full-time officials - making lay member democracy real.

We should make clear our commitment is to democracy, not backroom deals.



## Construction ballot: don't waste the potential!

There is another dispute looming in the construction industry. The employers still have their sights set on breaking the national agreement and the unions. Now a national ballot, organised by both the GMB and Unite, is underway, taking up the employers' refusal to make a pay offer or give any guarantees of employment security in the review of the NAECI agreement for 2010.

The last dispute showed that solidarity, all-out action and workplace democracy win. It is also in workplace meetings that it is possible to tackle the nationalism and even racism of some members by opposing the use of slogans like "British jobs for British workers". (A process not helped by Derek Simpson posing with this slogan for the *Daily Star!*)

We should have learnt from this that there are ways round the anti-union laws and that determined action works. This time the Unite and GMB negotiators will be responsible for a legal dispute - if the lessons of the last strike have been learnt then it could show the effectiveness of trade union organisation. If the ballot is won then power stations can be shut down by legal strike action. It will show the employers and government the potential strength of our movement.

Compromise and sluggishness will not only risk losing the confidence of these militant workers, but open the trade union movement up to more attacks from employers and Government. Watch this space!



## Unite fails Vestas Workers

You have probably heard of fight of the Vestas Blades workers to save their jobs. However it is unlikely you have heard of it from Unite, whose role throughout this saga has been lamentable and whose silence speaks volume.

When Vestas announced the closures with the loss of 600+ jobs, some of the (ununionised) workers approached local Unite officials and were met with indifference. It was only after socialists, environmentalists and trade unionists from Workers' Climate Action started talking to workers about tactics that can be used to fight closures that some of them were emboldened to act.

Since the occupation started the workers have been joined by activists from Climate Camp and rank-and-file workers from a range of unions. However Britain's largest union has been largely noticeable by its absence. Individual Unite members have visited the picket line and some have even stayed in the camp (Jerry Hicks went down to the Isle of Wight early on to join the picket line), but in general the response from the left in union has been luke warm at best.

The closure of the only wind turbine blade factory in the country isn't just a blow to the workers; it also exposes the pathetic nature of the government's response to dangerous, man-made climate change.

In this Vestas workers are showing the way forward and need strong solidarity from members of Unite. Join the

national day of action on 17 September!

[savevestas.wordpress.com](http://savevestas.wordpress.com) / [savevestas@gmail.com](mailto:savevestas@gmail.com)  
[workersclimateaction.wordpress.com](http://workersclimateaction.wordpress.com)



## How not to save jobs at Diageo

In mid-July 20,000 people marched through Kilmarnock in protest at Diageo's plans to shut down its Johnnie Walker bottling plant in the town, and its grain distillery in Glasgow. Total threatened job loss: 900. At the closing rally great speeches by politicians from all the major parties pledged support for the campaign to keep the bottling plant open.

A government-led task force, involving representatives from across the political spectrum, trade union leaders, and civil servants, would draw up an alternative set of proposals to save jobs and the bottling plant in Kilmarnock.

A firm of consultants was commissioned to research Diageo's proposals and draw up alternatives. Their findings have now been published.

They describe Diageo's plans to shut workplaces and axe jobs as "sensible", dismiss the significance of the link between Johnnie Walker and Kilmarnock, and propose the sell-off of the Glasgow distillery, even though, in the current economic climate, a buyer is unlikely to come forward.

The only argument the task force now has with Diageo is: how many hundreds of jobs should be lost!

That's what happens when you try to run a campaign to save jobs by telling the bosses that you can come up with better plans to make a profit than they can.

**Unite members should be demanding that the union formally withdraw from the task force**, and campaign, alongside of other unions, for:

\* no job losses in any of Diageo's plants;

\* cut hours, not jobs, with no loss of pay;

\* nationalisation of Diageo's operations in Britain.



## Migrant workers: which side are you on?

As more and more migrant workers enter Britain, the question of organising them is becoming a life-or-death one for our unions.

Without a strong labour movement campaign to organise all workers and level up wages, conditions and rights, the bosses will use migration to push down living standards, dividing the working-class through racism.

That's why battles by migrant cleaners, whether in the RMT (on London Underground), Unison (in universities) or Unite (at banks and companies in the City of London) are both inspiring and crucial. A left worthy of the name will throw its resources into championing them.

In fact, however, the Unite cleaners in London have received a lot of hostility in the union, with Alberto Durango, who was victimised by cleaning company Lancaster, being disciplined on spurious grounds - and Unite organiser Jose Vallejo Villa actually claiming that militant cleaner activists are in the pay of the bosses!

This is a dividing line for the left: whose side are you on?

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