

Britain: right-wing union leaders maintain control by any means necessary

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Allies of Prime Minister Tony Blair are engaged in constitutional shenanigans to maintain right-wing control over two of Britain's largest unions.

In an extraordinary display of bureaucratic skulduggery, Barry Reamsbottom, general secretary of the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), has refused to recognise his elected successor, Mark Serwotka, just days before he was due to stand aside. Serwotka, a supporter of the Socialist Alliance—an umbrella organisation comprising left groups such as the Socialist Workers Party—was made general secretary-elect in a postal ballot of the union's 280,000-strong membership in 2000, winning 40,740 votes in a 30 percent turnout. Reamsbottom had agreed to retire on May 31, 2002, leaving Serwotka in sole charge from June 1.

The union's annual conference in Brighton reaffirmed the result earlier this month. But at a National Executive Committee meeting on May 23, Reamsbottom produced legal advice that merger terms agreed between the Public Services, Tax and Commerce Union (PSTCU) and the Civil and Public Services Association (CPSA) to form the PCS in 1998 meant the postal ballot which led to Serwotka's election was invalid, and that he would continue in his position until 2004.

Under transitional provisions for the 1998 merger, each union appointed joint general secretaries, John Sheldon and Reamsbottom respectively, to serve in the PCS. In the event that one of the joint general secretaries retired, the remaining functionary was to be appointed sole general secretary until 2004 or his retirement, whichever came first.

Following conference demands for new elections to be held, however, the PCS NEC was forced to agree to a ballot for general secretary in October 2000. Reamsbottom refused to stand and took legal action in the High Court to prevent the ballot, arguing that it breached the transitional agreement under which he was not to face

re-election for five years.

In the event, the union bureaucracy stitched-up a deal to smooth their differences, in which Reamsbottom could remain as general secretary until May 2002, after which he would continue to draw his full salary until his retirement in May 2004. In the meantime, the elections would take place and Reamsbottom would work with the victor, "with a view to implementing a smooth transfer of duties and responsibilities". The deal was meant to be "in full and final settlement" of Reamsbottom's claims against the union. As it later transpired, Reamsbottom would not have been able to contest the 2000 election as he failed to gather the requisite number of nominations. In the subsequent ballot for general secretary elect, Serwotka beat Blairite "moderniser" and PCS assistant general secretary, Hugh Lanning, to the post.

If these manoeuvres leave a nasty taste in the mouth, it is hardly surprising. The bottom line was that, irrespective of the memberships wishes, nothing was to be done to jeopardise Reamsbottom drawing his salary and, one can surmise, a substantial "golden handshake" on retirement. Rather than honour the agreement, however, Reamsbottom used his period of grace to marshal his forces and prepare a counter-strike against his successor and the stated wishes of union members.

After presenting legal opinion that Serwotka's election was invalid, the NEC meeting on May 23—by now comprising mainly Reamsbottom's supporters as it had reconvened to another room—proceeded to revise standing orders, make appointments to all sub-committees and authorise "negotiations" with Serwotka on his taking another officer's post at headquarters, or leaving union employment altogether. Whilst the Socialist Alliance has yet to issue a statement on events, reports are that Serwotka is considering his own High Court challenge against Reamsbottom.

With supreme hypocrisy, the right-wing in the PCS

hailed Reamsbottom's coup as a victory for the membership and for union democracy. A PCS press release on the May 23 NEC meeting proclaimed, "Moderates rescue Whitehall's biggest trade union". In red-baiting language, one group of Reamsbottom's allies, the self-designated "Moderate Group", regularly issue statements filled with bile against "trots" (Trotskyists) whom they accuse of pursuing a political agenda. They, in contrast, "are getting on with the job of promoting and protecting the interests of PCS members"—we must presume through over-turning ballot decisions by bureaucratic fiat!

They continue, "By his action Barry has saved the union thousands of pounds of members' money and becomes sole General Secretary for the next two years with guaranteed responsibility *for all the areas of the union he wants*" (emphasis added).

In a related development, the general secretary of the Amicus engineering and electricians union, Blairite Sir Ken Jackson is facing an electoral challenge from Socialist Alliance candidate Derek Simpson between June 24 and July 12. Senior officials are said to be so worried about the outcome that they have been accused of ballot-rigging to ensure Jackson's re-election. The union's executive has convened a three-man investigation into the allegations, after three officials—Geoff Saunders, Rob Johnston and Stuart Wallis—admitted voting twice to nominate Jackson. A number of other officials are also said to be involved and at least one is alleged to have voted three times. Earlier this week, top official Roger Maskell, the southeast England regional secretary, was asked to appear before the inquiry after allegations that he had doctored computer records in order to hide union headquarters' involvement in the scam.

Such alleged malpractice by the right-wing leadership of Britain's unions is nothing new. For the bureaucracy, the unions are their own personal fiefdom to do with as they please. Leadership positions are a source of significant social privileges, including fat salaries, generous pensions, access to the corridors of power and more often than not, a seat in Britain's boardrooms and/or the House of Lords. In return they are charged by their social betters with stifling all forms of working class discontent that might endanger the interests of capital.

But five years after Labour took office pledged to reverse the social devastation caused by its Conservative predecessors, the trade unions have been largely discredited by their collaboration with the employers and a government that has acted as the faithful champion of

big business. Disenchantment with Labour has found expression in low electoral turnouts, but also in a limited increase in strike activity and support for left-wing candidates within the unions who claim to oppose the sitting pro-Blair leadership.

Besides the PCS, over the last year leftist candidates have won elections in the rail and postal unions as sections of workers seek to express their hostility to the union tops and their pro-business agenda. The support for the radical left should not be exaggerated. Many workers have left the trade unions in disgust, while the turnout for elections has generally been small (only one-fifth of the PCS membership voted). But any indication of a rebellion against the Labour government and its trade union counterparts is enough to set alarm bells ringing for the ruling class. Hence the media and sections of the establishment have raised the spectre of a return to 1979, when a militant industrial movement brought down the Labour government. Some have even criticised Blair because in his efforts to distance Labour from the trade unions, as part of its general turn away from the working class, he has left the government exposed on its left flank.

In reality, the successful candidates, mainly from the Socialist Alliance (SA), do not represent a genuine alternative to the union bureaucracy. The SA is opposed to leading a political uprising against the union leaders because this would jeopardise its own goal of maintaining and bolstering the authority of the trade unions over the working class. It functions as a loyal, albeit sometimes noisy, opposition to the right-wing, while at all times seeking to cultivate relations with the ostensibly more left-leaning sections of the bureaucracy. However politically accommodating the radicals are prepared to be, any talk of defending workers interests is enough to send the union leaders into a frenzy. For the union bureaucracy the emergence of any working class opposition is as much a threat to its own privileges as it is to the government of the day. Hence its brazen efforts to reassert control, by any means necessary.



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