

# Britain's Labour Party expels rail union

**Julie Hyland, Paul Stuart****28 February 2004**

On February 7, Labour's national executive expelled the Rail Maritime Transport Workers Union (RMT) for allegedly breaking the party's constitution by allowing its branches to affiliate to other parties.

The rail union's links with Labour go back to the party's inception. It was the RMT's predecessor, the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants, that moved the resolution at the 1899 Trade Union Congress proposing support for the Labour Representation Committee that went on to found the Labour Party in 1906.

The rail union has bankrolled the Labour Party throughout the twentieth century, while providing it with crucial political support. Until the death of former RMT general secretary Jimmy Knapp in 2001, it had never opposed New Labour's right-wing, pro-big business policies.

The trade unions remain one of the main sources of Labour's income, accounting for some £9 million a year. And despite Prime Minister Tony Blair's efforts to reduce the party's reliance on them, both financially and through their control of the block vote they continue to exercise significant influence.

Given this history, the decision to expel the RMT must express a major political crisis within the bureaucracy, which this latest action will only exacerbate.

The conflict between Labour and the RMT is rooted in the growing alienation and hostility felt by working people towards the government of Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Blair rules on behalf of an international financial oligarchy, whose political interests are diametrically opposed to that of the mass of the population. Over the last seven years, Labour has worked to curtail public spending and extend privatisation into essential services such as health and education, and has presided over growing social inequality. The prime minister made clear his contempt for the concerns of working people last year, when, faced with the largest ever demonstration in British history opposing the war against Iraq, he pressed ahead with military aggression.

He feels able to proceed in this manner because he has largely freed himself from any democratic accountability. Within parliament, an opposition that shares his right-wing views presents no real challenge. As for the Labour Party, the haemorrhaging of tens of thousands of members means that it has lost any significant social base it once had in the working class and is ruled by bureaucratic fiat from central office.

But Blair's efforts to free himself from popular control have backfired, as it has meant that Labour has no means through which to curb the political anger that his right-wing policies have inflamed. Amongst the RMT's 70,000 membership, for example, there are only 500 paid-up members of the Labour Party.

For some time, the trade unions have been warning Blair of the dangers posed by this development. Especially in the public sector,

which has borne the brunt of Labour's privatising initiatives, and in those industries already privatised by the Tories, of which the last was rail in 1996, there have been repeated warnings by union leaders that they find it almost impossible to justify their continued defence of Labour.

Candidates backed by Blair in union elections have been repeatedly defeated, and left-talking individuals have taken leading positions. RMT leader Bob Crow, a former member of the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain, was one of this new layer of officials dubbed the "awkward squad" by the media. Such victories were hailed by left groups such as the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) and the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) as the start of a revival of militant trade unionism that would challenge the government.

In reality, the new union leaders' differences with Blair are ones of degree. They are all politically committed to private ownership and production for profit, arguing only that this must be accompanied by efforts to ameliorate class antagonisms through certain reforms and concessions. Whereas Crow and others have professed a desire to see renationalisation implemented, they have opposed a political break with Labour and done everything to suppress conflict with its policies—especially in the run-up to and during the war against Iraq.

Between September 2002 and January 2003, for example, Andy Gilchrist was in the leadership of the firefighters' strike at a time when the government was preparing its illegal attack on Iraq. When the government despatched the British Army to take over fire services and attacked the firefighters as traitors for striking when the country was preparing for war, none of the other union leaders came to the firefighters' defence and Gilchrist abandoned the strike.

During the Labour Party's annual conference in 2003, it was the union leaders who ensured a motion calling for a debate on the Iraq war was kept off the agenda, so as not to embarrass Blair before the TV cameras.

Previously, the RMT executive resisted growing calls for the union to disaffiliate from the Labour Party. Last year's RMT conference institutionalised its affiliation to the Labour Party for the first time in its history and made this unchangeable for three years in order to counter demands for disaffiliation. And Crow still claims that his aim is to recapture Labour from within or pressure it from outside by grouping together all the political parties with the same perspective.

The union had been withholding parts of its political levy to the Labour Party as part of its attempt to persuade the Blair leadership to tack left. Despite its very best efforts, however, the union's appeals for restraint have fallen on deaf ears as Blair has plunged into every area of the public sector, tearing up agreements on pay and conditions and preparing the ground for further privatisations.

These circumstances led to the decision by the RMT's 2003 Annual General Meeting to allow branches to affiliate to and provide finance for other political organisations of their choosing. Soon after, five

branches in Scotland voted to back the SSP, and in October the Scottish Regional Council applied to the RMT executive for affiliation to the SSP.

Labour made no attempt to discuss with rail workers, much less convene branch meetings to challenge the decision. It felt completely unable to defend its record. Instead, it resorted to its favoured *modus operandi*—threats and decrees from on high. The RMT was given until 12 noon on February 7 to reverse its decision to allow branch disaffiliation or the entire union would be expelled.

Crow felt that he could not do as he was asked. “It’s very hard to explain to our members if you go down to King’s Cross or Euston [underground rail stations in London],” he said. “You say to them, ‘Who privatised you?’ and they say, ‘New Labour.’ You ask, ‘Who privatised the mainline services?’ and they say, ‘The Tories.’ What is the difference between being privatised by someone with a red rosette instead of someone with a blue rosette? Both are carrying out Tory policies against working class people.”

A special delegates’ conference of the RMT voted 42 to 8 to reaffirm the 2003 conference decision. Just after the appointed hour, Labour national executive voted for the union’s expulsion, with just 3 against.

There is clearly no basis for any union member to agree to pay a political levy to a party whose policies are antithetical to the interests of working people. What is required is a political and organisational break with Labour and the construction of a new, genuinely socialist party. But it would be foolish to believe that the trade union bureaucracy, or any faction of it, can be relied upon to lead such a fight.

Labour’s trajectory is the result not merely of a treacherous leadership, but of the bankruptcy of the programme of national reformism.

The Labour Party was formed at the turn of the last century to represent the interests of the trade unions in parliament. Though it included socialists within its ranks, it was the trade union bureaucracy—a privileged social layer that benefited from its role as arbitrator between the employers and the working class—that determined its political line. Both Labour and the trade unions were united in opposing any revolutionary challenge to the profit system, advocating instead limited social reforms within the framework of capitalism.

For decades, working people in the advanced industrial countries such as Britain were able to win improved wages and conditions while remaining tied to the reformist programme of the official labour movement. Most workers owed their political affiliations to Labour, and even the more militant elements were not generally prepared to break from it. For their part, both the Labour Party tops and the trade union leaders had a vested interest in preserving their political alliance in order to prevent the working class from challenging the essential interests of the employers.

But the apparent viability of social reformism was in the final analysis determined by the fact that the production process remained largely nationally based and relatively immobile. Under these circumstances, a combination of political pressure and national regulation could be used to extract certain concessions from the major corporations in the form of higher wages and improved living standards in order to maintain social peace.

The era of global production, facilitated by developments in computerisation and telecommunications, has destroyed the basis for such national reformist strategies. Free to roam the world in search of

the highest rate of return, the transnational corporations now regard any social concessions as an unpardonable drain on their profits and demand instead the best conditions for maximising their exploitation of the working class.

No longer able to reconcile its policy of social reforms with the fundamental defence of capitalism, Labour has transformed itself into a political instrument for imposing the dictates of global capital. The same process has taken place within the trade unions. Even though they encompass millions of workers, the unions have marched in lockstep with Labour, working to prevent industrial action and to force workers to accept greater exploitation, longer working hours and lower wages. Despite the resentment felt by many workers toward the government, the level of industrial action has been kept at a historic low.

The election of nominal “lefts” to the leadership of several unions does not change the fundamental political character of the trade unions. It only proves that an organisation with tens of thousands of members who are being directly attacked by Labour cannot continue to uncritically endorse Blair’s right-wing nostrums. It does not mean that the leadership of the RMT or any other union will strike out on a fundamentally opposed course to that of the government. Even at this stage, Crow has been at pains to stress that he does not intend to lead a political rebellion against Labour and has refused to make a public call for other unions to disaffiliate.

Crow’s proposed alternative for his union offers no progressive way forward for working people. The RMT is currently working with the SSP to discuss representation on the party’s executive. The SSP offers only a rehash of the old-style reformist policies that have so patently failed working people, coupled with an embrace of Scottish nationalism that serves only to divide and disarm the working class. Crow has also called for support for the Welsh nationalist Plaid Cymru—an organisation that makes no pretension to socialist, or even left-wing, policies. And in 2002, he addressed the Green Party conference, promising, “The Green Party will be very, very closely associated and looked at by the RMT. If the other political parties are going to denounce us for standing up for the people, then we are going to have to look for a political voice somewhere else.”

Thus, the RMT leadership is responding to the hostility of its members towards the Blair government by casting around for some other pro-capitalist ally—with slightly less tarnished credentials—in order to oppose a development towards socialism, while hoping that at some point it will be allowed back into the Labour fold.



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