Britain: Fractious leadership contest in Unite union

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The leaders of the Unite trade union have made headlines recently with their advocacy of "British jobs for British workers", first used in the Lindsey oil refinery dispute. Unite joint General Secretary Derek Simpson even joined with the right-wing tabloid, the *Daily Star*, to promote the demand.

Central to this are efforts to secure the post of general secretary of the Amicus section of Unite, with ballot papers issued on February 16. The winner will become joint general secretary with Tony Woodley of the Transport and General Workers' Union section of Unite.

Unite was formed out of a merger between Amicus and the Transport and General Workers Union in May 2007. It is the largest trade union in Britain with almost two million members across every industry. It is also the largest contributor to the political fund of the Labour Party.

The merger, made necessary due to declining membership figures and finances, came at a heavy cost. The two unions could only be persuaded to pool their resources through an agreement that Simpson would retire on his 66th birthday, on December 23, 2010, and Woodley one year later. Currently, the union maintains separate financial and membership systems for the TGWU and Amicus sides, and separate rule books. But the union was to formally complete the merger in November 2008, with an election for a single general secretary of the union due in 2010.

The agreement that Simpson could continue past his retirement age was challenged by Jerry Hicks, former Socialist Workers Party member, now a supporter of George Galloway's Respect organisation. Hicks pointed out that not only did this flout Amicus union rules, but Simpson had initially won his position by forcing an election through a legal challenge to Sir Ken Jackson, dubbed "Tony Blair's favourite trade unionist", on the same basis in 2002.

This has thrown the entire process into crisis. The union tops were venomously opposed to Hicks's challenge. If Simpson stood down on his 65th birthday, Unite would have to stage an election for a single general secretary that would also threaten Woodley's position. But the bureaucracy was forced to acknowledge that the challenge would legally stand. To bypass this threat, a special meeting of the Unite executive council put on hold the process of full integration until May 1, 2009. This allows the current election in the Amicus section that concludes March 9 to go ahead, with the winner holding office for a year, from December 2009 to December 2010.

The dogfight for lucrative positions within the new "super union" sparked all-out warfare throughout the TGWU and Amicus sections. This finds expression in the line-up of competitors in the election for general secretary, reportedly the highest paid union position in the UK.

Although receiving the most nominations for the election, though less than expected—164 from the branches and 151 from workplace representatives—the re-election of Simpson is far from certain. In 2002 Simpson was promoted by the Socialist Alliance—an amalgam of Britain's various pseudo-left groups—as an opposition to Tony Blair's New Labour government and someone who would stand up for the working class and rejuvenate the trade unions as fighting organisations.

Nothing of this materialised. Simpson actively supported the Blair government in every step of its turn to the right. A former member of the Communist Party of Britain, he joined the Labour Party in 1994, the same year the party's new leader Blair told conference that he intended to ditch Clause IV committing Labour to "the common ownership of the means of production and exchange".

Assuming the role of a trade union advisor, his main role was to alert Labour to the dangers of it losing its former constituency in the working class. He has consistently defended the payment of the union's political funds to the Labour Party, without attaching any political demands.

A further setback for Simpson came in the form of a campaign waged by Rupert Murdoch's *Times* against him over allegations of perks and breaking union rules, obviously aimed at supporting his right-wing challenger, Kevin Coyne. Unite has mounted a legal challenge to Times Newspapers Ltd for "a series of libels" against Simpson.

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Coyne has the support of 94 branches and 150 workplace representative nominations. A life-long member of Labour, he complains that arguments within the union are now holding up the process of merger and creating a situation where "the union is spinning out of financial control and heading for a serious deficit".

The possibility of Coyne winning the election has created a crisis within what passes for the union left. Initially, the Broad Left, comprising what remains of the Labour left and the Communist Party and gathered around the *Amicus Unity Gazette*, had backed a third candidate, Laurence Faircloth.

With 44 branch and 49 workplace rep nominations, Faircloth had enough to stand in the election. But the Broad Left subsequently prevailed upon him to withdraw in order to unite behind Simpson. In a statement issued by the editorial board on February 2, it announced its gratitude to Faircloth "for the principled position he has taken in withdrawing his candidature". The statement went on to say that it had been determined that Faircloth could not "mount a credible challenge", and that "therefore the members are faced with a stark choice between Derek Simpson and Kevin Coyne".

"Voting for Derek Simpson is by far the better option for the Left", it continued. While it was not possible to "impose this decision through the discipline of the Left", it nonetheless recommended "Vote for Simpson—Stop Coyne!"

This stand effectively marginalises the challenge of Respect Renewal candidate Hicks, who got 58 nominations by branch and 55 by workplace representatives. Hicks is the only candidate who makes any pretence of being left wing. In his election address he says, "We are at a crossroads in our relations with the government, employers, and between the union and its members. Despite being the country's biggest union, instead of offering strength and resistance, we appear as onlookers while employers confidently cut jobs, break agreements and ignore us".

Hicks' description of Unite's policies is in reality a fig leaf. Far from being onlookers, Unite has played an active role as an industrial policeman, strangling any independent struggle by working people. Again and again they have agreed to and overseen all attacks on their living and working conditions.

This could be well observed in the recent weeks. In addition to its despicable role at the oil refinery strike—championing national protectionism—there has been the experience at BMW's Cowley auto plant in Oxford. When union officials announced that 850 jobs would be slashed, workers were very clear about the role of the trade union. They pelted them with fruit. At the meeting union officials, not the management defended the job losses. When one worker denounced the union as "a corrupt organisation" it raised a huge cheer.

Hicks is conscious of such antagonisms. He says his candidacy is about bridging the "chasm between the union and its members" through such things as "greater workplace representation", "branch independence and authority over decision making". He says the problem is that union officials are appointed and not elected and that he would only draw an average skilled worker's wage.

But the "chasm" he refers to is the outcome of the trade union's role as defenders of the employers and the profit system, which Hicks does not mention.

The right-wing policies of the unions are not merely due to a few bad leaders. Trade unionism always accepted the right of the employers to exploit workers and the nation state as the basis for economic and social life. Its politics always were to try and win one or two concessions here and there within the framework of the profit system. Under present conditions of international competition and economic crisis, this translates into sackings and wage cuts, the advocacy of "British jobs", at the expense of foreign workers, and to appeal to the government of the day to finance British companies. After all, capitalism must survive for who slaughters the cow that gives the milk?

To defend its interest in the midst of a systemic crisis of world capitalism, the working class must organise on the basis of an international socialist programme. They must break with the rotten trade union organisations and build independent organisations, with their class brothers and sisters globally in the fight for a socialist planned economy to provide for the needs of all based on social equality.

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