

Rail Maritime and Transport union puts Britain's opportunist groups on notice

Paul Stuart
6 February 2009

Last month the Rail and Maritime Transport Workers Union (RMT) convened a conference with the ostensible aim of addressing the “Crisis in Working-Class Political Representation”.

But the gathering was not aimed at opening up political discussion amongst workers as to Labour's evolution into a right-wing party of big business and the need for a socialist alternative. Rather the RMT, together with Labour's ever declining “left” and the remnants of the Communist Party of Britain were trying to determine how best to prevent the economic crisis from generating a social movement against the government and its trade union backers.

The conference was an occasion for the trade union bureaucracy to put various pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Party, formerly the Militant tendency, on notice. They were instructed that it was time to put all calls for a new party to replace Labour on the back burner and to focus on supporting a programme of minimal demands that could be used to resuscitate support for Labour.

Acknowledging that the impulse for the conference was the deepening alienation of millions of workers from Labour, RMT President John Leachy said it had been agreed upon, following the defeat of Labour's Ken Livingstone as Mayor of London by the Conservative Boris Johnson in May 2008.

The RMT had done everything possible to portray Livingstone, who was the favoured candidate of the City of London, as a left and to support his re-election, even calling off strikes on the London Underground so as not to damage his chances. But it was not enough.

The union's loyalty to Labour was despite it being expelled from the party in 2004 after allowing for some of its branches in Scotland to divert political funds—usually the sole preserve of Labour—to the Scottish Socialist Party, an amalgam of various groups. By this time, the SSP—which claimed radical change could be realised through an “independent” Scotland—was part of the mainstream in the recently-devolved Scottish parliament, with six MSP's and two councillors.

RMT General Secretary Bob Crow insisted that the union had not intended to undermine the Labour Party, pledging that “Affiliation to the Labour Party is still enshrined in our rule book” ... “RMT is still embedded in the fabric of the party” and that “We will send the affiliation cheques. If Labour doesn't cash it, then, that is up to them.”

At the London meeting Crow, a life-long Stalinist, acknowledged that the intervening years had only deepened the gulf between Labour and millions of working people. But his admission was made only in order to rule out the building of a new workers party against Labour for the foreseeable future.

It might be possible in “five” or “20 years time”, he said, to build another party. But in the meantime, “factories are closing”. There were only two options for dealing with this: either “armed insurrection” or “the Peoples Charter,” he said, ridiculing the former by stating that the audience could organise a collection in the nearby pub for arms and “see how far you get”.

It should be noted that the RMT's so-called “People's Charter” does not even exist, though the Communist Party of Britain has drawn one up. It was this that was the basis for any discussion, with the proviso that a final version of the charter would first be presented to the leaders of the trade union and Labour MPs for approval before being finalised!

Crow's attack on revolution naturally got a big laugh from the audience and set the tone for the whole meeting. Capitalism is in crisis, unemployment is growing while the government protects the banks and super-rich at the expense of working people but now is not the time to discuss an alternative to Labour and the profit system because.... capitalism is in crisis, unemployment is growing, etc., etc.

The RMT has kept its ties with Labour through its parliamentary grouping of MPs led by self-proclaimed “left” John McDonnell.

McDonnell told the conference that they had to hold onto the possibility of changing the Labour Party from within. A majority of the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) did not agree that it was necessary to break from Labour and until this changed there was a “lot of work to do before we can launch a new party.”

The LRC is a vehicle of the bureaucracy that is supported by six national unions, including the RMT and has the support of just nine Labour MPs and constituency parties. Its leader, McDonnell, was unable to muster even the support of 44 Labour MP's to run in the party's 2007 leadership contest after Tony Blair stepped down. But its decision is supposed to determine when it is permissible to raise the need for a new workers' party.

Prison Officers Association General Secretary Brian Caton addressed the gathering. Caton said that he remains a member of the Labour Party and called on the meeting to rally around "what unites us not what divides us."

The Communist Party of Britain's Mary Davis was wheeled out to give theoretical justification to this demand to focus on the charter, by utilising bogus analogies with the Chartist movement of the 1840s.

Chartism was the first mass working class movement, which had sought not merely an extension of the franchise but radical social and political change. One year before the General Strike, Leon Trotsky had pointed to the necessity to rediscover its revolutionary temper as one of most critical elements for the contemporary development of the British working class.

"As the Chartists tossed the sentimental preachers of 'moral force' aside and gathered the masses behind the banner of revolution, so the British proletariat is faced with ejecting reformists, democrats and pacifists from its midst and rallying to the banner of a revolutionary overturn," he wrote (*Where is Britain Going*, 1925).

In contrast, Davis insisted that there was no point in discussing Labour's treachery, as "we are all aware of it". And she made clear nothing must be done in opposition to it on the basis of preserving a spurious "unity".

Experience had proven it is not possible to build an independent party she said, and any movement must "walk before it can run."

"If you don't think [the Charter] is a revolutionary programme, it isn't", she said. "These are not transitional demands for the revolution."

McDonnell was similarly explicit. He was opposed to anything that threatened to "undermine the institutions of this movement," he said. Any discussions had to be based on the trade unions and should stay within existing organisations, he continued, stating that his own demand for the trade unions to support the repeal of the anti-trade union laws were not intended to "split the TUC."

The fact that a campaign to repeal the anti-union laws could be regarded as a threat to the unity of the TUC, speaks volumes as to the right-wing character of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy and the real relationship between these "institutions" and the mass of the working class.

It passed without comment, however, as the various organisations present were reduced to pleading with the bureaucracy to make more of a feint of confronting Labour.

Nick Wrack from George Galloway's Respect organisation exclaimed that if the trade union leaders called for a new party they could "electrify" the working class. Passing over the fact that they are not, he continued that the "left" should throw its weight behind the charter, adding that what it required was "a bit of sandpaper to brush of the bristles we all get when we work with each other."

John Reed, RMT industrial organiser and a member of the Socialist Party, argued for the trade unions to start slowly in mounting an electoral alternative to Labour, with 10-15 candidates, and push on from there, while the SP's Dave Nellist also proposed a national conference be organised to discuss standing candidates and how to build a new party.

This was given short shrift by Crow, leaving the Socialist Party to comment on the conference, "While disappointed once again by the fact that at this stage no left trade union general secretaries are prepared to put their weight behind the building of a new party, the Socialist Party will continue to argue for the need for working class representation."

It is this readiness to cede all authority to the trade union bureaucracy that defines the politics of the opportunist groups. Whatever their rhetorical demands, they will not countenance any political movement that might develop outside of its control and so endanger their own numerous positions within the union apparatus at local, regional and national level. This was, in short, a conversation between political kindred spirits who disagree only over tactics.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact