

Britain: unions found anti-Blair ginger group

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On Saturday July 3, some 350 delegates gathered at the Trades Union Congress headquarters in London for the founding congress of a Labour Representation Committee.

The original Labour Representational Committee (LRC) was established on February 27, 1900, by representatives from the Independent Labour Party, the Social Democratic Federation, the Fabian Society and the trade unions. At a time when the ruling class was waging a legal offensive against the unions and the right to strike, the LRC called for a break from trade union support for the Liberal Party and the political enfranchisement of the working class within parliament through the founding of a Labour Party based on the trade unions. Its founding in 1906 represented the first step by British workers towards their own independent political party.

But the party was never a socialist organisation. Financed by the unions, Labour advocated a limited programme of social reforms in order to ameliorate the worst excesses of capitalist exploitation. Today, under conditions of the globalisation of production and intense competition for markets and resources, the Labour Party has abandoned even this goal and has been transformed into a party openly committed to defending the interests of big business.

By adopting the name LRC, the recent conference clearly hoped to invoke Labour's so-called "glorious past". But such an historical analogy is fraudulent. For unlike the earlier pioneers of the LRC, the concerns of those gathered in Congress House was not how to secure independent representation for working people against the parties of big business, but to ensure that workers remain tied to what has now become the favoured party of business—Labour. They are seeking to safeguard and restore the political monopoly over the working class enjoyed by the bureaucratic monolith that constitutes Labour by building illusions that it can

be returned to its former reformist programme.

Though billed as a meeting of the "rank and file", the founding congress comprised in the main seasoned bureaucrats such as veteran Labourite Tony Benn, MPs John McDonnell, Alice Mahon, Alan Simpson and former cabinet minister Michael Meacher. They were joined by trade unions leaders, including Billy Hayes (Communication Workers Union) and Mick Rix (former general secretary of the rail drivers' union ASLEF).

It was supported by nominally left groups, such as the Stalinist Communist Party, Labour Left Briefing and the Socialist Campaign Group. These organisations are united in their bitter opposition to any break by the working class from Labour, the mere mention of which produces a chorus of denunciations of "sectarianism", "delusions of grandeur" and a mantra-like insistence that Blair's party remains the "mass party of the working class" by virtue of its connection with the unions.

It is now a decade since Labour, under its newly elected leader Tony Blair, finally repudiated any connection between the party and its working class base—throwing out Clause 4 of the party constitution committing it to social ownership—and openly refashioned itself as a big business party.

During Labour's seven years in government it has implemented a programme of privatisation and attacks on welfare more far-ranging than even that carried through by Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, policies that have widened social inequalities.

Alongside the United States, it has set out on a path of neo-colonial conquest and military aggression, launching and joining wars in the Balkans, the Middle East and Africa.

Yet none of the above had caused Blair's critics assembled at Congress House to launch any challenge to this right-wing course. Moreover, these policies have

been carried out in lock-step with the trade unions organised within the Trades Union Congress. It is only the fact that the Labour Party faces complete meltdown as a consequence of these policies, and the fact that Blair seems deaf to the entreaties of the union bureaucracy to moderate aspects of his right-wing course for fear of provoking a political rebellion by their members—that have finally pushed them into action.

In the June ballot for local authority elections and representation in the European parliament, Labour fell to third place, losing even such traditional strongholds as Doncaster, South Yorkshire.

At the same time, the party's official membership has fallen to less than a quarter of a million and is, in reality, much, much lower. So drastic is the decline that some members have formed a Save the Labour Party group to highlight the fact that the organisation is virtually incapable of mounting any effective political campaign.

The founding congress of the LRC made clear that its aim is to try and stop this hemorrhaging of support by mounting a pretence that some life is still left in the Labour corpse.

The congress heard that the objective was not so much to “reclaim” the party (the position traditionally put forward by those claiming to mount a left-wing challenge to the leadership), but to “rebuild it”.

It is certainly the case that it would be impossible for those gathering at Congress House to mount any kind of effective campaign within the party, given that virtually any one with a shred of principle, let alone socialist convictions, has already left. But the emphasis on rebuilding the party was also aimed at reassuring Labour's hierarchy that the LRC has its best interests at heart.

The LRC sought to “give hope to socialists within our movement that Labour can achieve a third term with a radical socialist agenda”. But a wish-list presented to conference by Billy Hayes for such a “radical” manifesto, said nothing about opposing imperialist war, and did not even call for a fight against Labour's ongoing efforts to privatise such vital services as health and education, which threaten a disaster for working class families and the elimination of tens of thousands of jobs.

Hayes silence on such matters was entirely

diplomatic, given that some of those behind the LRC project have made clear they support the occupation of Iraq.

Hayes's proposals for “democratising” the party went only as far as allowing annual conference to amend policy documents drafted by the Labour Party hierarchy.

Such mealy-mouthed proposals make clear the content of the professed opposition by the trade union bureaucracy to Blair. In the last months, the Fire Brigades Union has disaffiliated from Labour, whilst the transport union, Rail, Maritime and Transport, was expelled for allowing its branches to sponsor other parties besides Labour.

The General Municipal and Boilermakers union (GMB) refused a request of £744,000 for Labour funds and the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), Blair's own union, has threatened to withhold £750,000 from Labour's coffers.

Writing in the *Guardian*, GMB leader Kevin Curran spelt out that the unions' criticisms arose primarily because they feared being excluded from positions of power and influence. They “have arisen because we [the trade unions] have been excluded from consultation... A self-selected group of people lock themselves away in secrecy—and then when a decision is made we are all expected to rejoice in its wisdom.

“That's how policy all too often emerges from No 10. We aren't part of the process. Indeed, we aren't even aware that a process is taking place despite the fact that we represent employees who would be affected. Then, when we are told, we are expected to support it—and if we don't we are accused of being disloyal.”



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