

Britain: "Left" union leader pledges loyalty to Blair

Julie Hyland
10 August 2002

The first act of Derek Simpson, the newly elected general secretary of the Amicus trade union, was to pledge his loyalty to Prime Minister Tony Blair and his government.

His undertaking came after a bitterly fought leadership contest saw Simpson—a Labour Party member for 10 years, a regional union official and a former member of the Communist Party who advances himself as a left—beat Sir Ken Jackson, a prominent ally of Blair, by just 406 votes.

Simpson's surprise victory in the union, Britain's second largest, representing nearly one million engineering and public service workers, had caused uproar in Amicus. Having forced four recounts, Jackson's supporters initially refused to concede defeat. No sooner was the final result announced than the Amicus executive meeting tried to reject it, whilst Jackson angrily vowed to fight on.

It was only because the row threatened to completely discredit the union that Jackson's fellow bureaucrats persuaded him to accept defeat.

The election result also sent the media into a frenzy, with Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* newspaper warning that Simpson's election heralded a return to 1970s-style militancy, whilst the *Guardian* and *Independent* rushed forward to offer helpful advice to the government on how it should seek to thwart such a development. But speaking immediately after the election result was declared last month, Simpson told the BBC, "I have never met Mr Blair, who... is sad to have lost a friend. I don't know why he thinks he hasn't gained one... I am a member of the Labour Party, and I support the Labour Party and the Labour government."

In response, Blair invited Simpson to an hour-long private meeting at his home, with the aim of building a "good working relationship". "More will ultimately unite than divide them," a spokesman for the prime minister said.

There is an important lesson here.

Simpson's candidacy was supported by the Socialist Alliance (SA), a loose grouping of middle class radical organisations who claim to be leading a fightback for socialist policies within the trade unions.

Some members of the Socialist Alliance are nominally committed to the creation of a new workers' party to replace Labour, while others are opposed to such a move. What unites

them all is an agreement that no such development can be countenanced unless it has the backing of significant sections of the trade unions, which they regard as intrinsically socialist and the "natural" leadership of the working class. Until then, the Socialist Alliance will confine itself to encouraging a leftward movement in the trade unions and building a working relationship with the handful of left Labour MPs in the hope they too will be eventually convinced to quit Labour for a new socialist home.

Simpson is now the fifth union general secretary to be endorsed by the SA. Although not all are members of the SA, they have accepted the organisations backing in order to strengthen their left credentials.

The SA jubilantly welcomed Simpson's election as further proof that the union bureaucracy can be forced to the left. However, Simpson's cuddling up to Blair confirms that what is taking place amounts to a pre-emptive strike by a section of the bureaucracy aimed at stifling the development of a genuine rank-and-file opposition to the government.

Whilst Blair will certainly miss Jackson's presence—the Amicus leader was regarded as the consummate expression of Blair's New Labour project within the unions, having first made his mark as an official within the EETPU electricians union organising strike breaking during the 1986 printers disputes—none of the recent changes in union officialdom constitute the basis for a political rebellion against Labour's pro-capitalist agenda.

For more than two decades the unions have functioned as the primary means through which the ruling class has carried through cuts in living standards and working conditions and dismantled welfare provision. As Jackson's own biography shows, Labour's abandonment of its social reformist programme was first pioneered by the trade unions as they sought to consolidate their relations with big business.

Especially following the year-long miners' strike in 1984-85, when the Labour and trade union bureaucracy refused to mobilise in the miners defence paving the way for their defeat, the unions have become virtual prison camps for their members, stifling industrial action and imposing management dictates. That is why, despite British workers now working the longest hours in Western Europe for the least pay, the level of

strike activity remains the lowest on record.

As a direct result of this corporatist agenda based on direct collaboration with the employers and the government, union membership has plummeted from 12 to 7 million as workers have resigned their membership in disgust. Thanks to the cowardice of the bureaucracy, most new jobs in the burgeoning and highly exploitative service sector are non-union while Britain can boast of being the cheap labour capital of Europe.

During Blair's first term in office, the unions played a key role in enabling Labour to make significant cuts in public spending while holding down the wages of public sector workers, to a point that many are now dependent on "top-up" state benefits to survive. Strike activity under Labour has fallen to an even lower level than under Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

But after five years of social pain, the entreaties by the unions for workers to give Blair "a chance" are wearing thin. Growing disaffection with the government has been expressed in record abstention levels in both local and general elections. Strike activity is also increasing as workers, especially those in the public sector, protest poverty level wages, poor working conditions and the government's privatisation policy.

The total number of days lost in the last twelve months is approximately three million. This still pales next to the 19.5 million lost during the mass movement against Labour in 1979, and against the 27.1 million against the Tories in 1984.

Nevertheless, forces within the union hierarchy fear this could change rapidly. Having had their noses put out of joint by Blair's apparent disregard for their importance, and acutely aware that a confrontation between workers and Labour would constitute a grave threat to British capital and jeopardise their own privileged lifestyle, some union leaders are repositioning themselves as loyal critics of the government.

In recent weeks, even TUC General Secretary John Monks has publicly warned the prime minister that Labour is "haemorrhaging support" and that urgent action is needed. Then, in a surprise attendance at a meeting of the Socialist Campaign Group of Labour MPs on July 20, John Edmonds of the GMB announced he had come "to bury New Labour, not to praise it", and even that "New Labour is dead already".

Edmonds shared a platform at the meeting with veteran left Labour MP Tony Benn and three union leaders, Bob Crow, Dave Prentis and Billy Hayes. Under the heading, *After New Labour*, the meeting warned Blair that he was severely overexposed on his left flank and called for a return to "old Labour" values.

Such advice will fall on deaf ears. Even if Blair had enough wherewithal to be concerned that his New Labour project had run out of steam (and there is no sign of that), such matters are not under his control. Government policy is determined by the interests of big business and the rich, who regard any concessions to the working class as an intolerable tax on their own wealth and privileges. Any social reforms today can be

won only as the by-product of a revolutionary, socialist movement of the working class.

That attempts to try and affect a safety-valve for workers opposition should involve such discredited individuals as Edmonds and the ever-dwindling ranks of the Socialist Campaign Group points to the extreme weakness of the labour bureaucracy. Hence the readiness of those such as Simpson to allow the SA to act as his election agents—its claim that is it possible to breathe new life into the old moribund organisations providing a cover for the bureaucracy's efforts to police the class struggle.

The vote for the SA and other supposed lefts is only the most partial and distorted expression of the opposition of union members to the betrayals of the right-wing bureaucrats. Claims that it constitutes a more fundamental "left revival" of the unions conceals that the advance of Simpson and his ilk is not the result of a wave of enthusiastic support, but is primarily due to the *alienation* of millions of workers from the bureaucratic apparatuses. In the elections for leadership of Amicus for example, some 75 percent of the membership did not even bother to vote, with Jackson and Simpson divided by less than one percent of those who cast a ballot. The abstention rate has been similar in other elections, with branch meetings sparsely attended and frequently inquorate.

The political consequences of the alliance between the middle class radicals and the union bureaucracy was made evident last week in a deal stitched up between the unions and local government. Over a million council workers struck last month for 24 hours to protest low pay and demand a six percent pay rise. Amidst fears in ruling circles that another strike scheduled for August 14 would encourage other workers to press forward pay demands, public sector unions held conciliation talks with management.

The talks ended with union claims that they had secured a great deal which provided the basis for "overcoming low pay" and that all further action would be suspended. With this ringing declaration, the unions have accepted a paltry three percent rise for this year, with a possible 3.5 percent next year. In a divisive deal, the unions also agreed to an additional one percent increase for the lowest paid from October—a derisory amount that effectively sanctions £5 per hour as an acceptable living wage.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)