

Britain: Labour Party membership plummets

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The Labour Party's official membership has fallen to less than a quarter of a million—its lowest level for 70 years.

According to the latest published figures, Labour membership of 248,294 is now much lower than the Conservatives—which claim 300,000 members—despite the Tories' loss of support over the last decade being considered to have set a new low in the fortunes of a major party.

Details of Labour's plummeting membership were revealed in the *Guardian* newspaper on April 12. So dire is the situation considered to be that some members have formed a Save the Labour Party (SLP) group to highlight the issue.

The group are concerned that, with the equivalent of less than 390 members in each constituency, the party is effectively unable to mount any kind of viable election campaign. The group say that there are not enough volunteers available to canvas for support or even to stuff envelopes, threatening the party's electoral chances in the upcoming local and European elections on June 10, and that many branches are unable to meet and make decisions.

But even the latest published figure is inflated, according to the SLP, as it includes lapsed members. As the figure only runs up to the end of 2002, it also does not include those who left the party over the last year in opposition to its support for the US-led attack on Iraq. Sources suggest that thousands of members have left the party in opposition to the war, although no official figures are available.

In former Labour strongholds such as Sheffield, there are complaints that the party is unable to mobilise enough support even to ensure each ballot station is covered. According to one report, the party could not even cover five ballot stations in the city during the last elections.

According to the *Guardian*, a survey of eight Labour

Party constituencies revealed that almost 12 percent of those listed as members were actually lapsed as their membership subscriptions were more than six months in arrears. This would suggest that actual membership is at least 30,000 lower than suggested, taking it down to levels last seen in the 1930s.

SLP chairman Peter Kenyon said the group had decided it was more dangerous politically to sit on the figures.

"The latest figures are a crushing indictment of the latest generation of British political leaders and New Labour under Blair in particular," said Kenyon. "We consider the electoral risk of saying nothing is greater than highlighting the issues now."

Labour admits that the latest figures are way below the 405,000 recorded members claimed by the party when Prime Minister Tony Blair took office in 1997, and even below the 265,000 claimed when he took over as party leader in 1994.

The increase in numbers between 1994 and 1997 was largely facilitated by Blair's decision to introduce a lower level of membership subscription in order to establish an alternative power base for him within the party so as to facilitate his efforts to sever Labour's connection with the working class.

Oriented to more privileged layers of the middle class and disillusioned Conservatives attracted by his paean to the free market and global capital, and aided by the passivity of the so-called "lefts," Blair refashioned Labour as the preferred party of big business, receiving the backing of such former stalwart Conservative newspapers as the *Sun* during the 1997 election.

But whilst these layers may have been sufficient to bring Blair to power, they do not constitute a foundation for sustaining the party as a viable political organisation.

It is fitting that Labour's fate should be treated in the same manner as those of other endangered species—with

a special group set up dedicated to trying to ensure its survival in otherwise hostile conditions.

The party's embrace of privatisation, its attacks on democratic rights and its warmongering in defiance of popular opinion has severely damaged its standing. But its loss of a once loyal membership since the Iraq war is only a partial reflection of the alienation of the broad mass of the population from Blair and his New Labour monstrosity.

Neither the anxious efforts of the SLP, nor even the backing of Rupert Murdoch's News International empire, will be enough to reverse Labour's decline, which is rooted in the growth of social inequality and class polarisation facilitated by the Blair government's policies.

Labour's bright idea for winning back members is for Blair to send a personal letter to the 40,000 individuals known to have left since 2001, inviting them to rejoin. So far removed is the party from the concerns and outlook of working people that the prime minister is still considered by its leaders to be Labour's greatest draw, rather than its greatest liability.



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