

Workers' Liberty

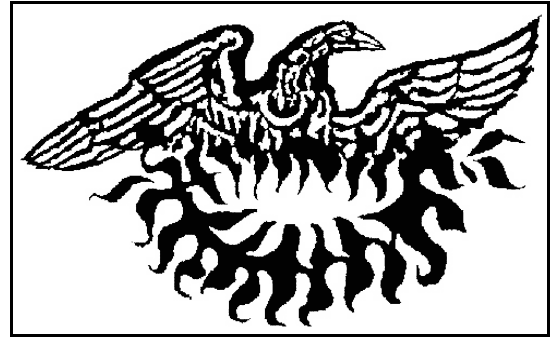
UNISON Labour Link Forum Bulletin

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unison@workersliberty.org

0207 207 3997



After the coronation, what next?

Delegates at the 2007 UNISON Labour Link Forum face a key question: what do we do to promote our union's policies, policies that would not only reverse the increasing inequality in the UK but also convince UNISON members to go out and give our party a fourth term, and make them also the policies of Brown's government? They are, after all, the policies which can reverse the biggest trend in current UK politics: the tendency not to vote at all.

What have we learned from dealing with Tony Blair?

Trade unions, including ours, have for ten years operated on the basis of making friendly suggestions, being supportive at all times in public, whilst hoping for a hearing and backroom deals with 'our' ministers. Basically we've sought patronage. Has this approach worked?

No. Even the things we view positively like inner city regeneration, building new hospitals and schools have been tied into providing huge profits for private enterprise, and often giving the private sector effective control over the planning and running of public services.

Why hasn't this approach worked?

Because the union leaders have acted as though Blair's government viewed the unions positively and really wanted a genuine partnership when in fact they are clearly more loyal to organisations like Capita, Costain, United Healthcare, BAE, the Vardy Trust and Balfour Beatty.

We need to ask ourselves whether we want to carry on this way with Gordon Brown. So far the signs are not good. UNISON, and other health service unions, have tried to speak to Gordon about NHS pay – both before and after his promotion to Prime Minister, but he has not been willing to meet us, despite the decision to give him UNISON's nomination for leader, which was supposed to win us 'influence'. Seeking influence by subservience does not work.

Workers' Liberty supporters in UNISON think we need to replace appeals for patronage with democracy and accountability in the Labour Party. If this sort of fundamental change had been made previously then the UNISON group of MPs could have ensured a contest in the recent Leadership election, therefore guaranteeing a debate about the privatisation, public sector pay, Trident and all the other issues which could have been raised. An assertive UNISON committed to open debate in the Labour Party would have nominated John McDonnell not Gordon Brown.

We could stop Trident replacement

Trident clearly illustrates the problem we have with the Labour party and our union's intervention into it.

The continuation or replacement of Trident will take money away from public services. That Labour is pushing ahead illustrates just

how off course this government is, and how we have been ignored once again.

It is time to show our members that we are not just interested in preserving our links with Labour, but in using those links on issues like Trident.

Defend UNISON's right to put motions to Labour Party conference

On Sunday 24 June, just before he was crowned leader, Gordon Brown put what was presented as a non-controversial document on "improving" the policy forum process to the Labour Party National Executive Committee. Inquisitive NEC members were reassured that the proposals had been cleared with the leadership of the major trade unions via the Trade Union Liaison Organisation.

It has not taken long for the full and radical significance of Gordon's plans to become apparent. By all accounts the NEC did not study the document properly.

In Gordon Brown's speech to conference that afternoon there was just one main reference to the document. In it he said that he wanted Labour's programme to be decided by a "One Member One Vote" ballot.

By Monday the spin doctors had been at work and what was being presented to the media was somewhat different from what the NEC had been told 24 hours earlier.

Radio 4's Today programme said the proposals would: "stop unions shaping policy at Labour's annual conference".

The details of the proposal are this. Gordon Brown wants to remove the right of both CLPs and trade unions to put contemporary motions to Labour Party conference. He wants to allow only "deliberative debates" with no votes. The aim is to stop motions which oppose government policy or call for major changes on issues like housing, the anti-union laws or privatisation.

Brown is in a rush to get these proposals through. A timetable has been put forward which might mean the changes get put to this year's conference.

Brown has said that he wants to convince the unions about these proposals — which means that he wants to convince the trade union leaders. How on earth can he do that?

The Brownite camp say some union leaders could be persuaded that the changes would make it politically easier for Gordon to make behind the scenes concessions to them. That without media attention on votes at

party conference Gordon wouldn't have to make a point of facing down trade union "demands" and could give us more.

Is this very convincing? Are our leaders so demoralised, lacking in confidence and so plain desperate that they will agree to neuter themselves in the hope of getting a few crumbs in return? Maybe.

Whether this can convince union and CLP activists is another matter. The unions are the target of Brown's campaign in the press, but the CLPs too would be denied the right to put motions to conference.

The TGWU executive has issued a statement this week calling for an end to the manipulation of Labour Party conference by the party leadership. This statement could be used to build a broad campaign to oppose these proposals in both the unions and the CLPs. John McDonnell MP has — rightly — talked of the need to launch such a campaign immediately.

We think that such a campaign should not be limited to defending the status quo. We should raise the right of conference to win back control over policy, by pressing for the right of CLPs and affiliates to submit motions to amend policy documents and other proposals from the NEC, and for contemporary motions to be taken as amending Policy Forum documents. If we campaign about what is wrong with the policy forum process and the sham of OMOV, "take it or leave it" ballots, we will be in a better place to make sure Gordon does not get any of his proposals through.

The question for members of the UNISON Labour Link is are we willing to fight for Labour Party democracy?