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# Re-launch to achieve workers' representation!

THIS CONFERENCE of the Labour Representation Committee will provide an opportunity for socialist and trade unionists who want turn the tide of retrogression in the labour movement.

The significant effort by the left to re-assert itself through the campaign for John McDonnell MP for leader of the Labour Party was unable to surmount the bureaucratic obstacles bolstered by the Parliamentary Labour Party and the union hierarchy. At Labour's conference in Bournemouth, the union leaders allowed the abolition of conference's ability to make policy and at a stroke disenfranchised sixteen affiliated trade unions and all Constituency Labour Parties.

## **Fight in the unions to reverse Bournemouth!**

**The Political Committee of the post and telecom union CWU passed a motion, to come to this LRC conference, which called on the LRC to "work with unions and CLPs to reverse the Bournemouth decision".**

**Unfortunately the motion was blocked at national level in the union. But it reflects a strong feeling among CWU activists.**

**There will be a fight at the CWU's 2008 conference to commit the union to campaign to restore the full rights of unions and CLPs to put motions to Labour Party conference, have them debated there, have them prevail over National Policy Forum documents, and have the Labour Party leadership be bound by conference decisions.**

**The LRC should promote that fight in every union. In Unite it will also involve campaigning for a special union conference, since on current plans Unite's next policy conference will not be held until after the Bournemouth ban on motions is "reviewed" at Labour Party conference 2009.**

**But no authoritative union conference approved the unions' vote at Bournemouth to throw away the unions' political rights. In fact, until only days before, union leaders like Billy Hayes, Paul Kenny, Derek Simpson, and Tony Woodley were insisting there was "no chance" of them agreeing to do that!**

**Calling them to account, and committing the unions to fight to reclaim their political rights, is a basic issue of union democracy.**

In the class struggle in the postal dispute we see the crisis of working class political representation being given its most concrete expression; the seething anger of the rank and file brings into question not only the role of the union leaders, but the entire nature of the relationship between the Communication Workers' Union and the Labour Party.

For a decade a significant section of the left responded to the process of centralisation and exclusion in the Labour Party through efforts to coalesce into electoral blocs. These myriad initiatives to construct an alternative to "New Labour", not organically from a process of struggle within the labour movement, have failed. Now just at the point when this historical phase of change in the Labour Party appears to have run its course, these projects have all but exhausted themselves. This places the Labour Representation Committee in a strategically important position to address our current dilemmas.

Ten years ago Tony Benn argued that: "We need to recreate a representative body of people to fight for working-class rights... [the] trade unions will again have to set up political action committees to get Parliamentary representation" He raised the idea of "refounding the Labour Representation Committee.....based on the labour movement as it exists".

The current LRC was founded "to secure a voice for socialists within the Labour Party, the unions, and Parliament." The LRC can boast the affiliation of five national trade unions, eight union regions, and 62 union branches; but only 10 Constituency Labour Parties and seven LP branches along with 16 other organisations. This is still a potentially powerful base of support to build upon.

Now the LRC is at a crossroads. If it is to achieve its strategic goal of working class representation it cannot allow itself to be restricted to "the development of a radical policy agenda for the Labour Party and the trade unions".

Yet while the Labour Party at one level remains an arena of struggle, the LRC goal been rendered unattainable by structural changes. There is legitimate objection by LRC members and within affiliated trade unions to restricting the socialist project to reforming the ossified Labour Party. As John McDonnell has argued:

“We have to face up to the challenge of identifying and developing new routes into effective political activity.”

The LRC needs to grasp the historical opportunity and re-launch itself — to make itself the axis for a re-composition of the left, to become a workers’ representation committee in its full and unbridled sense.

Such a re-launch would comprise:

1. Replacing the name LRC with that of the “Workers’ Representation Committee”. This is the equivalent of the LRC initiated by the Scottish TUC in 1899, which unified wider forces and was clearer in its call for a new worker party committed to creating a socialist society. It is about adopting a name more representative of our purpose to represent the politically disenfranchised workers, as opposed to being a fraction of a body which they consider has disenfranchised them.

2. The LRC conference needs to take a clear decision to reconstitute itself by seeking to unite under the banner of workers’ representation the various bodies of our movement, socialist organisations, the trade unions and, where affiliation is not yet attainable, the broad lefts and rank and file organisations. A new Workers’ Representation Committee would seek to be an axis to bring about a re-composition of the left. An urgent appeal for socialist unity to achieve Workers’ Representation should be issued.

3. The coming conference should give a new impetus to the efforts to establish local workers’ representation committees, drawing together socialists, trade unionists and working class communities. The question of elections is crucial to the provision of workers’ representation but it is also the cause of some of the fragmentation on the left.

There is a tendency to erect false-opposites in this debate. A new Workers’ Representation Committee should seek to transcend such fragmentation which can only weaken our overall effort. As a federal body it should allow flexibility of tactics among its constituent elements in achieving the strategic goal of workers’ representation.

The RMT London Transport Regional Council recently voted in favour of the RMT initiating an independent working-class slate, on broad working-class policies, for the London mayor/GLA elections in 2008. The RMT Executive eventually decided that there was not enough momentum behind this idea to implement it, but what was proposed was not a sectarian stunt. Worker-based electoral challenges of that sort should be viewed as complementary to the LRC’s goals.

We should work for such candidates to stand under the banner of Workers’ Representation in order to strengthen our overall project to provide workers’ representation against those of capital.

Achieving workers’ representation should be done through all avenues available: where it is still possible, we secure workers’ representatives through the Labour Party; when securing council candidates there is no absolute principle to mount a counter challenge.

Immediately we must wage a struggle in the unions to call the leaderships to account for their actions at the Bournemouth conference.

Though plainly it involves risks with Labour Party discipline, this argument is not about abandoning posts in the Labour Party, rather, about facing reality. Through these struggles we should be laying the groundwork for renewal through new forms of organisation — workers’ representation committees which require full freedom of manoeuvre in asserting our class interests.

In calling for a new Workers’ Representation Committee, we should avoid repeating the errors of the past. Tony Benn was wrong in one respect when he argued in the past for “action committees to get Parliamentary representation”.

The project of gradually instituting socialism through parliamentary legislation was doomed from the outset. And so the practice of “gradual change” was replaced by a defensive capitulation to capitalist parliamentary manipulation. We need something much broader.

The situation cannot be countered without a fundamental reorientation, transformation and renewal of the labour movement so that it is capable of offensive action. Without that, we will all end up like that part of the left who have while repeating the line about the “decay of capitalism” for decades, have found that all that has decayed so far is themselves.

**For LRC committee: vote for David Braniff-Herbert, David Broder, Tony Byrne, Maria Exall, Chris Ford, Christine Hulme, and John Moloney**

**Chris Ford has submitted this statement for the committee election:**

**The Bournemouth conference marks an historic turning point; the crisis of working class representation is acute. I consider the LRC in a prime position to bring about re-composition in the socialist and labour movement; it must re-launch itself with the goal of achieving of the widest possible unity under the banner of working class representation. The new NC should appeal to of all socialists, trade unionists and radical social movements to join our project. It must and ensure the necessary organisational changes to facilitate achieving these objectives. I am a member of Hackney North CLP and the Alliance for Workers Liberty.**