

Britain: Rail union slashes funding to Labour Party

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Last week Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott announced that he was resigning his membership of the Rail Maritime and Transport Union (RMT) after 47 years. His decision was made after the RMT cut its annual funding to the Labour Party by nearly £100,000.

The funding cut was passed unanimously at the RMT conference on June 25. Backing the measure, recently elected General Secretary Bob Crow told delegates that Labour had betrayed workers by implementing policies such as the partial privatisation of the London Underground.

Crow, a member of the left umbrella group, the Socialist Alliance, said the government treated the unions as if they were a “concrete necklace”, but was happy to accept huge donations from businessmen. Several leading MPs, including Prescott and leader of the Commons Robin Cook, had refused to support an RMT charter calling for renationalisation of Britain’s privatised rail network, opposition to the proposed part-privatisation of the London Underground and the overturning of all anti-union legislation, Crow told conference.

In response, conference voted to switch its annual financial aid of £40,000—paid to selected MPs—from figures such as Prescott and Cook, to a group of 13 Labour MPs, including Jeremy Corbyn and Diane Abbott, who are viewed as representing the party’s left wing. Conference also agreed to reduce its affiliation level to the Labour Party from 56,000 to just 10,000 members—a cut of £92,000 to £20,000 and a record low. This would greatly reduce the size of RMT delegations to Labour’s annual conference and its policy forums, Crow said, but Labour “cannot accept our money week in, week out unless it is prepared to do something for us”.

The cut was greeted with howls of outrage from

within the Blair government, of which none were more dripping with moral indignation than Prescott’s.

Prescott was chosen as Blair’s deputy because he could rest on his past as a union shop steward to pronounce an “Old Labour” benediction on Blair’s “New Labour” project. He famously delivered a keynote speech calling for party unity when Labour ditched Clause Four of its constitution, committing it to the social ownership of industry. He is regularly wheeled out as living proof of Labour’s continued connection with the working class and willing to act the part—playing up his “blunt northerner” persona for as long as it continues to help finance all the trappings of his privileged lifestyle.

True to form, Prescott likened the RMT’s decision to the treatment he once received at the hands of shipping bosses when a steward. Announcing his “sad” decision to resign his membership, he accused Crow and the RMT of trying to stifle MPs individual consciences by dictating how they should vote.

For his part, Cook declared that he was “not to be bought for any particular agenda”, a ludicrous statement coming from a man that has displayed an unerring ability to change his positions according to whichever way the political wind is blowing.

Prescott and Cook received the full support of the Conservative and Labour press, which commended them for their bravery and defiance. Without any apparent trace of irony, *Observer* columnist Andrew Rawnsley weighed in to defend “wilfully independent Labour MPs” against attempts to boss them around. Comparing the RMT with the Confederation of British Industry, Rawnsley went on to assert, “The unions and business are both important vested interests. One side employs millions of people, the other bargains for millions of people. Government exists not to do their

bidding, but to balance their demands against each other and the wider interests of the whole country.”

Times columnist Peter Riddell concurred that the RMT’s stance had “handed Labour a moral victory” and that its “demand for explicit support from MPs, whose constituencies the union helps finance, breaches both these implicit understandings about the relationship and possibly also the rules of the Commons on privilege and improper outside influence on MPs”.

Cook said he would consider if the RMT’s actions should be referred to the Parliamentary Standards Committee. “We are not here to act on behalf of any other specific or particular vested interests or agency. That has to be a very important, cardinal principle of this house”, he warned.

This is hogwash. Labour is politically in thrall to the “specific agency” of the British ruling class. This is not simply a financial arrangement (although Labour has on numerous occasions been caught out fashioning government policy directly in line with the demands of its big business backers), but more fundamentally of the class interests its programme and policies articulate and defend.

For the past five years in government Labour has faithfully served its capitalist masters, tearing up welfare entitlement, privatising key sectors of public services, and overturning democratic rights. No demand has been too great, as Labour has taken up measures that even the Conservatives shied away from, including the privatisation of health and education. And it has done so even where those measures have flouted previous party policy—such as in the privatisation of air traffic control for example.

Labour’s actions have alienated large sections of workers, whose anger has found limited expression in the election of a number of leftwing candidates to leadership posts in the trade unions. Elections in the Communication Workers Union, the civil service and the RMT have all seen members of the Socialist Alliance elected to the position of general secretary. These unions have announced significant cuts in Labour Party funding over the past months, in protest at government policy.

Prescott muttered darkly that it was the first time the rail union had been led by someone committed to disaffiliation from the Labour Party, implying that the

funding cut was part of a broader plan.

This gives the supporters of various middle class radical groups more than their due. The funding cut is a limited protest and nothing more. Although the Socialist Alliance speaks of the possibility of building a political alternative to the Labour Party, it presents this as a possibility only for the distant future. In reality the Socialist Alliance is opposed to leading a political rebellion against Labour, which it insists is still a working class party that can be pushed to the left through its connection with the trade unions.

Through withholding union funds, Crow and others hope to convince the government that it must make some concession if it is to avoid class confrontation, and retain political credibility. By latching on to a handful of Labour lefts and targeting their ire against a few high-profile Blairites, the radicals are seeking to prevent a more thoroughgoing political break with Labour and contain opposition within the confines of the bureaucratized union structures.

Crow made this clear during the RMT conference, when he stressed that although workers’ patience with the government was “wearing thin... for the trade union movement to abandon the Labour Party would be a serious mistake.” The RMT’s withdrawal of funding should be seen as an example of tough love, designed to persuade Labour “they now have to deliver the goods”.

Such calls are lost on the Blair government, however. Both socially and politically, Labour is entirely removed from the concerns of working people and utterly hostile to the suggestion that it should in any way be held to account by them. Far from “balancing” between competing interests, Labour insists it must be free from any restraints that would otherwise impinge on its big business agenda. That is why it has responded so furiously to the RMT’s token protest.



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